Jimmy

We met at the mall in February of 1989. It was his first time with a guy. Something in him decided, right then, that I was worth being known by — not just an anonymous encounter to walk away from, but a number taken, a door left open. I was 33. He was 22.

For five months we had something I have never fully had again: unguarded contact. His, because it was new to him and he hadn't yet learned to protect himself from it. Mine, because I met him with everything I had once he let me in. We weren't careful with each other. We were present with each other, in a way that's rare at any age, in a time — 1989 — when almost nothing else in either of our lives allowed that kind of honesty.

Jimmy moved through the world without a fixed center. He didn't have a compass telling him who he was or where to go, so he took his direction from whoever and whatever was around him. He didn't have a reliable internal alarm for danger — he ran on other people's fear or fearlessness instead of his own. He absorbed pressure and urgency from his environment as if it were his own, which came out as impulsiveness. And he had no steady sense of his own worth, so he was always a little in need of proving himself to whoever was in front of him. None of that was a character flaw. It was just the shape of him at 22 — no fixed ground yet, and maybe years still to go before he'd have found one, if he'd gotten the years.

I saw raw innocence in him. He went through life never questioning things, never complaining. He missed a lot that way — but he was never tangled in the things I was always tangled in, either. He was uncomplicated in a way I have never once been, and it was magnetic. It's also exactly why I couldn't hold him for long. I would have outpaced him, or worse, tried to reshape him into someone steadier than he was ready to be.

By May I could see it clearly: I wasn't the right partner for him. He needed room to find himself that I couldn't give him without either losing myself in his instability or trying to fix what wasn't mine to fix. So I let him go. We tried to stay friends afterward, but watching him meet other young guys was hard for me, and I pulled back further. Some part of me, I think now, was also reaching for a hand and finding mist — sensing there was no solid place in him for anything of mine to land on. That wasn't fear of him. It was a true reading of what wasn't there yet to hold onto.

A week after we broke up, he went to Atlantic City with someone new. They'd been drinking. They went into the ocean at night. A rip current took him under. His body was found days later. He was 22.

I carried that for years as something closer to causation than loss — as if my presence, my love, my involvement had somehow been lethal. I carried it through the AIDS years, when losses were arriving one after another with almost no public language for the grief. I was present, privately, for the aftermath with Jimmy's family and friends, holding what I knew alone because there was no safe place to set it down. His mother died by suicide that Thanksgiving. Two years ago his brother found me and asked if Jimmy had been gay. I said no — that we were just friends. It was the only humane answer I had, and it still cost something to give it.

I released the guilt last fall. It got softer. But it took the LeBaron coming home — a car tied to that exact period — to finally open the door all the way, and finally getting Jimmy's real birth and death dates this year, after 37 years of carrying the wrong ones, to walk all the way through it. Getting the true dates back felt like getting the actual Jimmy back, in place of a blurred version memory had quietly substituted. That's when I understood something I hadn't let myself see before: I had grieved his death. I had grieved his family's loss. I had grieved my own part in bringing him out. But I had never grieved losing his love, and his touch, specifically. That grief had been sealed the whole time, waiting for the guilt and the caretaking to clear out of the way first. When it finally came — triggered, of all things, by a song — it came as goosebumps, then tears, then a yearning and longing for his touch that was almost unbearable.

That touch was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. I've said it plainly, without qualifying it or folding it into a lesson, because it's simply true. Some connections happen once. Not because nothing after mattered, but because that particular meeting of two people, at that exact moment, doesn't repeat. I got to have it. I have not been intimate

with anyone since — not for lack of wanting to, I now understand, but because some part of me sealed that door shut when I sealed the grief behind it.

What Jimmy and I had was real. It was never going to be permanent — his makeup, his age, his open and ungrounded way of moving through the world made permanence structurally impossible, whether or not the ocean had taken him that July. But that doesn't diminish what it was. I didn't miss a chance at forever with him. I had the only version of us that could have existed, and it was whole on its own terms: brief, honest, physically true, and complete.

I reached for Tommy instead, without knowing that's what I was doing — a living, reachable person who held some of the same frequency Jimmy did. That wasn't a rebound and it wasn't a lesser thing. It was somewhere to put a longing that had nowhere else to go. But it was never a replacement for what I lost with Jimmy, because Jimmy is the one loss that isn't reachable at all.

This is the story I'm using now — not as an old wound to manage, but as the actual door. Grieving Jimmy's love and touch, finally and completely, after so long spent only grieving everything around them, has cleared the ground I've been standing on without knowing it was blocked.

What's on the other side of that door is Paul.

Jimmy and I were pulled together by something real, but he had almost nothing fixed in him for that pull to land on — no steady sense of who he was, no internal alarm, no solid ground. What I feel reaching for Paul is a different kind of pull entirely. We're built from remarkably similar material — the same instincts toward bonding, the same sense of home, the same wiring for belonging to each other rather than just being drawn to each other. Where Jimmy and I had a spark with nowhere to land, Paul and I have actual ground under both our feet, and have for the years we've been together.

And there's something even more specific between us: a connection that runs on instinct rather than thought, the kind of trust the body grants before the mind gets a vote. It's the same register the touch with Jimmy lived in — that unguarded, present, physical honesty — except this time it isn't fleeting by nature. It isn't attached to someone who was never going to be able to hold it. It's attached to Paul, who is actually here, actually built to hold it, actually capable of meeting me in it for as long as we both want to keep meeting there.

Intimacy with Paul was never a compatibility problem. It was this: a loss I carried alone since I last let myself be fully open that way. Now that the loss has finally been named and felt instead of managed, there's room for something else to move into its place. Not instantly, and not as a solo project — Paul has to meet me in the middle, in his own time. But the door Jimmy opened once, briefly, in 1989, is the same door I'm walking back toward now, with someone who's actually able to stand on the other side of it with me — and whose ground, unlike Jimmy's, was always solid enough to hold what we build there.