

SOUL MATES

By Michael A. Kozlowski

Albert lay in bed watching his wife. She looked so peaceful and beautiful, like an angel. Cherubic, he thought, a good word for it.

He recalled how they met; a blind date set up by his friend, John. They'd arranged to meet at that little Italian place down the street from his apartment which, even though they had long ago moved out of the city and settled into the suburbs, was still one of their favorite restaurants and where they spent every anniversary. He had arrived almost half an hour early; anxious, nervous and excited. By the time she walked in the door, he'd knocked back two Coke and whiskeys in an effort to settle himself.

Angela was gorgeous, easily the most attractive woman he had ever been out with. She had described herself on the phone, as he had done in hopes of avoiding the awkwardness of trying to locate each other in the restaurant, but she had drastically undersold herself. She spotted him right away, he guessed because he was the only guy in the place sitting alone and staring at the entrance like a dog waiting for a scrap to fall from the table. She waved a hello and started to toward and, he swore, the whole world went into slow motion as she did.

He knew, absolutely knew, that he would blow this. She was so clearly out of his league they might as well have been playing different sports. He clumsily stood to greet her, knocking over his chair in the process and nearly spilling what was left of his drink all over the table. Stuttering and stammering, he managed to right the chair, wipe his sweaty hands on his pants and softly shake her hand as he formally introduced himself.

He recalled how a slight blush rose on her cheeks and how her eyes fell shyly away as she took his hand, as if she were embarrassed by all the fuss she was causing; humbled by

it. That was the moment he fell in love with her.

Looking at her now, lying next to him, he tentatively reached out to brush her cheek, careful not to disturb her. Her skin was soft, smooth and warm beneath his fingers and he imagined he could see the redness swelling to the surface, as it had at that first meeting nearly fifteen years ago.

Fifteen years. It was a long time.

Of course, he hadn't blown it. She had a way about her that immediately put him at ease. She was interesting and funny, clever and playful. She held enough of the conversation that he never felt pressed to raise a topic and she drew back and seemed genuinely attentive when he had something to say. How beautiful she was quickly became a non-issue and he felt, for the first time ever, that there was such a thing as a soul mate.

At the end of that first date Albert had walked Angela to her car and kissed her goodnight. It was a soft, tender kiss and he never even thought to ask her back to his place or try to make a move to take things further. The time spent with her had so sated him that idea of sex had never entered his mind.

The first year of their relationship was a blur of happiness. They spent time together nearly every day; never went without at least talking on the phone. It was that most glorious time of a relationship; when everything is new and the dopamine is flooding your brain. It was the time when you're never lost for something to talk about, spending hours discussing favorite music or food, each other's childhood and families, sharing your goals and dreams.

The sex was great. It was new, it was exciting. Each time they would push each other a little farther out of the comfort zone, exploring the limits. They never found them. When Albert would sheepishly suggest they try something, a gleam in Angela's eye would tell him to go for it. Shy, humbled and reserved to the rest of the world, Angela was an animal behind closed doors.

A year to the day after that first date, Albert had proposed. Many of their friends

termed it a whirlwind romance, but Albert thought it had been more than long enough to determine, without doubt, that this was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. They had married six months later.

Some people had said it wouldn't last but here they were, fifteen years together, lying next to each other. He brushed a stray lock of hair away from her eyes and recalled the first few years that they spent in the small, city apartment.

At the time, with money tight as they squirreled what they could away for a down payment on a house, nights spent in front of the television, eating cheap meals like turkey and rice, made them feel like they were missing out on some of the best parts of that time of their lives. Looking back on it now, Albert missed those evenings spent with Angela, in her worn, flannel nightgown, curled up to him on their ratty sofa watching sitcoms or the latest VHS release.

When they did spend some of their precious income on a night out, or a day trip, it was always something they did together. They were each other's best friends. Maybe it was out of necessity, rather than choice, that they spent all of their time together but Albert missed it just the same.

When they had finally moved out to the suburbs and started living "the American dream" they had also started spending more time apart.

In the city, though separated from neighbors by only thin walls, everyone pretty much kept to themselves; a cursory nod of acknowledgment in passing, at most. When they settled into the suburbs, people were quickly dropping by to introduce themselves, or invite you to a block party or a backyard barbecue. It didn't take long before new friends were made, bowling leagues were joined, wine drinking nights masquerading as book clubs were started.

Though Albert thought these were nice things, he viewed them now as the start of the divide that would grow between him and Angela. They tended to do things separate from each other. Nights were spent out with the guys or the girls. More often than not, they

saw each other in passing. They began to grow distant.

A frown crossed Albert's face as he stared at his wife. Maybe he should have been more mindful of her. Maybe he should have made an effort to spend more time with her. But then, she bore some of that responsibility as well, didn't she?

It would have been easier if there had been some defining moment, some event that forced a wedge between them, but that's not how these things work. Instead, it's a slow, glacial process. One day your loving every minute of your happily ever after and then, fifteen years later, you realize that you barely talk to your wife, that you never share with each other, that you know all you want to know about her and have no interest in discovery anymore. And what's worse... she feels the same way.

It was inevitable, given the circumstances, that someone would come along and those endorphins would kick in again. Albert wasn't proud of it. In fact, he was racked with guilt. He was ashamed that his body had betrayed him and let him fall into the arms of another.

He couldn't prove that Angela had done the same, but he wouldn't be surprised. As he pulled the already bloody knife across his wrists, he cursed the physical world. Nothing could truly last within it. It was the nature of the world for things to crumble and decay.

He set the knife on the nightstand and eased his body up against his wife's. The blood from his wrists mixed with that already on her nightgown and, though he was quickly growing lightheaded, he thought it very symbolic, even lovely.

The physical parts of love are subject to the physical world. But the soul... well... soul mates are forever.