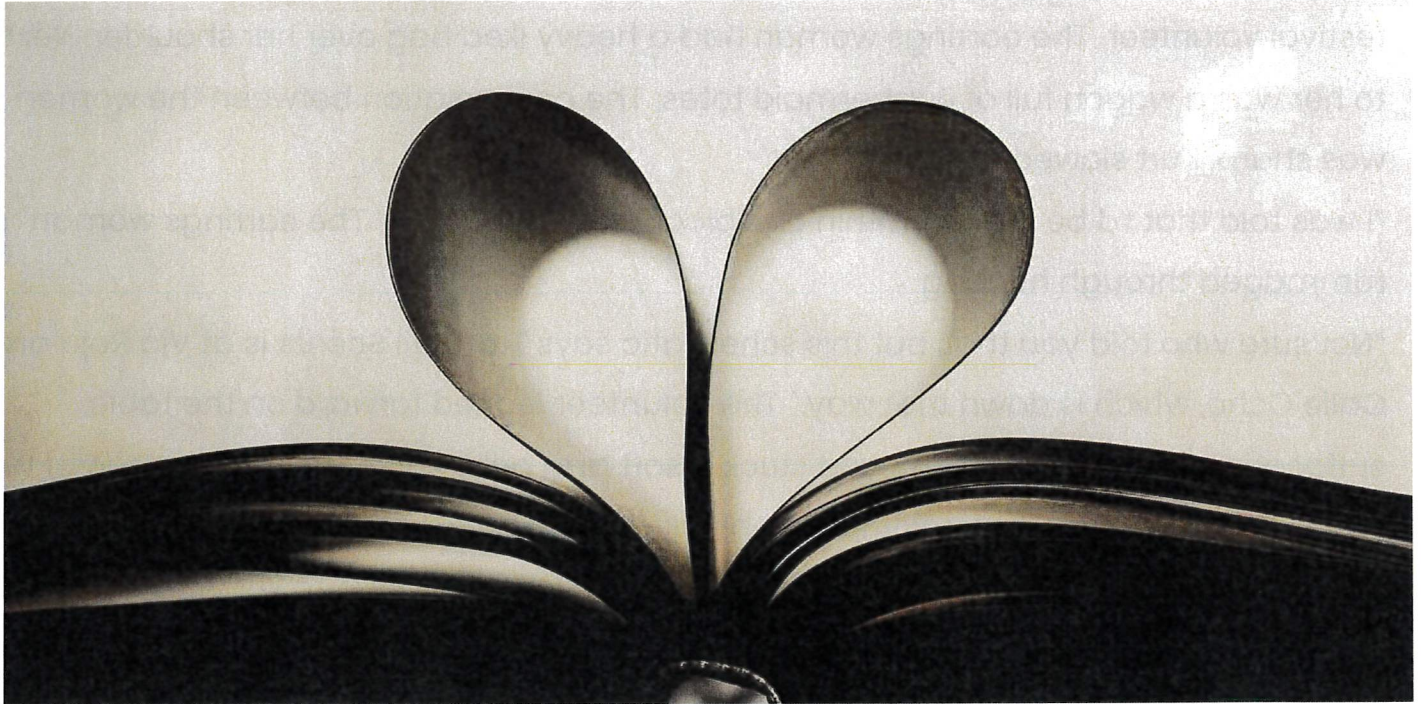


Last Year's Love Story by Liz Lydic

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"Young lady, are you concerned for the future of your beautiful daughter?" Kurt posed his routine question to a woman in leg-gouging shorts and oversized sunglasses. In response, she redirected her pink-clad toddler toward the Tierra Vieja Fire Department booth, where uniformed men performed hose demonstrations and served sno cones. Kurt leaned down past his card table to pick up his water bottle. Near empty. Leaving his clipboard and homemade 'Recall Marilyn Galidou' sign, Kurt made his way to the central drag of the Let's Go, Summer! Festival. The day had gotten bright and humid. Charlotte at her quilted handbag booth would give Kurt a water, and remind him, as usual, to prepare himself better tomorrow.

Near the porta potties, Kurt cupped his eyes to scan the lineup, smelling his piney

deodorant under the T-shirt silk screened with the Marilyn Galidou recall message. He locked in on Charlotte's booth, placed almost at the end of the block. Kurt furrowed his graying eyebrows. 'You walk like a gazelle,' his wife, dead for a year, had always told him, and he was conscious of his stride now as he passed vendor tents featuring hoverboards, electrolyte water systems, and college prep for middle schoolers.

At the information booth, there was a woman with dangling earrings talking to a festival volunteer. The earrings woman had a heavy Ikea bag over her shoulder. Next to her was a wagon full of Rubbermaid totes. The conversation between the women was sharp. Kurt slowed his pace.

"I was told that I'd be placed within one block of the Kid Zone." The earrings woman rummaged through her bag.

"Not sure who told you that, but this schematic says Tranquil Scents is at Via Roja and Calle Ocho, which is down that way." The volunteer leaned forward on the table, suffocating her ample bosom, and stuck a soft arm out to point toward the end of the street. "And, anyway, that is within one block. We have long streets here." She laughed and picked up her Big Gulp. "Now, you do get a yellow wristband to show you're a vendor, and that gets you a nonalcoholic drink from the Beer Garden, and admission to the 70s tribute band concert tonight at six."

"Can I help you find your spot?" Kurt's boldness was unplanned. The earrings woman, finished with the wristband, looked up. Gravity pulled at her mouth. She was attractive nonetheless, all green eyes and sun skinned.

"I guess," she said. "Apparently I'm in Timbuktu to sell my candles." Kurt took the Ikea bag from her and they walked to her chalk-lined station, labeled '23'.

"Oh, ha! I'm down on the other end. Just a hop, skip, jump, and 25 mile jog from the activities." It took the woman a minute before smiling. "It's my fault, though," Kurt continued, surprised by his instincts in unloading her items, and how she allowed him to help. "I'm a troublemaker. I get put far away." The woman didn't answer, caught up in extending the legs of a tiny folding table. "I'm Kurt, by the way. Unpopular purveyor of the 'Recall Marilyn Galidou' booth." He began unloading her totes.

"Those can go over there, and I'm Deb." She pointed to the far east corner of her

space. Kurt's left eye twitched in the thrill of her bossiness.

"Wow, we're already like a married couple," he said, then regretted it.

But Deb raised her closed lips into a smile, her eyes framed by whisker-like lines.

"Well, you listen better than my ex, so that's a good start."

They both laughed and Kurt was suddenly parched. "Yikes, I'm supposed to find some water then get back to my booth. Are you ok to finish setting up?"

"I mean, I'm already hours late thanks to the parking situation. Is this place disorganized, or is it just me?"

"Not just you," said Kurt, licking his lips. Between the heat and his excitement about Deb, he was lightheaded. "This fair used to be run by Kiwanis and it was great. Now, I dunno, they hired some event company to organize it." He looked toward the information booth. "It's all...newer. Shiny stuff." Kurt's voice was tired from thirst. He wanted both water and more Deb. "I'll come back in a bit. You'll still be here?"

Deb raised her eyebrows. "Yeah. Unless another festival calls me up saying they have a booth for me in space one, I'll be here."

She's funny too? Kurt steadied his body as he headed to where he'd seen Charlotte. I won't mention Deb, he thought. Kurt's mind looped on Deb's earrings and eyes and without intention, he wound up back at his own space instead of at Charlotte's. At the desolate spot on the sidewalk where he'd left his card table, there was nothing. Convinced he was dehydrated and delirious, Kurt looked around. The fire trucks were still there, and he recognized a smear of bird crap on the curb a few feet from where he'd had the table.

"Hey," he shouted in the direction of the fire engine. "Hey, where's my stuff? You guys see anyone?"

Four ball-capped heads turned. One of the firefighters walked toward Kurt, light bouncing off his sunglasses. "Hi, sir. I'm Dave Kaplan. What's going on?"

"It was right here, my table, my clipboard. I'm collecting signatures to recall the D.A. You know her, Marilyn Galidou? She's trying to let criminals with minor offenses out to clear up space in the system. My sign was there, my--"

"Ok, ok. I understand." Dave interrupted.

Kurt recognized the actions of a man on autopilot. "No! You don't. Someone stole my clipboard, my chair, my fucking signatures! This is exactly why we need people to go back to where they—" 

"Hey, man. It's ok, we understand." The three other firefighters had appeared next to Dave in response to the commotion, a squad of young, fit, calm boys. "Now, are you sure you didn't pack it up? It's a pretty hot day; maybe you moved it to somewhere shady?"

"Do you think I have dementia? I'm pretty sure I would remember moving my goddamn table and chair."

"Hey, man," said a skinnier firefighter. "Why don't you come on over here and we'll get you some water?" Kurt rambled on about the theft as he was led to the bumper of a fire engine and was handed a large bottle of Evian. The men formed a semi-circle around him, and glanced over their shoulders now and then, hands occasionally feeling for the radios at their hips.

"Deb," Kurt said. His heart had begun to slow its rapid pace.

"Deb's your wife?" asked Dave.

Kurt smiled, the lump in his throat forming. "No. She's a woman here. She needed my help. I told her I'd come back to her booth. She sells candles. But...my signatures."

"Oh, hey, Kenny, you hear that? There's a lady here with candles. Michelle likes those, right? Maybe go get her one." Dave turned back to Kurt. "What booth is Deb at? Kenny here can walk you down there. Not that you need the help, but he's gonna go over there and get his wife something. Gotta make up for him working overtime today, his anniversary."

Kurt's tears came then, something about the word 'anniversary.' Dave's hand was on his shoulder quickly, as Kurt heaved, his head hung low. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Kurt sobbed.

"I know, man, that's a tough loss."

"It wasn't supposed to happen." Dave's hand was squeezing Kurt's shoulder now, a steadying Kurt didn't know he needed until it was there. 

"I know. I know. Probably a lot of names on that list." Kurt looked up, and shook his head but didn't speak. The wetness on his face was met with a light breeze.

The two men were quiet for a moment, both looking at the crowd on Calle Ocho, the slow-moving, overheated people seeking something to do or buy. Kurt would have to email the 'Recall Marilyn Galidou' outreach chair and say that he had collected zero signatures. Kurt could mention irony: a crime committed by someone allowed to commit it perhaps because of Marilyn's own casualness. He could say that in the past, he left his post anytime he wanted, trusting the festival goers and vendors like a community. He could explain how different it was now: strangers behind booths, luring locals with corporate products and experiences. Or he could say that for a moment, he lost sight of his task, overwhelmed by the presence of newness in a world he thought had already settled.

Kurt considered these options as he and Kenny made their way down to Deb's booth. The blue of her tent was bright, the candle scents reaching his brain well in advance of seeing her. She was there behind her table, earrings sparkling in the sun.

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