

DÉJÀ VU

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Late afternoon, heading toward sunset on a summer day. Six of us at a café, tossing ideas. Time is the subject that captures our attention, and Hector asks about déjà vu. I listen to my friends as they talk about memory and time. I stay silent. I have nothing to offer, nothing to say about déjà vu.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, I awake and look up at a full moon centered in an orb of haze. It is then that déjà vu floats across space and time and settles in memory. I think of Stephanie, decades ago, when we were young and in love.

Stephanie had a van, outfitted for long journeys. We traveled up to the north country and spent the night at a campsite beside a lake, waves lapping on the shore. It was a safe place to sleep, sheltered by tall trees. In the morning, making breakfast, Stephanie and I argued. Why? I don't remember. I only remember the tension, our defensiveness, the clash of tight, harsh words.

I stepped outside to get past the anger—shake it off, and breathe. Inhale. Exhale. I remember asking myself: in a hundred years, will this argument matter?

It was early spring, a damp, cool day. I walked along the boat landing to the water and stood there beside the lake. It seemed to stretch into infinity. The gray sky above was vast, unending. I felt a wave of grief sweep over me, a deep, inexplicable sadness. Why, I wondered, why this profound and immeasurable sorrow?

There was no answer to my question, only a sense of being outside of time, inside a realm of grief. Sorrow held me fast and would not let me go until I turned away from the lake and returned to Stephanie.

She and I tumbled through four years together, trying to find our way to forever. It was only when we gave up and let go that we found our forever in friendship. As we widened our circle of friends and lovers, we enjoyed an era of our own making—an era steeped in laughter, music, good food and wine, coffee and talk. Mostly, I remember the laughter.

Twenty-odd years went by, and I had found my soul mate in Donna, someone who loved Stephanie as I did. Their friendship came easily—Stephanie was generous and funny and brought us a world of music and song. Life was good, until the day we heard that the frequent headaches Stephanie had been experiencing were a symptom of an underlying illness. Something had gone wrong in that mind of fine wit and wondrous circuitry; something was amiss in her mother earth body.

Death had come with a travel plan clutched in his bony fingers, beckoning Stephanie, offering to cover her with his dark cloak, whispering he would keep her warm on the long journey to the other world. And though she was oh so young, we could not dissuade Death. He insisted on her departure.

None of us knew when, but we all knew she would soon be gone. Donna and I drove from San Francisco to Santa Rosa, where Stephanie lived in a modest house with Anne, a woman who made her happy, the woman she had been with for a while, yet not so long. Anne was the woman Stephanie thought she would grow old with—Anne, who came just in time to help Stephanie through the end game.

While Donna sat with Anne in the living room, I walked along the hallway to Stephanie. She was in bed, propped up on pillows, next to a window that looked out on a clouded April day. We spoke, but not for long; she was too weak. Even then, she made me laugh. Gentle laughter, full of love. I said farewell—for now—unable to accept a final goodbye. I made my way through the house and stepped outside. I stood there in the cool, misty air, under a gray sky, and I knew this was the last time. I would never see Stephanie again.

And there it was—in that realization—*déjà vu*. I had been here before, in the north country, standing by a lake. That long ago morning, walking away from Stephanie, I had felt a wave of grief I could not comprehend. Today, I had the answer to the question I had asked all those years ago—why this sorrow? This was that moment, a moment outside of time, inside infinity—past, present, future: the continuum of love and loss. And always, love.

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