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I sat staring at the television, trying to take in what it was saying. Over and over, footage of Rock Hudson standing next to Doris Day was playing. He had made a guest appearance on some sort of television show she was doing, and he looked ghastly. His skin was ruddy, wrinkled and sunken as if by very old age, with thinning hair and a weak demeanor. It was one of the last close-up images most of us would ever see of Rock Hudson. And it terrified me.

My heart was pounding, and I tried to listen to the voice-over, which spoke of the sudden illness of Rock Hudson and speculation that he might have AIDS. Throughout the newscast, memories of a night in 1982, nearly three years earlier, sprang to life. The images taunted me and screamed at me and said gonna getcha gonna getcha gonna getcha ...

It was an anniversary for Charley and me. We had been in Los Angeles for only a year or so, and were going to celebrate with a dinner at New York Company, a gay restaurant and bar next door to Hollywood in the community of Silverlake. It wasn't exactly the classiest place to dine, or even the trendiest, but it was gay and friendly and you got a candle on your table and mushrooms on your prime rib and they would probably sing to us or bring a special piece of cake. We were still thinking like a couple, having recently moved to Los Angeles and begun the work of building a life in the vast city together. The emotional distance between us had not grown so far that we couldn't celebrate an anniversary with a fair amount of sincerity, so we dressed our best and headed for Silverlake.

The host greeted us and led us into the rear dining room, which was my favorite because it exuded what at twenty-one years old I thought was real class: completely black walls and ceiling, with small round tables decorated with a red rose and a dramatic spotlight lighting each table from above. We were seated in the back of the room, only one table shy of being in the far corner. Charley looked handsome in slacks and a sweater, and I adored his mustache and maturity with equal measure. I was in the height of my commercial acting "marketability," with the fresh freckled face and strawberry blond hair that pleased casting agents and acquainted me with every variation of redheaded characters that my friends could come up with. Opie, Ritchie, Howdy Doody, all were a consistent nickname,

although Charley would always smile and tell me not to worry, that I was much cuter. It helped.

No sooner had we settled at our table and ordered drinks than Charley started nudging my arm and staring across our table. He was facing the back of the room, towards the table next to us in the rear corner. I glanced in that direction, and didn't see anything unusual or someone I might recognize. I glanced again, and this time was stunned to realize that Rock Hudson was seated there, talking with another man. I looked back at Charley instantly.

In our short time in Los Angeles, I had developed the attitude that famous people deserved their privacy and one shouldn't ogle them. I always tried to be nonchalant about it when I happened upon someone famous at the movies or the mall or wherever. Maybe I thought it was cool not to care they were there, even though I was dying to look. Or maybe I was a little bit jealous when I saw a celebrity because they had achieved the kind of fame I hoped my budding acting career would someday give me. In any case, Charley was staring across our table in a gay restaurant directly at Rock Hudson and I wanted him to stop right *this minute*.

I softly told Charley that we shouldn't be bothering the man and to stop staring. Charley sheepishly returned to his menu for a moment and then his eyes darted up again, taking in the famous sight five feet away. I tried making conversation, which was hopeless, and while the waiter provided needed interruption by bringing our drinks and getting our order, Charley continued to look.

I was definitely jealous, not only of being upstaged by a movie star at my anniversary dinner, but because I wanted to look at him so badly myself, and Charley had the perfect view. I would have had to turn my head to my right, away from Charley, which would have been an obvious gawk and I couldn't bring myself to do it. So instead I pestered poor Charley for the next ten minutes about how rude he was and how I couldn't believe he found the man so fascinating and why couldn't he pay attention to me on this special night and all sorts of other such lies.

"You men having any fun?"

There was no mistaking the voice, and I looked up from my pouting stance to Charley, who was grinning across our table at the man to our right. "Sure," Charley managed to say. I looked to the forbidden right, and Rock Hudson was smiling at me. The residue frown displayed on my face quickly became my best McDonalds smile as I looked at him, utterly taken in. I was a star struck boy from Louisiana and there was no hiding it now.

"Yeah, me too," I said. How completely embarrassing.

“You sure?” he asked, “Because my friend and I were just discussing it, and I was saying that the two of you were having a fight.”

Rock Hudson was discussing me. Rock Hudson was discussing me.

“Uh no, not at all,” I lied, jumping in before Charley had a chance to say what a bitch I was and how I thought you shouldn’t ogle movie stars. “I think we’re just kinda tired. As a matter of fact, today is our anniversary and we’re celebrating.”

“Yeah,” said Charley, “we’re doing fine. How are you tonight?” He was playing along, had forgiven me, and was asking Rock Hudson a question. This was unbelievable.

“Just great, thank you. You boys need another drink to help you celebrate.” He motioned for the waiter nearby, and ordered all of us a round. The service was excellent, wouldn’t you know.

There was a bit more small talk and we slowly settled into our meals, Charley and I on our best behavior, eating politely, chewing slowly, smiling at each other. And extremely aware of the presence next to us. They talked and drank, and if they actually ate I don’t remember the food being delivered to their corner table. What *was* being delivered was round after round of cocktails which the two men gulped heartily. Another round or two was brought to our table as well, which we accepted graciously with a nod and a thanks. Yet after our few moments earlier of being received by the icon, we dared not invite another conversation.

We were enjoying our cake, brought to us with a candle but without song, when he spoke up again.

“It’s really wonderful that you two are having an anniversary. How long have you been together?”

“Three years,” we said in unison.

“That’s just great. Congratulations.” At this point he introduced his friend, who went “way back” and who’s name I couldn’t tell you in a million years, and then he offered an invitation. “Come sit with us, boys. Have a drink. It’s a special occasion.”

I looked at Charley, holding on to my “protect their privacy” stance for a few more seconds, but he had already risen to join them. What the hell. Like I would have refused. This is incredible, I thought as I took my spot beside Rock Hudson because I would have broken Charley’s arm if he had tried that seat and he knew it. Another round of drinks appeared, and the star launched into clever anecdotes and stories that I don’t quite remember but I’m sure were more than fascinating at the time.

The conversation wandered onto Trivial Pursuit, the game which was then new and all the rage. Everyone we knew seemed to have one and it was a standard after-dinner entertainment.

“Yes, I’ve heard of that,” Rock said. “I haven’t played it yet.”

“We’ve got the game, Rock. You should really come over some time and we’ll play it with you,” Charley said. I couldn’t believe what he was saying. He actually called Mr. Rock Hudson “Rock.” I hadn’t called him anything yet, not knowing exactly *what* to call the man. And close on the heels of this thought was the revelation that my partner had just invited this man “over some time,” like that was really in the realm of possibility.

More drinks arrived. This man can drink like a cow, I thought, and not even show it. He didn’t seem in the least bit drunk. He was playful, though, and shot a few looks my way that I would have taken quite differently if it weren’t clear I was celebrating my anniversary with the man to my immediate left. But I did love it, and was completely devoted to giving him attention and smiles and chuckles in all the right places.

“It’s a great game,” I found myself saying. “You wanna come over and play it with us?” I was a teensy bit smashed, no doubt about it.

“Yes, I would.”

I’m sure there was more to it, more of a rationale as to why he felt comfortable crashing our anniversary evening and coming over to play Trivial Pursuit, but I don’t remember. All I can tell you is that within a few minutes we were making arrangements for him to stop in. His friend kindly begged off of the event, and it was decided that Charley would take his friend home while I rode with Rock so he had no problem finding our apartment.

What sort of small talk do you make on your way to your apartment with a movie star driving? I believe I spent most of my time giving directions. I still will never believe he parked his classy import on Edgewood Avenue, because it made me nervous parking *my* car there. Once inside, I discovered a full bottle of Scotch, his liquor of choice, and poured him a drink. I prepared the game and showed him around all five rooms of our apartment until Charley got back.

I was no fool. What we had here was a prescription for something ... unseemly. Of course it was on my mind, and I had heard the stories about certain celebrities and even Rock Hudson himself for crying out loud, but I was barreling through these bizarre circumstances and wasn’t weighing the specific possibilities. Hell, even if I knew for certain what was to come I would have pursued it.

I was pursuing it *because* I suspected what was to come.

We played the game for a couple of hours at least, Rock winning and drinking. Before it was over the Scotch would be history and I would offer to roll a joint. “Pot makes me horny,” he had said “so I don’t know if I should ...” and of course I was passing him the joint faster than you could say Star Fucker.

He talked about movies. And sex. And people he loved and hated. I knew I was getting the basic stock tales he liked to tell the most but I didn’t care. The juiciest began with “I was really drunk one night when” and the meanest had to do with people he thought had treated him badly professionally (“You need Julie Andrews like you need a knife in your back,” said he).

Charley had taken it all in, but knew when enough was enough. He excused himself quite late to go to bed, Rock offered to go, I wouldn’t hear of it, and we continued sitting in the dining room passing the joint.

At twenty one years old I had navigated life long enough to know what was being played out. Questions floated about in the back balcony of my head, just within earshot. What kind of guy was I, was I going to have sex with this man right here in the living room? What about my anniversary? What about the man I loved asleep in the bedroom in the back of the apartment?

Was Rock Hudson as well hung as everyone said?

Some questions got my attention more than others, and I maneuvered the movie star in a flirtatious dance of predator and prey, exchanging our roles back and forth with the ease of the joint passing between us.

Charley will not be happy, I thought to myself, if I report to him tomorrow that I laid Rock Hudson in the living room as he slept. It might be best to invite Charley aboard.

Rock made motions for the umpteenth time that it was time to go home, so I slyly suggested that he say goodnight to Charley. I took him by the hand and led him to the bedroom and there, standing beside the bed as Charley looked up at Rock bleary eyed while Rock whispered an insincere goodnight, I drunkenly opened the pants of Mr. Rock Hudson. (And it would be entirely too easy to make some sort of “Giant” crack at this point—appropriate, no doubt about it—but way too easy.)

The fact that this was a famous escapade overruled the anniversary etiquette issues, because within moments Charley and I took the evening to its inevitable conclusion.

And so did he.

Thirty minutes or so later, I stood in my robe outside the bathroom, wondering what Rock Hudson thought about the rust stained bathtub in which he was quickly showering. The hurried, drunken sex acts we had just performed seemed

worlds away from Technicolor Doris Day comedies, to be sure. The roll in our kingsize bed was in near dark, as we all preferred, and done without the pretext of romance—no tender caresses or meaningful glances. The only direct look from the man came very late in the game, as it were. I stared down upon his face after the exhaustion of my own labored orgasm—too much bourbon, too much pot—and worked on catching my breath as my eyes adjusted to his face in the dark. And then there it was, staring back at me, with a surprisingly impatient look. Stern and almost elderly.

“Are you *done*?” he asked blankly.

Well, life ain’t the damned movies, I suppose.

I would make small talk with him as he towed dry and dressed, him saying something about calling sometime—but not offering his number of course—and then me, in a final act of staking my claim, asking for his *autograph*. Yes, so help me, I asked the damp, drunk and spent star to scribble “All my best, Rock Hudson” on a piece of notebook paper before his hasty exit down the duplex stairs and out to his waiting Rolls on the street below.

I watched the car pull away and walked slowly back to the bedroom, where Charley was already sound asleep and snoring. I laid down in the dark and mused about the night; not triumphant, not satisfied, just curiously pensive and wondering what exactly had been gained.

I had just bedded the ultimate male screen icon of a generation, and I hadn’t the slightest idea how to feel about it.

Rock Hudson was now a ghastly figure on a television screen in my living room. For weeks I would be bombarded with images of the ailing movie idol with AIDS. My heart raced every time the evening news began and some new tbit of information about his disease, his sex life, his kiss with Linda Evans on “Dynasty” the previous year, his lovers, his closeted homosexuality and his drug treatments were reported with morbid tones and oh-my-God urgency.

I had not yet been tested for HIV. In 1985, what was the point? There were no known effective treatments, the first drug treatment, AZT, was just being introduced and people with AIDS were dropping like flies. It was politically incorrect to get tested because it could lead to possible discrimination, brand you as terminal and assure you that every pathetic image of a dying AIDS patient you witnessed applied directly to you.

And that is exactly what the Rock Hudson coverage was doing to me, test or no test. Magazines and Dan Rather news stories were talking to me specifically, and it terrified me. ROCK HUDSON HAS AIDS, the headlines screamed,

AND MARK KING WILL DIE AS WELL. “Rock Hudson is now resting in his Los Angeles home beyond a doctors care,” reported Mary Hart on *Entertainment Tonight*, “and Mark, you’re an idiot if you think you can escape this now. You’re dead as a door nail, buddy. What were you *thinking?*”

The plane carrying Hudson to and from France for experimental treatment. The stretcher on the tarmac, photographed from above at night and showing a fuzzy picture of his body under a billowing sheet. Mark King will end up just like *this*, the media reported in my living room.

To make matters worse, Charley and I had told anyone who would listen about our evening at New York Company and our brush with celebrity. We edited the sleazy three-way portion of the tale, keeping it a secret from all but my closest friends. Now our story came back to haunt us, as friends asked if he seemed okay the night we saw him and *gee I wonder if you guys could have caught something.*

I was too stunned and disbelieving to cry about it. I would wrap myself in a blanket on the sofa and stare at the coverage without a word. Charley and I saw news reports together many times, and couldn’t bring ourselves to make the slightest comment or even look at each other. We would nod our heads at parties when someone said how tragic it was and excuse ourselves. At night I would lay in bed wide awake thinking about death.

My parents had been told the censored version of the anniversary night story that very next day, and called me in Los Angeles shortly after Rock was reported ill. “Why not go down to the hospital?” my father asked. “You could try to cheer him up, maybe bring Trivial Pursuit!” I explained the man had a million fans and wouldn’t remember me, without mentioning how truly trivial the pursuit had been.

In October of 1985 Rock Hudson died in his home. News reports tortured me for months to come.