

BLUE WILLOWS
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Blue Willows

A homoerotic romance short by

GREGORY L. NORRIS

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“Don’t be shy or nervous,” said Mister Lang.

The old hippie’s musical baritone again hypnotized Brent.

“Please, touch him. Touch him anywhere you’d like. As modern men, we’ve become disenfranchised from the male body out of fear and prejudice – by our peers, by the conservative media, and by our own preconceived notions of what it might imply. We’ve grown ashamed of what it means to have a cock and how it feels to be a man.”

Brent blinked himself out of the trance created by the melody of Mister Lang’s voice, the humid, earthy scent of the woods and the fresh morning rain, and the image of the volunteer standing in the parade-rest stance of a soldier before the phallic totem in one of the camp’s sacred spaces. He’d noticed this man soon after his arrival at the men’s retreat weekend; he’d been walking along the lake alone, a solitary male figure looking forsaken in this vast bucolic landscape. He seemed even more lost now, surrounded by nearly a dozen naked men ranging in ages from Brent’s twenty-two seasons up to the golden years of silver pubes.

Brent was surprised by the flicker of jealousy that jolted through his blood when one of them placed a hand on the volunteer’s midriff, a terrain of ripped muscles and coarse, dark fur.

The volunteer, the lost soul, tensed. The wounded look in his eyes, a pair of magnificent twin emeralds, intensified. Some unaffected register in Brent’s dazed thoughts noticed the handsome man’s throat as it knotted under the influence of a heavy swallow, the perfection of his naked body shuddering at the physical contact. Fresh sweat dripped out of the dark thatch at his hairline. Beads of perspiration clung to the lush hair on the crossbar of the T-shaped pattern stamped over his torso.

“A man is more than a cock and raw, ruthless lust,” Mister Lang continued. “A man embodies the spirit of a warrior. His greatest desire is to be a hero, to make his family happy and to protect them from all harm. The need is no different whether

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he's straight, gay, or bisexual. Inside, all men dream of being champions and when we are given that chance, we fulfill our destinies.

"The man before you wants to be a hero, and he will be. He will rise up. Touch him. Feel this man, this hero."

Brent reached a shaking hand toward the man, a volunteer from among the attendees who hadn't really volunteered so much as he'd been chosen by Mister Lang. But then he caught the tick-tocking swing of his cock and realized he had gotten hard, somewhere during the *a capella* solo of Mister Lang's voice. His face flushed and he withdrew his hand to conceal his erection. Brent turned away, but the power infusing Lang's words spun him back.

"Wait. Are we to be embarrassed by the swellings of our cocks? Have culture and religion shamed our erections into the shadows, along with our male emotions? Be proud, young brother. There is nothing to fear in the excitement of your magic wand."

Removing his hands and allowing his hard length to hang in the open for all to see was the second-greatest feat of Brent's life. The first had come less than a day earlier, when the clothing-is-prohibited rule went into effect. Getting out of his blue jeans and his underwear had taken a Herculean effort; now, among these strangers, he had thrown a boner and was being asked to display it without shame.

"What is a man?" Mister Lang asked.

Tapping his walking stick, he stepped closer to Brent, a tall slender figure with a gray ponytail reaching almost to the sagging flesh of his bare ass and an enormous length of foreskin drooping down his front. The neck of his cock was decorated with a wreath of wildflowers picked from the nearby meadow.

"Modern man is body hair and skin and smells. Musk and foot odor and hairy legs and balls that sweat and facial stubble that must be shaved daily, right?"

Shoulders shrugged and grumbles passed around the men.

"But are we only hairy armpits and ass cracks like sandpaper? Genetically determined automatons expected to watch sports and forget anniversaries and stink up a room when we take off our shoes after a long day on the job earning our

paychecks? Or are we something more, so much greater than the sum of our hairy, horny parts?"

Brent stole a glance at the volunteer's hairy legs, his big, bare feet. The toes were long and sexy, so male, so curiously desirable, he thought. Drifting into that strange headspace that being in this place deep in the Adirondacks kept inviting him to wander through, he wondered what it would be like to kneel before those feet, to suckle them as though each toe were a smaller version of the cock hanging between the man's naked legs. A cock as magnificent as the rest of the body it was attached to.

"I believe we can be. Heroes, each of us, if only we make the commitment."

Mister Lang gripped Brent's wrist. An icy-hot sensation flickered across his flesh and through his blood as Lang guided his hand toward the volunteer, where numerous other hands were already exploring skin, muscle, hair; ogling the swollen, humidity-loosened sac of his balls, pulling on the thick, flaccid tube of his cock. Brent stole a look at the volunteer's magic wand and saw that its head was more arrow-shaped than helmeted, long and thick, sprouting forth from a nest of dark curls.

He considered pulling away but thought better of it. For reasons he couldn't quantify, Brent knew he'd be powerless to resist Lang's wishes. The man must have weighed a buck-sixty soaking wet, but he had strength. A quiet, deceptive strength.

Brent's hand met warm skin. He groped the volunteer's cock, gently squeezed the tube of flaccid muscle, felt it twitch; wandered the tips of his fingers into his patch of surrounding hair, then down onto the silky flesh of his balls, rolling them around in their sac.

"Are we merely soldiers, wearing uniforms of khaki slacks, dress shirts, and ties?" Lang posed, his dreamy voice reverberating through the air with an eerie echo, right beside Brent's ear, yet at the same time sounding a hundred miles away.

"Or do we, each of us, occupy a unique position in the tapestry of the cosmos. More than what others thought possible. Greater than we ever dreamed ourselves capable of becoming."

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Brent sensed the other men, Lang included, pulling away. He felt the volunteer's cock push against his hand, hot and fully hard now, not just erect, but completely so, pulsing with life and want. The man leaned forward, into Brent's touch. Unable to resist, Brent glanced higher, up into his emerald gaze.

Just how handsome the man was sank in fully. The crow's feet around his eyes. The plumpness of his lips, the bottom one slightly larger than its topside twin, forming the slightest of smiles and begging to be kissed. The layer of prickle on his chin, cheeks, and throat; five o'clock shadow at eight in the morning.

And for the first time, Brent thought, he could be *my* hero.

* * * *

Childhood wasn't that far in his past, only a decade behind him, ten short years, but Brent had nearly forgotten the joyful tickle of grass beneath bare feet, of walking down paths and through woods at a lazy pace without the dread of rushing to get to a class or a job, one mandated Circle of Hell or another.

A thin layer of mist drifted through the forest, adding to the illusion that Not-E-Nuff Acres was a setting far removed from the hectic climate of the real world. This was a land closer to the dark territory of the Brothers Grimm than New York City.

"Joe," he said out of the blue, around the stalk of timothy grass clenched between his teeth. "Joe Legere."

"I thought one of the weekend's tenets was that we were to pick a 'hero' name and not reveal our real ones."

"Then you can call me Samson," he said matter-of-factly.

Brent smiled. "I like Joe Legere better. Brent. Brent Dunne."

"Pleased to meet you," he said, extending a hand.

Brent chuckled as he accepted the gesture and secretly marveled at the strength in the other man's shake.

"Something funny, Brent Dunne?"

"I was just thinking that I shook your dick before your hand."

Joe snorted. A mischievous smile curled at one corner of his mouth. "I liked that."

“Liked what?”

“Your little ‘handshake.’”

Brent indulged in a bold glance. Joe’s cock was hard again and metronoming as they walked at a lazy pace through the meadow.

“I guessed you were straight.”

Joe shrugged. “I don’t know what I am anymore. Besides, I thought making any kind of judgments about a dude’s sexual preference was against the rules, too.”

“I wasn’t judging you.”

“Then you’re a bigger man than me.”

Brent’s gaze wandered. He pegged Joe at six-one or six-two. “You look pretty tall to me, hero.”

Joe stopped walking. Brent was a few steps ahead before he realized the other man had fallen behind. Turning back in Joe’s direction stirred the sweetness in the air, the scent of wildflowers, mowed hay, and pines. Among the intoxicating mix was a trace of Joe, too. His sweat. His maleness.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here, honestly,” Joe said, spitting the stalk out of his mouth. “I thought I did. I mean, I came here knowing who I was and what I was doing, only now it seems more like a dream.”

“So wake up.”

“Maybe I don’t want to,” Joe said, folding his arms. The other man’s body language might have appeared defensive – if not for the stiffness of his cock, the looseness of his balls, and the dime-sized hard points of his nipples jutting forth in excitement from the mat of dark hair on his chest.

“This weekend was designed to help us get in touch with the beauty of being male, to find the hero within,” Brent said.

“Did you find yours?” Joe asked.

Brent wasn’t so sure about that, but he had found the hero without. With Joe standing on the path that meandered through the meadow, framed by the trees, the fog, and the platinum disc of the sun floating out of focus behind the clouds, the beauty of maleness had never been so clear to him.

Wordlessly, he approached Joe and reached for the other man’s face, cupping his cheek. Joe leaned into Brent’s touch, closed his eyes, growled a happy sound.

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Joe uncrossed his arms, planted a hand on Brent's shoulder, and pressed down. Brent dropped to his knees in front of Joe's cock, not worrying or caring that they might be seen. Because, for reasons he couldn't yet explain beyond the ache in his erection and stomach, this somehow seemed right.

"When I first saw you..." Joe sighed.

He didn't finish the statement. More of that brainwashing of males out of their feelings by a society that had labeled such things impure, Brent thought. But Joe didn't need to speak. Brent understood and had felt the same way since the previous afternoon, when he'd seen the handsome stranger wandering the grounds, looking lost.

Brent squeezed down on the root of Joe's cock, an action that forced the other man to the top of his toes. Taking the head between his lips, savoring the taste, the texture, Brent performed a ritual he'd practiced hundreds of times in his imagination, but had never experienced in the flesh before now. Before Joe.

"Yeah," Joe growled through clenched teeth.

Brent steadied his free hand on Joe's calf. He began to massage the other man's leg up and down as he adjusted to the newness of having a cock in his mouth. The taste. Joe's scent...

He gazed up, saw Joe staring down at him and, in their bottled gaze, knew they had traveled past simple sex. This was more than physical attraction. Dare he think it?

Love?

* * * *

Brent pulled his small green hybrid onto the patch of crushed gravel where the other cars were parked.

Not-E-Nuff Acres, read the primitive wooden sign. Cute.

Culture Club's 'In the Church of the Poison Mind' played on the radio for another several seconds as he scanned the camp through the car's windshield. He switched off the power, but kept humming while shutting off the car.

Bags in hand, he walked briskly toward the first and largest of the single-story log cabins—faster than he should, he soon realized. Taking a deep breath of the sweet country air, Brent forced his steps to slow.

The main house—one of several bungalows on a slight rise delineated by a rustic wooden fence—sat beneath the shade of a tall willow tree. The gentle coo of a mourning dove drifted through the air, counterpointed by the lazy drone of meadow insects.

Though hypnotized by the setting, the calm, and the fragrance of the landscape, Brent was more skeptical now than he'd been after he'd paid for the damn men's weekend. What could he possibly hope to learn about maleness in so soft and serene a place?

A short-haired black cat with a white medallion lounged on its side on the front porch among stoneware crocks filled with herbs and geraniums. Wind chimes pinged and tinkled, but the breeze seemed in no more of a hurry than the cat, which lifted its head, lowered it, and resigned itself to snapping its tail as Brent walked past.

"Hello?" he called through the screen door.

Mister Lang appeared. He was a tall, slender man with a silver ponytail. And he was quite naked.

"Welcome, honored guest," he said.

They shook. Mister Lang took one of Brent's bags, then pointed the tip of his carved walking stick toward the path leading to the other cabins.

"I'm starting to think I over-packed," Brent chuckled, unsure of what else to say.

"Perhaps you did."

"Is this...clothing mandate optional?"

"Do you really want it to be?"

"It's just that I... well...I'm not used to going around bollocky-bare-assed nude in front of a group of strangers."

Mister Lang led Brent toward a bungalow set among black-eyed Susans. Meadow, forest, and the lake were visible beyond, along with an elegant footbridge that carried over a stream. "Men come into this world naked, but we're made to feel criminal and ugly about ourselves and hide our male beauty beneath the layers our Puritan society forces upon us."

"I take it that's a no?"

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Mister Lang faced him and smiled his strangely charming, mysterious smile. "I can refund your money if you'd like, but didn't you come here to find out what's missing in your heart?"

And that, as the saying went, had been that.

Mister Lang bid him to enter the small cabin. Inside was an antique brass bed and kneehole writing desk, upon which sat a jar candle. Several framed botanical prints decorated the walls.

"Don't worry, you aren't the only one here concerned about displaying his cock for our little corner of the world to appreciate. Some of our guests are here to be better husbands, fathers, lovers, and I suspect there to be one who isn't exactly who he claims to be..."

The sound of Lang's voice was musical, bewitching. But before he could press him on his last statement, he changed the course of the conversation.

"Showers are communal, contained in the large cabin over there," he said, aiming his walking stick in the direction of the wall behind the headboard.

Brent opened the washroom door. A toilet and sink complete with towels and another jar candle greeted him inside. A vase with a small bouquet of black-eyed Susans sat on the back of the hopper.

"A welcome meal will be served shortly. Please join us. After getting comfortably settled in, of course."

And out of my pants, Brent thought.

The vibe coming off Lang wasn't that of an old pervert in search of a cheap thrill or a copped feel; no, even as inexperienced in the politics of love and sex as he was, Brent sensed otherwise. The man was as he spoke.

"I hope to see you there, young hero."

Brent smiled and nodded.

"And should you need some time to reflect or soul-search first, feel free to wander the grounds. There are sacred spaces scattered throughout the fields and woods. Pagodas, temples, grottos—we have no particular prejudice against any Gods of the Light. All are welcomed and worshipped here."

Mister Lang bowed. The luxurious noose of foreskin around his cock, Brent thought, seemed to drop halfway down to his bony knees.

* * * *

Brent removed his notebook, tinkered with the lyrics of a song he was working on, then decided instead to masturbate. He always felt calmer after jerking off, but the need to satisfy his cock was more strategic than anything else, born out of fear of popping a hard-on in the company of his fellow retreat attendees. If he wore it out, he might be spared any embarrassing surprises. What was it Lang had said on the slow walk to his cabin?

““Boners are to be worshipped, not humiliated,”” Brent said aloud while starting to strip.

* * * *

Worshipped.

Brent smiled around Joe’s erection. He plunged down again, surprising them both with his ability to take the other man’s length, almost to the balls.

* * * *

He washed, stripped. There were no mirrors in the washroom, so Brent studied his reflection in the window the best he could. His nakedness hovered out of focus in the pane, like an apparition.

A flash of movement from outside captured his gaze. Far beyond his naked torso, near the big apple tree guarding one of the camp’s sacred spaces—the little pagoda set before the ornate footbridge stretching across the stream—he saw a man. The man was naked, too, but only from the waist up, dressed in cargo shorts that showcased hairy, athlete’s legs to perfection, white socks, sneakers, and a baseball cap.

Brent wouldn’t appreciate this man completely nude until the following morning, when he would stand with his arms behind his back in front of a totem at another of the sacred spaces. But even with his clothes on, Brent loved what he saw.

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Walking from the cabin to the dining hall seemed to take forever, though in actuality, the hike lasted less than a minute. With each step, Brent sensed the transformation gradually taking hold of him, freeing him from his embarrassment.

The dining hall was filled with male bodies, all of them naked. Spirited conversations carried in the air while flaccid cocks dangled, their owners no more concerned over showing their penises than they would be an ear or ankle.

The food, as advertised in the brochure, was vegetarian. To Brent's surprise, he soon realized the candy bars and beef jerky he'd smuggled into his cabin probably wouldn't get eaten. Book-ended by vases filled with wildflowers were platters of fresh fruit and luscious berries, herb breads, cheese and crackers, baby quiches, and vegetables and dip.

The handsome, partially-clothed man Brent had spied near the pagoda wasn't among the bodies. He grabbed a plate and shoveled cheeses, plump blueberries and strawberries onto it, then hurried over to the nearest bench, thankful for the cover of the checked tablecloth.

He toyed with the food at first more than he actually ate anything. All of the berries, he overheard one of the nudists quip, had been picked that morning from the gardens and berry patches in the nearby woods.

Brent tried the blueberries and found them sun-kissed and succulent. He devoured the rest and saw that the pattern on the antique china plate was Blue Willow. Brent smiled. Just like the teacups and saucers his grandmother, the singer, had once owned. Talk about a return to childhood.

* * * *

Joe masturbated him using the old reach-around, the trusted standard that sexually curious but moderately confused males referred to as the Rusty Trombone. Brent resisted the urge to chuckle as his mind called up yet another musical reference.

It hadn't taken him long to come with Joe's athletic body pressing on his back, the other man's cock grinding against his butt, dipping into the space between his spread legs, and Joe growling, sweating, the side of his face resting against Brent's.

The explosion had been glorious, one of the biggest Brent could remember. Gasping Joe's name, he thought he must have sprayed a pint of his seed across the meadow flowers they'd flattened. When it was over, he licked his lips and tasted Joe's musk.

"I want to fuck you," Joe grumbled.

"I want you to," Brent said. "But..."

"Yeah, no cock-sock."

"I didn't bring any. Didn't think—"

"We'd meet. Me, neither. No rubber. Oh well, what you just gave me fuckin' rocked. I can always hump you."

"You certainly can," Brent sighed, a wide smile on his sweaty face.

Joe humped him, but not in the dry sense, because their bodies were damp with perspiration and the air was humid and misty.

"This still classifies as doggy-style, right?"

"Doggy," Brent chuckled. "It sounds so crude."

"It is crude," Joe said, laughing, too, as he drove the point home, rubbing himself closer to climax against Brent's glistening flesh. "What else would you call it?"

"I dunno, something less vulgar?" From the corner of his eye, Brent watched a lemon-colored butterfly dance across the flowers. "Butterfly-style?"

Joe momentarily ceased humping. Snorting a laugh, he collapsed atop Brent's back, pulling him into a reverse bear hug. "You're funny."

"And you're a lot of fun. Not at all what I suspected when I saw you brooding down by the lake yesterday."

Joe whistled a sigh past Brent's ear. "You're my first...you know...guy."

"That makes two of us," Brent said. "I am, was—"

"Not anymore, because as I see it, oral is real sex and so's butterfly-style."

Joe nibbled his ear, licked his way down to Brent's lips, and they brought one another to their second climaxes of the morning, just as rain began falling.

* * * *

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"I'm hungry," Joe said.

He lay sprawled across Brent's bed, his legs crossed at the ankles, his bare toes aimed at the ceiling along with his eyes.

"I've got jerky," Brent said.

"Huh?" Joe pulled his eyes down from the polished burl of the wooden beams. "Dude, I'm so spent."

"No, I wasn't asking you to jerk me off again. I came prepared."

He slid off the bed and retrieved his stash.

"Thanks," Joe said, "but after missing out on lunch I sure could go for something more substantial than sugar and rawhide. Especially after so much great sex."

Brent beamed from the compliment. Not bad for a first-timer. "Want me to brave the elements and streak to the dining hall?"

"Naw, you don't have to. I'm happy just to stay right here. Really happy."

In the wan light cast by the flickering candle, Brent saw the look on Joe's face. He didn't look as happy as he claimed to be.

"Something wrong?"

Joe blinked, faced him. "What?"

"You were somewhere else just now."

Joe scratched his chest then ogled his balls. "Let me ask you. What's the one thing you want, more than anything?"

"To be happy."

"And what makes you happiest?"

"When I'm writing music, performing music. Music, I guess. It's in my blood, thanks to my Grandma. She was pretty famous. What about you?"

"Not having to pretend."

Joe's eyes met Brent's, twin emerald stars that glowed green in the candle's light.

"Pretend?" Brent parroted.

Joe turned back toward the ceiling. "Nothing," he said. "It's not important."

Brent drew in a deep breath of the Joe-scented air. "How about I bring us back some grub?"

"You'd do that for me?"

“Sure,” Brent said. “That and so much more. Anything, for—”

He started to say it, but caught himself. It was far too early. Was it even possible to love a man you’d known for little more than a day? Not that he really knew Joe. Still, if his heart was to be trusted, it was conceivable.

“For the handsome dude in my bed,” Brent settled for instead. He grabbed Joe’s nearest foot and gave it a playful shake.

Joe recoiled. “Hey now, ticklish!” the other man chuckled.

That’s one more thing I now know about him, Brent thought on his way out of the cabin and into the rain.

* * * *

A misty half-darkness cloaked the camp. The glow of candles in windows and the outside lights of the main house, showers, and dining hall created dim constellations separated by vast stretches of shadowy space.

A trace of fear tickled Brent’s spine. It wasn’t his nakedness or the fact he knew he needed a shower following their lovemaking—they both did. But halfway to the dining hall, Brent sensed he was being watched.

The hall was unlocked and empty of guests and their cocks, the food stored neatly in the refrigerators. He loaded up a plate and grabbed two sodas. The cans were cold and dewy; shocking against the bare skin at the side of his chest when he balanced them along a length of arm.

The feeling of being watched intensified on the march back to his cabin, but the mist made it difficult to see anything except for what was directly in front of him. The ping of raindrops on leaves cloaked all sound except for the melancholy song of a night bird, performing among the dark trees.

A figure appeared on the path. Brent gasped, halted. The tall, slender apparition shrouded in mist stepped closer.

“My young hero,” Mister Lang said.

Brent recaptured his stolen breath. “You freaked me, man.” Then, embarrassed, he added, “I was just raiding the fridge.”

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“We missed you and our other young hero at dinner this evening—and at the rest of today’s workshops. I suspect you both had other, more pressing plans.”

Brent recalled Joe’s weight pressing atop him and the numerous, delicious positions they’d experimented with, all without actual penetration. Mutual rubbing. Foot worship. Sniffing. Licking.

“Sorry,” Brent apologized.

“Oh, there’s no need for that. But I would caution you about moving forward too quickly. The hero in your bed isn’t who you think he is.”

* * * *

Brent marched back to the cabin, unaware that he’d stopped blinking until his eyes started to blur and burn. The closed door had bottled the heat and the scent of their lovemaking. The smell of Joe’s masculine sweat greeted him, stirred into an even more-intoxicating presence by the fragrance of summer rain that followed Brent inside.

“You’re back, and with food,” Joe said.

Brent forced a smile and did a little dance. “Ta-da!”

He extended the plate along with one of the icy, perspiring soda cans. Joe accepted the offering. He snacked on the berries, the breads, the little pastries, growling his approval.

“So tell me about you,” Brent said, seated beside him but not eating.

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you want to tell me.”

“Be specific,” Joe said around a mouthful of blueberries, his eyes narrowed.

“For instance...you know I go to school, work a shitty job in a restaurant to pay bills, sing in a garage band...only it’s really more of a basement band, and that I’ve got this crazy dream of a music career. You know what’s in my i-Pod at the moment.”

“Yeah, Boy George.”

“So what’s in yours?”

“Jock rock.”

“Aah, sports anthems,” Brent said. “So you play sports?”

“Softball right now. It’s like baseball, only with bigger balls.”

Brent cast a glance down at Joe’s crotch. He could believe that part without any stretch of the imagination. “Work?”

“A shitty clerical job.”

“Doing what?”

“Shitty clerical work,” Joe snapped, abandoning the plate. “Look, dude, what is this—some kind of job interview?”

“No, but I figure we’ve gotten to know each other physically. Maybe we should share the rest of it. The stuff that isn’t so exciting or sexy, but just as important. Especially if—”

“If,” Joe repeated, standing. “If what?”

“If you want there to be another verse after the chorus.”

Joe shook his head, opened his mouth to speak, but no words emerged.

“Tell me the truth,” Brent said, shattering the heavy silence. “Do what Mister Lang said you’re capable of—be a hero. My hero.”

The wounded expression returned to Joe’s face. His eyes, looking heavy in the mosaic of broken candlelight, pinned Brent in their sights. “I’m not a hero. I’m a coward.”

Saying nothing more, Joe stormed out of the cabin. Brent stared at the door for several long minutes, wondering if he should pursue, but he didn’t in the end and cursed himself for being a bigger coward.

* * * *

He sat in the lotus position in the small, airy pagoda beneath the apple tree, beside the footbridge. Another vision formed in Brent’s mind’s eye, painted in shades of gray and sepia. He was walking down a busy city street, surrounded by a throng of bodies, of strangers, all of them clothed. But he was really alone. Brent could read that glaring fact on his future self’s face.

He entered a building through a revolving glass door and rode an elevator up to a floor that housed the biggest, most tricked-out recording studio he’d ever seen. He sang into the microphone, but the melody sounded soulless, gray. Gray like

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the world around him. Plenty of people wanted to fuck him, to come with him, on him, and inside him. That was both the blessing and curse to guitar players, drummers, and especially the dude on lead vocals, no matter how good or famous a band was. Only Brent wasn't interested in any of them, only Joe.

"Brent."

Brent closed his third eye and opened the first two to see Joe standing just outside the pagoda. A rush of near-blinding color from the woods, meadow, and lake replaced the blanched landscape of the vision. Brent blinked. Eight-pointed sparkles of sunlight glittering off the lake's surface burned the afterimage of an aura around Joe's body.

He saw that Joe was clothed – a black t-shirt, baseball cap, old blue jeans, sneakers with no socks. This image troubled him almost as much as the vision of his future. On the surface, Joe looked so masculine and natural, but also distant, defeated.

"The truth," he said, without prompting, "is that I want to be with you. Not just here wagging our dicks among the pines, but in the real world, too. Another verse, after the chorus, only a song that never ends."

Brent unhooked his legs. "I want that, too."

He started to rise, but Joe held up a hand in restraint. "Only we can't. It's not possible. Not safe...for me, but especially for you. I won't let anything happen to you, babe."

Brent reached for him. Joe held him back, by the wrists. "Make me a promise."

"Anything."

"Swear to me."

Brent did. "Cross my heart."

"Forget me."

"What? No," Brent argued.

"You promised. Now let it go and don't look for me again. Forget we ever met."

Joe pulled him closer and crushed their mouths together, silencing Brent's protests. The kiss was brief and verged on painful.

"This was the best weekend of my life, being here with you," Joe whispered. "But I have to forget it and so do you."

He turned and hurried down the path. Brent started to follow, but the ground beneath his bare feet seemed to stretch out with his steps, turning yards into acres.

Brent had wondered to himself why, with so many juicy cocks and plump, bare backsides hanging out in the open, not one mosquito had feasted on a single guest.

Or how he'd gained the ability to foretell the future.

Or how the earth now seemed determined to keep him from following Joe.

Brent called his name, but Joe was already far ahead of him, light years too distant to hear.

* * * *

For the third time in a week, Brent found his butt planted on the red vinyl stool at FuBar, the neighborhood's newest gay-friendly watering hole. A couple of beers weren't going to hurt him. Since the club scene had gone smoke-free, neither would the second hand cancer sticks. But the memories threatened to crush his spirit.

A man saddled over to him, asking him what he was into.

"Joe," he said flatly.

"Coffee? Kinky."

Brent picked up his bottle and walked to an empty table at the outer orbit of the dance floor.

Forgetting hadn't been so easy and since the weekend men's retreat Brent had experienced the same creepy sensation he'd felt on the *recce* to the dining hall for food, the feeling that somebody was watching him. It had happened twice at the restaurant, once while he was pouring ice water into a glass, going through the motions only to have a gaze slither across him, the phantom tickle unleashing a shiver down his spine.

At his favorite used music store in the Village where he sometimes went to peruse the stacks of CDs and vintage vinyl in search of forgotten treasure, a ghost had walked across his grave. The handful of '80s soundtracks he considered adding to his music collection dropped from his shaking hand and clattered across the scuffed linoleum floor.

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Brent tensed as a skeletal hand again teased the short hairs at the nape of his neck. He whipped around. FuBar went spinning out of focus. When the place stabilized, a well-dressed, moderately attractive man seated at the bar was staring at him. An older man, business type, if Brent had to guess. Real money. The man raised his bottle of beer.

Brent smiled and mouthed, “No, thanks,” and returned to his drink, not caring for it any more than the notion of allowing the business suit to buy him another.

His thoughts returned to Joe. Their short time together in the Adirondacks had been so colorful, so alive. In recent days, he’d gotten back into the studio and the band was hired to play a bunch of upcoming gigs – one with the potential to turn into a fairly big deal if the Music Gods smiled favorably upon them. Still, all he could see was just how gray his bright future seemed without Joe in it, as foretold by his vision. He loved Joe, but maybe Joe had been correct in asking Brent to forget him. It would make things so much easier, happier. His life would have seemed so much better had he never gone in search of inner peace at a glorified all-male nudist retreat.

Sighing, Brent took another swig of his beer, then abandoned both it and his seat. He told himself he would return to his tiny apartment, spend the rest of the late night working on his new songs, but he knew that was an excuse. He’d stopped writing after the men’s retreat. What was the point of love songs, without the one you loved to sing them to? But he was jerking off more to get through his mean blues and likely would again tonight. There was that to look forward to.

He headed toward the exit. The Suit stormed up to him.

“Leaving?”

“That was the plan, yes,” Brent said.

The Suit matched his steps, a large, dark thunderhead swimming at the periphery of his vision. “Stay a while. Talk to me.”

Brent dug in his heels and turned to face the man directly. Up close, the Suit’s good looks took on a far sharper edge. The hunger in his eyes wasn’t the lust Brent expected to see, but more like the glaze that comes over a predator once it has cornered prey.

"I'm flattered and all," Brent said, backing away. The Suit matched his retreating step with one in advance.

"I just want to talk," the man said.

"I don't. Get the hint. Later," Brent said. He pushed through FuBar's front door.

The Suit pursued him. "Maybe you didn't understand me," the man said, punctuating the rhetorical statement with a chuckle that wasn't humorous and sent a frigid jolt through Brent's blood. "I'm going to ask the questions and you're going to answer them, faggot."

"Excuse me?"

"There ain't an excuse for you, cocksucker."

The man rushed him. What happened next passed in a distortion of time and space, through a filter of pain and a stain of red color.

"In particular, Joseph's Legere's cock," the man said, pulling him into a Bob's-your-uncle bear hug and marching him away from the sidewalk, into a shadowy back alley. Once they were out of sight of the night's other pedestrians, the Suit grabbed a handful of Brent's hair and dragged him the rest of the way into the region of darkness.

Brent tasted blood. The prick had clocked him hard. "Let go of me," he demanded, spitting out the noxious cocktail of saliva and copper on his tongue.

The man backed him against a brick wall. "Nothing would please me more."

Through the lens of red superimposed over his vision, Brent caught a flash of silver—the blade of a large hunting knife reflecting the glow of distant streetlights.

"I'm done asking," the Suit huffed.

Brent gagged on the trace of beer on the man's breath, barely covering up a deeper, danker smell that reminded him of decaying meat. The man was rotting—from the inside out, mused a voice in Brent's thoughts. Another inner critic, one more conscious of the danger, urged Brent to speak, to sing, like in those old film *noir* flicks he sometimes caught on PBS at weird hours of the night. But he wouldn't betray Joe. He couldn't.

"What...what did you say his name was?"

"Joe—"

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“—Legere,” growled another voice, directly behind his attacker.

At first, Brent thought he must be hallucinating, because Joe was back, right there in the alley, rushing at the Suit. If Joe was an illusion, the Suit seemed to see him, too.

The Suit revolved. “Speak of the devil—and the dick-licker,” he said.

And then he swung the blade.

* * * *

“Are you okay?” Joe asked, shaking his right hand out of a fist before clamping both on the tops of Brent’s shoulders.

Brent nodded, smiled. “I am now.”

Their eyes remained locked for several seconds, too brief, but long enough for Brent to see Joe smile and to gauge the look in his magnificent twin emeralds as being made up of equal parts relief and love.

“Come on, we have to get out of here,” Joe said.

Brent shot a look at the Suit, now sprawled on the ground and moaning in a weak voice, toppled by Joe’s righteous anger and a powerful right hook. The hunting knife juttied up from the ground, its blade driven into the asphalt. Joe grabbed it by the hilt and pulled it free. As he pocketed the weapon, Brent saw a stain of crimson cutting across the blade’s silver glint.

“Who the fuck is he?” Brent asked.

“One of my father’s enemies.”

“Your father?”

“Later. Right now we don’t have the time for explanations.”

Joe guided him toward the alley’s entrance. A few steps short of the actual street, Joe winced and Brent saw the fresh glisten of blood.

“He stabbed you?”

“It’s not bad. He only grazed me.”

The ‘graze’ had ripped open the side of Joe’s button-down shirt.

“Joe!”

"I told you, we have to get out of here. Now, before the rest of his pals show up."

* * * *

They boarded Joe's truck and headed north of the city. Once they were traveling at five above the speed limit, Joe came clean.

"You have to believe me—I'd die before getting you involved in this."

"What's this?"

Joe's throat knotted. Eyes aimed at the road ahead of them, he said, "My family runs a very successful business. Only not the kind of business that pays taxes or keeps books for the I.R.S. to audit. There's a long-running feud between my family's company and another powerful organization. You could call us rivals, but 'sworn enemies' is a better way to phrase it. It's been a long, bloody feud, headed toward disaster—until my father and the head of the enemy organization agreed to this fuckin' radical, whacked idea. Have me marry his daughter. Build both businesses and bridge the rivalry with a wedding...kids."

Joe shook his head.

"I didn't have a say in it. I tried to be the hero, like Mister Lang said. That's why I went there, to learn to be a man, do my duty, deny myself for the greater good...but the longer I was there, the more I realized I couldn't do it. Being the hero doesn't mean living a lie, it means being true to my needs. And yours."

Joe tipped a glance his way.

"After I met you, I tried to stay away, to follow through with it. But I couldn't. I love you, babe."

In spite of everything he'd learned and all that was happening around him, happiness surged through Brent's insides. "I love you, too, Joe."

Joe gripped Brent's hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it.

"We can go to the police," Brent said.

"Who do you think tailed me to the men's weekend? My father's enemy has spies everywhere."

Brent remembered the chilly, icy sensation of being watched on his way to the dining hall.

BLUE WILLOWS

Joe's grip on Brent's hand tightened. "I broke off the deal to get married, and right now, they're pretty pissed at me."

"We can go to my place."

"No, there's only one safe place for us..."

It was still dark when they pulled into the driveway at Not-E-Nuff Acres.

"Joe, we can't stay here. They know about this place."

"Yeah, but when I was leaving that weekend, I had this...vision, I guess you'd call it. Mister Lang, telling me to come back if I was ever in serious trouble. I don't know why, but I feel safe here."

Brent hesitated from exiting the truck.

Joe said, "If you want to leave, I won't stop you." He reached across Brent's lap and popped the glove box. "There's money in there. A decent amount. Take my truck. You could go anywhere."

"I'm where I want to be—with you."

Their lips met. Soon after Brent felt the exploration of Joe's tongue working into his mouth, a gentle knock rapped on the driver's side door, driving them apart. Joe reached for the knife.

"Put that ugly thing away," Mister Lang commanded. He held his walking stick, had used it to knock on the door, and was still quite naked. "There are no weapons allowed here, except for your brains."

"Mister Lang," Joe said. "You knew we were coming?"

"I sensed you would. Especially after the others arrived."

"Others?"

"Men," Mister Lang said, shaking his head. "But not heroes. Not Agents of Light. Shadow men. Bad men. They're presently searching the grounds for you."

The hollow crack of breaking pottery sounded from the direction of the main house.

"I'm so sorry," Joe said.

Mister Lang smiled his strange smile. "That? Nothing that can't be fixed. Now hurry—if, that is, you're sure you want my help, my young heroes."

They exited the truck.

"This way," Lang said.

Holding hands, they followed him past the line of bungalows, which had been turned inside out. One had been set on fire. Several of the thugs tearing through the place hooted and hollered, their dark silhouettes framed menacingly by the flames.

“You have to let me stop them,” Joe whispered.

Mister Lang waved a hand for him to be silent. “They’ve done nothing that Isis and I can’t repair.”

“Isis?”

“My cat.”

They had reached that part of the path leading down to the lake. Brent stopped. “What’s your name?”

“Mister Lang.”

“No, I mean your real name. Your hero’s name. Buddha, is it? Or Jehovah?”

“Oh, what’s a name?” Lang sighed, unleashing a powerful shiver down Brent’s spine.

For the first time, Brent realized how beautiful this man was...and the origin of his power.

“In the end, isn’t it what’s in here that counts?” Lang placed his free hand over his heart. “Please continue on, over the footbridge, and you’ll be safe, I promise. But move quickly.”

They ran.

“There,” bellowed a voice from behind them. “I found them—they’re headed toward the water!”

The deafening report of a gunshot shattered the tenebrous calm.

“I love you, Joe,” Brent said.

“I love you, too, babe.”

They reached the footbridge.

The thugs moved in from both sides, guns drawn, trapping the two young men in the middle.

But as the bright red disc of the morning sun rose above the lake, they saw that the footbridge was empty except for a pair of doves, right where the lovers had stood. The birds flew up from the footbridge and soared across the lake, holding close formation with one another. One sang out loudly in the most beautiful voice, as though in praise to the gods, as they ascended into the sky.

About the Author

Gregory L. Norris is a full-time professional writer with over 1,600 individual credits to his resume. With his writing partner Laura A. Van Vleet, he has written two fifth-season television episodes of Paramount's STAR TREK: VOYAGER ("Counterpoint" & "Gravity"). As a team, they write regularly for the top genre entertainment magazine, CINESCAPE. Some of the personalities they have featured include Martin Landau, Kate Mulgrew, William Shatner, David Duchovny, Tia Carrere, Lance Henriksen, and Leonard Nimoy.