

Visions

By Marty Weber

A brisk wind begets the singing of the leaves in autumn. The orange and red of the sun glistens off the blue of the river. It was a clear day and going to be a clear night, perfect for beer, cheese, and the company of an old friend. A tray of cheese and crackers made an abrupt landing on the table between my friend Gale and me.

“Woah, babe! You ok?” I asked, startled by my wife’s delivery of food.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. Sarah was normally quite graceful in her movements.

“*CH- eeese*, Sarah, careful! Your wooden table ain’t exactly steel reinforced.” My friend, Gale, never misses a beat with his jokes, no matter how Sarah reacts.

“That was so funny, Gale! You should go down to the river and do standup. I think the crickets need the company.” Without letting Gale reply, she spun her head around to walk through the patio doorway and check on dinner.

“Was it something I said?” he asked. Gale was kind of a little bit of clueless mixed with a little bit of not- giving-a-fuck-what-people-thought-of-his-humor. So I said to him,

“I think it was something you were born with, amigo.” He laughed at me and looked out towards the river as he sipped his beer, “She probably just had a long day at the studio. Don’t harp on her too much, please?”

“I got you, Raf. You can always count on me!”

Sarah yelled from the kitchen, “Yeah, to eat our food!”

“Aww, I’m hurt!” I know he sees me roll my eyes. Then he grabbed a couple things of cheese and crackers and stuffed his face. “So how are them doggies doing?”

“They’re great, they’re healthy, just the way I like ‘em. River’s been showing her age a little, but other than that, she’s fine,” I said. I reached for my beer to take a swig.

“So how did you and Sarah meet, again? It was something to do with Wave?” he asked.

“Oh right! I never finished the story the last time.” Wave was kind of my father’s dog, but didn’t have him for very long. Wave became my best friend the moment I saw those stupid baby blue eyes, always getting me to do things for him, slip him a piece of burger, or cheese. I swear he was me if I were a dog. “Wave literally lead me to Sarah.”

Wave was pulling me along the littered sidewalk on a New York rainy night. It was like my eyes were being pulled into the raindrops. Someone ran into him with his black fat tire bike, so I couldn’t really see the guy. Wave’s a big boy, so it didn’t seem to hurt him too bad

“F--- you!” he said. At least that’s what I think he said. I couldn’t tell between the barrage of rain and the yelp of my dog. Yeah, fuck me right? Just trying to take care of my dog here. Wave was walking with a limp, so I carried him back to my apartment.

The elevator drags me up to my apartment with Wave in my arms, feels like lifting 250 at the gym. We get inside so I can take a look at where Wave was hit. I tried looking while we sit on the couch to see how bad it looked. It was somewhere on his leg. But between his hair hiding it and him licking my face, the location of the injury was not visible. I figured I should take him to the vet just to be safe but they were closed until tomorrow. So I grabbed an ice pack, wrapped it in a thin towel, and held it on his leg for twenty minutes. I was hoping it did something after getting attacked by his tongue for twenty minutes—his way of thanking me I guess.

Four walls painted white, a taunting white, waiting to crash down over me. Wave made me nervous when a cat was in the room. He never did anything, just stared, ready to make a move; it made me anxious. I always found myself in these places, waiting, waiting for the answers to come to me, to save me. I've never found them.

I never liked Wave getting hurt; it always freaked me out. He was my best friend. If I lost him, my heart would just burst for that big oaf of a black lab.

"Mr. Santos?" the receptionist said as she entered the room.

"Santos, actually, Rafael Santos," I corrected her.

"Oh! My apologies Mr. Santos."

"It's quite alright," I told her.

"Dr. Evans will see you now. Go right on in," she said.

“Thank you,” I said. The vet greeted us as we walked in.

“Hello. How can I help you today?” She asked. I thought I was talking with a short blonde robot. She must be good. All the great smart people have no social skills. She barely moved from her place by the table.

“Well, I was running yesterday and some guy ran into Wave here with his bike. It doesn’t seem to bother him, but he’s still walking with a little limp. I just wanted to be sure he’s ok.” Dr. Evans had me lift Wave up onto the table. She took a look, asked me questions, and gave me a sucker. I have no idea why she did that. This wasn’t the dentist and I wasn’t 12. After being told I shouldn’t worry, and about 500 bucks later, we were out the door.

Since I had the afternoon off, I took Wave to the park nearby our place. It was an hour of him dropping the Frisbee every throw and running into bushes, one time he hit a tree. He shrugged it off. Apparently a bike hurts more than a tree. I decided to leave and went to put his leash on. He bolted underneath my legs, not between my legs, underneath, bringing me to the ground. As I’m getting up, he’s running over to this chocolate lab with a smooth coat.

“Dammit, Wave. Get over here!” He was not listening to me. That was weird; he would always listen to me.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. They seem to like each other,” The voice came from the owner of the chocolate lab. I looked up into the blue eyes of a woman, as she helped me up. “Sorry about River. She gets excited around other dogs. How old is yours?” Eyes tend to catch my glance, but I was apparently staring. I was trying to remember something that her eyes made me think of. Then I spoke up,

“Oh, um, he’s about 7 now. Yours?” I asked.

“This little lady is just 5 years old. What’s his name?”

“I named him Wave,” I said.

“Wave? Does he like to play in the water?” she said. I replied,

“No, that’s what he feels like when he jumps on you. haha.” She laughed; it was cute. I loved it. “What about you? Where did River get her name?”

“Well, when she was only a few months old, she could slip past all the people trying to catch her. My family used to live on a farm, and she liked to escape from the house to run around in the fields. Always was difficult trying to catch her.”

I figured it out. The blue in her eyes reminded me of Wave’s baby blue eyes when he was just a pup. I could always feel him intimately saying something to me through his eyes.

“I’m Sarah by the way,” she said. A new record, I never talked to a girl this long before, “What do I call you?”

“Santos. I’m Rafael Santos.”

“Like the painter?” she asked.

“That. And my family is very catholic,” I said.

“Very nice,” She smiled and I returned the smile in kind, “well I should take River home, she needs to eat. It was lovely meeting you.”

I don’t know what possessed me, “Do you want to grab coffee?” She looked slightly confused at my question, “I mean sometime... in the future, the near future.” Why did I just ask that? We only just met. Coffee? I don’t even like coffee.

"I'd love to." She said, and gave her smile again, "Let me give you my number." I told her I would call her and we parted ways.

After deciding to not text her that same evening and freak her out, I called her the next day, Saturday morning. "Hi, Sarah? It's Rafael, from the park?" Phone calls always make me anxious.

"Well, hello there!" She was so bubbly.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to Roots, the scones there are delicious," I paused for a split-second, "I know it's a little short notice, but I was—"

"You read my mind. I love scones!" ok, she was still cute, but the bubbly energy was starting to get annoying, Then I hear her yell, "River! Don't even think about it!" So, she's not completely bubbly.

"Sorry about that. So this afternoon, about 3 or so?" she asked.

"3 is perfecto!" I said. *Perfecto?* Why would I say that?

"Great! I will see you then," And we hung up.

I was kind of hoping for a day without, ya know, people, but I had to go on a stupid date instead. Wave was fine. He was all I needed. What sort of spell did she put me under?! It's been forever since I've been on a date. Maybe my biological clock was just messing with me. *Oh, shut up about it.* I was thinking a thousand thoughts a thousand times a second, and it's a half an hour before 3. I thought my brain was going to crash. Or worse, I'd freak out and leave her in the middle of it. I can't leave Wave. He needs me here to.... Make sure he's ok and stuff. *Bullshit, you know it.* I can't go on this date; it's not going to go well. She's going to think I'm boring and never date me again and I'm going to die alone in a lonely urn. *Wow that escalated*

quick, don't ya think? I went into the bathroom and grabbed the pills I took for depression and anxiety. I shook a couple out in my hand and shoved them in my mouth, and then I went to the kitchen to chase the pills with water. I looked at the time: 2:42. It would take about 15 minutes to walk to Sarah's address she gave me. I looked at Wave as he sat on the couch, staring me down with those damn eyes. 2:44. Ok, now or never. I looked at Wave for a long moment. Then, I turned around and walked out the door. I had a knot in my stomach, but at least I was walking.

We were walking along the bike path near the river. Leaves were still clinging to the trees. Her black flats were carrying her 5'2" petite body with grace.

"Those scones were delicious. I can't believe you don't like scones," Sarah said, "Why did you invite me for a scone?"

"I figured you were a scone girl. The muffins are enough for me."

"How'd you manage to guess that?"

After a small pause, I said, "Something about your eyes." She turned slightly red at this. We had been talking for hours about nearly everything. It was almost like we already knew each other and were meeting up after a long time apart.

"Well, that's very specific." She was trying to get past the fact of her blushing cheeks. She looked out over the river as we kept walking, and then turned back to me, "So your family's catholic?"

“Yes, bonified catholic. My Grandmother would hit us with a shoe when we said something bad, and dragged us to mass on Sundays.”

“A shoe?” she asked.

“Yeah, you know, taking the Lord’s name in vain, saying things like “crap”, or just being lazy not doing anything. She used to say, “Only the devil stays idle, Raffy.” But really, she was a sweet old lady.”

“Haha. What about church, do you still go?” she asked.

“Not so much anymore. It’s been a few years since I moved out here,” I said.

“And your family’s from Connecticut?”

“Yeah, one of the few in the little town of Colebrook,” I said. I started looking away towards the street at all the cars and buildings, people walking through the clouds of pollution. They know what’s happening to them.

“So why New York?” she asked me.

“Why are you in New York?” I tried to avoid the answer, knowing where it would lead.

“I believe I asked you first.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear your answer first,” I said. Wind was picking up, but neither of us cared. We were autumn people. The blue in her eyes kept me fixated on her, like I could see more of her than she was telling me.

“Alright,” she said. “My family was in Buffalo where I grew up. I always wanted to be a dancer, since I was little. So here I am in a place where anything can happen.” She was a twister of purple and red flowers on her dress. The way her

smile lifted both cheeks, draped by her chestnut hair, I could tell she loved what she did.

“And has that dream become a reality?” I asked.

“No, you don’t. I’m not letting you off the hook, Connecticut boy. Why NYC? Why come here?”

Do I tell her? I thought to myself. It’s insane; we only just met. But I’m beginning to like her. There’s a strong connection, but I barely know her. *Oh shut up.* I was thinking too much, and there she was staring at me waiting for an answer. I haven’t jumped off of a cliff in a while, so why not tell her.

“I had to get away,” I said as I looked down at the ground overlooking a bend in the river. There was a moment of quiet. Then she said,

“Away from what?”

“My father.” It was hard to make eye contact with her now. But she pulled my face up to hers, leaned in and kissed me. After several moments, she pulled away and our eyes opened to each other. She understood and didn’t need to hear anymore. She didn’t need to say anything, but I could tell.

We walked back to my apartment. I never felt like this; it felt crazy. After 33 years, what the hell am I doing? Bringing a woman I met barely a day ago, to my apartment. We kept talking, had dinner, and talked some more; she told me about her dancing being a struggle, and I told her about the boring software job and the stories that didn’t go anywhere. We arrived at my door and I asked if she would like to stay. But she needed to get home, she said. She was worrying about River. We

said goodbye at the door, and she pulled her hair behind her ear before turning to leave. Her eyes darted to the floor as she walked away.

I began to wonder what that departing look meant. *Stop thinking about it. That was great!* Maybe it was nothing. It was a fun time. The day could've been another Saturday with a sad movie and my dog to *survive*, get through the day. But then, she came along. I couldn't wait to see her again.

Then, I saw the pill bottle on the counter. She could've seen them from the door. *Oh god.* Is that why she walked away the way she did? I grabbed the pills and tossed them back into the drawer in the bathroom, and went to my bed.

Thursday. I was freaking out. I called in sick. *You're not sick, you know that.* Another day of missed work, that's the third one this month. Maybe my boss thought I was so skinny, that's why I get sick so often. They couldn't get rid of me. Who else can lift boxes from the top shelf? I tried watching a little netflix. It was a dramatic episode, so that didn't help. I took a shower, played music, and burned incense. Wave was licking my face and it was 9:03am.

I hadn't called Sarah. *Was I supposed to call Sarah? Would she call me? This week has been hell. Work has been annoying. I'm not any closer in my story I'm working on. The main character can't get past that goddamn first chapter. I need to see Sarah. I don't want to see Sarah. Is that a weird thought if we only just met? Is she*

weirded out by my anxiety pills? Wave was curled up like a ball, a ball that takes up my whole couch, but he's my ball of fur.

I felt my phone vibrate on the couch and I see a text. It's from Sarah,

Sarah: Heyy, how's it going?

Me: Hi! It's all right. Long week at work. What about you?

Sarah: Had a couple of auditions, and the coffee house is still a coffee house, haha.

Me: Nice. When do you hear about the auditions?

Sarah: Oh, not for a few days, so probably not until Monday. It's always nerve-wracking, lol.

Sarah: Sooo whatcha up to tonight?

Me: I had no plans, why? I want to see her. I could have just been a little more excited about talking to her.

Sarah: Wanna get together? This was perfect. I didn't even have to ask.

Me: I would love to. What time?

Sarah: How about 7pm? There's a place by the river with a patio. They have really good sushi. Does that sound perfect? ☺ Sushi did sound pretty good, and I could use an open space in the air.

Me: Perfecto ☺

"I don't know what you were eating, but that was terrible!" I said.

“Those tacos were delicious and the sushi was delightful. It just hasn’t grown on you, yet,” she said.

“I don’t want any of that stuff to grow on me.” I put my key into the door of my apartment. She brought River along, which was fine with me. Maybe Wave will be too busy to mess with us.

“Oh you’re just afraid to try new things!”

“Yes, I am afraid to try food that looks like it was made in the back of a van. And I’m trying you out aren’t I?” I said.

“Oh? I’m just a tryout, am I?”

“No, no. No. You’ve moved past the tryout phase. You’ve won!”

“And what exactly did I win?” She was staring me down, her eyebrows furrowed. I was scrambling for a response,

“Ummm... me?” I said as I smiled at her. She deflated and started to laugh.

“And what a prize you are on a Saturday night,” she walked up to me, grabbed me, and kissed me. I pulled back for a moment. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Sorry, I got something in my throat,” I went to the kitchen sink for water, “I just need a drink,” I lied. I was getting nervous. Wave must have sensed this as he came running in.

“Hi Wave!” she said. He attacked her face with his tongue. “Hi buddy.” Wave seems to like her. She was rubbing Wave’s belly and looked up at me, “So tell me about your father. You said you wanted to get away from him. Why? What did he do?”

I didn't like where this was headed. I drank from my water, and then I set down my glass. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because we have been on 3 dates with a million conversations, and every time we get close to a topic about your family or Colebrook, you change the subject. For everything you've told me about your family, I know very little about them."

"He didn't do anything," I said. She didn't show any signs of letting me off easy.

"Well, why-" I cut her off.

"It's not what he did. It's what he didn't do; it's what was done to him," I said. I knew that wouldn't be enough for her. I began to notice my grip tightening on my kitchen chair, "The alcohol never really helped matters." It was silent for a few minutes. Car horns blasted outside, and people were being loud. I was waiting for her to tell me it's okay, that I'm not my father and I won't end up like him. She walked up to me and kissed me on the cheek. I just looked at her hazel eyes with the blue specks in confusion, and she said to me,

"When I was younger," she played with the collar of my shirt as she talked, "about 7, every once in a while, my dad would come into my room and tell me to turn on my music and dance for a while. He kept encouraging me to dance, even in high school. It wasn't long before I learned that when I was dancing in my room, he would close the door so I wouldn't hear him and my mom fighting," she paused while her stare was locked with mine, "I heard them every single time. I just didn't know that was why my dad told me to dance. So I kept dancing." I didn't know what to say. I kept listening with probably an astonished look on my face.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," I said.

"You're not the only one running from something. My parents got divorced, too." We both knew what was deep down, but neither of us wanted to give it a voice, to give it credence. It was never invited and continues to overstay.

"River!"

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I think it's getting late. It's time for me to go," she said. She was grabbing her things and River came running out.

"Are you sure?"

"No! I'm not! I'm never sure. My dancing is going nowhere. I haven't had the energy, nor the opportunity to put myself out there, and I've got River to worry about," she took an audible breath before continuing, "but I know one thing, if you really do like me. I know you feel it, whatever this thing is between us; it's strong. 3 years got packed into 3 dates. It feels right." Tears started to form around her eyes. She looked away.

"Well-" I began to say.

"You don't talk right now. I'm not finished." I blinked and looked down. She moved on, "But people are stupid. Even when something is right, they get scared and push it away before they have to feel anything, before their life is interrupted. And I would rather this end now and not 3 months from now because we couldn't face each other's baggage." She put River's leash on and opened the door. Standing in the doorway, she said, "You have a choice, Rafael: do you want your life to stay the same, or do you want it be interrupted?" She slammed the door behind her.

My face was warm. I slumped into my chair. *What just happened? What did you do?* Did I just ruin it? It was going so well. How can it be over? Maybe I'm just doomed to be alone. She doesn't want to see me again. I wonder what's on Netflix. I walk over to the couch. Before I can sit down, Wave pushed me into the ground. "Wave! What the hell?" He just stared at me while I was pinned down. Those baby blue eyes were a piercing brightness. *The Choice.*

I broke the stare and got up, pushed Wave off of me and ran out the door with Wave at my heels. I forgot his leash, but he was leading me. We got to the lobby of our apartment building and outside. Wave starts running and I follow. Through my hair and arms, the wind pounds on my chest. It whispers in my ears to run faster. We got to an intersection and I didn't know which way to go now. Wave bolted to the left, so I had to follow. Three blocks and still no Sarah. We rounded the corner and there she was with River, maybe 20 feet away, almost towards the park.

"Sarah!" I yelled. I ran up to her.

"What are you doing?" She asked. She seemed startled.

"You said I needed to make a choice," I was a little out of breath, so I paused so I can breathe, "I made... my choice." She looked at me with dried eyes and I said, "I want a massive interruption."

She smiled and laughed as she fell into me, an exhausted embrace of validation in this wind. She kissed me and then pulled away to say, "You know you could have just called tomorrow or something, right? You didn't need to chase me in the middle of the night in New York City."

“Well, when you put it that way, that does sound creepy. But that doesn’t raise any red flags for you, right?” I said. We both laughed. Her eyes became watery again. Sarah and River came back to the apartment to spend the night.

The next morning, we were walking down by the river. I couldn’t believe it. Sarah and I were in love. Neither of us had said it, yet. But I knew it the moment I saw her. Wave and River were chasing each other. There’s usually less traffic by the river, so we let them off the leashes. We didn’t say a word to each other. We just enjoyed the view. I felt calm and peaceful when she was with me. Nothing else entered my mind. She existed, nothing else.

After a while, we started to head back. We put the dog’s leashes back on and were on our way back.

“What do you wanna do tonight?” Sarah asked.

“I’m not sure we can top last night,” I said.

“Funny. How about sushi, or tacos?”

“No. No tacos. We can try sushi again, though,” I said.

“That will never make sense to me,” Sarah said. “You are so weird.”

“I guess you’re into weird guys, then.” She knocked me in my gut, but she still laughed. I pulled her tighter to me as we held on to the leashes going down the street. River’s ancient leash broke as she tried to run. Wave just pulled his leash out of my hands and ran after her.

“Wave!”

“River! Get back here!”

River stopped at an alleyway in between the buildings and we saw some pigeons fly away. Wave was right behind her and knocked her to the ground out of the alley. At that moment, we see this van smack into Wave. I started running, and yelled, “Wave!” I got to him and felt where it was hurting. He was whimpering and I needed to get him to the vet, now. After Sarah stopped shouting at the van that apparently sped off, I started carrying Wave. The vet’s office was only three blocks and would be faster without driving this time of day.

All I could hear was Wave, whimpering in pain, and Sarah trying to tell me it’s going to be ok. We got to the office and I was about to give in, but I pulled it together and brought him inside.

“Help, Please! My dog was just hit by a van!” I hear the receptionist call Dr. Evans to explain the situation.

“Go right on in,” she said. I went as fast I could with Wave still in my arms. I put Wave on the table next to Dr. Evans, and she began to examine him.

I kept petting him trying to keep him calm. After a few pokes and prods lasting agonizing nano-seconds, she came to a conclusion, “Wave has taken a big hit. I don’t know how extensive, but it is likely he won’t be able to recover.”

“What?” I asked.

“What do you mean, Doctor?” Sarah asked.

“I can do my best, but I need you to wait outside while I work.”

River kept climbing up to lick Wave in the face. Sarah was trying to hold my hand to calm me down.

“Wait outside? I can’t leave him now!”

“Raf!” Sarah said. My hand squeezed at the beckoning of hers and she looked at me and nodded. We walked out into the waiting room.

Four white walls. Again. What was I supposed to do? There was nothing I could do. Just sit there and wait. At least Sarah was with me, her hand holding mine. *Wave needs to be all right. He has to be all right. What’s gonna happen if I lose him and that slobbery tongue of his?* Dr. Evans came out and I shot out of my seat.

“I’ll give you a moment alone. Let me know if you want me to help his pain.” She started to walk out the door. The second it closed, I said,

“Help his pain?” My eyes were blurred a little from the tears. “How can she say that?”

“She ‘s doing her job, Raff. Talk to Wave,” Sarah said. I wasn’t comforted by her words, but I knew what was happening. I just didn’t want it to be true. I stood over Wave stroking his head and belly, hoping my hand could somehow wipe away his wounds.

Wave kept trying to lift his head to look at me. River was still licking his face; that made me smile for some reason. “Can you get Dr. Evans, please?” I asked Sarah. She walked out the door to get her.

“Hey buddy, it’s ok. Everything’s gonna be ok,” I said to him. Images of my father kept flooding my brain. When dad didn’t come home from work one night, I went looking for him. That’s when I found Wave, waiting for him to come out of the

river near his work. Sarah and Dr. Evans came in. The doc prepared a syringe. She looked at me. I waited for a moment, and then nodded to her. I looked back at Wave, and I said to him, "Say hi to dad, buddy. I'll see you soon." Dr. Evans put the syringe in, and then Wave didn't move. He was so still and peaceful. River stopped licking his face, and Sarah held my hand tighter. My hand rested on Wave, and that was it.

Sarah dropped a couple more beers on the table for me and Gale, while I finished the story.

"Wave was my best friend. I miss him," I said. "But I don't know what I would do without Sarah."

"Suck up!" Sarah yelled from the Kitchen.

"Do I know where anything is in the kitchen?"

"True that. You'd probably starve," she said. Bringing out more crackers and cheese, she sat down next to me.

"Wave was your dad's dog, right?" Gale asked.

"He was just a pup, barely a month old, but yeah. Right up until he walked himself into that river. The divorce destroyed him, and his depression and anxiety went into overdrive. Wave seemed to like me from the start, always staring at me with those sappy blue eyes. So after about a year, I took him with when I moved here. Colebrook was a void for me; I couldn't stay there. I thought I was going to end

up like my father one day, losing to a battle that can't be won. If I had lost Wave before Sarah came into my life, who knows where I'd be."

"And he didn't know at the time, but Raff was my savior," said Sarah clasping my hand.

"How's that?" Gale asked. He took a bite of a cracker.

"I just remember being stuck, like being swept away from everything hitting me constantly. I wasn't reaching my dancing goals like I thought I would. River was keeping me going, but I was still stuck. Raff and I were both dealing with the same thing. Wave dying kind of healed us both from the pain we were feeling, brought us more together." Her hazel eyes shined and the blue around the edges pierced me. We both smiled. She wasn't an answer. But she was the question I never knew to ask. I was so focused on my pain before. I didn't think someone else might have the same feelings.

"We found each other at exactly the moment we needed to. I'm done with that software company, and I'm writing books." I said.

"And I'm still doing my dancing and now I'm making headlines," she said.

I put my hand up to the side of my mouth and said, "The good kind of headlines," I get a good chuckle out of Gale. "Nothing's perfect. But it's better."

"Well, as your friend, I'm very happy for the both of you. And I'm glad I have a place where I can come and eat delicious cheese and crackers."

"We wouldn't expect anything less," she said. She went back in the kitchen to grab dinner. My friend and I clinked our beers together, and watched the sunset on

the river. River ran up along with her two pups, Wave, and Maria, after my grandmother's name. They were about 5 years old now.

My friend said, "That's a beautiful view. You sure are lucky." I was looking in through the window at Sarah. She looked up to catch my eye. We both smiled. *I Love you.* We didn't need to say it. We never did.

"Yes, my friend. Yes, I am."