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Opening Extract from...

Claire DeWitt and the Bohemian Highway

Written by Sarah Gran

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CLAIRE
DEWITT
AND THE
BOHEMIAN
HIGHWAY



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The detective thinks he is investigating a murder or a missing girl but truly he is investigating something else all together, something he cannot grasp hold of directly. Satisfaction will be rare. Uncertainty will be your natural state. Much of your life will be spent in the dark woods, no path visible, with fear and loneliness your only companions.

But answers exist. Solutions wait for you, trembling, pulling you to them, calling your name, even if you cannot hear. And when you are sure that you have been forgotten, and that every step has been wrong, and that the woods are swallowing you whole, remember this: I too was once in those woods, and I have emerged to give you, if not a map or a path, hopefully at least a few clues. Remember that I, if no one else, know you are there, and will never give up hope for you, not in this lifetime or the next. And the day I came out of the woods I saw the sun as I had never seen it before, which is the only consolation I can offer as of now.

I believe that someday, perhaps many lifetimes from now, all will be explained, and all mysteries will be solved. All knowledge will be free for the taking, including the biggest mystery of all — who we really are. But for now, each detective, alone in the woods, must take her clues, and solve her mysteries for herself.

— JACQUES SILETTE, *Détection*

I

San Francisco

I MET PAUL WHEN a friend of my friend Tabitha played at the Hotel Utah late one Thursday night. About twenty people were there to see the friend's friend's band. One of the about-twenty was Paul. I was at a table in the corner with Tabitha and her friend. Tabitha was tall and pole-thin with orange hair, and arms and legs covered with tattoos. Tabitha's friend was one of those guys who was too sweet to be real. Or desirable. He was a little younger than me and smiled like he meant it.

I saw Paul at the bar looking at me, and when he caught me looking he looked away. It happened a few more times, enough times that I was sure it wasn't my imagination. Things like that happened to me often enough, and it was not exactly noteworthy for a man to make eyes at me across a dark and dirty bar in San Francisco.

Except something about Paul, about his big dark eyes and his quick, shy, smile, a smile he tried to hide, made me take note.

At the end of the night I felt his eyes on me when Tabitha and I left the bar, and I wondered why he hadn't talked to me and I wondered if he'd planned that, too, to make me think about him, because with men you never can tell. At least I can't.

Two weeks later we went to the Hotel Utah again to see the

same band and Paul was there again. I wouldn't have admitted that that was why I went, but it was. Paul was friends with the guitar player. Tabitha's friend played drums. Paul and I avoided each other, although I didn't notice it at the time. He went over to sit with the band while they were hanging out drinking before the show and I left to go to the bathroom. I came back and Paul left to get a drink. I'd been thinking he was a kind of cute, kind of smart-looking guy who maybe I would meet and maybe I would sleep with.

But that night I felt something in the pit of my stomach, more bats than butterflies, and right before I finally shook his hand I felt a wave of dread come over me, like we were being pulled into a black undertow we couldn't fight our way out of. Or didn't want to.

Jacques Silette, the great detective, would have said we knew. That we knew what was coming and made the choice to pursue it. "Karma," he said once, "is not a sentence already printed. It is a series of words the author can arrange as she chooses."

Love. Murder. A broken heart. The professor in the drawing room with the candlestick. The detective in the bar with the gun. The guitar player backstage with the pick.

Maybe it was true: Life was a series of words we'd been given to arrange as we pleased, only no one seemed to know how. A word game with no right solution, a crossword puzzle where we couldn't quite remember the name of that song. 1962, "I Wish That We Were _____."

Finally we met.

"I'm Paul," he said, extending a cool rough hand, callused from years of guitar. He had dark eyes and his smile was a little wry, as if we were both in on a private joke.

"I'm Claire," I said, taking his hand.

"Are you also a musician?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm a private eye."

"Wow," he said. "That's so cool."

"I know," I said. "It is."

We talked for a while. We'd both been traveling, had been traveling for years, and we traded war stories. Holiday Inns in Sa-

vannah, missed flights in Orlando, grazed by a bullet in Detroit—maybe being a musician and a PI weren't so different. Except at least some people liked musicians. Paul was smart. You could jump up a few levels in conversation right away, without warming up. He wore a brown suit with white chalk stripes, frayed at the collar and cuffs, and he held but didn't wear a dark brown, almost black hat that was close to a fedora but not exactly. In San Francisco men knew how to dress. No cargo shorts and white sneakers, no pastel polo shirts and misplaced socks hiding an otherwise good man.

Tabitha spent half the night in the bathroom doing some awful coke—it was cut with horse dewormer or cat tranquilizer or dog stimulant, depending on who you believed. It was going around town. I did a little and tasted the chemicals thick in my throat and passed on the rest.

Later Tabitha's friend went home with a different girl and I found out he wasn't really a friend. He was a guy she'd been sleeping with. The girl he went home with was younger than us and her eyes were bright and her hair was long and blond and unbleached and she smiled with white, unbroken teeth.

Tabitha was too drunk and had had too much of the horse-deworming cocaine and started to cry. I gave Paul my number for another day and took her home.

"I was so stupid," she cried bitterly, stumbling down the street. "Someone that nice would never like me."

I didn't know what to say because it was true. Tabitha was a lot of things, many of them good, but nice wasn't one of them. I took her home, helped her get upstairs, and left her on the sofa watching *Spellbound*, her favorite movie. "Liverwurst," she muttered along with Ingrid Bergman.

When I got home Paul had already called. I called him back. It was two fifteen. We talked until the sun came up. He was one of those men who are shy in a crowd but not alone. He'd just come back from six months in Haiti, studying with *bokos* and their drummers. I didn't know much about music, not the technical parts, but we both understood what it was like to devote yourself to one thing above all else. Something you gave your life to, and

never knew if you were right to do it or not. It wasn't something you could talk to many people about.

We all want to be someone else. And sometimes we succeed in convincing ourselves we can be.

But it doesn't last, and our own true selves, broken and scarred, always win out in the end.

2

PAUL AND I DATED for a few months after that. Maybe closer to a half a year. Then I went to Peru for a week on the Case of the Silver Pearl and stayed for another six weeks studying coca leaves with a man I met in a bar in Lima. I could have called Paul, or written him, or emailed, or sent smoke signals, but I didn't. When I got back to San Francisco he was dating someone else and soon enough I was too. Or at least sleeping with someone, which was almost the same thing.

And one night a year or so after our thing, whatever our thing was, had ended, I ran into him at the Shanghai Low, a bar near my place in Chinatown. Paul had on an old leather jacket and brand-new blue jeans, dark blue and stiff with folded-up cuffs. We were both there to see a band play. We were, if not technically *nursing*, slowly drinking cocktails and talking about a trip he'd just taken to eastern Europe when my friend Lydia walked in the door. I saw the look on Paul's face before I turned around to see what he was looking at and saw Lydia.

I knew that look.

"Claire!"

"Lydia."

She sat with us and got a drink. Lydia was barely a friend. More like a woman I knew. An acquaintance. She was a friend of my friend Eli, Eli who had long ago moved to Los Angeles with his

lawyer husband, betraying us all by marrying well. But I liked Lydia okay. She was a tough girl from Hayward who'd worked hard to make herself into something she wanted to be. She played guitar in a fairly successful band called the Flying Fish. She had fancy, expensive tattoos up and down her arms. Her hair was long with short bangs and dyed black, and she wore a tight black T-shirt and cropped jeans and patent leather high heels that revealed more tattoos on her legs and ankles. Even without the high heels, she was a looker. With them, she was something else. Paul wasn't the only one staring when she walked into the bar.

Nice work if you can get it. You always get a little extra at the deli counter and you get fewer speeding tickets and no one tries to steal your place on line, ever. On the other hand, a pretty girl is always the object, never the subject. People think you're dumb and treat you accordingly, which is sometimes helpful but always annoying. I figure once you hit thirty it's diminishing returns on your investment anyway. Might as well move on and put your money into more useful skills.

That was me. Lydia was a different kind of girl; the kind who milked her symmetrical features and flat belly for all they were worth. I figured Lydia hadn't paid for a drink since she was fourteen. Fine with me if it made her happy. It was making Paul happy too. They started talking about bands and music and Cuban claves and Mexican *guitarras* and people they knew. Maybe they'd met before and just didn't remember. They knew plenty of the same people, not just me. But wouldn't they have remembered?

Maybe they'd met before but the other time wasn't the time. Maybe only this was the time that mattered.

Watching people fall in love is like watching two trains rush toward each other at top speed, with no way to stop them. I pretended to see someone I knew at the bar and wandered away. Then I really did see someone I knew, a PI named Oliver. He was a solid, mediocre PI who specialized in things like credit card fraud and embezzlement, the dull and damp shores of greed.

"Look," he said. "Lydia Nunez."

I'd forgotten Lydia was kind of famous. There weren't too many pretty girls out there playing guitar; the few who did got a

lot of coverage. San Francisco was, like New Orleans or Brooklyn, smugly proud of its local celebrities.

And besides, Lydia was a hell of a guitar player.

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s a friend of mine. You know her?”

“I wish,” he said. Oliver got that aching sad look men sometimes get when they want a woman they can’t have. Like he was losing a limb.

Oliver bought me a drink. Paul and Lydia came to get me when the band started, but I pretended I really wanted to talk to Oliver and told them to go without me. When I introduced Oliver to Lydia, he spilled half his drink on his lap. Later, I went downstairs looking for Lydia and Paul to say good night. But they were already gone.

That night I dreamed about Lydia for the first time. I was standing on the roof of my apartment building, surrounded by black, inky water. White stars glittered in the black sky above.

I watched Lydia drown.

“Help!” she screamed. Black muck was streaked on her face and matted her hair. “Help me!”

But I didn’t help. Instead I lit a cigarette and watched her drown. Then I put on a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses and watched her drown more closely.

“The client already knows the solution to his mystery,” Jacques Silette wrote. “But he doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t hire a detective to solve his mystery. He hires a detective to prove that his mystery can’t be solved.

“This applies equally, of course, to the detective herself.”

Two or three days later Lydia got my number from Eli and called me. We talked for a while about Eli and other people we knew in common and then got around to the real reason she’d called.

“So, are you sure you don’t mind?” she asked. “About me and Paul? Because we both really like you and—”

“No,” I said. “Of course I don’t mind. Me and Paul weren’t—”

“Oh, I know,” Lydia said. “I would never—I mean, if you’d still been—”

“No,” I said. “Really. So are you guys still—”

“Oh my God,” Lydia said. “I’ve seen him like every day. It’s been great.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said.

“Do you really think so?” Lydia said. “Do you really think it’s wonderful?”

Did I really think it was wonderful? *Wonderful* was probably an exaggeration. I thought it was fine. Maybe even good. I couldn’t say the last time I thought anything was exactly *wonderful*. That implied more joy than I may ever have felt. But that was what she wanted to hear.

“Yes,” I told her. “Of course. I think it’s *wonderful*.”

Lydia and Paul started a new band together, Bluebird. After a year or so Bluebird broke up and they each started their own bands again; Paul started a Rom-ish, Klezmer-ish outfit called Philemon and Lydia started a bluesy, roots-y, Harry Smith-inspired punk band called the Anthologies. I saw each band once or twice. They were good. Better than good. I saw Paul and Lydia together at an Anthologies show and they seemed happy, smiling and supportive and generally kind of joyous. And when they got married, one year later, they sent me a sterling silver magnifying glass from Tiffany’s, a kind of bridesmaid’s gift even though I wasn’t a bridesmaid. *Thank you*, the card with the glass said. I wasn’t sure if they were thanking me for introducing them or for stepping aside so gracefully.

I was invited to the wedding but I was in L.A. on the Case of the Omens of No Tomorrow. It was a good magnifying glass and I used it often until two years later when, stuck in Mexico City with no passport and no ID and little cash, I pawned it to pay a coyote named Francisco to smuggle me across the border.

Nothing lasts forever. Everything changes.

Maybe Lydia and Paul’s story wasn’t a series of words that had already been printed in ink. Maybe it was a novel they would write themselves. Maybe it could even have a happy ending.

Or maybe it would be just another crime story where someone kills somebody else and nobody pays and it’s never really over.

“Mysteries never end,” Constance Darling, Silette’s student, told me once. “And I always thought maybe none of them really get solved, either. We only pretend we understand when we can’t bear it anymore. We close the file and close the case, but that doesn’t mean we’ve found the truth, Claire. It only means that we’ve given up on this mystery and decided to look for the truth someplace else.”