

## ANOTHER TIME

by Harvey Mendez

Charles wrote at a wooden table close to the weathered wall that protected the small cantina from the sea. Wax dripped like hot lava from a single candle in the table's center. His half-empty tequila bottle sat next to his right arm. He heard waves hitting against the other side of the wall and lifted his head.

She saw him first. "Charles . . ."

He turned. "Martha."

She stared at the tequila bottle. "You still drink too much."

"My pages fill easier."

"Am I in your story?"

He rose, found her eyes. "It *is* you."

"From the beginning?"

"Yes. Sit, it's hot today." He pulled out the other chair for her.

"Thank you. It is hot. A cool drink would be nice."

"Is it still rum?"

She nodded and looked around the room at the shadows sliding up and down the cracked walls.

Charles waved to the old woman behind the bar. "Maria, bring some rum."

The boom of waves crashing sounded through an open window.

"Listen," Charles said, "such splendor."

"The sea is the sea." She sipped her drink. "It can wait."

"I waited."

"It couldn't be helped. I need freedom—not passion."

"I needed each day. You vanished. I got drunk."

She sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I saw you. Once. In the city. You didn't see me, though."

"Was I alone?"

"You were with a fancy-dressed man."

Martha tilted her head toward him. "He's gone now."

"I got drunk again that night. Started this story." He pointed to the top page.

"The hurt came alive on paper the more I drank."

The fiesta outside the cantina started. Dancers filled the street and the music played loud and brassy.

Martha pushed back her chair. "Come, Charles, let's go now—back to Paris, when we were young, in love, and you wrote without drinking so much."

“You go, Martha dear. I’ll remember that time always, when words came loose and easy. Each day was the same, but each day was different—the way lovers go through time.”

She rose, lingered for a moment, then walked away.

His hand gripped his bottle, but his stare followed her. Outside, the noise grew louder. Charles poured the tequila into his glass and downed it fast. He hadn’t seen Martha since that last night in Paris. *Why did she show up now? He was older, spent his time drinking and writing. Yet, there was always Martha.*

The cantina door opened. Martha entered, walked to his table. “I couldn’t leave—not like that.”

“It would’ve been better,” Charles said.

“No, I must tell you how I feel—why I’m like I am.”

“You don’t have to explain.” His eyes searched hers.

“Pour me a drink, please.”

Charles lifted her rum bottle. “I was so taken by you, so much in love with you, so ready to change my life for you—to settle down.”

“I know, I know,” she said, softly. “But I wasn’t ready. I needed what the others could give.”

His eyes moistened. “I missed you so much. I drank and I drank, but every time I sobered up you were still there. Every time I turned a corner or opened a door I hoped to see you.”

“Charles, I thought of you too. The passion you filled me with was real, only . . .”

“Only you loved him. He had something I could never break through—a cement that sealed you together.”

“Yes, but you were there also, just a different way.”

“It doesn’t matter now.” His eyes dropped. “The magic is gone, just scars left now. Deep inside all the passion lies dormant, waiting, hoping . . . like a little boy.”

“Charles, I don’t know what to say. Some things can never change—never be the way we might like. I did love you, too.”

He raised his head. “It’s the *too* that hurts. After we met, I remember asking about you. Who you were? Did you have a husband and babies? I didn’t set out to fall in love with you. It just happened. I needed to see you—to find you.”

Her eyes glowed now. “I was surprised. I didn’t know what to think at first. I was attracted to you from the start. But I was afraid. The first time we made love . . . your warmth, the animal passion. It overwhelmed me. But, I couldn’t break away.”

“From him . . .”

“Yes.”

“Now, it’s too late.”

“Are you sure?”

“It has to be.”

She slowly rose from the table. “Good-bye, Charles.”

His moist eyes followed her out until the tears welled over and ran down his cheeks. He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes, drank more tequila, and picked up his pen.

THE END