

## Gerald in JAP-land

by Chava Hudson

Abi pulls on her new top for the party. She turns, admiring its retro paisley print in the mirror, especially liking the way it falls mid thigh below her sweater, like a mini-dress over her worn jeans. 30 years before she might have worn this, but without the jeans underneath. That was back when she was fresh-faced and had a sheet of chestnut hair down her back, but now, there was no denying it, she's a crow-footed lady in a hippie outfit. Still, even with her droops and crinkles, Abi doesn't think that she looks so bad for a divorced lady who's recently emerged from the trenches. Finishing the effect with a new coat of make-up and satisfied that this is as good as it's going to get, she blows a kiss to herself in the mirror, grabs her keys, and drives to the party, a gathering of jazz musicians to which her friend Francine had invited her.

It's clear that Gerald, who standing next to the white baby grand skatting a baritone rendition of *Fly Me to the Moon*, also likes the way Abi looks. He follows her with blue eagle eyes as she settles herself next to Francine on the white couch, and then sings as if it's just to Abi. She catches the beam of light sizzling from his eyes as it locks her in, a feeling both uncomfortable and deliciously light-headed. When he's finished his set, Francine removes herself to freshen her drink and Gerald plops down in her place. He's a big man, heavy and tall, and Abi's cushion raises slightly from his weight, as if they were on an upholstered teeter-totter.

“Hi, I'm Gerald.” He extends his hand and Abi's is lost in it as they shake.

“Abi,” she says. “You've got a great voice.”

Gerald expands, now looking somehow puffy. He nods and has a close-mouthed smile, almost a smirk on his red face as if he doesn't believe her. “Thanks.”

They chat about jazz. Who are her favorites? Yes, he likes Eva Cassidy too. Where does she go to hear music? Oh he knows that place. He used to sing there. What does she do for fun? Abi is flattered by this attention, but feels guarded since she feels as if she's being interviewed. She plans an escape and excuses herself

to get some food. She balances a plate with pasta and salad in one hand and holds a glass of wine in the other, tapping her foot to a jazz jam coming from the great room off the kitchen. The musicians wear glittery new year's hats and some people dance to Company B, one of the great old songs that Abi loves to swing dance to. She looks around for a partner, but it doesn't look promising. She eats some pasta and sighs. Here she is again, always looking, and not just for a dance partner.

Gerald finds her in the kitchen, takes her plate and sets it on the counter next to her glass of wine, takes her hand and starts moving his legs in a classic swing step. For a large man, he can dance! Gerald has good rhythm, knows the patterns and has some new moves. Abi is joyous as he twirls her under his arm right there in the kitchen, careful to avoid crashing into people with plates.

"Hey, you're a good dancer," says Abi and Gerald gets the puffy look again.

"So are you. Say, maybe you'd want to go dancing some time?"

Abi never knows how to say no when she's not sure, and now that she's looking again, her therapist has encouraged her to keep an open mind about men. *Give them a chance, Abi.* But in Abi's heart, she knows that even if Gerald can dance and sing, there's an unnamed something about him like a secret poker game going on in a back room, and she suspects that it wouldn't work. He's a bit too eager. Still, he's only wanting to go dancing, and she loves to dance. It's easier to say yes, and she finds herself digging her card out of her purse.

"Abi Singer," he examines her card and laughs. "You're a singer too."

"It's my ex-husband's name so it's not the kind of singer that I want to be, she remarks. I always wished I could sing."

"Oh." Gerald's mouth tightens and he looks disappointed about the singing. "I could teach you how to sing and then you could be both kinds."

"Thanks, but I'm hopeless. I can sing if it's low enough, like John Lennon songs have always been perfect. Sometimes I suspect that might be able to sing if the only I had more range and my voice is too weak. In yoga when we sing *ohmmmm*, I feel like I'm riding my voice that comes from deep in me somewhere. I never knew that I could do that. I feel like in a way, I'm just starting to find my voice."

"Let me hear you sing something," he says.

“Absolutely not. I'd be too embarrassed, singing in front of the master.”

“Me? I didn't always sing. I started doing karaoke when I was going through my divorce. I got hooked and went out every single night.”

“Sounds like an addiction,” Abi observes, peering at him. Once she'd lived with a man who was an alcoholic and she has radar for addictive behavior.

“Yeah, maybe it is. It's a healthy addiction though.”

The following Sunday, Abi meets Gerald for brunch at Sammy's, a local restaurant. He says that he wants to get to know her and says that the dancing will come later. They both order poached eggs and coffee and Abi steers the conversation to Gerald. She finds it easier to ask questions and listen than to talk about herself, and Gerald is happy to oblige. He tells her about growing up as an only child and always loving music, where he would lose himself. Abi had felt that way about art too when she was growing up and understands.

After breakfast they walk around Abi's beach town, and she takes Gerald to her favorite vista, overlooking the harbor. On the way, he bursts into song right there on the sidewalk as if they are in a capsule and none of the other pedestrians or people in the nearby houses can hear and she cringes inside. Embarrassed, she wants him to stop, but doesn't want to hurt his feelings. People walking their dogs pass by and give her amused looks and Abi now chews on her lips, cringing outwardly. Gerald doesn't notice.

Even after Gerald's embarrassing serenade, Abi accepts another invitation for a walk and dinner the next weekend. She supposes there are worse things that a guy could do than burst into song. What if he is the sweetest, kindest, funniest guy in the world? Would she care if he sang out loud in the middle of the city? Maybe the world needs more singing, and she will get over her discomfort. She dresses in a new sweater, her best jeans, and sneakers. They walk around the acres of a working, historical farm and Abi points out the beautiful landscape, but Gerald doesn't seem to notice. He barely acknowledges it except with a slight nod, something Abi takes as a bad sign, since she feels a soul connection to the beautiful meadows, full of cows grazing, and wants to share it with a man who feels that connection too. The landscape's beauty deserves lots of adjectives and wishes that Gerald would say them. Instead, he sings loudly as they walk. First he does a rendition of *Autumn Leaves* and the cows moo and regard him strangely. Could he be a distant relative? Abi

likes his voice but still, is grateful that there are only cows around. She wonders if Frank Sinatra used to unexpectedly sing everywhere he went, or if Kurt Elling taking his wife out for a walk, bursts into song.

When Gerald finishes three more tunes, Abi tells him about herself an article that she's writing. Gerald is interested and Abi again feels that maybe there is some connection there. She is determined to learn more about him, since she realizes that she has no idea who he really is. At dinner in a Greek restaurant, Abi rests her elbows on the table after they order drinks, her head supported in her hands.

“So, tell me about your life,” she says.

“Whoa,’ says Gerald, sitting back in his chair as if Abi had thrown something at him. “Nothing like being direct. But that's okay. That's part of intimacy. Sure. We have to tell each other about our history. Okay. I was married twice. The second one was just a rebound thing, but the first one was hard. I had five kids with the woman. She got involved in this AI-non thing because of one of her friends, and next thing I know, she decided that I was an alcoholic and threw me out.”

“Why did she think you were an alcoholic?”

“I have no idea.” Gerald looks at her with unblinking blue eyes.

“Do you mean that she made this up?”

“Yes. I don't drink. Okay, maybe one or two, but that's all.”

Abi thinks that there must have been some reason that his wife thought he was an alcoholic and she is now wary. The waitress sets their glasses of wine on the table. Gerald, emitting that soul-lock look from his eyes, raises his glass and toasts Abi. “To new friends.” His voice is full of meaning.

Even the possibility that he might be an alcoholic has shut Abi down. She winces inside at her idea of what he might mean by friends. She doesn't want to lead him on, but thinks that this toast is harmless enough. You can mean a lot of things by *friends*. She raises her glass and says lightly, “To new friends.” She quickly clinks his glass and takes a sip of her wine.

Abi chats amicably through the rest of the meal, but she's decided, but when the check comes and Gerald covers what is a very expensive dinner, Abi lets him pay it. They arrive back at her place with more singing in the car. She feels guilty and invites him in for tea and dessert to pay him back and plans to keep it short. They



crosshatch design, covering her headboard. She has just fallen asleep, wallowing in her sadness when the phone rings.

“Hello?” Abi hates to be awakened. Now it will take her an hour to get back to sleep.

“I just called to say good night,” says Gerald, his voice soft and romantic.

But she'd already spent the evening with him. What more was there to say? Who calls someone they don't know well this late? She'd told him that she had to get up early!

“Thanks but I was sleeping. Can you call me another time?”

“Yeah, sure.” Gerald sounds miffed.

But in the morning, Abi opens her email and Gerald has invited her to his gig the following Sunday, followed by dinner at his place. Uh-oh. Payback time. Abi doesn't really want to go but finds it awkward to decline dates, so she agrees, but as the day draws closer, she knows that she can't do it. She hates herself for what she knows she must do. Abi emails him and lies poorly which somehow seems kinder than telling him the truth and hurting his feelings.

*Morning.*

*Im about to dash out for a breakfast meeting. These next few weeks are going to be intense, I think i'm going to have to postpone seeing you sunday...my nephew says he wants to see me on his trip to Boston this weekend and all he has open is Sunday. So many things are going on! I hope i can have a rain check?*

*Abi*

Gerald takes it well and Abi thinks that she is off the hook. But the evening of the mythical nephew visit, Abi is watching a movie when the phone rings. She checks her caller ID and it's Gerald. She just wants to watch her movie so she lets the phone ring. In the morning, she opens her email.

*Abi,*

*I am getting the feeling that you are much too busy or otherwise disposed to communicate with me. have been looking forward to more interaction with you in an effort to increase intimacy- and i do not mean only physical -but rather a continuation of a basic dialogue involving the Arts, common interests and the sharing of mutual feelings, as well as intellectual and spiritual matters. also have felt spontaneous verbal affection from you as well as a controlled distance. I don't want to ramble on here but merely wanted to share some thoughts to enhance a continuing dialogue if possible.*

*Have a great day.*  
Gerald

Abi feels pressured and shoots off a response.

*Hi Gerald,*

*You knew I was spending the day with my nephew! I'm sorry, but I hardly know you and this feels like there's this underlying pressure or expectation. I'm sorry I've disappointed you, but we've only gotten together twice and this feels like a scolding for not paying enough attention to you, which isn't exactly endearing.*

*Abi*

*Good morning Abi,*

*I can certainly see your point regarding your not knowing me well and yes I guess I did scold you in some manner but I really don't have any overriding expectations other what I expressed in the message- did you find those comments to be indicative of undue pressure? I also must tell you that for the past several days I have had a terrible cold, the effects of which put me in a somewhat regressive state with an underlying fear that I would not be able to sing. I am rarely sick and always find it difficult to adjust at these times. My gig was cancelled because of the weather. As you can well imagine I had mixed feelings about that.*

*Have a good day.*

*Gerald*

Abi is sorry that he's sick and that his gig was cancelled but doesn't think that's an excuse for scolding her and she simply is not interested. She's already she's told him that and hopes that he'll get the hint. The next morning this is in her inbox.

*Abi-thanks for the short tour of Jap land, I clung to the electricity in your eyes upon our first glance and when you were leaving i heard a somewhat dejected voice saying good night and I foolishly and all to willingly wanted to see you and we had the first of two "lovely" meetings and you spoke highly of my voice. ah but then the 10pm phone call and once again the Jap voice emerged and not even a "how was your drive home Gerald?" chit chat emerged -frankly a rather chilling encounter of your primary control needs. Oh and let us not forget my feeble attempt at an embrace- you so limp and frightened -vulnerable perhaps? ."oh you are tall" SUCH SWEET SENTIMENT!.but alas i must not dwell on bitterness? thinking only with my rejected male appendage perhaps? and yes I did know that you were spending a 24 hour day right? with your nephew with not a chance for a moment of conversation right? lame,lame- oh these are just the sad ,angry and disappointed musings of a lonely man- I feel that I could have been a good friend to you Abi with or without physical intimacy yet you gave an array of mixed messages,the likes of which i have never have encountered from a woman.*

*Gerald*

*Japland?* Without a second thought, she emails him. The on top of everything else, the guy is an anti-Semite and he's totally missed who she is. Abi is furious, but doesn't think that he's worthy of a tirade. She just wants him out of her life.

Gerald,  
You obviously need a lot of attention. Thanks for the preview and don't contact me again.  
Abi

She feels better, since Gerald's rants and neediness can't touch her now. Yes, she is definitely safer, but sadder, and she picks up her cat, rocking him slowly in her arms. She begins to sing and allows her voice to come out, soft and low, surprising herself that she sings in tune. Her voice cracks a bit at first, but she tries to give it more air and thinks that she sounds okay. *Stars shining bright above you. Night breezes seem to whisper "I love you." Birds singin' in the sycamore tree. Dream a little dream of me.* Muffin purrs and snuggles under her chin. Abi sighs.