

## CHPTR19 - The valentine

It could seem, what with Valentine and myself being like a pair of helpless little girls, that Newton got the short end of the stick, having to act as some sort of father figure to the two of us.

And that would be perfectly on the mark.

Well, in Valentine's case, at least she was indeed a cute girl, if you mean the inclusive sort of cute which spans from unremarkable to stunning - and this beauty goes a long way towards excusing any sort of idiocy or ineptness. Also, her angelic voice served as the contrast to the sort of riffs Newton and Hume cooked together for their Beauty and the Beasts metal act, which was a fine hobby on the side whenever donning top hats and pretending to be intellectuals didn't quite cut it.

As for myself - well, that's as perfect a fucking mystery as Linear A.

Even so - it just so happened, in the Chinese year of the hare, when Quirinius was governor of Syria, that our usual roles were reversed and Newton dragged me to the mall babbling something roughly as coherent as *you know, there's this thing, I've been wondering, maybe you could, if you've got a minute, maybe, it's just -*

Now, usually, the only two things I'm any good for is carrying things which aren't really all that heavy, but simply too voluminous to handle single player, and driving stuff around

because I come sort of bundled with a car. For both of those purposes, the four of them usually budgeted all their goodwill for band related activities, so while I wasn't exactly eager to get involved in anybody else's problems, I felt at least the slightest bit curious to see what had come up.

Also, for the time being, I had never even had a car, but let's not go there, because verbs can be quite the bitches, but they haven't quite deserved to be broken on the rack. At least, back when I'm sort of telling you about now, then I had had a car for a while. Bah.

"Well, you know, it's February -" Newton said. He voiced it much like an explanation, but it really didn't bring anything much into the clear. At this point, my former curiosity was very quickly metamorphosing to worry, because Newton generally knew better than trying to bait me into a game twenty questions unless he was really treading the water, and there were very few things other than sports that Newton didn't like to pretend that he mastered through and through.

I stared at his stupid face for a good ten seconds before I realized he wasn't going to elaborate and promptly changed the topic to something in my opinion more urgent: "Why?" I asked, completing the question by indicating the stores and shoppers around us with a windmilling finger.

No longer having to try to explain whatever it was that was giving him so much trouble, Newton suddenly became his usual, if not quite normal, self: "Oh!" He practically shouted the word, as if carbondioxide had been building up during his last few minutes of disfluent speech and was suddenly released. "Oh," he repeated,

this time as if testing the microphones before a gig, at a volume which didn't make the people around us turn and frown and mutter about kids these days. "Nothing special, I was just looking to pick up a new dress shirt, and the ol' sneakers are beginning to resemble hand puppets in the front, you know. Foot puppets?"

He pulled me into some or other store as if we were a couple out shopping, preempting my next question as if we were a pair of fraternal twins: "Don't tell Jonathan, though, or he'll be all pissy about not being my first pick." That still didn't make much sense, seeing as Hume actually was a sharp dresser who cared enough about fashion to spend his spare time browsing through catalogues, while I would be hard pressed to find something which interested me less. Well, not really; calculus, Africa and nail polish, for starters, but you catch my drift.

This sort of nonsense was more or less what echoed through my skull as Newton went through the laborious process of finding a button-front that he wouldn't feel embarrassed to be seen in and which simultaneously didn't make me wince and shake my head in subtle, ten degree arcs, all the while trying to fend off the pair of unhelpful salesgirls circling around us like starved buzzards. Much too much later, we finally sat down at some cafeteria table, a few more shopping bags than two heterosexual men should really be walking around with tucked away in a corner. It seemed Newton had taken advantage of the interlude to figure out what the hell he had wanted to say.

"So - you got any plans for the big day? Anybody special you've got your eye on?" The me sitting at the table drew a perfect blank at what *big day* he might be referring to, so I'll take the opportunity to comment that this is a very common rhetorical

device, where you feign interest in someone else's situation only to bait out the question *What about you?* - at which point you'll whelm them over with a veritable flood of personal information they really would have preferred for you to confide to your diary or therapist.

I grunted a *nuh*, which was indeed closer to no than yes, prompting Newton to move on to the next stage of the assault. "You see, it's already next Thursday, and - " He didn't really cut off here, but I sort of forgot to listen to what he was saying while I tried my very best to find the calendar on my cell phone to figure out what in the world he was going on about. I could of course just have *asked* him, like how normal people converse taking turns opening their mouths, but, ye, that wasn't convoluted enough for my tastes.

"So, you know, figured I shouldn't be watching Grease with Jonathan like last - " This line didn't make much sense out of context, but I finally managed to pin down what was going on. Thursday would be the fourteenth of February. Ahead of my consciously understanding the situation, a sense of...foreboding grew in me, like when you suddenly find something moving in your shoe and dread seizes you long before the department of visual cognition reports that, yes, indeed, it's a fucking spider the size of a golfball and it's ugly, hairy legs are moving like a goddamn locomotive.

The next few lines hit me, like some sort of punch drunk ragdoll in the boxing ring - they hit me as some chaos of jabs and hooks out of nowhere while a feeling of nausea rose from my gut and bubbled up through my trachea to fill my mouth with a bitter taste. The scene was a bit like those sort of strobe-light cuts you

see in movies or at the undercover drug stores called house parties, short flashes lacking the coherency which usually link events together, leaving everything in a sort of blurry and out-of-sequence unreality.

“So I was sort of wondering - “ Newton told me in a slow-motion, bass-modulated voice which didn’t match his boy-band face and the movements of his mouth. “You know her better than me, you know...” - “Maybe it would be sort of awkward, what do you think?” I think I gripped the table to steady myself as the room swung to and fro’ as if though we were sitting below the deck of Santa Maria. “You don’t think she’s got any other plans, do you?” - “Maybe it’s a bad idea, I just thought...” - “How about...” - “Don’t you?”

At some point down the line, I sort of came to myself and was still sitting in the chair, and Newton was looking me straight in the face with this sort of half quizzical, half worried expression, seemingly expecting me to say something. I did, at some or other level, understand at least the general topic of inquiry, but like when someone asks if you don’t perhaps think it wouldn’t be entirely unwise if you forgot about not going forward with un-reversing the change of plans - I had no clue what *yes* and *no* would mean respectively. I eventually just stuttered out a “Ah-Ah-I, I don’t tuh-tuh-think so,” like how Wilhelm Tell fires off an arrow into the black.

And when Newton’s relieved reaction informed me that *I don’t think so* was just what he had wanted to hear, the second wave of nausea engulfed me as, accursed with a much too vivid imagination, I pictured the two of them going to the movies or sharing a plate of spaghetti or just walking side by side, hand in

hand, fingers in fingers entwined, ‘neath a sparkling night sky, scenes I had shot in my mind’s eye in hundreds of takes previously, though with a different male lead. Meanwhile, Newton babbled some thanks that I was being such a good sport and all and bade me wish him luck.

I was surprised that I didn’t make more of a scene of things or at least tried my very best to sabotage the whole little project. Part of it must have been how everything happened the slightest bit faster than what my mind could keep up with - most of it was probably how I had always preferred seclusion to conflict - and there was also, I guess, how I found some sort of masochistic pleasure in seeing the architecture of my hopes and dreams crumble to finest dust, sort of a slightly more adult and probably twice as pathological way of cutting yourself.

*Newton <- Me : Maybe take her ice skating. 11:17 PM, Fri*

I thought she’d’ve liked that. I had always wanted to take her ice skating.