

Michael^{AND} Zoe

A Love Story By

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Zoe and I share a corner table at dinner and struggle to keep straight faces, as the waitress pours us more wine. It's our second bottle. We've clocked that every 10 minutes, she returns, asking how our meal is, while topping us both up.

"I think..." Zoe points from me to the glass and back. "I think she's trying to get us drunk."

"It's working," I say, putting down my chopsticks. "Alright. What about those two? By the door."

She leans in, ready to conspire.

"First date. They know each other already, maybe they work together or live in the same building, I dunno. It started off well."

"Why do you say that?"

"They ordered a starter first. But—" She traps a dumpling between chopsticks and chews thoughtfully. "There's not enough room for both of them at the table. He likes the sound of his own voice, more than she realised."

"Wow."

“You look surprised.”

“She looks like she’s enjoying herself.”

“Oh, Michael.” Her soft palm on mine, beckoning me closer, close enough for her warm voice to brush my ear as she says, “I think she’s trying to work out how to leave.”

“Well,” I say, pulling away enough to look her in the eye, “here’s to first dates.”

“Is that what this is?”

“I guess so.” She smiles, her eyes glittering from more than the alcohol. “What?”

“This isn’t going how I imagined it.”

“Better or worse?”

“Better.” I don’t know what to do with this, how not to psych myself out, so I’m grateful when a new song starts up. I recognise the opening notes, those quick drum patterns, as does she – *Joy and Pain* by Frankie Beverly and Maze. As the song progresses, she sings along, matching each note so it’s not just perfect, but hers. I love this song. I love how the first notes you hear are as much an exclamation of joy as they are about tender heartbreak. I’m not much of a dancer. At a house party, I’m more likely to hug my back to a wall than to slide across the expanse of a small dance floor. But I know how to feel, how to surrender to the plucks of a guitar, the croon of a horn, those choruses which speck my arms with goosebumps. Long, soulful cuts like these, where melodies loop and progressions build, take me away, elsewhere.

And then I’m back in the room, and without meaning to, I’m saying, “I’ve got this record at home. And that Al Green one, too.”

She winks. “I bet you do.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh stop.” She winks again. “We’re both adults here.” She slides closer to me in the booth so that our knees knock. Sets down her chopsticks and brushes a stray braid from her eye line. Her gaze is direct and sure. “Do you want to go out? Let’s go out.”

“OK,” I say. “Let’s go out.”

The first time we met was too soon. It was a New Year’s house party, and I was holding up the wall with my shoulders. I needed a drink, having raised my cup to my lips and come up empty. I patted my pocket for the tiny bottle of rum I’d split with friends, but someone else must have had it. The makeshift bar – a table swarmed by bottles and mixers – wasn’t in good shape, but it was the wrong side of the countdown. It was that time of the night, when the music had begun to slow and we’d long started to sway. Some ducked out early and others took a seat in the living room, tipping over tipsy toward drunk, convinced they just needed to rest for a moment. I sighed. All I wanted was something to tide me over before the walk home. That’s when a woman appeared beside me, brushing my elbow. Her eyes scanned the scene, glimmering in the soft darkness of the room. She was holding a bottle by its neck. We looked at each other for a moment. She was as tall as me, so the gaze was direct and intense. It wasn’t quite a smile we shared, but it wasn’t far off. I took the bottle, poured a little for me, a little for her, and gave thanks. We both stood there, a little awkwardly, nodding to the music. *Be Your Girl* was fading into *You Don’t Know My Name*. Maybe it was the drink, but I felt brave.

“**Wanna** dance?”

“This isn’t dancing music. And, besides” – She gestured to the room, bodies pressed up against the walls, the middle of the space, empty.

“OK,” I said. “What is dancing music?”

“Some Al Green,” she says. “Maybe *Let’s Stay Together*.”

“Nah, too fast,” I said.

“Maybe... *How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?*”

“I’ll give you that. Kinda cheesy, though.”

“One, it’s a classic. Two, coming from the guy who’s tryna dance to slow jams at a house party with a stranger.”

“**Fair** point.” There was a quiet between us, not quite silent, something humming. I held out my hand. She considered for a moment, before taking it. I led her through the living room, through the corridor where friends were still debating the same things they were a few hours before and were likely to continue, through my friend’s bedroom, where, if you negotiated your way through the tiny window space, there was a balcony where two people could stand. I played *How Can You Mend a Broken Heart* from the tiny speaker on my phone. She feigned disinterest at first, making a face which said, “Now who’s the cheesy one?” But after a moment, she took my hand again, and pulled me close. I can’t remember if it was the first chorus or the second, but she pulled me a bit closer and she’s as tall as I am, so the gaze was direct and intense. I brought myself a bit closer, close enough so that our noses grazed and—

“Zoe!” We separated immediately. “Zoe, where you at? We’re heading out.”

“I think you’re wanted,” I said.

“Yeah, I think so.” Neither of us make the next move, despite knowing what it is.

“I’m... I’m seeing someone,” she said.

“Ah.”

“Well, not seeing someone per se but sort of, I dunno...”

“It’s complicated.”

“Yes.”

“I get it. I’ve got my own complications,” I said.

“Ah.” We fix our gazes on anything but each other.

“Shall we go back to the party?”

I didn’t wait for an answer, squeezing back through the window and helping her through. My hands trembled, or maybe hers. I couldn’t tell. Whatever had hummed between us was still there.

That night, our two groups merged. There were plans to go on to another party, perhaps to a club, but the goodbyes took too long and when the clock touched three, numbers dwindled until there was no excuse for Zoe and I not to separate. She punched her number into my phone and over the course of the next few months, we texted regularly, exclusively in emoticons and smiley faces, finding a strange language to house whatever pulsed between us: a smiley face for a general check in, a full red heart for something steady, a broken heart to indicate availability. We did this until May arrived, and after a pair of smiley faces, a broken heart followed another. Words emerged to decide place and time and declare real excitement. So I guess, what we’re doing now, tonight, is trying to fulfil some long standing plans. Tending to unfinished business.

Tonight, we stumble down from the tiny Japanese eatery, to a little bar under the arches of Deptford train station. It’s south east London, so it feels local to me; Zoe, a visitor from east, looks on as I greet this person and that, her eyebrows raised as if to suggest I couldn’t possibly know all these people. I shrug and smile and she rolls her eyes, playfully. The bar is shaped like an elongated U and heaves in a way which isn’t uncomfortable. We both nod our heads as the DJ lets two tracks wash over each other, one rising, one falling. There’s a slight change in tempo, veering not quite toward frenzy, but some controlled magic where you put total trust in your limbs, total trust in yourself.

I'm thinking, I want to say to her, there's something about the house music playing, something spiritual, something comfortable about a two step and a head nod to 108 beats per minute; most of us moving at half that speed, which, when compared to a heartbeat, is slow lumber. But then we're at the front of the bar, and we're slamming our shot glasses down, shaking our heads as tequila dizzies itself in our bodies.

I'm feeling brave. When she takes my hand, I don't hesitate. I'm not much of a dancer, but she is. I follow her lead to where a set of tables and chairs have been pushed against the wall and people are gathered because of the music, because of something spiritual. I put total trust in my limbs, total trust in myself. One song plays, and another. We raise our hands to a DJ when he plays something nostalgic. I feel the hum, the tremble, the tremor, the shake. I'm thinking, I want to say to her, maybe this is what happens when you meet someone and you go toward each other, treat that quiet hum of desire between you as virtue not vice. But then there's a little break in proceedings, where the bass falls away, and it's just the drums and a voice. I couldn't tell you what the voice was saying, but I know the look Zoe fixed me with was direct and intense. I knew neither of us had to speak then; that if I took her hand, she wouldn't hesitate. She would follow my lead, letting me take her away, elsewhere.

It's a 12-minute walk back to my place. We pass through an off license for snacks and a bottle of wine, perhaps not out of necessity, but a way to pace and parse our nerves. The hum of quiet is louder than before, making my hands tremble in my pockets. She looks toward the sky as if examining a ceiling, making constellations with her finger. Her other hand slides into my jacket pocket, her palm locking into mine. As we turn into my street, her phone rings into the night. She lets it go.

"You need to get that?"

"Nah."

"Sure?" I begin to pat my pockets for my keys. She nods. We walk on, the early summer night warm and welcoming, that sort of night which stretches, or rather you

allow, to go on and on. I unhook my hand from hers, searching my other pockets. We reach my door around the same time I realise to search any more would be futile.

“So. Do you want the good news or the bad news?”

“Good news, please.”

“We have wine and snacks,” I say.

“And the bad?”

“We’re locked out.”

“No spare under the flowerpot?”

I shake my head, dialling a locksmith. Friends and family warned me I needed to give someone the spare key, but I never listened. She unscrews the bottle and takes a short swig, raising it to my lips, wiping away the drip with her finger.

“An hour, he said,” when I get off the phone.

“I can do an hour,” Zoe says. She takes a set on the concrete step, tearing open one of the bags of crisps. Her phone begins to ring again.

“Sure you don’t need to get that?”

“I erm...” The phone rings out and she fiddles in her lap, before looking at me.

“Remember when we met? How things were complicated? They’re still complicated.”

“Ah.”

“I couldn’t wait.”

“Neither could I.”

“As in?”

“As in, I still have my own complications,” I say.

“Ah.”

“Indeed.”

The hum of quiet returns. Or maybe it never left. I guess, this is us being honest and giving in, treating our desire as something to be valued, bending toward it, if only in these brief moments.

She takes another swig from the bottle and offers it to me. We pass it back and forth, content. My hand locks into hers again. She’s pointing at the stars, gasping as one shoots across the sky. I’m wondering if this is when I should speak, when I should say, this is what happens when two people go toward each other. But she grins at me and the need for explanation falls away.

“What now?” I ask.

“Guess we have to wait for the locksmith so we can listen to that record,” she says.

“I think I can solve that problem.” I push a few buttons on my phone and let Al Green’s music pull us to our feet. Neither of us speak. I take her hand and she doesn’t hesitate. My hands don’t tremble, not now. Not as we dance slowly on my doorstep. Not as we put total trust in each other, if only just for the length of a song. Not with a long, soulful cut like this, where melodies loop and progressions build. Not here, where we let the music take us away, elsewhere.