Waiting for the Call
Taylor, Jacqueline

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Hand to Hand

My lesbian relationship had started coming apart almost immediately. Witty, charming, and smart, my girlfriend trained on me the kind of rapt attention Mother had bestowed, which had elsewhere proved, to my abiding disappointment, exceedingly rare. Perhaps most seductive of all, she revealed, underneath an aura of certitude, vulnerability and despair, feelings it seemed I alone could assuage. What, at thirty-one, I was evidently still too naive to notice was that she offered that charm and glittering attentiveness to all new acquaintances. But once she felt certain of their attention, she lost interest.

In the three weeks between our first kiss and my separation from my husband, my new girlfriend could not get enough of me. I was the greatest thing that had ever happened to her. But once I was free and clear she shifted into reverse and spent the next year and a half backing out. By the time we began living together, about nine months in, I was contemplating with little amusement the irony of taking so much heat for my wicked, wicked ways while getting so little pleasure in exchange.

Still, she introduced me to lesbian life. For her, a lot of that consisted of going to bars. At first, I enjoyed these excursions. It was 1982, and there were few places where groups of lesbians congregated. I was fasci-
nated by the handsome women in short haircuts and sensible shoes twirling each other around the floor and buying each other drinks. I watched as if my life depended on it, looking for clues that might enable me to find my place on the new planet where I was surprised to have landed.

By the summer of 1983, I realized that hanging out in gay bars with twenty-somethings and watching my girlfriend dance with her exes was not my idea of a good time. I had started out naively believing that the fact we were all lesbians would make us pals, but I gradually realized that some of these women were just plain boring.

I studied the gay weekly newspaper for ideas. There were a few ads for churches that claimed to be gay friendly. I could hardly imagine such a thing. I found an announcement for a lesbian reading group that was forming. The group met once a month in members’ homes. Within a few short weeks, I went from having no lesbian friends of my own choosing to having several.

There were maybe twelve of us gathered for the third meeting of the book group when the doorbell rang again. The hosts were busy, so I jumped up to open the door. There in front of me was one of the finest-looking women I had ever seen. She was about my height and build—tall and thin, and her freckled face was framed by soft, brown, wavy hair that fell in layers to her shoulders. She took a forthright step into the apartment and gripped my hand in a no-nonsense shake. Her name was Carol, and she had recently moved back to the Midwest from Maine. She came in and sat down next to me. She was smart and funny. She liked to tease, and when she said something really mischievous she would touch her tongue to the bottom of her front teeth and laugh. I was sure we were going to be friends.

Meanwhile, back at home, my relationship continued to grow ever more miserable. I was in therapy, she was in therapy, we were in therapy. Despite all that, we couldn’t connect. When my therapist asked me why I was afraid to have a relationship with an equal, I was shocked. I was paying the bills, cooking the meals, doing the cleaning in the large apartment to which we had moved, and making all sorts of accommodations so we could be together, and yet I still thought my girlfriend was the one in charge.
It’s hard to know how I could have thought this. She was young and floundering. Unable to extricate herself from the demands of her needy family. But I was so committed to the notion of a prince that I was still trying to cast her in that role just because she was a few inches taller and a lot more butch than me.

By the time she broke up with me on New Year’s Eve, I must have known it was already over. She moved into a different bedroom, and for several weeks we continued as roommates.

Gay people joke quite often about the unlikely characters we sometimes choose to come out with. Perhaps that was part of it. Maybe my unrecognized but no less urgent need to come out, and the limited opportunity I had to do so, caused me to waltz off with the first woman I found.

But the truth is she fit a pattern of mistakes I had made with men. Although I somehow managed to marry honest, honorable men, in between I had fallen hard for a couple of thoroughgoing narcissists who would tell you anything they thought you wanted to hear. On some level, despite all evidence to the contrary, I still believed every song my mother had ever sung. Out there somewhere was a handsome soul mate, the one who would love me and only me. Surely growing up with a mother who was by turns adoring and angry, sane and crazy, a mother who in the end needed help I desperately wanted but did not know how to give, made me hungry for a chance to try again, to bring to someone I loved the healing comfort that I never could provide for my mother. I fell in love repeatedly with people who would never be able to love me back the way I wanted and whose deep hurts were far beyond the reach of my love.

When my mother had careened off into madness, I felt great pain, but I also felt enormously alert and alive. She needed me. I could help.

Except, of course, I couldn’t. It was a tired and tiresome drama by the time I finished repeating it in the third of three increasingly miserable and melodramatic romances.

When she first told me it was over, I cried. But even at my most miserable I could see that this breakup was no disaster. Soon I called my friends. Carol from the book group was one of the women I called. We went out for Chinese on a Monday night and sat in the restaurant talking until the waiters began to give us baleful looks and we realized we were
the last diners in the room. She told me how she had headed off to graduate school in Maine with a boyfriend named Loon, living in a tent that fall until the cold weather forced them to find better shelter. She cooked over an open fire and showered on an as-needed basis at the home of friends. She loved the camping more than the boyfriend, and once the tent was struck and she started going to classes all the time he gave up and wandered on. I was utterly charmed by the notion of a tent in the woods as transitional graduate student housing. I concluded that she was, in the best sense of the words, a wild woman. Not long afterward we sat laughing and talking together in a Greek restaurant when a man approached to ask if we were alone. “No!” we shouted in unison and burst into laughter.

Shortly after New Year’s Eve, I went to a house party for single lesbians. I was determined not to sit at home and mope. When I walked into the kitchen, Carol was one of the first people I saw. I never got past the kitchen. I stood and talked to her for an hour and a half. As we talked, I grabbed her arm. I expected her to be skinny like me, but I felt a big, firm bicep. “Wow, have you been working out?” I asked. “I swim at the Y,” she told me.

Pretending to myself that there was no connection, I joined the YMCA and started doing laps. Predictably, I ran into Carol there. I would watch her in the next lane over glide effortlessly through the water with a fluid stroke that made most of us look like turtles paddling alongside a dolphin.

Later we would shower, standing across from each other and talking. Then we’d stop at the sink to put our contact lenses in. Twenty-twenty vision restored, we’d sit together in the hot tub before we headed off to our separate apartments. My workouts grew more and more frequent.

One night, as we walked home from a restaurant, Carol asked me if I was close to my mother. I said the first thing that popped into my mind. “I guess you haven’t seen the surgeon’s scar on my hip. It was painful, but at least we can now lead separate lives.”

She laughed. “So that’s a yes?”

“I’m really close to her. I’m too close to her. She can read my mind. She thinks I’m her. But I’m working on it. The doctors think there’s hope.” I’m not sure why it came out quite like that. But the wounds from
our painful coming-out correspondence were still fresh, and my mother and I were in the throes of trying to figure out how we could be so close and yet so far apart.

Carol and I planned more and more evenings together. Theater lovers both, we saw numerous plays. At the Y, our workout schedules magically synchronized. One cold February day, we walked partway home together. At the corner on Sheffield, where I headed north and she south, she said good-bye and swatted me lightly with the brown leather glove she held in her hand. It was like one of those little jock swats that athletes use to show affection for a member of the team who has made a really good play. Her father was a basketball coach. I loved this little jock caress. I was slow, but I was starting to catch on that I wanted to be more than her teammate.

Carol loved language. Behind her quiet reserve, there was an independent and adventurous streak that I relished. She had resisted getting a real job for years and so had pursued an MA in comparative literature in Maine. She had boyfriends and tried to imagine herself married someday. She pictured herself with a sailor or a surgeon. It was, of course, a picture of herself married without a husband underfoot. She found her first feelings for women terrifying. Eventually, she found a group of lesbian friends, found a woman to love, lost that love, and then worked her way into advertising—not exactly what she had intended her love of language to come to, but it earned her a good living. She loved Maine’s wildness, its abundance of water, its unpretentiousness. But it was not an easy place to make a living, and when she eventually found herself without either a job or a girlfriend she moved to Chicago and began reaching out for new friends.

I sensed in Carol a solid core of integrity that I valued more than ever after the shifting sands of my recent relationship. She was the sort of person who paid her fair share and followed through on commitments. She maintained friendships from high school, college, and the years in Maine. She was hardworking, responsible, and unflinchingly honest—a person whose opinion was unvarnished. She was gentle hearted and kind but constitutionally incapable of flattery. And she was funny.

On Valentine’s Day, I telephoned her at work. I was preparing material for a performance of poetry class I was teaching, and I used that as an
excuse to read her an Adrienne Rich poem over the phone, “Transcendental Etude.” She knew and loved the poem. “Happy Valentine’s Day,” I said boldly as I was hanging up the phone. “Happy Valentine’s Day to you,” she replied.

One night near the end of February we decided to have dinner together and then go to Mountain Moving Coffee House, a woman-run organization that brought folk music and other programming for women-only audiences to a small performance space in a church basement. Although by this time she had told her friends that she was interested in me, Carol had assured them that she did not intend to get involved with someone so obviously on the rebound.

At dinner in a Thai restaurant, the sexual tension was running so high that my mouth kept drying up. Between the spicy food, the white rice, and my own anxiety I couldn’t drink water fast enough. Finally, I tackled the subject head-on.

“I’m so attracted to you, I’m having trouble talking. I can’t think about anything else.”

I looked into her gray-blue eyes. One of them has a brown speck in it. She looked down at the table, then back into my eyes, then away again.

“I feel the same way about you,” she said. “Does that make you feel any better?”

It did. She looked terrified, like she might bound from the table if I made any sudden moves. I felt like I was courting a wild deer. She abruptly bolted for the ladies’ room, but when she came back to the table we were still falling in love.

We later drove to Mountain Moving, went inside, and tried to concentrate on the evening’s program but couldn’t. At the first intermission, we left and went for a drive.

“I’d really like to get involved with you,” Carol told me, “but you need to know two things. I don’t want to get involved with you as long as your ex is living in your apartment. And I don’t want to get involved with you unless it’s going to be a monogamous relationship.”

She was serious about this. She had standards.

“OK,” I swallowed. “I can live with those terms.” We drove for a while in silence. I reached my hand toward hers. “Can I hold your hand?”
“Yes.”

“Can I take your glove off?”

“Yes.” Her shy blue eyes brushed over me and back at the road.

I slipped her long, strong, right hand out of her leather glove while she kept the left one on the steering wheel. With naked hands clasped, we drove up Lakeshore Drive into the northern suburbs and then back into the city. We were nervous, happy, excited, and so wide awake and alive. Something was beginning. Something wonderful. Or crazy. You can never tell at the start. You jump and only begin to find out months or years later where you have landed.