
RE-TOUCH **TANIA KATAN**

Do you remember that show from the 90s “Touched by an Angel”? Where there would be some dying kid or down-and-out street person or someone who needed to be cured of an illness and Della Reese would place her loving angel hand upon their face and erase any sign of discomfort, disgrace, or disease? I think I was touched by an angel. Actually, it was more like molestation. Yeah, I guess I was molested by an angel.

“Can I touch your breasts, Tania? Please?” John casually asked me as we shared a bench seat at the crowded coffeehouse on the corner of 18th and Market Street in San Francisco in 1999.

“Sure,” I told him, and without missing a beat, added, “But only the right one.”

“Okay,” he said. He moved his hand towards my right breast, and as soon as his fingers felt the material of my shirt draped around my breast, his hand recoiled. His face lit up with a combination of horror and delight.

And with that touch and the verbal contract, John and my right breast began a two-year long relationship. But you should know that John is gay. And I’m gay too. Oh, and I don’t have a right breast. I think that’s everything.

The relationship between John and my right breast started innocently enough. See, it had been a long time since someone requested to touch my right breast, because, quite frankly, it had been a long time since I’d had a right breast—seven years. The last person who touched it wasn’t exactly an angel. She was more like a pony. A Ponyboy, to be exact. Do you remember that character from the 80s film *The Outsiders*? Well, my girlfriend in 1992, Dawn, was a lot like Ponyboy: tough, brooding and no hips. Her looks were so compelling to me that they almost pulled focus from some of her quirks, like communication. Dawn’s prime method of communication was the Screwyou slam the door I’m leaving Method. I would say something that irritated her, like “Have a nice day!” and she would say “Screw you,” slam the door, and leave. Another one of Dawn’s quirks was her unique sense of language. She would say things like, “That woman was so skinny. Tania, she was emancipated.” So . . . she’s free to be skinny? In retrospect Dawn and I didn’t have a lot in common, except for sex. And some other stuff, but mostly sex. That was our preferred method of communication.

During one of our communication sessions, Dawn and I were kissing while she was touching my breasts, and then . . . and then . . . AND THEN . . . she stopped. Placed my hands on my right breast and said, “Do you feel that? It feels weird.” My half of our dialogue was about to climax, if you will. A lump, in the larger scheme of things, didn’t seem like a big deal.

But in fact, that little lump discovered by my mildly toxic girlfriend was a big deal. It was Stage 3 breast cancer. So in 1992, at 21 years old, I was scheduled for a mastectomy and thrown into a medical labyrinth where being poked, prodded, and pinched was all par for my booby’s course.

John never grabbed my (fake) right breast, or pinched it, or poked it, or treated it unkindly. He would sneak a quick pat every once in a while, or skim what he thought was my nipple with his hand, as if to say “Hello, Tania’s booby.” He just reveled in the fact that a woman had given him permission to casually touch her breast whenever he wanted. John’s a massage therapist, after all. Someone who uses his hands to touch and heal. He’s the kind of friend who, when you make that instinctual gesture to feel the tension between your neck and shoulders, moves closer to you and starts massaging out the lumps and bumps you never thought anyone could find. He’s always touching people, mostly for the purposes of healing, and, on occasion, for the purposes of copping a feel under the guise of healing. He’ll use those massage therapist moves—which seem kind of bogus to me—to legitimately touch cute guys. (You know the massage therapist moves I’m talking about. Like when my massage therapist finishes a session by kissing me on the mouth. Everyone’s massage therapist does that, I know, but still, it feels odd.)

Now let’s fast forward to 2002. Ten years after having breast cancer I ended up in Long Beach, California, living with my father in his one-bedroom apartment (that’s a story in and of itself) and pursuing my dream of becoming a sitcom writer. I was 31 years old, feeling healthy and completely satisfied with my ten-years-out-from-cancer-status. I was ready to get into a normal romantic relationship and start the next decade of my life. That’s when I met Sal. She had all the allure and coolness of Dawn, but was very different. She was extremely bright -- always reading, never really talking. She wasn’t big on talking. Or words. But the ones she used, she totally knew the definitions of! I mean, sure, in retrospect there might have been a couple, a few, several hundred red flags, but when you’re just beginning to date someone who’s cute and thinks you’re cute and you’re feeling great because you don’t need to visit the oncologist anymore, red flags like someone preferring not talking to talking, or never having met a Jewish person before you, or truly believing that Armageddon is coming so she’s a bit tentative about making long term plans, I mean, those little things can get obscured. Especially because Sal was such a good kisser, and she took such care when handling my only breast, the left one, as she caressed it one summer night while we kissed in her futon bed with her flea-infested cat looking on -- okay, another red flag, but who’s counting? And then. And then. AND THEN. She stopped and carefully placed my hands on my remaining breast.

“Tania, do you feel that?” she asked, her hand enveloping mine, firmly pushing it into

the soft skin of my small left breast.

In that moment, with a curious lump beneath my fingers and an even more curious lump pointing it out to me, I knew something was wrong. The lump hit a nerve that released all of my history. In 2002, ten years after my first breast cancer, I was diagnosed with a second primary breast cancer.

By 2001, John and I had been good friends for two years, and like any good friend he came over to my place in San Francisco to help me pack for my move to Long Beach. John had never been to my apartment before; I lived in stuffy Nob Hill and he lived in the Castro, so we spent most of our time together at his place. As he entered my apartment through the kitchen, he noticed photos on the refrigerator and stopped to have a look. I looked with him, filling in details on the events in the photos. As we scanned the refrigerator for more stories connected to images, we both noticed one photo at the same time. We both stopped. I stepped back about a foot from the refrigerator. John continued to stare at the photo. His eyes moved quickly around the photo as if he were looking for more clues, for something to explain what he was seeing, because it didn't make sense. "You don't have a right breast?"

The photo on the refrigerator was of me without my shirt on, proudly displaying one breast while standing next to another woman who was also shirtless and less one breast.

I know: I should have told him. But there never seemed to be a good time, and after a while I forgot. My innocent inside joke had reached the point of no return, like when you're six months into dating someone and you realize you don't know their birthday, so the best you can hope for is that they'll leave their driver's license unattended. But that opportunity never presents itself, and inevitably the birthday passes, unbeknownst to you until they wake up the morning after their birthday and stare into the distance, beyond you, beyond understanding, outside the confines of everything they thought they knew about you or you knew about them, and say, "How could you forget my birthday?"

So John stood there, perplexed, in my kitchen, staring beyond the photo and the refrigerator, and asked me, "How could you forget to tell me that you didn't have a breast, Tania? What have I been touching all this time?"

I coughed out an awkward giggle, as if to say, "Wow, I don't have a breast? News to me too!" But the giggle only lasted a few seconds, so I fidgeted with my shirt, not knowing what to say or how to say it. Standing in front of me was a man who adored my breast and me, whether we were real or fake. Soon John started laughing, recalling all the times he had touched my fake breast thinking it was real. The two of us sat in the kitchen laughing and talking about illness and wellness for a long time.

Now that I have no breasts, John feels totally comfortable touching my chest. He likes to believe he is sending healing energy to my scars, but I know it's because he thinks I look like a hot gay man. I guess what I've learned after two rounds of cancer, four lumps and having a massage therapist for a friend is: if unhealthy relationships can give you lumps, then maybe having a friend whose job is to dissolve lumps is the best protection against getting cancer again. I'll keep you posted.

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