

In this excerpt from the short story "Forever," from the collection "Forever - and other stories," one of the main characters is under hypnosis, recalling how -- in a past life -- he met the man who would forever change his life.

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"Where are you?"

I'm --

"Yes?"

-- standing at the counter, at Schwab's waiting for my soda to arrive. Damn but that soda jerk is awfully slow. How long does it take to make a cherry coke? Not long, I can assure you, but here I am, on a overcast Saturday waiting for a soda. I remember looking at the door when I first saw them come in -- the blonde and the guy with the odd-looking suit. It's too warm a day for a suit like that. Yeh, it's overcast, but it's awfully hot in the drugstore. A suit? But the skirt's a looker, she really is. His wife, probably, I would think. Finally the soda arrives and the guy and his wife take the last two seats at the counter forcing me to stand. Just figures, doesn't it? Just figures.

'Afternoon,' I say to the guy who nods me a reply and turns back to the dame. What a shirty guy. What a rat. I turn to walk away from the counter with my soda and the guy moves his arm right into the soda glass. Can you imagine that? The guy bumps the glass right outta my hand, stands up and walks off like there's no tomorrow. Well, I'm telling ya, I coulda just reached across the distance and given him a shiner right there.

'Sorry,' the dame says, grabbing a fistful of napkins and wiping at the spreading stain on my slacks. I tell her it's okay. Then the shirty guy returns and practically accuses me of having a quick one with the skirt. What a dope. The dame explains the story fast and the guy gets all nicey-nicey suddenly, like he had no idea he whacked the cherry soda from my hand. So I say it's all right to him, too, and the seat next to them clears up, so they invite me to join them. Invite me, when they stole the seat I had in the first place. I saddle in next to this guy, he starts getting all chatty with me and I turn my head and look him right in the eye for the first time and SOCKO! I thought my heart was gonna stop right there in Schwab's Drugstore and they'd have to take me out on a stretcher.

"Why did you think that?"

Come on, don't be dumb. He had the most beautiful deep, dark blue eyes that I had ever seen in another man. I stared into those eyes and drank in their beauty. I thought I was gonna die, truly I did. I must have stared at him for over an hour. I took in the rest of him while he was bla-bla-bla-ing his life story and telling me about Maryland and the small house they had there, and his wife and the job she had at the cosmetic counter at the Bullock's Wilshire. 'Bla-bla-bla' he continued while I memorized each and every strand of his short hair that looked like it came off a mink coat and the way the muscles around his face moved when he bla-bla-bla-ed about how he joined the service or something. I was sure he could tell about me, I mean that I liked guys and not women, but you wouldn't know it to listen to him yapping about his damn future and the dreams he had for himself and the wifey who sat not seven inches from me, and if it weren't for her I would have grabbed this guy and -- but it doesn't matter does it? I mean, in the long run it doesn't matter a bit.

"What do you mean?"

I don't remember. I really don't remember whatever happened to us. Something happened to me, I think, but not until after we had all those years together -- well, as together as we could be, both of us married and all.

"You got married?"

Yeh. It's the strangest, isn't it?