

## Blue Eyes

by Rome Reginelli

Have you ever fallen in love with a person you imagined? I have, and this is her story.

This is her story, not mine.

Her name is Harriet, and she is 15, which seems a little dangerous since I've already crossed the boundary into adulthood, but hear me out. Harriet only exists in my imagination, and she has since I was young. I can't help getting older in the flesh, but my imagination never ages, and so neither does Harriet. Sometimes she'll jump around in age; I'll see her preparing for prom or graduating college or as a lonely old woman, but by and large she is the same person, the same girl of a slight 15 whom I've always known.

This story is how I fell in love with her, but it is not *about* how I fell in love with her.

She is bookish, with big round glasses that make her eyes seem bigger than they are, big and blue and with an intelligence that can see right through you. She acts nice most of the time, and she keeps those eyes turned away, turned down toward whatever she's reading. She uses these probing eyes to dissect texts, for the most parts, but once in a while if you prompt her, she'll turn them on you and pierce right to your darkest intentions. Later, when she goes to college, Harriet will get contacts, and then she'll have that coldest, most piercing of her facial expressions all the time. Harriet will be better through most of college, and it'll only be a couple years after joining the Force (the police force, I mean) when she'll discover the tenderness of turning off *the Look*, and then she'll use it only against suspected criminals, and her boss when she's angry with him. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. Back when this story

happens, the Harriet I fall in love with wears big, round glasses and she doesn't realize the power of her eyes. If she looks up at you, you'd better be prepared.

The first time she looked at me, I wasn't prepared, and she looked straight up through me, through me to the older man in the suit who was asking if he could sit down next to her on the bus. I am in the seat next to her at this point, but I don't take up any space. That's just my point of view. So she says that yes, that's fine if he sits next to her. She has already noted that all the other seats on the bus are taken, so she's not expecting him to have singled her out. He sits, and Harriet goes back to reading her book, while her left hand plays with the tip of her braid. I am the only one on the bus who seems to notice how seductive this is, and I am still coming to grips with where I am, so it escapes comment.

After some time, the man in the suit introduces himself, because Harriet has put down her book. "Depressing weather we've got today," he starts. "I'm John." He holds out his hand.

"I'm Harriet." She is looking out the window. I can tell she sees his hand in the reflection, but chooses to ignore it. She brushes her finger across the tip of her braid again.

John awkwardly lets his hand fall back to his lap. "Where are you heading?" he asks.

"The library."

"Getting some reading for winter break?"

"I work there."

He thinks on this a while. The bus bounces along, swaying with wind and traffic, bank buildings and cheap restaurants passing by outside. Harriet ponders the cubist reflections of their bus on the mismatched, angular store windows.

“Halt’s Jewelry Shop...” he mumbles at one point. “My grandfather used to work there. A long time ago, he sized rings to people’s fingers.”

Harriet does not know what to say to this. For that matter, neither do I.

Finally the bus wheezes to a halt. Harriet squeezes past the man in the suit and gets off at her stop.

The library is large. Dramatic skylights swoop in from one side, allowing dull gray light from the sky to cast a pallor over the lushly-furnished reading lounge on the first floor. Harriet moves purposefully between the big, padded chairs and drops her book into the Returns box.

I look on as she finds her boss – a really nice guy, kind of funny looking because he’s a leather-jacket-wearing failed Beat poet with bifocals. His name is Gary, and he’s a friend of her family. He realized early on how earnest Harriet is and he encouraged her to get the work permit so she could work part-time here. He points Harriet toward a cart that’s stocked for reshelving, and she sets to work.

An hour later a familiar voice calls out, “Excuse me, can you help me find something?” Harriet looks up, this time with not her usual intense gaze, but a gently blank face. She finds herself facing the man, John, from before, but he’s no longer wearing a suit. He’s got a sweater on, and glasses. He could have aged twenty years since she saw him last.

“What are you looking for?” She puts it kindly, treating him like any library patron.

“I’m looking for *With this Ring* by Penny Proddow. It should be in this section somewhere...?”

Harriet glances around. Reference, 391. “What’s the call number for your book?”

He produces a small strip of paper from his pocket and reads from it: “390.22...”

“That’ll be on the lower shelf around the corner here,” she directs him.

“Thank you,” he says, holding out his hand for Harriet to shake. This time she does, tentatively.

“I’m John,” he says.

“Yes, we met on the bus.”

John’s expression halts a moment as if he’s receiving a news bulletin. “Ah. So we did. Harriet.”

She nods.

“Well, thank you again.” He releases her hand and walks around the corner for his book. That is the last she sees of him for a week.

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Their next encounter is also on a Thursday. Harriet is again taking the bus to work when he asks to sit down next to her. I feel slightly perturbed, because I am sitting next to her, but neither of them seems to notice, and John takes my seat. Harriet bundles herself up in her blue sweater – she does not have a book today – and John comments, “Depressing weather we’ve got today.”

“Yes, it’s a bit chilly,” she responds.

“I’m -”

“John,” she finishes. His outstretched hand falls limp as this sinks in.

Finally: “We’ve met.” He says it to her almost like a question.

“Last week. Right here.” She eyes the man over. He is in the suit from before, without the glasses from the library. It makes him look young again. His tie is loose around his neck, below a face with kindly sagging bags under his eyes. His nose is crooked, his hair thin but not balding yet. I estimate him to be about thirty five, maybe

forty. Harriet estimates him – apparently – to be harmless. “I was on my way to work. At the library,” she continues.

“So you were,” he says slowly as if it has barely dawned on him. “I am on my way to work, too.”

“Where do you work?” Her compassionate face shows no indication whether she is humoring him or genuinely interested.

“Well, strictly speaking,” he says while pointing a finger towards the back of the bus, “I work that way. But once per week I make a trip down to the local board of directors for Citibank. I report on the state of the industry – the health industry; that’s where I work – and predicted developments in the market.”

“You mean for stocks and things?”

“Yeah, stocks and things.”

“I’m afraid this is my stop,” Harriet interrupts. “See you next week, perhaps?” She smiles as she gets up.

“Next week,” John mumbles. He and I both smile and wave.

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It is, in fact, less than a week until Harriet sees him again. It is Saturday night, and Harriet’s mother is taking her out to a restaurant with her boyfriend. Harriet does not have a serious problem with her mother having a boyfriend, but this one bores her. She hopes that her mother will discover how boring he is soon, but humors them and comes along to this restaurant, a nice Greek place. She is sipping her avagolemon soup and staring into space while her mother carries on about some painting she saw in an art gallery somewhere.

I am watching Harriet’s face, as she fiddles idly with her soup spoon, and so I see it happen more in the slow

glint of fascination that forms there than in the actual event. As I look behind me I discover that what has sparked Harriet's reaction is not John, exactly, but the woman who is accompanying him.

The pair have walked into the restaurant arm in arm; John is dressed in the same suit he always wears, albeit with a snazzier tie. But the woman with him is stunning. She's a redhead, with a thick bun piled precariously high on her head and pinned expertly. Her bare-shouldered green dress shows off a *very* womanly figure, and when she smiles at the concierge her teeth seem to gleam with newness. I think perhaps Harriet's simple beauty is more to my taste, but there's no doubt John has found himself a looker.

Harriet doesn't seem to know what to do. It doesn't seem that she has explained, or cares to explain to her mother, how she got acquainted with a quirky thirty-or-fortysomething. Instead, Harriet sits uncomfortably spying on the behavior of John and his mistress. Harriet doesn't say a word to anyone, least of all me, though I am the only one to appreciate her interest in the situation. So instead, I simply watch silently, too.

They sit at a table for two, and their presence seems to bring the restaurant to life around them. The tablecloth seems cleaner, the candles brighter, the décor fresher and more beautiful the moment they sit down. They invigorate the old restaurant with a youth it hasn't had since the past decade. I marvel at the way the strange man we encountered on the bus, who couldn't put two and two together until he was reminded, not once, but twice, now laughs easily with this woman. Is she as strange as he is? Or does she bring out the best in him? For her part, Harriet seems as confused as I am. They toast, and laugh some more, and seem blissfully wrapped up in their own world. Then it seems that she – the woman, John's date – has to

get up and go to the restroom, and he sits patiently, oblivious to the two pairs of eyes glued to his table. He loosens his tie, pours more champagne into each of their glasses from the bottle he brought with them.

“Harriet! Harriet, don’t you just think that river painting would go perfectly above the couch?” Harriet’s mother jolts us out of our trance.

“You mean where Matisse’s goldfish are now?”

Harriet gives her mother an “Are you serious?” look.

“Yeah, that old replica. I’d so love to have a real piece of art there, you know, one of the originals. Nothing adds a touch of love to a house like a hand-painted...” she starts carrying on again, more to her boyfriend than to us. And startlingly, right in the midst of her speech, she’s cut off by a shriek that would rend stainless steel. Harriet frantically looks around, searching for the cause of the commotion, but nothing seems amiss – the waiters are still passing from table to table at their leisure, no crowd has gathered; in fact, no one is even looking around for the source of the sound.

“What was that?!” Harriet exclaims in a restrained yell.

“What was what, sugar?”

Harriet is exasperated at her mother. “That scream! Don’t tell me you didn’t...”

“I didn’t hear any scream, sugar. You know I would be all in a tizzy if I...”

Harriet can’t look at her mother any longer. She turns away, glares in my direction, and my stomach flutters at that gaze going right through me. “I know I heard it...” she says under her breath.

“I heard it too!” I say to her. But she doesn’t react. She’s staring back at John’s table again. I look that way, myself.

The table is empty. It's more than just abandoned; it's deadened. The glasses of champagne are missing; the candle is burnt halfway out. The napkins are folded up, as if nobody had been eating there. The decanter on the sill behind them is cracked and dusty.

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The next Thursday, as promised, John appears on the bus. He asks, in the exact same way as always, to sit next to Harriet, taking my seat. At this point, I'm so curious that I don't mind.

"Hi, John," she greets him. This seems to startle him a little - you'd think that he would get used to being recognized by the third or fourth time. I am beginning to wonder if he has Alzheimer's or something. He doesn't seem *that* old, though. How young does that disease set in, anyway?

"I saw you the other night," Harriet begins slyly. "You were at Brasa, the Greek Restaurant, weren't you?"

He processes this slowly, as always. "At... Brasa... Oh!" He pauses, shocked, for a moment. "I can't talk about that right now," he says finally. "I'll find you somewhere... the... library?... perhaps. And I'll tell you then."

"Tell me then? Tell me what?"

"You mean it didn't happen?"

She is getting suspicious, now. And when Harriet gets suspicious, there's no stopping her. Her eyes burn holes in my heart, and I *know* she's not even looking at me. "What didn't happen? What did you do? What was that scream?"

"I... I swear, I can't tell you here, now. It's too difficult. I..." Then something strange happens. He twitches, or flickers, or something. For a moment it's almost as if he's

a different person.

“John? John, what’s going on?”

He is wincing now, his eyes pressed shut. He’s not responding. I see him mouth something, barely eke a sound from his throat. It sounds like, “Abigail.”

“Who’s Abigail? John!” People on the bus are giving us strange looks, now. John won’t respond. He’s just got his eyes closed, and he’s muttering, “Abigail, Abigail,” over and over. Finally he takes a deep breath, and the John we first met emerges. Harriet’s face reads shock and concentration. She’s given up trying to force him and now is just trying to react.

“Depressing weather we’ve got today,” he finally says to her, as if nothing had happened.

“Very.”

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At the library that day, Harriet asks her boss, “Gary, do you know anything about ghosts?”

“Ghosts? Of course, girl. They’re all around us, washing in the painful memories our society creates. Ghosts are the things that can’t forget, the things that bump in the night, the lost and found of the collective human soul. They’re not spooky or friendly, they’re just tragic. There’s nothing worse than to see your friend become a ghost before your very eyes. But if you show a little tenderness, you can sometimes, just sometimes, bring them back to life.”

“I see... Thanks, Gary.”

“You’re welcome.”

She wanders the library, lethargic about her work. At some point I catch her shirking in one of the big leather chairs on the second floor, a book on ghosts in her hands.

She sits like that for an hour, almost, flipping through page after page, in a far away world. It's times like this that remind me she doesn't exist, strangely – it's as if, here I am envisioning this girl, this beautiful young girl whom I've been imagining for so long, and for a brief period of time, she leaves my imagination and enters her own. That's a world I have no control over, an escape from the realm in which she's a figment of my troubled mind. I can only guess what she's thinking when she reads about ghosts. Does she create worlds of her own, as well?

Finally, it is nearly closing time for the library. Harriet has to work the counter; everyone tries to pay their fines and check out extra books during the last hour. And that's when he arrives. He trudges in, bundled in an overcoat and a hat, his glasses thicker than ever, his hair nearly white in the harsh light. John is returning a book on flower arrangement. Harriet takes it from him, scans it. It was not marked checked out. She looks again. It was not checked out. He looks questioningly, wondering how big his fine will be. But Harriet is clever. She's not phased. She sets it down on the returns shelf without a fuss, and says, "No fine. John."

"You..."

"No, you. You owe me an explanation. I looked like a freak on that bus because you were tripping out," she hisses. "What was I supposed to do?"

"I... yes, I do owe you an explanation."

"Harriet! Done for the day?" calls Gary, her boss, from the other counter. He's not looking our direction.

"Last one," she says.

"Great! Go home after this. I can tell you've got someone on your mind," he replies. "There's no use trying to force yourself to keep the peace when you're at war inside."

“Thanks.” She looks back to us. “Now. Explain.”

“I have a problem,” John says. “And I can’t solve it.”

“But maybe I can.”

He takes a breath, swallows. “I hope so.” He closes his eyes, lightly this time. When he opens them, he’s determined. “I need to show you.”

“Fair enough. You promise I’ll be safe?”

“I promise.”

She grabs her bag and we head out.

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Outside of the library is windy. Harriet’s backpack straps flutter wildly, and her hair threatens to escape its braid for once. I fail to see how John’s delicate hair manages to remain on his head. We walk briskly, and John takes us on a bus away from the heart of town, heading up into the slightly hilly region to the east. We get off at a cemetery, an old Catholic one with row upon row of white crosses in the green. The whole time, Harriet inspects him patiently, trying to grasp his secrets, but John is beyond her abilities. So she waits, and follows, and we are soon standing in front of a gravestone that reads, “JONATHAN EDMUND BURKE” in gothic capitals.

“This is me,” he says. “I am dead.”

Harriet takes this better than I would have expected. “Then what am I seeing right now?”

“I am a wandering soul, little more than a collection of memories that cannot leave this earth, doomed to relive the scenes in my life that were important to me and the reason I am still here.”

“It’s really true...” she whispers, to herself I guess.

“You have to understand; the me you encountered on the bus is a younger memory. I relive each scene slightly

differently each time, but it's harder for me to break out of the moment the farther back I go. That's why I had to explain this to you now, not then. This version of me is near the end, a few days if I remember properly. I probably don't. Alcohol will do that to you."

"You drank yourself to death," I say. *And they gave him a Catholic burial. It's not suicide if you pass out from the whiskey one night and never get up.*

"What happened on the bus?" Harriet asks.

"Abigail. I met Abigail on the bus."

Abigail. Was she...

"Yes, the one you saw with me in the restaurant. My one true reason to live. The love of my life... and... my own personal tragedy."

"Who screamed?"

"That would have been her," he says. "That was her. The beautiful night of our last dinner together. I took her out, to the nicest restaurant I could afford, because that was supposed to be the night..." He almost chokes up here. He wipes his nose on his sleeve. "That was supposed to be the night I proposed to her. I had the ring in my pocket, and I hadn't posed the question yet but I already knew the answer. How could I not? From the day we met, I knew there could be no other way. We were meant for each other."

I can't help staring at Harriet during this speech. Anyone else might have gotten sick of an old man's sob story by now, but she is listening attentively. I don't know about later, but at this point in her life, patience and compassion are virtues Harriet has in spades. She's almost biting her lip in anticipation for the horror that is coming. I wish I could step forward and hug her, make her feel the warmth that John is describing. I wish I could comfort her, but I am not really, really there. I am not really present. I

never am.

“I think Abigail knew what I intended. She was happy, too. I could see it in her eyes. She had to go to the restroom to prepare herself. She got up, went to the ladies’ room. After that, I have only the court’s best guess as to what happened. While she was at the mirror, looking at her face, a drunk barged in. He had been already far gone before entering the restaurant – and before the Brasa bartender had a chance to recognize this, he’d wandered off in search of a piss, and hit the wrong door. Well, he seemed a little upset that there was a woman in his bathroom, and even more upset when she insisted he was the one making a mistake. He started to take off his pants on the spot, and she objected. He didn’t take well to that, and he’d had a rough day. This drunk, this punk... he had a knife. By the time I got there, Abigail was a wide-eyed heap buried in red, and he was stammering in the hands of the bouncer. He got eight years in the slammer and I never got a chance. I was never the revenge type. Before his sentence was up, I had wasted myself away to a mess of a man. It would almost have been a relief to have reached the afterlife, had not... *this*... happened.” He gestures around him disgustedly. “It’s almost good sometimes. I almost relive the moments on the bus every week, the moments when I met her, got to know her. She tried so hard to escape the her birth, but in the end poorness caught up with her. If I had been ready to commit sooner... if I hadn’t waited *that* long, until *that* night...”

Harriet is nearly moved to tears. If not by the story, then by the earnestness with which he tells it. She can’t help but lean in and hug him, her head hitting his chest with a soft thump, a beautiful act of human dignity. She believes in him, I realize. She believes in him so much that he’s as solid to her as the grass beneath her feet.

*I want to help him*, Harriet wrote in her journal that night. *It's just too sad*. I sympathize. I know what an unrequited love feels like. It's the most difficult feeling in the world. I wonder if Harriet knows, too, or if she just has so much empathy for this strange character that she has somehow picked up on the feeling secondhand. Reading her journal is not the same as talking with her. I can know what she's thinking, but I can't understand why she's thinking it, and I can't ask. We are separated by the boundary of text and reality, that transparent wall between her world and mine.

She keeps writing. *There must be a reason he's still here. Not everyone who dies lovesick can be a ghost. It's that unfinished business thing. Like Gary said. I have to show a little tenderness, I have to bring what he's looking for to the lost and found of life.*

*She died in a restaurant. She died on the night he was going to propose to her. To think, all this time he has been reliving that moment, waiting to propose and never getting the chance... I have to help him do it. He has to present her with the ring. The ring. What ring?*

Harriet leaves off her journal here. She taps her lip with her pen, taps her foot on the ground. The page stares up at her. Then her mother invades again. That voice echoes from downstairs. "Harriet, come down and tell me what you think of this painting. I'm trying to decide if it'll replace the Matisse."

*I'll have to find out*, she scratches in before shutting the page.

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The answer comes to her on the bus the next day. It's Friday, a cold Friday. The sky is darker than the

pavement, and the weather has been alluding to rain for days. She's staring out the window and she sees something that brings back a memory. Halt's Jewelry Shop.

She gets off at the next stop. I can barely keep up. She goes running back, bumping people on the street, her eyes fixed on the signs of the storefronts. Finally she reaches the one with red and yellow letters painted on the glass in curls and curves, something that looks straight out of the nineteen thirties. This is the place. Breathless, she enters. The bells on the door ring, old style. This shop seems like it hasn't changed since the days when John's grandfather worked there, fitting rings. An antique wooden showcase holds necklaces, bracelets, lockets, earrings... the works. A smaller counter of used jewelry hides to the side of the store. An old man greets Harriet, curiously, as those powerful eyes of hers search savagely through the used jewelry. She does not know how she'll recognize it, or that it's even here, but somehow she has a sense. I know she'll find it. I can guide her hand there, though she does not feel my touch; I can point her eyes to it, though she does not sense my influence. But there, at long last, tucked away into the corner, is a small ring in a small box, a mostly unremarkable ring that somehow radiates the right feeling.

"There!" she says. My heart floods with warmth that somehow, secretly, I have helped her reach this. It is a service only I can provide, a power bestowed only to me.

"Can I help you with something?" asks the old man behind the counter.

"That ring in the corner - where is it from?"

The old man thinks for a while. "That one... that has been here for a long time. But if I recall properly, and really sad fellow returned it one day saying it was good as new, never used. Of course, what's the chance of that?"

"It just might be."

“Do you want to look at it?”

“I need it. How much is it?” She starts digging in her purse for cash. I have a bad feeling that any amount a fifteen-year-old is carrying – even one with a job and conservative spending habits – is not going to be comparable to the price of a wedding ring.

But sometimes, just sometimes, good people can sense when they’ve become a part of something bigger than they are. I give him a nod, though I am sure he does not see me, and the old man withdraws the ring from the cabinet. “Five dollars,” he says.

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Now that she’s got the ring, Harriet realizes that she doesn’t know what she’s doing. She knows she’s on the right track, but where to go next eludes her. She ends up wandering. “I should be at work,” she says aloud to nobody in particular, at least I don’t think it’s to me and there’s nobody else looking her direction on the city streets. She ends up hopping on a bus, waiting for John, looking around. Nothing. She ends up going back to the library, searching it end to end, but unable to find him. Even I can’t be of use now. This last step is purely her doing. As Harriet is leaving again, Gary asks her “Where are you going?” to which she responds, “Chasing ghosts!” He shrugs and lets her walk out.

Frustrated, Harriet kicks the street. As the weather starts making do on its promises, Harriet seeks shelter and ends up back on the bus. This is the bus John took us on the day before, the bus to the cemetery. Harriet knows it. She gets off at the same stop, facing the endless rows of white tiles, each tile a person no longer. In the distance there’s a group. It’s hard to see because it’s dark and the air

is thick with precipitation, but she suddenly starts running towards it. It's a burial, of some sort. A funeral. How perfect. No funeral is complete without the downpour weightening the undertaker's dirt as it hits the coffin. And there he is, in the back of the line, head downcast, droplets splattering his face to make up for the teardrops that have run dry. He doesn't see her approach.

She takes him by the arm, and he looks down, too melancholy to be startled. He accepts the ring from her, no questions asked. She gestures forward. I can't even hear them over the splash of droplets on the saturated ground. He holds the ring between finger and thumb, kisses it, and stares at it one last time. He makes his way to the front of the crowd, and crouches down in front of the tombstone, eyes closed. He sets it gently on top, and whispers something that only he can hear.

And that's it. The funeral procession is gone. The black suits and veils fade into nothingness, and even John is nowhere to be seen. The tombstone stands attended only by Harriet and me, edges rounded by years of rain. The ring sits on top of it. But somehow, the soil looks fresh around it. Harriet stands up from in front of the tombstone, and says aloud, "Thank you." She says this, and for the first time, she looks directly at me, not through me but *at* me. She looks me in the face and repeats, one last time, "Thank you. For the happy ending."