

Before Our Eyes

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On any given Saturday morning, I could be found in my favorite chair in my favorite bookstore, reading a book and drinking my favorite coffee. French roast, no sugar, no creamer. That was my weekly routine. Until that last Saturday in May.

“Do you get headaches?” he asked. He stood in front of my chair, holding two glasses of water and wearing a smile that stretched the full width of his face.

I had seen him before, on previous Saturdays. He browsed the non-fiction section religiously. He wasn't strikingly handsome but had an interesting look to him. Dark hair, ruddy tan, slim build. For the first time, I noticed his eyes were brown, but with green and gold, too. Maybe that's what people called hazel.

His smile wasn't like the goofy grin of someone who had just thrown out a cheesy pick-up line. It was the smile of someone remembering something lovely. I was intrigued.

“I get terrible headaches sometimes.” I wanted to see where this would go.

He gestured to the end of the sofa next to my chair. “May I?” He paused for a second and then sat down. He handed me a glass of water. “You're dehydrated.”

I must have had a confused look on my face.

“Dehydration is one of the leading causes of headaches.”

“Oh, of course.” I had never been hit on in a bookstore before. I wasn’t sure how to react. My book-nerd friends and I always joked that we would find our husbands in either a bookstore or a grocery store. Looking at him, I had to wonder.

“I’m Justin.” He held out his hand. His expression—his whole demeanor—was practically begging me to shake his hand. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

I took his hand and gave it my most professional shake. But as soon as my palm met his, I felt a rush of warmth. Not sweaty. Not weird at all. Just warm.

“I’m Deannie.” As soon as I said my name, he smiled again. I half-expected him to laugh, he looked so pleased. “Have we met before?” I asked, suddenly feeling familiar. I wasn’t sure what it was about him, but I felt as though we had spoken before.

“No.” Justin released my hand gently. “I’m in here a lot. I see you here on Saturdays. But this is the first time I’ve worked up the courage to talk to you.”

Now I was the one smiling. “Am I so scary that you have to muster your courage?”

“No. I’m afraid of the unknown. But now that I know how kind you are, I wish I’d met you sooner.” He nodded and took a sip of his water.

I slipped my bookmark into my tome and turned my full attention to him. “Are you a doctor? You asked about my headaches.”

His smile settled into the corners of his eyes. I liked that very much.

“You...” he stopped short. He tapped his right index finger over his bottom lip as if he had to rephrase his sentence. Looking directly into my eyes, he said, “A friend of mine calls me

Doc all the time. Tells me I focus too much on health, and not enough on joy. She's right, of course. I'm trying to be more fearless."

I blinked. For a split-second, I had to look away. My emotions felt too close to the surface. How had this happened? He was a stranger. Sort of. Yes. He was a stranger, and I was falling for him. This was not like me at all. I'm a practical woman. I read biographies, mysteries, satire, histories. I'm not really a romance reader—not in public, anyway.

"To answer your question, no. I am not a doctor." Justin seemed to wait for me to catch up. "I've had several jobs in my life, but these days I work as a loan officer for a bank."

"And do you enjoy it?" It was the polite question.

"I like helping people better their lives." Justin sipped at his water.

I finished my coffee and leaned back into my chair.

"And what do you do, Deannie?"

When he said my name, it was almost like a song. I'd never thought much of my name. I was named after my dad's mother. Priscilla Dean. Deannie was the only cool-sounding name I could work out of that. But when Justin pronounced it, *Deannie* became one-hundred percent cooler. "I'm a receptionist for a veterinarian's office. There are four doctors there, and I schedule all the patients and manage the main office."

"That sounds like a hectic job. You must be good with animals."

"It can be pretty tough. There are lots of regular appointments, of course. Pets coming in for their shots, for grooming, and for check-ups. But the rest gets hard. Emergencies where pets have eaten something they shouldn't. Or accidents and illnesses when I know the pets aren't

going to make it. The worst is when a family brings in a pet they've had for fifteen or twenty years. The dog is blind or can't walk anymore, and they have to let it go. My heart breaks every time." As the words poured over my lips, I could feel the sting of tears in my eyes. Why was I telling him all of this? Why did he have to be so easy to talk to?

"You're a compassionate person," Justin whispered.

"I try to remember how much joy a dog or cat brings a family. That's not a small thing." The words rattled over the lump in my throat.

"It's not a small thing." His voice carried a slight tremble, and I glanced up at him. His eyes shimmered. He sniffed, and I sniffed. We both looked ridiculous, sobbing in the corner of the bookstore.

"The families are lucky to have you taking care of them. And the doctors, too." Justin nodded. "I'm sure you're a blessing to everyone who knows you."

I picked up the water glass and poured the cold water down my throat as quickly as I could manage. "Thank you," I said when I finally found my voice again. "And thank you for the water, too."

He gestured to my book. "*Elephants Can Remember*." He smiled as he held up his book. "And I have *Dynasties of Ancient Egypt*." He slipped his book onto the end table beside our water glasses. "What if you put your book here next to mine, and when we got up to leave, you took mine, and I took yours? Then next Saturday, we would need to swap them back. We would probably have to chat for a few minutes about how silly we were to pick up the wrong books. And then maybe you would let me take you out to dinner or a milkshake or something."

I looked down at my mystery and wondered. Is this crazy? I see him here all the time. Justin isn't a grifter. He's a reader. Don't be stupid; serial killers read. Probably. But my gut says he's okay. My gut says he's more than okay. I slipped my book on top of his. "And what do we do with the rest of this week? Do I read about pharaohs while you try to solve my mystery?"

"I suppose we'll have to." Justin pulled himself to the front edge of the sofa. "And of course, you can spend the week looking me up online, making sure I'm not an ax-murderer. I work at First American, by the way. My department manager's name is Marcy Campbell. My father's name is Richard Barclay, and my mom is Ella Todd Barclay." Justin swallowed hard after each name.

My heart pounded in my chest for no apparent reason, other than I could sense a tug in his voice. Longing. Something familiar yet invisible. The moment, that very second, felt important and full of meaning.

"Are you sure we've never met?" I asked, suddenly realizing I again had tears in my eyes. I shifted forward in my chair.

"We've not spoken to each other before this day. No."

I inhaled a deep breath. His answer was precise. Confident. But somehow it was wrong. I knew him. In the very best ways, I knew Justin Barclay. "And so we're going to swap books, and walk away from each other. For a week we'll pretend until we meet back here again?"

Justin inched closer toward me. I could see that he was struggling. He reached out like he was going to take my hand, then pulled away. "You're a careful person, and that's a good thing, Deannie. But right now," he faltered. He rocked his head back and looked to the ceiling.

“Whatever it is, just say it.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He released a quick laugh. “You always say that.” It was barely louder than a whisper.

“What do you mean? How can I *always say* anything if this is the first time we’ve spoken?”

“Deannie, I don’t want to mess anything up, but I also don’t want to play games. I don’t know how long I have.”

What? Fear took hold. What did he mean by that? I scooted back in my chair. “I don’t understand. I wish you’d just say whatever it is you need to say.”

Justin dropped his head and whispered almost silently before looking up again. As if he wasn’t sure if he could make eye-contact with me, he stared at his hands, and before I could stop myself, I took them into my hands. I didn’t know what he was going to say, but I was ready for just about anything. I thought.

“You know how when someone’s about to die, and they say their life flashes before their eyes?”

“Yes?”

“It’s true. But maybe not their whole life. Maybe just the significant moments. Maybe just the best moments.” He stopped and seemed to study my face, searching for understanding.

“Like the moment I finally got up the courage to talk to you. That moment changed my life. You brought joy to my life and made every single day after richer.”

Confusion flooded my mind. I didn't understand. I couldn't respond yet. What he was saying didn't make sense. But somehow I knew he wasn't crazy. Maybe I was, but he wasn't. I wanted to hear more. I wanted to know the truth. Breathe in, breathe out. It will come.

"This is our first day?" I asked, still barely comprehending what he was suggesting.

"The first of many. And I want to tell you. You need to know how much I... how much you mean to me. Love isn't a strong enough word. I didn't say it enough, though. But you need to understand that you are not just my better half. You are the very best part of me. And for the next fifty-eight years, whenever I get sour or moody, you remind me that we have joy. And that's not a small thing."

In that second, I knew. I could see him, aged and weak, clinging to my hands. I felt decades of love and joy. I sensed memories not yet made. I recognized him. He was my future. And as quickly as that image flashed before my eyes, it was gone.

I sat in the corner, holding hands with Justin Barclay. Both of us blinking away tears. Both of us smiling. He wasn't just my future, and I wasn't just his past. We were each other's now.

"Maybe we don't have to swap books." I squeezed his hands.

"Maybe you can read yours to me." He sighed.

I nodded. "Today is our first day."

Author's note:

"Before Our Eyes" appears in the Texas High Plains Writers 2020 Anthology, *With Words We Weave*, available [here](#) on Amazon.com.