

It was the last weekend of summer and Tara hadn't gone anywhere or done anything special. She was a social recluse, a misfit, the kind of woman that brings out prejudices in others toward cat lovers. Basically, Tara had no friends other than the people she was forced to be around. Still, she always wanted to fit in, especially during holidays or to at least participate in festivities. Since she wasn't the type to get invited to parties, rather she'd scour the papers looking for things to do. Boring to others but never boring to herself, she enjoyed her solitude like a free spirit. It was also this kind of lifestyle that allowed her to go off on last moment road trips.

Astoria, the town of wonder, is known for its mythical landscape and artist colonies. It has attracted filmmakers, artists, writers, and musicians. Mysteriously capturing the hearts of creative folks from all socioeconomic backgrounds, it was this place that would also capture the heart of Tara.

An avid primate enthusiast and all around animal lover, Tara dreamed of one day finding a new primate they call Bigfoot. Her childhood dream job was to live with the apes like Dian Fossey and study them in Africa. She never finished school though since it just wasn't for her, although she did love to read and delve deep into obscure interests. Even her hobbies were off the beaten path but Tara didn't care what others thought of her. She loved the idea of living in the land of Bigfoot.

Unfortunately for this pretty eccentric nerd, social anxiety prevented her from using her intellectual gifts in any purposeful way or from making a good living. After blowing through 15 jobs by the time she was 32, she settled on her current vocation, the longest job she held for the past 3 years as a toll booth operator. Portland Airport suited her just right. There was no one to bother her late at night, and she could read most of time she was supposed to be working. The city job offered her two weeks paid vacation which she reluctantly took in the first two weeks of January. Her co-workers were too nosy in her opinion, always asking what kind of plans she had for this or that weekend so she got her vacation over and done with first of the year and spent it watching Christmas special reruns while pretending to have visited relatives back east.

In total, this shy little fox went on 362 first dates, and zero second dates. Never did she kiss anyone except her pets which consisted of three dogs, two cats, four rabbits, one chinchilla, and a parakeet named Chase, who recently died after twelve years. The death of her bird so upset her that she recently took to drinking valerian tea and over-sleeping. Determined to recover from this recent tragedy, Tara began to wish she had a boyfriend instead of wishing her bird be brought back to life. So much did she miss Chase that she often dreamt about him. Perhaps it helped her from confronting the heartache of losing a beloved pet that

manifested such dreams. Perhaps it was all the extra sleep she'd been having that aroused such wishful fantasies. After two weeks of lucid dreaming about Chase, she knew it was bordering on unhealthy attachment, so she began to transmute her desire for her dead bird onto a desire for finding a human mate.

One night when Tara was lying in her bed sleeping peacefully, she had a dream that she was in an antique shopping mall. In this lucid dream world, she became her ideal self, a happy free-spirited woman without a care in the world and very well liked. It was also in this dream where she met a man that she instantly fell in love with. An experience that had never been mutually fulfilled until now. It was this complete and utter bliss that annihilated her sense of loss for Chase.

Love at first sight was not something this woman believed in, but after having such an experience, whether in real life or not, the emotions were the same if not even more intense in her dreams. She was made a believer of the old romantic cliché through personal experience. Tara decided to act on her passionate impulse to find this lover in real life and all the signs of where he could actually be pointed to the Oregon coastal town called Astoria.

Astoria is about 350 miles from Tara's condo. Because she had pets, she couldn't leave them alone longer than 24 hours. Her pedantic calculations of gas vs. mileage were uncertain.

"If I leave at 2:00 on Sunday, I can be back before 4:00," she said aloud repeatedly until she felt it would be a possible mission. Asking a neighbor for help was simply out of the question due to her reluctance to trust anyone.

"I love you Max, Heidi, I love you Franklin," she said to her dogs as she laid out newspapers all over the floor.

"I love you Paula, I love you Cisco, Jerry, Terry, Larry, Mary, and Mondo," she kissed them all on the tops of their heads.

Next, she went to her chinchilla sitting in a cage near the far front window. "I love you Mr. Whiskey," she scratched his little head and poured extra food pellets in his coral ceramic bowl that had his name painted on it.

When all was in order and she said her proper good-byes, Tara stood up and sighed.

"I'll be back, I promise."

Sadly, the animals didn't seem to believe her.

"Stop looking at me like that you guys," she whined.

"You behave yourselves and I'll bring you back some souvenirs."

And with that promise, she hiked up her red and yellow plaid skirt and rolled her suitcase over the pet pads and newspapers, stepping with her black combat boots over cat toys along the way.

Once she hit the road, she felt better about having left them all behind. It was a picture perfect scenic fall drive. Highway 5 was lined with massive pine trees, red and yellow oak trees, brown maples, and nearly balding white and grey birches. An autumnal kaleidoscope of 60 mph shapeshifting countryside. It was this part of the state that appealed to her girlhood curiosity and the reason why she moved all the way from the concrete of New York City. Nature spoke to her in ways that people just couldn't. Understandably, she wanted to feel accepted her whole life, but never felt that sense of belonging until she discovered her love for nature.

Junk food sprawled out across passenger seat of her volvo and Twenty One Pilots blaring over the car radio, she juggled to see the road in front of her. "Is this the right exit?" she asked herself. The map seemed to suggest she continue on toward the heart of the village. Once she arrived in front of a quaint bed and breakfast, she knew this was the place to be. It was an old house that looked haunted but Tara wasn't afraid of ghosts, in fact she welcomed any sort of company that took to her. Ghosts or no ghosts, Tara paid no attention to anything in her antique style room. There was no time to waste in here talking to ghosts. Tara had to go out and find that dream lover.

Her first stop was a boutique called *The Muse*. In here they served CBD dog biscuits as well as a complete spectrum of beauty and wellness products. It was a lovely store on the second story of a historic building. Fashioned with sunflowers and cheery burlesque style upholstery, it was a place that welcomed people from all walks of life. One could spend hours in here, but she had to hustle if she was going to find souvenirs for all her pets.

Next, she went to record store that sold rare vinyls, used 8 tracks and cassettes, incense, glass pipes and brass art, as well as handmade pet toys. Tara felt as if the plants were speaking to her as soon as she entered the atrium entrance where they called her to look up at the twisted bamboo plants hovering over her head. The aisles of records obscured by long locks of ivy and random kitty cats tilted like a maze she could get lost in. By the time she left it was close to 7 pm and all she got from there was a cat condo and canopy bed. Each of the cats would get a hand-painted terra cotta bowl with a catnip plant growing inside it. When she finally had all her gifts, she went back to the hotel, made a cup of hot water in the coffee pot and drank a cup of valerian tea but this time it was laced with some marijuana tincture she picked up at the Farmacy.

That night Tara would have the most amazing dream of all. This time she actually spoke to her dream lover.

"Who are you," she asked the grey man, holding on as hard as she could to him.

"I am your twin flame," he told her.

As she primped and preened herself in the mirror later that morning, Tara caught a glimpse of her former self frowning back at her. She never thought she'd wind up like this, a superstitious ninny. "How did I get here?" she asked her new self.

"Why are you here?" the mirror answered.

One of the first signs that one is heading toward a psychosis is talking to oneself and answering one's own questions as if it were a third person. She knew that much because she researched every mental disorder currently known to Western science. She hoped that she could prevent going crazy by arming herself with logic and equipping herself with knowledge just in case it ever would happen to her the way it happened to her mother. As long as she questioned her sanity, there was hope for her, or so she thought.

Determined to stop crazy dead in its tracks, Tara decided right then and there to stop placing too much importance on her dream life and start living her real life as if it were the only one she'd get. She also vowed to stop talking to herself. However, there was no point in rushing back to Portland just yet, not when the harvest festival was taking place downtown.

It was nine in the morning by the time she left the hotel. The town was just starting to wake up and the farmer's market was just getting set up. It was drizzling rain and the morning still scented with ocean dew droplets and decaying wet leaves. Shopkeepers began straggling in clanking their keys like overworked and overtired overseers. Tourists strolled past them like tightrope walkers peeking through windows and gasping in awe at the displays of art.

Tara felt a presence of someone nearby. The hairs on the back of her neck stiffened as she gazed into a store front window reflection. She whipped her head around and bumped into a drenched windbreaker. She looked up and saw a man with an umbrella reach out to catch her from falling. She took a step away to get a better look and hit her back to the wall. It was HIM-- her dream lover. His eyes were the same grey color of Astoria skies and his hair nearly matched it too except for the

waves of black he still had in it. He moved slowly out of her way, but she didn't budge.

"Do I know you?" she asked with such great hesitation that it came out in a garbled whisper.

The man sort of laughed and overlooked her awkwardness out of politeness perhaps. He bent his head down toward her really close as if to show her that he was nothing to be afraid of. He peered directly into her eyes and gave her an enthusiastic friendly smile. Breaking all the rules that strangers have for personal space, she welcomed his closeness.

"I don't know," he stuttered.

His voice was soft like a shy intellectual who rarely spoke at all.

"You tell me. *Have we met before?*"

Tara's stomach dropped as it did going down hills and valleys during the drive over here, but she ignored her fears, hoping that her social anxiety would just go away once she got to know him a little better, which she most certainly wanted to do. He was pleased that she showed such fascination.

"I do believe that I know you," she spoke with her hand covering her mouth.

Partly in disbelief, partly to hold back an urge to vomit all over him, she kept her fingers over her lips.

"Are you feeling well?" he asked. "Shall I fetch you a glass of water?"

"No, I'm fine. It's just that I'm a bit shocked to see you here," she said.

The man brushed her blond hair away from her face.

"I know what may make you feel better. Care to come with me to my pizza parlor? It's just across the street on the dock."

Tara giggled with her hand still covering her mouth.

"I do wish you'd show me your smile. I bet it is gorgeous", he said.

They laughed but Tara didn't say anything. She was too much in shock.

"I know this may sound strange," he said, "I would very much like to get to know you better."

Tara sighed. "What's your name?" she asked looking at him sideways.

The tall grey man offered his right arm to her and said,

“My name is Quentin.”

They shook hands like salesmen, affirming their mutual interest. Then she reached for that arm he offered and held onto him as they strolled together under his umbrella. Soon, she felt as if they had known each other forever. He pointed out places of interest along the way and offered her random trivia facts about the town. Delighted with his vast array of knowledge, Tara lost track of time until the pizza showed up at the table.

Quentin poured her a beer. “Now it’s your turn to talk,” he said.

Not one to do well in the spotlight, she feared she might forget herself and bore him with long discussions about the complex bonding behavior of bonobos or something of that nature. Tara touched the icy droplets trickling down her beer mug and used that as a focal point as she decided to say whatever was on her mind. She couldn’t be anything but honest about herself. It just felt creepy for her to fake small talk.

Finally she gathered up enough courage to say what was on her mind.

“I do feel like I know you.”

“Yes, so do I,” said Quentin.

Tara bit her lip and gushed. “Did you have a dream about me last night too?”

Quentin tried to keep his smile going.

“Uhh...I think so.”

“Do I...um...know you?” she asked.

Quentin squirmed in his twisted wooden stool and waited for her to say something else.

“Well, have you been dreaming of me too?” she asked, frightened at his reaction.

She looked in his eyes now and remembered the creases around his face were exactly the same as she remembered them. He had to know her if this was at all real.

He brushed off the question with a new and bigger smile.

“Sort of,” he answered.

“Sort of what?” she demanded. “You either remember me or not.” Her nature was that of a scientist, not a romantic artist.

Quentin continued to avoid the question.

Tara crossed her arms in front of her.

“Why do I feel like I’m in love with you?” she asked point blank.

Quentin couldn't maintain further eye contact but rather looked away. Quentin no longer could hold his smile although he still tried. His mouth quivered and his eyes widened, yet the grin stayed plastered on his face and gave her a Jekyll and Hyde sort of vibe.

“I don't know,” he shrugged and covered his mouth as if to go into deep thought. “I'm not sure what to say.”

Any other guy would have turned tail and ran off by now, but not him, which made him very suspicious. Usually when Tara said something too direct or honest like this, she was sure to push the guy away. Since he continued to show the same level of interest, Tara was certain that this man was putting on some sort of act. The question now was, why?

“Who are you?” she asked. “Why have I been dreaming of you?”

Her curiosity often annoyed others, but she didn't care. She was far more concerned about ideas than about people's feelings toward her. Quentin could no longer hold his smile and took to drinking his beer. He looked sheepishly around the room and twitched whenever he tried to regain eye contact. Tara simply sat there observing him one inspects a cornered rat.

As if to give him one last chance for escape, she asked with a skeptical eye, “Do you even know who you are?”

Poor Quentin's hands began to tremble, and beads of sweat started to form along his receding hairline.

“Does the cat have your tongue or something?” Tara chided.

He shook his head no and found the nerve to smile again, however he continued looking away from her, smiling like an android, or something far more sinister. One thing was for sure, even if he knew who he was or why he was there, he wasn't ever about to tell her the truth.

“I have to go,” Tara said and shuffled through her purse for a \$20 bill and dropped that on the table. She looked at him cockeyed before swigging the last few ounces of her beer.

On the way out of the restaurant, an old sailor looking fellow blocked her from the exit.

"Excuse me," she said to the sailor on the way out.

The menacing man in the doorway didn't say anything but he threatened her with his oppressive body language that blockaded the doorway. All around the restaurant people ignored them, but the bartender saw her struggle to get past and even he didn't pay them any attention. Tara reached in her pocket for a bottle of pepper spray and was ready to use it. She elbowed her way around him and he finally stepped away from the door.

That was probably the strangest date Tara had ever been on. The fresh air whipped her awake. Glad to have her wits about her again, she walked straighter than ever, taking longer and longer strides and never looking back.

"Hey missss," someone whispered from the alleyway.

Tara kept right on walking but turned her head ever so slightly to the side to see who was behind her. From her peripheral vision she saw that it was looked like a couple following her. They both wore black hoodies the way new couples like to dress the same. Their faces were covered but she could tell that one was male and the other was female. Tara ran and they ran after her. They chased her all the way to the trolley until she escaped by jumping onto it. The driver put on the breaks and the couple disappeared somewhere in the mist.

"Hey miss" the driver called, "You can't jump onto a moving trolley. It's against the law. I'm gonna have to call the police."

"Good, call the police." Tara was too out of breath to argue.

Once the police arrived, Tara explained what happened and why she had to jump aboard the moving vessel. The police took the report and showed her sympathy. It was 1 pm and Tara was fretting to get back home.

"Would you like a ride back to your hotel?" one of the cops offered.

Tara was relieved and accepted with no hesitation. It was now 1:15 and the streets were busy with tourists going about their own business, not having a clue as to what just happened. Tara rode in the backseat of the police car and wished she knew who Quentin was and where he came from. Perhaps this was the first stage of a nervous breakdown brought on by the death of her bird.

The driver kept quiet and let the other cop do all the talking as she thought up various

hypotheses. It seemed as if she was the only person who would ever care about the incident. Tara was still shaken and felt the cop's chatter was a purposeful diversion and she wanted him to shut up. What she really wanted to talk about was who were those people and why were they chasing her. It was no use asking for help. The police didn't make a big deal about this. As if this sort of thing happened all the time and one just had to forget about it and move on, they acted as if she made it all up in her head.

"You missed the turn," Tara snapped.

But the driver didn't pay any attention as usual, but instead drove faster while the passenger cop explained why they were taking her into the police station.

"We're not taking you into custody, nor is this an arrest, it's simply a matter of precaution. We have to follow procedure or else everyone will be jumping onto trolleys. You'll have to fill out a few more forms."

"But I didn't do anything," Tara insisted.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's what they all say. We have to follow orders."

"Who's orders are you following?" she asked.
They didn't respond to her but kept driving.

"Excuse me, but I have a right to know where you are taking me and why you are detaining me?"

The passenger cop began to respond the same way Quentin did when she started asking probing him with questions. She'd get no honest answers with them either. That she knew for sure.

"Fuck. This. Shit. Let me out of the car now." Tara reached around for a door handle but there was none.

Now the cops started changing very quietly and she had no idea what language it was. White metal bars protected divided the front seat from the back. They kept driving, ignoring her as she struggled to escape.

"Stop that right now or we're gonna have to arrest you," the passenger cop

Warned. "I don't want to have you have an accident."

Tara caught a vision of the driver through the rearview mirror. He appeared just for a moment as an ape. His face was covered with amber hair like Chewbacca. For just an instant he appeared like this to her, then reverted back to his human form.

"Who are you people," Tara cried. "What do you want with me."

"Now, now," the passenger cop tried to assure her, "You're not in any danger."

The policemen their eyes at each other and pulled the car over. The passenger cop pulled out his handcuffs and had a hanky soaked with chloroform. The driver radioed for assistance. Tara grabbed her pepper spray in her coat pocket. As soon as the policeman opened the door, she sprayed his nose and eyes with it. He keeled over gasping for air. Tara removed his gun and cocked it at the driver's head as the passenger cop accidentally made himself pass out by rubbing his eyes with the hanky. The driver raised his hands in the air and she sprayed him in the face as well before running away. Nobody saw them as they were too busy going about their own business.

Tara was running when she felt a jolt of electricity shoot down her spine. She lay on the sidewalk convulsing. A elderly woman with a beige trenchcoat was standing over her looking around to see if any witnesses were around. There was only a father and son shoving their faces with chili-cheese-dogs. The old lady shuddered and said, "Goonie dogs, the breakfast of champions."

Tara couldn't speak or move. The woman held her head so that it wouldn't hit the pavement. "There, there my love," she said, "You are like a wild stallion that simply will not be broken."

A giant man with huge muscles stood above her. "I'll carry her to the car now."
The old woman brushed Tara's hair back and kissed her on the forehead. "My dear, all is going to be alright, have faith."

Tara looked at the woman's watch. It was almost 2 pm. Her last thoughts were on her pets.

"Tsk, tsk, my love. We'll take good care of your pets."

Tara's eyes widened. This woman could read her mind.

"Hey boss. We gotta hurry before someone sees us."

The old woman stepped aside to allow the big brute room to pick her up.

He placed her in a black sedan that also was free from passenger handles. Tara couldn't move still but continued to convulse.

"I had to taser you for your own good," the elderly woman said.

The brute drove the car and chuckled. "This one has one heck of a spirit."

The old woman agreed with a look of pride that only a grandmother could give. "I know everything you're thinking so don't bother trying to talk. As soon as you relax enough, you'll be able to read my mind as well. That is, if you want to and if I want you to, we can share thoughts, or even dreams with each other." The driver and her cackled as Tara was struck with the realization of what had been going on for the past few weeks in her dreams.

"Nothing to be abashed about," said the old woman reading her mind.

"You should be proud of yourself actually. It's okay. Yes, your pets are okay. Someone is heading over there right now to get them out of that dreadful condo you call home. Pretty soon, you'll be living in a mansion under the sea. We call it, Hotel Astoria. It's run by Sasquatches. Oh you know them."

Tears spilled out of Tara's eyes yet her facial expression didn't change. The beige lady elbowed her bodyguard to dry her face or hug her or do something to help her, but none of them knew how to make her feel better.

"This is just something you'll have to learn to accept," the old woman said as she did her best to convey compassion by laying the palm of her hand on the top of Tara's head. "You're stronger than you believe you are."

The car pulled up to a cliff along the mountain side. "She is the most obsessed one I ever had to watch," said the bodyguard chuckling to himself.

"You sure this is a good idea Madame Tourpier?"

She nodded. "Hank, how many times have I told you to not question my plans?"

Tara was there physically but not mentally. She became mute the same way she did when she was a little girl and was taken away from her mother.

“What floor are we going to?” Hank asked.

“I’m taking her to my own special private reserve,” Mrs. Tourpier announced.

The bodyguard made a motion with his hand and a large boulder moved. Behind it was an elevator panel. They walked right into the side of the mountain that was tunneled out in all directions but mostly it went deep down inside the earth.