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# Distant Friends

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# *Distant Friends*

GREG JOHNSON

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A gypsy child of the Sixties, Lex travelled most of the year. He had money, but this was hardly apparent; he still carried a knapsack, wore blue jeans faded at the knees and seat. Though nearing forty, from a few feet away he looked youthful, if rather indistinct. A girlfriend once wrote to Lex that after a few months' separation she couldn't summon him in her mind's eye: he tended to fade, lose his outlines. The letter was catty, Lex knew, but it had absurdly cheered him.

When in late October he got a call from Marty Krieger, his friend who lived on the other end of the continent, Lex had been about to take off but hadn't yet decided where. Boulder, Colorado was still his "home base" because he'd gone to college there, and because the place where he'd grown up—a small city in southern Georgia—had in Lex's imagination entered the realm of myth. (His parents were dead, his memories of other relatives still in Georgia resembled cartoon figures from some grotesque Southern novel he might have read, but would never read again.) Nowadays he seldom went further south than Birmingham/Atlanta/Richmond, and made those stops only briefly as he looped from the Southwest up toward New England, his favorite part of the country.

Here in Boulder, he had a small efficiency in a building he owned and spent much of his time managing; it was overrun with college kids who had an intuitive grasp, it seemed, of who he was, why he was there. Headed themselves for hard-driving careers in business or high-tech, they perhaps saw in Lex a line of development, vestigial but sympathetic, they might gladly have followed except for some accident of politics or culture, whatever had pulled them into the shunting, hard-surfaced world that had replaced the world of Lex's extreme youth, that storm of bullets and flowers.

"Marty? You sound upset," Lex said into the phone. He listened to the faint roar of long distance, that obscure crackling. His friend sobbed again.

"Lex, I hate to bother you, but it's Priscilla. This time, she might not make it. So the doctors say."

The last time—just before Lex's previous visit to New York, a year earlier—she almost hadn't made it, either. Priscilla was the Kriegers'

daughter, five or six by now, whose supposedly “mild” cerebral palsy had brought vicious complications more than once. “They said that before, Marty, don’t forget—that’s *exactly* what they said.”

“No point in blaming the doctors, Lex.”

“But they’re always negative—you know, just in case. Got to cover their asses.” He was almost shouting.

There was a long pause from Marty. “I feel guilty for calling you, I know you’ve had more than your share of hospitals, doctors . . . but this time, Lex, Diane is really wiped out. She won’t even talk to me. Sits outside the room in this pitiful folding chair, just staring. The doctors say let her sit.”

Imagery of his mother’s slow death in 1969, uterine cancer, the place he’d started out gone bad, rotted; of his brother’s quicker fading in 1971, flown back from Vietnam with “internal injuries,” cancer in another form. *Don’t die on me, Pete, we’re the family now, we’re the pitiful remains!* He’d done some sitting, some staring of his own.

“Well, they’re right about that,” he admitted to Marty.

“When you came that other time,” Marty said, softly, “it was such a help—”

“Marty, I’ll be glad to come.”

He had nothing better to do than try to help Marty and Diane Krieger. He was a vagabond, after all; he was an “heir.” Yet that evening he packed without much sense of motivation, and though he’d promised Marty he would arrive by noon, the next morning he cancelled his plane reservation and decided instead to drive the little bone-colored Valiant he used to crisscross the country once or twice each year. He’d make good time, and from the details he’d gleaned from Marty he gathered that Priscilla, for the moment, was stable—even if her parents weren’t. . . . As he drove, Lex wondered about his own ability to help Marty and Diane. Back in college, when Lex and Marty were roommates during their junior and senior years, it had been Marty with his sure-fire accounting brain and tight-assed ways—as Lex liked to kid him—who had to look after his slovenly friend, whose laziness extended to his politics (he had to be dragged to protest marches) and even to his drugs (he bummed off everyone in the dorm). Lex could still summon a pleased nostalgia for himself in college—that same pair of jeans worn two years straight, the straggly blond hair halfway to the shoulder and tied with a red bandanna he’d frame now if it hadn’t been lost in his wanderings, the indifference toward his classes that was often mingled, especially if the topic were philosophy or literature, with a thrusting, combative style of inquiry that the other students distrusted

and his professors feared. He hadn't been likable, though Marty and a few others had called him on his "act"; they saw through to the docile and plaintively bewildered soul underneath. When he graduated, and then suffered the loss of his mother in the same year, they hadn't been surprised when he cut his hair and took a job writing newspaper copy right there in Boulder and married an orthodox Jewish girl who had her own money. But they also hadn't been surprised when he divorced her two years later and when, after Pete died, he quit the job and spent long stretches of time away from Boulder, unreachable by telephone or mail. At least one had assumed, he later told Lex, that Lex had gone to "find himself," but Lex had been even less embarrassed by the cliché than his friend had been.

Because Lex's college friends had scattered in all directions, as if thoughtfully providing the dots for Lex to join as he moved in the grim and patient Valiant across state lines and time zones, there was never the fright in Lex's life of reaching a destination: he made stops, some brief and others protracted, but eventually he went away. For his friends, Lex supposed that something called "normal life" resumed after he left, though their lives were never normal while he was there. Hospitals, funeral homes, divorce courts had been some of his past destinations, and now he understood the romance of the endlessly meandering voyage; as his friends pretended to, as well, feeling their confinements vicariously released through him. It fascinated Lex that his friends were always the ones to call—*Come visit us! Come witness our triumph! Come share our pain!* they cried from Dallas, Lake Forest, New York City. Never once had Lex showed up anywhere uninvited.

It was Marty, in fact, who had angrily pointed this out, though Lex had been uncomprehending at first, and rather defensive. It was mid-December, three or four years ago, when Lex had called Marty "for no reason," mentioning that it had been a while since their last visit. Although Marty was the most emotional man he had ever known, Lex hadn't been prepared for his reaction: he became suddenly furious, insisting that if Lex had nothing planned for the holidays he didn't need to "fish" for an invitation. Why the hell was Lex so fearful, so held back, as if they were mere acquaintances?—as if they hadn't been close friends for nearly two decades? It was really a kind of insult, wasn't it, Lex's refusal to ask outright for anything? A way of disclaiming the friendship?

Alarmed, Lex had changed the phone to his other ear, casting his eyes about the room; but he said nothing. He pictured Marty—short, swarthy, powerfully built; his dark eyes quick-moving, guileless. Lex imagined him performing a familiar gesture, running a hand through

his curly black hair, exasperated. Lex wanted to speak, but in addition to remorse he felt a twinge of his own anger, for how could Marty dare to criticize him? What had happened to their humorous rapport, that longstanding mutual tolerance that had sustained them for so many years? Lex waited, feeling an unfamiliar stubbornness, and of course Marty had apologized, describing the stress he'd been suffering due to Priscilla's condition, not to mention Diane's growing depression, her frightening unpredictability—but still there was no excuse, Marty said, he'd never spoken to Lex that way before, had he, in all these years had they exchanged a genuinely harsh word? No, Lex had replied, but it's all right—really. I completely understand.

And Marty had taken a deep breath. His anxiety had been nearly palpable through the wires. Then you'll come for the holidays? he asked. Why not plan a long visit, stay right through New Year's . . . ?

Of course, Lex had said, relieved. I'll be glad to come.

When he reached Philadelphia, Lex remembered another friend. A girl he'd known in Boulder, Suzie Clegg, but hadn't really dated: she'd been a sophomore, lived in Lex's building with two roommates, had stayed only a semester. Yet she gave him an address when she moved, and sent him a postcard once or twice a year. Nineteen, honey-blond hair, a quick and somehow boyish laugh: even at the time he admitted that she frightened him. He'd recently turned thirty and had felt certain, with comical but genuinely painful despair, that his life was winding down. Now he had a sensation of panic, again, to think that after all this time she would still be in her twenties, and probably had not lost her infectious gaiety, her athletic, bouncing walk.

He found himself in a corner phone booth in Center City, somewhere on Twelfth Street; it turned out that she lived only a few blocks away. He thought of calling Marty in New York, but then glanced at his watch—it was past midnight—and pictured his friend in the waiting room outside Intensive Care, slumped inside a vinyl chair, eyelids fallen shut. Lex was exhausted, himself; he'd spent last night in a scrubby motel, somewhere outside St. Louis, and was on the road again by seven this morning. And he wondered at his own audacity, calling Suzie Clegg out of the blue after seven years, past twelve o'clock on a weeknight. He came out of the phone booth with the collar of his leather jacket turned up, clutching the paper where he'd scribbled the directions she gave him.

Inside the apartment, she had to chide him out of the jacket. "Come on, it's chilly out," she laughed. "But not *that* cold."

It was true: this was only October, the temperature in the fifties.

He grinned. "Sorry," he said, hoping his awkwardness didn't show

and knowing it didn't. Often, arriving anywhere, he felt himself a stationary object around which his friends busied themselves, as if acknowledging his wandering soul, his need for respite. Suzie took the jacket, hung it in a small but impeccably ordered closet, and handed him a glass of dark beer, talking all the while. She seemed absurdly happy.

He'd explained on the phone, but he said again, "I've got these friends in New York, Marty and Diane Krieger. Their little girl . . ."

"Yes, that's really awful," Suzie Clegg said, clicking her tongue. Her round blue eyes were pained, wondering as a child's.

Then he remembered. "You were going to work with kids, weren't you? A psychologist, something like that?"

"Physical therapy," she said, with a shrug of her lovely shoulders. She wore a wide-necked blouse that all but revealed them, and did reveal her taut collarbone and the tops of her pale breasts. A peasant blouse, he thought they were called, loosely fitted but alluring. She wore no bra; her jeans were tighter than his own.

"But I didn't make it," she said, then pointed to her temple. "Didn't have it up here."

"I don't believe that."

They were standing near a small, battered sofa covered in brown corduroy; she had lost her hostessy good cheer and now seemed stalled, distracted. Why hadn't she suggested they sit down? Lex put his beer on a low table beside them. Suddenly everything pleased him: her confusion, the shabbiness of this cramped apartment, the sharpened image of himself her rather alarmed gaze gave back to him.

He stepped forward and they kissed, first gingerly, then with such fierce absorption that he lost himself again but it hardly mattered. Lying with her on the bedraggled sofa, he felt that within her orderly, chastened existence she had set herself adrift, had continued through the years with steadily diminished expectations. He had associated her with an affluent background, recalled a family on the Main Line, but when he asked her about it she smirked, her first hint of irony. "They don't approve of my life, the way I live," she murmured.

She'd taken his hand, spreading his capable strong fingers as if preparing to suck them, like a child. "They only agreed to my going to Boulder because they hoped I'd meet someone there, get married, and when I flunked out Daddy got me a job in a bank, right here in Philly. But that lasted all of three days." She laughed, letting the irony slip away. She kissed each of his fingertips on one hand. "Anyway, I've been pretty much on my own since then. I'm not unhappy, though. I have friends, usually I have a good time. . . ."



"What do you do?" he said, hoarsely as if rising from sleep. "For money, I mean."

"Right now I'm waiting tables," she said, again with her inconsequent laugh. "I really like it, though."

"No reason you shouldn't," he said.

"Of course, I have no idea where I'm going," and this time when she laughed Lex resisted the impulse to lay his palm across her mouth.

"Who does?" he said at last, softly.

She asked him to stay the night, and his only regret came the next morning when he stood, naked, before her peeling bathroom mirror with his face half shaved. The steam from his shower had begun melting off the mirror; the strokes of his razor slowly revealed his long, bony face, a face that might be twenty-five, or forty-five. His eyes were a pale blue, with only a few thin lines raying out from their corners; his wet hair was sand-colored, cut in a youthful, anonymous style. He had known so many people in his life, he thought, yet none of them knew where he was at this moment. Nor did he know, himself; before leaving he'd need to get more directions. Then, just as he noticed how his skin had paled beneath the stark-white remains of the lather, she came up behind him, smiling. She wore the same blouse as last night, but her hair was disheveled, as if pushed back carelessly with a single sweep of both hands. In the bleak light from the room's small, high window her hair appeared the same color as his own.

"Morning," she said, circling his waist.

He tried to smile; it was absurd, but his nakedness embarrassed him. Had she glimpsed his fear, his panic? No.

"I'll need to be leaving in a while," he said politely. "I've got—"

"I know," she said, with something of the old, cheerful Suzie in her voice. She pressed her cheek against his warm, damp shoulder. "You've got friends in New York."

After breakfast, she gave him directions. He asked her to keep sending the postcards.

In the past decade, Lex had visited the Kriegers more than anyone else. They were the nearest he had to a "family," allowing him to return now and then, a beloved prodigal, and to depart just as abruptly. The Kriegers were not offended when he stayed at his favorite fleabag hotel in the Village instead of using the spare room of their brownstone. Marty had recently joined a prestigious accounting firm as full partner and Diane owned a thriving art gallery, but they never talked about their money and Lex never apologized for his. He and Marty had sustained their boisterous, pretended antagonisms through the years,

while Lex and Diane had developed a camaraderie like a brother and sister's, tinged with erotic attraction. She was a small, slender-boned woman with luxuriant dark hair— a princess out of the Old Testament, Lex had once thought, a regal and mystical quiet beneath her abundant energy, charm and good cheer. Lex had always thought her the perfect complement to Marty, who tended to brood and who took everything so seriously. Lex loved both the Kriegers, and normally visited in both the spring and fall. Last April he'd had to decline their invitation because of some repairs he had undertaken for the boarding house, but the previous year their visit had gone well, Priscilla having recovered from a serious bout with a lung infection, both Marty and Diane seeming invigorated by their latest triumph over fate.

This trip, Lex stopped at the hotel only long enough to drop off his bags and have his car parked in a garage before taking a taxi to the hospital.

He asked directions at the front desk, and when he reached Intensive Care half-expected to find Diane just as Marty had described her. As it happened, the folding chair was there but Diane was not. He found her in a windowless beige waiting room halfway down the corridor, huddled in a small chair of sculpted blue plastic with a blanket over her knees. He stopped at the doorway, lips parted in shock.

"Yes, it's me." She smiled wanly.

The smile both reassured and terrified him. Her face was creased and pale, the lines cutting most severely at the sides of her mouth. He felt an absurd reflex of anger that she wore no makeup and had let her hair fall limp and bedraggled to her shoulders. Why hadn't he known it would be this bad? He'd heard the pleading, the terror in Marty's voice.

"Diane," he said gently. He came forward, pulling a chair next to hers. She sat with her arms and knees drawn inward, toward her womb; there was a sweet, helpless resignation in her posture that he'd never have connected with Diane. He tried to remember the feisty art dealer, the competent mother and wise friend.

"You took a long while," she murmured, idly. "Marty said—"

A nurse had appeared in the doorway.

"Yes?" Diane said, leaning forward with such urgency that Lex's arms came open to catch her fall. But she didn't notice; her eyes were glassy, opened wide so that the white showed above the sable iris.

"Has Mr. Krieger come back?" the nurse asked, politely. She ignored Diane's alarm, in that "professional" way of hospital staff that Lex found so maddening: bad things aren't happening here, the rhetoric implied; you're childish to think so. The nurse was a pleasantly smiling blond in her twenties, several months pregnant, but even so Lex wanted to slap her.



"No, not yet," Diane said, "he had to get some rest. Why do you need him? Couldn't I—"

The nurse shook her head. "That's all right, we can call him at home," she said, and now Lex had an inkling about the way she was handling Diane: the child's mother could not take any more stress, deal strictly with the father. Perhaps Marty himself had seen to this.

The nurse glanced at Lex, her eyes alert but unreadable; he felt she had assessed and dismissed him. Then she vanished. Diane sank back in her chair, eyes closed.

"That's the way they treat me," she said. "Like a child. A moron."

"They're trying to spare you," Lex said. "When Pete was in the hospital, I remember—" but he stopped. She didn't need to hear about that.

She kept her eyes closed, saying nothing.

"I would have gotten here sooner," he said, "but at the last minute I decided to drive. I spent last night in Philly."

He did not know what to say to her; like the nurse, he wanted to protect her, talk lightly of inconsequential things. But that would be insulting, and he had always believed in Diane. He decided to plunge in.

"Diane, how is she? How do things stand?"

She raised her head, and the look she gave him told more than her words: "Last night was the worst night. We almost lost her, Lex. Twice. They had a—what do you call it, Code 99. It's her breathing. She can't breathe."

She sucked in her own breath; Lex's gaze fell to the floor. He took her hand as she wept, but he still felt he'd never been more useless than from the moment he'd entered this room.

"It's—it's pneumonia," she choked out. "I guess Marty told you."

"Yes," Lex said.

"They're giving her as much oxygen as they can. They're doing what they can."

"Yes," he said.

They were silent for a while, and then Diane moved from the chair to the small vinyl sofa; a pillow in one corner already bore the mark of her small head. "Try to rest," Lex told her and she nodded, murmured something unintelligible.

He went out immediately and found the nurse.

No, she said, it wasn't a good idea for him to see Priscilla; in any case, she was comatose. When Mr. Krieger returned, perhaps he would authorize it, but she didn't want to disturb him again. To Lex's surprise the nurse reached out, touching his forearm, and he understood that his sore heart showed in his eyes. "We're glad you're here," the nurse

said. "They'd been talking about you, saying you were coming." "I'd have been here sooner—" Lex began. "Most of their friends seem to just pop in," the nurse said, "leave some flowers and then disappear. It's understandable, of course. We see that all the time. This is a tough situation, no one knows what to say or how they can help." Lex nodded, dazed by her quick understanding, her clarity. He felt groggy. He asked, in a voice that must have sounded timid, "Will she make it? Is there any chance?" And the nurse said, calmly, "No, I'm afraid not. That's why your being here is so helpful."

He wandered the hospital corridors, not feeling helpful. Every few minutes he checked on Diane, who had slumped into one corner of the sofa; a discarded rag doll, he thought. He remembered that he had given Priscilla a rag doll on his previous visit; her birthday had been only the week before. Opening the package with her mother's help, she'd said nothing at first, but a slow and unforgettable smile had widened her mouth. Then she'd said "Tenk yuh" in her slurred speech, clumsily folding the doll in her arms, and Lex had understood, really for the first time, the passionate absorption of Marty and Diane in her every movement and gesture—the beatific calm of Diane when she helped feed Priscilla, or adjusted the neckline of her dress; the glittering tension in Marty's eyes as he watched them both. When he strained to remember his own early childhood, he didn't recall that his parents had been so protective or solicitous; after all, he'd been a healthy boy. Once, on a car trip through the Rockies, they'd encountered an obstruction in the road—a large dog of some kind—and his father braked abruptly and swerved onto the shoulder of the highway. Lex, four or five, had been standing on the front seat between his parents, and he'd felt both their arms shoot outward to keep him from crashing into the windshield. Afterward his mother had laughed, nervously. "Whoa, that was a close one!" she exclaimed. "Poor dog," his father said, craning his neck backward, his arm still out although they'd come to a stop. "Yes, poor thing," his mother agreed. His parents' voices came back to him gently intertwined, a duet; they seemed ghostly and distant as voices remembered from a dream.

Yet his memories, Lex thought, were no more dreamlike than the present—the hours, the moments he was living through. For several years an eerie sensation had plagued him that each day, each friend, each lover that held his earnest if mysteriously weak attention had no connection to anything else, and not much to him. He had no sense of unity, only of brief pockets of time, filled with numbness or elation, and a fleeting sense of relationship to this or that person. Islands of experience, he thought. Accidents. His life existed only as a product of his own

“will,” an idea that was laughable but somehow true. He could not will himself into a different life any more than his friends, Marty and Diane, could will their daughter back to health. He was himself, nothing more, and could not apologize. Lately, when he received the monthly estate check and would glance at his name, so neatly typed—*Alexander S. Stevens III*—his heart for a moment gave a shimmer of denial, as though emptying out his past and his disconnected love in a kind of visceral abandon. Then he would turn the check over and hastily scrawl the name. He would think how to spend it—repairs to the boarding house, gifts to faraway, impoverished relations, a gadget or two that might ease, but not clutter, the minimal flow of his life.

Whether the predictable dailiness or the little shocks of life depressed him more Lex couldn't have said, but when he returned to the waiting area and found Diane standing out in the hall, hugging herself and looking precarious—several nurses were gathered around her, brisk and talkative—he felt a familiar stab of dread. Everything had been so quiet, so unthreatening just moments before. When she saw him, Diane reached out one arm but then retracted it; the arm curled back around her abdomen, a desperate embrace. Lex singled out the blond nurse and drew her aside.

“Mr. Krieger is on his way,” she told him. Her starched cap had come loose, and sat lopsided on her head. Lex's heart filled with terror.

The nurse added, in a lower voice, “The decision was made a while ago—you know, what to do when it came to this. That's why we phoned him.”

“She's gone, then?” he said, in a wondering tone.

She nodded once. “You can go inside now, if you like.”

He said quickly, “I can't,” but as relief lightened him, guilt pulled him down. He could not move.

Again the nurse touched his forearm, smiling. He looked across the hall to Diane, who kept hugging herself with one arm and shredded a kleenex in her other hand. The nurses stayed near her, one of them keeping the flat of her hand, a prop, held between Diane's shoulder blades. The whites had expanded around the dark, roving points of Diane's eyes. For a moment they snagged on him, and his heart lurched; but they released him just as quickly. He felt that he watched her through a telescope, from an incalculable distance.

Then there was commotion behind them, an elevator door shuddering open and a man's loud, fast footsteps. Marty. He went immediately to Diane and held her, while Lex watched. Marty was crying. He murmured a few words into Diane's ear, and though she did not respond—she looked dazed, incapable of language—he left her, dis-

appearing through the swinging doors of Intensive Care. Two of the nurses followed him, including the blond one. Lex wanted to cry out.

When Marty returned a moment later, however, he came directly toward Lex. Or rather, someone came toward Lex whom he half-recognized as Marty, his old friend. This man's face, tear-stained, seethed darkly with rage; he ran a hand through his curly dark hair as though reaching some final state of distraction, a point of no return. His eyes were pinpricks of darkness fixed upon Lex.

"Just look at you, look at you standing there," Marty said in a rough, trembling voice. His thick chest heaved beneath a wrinkled, wine-colored pullover. Lex pictured Marty's heart, beating fiercely in that big chest. "We don't need you *now*, do we?" Marty said, with vicious sarcasm. Lex remembered that his friend had a clever, wry sense of humor; he was never sarcastic. This was someone else. "It's a little late in the day, isn't it Lex? Your sorry presence isn't really required, is it? At this point?"

A nurse approached Marty but he waved her away.

"Marty, don't," Diane whimpered, and everyone looked at her in surprise. "He got held up, and anyway it's not his—"

"No, nothing is ever *his* fault," Marty said. "How could it be?" But his voice held a dying fall; he turned aside.

This had been, evidently, the final word, and in fact was a statement Lex pondered carefully once Marty had led Diane through the swinging doors and Lex had walked numbly to the elevators, where he illuminated the downward-pointing arrow with a single, unfelt touch of his finger.

*Nothing is ever his fault, how could it be?*

Downstairs, he sat at a small, sticky table in the coffee shop, then went to the doorway and stood there for a while, waiting. At the end of a long corridor were the elevators he had just used and he stood watching them, as though maintaining a vigil. He willed those doors to open. He willed his friend, Marty, to come hurtling out. Lex did not understand why this moment should be so important, and when the doors did open and Marty did come hurrying out, looking distracted and contrite, he did not understand the wild longing in his heart as he glanced to his left, to an automatic glass door that awaited only his footstep before admitting him into the wide, anonymous world outside.

He ignored his own emotion, of course, but later he would think that his sudden urge for flight, for distance, had shocked him as much as anything else that had happened.