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## A Love Story

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PETER HURD



"MUST HAVE HAD A SAD LIFE, death in the family or maybe a friend," a neighbor whose husband worked in Tansey's told Kate Lacey the first day Oliver moved his few things into the room on the third floor. She, Kate, never believed it because she had known people who had had death and sadness in their lives and none of them seemed as calm and controlled as her new roomer. There was either much more or much less to it than that, she decided. And after his first few months in Orion, when the speculation about him had become wildly improbable before it ceased completely and forever, she was convinced from her few glimpses and rare words with him that it was much less. And after twenty-three years of seeing him change only in appearance and age, she no longer gave the matter the slightest consideration. She would never have disputed with anyone that he was lonely and old and even, perhaps, disappointed, because she had no more idea than anyone else.

## A Love Story

LEE A. JACOBUS

His room was small with three small windows fronting out toward Highland Avenue where they caught the sunlight of early morning and of much of the day.

Oliver Gillen, partly because he was indifferent and partly because he was rarely in his room except in the evenings, kept the dark shades drawn from one end of the year to the other. Properly speaking, the shades were "fixed" in their present position and would not, even if he had wanted them to, roll back to reveal the day.

Prominent on the stand near his bed was a picture of his mother as she had appeared when he was too young to remember. She was a ruddy-looking woman of extraordinarily masculine stature, high-collared in the lace old fashioned way, and square-shouldered in a way Oliver would never be. He never looked at the picture other than to dust it, and almost as if he were con-

scious of all the modern talk about mother-complexes he kept it pointing away from his bed so that when reading or awaking he had not to look upon her reproachful sternness.

Mrs. Lacey had furnished the rest of the room with yellowed mesh curtains which smelled forever of a strange acrid dustiness, a bookstand with castoff books she had moved up from her own living room, two violent seascapes she had sent away for and had mounted when Mr. Lacey was alive and an assortment of lamps, chairs and oddments which had formerly been in other parts of the house, but which she now felt might be put to better use in his room. Because he was her most reliable tenant she gave him a few extra bits of attention, but he never acknowledged any of her touches, nor did he ever question her authority either in inserting an extra piece here or there or in removing a knickknack or lamp, nor did he ever question her taste in choosing things for him. He hardly ever noticed a change in his room unless it were of a major consequence; and few things were of major consequence to Oliver Gillen.

He countered the consideration that much of his life was dictated by routine with the conviction that he was ordering his life and living sensibly. He always arrived early to work, shocking his colleagues who regarded him not as someone to be envied but as someone to be avoided. As far as they were concerned he seemed to live for his work and anyone who lived only to work for Big Ed Tansey was, in their estimation, a trifle, if not a great deal, aberrated. But actually he thought of his work only as something to accomplish and accomplish well before he left late in the evening, later, often, than Big Ed himself. From work he traveled the few dozen yards across the street and up to the Astoria, where he bought the evening paper and read in the lobby under the watchful scrutiny of the manager, Oscar Brehm, until it was time for dinner. With the paper safely tucked under his arm and occasionally with a burnt-out cigar in his mouth, he would travel across the street, his back, now, to Tansey's, up to Claire's Restaurant, where he found his usual booth empty and waiting. After dining on liver or chicken croquettes, he would sit and ponder sometimes for all of twenty minutes in order to pick from the six choices of dessert, and three times out of five his first choice would be exhausted in the kitchen and he'd have to sit and stare for another ten minutes before he could make up his mind about a second choice.

Saturdays, of course, there was the show at the Orpheum on the corner

of Jameson Street. Whether the picture was a re-run, a holdover, a love story or a western, Oliver would be at the window to get his ticket for the early showing and he would buy a packet of licorice pastilles and take it to his usual seat on the right of the center aisle. Occasionally, if the picture were very good or very short, or both, he would decide to indulge himself by sitting through it twice. Invariably, he would fall asleep during the second showing, but he had an uncanny capacity for awaking as the film ended, and so he was never embarrassed by an attendant's having to arouse him.

Sometimes after a film he would want to talk with someone about it, either to criticize or compliment, but Oliver never had anyone to talk to. The urge would burn in him for a few long minutes as he started home, but it would usually die out unexpressed before he reached Highland Avenue. If the picture had really touched him he would cast a few words of comment or appreciation to the winds and would return home with his head full of the vision. In these few instances, he would fall asleep dreaming of himself as hero riding hard or loving hard, and he would slumber with a contented smile on his face.

It was after one of these latter experiences in the Orpheum that an odd thing occurred to him. When the lights went on after the picture he found that he'd been sitting only two seats away from Annie Buechler, who had been his waitress at Claire's for the past year and a half. He hardly recognized her without her normal drably-green uniform and he might not have said anything to her at all if she hadn't looked him full in the face with an awkward, almost girlish smile when he first saw her.

Having sat so long without talking, he found his voice thick and his hello a bit hoarse.

She answered very shyly as she edged over toward the aisle, heading in his direction; she called him, "Mr. Gillen."

Outside they found themselves standing together while the thick crowd of people flowed around them. Oliver did not quite know what the proper thing was to do. His strongest urge was to go right back to his room, back to familiarity and comfort; but at the same time he felt a strange obligation to say something to her, to offer, because he was a gentleman, to walk her home.

She accepted and they started down the dark street. Mrs. Buechler was

a quiet, melancholy looking woman, thin and somewhat reddened about the eyes. She seemed near Oliver's own age, though he thought she might be a few years younger; there was no way of being sure. Her marriage had not lasted, evidently, and she had been forced into working at Claire's and other restaurants like Claire's, she said as they walked.

After a few blocks of awkward, cautious conversation, they found themselves suddenly talking very fully and anxiously about the film. Their favorite actor had been the star and Annie was amused at Oliver's clumsy imitations of his voice and gestures. By the time they reached her rooming house they were both chuckling loudly over the comedy of the movie and the whole humorous situation in which the two stars had somehow found one another. They talked for a few moments in the street until Oliver began to sense her melancholy returning. He said goodnight then, and walked briskly back to his room in the crisp air, happy in one sense that he had had an opportunity to discuss the show with someone—that, in fact, someone had been interested in hearing his opinions—but he was distressed in another sense because he did not know how to make himself feel normal in Annie's presence. Being with her outside Claire's was too new an experience for him. It was almost an immoral experience. It was too severe a shift from the regularity of life for him not to feel let-down as he walked home; his conscience was far too strong, far too well-developed for him not to feel that he had done something wrong. Guilt was the only natural reaction he could call upon for guidance. It was the only reaction he had ever had in this kind of situation, a situation that veered away from normalcy. Oliver tried to fight against it as he continued home, but as his pace slowed and as the cool air of night crept beneath his clothes and into his bones he knew he was too old for such things as strolls with strange women, that his life had been too well-ordered to permit him the luxuries other men lived for. He knew now, as he walked up the stairs to his room, why he had felt such a straining in talking with Annie; it was like being thirteenth at table; it was something very wrong.

THE REST of the week dragged itself limply like a ragged animal. He saw Annie six times and before each time he felt a slight surge, an embarrassing twinge of an emotion he could not rightly identify. But she simply treated

him with the same dispassion and efficiency that she had always used toward him. She tolerated his long examination of the menu after each meal and she reported dutifully when an item he had chosen was not available.

By Saturday he had almost forgotten about her. He no longer felt anything when he thought about walking up Highland Avenue to Claire's. Whatever had touched him for those first few days had worn off.

The film, an adventure story about two men who loved the same woman and went to different parts of the world to try to win her, mesmerized him. His only disturbance was that he unconsciously identified himself with the wrong man, the man who had gone too far in his extremes and whose sudden death had created the proper occasion and atmosphere for the union of his chief antagonist and the girl. This ruffled him a bit, and as the lights went on after the performance he found himself staring at the empty screen for a moment.

When he rose, finally, to leave, he cast a sudden glance to his left and discovered the thin, wan, plaintive face of Annie Buechler, who had sat unnoticed through the film only a few seats away. He was startled at seeing her, as if it were the last place he would have expected her to be.

She smiled her plain, drab schoolgirlish smile and began moving toward him. Oliver felt tempted, as she folded up the seats between them, to simply nod and begin to walk up the aisle, but unaccountably he held himself back. It would have been rude.

"That was pretty good, wasn't it?" she asked as she came to stand next to him. "I liked the last part best."

"Yes," he said a bit too grimly, still thinking of himself as having perished in the wake of a great storm.

"But it was sad, too, wasn't it?" she said, reacting to his glumness.

"Yes, it was that, too," he answered.

They walked slowly that night, remarking occasionally at the quivering stars and at the heart-shaped linden leaves shining greenly over the street. Oliver was aware of the honeyed perfume of the trees seeping down around them. He had never noticed that before.

Their talk was not as voluble as it had been before, and they both seemed grateful that they could walk quietly and not feel the necessity for talk. Talking seemed almost superfluous to them.

When Oliver slept that night he dreamed of himself flying low over

choppy seas, dipping lower and lower as his fuel gauge disappeared, knowing that he'd never get back to land. The heroine, his woman whom he would never see again, had Mrs. Buechler's sad eyes, her sad smile, and her whole, round sad face.

The dream gave him an uncomfortable few minutes when he awoke and recalled it the next day.

During the week that followed, Oliver found it easy to accept Annie's indifference in Claire's because it was, in fact, his own indifference as well. They carried on the everyday life just as they had in the past, neither greeting the other with anything more than the normal courtesies they had shown in the previous eighteen months. Oliver even left the same tip, fifteen cents, after every meal.

One thing had changed, however, and that was Oliver's emotional state when he occupied his seat in the restaurant. It was similar to that of the first few days after their initial meeting in the Orpheum. He could not identify it, but it was very much like the adolescent quaking and anticipation in meeting someone viewed previously only from a great distance. He was sometimes annoyed by it, but could not alter it.

Their Saturday evening meetings became rather regular after that. For the first few times they sat in widely separated seats and Oliver found he could not concentrate properly on the film, knowing that Annie Buechler was sitting in the same aisle with him. It was only natural that he should linger a moment longer one Saturday night, the fifth after their first meeting, at the counter after buying his pastilles. Annie came in with her torn ticket stub and smiled plainly at him. They sat together that evening and for many Saturday nights after. Strangely, he found that with her sitting next to him, he could concentrate more fully on the picture. He could give voice to any appropriate comments which might strike him, and he exulted silently a little bit whenever she showed her appreciation by a stifled laugh or a somber nod, depending on his observation.

Gradually, as the time passed, they came to talk about things far removed from the world of motion pictures. She told him about her first husband, how he ignored her, drank until he had to take the cure and then, finally, how he'd run off with another woman who, she had somehow discovered later, had been thrown over for a third. He had been intolerable, she said, but she had been too young and impetuous when she married to know what he'd be like.



It was an old and familiar story, she admitted to him, but Oliver knew by looking at her, by realizing that she had been left with the marks of her experience, that it was a true story. He had nothing as grim to tell, in fact he had nothing to tell about his own history that would have interested her, but once in a while he found himself relating an experience here and there about situations he had been in or witnessed. And because the things which had happened to him were far less interesting than what had happened to other people, he would occasionally falsify a few details and relate someone else's story as having happened to him.

This bothered him.

Alone in his room after a Saturday evening, he would very often reproach himself for having lied. Sometimes he would go so far as to imagine that it was she, Annie, who had forced him to lie, as he would never have done had he been alone. It was at these times that he'd wrestle with himself, vowing never to see her again, imagining almost irrationally, that she was a kind of succubus who first extracted the truth from him and then, when the truth was not enough, forced him to lie. It was illogical, almost immoral, to think this way and he told himself so, though all his telling could rarely do more than blunt slightly the feeling he'd already entertained too long. There were times when his self-arguing would continue into the night, when he could not sleep with the thought that she, her very presence, made him a man he often did not recognize, a man who bragged as he would never have done under ordinary circumstances, a man who stooped to the sin of lying to impress. But his trepidations were, for the most part, short-lived. After a night's sleep, he would no longer think of Annie as succubus, but rather as a responsive, if somewhat plaintive and perhaps pathetic, companion. He was contented that he had someone to talk with and to listen to, someone who demanded little of him, only an infrequent lie or an occasional inflation of reality. Relinquishing his privacy of soul one evening a week was not too much, he realized, considering the pleasure he received from being with her, considering how much she, herself, seemed to brighten and shine with someone, himself, beside her to share a few moments with. It was not too much, he decided.

The professional indifference she showed him in Claire's continued. Their conversation, questions and answers pertaining to the menu, rarely differed from one month to the next and Oliver was happy with things that way. Not that he didn't enjoy her, or find that each time they met he was

tempted to reveal more and more about himself and to learn more and more about her, but he had found that adjusting to even this slight degree of intimacy with another person, particularly a woman, was so difficult that the adjustment to constant or greater intimacy would have been impossible.

Gradually, over the months, as summer waned into autumn and gave itself up into the beginnings of winter Oliver lost his feelings of guilt at his occasional lies. In fact, as they became more natural with each other at the Orpheum and after, he found that he no longer felt the urge to lie or to magnify his experiences. They talked less and less about their past experiences and more and more about abstract ideas, the world and God and life.

Their criticism of the films they had seen sometimes led them to harsher judgments of their quality than Oliver would dared have make had he not had her to talk with. And though he often disagreed, he pondered over her dislikes and observations and he took them to sleep with him, frequently unable to reconcile his own feelings or to agree that a film he had liked had not, in fact, been a good one. It was a matter of taste, he decided, and left it at that. Though they agreed on many things he had no right to expect that she would always like the pictures he thought most highly of.

SO GRADUALLY that it seemed unconscious, Oliver Gillen began to make certain slight changes in his habits and environment. The first change was unexpected. Oliver himself hardly knew what to make of it; but one day he found that Kate Lacey's seascapes were impossible to live with. She, so incredulous as to risk a palpitation by racing upstairs to ask why, had found them neatly stacked in her parlor with a small note saying, "Thank you," and nothing more.

In their stead she found two pastel prints of approximately the same size, but of subjects which were more lyric, milder and more generally pleasing in terms of their union of appropriate colors. Oliver had no explanation for her when she steamed into the room and looked about. He was busy arranging his furniture, looking critically at each piece to see how it should fit into the scheme of the entire room. Winded, she let out only a few exasperated tones and left as quickly as she had come, not even having given Oliver cause to wonder about her presence.

At Tansey's his colleagues began to notice that he wore a truly clean shirt,

that his suits—he had three now—were more often neat and pressed than not. Even Big Ed himself remarked casually about the difference to one of his secretaries. His comment was that for the first time since he had known him Oliver's haircut seemed to fit his head.

These changes were slight. Few people would have noticed any of them had they not taken Oliver for granted for many years. None was major enough for anyone to comment openly to him about them, nor were most people as moved as Big Ed even to mention anything to someone else. People simply noted the fact, wondered for a moment, then resumed their daily duties.

If Annie observed any changes in Oliver she kept silent. She herself seemed a bit brighter, a bit less plaintive even in these winter months. Their weekly meetings continued uninterrupted and they seemed mutually pleased by their Saturday talks and their weekly indifference. Oliver noticed that as February wore on, Annie frequently huddled near him for warmth on their way to take her home, that she talked less and listened more to him. He even thought, strangely, that her eyes were wider when she regarded him than they had been before. Consciously he attributed this to the weather, but unconsciously he feared it might be something else, that, in fact, another change might take place; and Oliver did not want any changes now. His life was too complete, too placid to accept an alteration in any but the most minor aspects of its routine.

Late in February, in the evening of the extra day the calendar had given it, Oliver turned his mother's portrait around to face his bed. It seemed far less reproachful and stern than it ever had before.

That very night he had one of the oddest and most frightening dreams he could remember having had. He dreamt he was in Claire's finishing his dessert and Annie had, without comment, placed his check next to his dish and moved back to the kitchen door where she could see his face from across the room. He thought nothing of it, but continued eating his Boston cream pie until each last flake of crust had been licked from his chin. Only then did he reach for his check, and simultaneously his hand took a dime and a nickel from his trousers pocket to place on the table. But he did not put the fifteen cents there. Instead he stared incredulously at the check where, under the printed figures of his bill, were the words, scrawled almost painfully as a child

would, "I love you." He was astonished. He gasped at the words, refusing to believe they were there in front of him, refusing that Annie had had the awful nerve to confront him with them. He couldn't imagine what he had done to provoke them, why she should do this to him, spoil the relationship he had had with her, a relationship he had come to respect and enjoy. Everything was ruined, he thought, as he stood there. Nothing was left. He couldn't even look at her face as he hurried out of the restaurant. He could only imagine the sad look of hurt that must have been there, a hurt she had only caused herself, a hurt he could do nothing to ameliorate. It was all beyond his power. She had betrayed him.

Oliver woke to the darkness in a cold, trembling sweat. That Annie might love him had never occurred to him before. It was out of the question, he had thought, but, then, how could he, Oliver, control such a thing? Was it his fault as well as hers? He couldn't be sure. Certainly he had never encouraged anything of this sort, nor would he. It was all only a dream, yes, but a possibility, nevertheless. Perhaps her huddling, her widened eyes should have told him that, beyond his control, he had affected her in a way he had never wanted to. It was a way which could only bring unhappiness to her and misery to him, a way he had never expected could happen.

Oliver didn't sleep the rest of that night. Instead, he bundled himself into his overcoat and wandered through the black streets of Orion, thinking about Annie and the dream, what he had done that might make the dream come true, and how he might reverse what he thought of now as the natural course of events.

As he walked he attempted to reason with himself that he had only had a dream, but something within him proclaimed that the dream was a sign, an irrevocable sign he should heed. He stood calmly in the cold outside the window of Claire's. The restaurant was closed, but the dull pink neon sign shone through the window and lighted his face as he looked inside. He could see Annie as she had stood in his dream. He could see her face now, and it was full of remorse and pain. Oliver couldn't endure it. He turned quickly away and stared up the street toward the Astoria. All the lights were out and the street looked cold and grim in the night.

The dream had been too real, he decided. He wasn't superstitious, but he was not so foolish as to ignore such a palpable directive. No, it was defi-

nately meant as a warning, he decided, as he turned his back to Jameson Street and headed home. It was a warning that he must act upon for his own sake and for hers. It was, in fact, a signaling of his duty in the affair.

FEELING STRANGELY guilty the next Saturday, Oliver avoided Annie in the Orpheum. He sat in the back on the left so he could leave quickly when the film was over and not have to see her. It was the only way, he thought. She would have to understand that he was saving them.

In Claire's—he could not alter his life so severely as to change his restaurant after twenty years of uninterrupted dinners—he tried not to look at her. He kept his eyes to his plate and the menu, and he confined himself to the normal problems of choice and choosing.

The following Saturday he could not avoid seeing her as he left the Orpheum. She had not gone in at all, but waited outside for him to come. And though he tried to avoid it, his glance was riveted firmly to her. She was standing silent, a thin specter of a woman with the sad round eyes of a child who had been betrayed. He couldn't help sensing her feeling and wanted to explain why he had behaved as he had, but the words would not come; they seemed almost unnecessary as he looked at her and saw that she could not speak, that she would not understand what he had to say. He hurried by her feeling nauseous and shaken, and he wished he had never seen her. The night was cold and whipping and when he returned to his room he walked endlessly over the worn carpets around his bed. He felt miserable but just. In the morning Mrs. Lacey found a note requesting the return of the seascapes and she found, after she had re-hung them, that the pastels were crumpled and wedged deeply in one of the outside ashcans.

Annie left Claire's shortly after that. Without a word or a nod she had simply vanished from Orion, and Oliver thought she had done the best thing. Her action merely confirmed what his dream had told him. She had been as sensible as he, and he was grateful. Months later he had heard from someone in town that her husband had found her and through fear of him she had left to start life somewhere else, but he could never be sure of what people said. It didn't sound very reasonable to him. Someone even said she had died only a short while after she had left, but he didn't believe this either. People weren't very sensible in Orion when it came to things of this nature.

There were times now when Oliver sensed something missing in his life, but these times were only brief, spasmodic moments of weakness, he knew. He paid no attention to them. Occasionally he would catch himself talking out loud in the Orpheum, but no one noticed. Once or twice he began going home from the film in the wrong direction, but he was never more than a minute or two out of his way, so it did not matter.

In April, perhaps because spring was coming, he turned his mother's picture away from his bed.

In June he still imagined, sitting in Claire's having dinner, that Annie was standing by the kitchen door watching him eat, but he shook that off, too, by protesting that he was getting older and that things of this nature were to be expected. Nothing was beyond his power of rationalizing because he had gone to great trouble to order his life well and to control himself. The only things that really bothered him were the things that happened to him in the night, when he was completely alone, when he would wake from a sound sleep and see her standing silent at the foot of his bed imploring him with her sad eyes, calling him mutely away from himself and into her world as if she were a spirit come to redeem him from bondage.



## HEADNOTES

VIVIAN NORA GRELICK is a Graduate Assistant in Art at U.N.M. She has a B.F.A. in Art Education from Syracuse University, and is a practicing artist as well as a teacher.

NORMAN HALLIDAY is a journalist. A former New Mexican and a 1942 graduate of NMMI at Roswell, he served in the U.S. Army in Europe in 1944-45. He has published in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Appearing for the first time in *NMQ*, LEE JACOBUS, graduate of Brown University, is an English instructor at Danbury State College, Danbury, Connecticut. He is currently working on a novel; and his "A Love Story" in the present issue of *New Mexico Quarterly* is one of a series of similar stories with the same setting of the mythical Orion.