

Chapter 7

Joan Taliaferro was a girl I met early in my senior year of high school. She was a quiet, darkly solemn personality who preferred to remain very much aloof from the mainstream of high school life. She was quite intelligent, and attractive, and would have easily been popular and well accepted but for the distance she maintained from her peers. Her shyness seemed to be in direct contradiction to her physical beauty, which was certainly not inconsiderable.

She was about medium height, standing about five feet five inches in her bare feet. Her bodily proportions (such things always a hot topic with most adolescents) were not so exaggerated or unusual, therefore attracting undue attention, but she had, by casual vote, one of the more beautiful faces and *the* longest, most luxurious dark brown hair in the school. Long, straight hair was in style, then, and hers was perfect.

She first appeared at school late in our junior year. I remember several others in the soon-to-graduate senior class, and in my own junior class as well, sought long and hard to gain her attentions. She was a very pretty girl; considered 'a catch'. Most of them, though, just didn't have that combination of personality and intelligence that would hold her interest for very long. She did have an interest in the opposite sex, but apparently lacked any special motivation, ultimately being happiest when by herself.

Joan preferred to be alone most of the time, and was usually only seen as she walked from class to class, the books in her arms hugged tightly to her chest. She just kept her head lowered, refusing to look her fellow students in the eye. She always seemed to be walking slowly and solemnly, though usually she made it to class ahead of most. Not taking any time to socialize between bells was usually the reason attributed to her habitual promptness.

The teachers seemed to like her a lot. She typically managed 'A'

grades, with the rare 'B' occasionally dotting her work. Not a scholastic overachiever, though, she was content to learn what she wanted to learn, study what she wanted to study, and know whom she wanted to know.

The downside of her classroom behavior was her extreme reluctance to speak up in class, volunteer answers, or participate in any extracurricular activities. She was never seen at any sporting event, though she was reputed to be an above average athlete herself. She could be persuaded to participate in class, but her reticent manner and slowly enunciated, South Carolina drawl tended to discourage even the most determined teacher from calling on her often.

So it was quite amazing to me, then, that I—brainy rich kid from a snobby, socialite family—ever became more than distantly acquainted with 'Miss Joan T,' as she was called.

Most people had no idea where she had come from, and she hesitated to say, even if asked directly. Most of us suspected some kind of deep, dark secret, such as a pregnancy and child, both gone now, or some other equally serious incident, but then a lot of others suspected she led a lonely, unhappy home life, and wanted no publicity on that score. Actually (and as far as I ever knew) she simply regarded her private life as just that—private—and therefore not for public consumption.

It was an accident that led to our first face-to-face meeting, and I did not particularly consider it promising. We happened to share the same homeroom (we still had those things, in those days) and although we ostensibly had assigned seats, that requirement was patently disregarded. It was about three weeks into the new school year, our senior year, that just by happenstance I ended up sitting in 'Miss Joan T's' assigned seat one morning. When she arrived, she approached her desk, and seeing that I sat there, did speak.

"I'm sorry," she said to me, her rich contralto voice like smooth satin, "but you're sitting in my seat."

I'm not sure whether I had known it (i.e.: had planned it), or not. She had been so mysterious and pretty I'm sure I just couldn't have resisted the opportunity to meet the 'Ice Princess,' and maybe get a chance to work on a 'thaw'. I stood up, apologized, and attempted to start polite conversation with her. I was a tad nervous, but I was still determined to try it. "I'm sorry, too. Hi," I said, "my name's Marc Huffman. You're Joan Taliaferro, am I right?"

She seemed to hesitate. "You're correct." Perhaps she was considering whether there was a more appropriate reply. She brought her head up fractionally to look at me. I noticed her very pretty, dark, doe-brown eyes,

and evinced a crooked, nervous smile. She saw my smile, but scarcely permitted the corners of her mouth to twitch in her own version of the same thing. "Hi, Marc. I'm sorry to ask you to move, but this is my assigned seat in homeroom."

"No problem," I said, and began casting about in my mind for something I could use to start a conversation. Anything. I noticed the calculus textbook she cradled in her arms. Well, I also took calculus. "When do you have calculus?" I asked, "I have it next."

"Third period." And that was all.

"Really? I've never seen you coming in after class." In reality, I don't see how I could have, since I had it first period. Oh well, so much for being brainy.

She shrugged, very slightly, but was silent. It didn't seem as though she objected specifically to engaging in conversation with me, she just seemed not to have much to say.

I continued, "Calculus is one of my hardest classes," (but not really). "I'll be lucky if I pull a 'B'." That may have been true, but it was mostly because I was just too lazy to work any harder.

She had to look away momentarily to guide herself into her seat. I hoped she wasn't ending the conversation, so quickly. Once seated, though, she returned her gaze to me and spoke, "Well, I'm afraid I couldn't help you out very much with the subject. I have to work very hard to understand what's being covered in class. Mathematics is certainly not my strongest talent."

"So, what is your best subject?" Things were warming nicely, now. Some of my nervousness was subsiding. But, was hers?

"I suppose," she paused, seeming again to consider the relative merits of more than one possible answer. "I suppose English is my best subject."

"Really?" I was becoming self-conscious standing there, towering over her like I was. She didn't seem to notice it. "Who do you have?"

"Mr. Tarczy." This time her reply was immediate, and given with no tinge of boredom or reticence. "And it's *whom*," she corrected me.

"Whom, indeed." And I nodded, hiding some embarrassment, and wondering what to say next.

But Joan was looking at me. Our eyes, previously kept continuously and so carefully moving so as to avoid having to actually *look* at each other, had no choice then but to meet. And when we made eye contact ... Joan definitely seemed to be inviting further efforts to have us become better acquainted. So I decided to take a big risk, and jumped immediately to the Question: Would she go out with me? It was what boys did when they liked a girl well enough, which I did, and when they also perceived

that the girl liked them well enough, which I hoped. I also thought this was quite likely to be my best (and only) shot, so I wanted it to be a good one. Quickly, quickly now ... where could we go?

"Would you like to go to the football game Friday night?" It was out before I could stop it, or edit it. "It should be a really good game," I finished. I expected her to turn me down immediately.

She was just a touch slow in responding, "With you?" I nodded. She responded, "I'm afraid I'll have to think about it." I noticed her complexion darkened oh-so slightly, possibly from embarrassment. It manifested itself mostly in her ears, though they were mostly hidden by her very long, very dark brown hair.

I waited, assuming she was just thinking of a way to let me down easy. During this pause, I was also taking time to prepare myself for 'the worst that could happen' they tell you to think about. Saying 'no' to me wouldn't be all that bad. I guessed I'd heard it before, a few times. At least.

"Can I let you know tomorrow morning, in homeroom?" she replied. But this was not what I had been expecting, exactly.

"Sure." I was more hopeful than a mere moment before, but my eternal pessimism wasn't letting me off the hook, just yet. I smiled, and Joan in turn revealed a smile of about the same magnitude as before—not much bigger than zero—and dropped her eyes to her books. The conversation was apparently over.

The next morning was a surprise. I was talking with my buddy Tom Germaine just outside the door to homeroom as she was arriving, and she actually smiled at me as she walked by. But, still, she didn't stop on her duly appointed errand to her duly assigned homeroom desk. I was forced to follow her. But her smile had given me the Answer, and all that remained was for me to hear it from her lips, in person.

Her reply, when it came, was very short and quite affirmative, and our conversation that morning consisted solely of my getting her address and telephone number. Then she said she had calculus homework to finish, and I was once again dismissed.

That was Tuesday.

I tried to call her that night, but she wasn't home either of the two times. I spoke with her mother, who seemed friendly and normal enough, but who wouldn't say where Joan was or when she would be home. It wasn't that she refused to answer, she just claimed not to know. I do remember thinking it unusual, but I had little choice but to wait. I didn't

ask Joan to call me. I assumed she was probably like most girls and simply would not call a boy. Well, I was wrong about that, but it didn't matter.

In homeroom Wednesday morning Joan apologized for not having been available the night before, but didn't say where she had been. Of course I asked her about it, but she just said, 'Oh, out.'

"Out doing what?" I inquired.

She replied, "I'll tell you about it Friday night at the game."

Well, I was a little reassured—maybe enough—not to completely give up hope for this girl. But I was certain by Friday I would be very interested in seeing just what Joan Taliaferro was made of.

The game Friday night was as good as advertised, but not necessarily for the home team for which Joan and I both rooted. It was a hard fought battle, but ended in a close victory for the *other* team. Well, I wasn't a true hard-core football fan (though Tom *was* our star quarterback), and neither, apparently, was she, so the defeat wasn't so hard to take. What I *did* do, though, was spend time taking Joan around to meet my friends. I guess I felt compelled to make sure as many people as possible knew I was out with 'Ice Princess Joan T'. I don't know why I acted so strangely. She had been more than a little difficult to get to know, as far as it had gone, and I suppose I just wanted to show off my accomplishment.

Joan did not appreciate the attention or notoriety I brought her. By the end of the game she was ready to be taken home, so to, I suppose, recover her composure in the privacy of her own room. But for whatever reason, I wasn't ready to give up yet.

"Are you hungry? You want to get something to eat? A burger, or a pizza, maybe?"

"No, I don't think I'm very hungry, right now." She buckled herself into her seat belt. I sensed a problem.

"What's the matter, Joan?" I asked her. She refused to look at me directly. Instead, she stared out the side window, looking away so I couldn't see her face.

"Nothing," she replied after some ten seconds of silence. "I'm a little tired." Then she sighed, "I think I'd like to go home, now." Her actions and tone of voice said *anything* but 'nothing' to me.

I was trying to think what I might have said or done that could have upset her, but had no clues. During the evening I had been polite, cordial, *attentive*, witty—anything I could think to help make our first date a success. All that, and now *this*? "I can take you home, now," I said. "It's OK with me, I guess, but I can't help thinking that there's *something*

bothering you." Well, actually, I was certain of it. But Joan was silent. I hoped she was considering what to say. "Besides," I went on, "you haven't told me yet what you were working on the other night when I called." Anything to rescue the evening from apparent disaster.

It seems she had forgotten about it. "That's right." She turned toward me, briefly, then looked away. "It's no big deal. You probably won't even care about it." It was an unfair thing to say, but I wasn't able to express that to her.

Instead, I asked her, "What do you mean?"

To which she replied, "As I said, it's no big deal."

I was becoming extremely frustrated and maybe a little angry, as well. I did work hard to conceal it—to maintain an even keel. "Please, Joan. What's the matter? Was it something I said; something I did?"

She was some time—maybe more than a minute—in replying. "Yes," was all I got, spoken through a small sigh.

"What, then?" I was puzzled. "I'm sorry if I upset you. I really didn't mean to."

"Oh, I don't blame you, really. Some other girl might have liked all the attention she received tonight. I don't need it. I really don't enjoy it, especially."

I was embarrassed, but I didn't know why I should be. I may have been a little too friendly, too gregarious, considering that I was usually pretty quiet, myself, but it had been what I had wanted to do. Joan was a pretty lady. I had just wanted to show her off. "I'm sorry about that," I tried to explain, "I really just wanted to introduce you to my friends."

"I know," she nodded. "No offense to you or your friends, but no ... as I said, I didn't especially enjoy all the fuss."

I was trying to imagine what *would* have been something she'd enjoy. This time, I was definitely angry, and let it show. "I imagine *you* would've been happier just sitting all alone and quiet, doing nothing but watching the stupid game. How boring."

She didn't seem to take offense at my remark. "Well, Marc, *we* could have talked."

"We could?" I turned in my seat. "We can talk *now*, if you want."

Her anger showed then, too, just a little. "I was truthful with you when I told you I was a little tired." ("So, like, get off my back!" I guess.) But she quickly backtracked, thinking how she must have sounded, then recanted. "Please don't think I'm angry with you. I'm not." But she didn't go on.

On the other hand, I was sure the date had been a disaster. And I was pretty sure it would be our last one, too. That tired litany of 'a Huffman

doesn't fail' went through my mind, but I was prepared to forget it. It wasn't worth it. "Fine, then. Let's call it a night." I started the car.

"Marc?" Joan spoke a few quiet minutes after we left the high school parking lot.

I responded, clearly disgusted, but mainly with myself, "What?"

There were another few moments of silence before she continued, "I really *do* like you. A lot, in fact."

"Really?" So *what*, I was thinking. "What does *that* mean ... to me?" Probably not much, I continued in my mind. And probably the wrong thing to say, too.

But she smiled. "Well, we can go out, again, if you would like."

"Are you sure?" I asked her, but *I* wasn't at all sure.

"Well," she seemed mildly irritated that I doubted her, "I generally don't make attempts to mislead anyone."

"I didn't mean that. It's just that I'm surprised you would go out with me again, after being drug around and embarrassed all evening long, tonight."

"Well, that may be true, I was embarrassed." She regrouped, "But I guess you really shouldn't feel like you have to shield me from other people, because I *can* handle myself." She paused, thinking. "You're right, though, I don't socialize much. It's not something that comes very easily to me."

"I kind of suspected that about you." But I didn't go on. I wasn't sure anymore what I *did* know about her.

"I watched you while we were at the game," she said, and smiled again. She seemed to be relaxing. "I think you're a very nice boy." I accepted her compliment, with 'thanks'. She went on, "And as I said, I like you ... a lot. Does that seem unusual?"

"No, not at all. I think I'm a very likable fellow." I was trying to be funny. "So, how about tomorrow night, then?" to return to her offer of a while ago.

She looked at me, wryly. "The night's not over, yet, Marc." We made brief eye contact, and she gave me an obvious, almost mischievous smile. My scalp tingled.

"Well, 'Miss T'," I said, slipping in the nickname that a lot of others had used for her, but I had not, previously, "where would you like to go?"

She regarded my use of that pejorative-sounding appellation with raised eyebrows. "If you want to use a familiar name with me, call me Joanie, maybe, but not 'Miss T'."

I was embarrassed, but in the semi-darkness of the car, it was

thankfully hidden. "OK ... Joanie."

I was surprised, a little, when she chuckled. "'Miss T' makes me sound so *old*—like I was a spinster, or something." It was the first time I had ever heard her laugh. "I've also heard people refer to me as the 'Ice Princess,' too."

"You have?"

"Yes! And I think *you* probably made it up." She grinned. I think she was teasing me. I told her I didn't know who had made it up. She went on, "Well, anyway, it's not true, but it doesn't matter. Let people think whatever they want. If you get to know me, *Marc Huffman*," she pointed a finger in my direction, eyes smoky and voice husky, "you won't think of me that way, at all. Maybe it's because I pick my friends very carefully, and in all honesty I really haven't dated much, so you think I'm the 'Ice Princess'. But I'm not. It's just that I'm not looking for *just anyone*."

"I guess I should be honored, then." But it wasn't the right thing to say.

She sighed, and I was right, it *was* the wrong thing to say. She looked away. "If you like." She was silent, then, for another few minutes. I didn't dare say anything more.

She finally went on, "I'm not *that* much different from everyone else. I suppose I may be considered somewhat good looking, but then I think many girls are attractive. I'm just too quiet—too introspective—to ever become popular."

I agreed. "You're quiet, all right, but if you don't mind my saying, you sure have talked a lot more tonight than I expected you would."

She smiled, but more to herself. "It just goes to show what you don't know." She was relaxing considerably, and so was I. "Actually, I say the bulk of what I want to say in words, on paper."

"What do you mean? You're an author?"

She corrected me: "Authors are generally published. But I like to write, yes." She smiled, so beautifully. "That's what I was doing the other night when you called."

"You were?"

"Yes. I was actually in my loft over the garage, writing. There is no telephone there, and I've instructed my family not to disturb me when I'm working. So they don't. I'm very sorry I missed you. I guess I hadn't realized you would call me, since we had already made arrangements for our date tonight."

"That's OK." I did wish I had known, though. "I would be very interested to read some of the things you've written."

"No, I'm sorry. I can't let anyone read anything before I've finished it.

It's like an artist who paints. You can't appreciate the value of the strokes on canvas before the portrait is complete. The incomplete work has rough edges, has inconsistencies and ambiguities that cloud the work. I look at my writing in the same manner."

"No kidding." She had *a lot* more to say than I ever would have suspected. "I'd have never thought you were so interested in writing. Most people I know hate to write. In fact, English is probably the least liked subject in school."

Joan just shrugged. "I know. It doesn't matter. I just express myself better when I write."

I was glad I'd met this strange person. She had depth; she was beautiful. I was definitely attracted to her, both physically and intellectually. Maybe I wouldn't have used the term 'intellectual attraction,' then, but now I recognize that other essential ingredient I require in any relationship. There has to be a meeting of the minds, as well as the bodies. As for a meeting of the bodies ... well I decided that night in the car that Joan T needed some loving, whether she realized it, or not.

After Joan and I got cheeseburgers and french fries at a nearby burger place (I think it was a McDonald's) we did go back to her house. She got out of the car the same time I did, but waited for me to come around to the curb. I had turned the engine off, so I felt inclined to take my time in saying goodnight. Also, regardless of whatever else happened, I wanted to make a date for Saturday, provided she hadn't changed her mind. Somehow, I didn't think she had—or would.

As we walked slowly to the porch, we continued our small talk over things at school. Her porch was one of those older traditional styles that wrapped itself around two sides of the house, which was older and rather traditional itself. The porch, too, was a good eight to ten feet wide and roofed over. When I had picked her up earlier, I noticed a porch swing to the right of the front door, of the kind I hadn't seen in years. As we stepped onto the porch, I decided I wanted to sit in the swing with her. Joan was coyly reluctant, but I insisted, taking both her hands in mine as I pulled her along. And as I did that, I realized I had barely touched her all evening. I hadn't put my arm around her at the football game, nor even held her hand at any time. I was well aware of the risks inherent in attempting to establish physical contact with her this late into our first date. How would she respond?

Joan didn't react in any manner, either for or against holding hands with me. In fact, her resistance seemed mainly just something so she wouldn't seem to easy, or eager. I was beginning to see that her reticence

at conversation and human contact extended perhaps only to the people she didn't know. And since we had talked a lot, and had become much better acquainted since our 'words' in the car, by the time we made it to her porch I was much more comfortable moving toward being openly affectionate with her. I didn't know, though, that once our involvement went beyond a simple kiss she would be in uncharted territory. Earlier, I might have suspected she'd never even been kissed yet, but her lack of any real nervousness or uncertainty now, as I pulled her toward the swing, told me that she at least knew *something* about boys. However little it might be.

I sat on the swing, and invited Joan to sit next to me. She complied, but slowly. I put my arm around her shoulders, being careful not to seem too forward or too obvious. As my hand came to rest on the top of her shoulder, she adjusted her position to be closer, to touch hips with me. She leaned toward me, a little. It was a quiet invitation. Our faces were in close proximity, and in the dim light coming from the window behind us, I looked closely at the shapes and contours of her face. I studied most closely her eyes, her lips. Those eyes were most quietly and calmly studying mine, and her lips were slightly parted, her front teeth showing.

We were eye-to-eye, and inches apart, but still I hesitated to make a move to kiss her. She felt relaxed and warm under my arm, but her expression was almost unreadable, so calm an exterior she had. My heart rate was escalating, I felt an adrenaline surge and it almost made me dizzy. If one of us didn't do something, and soon, I was going to lose it. I don't think she was wearing any perfume, but something in the air was definitely adding to my sense of excitement. Maybe it was me, maybe it was the house paint, but I have since learned to recognize mutual attraction at work. She was affected, too, and her own heartbeat was speeding up to keep pace with mine.

She finally broke the impasse. "If you're waiting for the go-ahead, Marc Huffman, you *can* kiss me, if you want." I think she was trying to be humorous. My only reply was to kiss her. After the first one, we hugged each other tightly, and kissed in a much more satisfying manner for quite some time.

I had expected it, but while we kissed, no one came to the door to break up our tryst out on the porch swing. It was pretty apparent someone in her family was up, because I could hear the TV faintly from inside the house. But we were given all the privacy anyone could have expected on a half-lit front porch.

Our heart rates rose steadily as we held each other and kissed, and

within fifteen minutes or so I was definitely trying to think of a more private place we could go to further our growing passions, and maybe escalate the action to a more intimate level. First, however, I needed a test to gauge her potential agreement to such a suggestion to seek sanctuary elsewhere.

Slowly, and with utmost care, I moved my hand from its position behind Joan's neck to a temporary perch over her collar bone. I could feel the hollow at the base of her neck, and the warmth of her skin beneath her thin, cotton sweater. There was no reaction to my hand. Her eyes were closed, and we still kissed. I was, on the other hand, watching her closely. Finally deciding to take a sizable risk, I brought my hand down slowly, so slowly, and lightly touched her breast with the tips of my fingers. It was the moment of truth, if indeed there were to be one. If Joan permitted me to touch her there, then the possibility of further intimacy—however remote—was in the offing. Joan's hand came up from her lap to gently touch my hand where it lay, gingerly caressing her right breast. A few tense moments passed while we continued to kiss, and I held my hand very steady, all the while expecting Joan to pull it away. When she made no move I decided to commit myself, and carefully placed my palm fully on the soft, warm mound of her breast. It was a delicious experience, and I tried to absorb the sensation as fully as I could, hoping to store it for future daydreams, and also for future night-dreams, as well. I might even, if asked, relate this to my friends, but it really depended upon what happened next.

Joan did respond to my advance, but not to pull my hand away. Instead, she pressed it even more tightly to her breast, and seemed to relax further into my embrace. Now that she had more clearly communicated her desires, I dared to become much bolder, and began to explore more fully the contours of the upper half of her body, in a tentative, but most gratifying way. I judged by Joan's reactions to my massaging and stroking, she was enjoying it nearly as much as me.

It wasn't long, then, before I made initial movements to touch her bare skin with my hands. First one, then the other, found the bottom of her sweater, and slid beneath it. Joan quivered at the cool touch of my hands on her rib cage, and though she didn't move to help me in any way, she made no motions to discourage me, either. As I raised my hands to cup her breasts directly over her bra, the cool night air was allowed to reach her bare midriff. I felt goose bumps spread over her abdomen as she seemed to be pulled back into her surroundings by the cold smack of the thick, moist, night air against her skin.

"Marc, it's too cold out here on the porch," she complained, but I

sensed it wasn't a serious problem.

"Well?" I asked, waiting for an invitation—a suggestion, maybe.

"If we go any further, I'm afraid we will go too far."

I listened to her, but I had little intention of stopping or backing down. The strong, steady flow of hormones into my system was giving me the ability to act with boldness and daring. I countered: "We *can't* stop. I don't think you want me to stop." I kissed her, but she barely returned it.

Joan was breathing hard, and her hair was in disarray all around her face, making her look as if she had just run a long, arduous race. "You may be right ..." she panted "... I certainly don't want to stop." She pulled the hair out of her eyes. "But we must. This is dangerous for me. I'm not used to ... this ... and you could very easily take advantage of me."

"But I won't," I assured her. Boys for millennia have made that same promise. (Is it number one or number two on the all-time lie list?)

She only laughed, briefly, and with some hint of irony. "But you already *have!*" At her statement my face fell. Quickly, though, she went on, "Look, I'll tell you what."

"What?" I mumbled, not happy at all.

"Let's take this slowly." She pecked me on the lips. "Let me adjust to it gradually."

"Uh-huh," I replied. Sure you will, I thought.

Joan cocked her head, and tried to look into my eyes. "I don't know how other girls feel about sex." At the 'S-word' my eyes came up. "But I'm not such a little girl anymore, I think. I *may* be ready to become an adult, but I need time to think it over. I need time to adjust to the powerfulness of the feelings you give me." She smiled. "I promise this doesn't mean we've gone too far to remain friends, and work on ..." she stopped suddenly, apparently not wanting to jump the gun or make any assumptions about my feelings for her. "Well ..." she started again, but again she stopped. She acted as if prepared to go on, but simply turned her ending inflection up into a question "...?"

I let my breath out completely, deflating and draining off anticipation and pent-up desires. I was able to calm down, then, somewhat. "Fine" I said, but I truly wasn't happy. And I don't think she believed that things were 'fine,' either.

"Marc?" she pleaded, "Please trust me. If I tell you a secret, will you *keep* it a secret?"

I considered, briefly. "Sure," I agreed.

"You promise me? I have to have your word."

I agreed fully. "You have my word."

She announced, "You're my first."

I didn't quite understand. "Your first *what*?"

"No other boy has ever touched me before."

I was embarrassed, in spite of myself. "Well, what we did wasn't all that much—" Oops. That was the wrong thing to say, there. "—I mean, I mean ... well, I don't know *what* I mean!"

Joan thought a moment, but smiled. "You're right, though." She pulled her sweater down, then, covering up her chilled midriff. Decorum restored. "It wasn't very much. But," she went on quickly, "compared to what I've experienced up to this point, it was a great deal. I made an important change in my life, tonight."

"You did?" I was curious. This girl was doing more talking than I was, tonight.

She smiled, but the smile didn't seem to reach her eyes. "Can we call it a night?"

I felt let down suddenly, punished. "I guess."

"Please don't take this badly." She put her hand on my arm, as if to reassure me. "I think we *will* do this again. It was a lot of fun!" She stood up. "Come on," she beckoned, but I hesitated, "there's tomorrow night." She giggled, girlishly. It seemed out of character. "Oops! I'm afraid I'm getting ahead of myself, aren't I?"

Tomorrow night? I thought. "Does this mean you want to go out again tomorrow?"

"Only if you're asking me. But, yes, I do."

I guess the news wasn't *all* bad. "Good," and I stood up, too. Standing face to face, now, I was enough taller than Joan to kiss her easily on the forehead by merely leaning over, and she seemed to like it. She put her arms around me, compelling me to put my arms around her, and we hugged each other, lightly.

I had cooled down considerably from where I had been just a few minutes earlier, but I distinctly felt the pressure of my former excitement as a painful knot in my groin. Nothing more than 'blue balls'. I was, though, acutely aware of its presence, and I had to work to hide the strain I was feeling. I mean, it wasn't something you talked to a girl about. The girl was the cause. But Joan had already indicated she didn't want to pursue further involvement that night, so I figured I might just as well endure it in silence. I was thinking, though, that when I got home I was going to have to seek some relief, even if solitary.

I wanted to complete the arrangements for the following night, so I asked her if she wanted to see a movie.

"A movie is OK, but I probably would prefer to stay in. We can watch TV, if you like. I do have a stereo, and some fairly good records." She put

her arm around me, and directed me toward the front door. "Let's you and I get better acquainted, first. Crowds don't make me feel very comfortable."

"Will we have to deal with your parents at all?" I thought I'd better find out then, as opposed to later.

"Why should that be a problem?" She seemed not to understand.

"It's not a problem," I explained. "I just wondered if I was going to have to 'pass inspection,' or something."

She shook her head, apparently mystified. "We probably won't even see them, if that's what you're worried about."

"Oh, I'm not worried. I just wondered ..."

"Well, if you *insist!*" She seemed amused, but strangely so. "My parents don't have any great concern for my safety or propriety. I *can* take care of myself, you know. I've been doing it for years."

"I'm a little surprised at your parents' attitude, I guess." She asked why I should be. "Most girls' parents," I explained, "are pretty careful about who they let their daughters go out with."

"It's *whom*," she crinkled her eyes in a smile, "and they *do* care. They just don't interfere. It really isn't necessary."

"Why is that?"

Joan laughed, quite pleased with herself. "I already told you I could take care of myself." Her eyes twinkled. "When I was about ten years old, my parents sent me to a karate school, believe it or not." I *was* surprised, then. "I really didn't enjoy it all that much, but I did learn a few things."

Whoa! I thought. There is definitely more to this girl than meets the eye. I wonder what *other* things there are that she hasn't told me about, yet. Probably everything. She was a cool, deep river, all right.

Though I hadn't said anything, Joan was intent on gauging my reaction, and decided to reassure me on one point. "You *don't* have to worry about my martial arts skills. I told you only because I want you to know you don't need to worry that I might suffer any physical harm when you make *amorous* advances on me." She grinned at the word 'amorous'. "I already told you, you see, I *like* you."

I was a little put off, nonetheless. "That's good to know," I mumbled. But, I thought, she did just say that she liked me. I felt some distance from her, but I waited patiently for the gap to close.

Joan didn't wait long to close it, because she gave me a warm, friendly hug and came up to her tiptoes to kiss me. I held her closely and we kissed goodnight.

A few minutes later I drove home, taking extra care not to disturb my *extremely* disappointed testicles.



There was a group therapy session that first night I spent in the alcohol and drug treatment center. I just call it *The Center*. I remember it was warm and gently raining, and though I hadn't had a drink in about three weeks by that time, the damp weather made my healing side twinge uncomfortably, making me feel almost hung over—basically miserable to the core. And incredibly lonely, too. Marc wasn't with me, anymore, and I was missing him—hugely.

Sheree was the one who dropped me off, since I didn't want to drive and then have to keep my car there. And too, if I had easy access to transportation out of there (*The Center*), in a pinch, I just might be tempted to use it. No, I didn't trust myself, and I really, *really* did want treatment and recovery to *work*. I knew if I failed it wasn't only going to be me who paid the price. Sheree had offered to come inside and wait with me, but I told her she should go. I think the way I felt said I'd probably be better off alone. She smiled, though, and waved as she drove away. I waved back, though much less cheerfully. I figured I was going to find it pretty hard to smile about anything, now that I was finally here. In recovery.

Inside, the lobby was warm and comfortable-looking, and the person behind the counter was very nice when I told her my name. They were expecting me, since I had called them in the first place, and I only had to fill out one form and sign four others. Everything else they needed (in order to admit me), they had already.

When I finished the required paperwork I had to wait about ten minutes, and I was the only one in the waiting room the whole time. Twice, the phone rang, and I strained to overhear the conversation—or at least the local half of it. The receptionist's voice was hushed, very quiet, though, and I was totally unable to get anything coherent out of my attempt at eavesdropping.

A man eventually came out to meet me. My very own personal therapist, as I was to find out later. As I said, there was a group therapy session that night, (there's one nearly *every* night) and he invited me to attend right after I put my stuff in my room. Quietly, we walked down the hall and around the corner to the large wooden door of my new home. I guess my room was on the first floor.

"Where are the rest of your clothes?" he asked, holding the door open for me.

"Oh. This is all I brought with me," I replied, holding up the one, small olive drab canvas duffel bag. Even in my own ears I think I sounded

pretty pitiful, almost as pitiful as I felt. He seemed unconcerned, though, and patiently waited while I hung my damp raincoat on the door of the one small closet.

There were two beds in the room. One of the beds looked like it probably had an owner, (being adorned with a funky pink, striped quilt) so I guessed the other one must be mine. (It was god-awful, hospital-plain.)

When I walked toward the orphan bed, he spoke from behind me, "That one's yours."

"I figured as much." I threw the duffel bag down disconsolately and sat on the edge of the bed, turning to face him.

He smiled when I looked up at him. "How're you feeling?" he asked.

"OK, I guess." I touched my side briefly and gently—on the left where the stitches used to be. "It still hurts, sometimes."

He didn't comment on what might be hurting me. He just went "Hmmm," then asked, "When was the last time you had a drink?" The question was phrased conversationally, and politely, but very directly nonetheless.

I waited a few seconds before answering, because when he asked the question I felt an instant urge to get angry, and maybe vent some of that anger, but I managed to hold my tongue for that crucial first instant. Just relax, I told myself. Don't go off the deep end. He needs to know—*deserves* to know—so you might as well cool it and relax. Just answer the question.

"A little more than three weeks," I replied, finally.

Apparently he believed me, because, "Are you currently taking any other drugs?"

"No." I was nervous, bordering on scared, but I didn't exactly understand why.

"No prescription medications, then, either?"

"Oh!" I had forgotten. I reached down and retrieved my duffel, pulled out three amber-brown plastic bottles. Two were huge, containing giant capsules, but the third contained little round pills, much smaller. "Just these three things," I told him, and inspected their labels. "One is an antibiotic, I know, another is for pain, and the third is to help my stomach tolerate the other two, better."

"I'm not worried about the antibiotic, but what is it, anyway?"

"I dunno." I squinted at the label, "I can't pronounce it," and handed him the bottle. He glanced at it and handed it back without saying anything more about it.

Then, and much more pointedly, "What is the pain medication?"

"It says here 'Motrin'." I looked up at him, hopefully, expectantly. If

he was going to tell me Motrin was bad, then I was going to be very upset. They had told me at the hospital that Motrin wasn't addicting, and so therefore safe for me to take.

But instead he only nodded, "OK. Good. The last one?"

"Tagamet," I said. "It keeps the other two from making me throw up." I shrugged, and tried not to smile at my joke, "It seems to work."

"I'm sure it helps. Tagamet works to keep the acid level down in your stomach."

"It's all right to take, isn't it?"

He nodded again, and smiled reassuringly, "It's fine." I relaxed. Then he slowly folded his arms and leaned back against the small table that faced the wall. And as he did, his smile faded. "I'm supposed to search your belongings. I really hate to do it, because it inevitably gets us off on the wrong foot, but I really have to know if you're hiding any alcohol or drugs in your things."

And there it was, again, an instant of panicky fear followed by anger, and then, again, I was able to suppress it. Of course I knew there was nothing in the way of contraband anywhere, in any of my things. For that matter, he could do a body cavity search on me and not find anything more controversial than a tampon. (Not that I even had one in me, either.)

"You can search through my bag, and even search me, if you have to. It's not gonna offend me ... but you're not gonna find anything, either." I tried to smile, but it wasn't going to come that easily. Nope, no smile.

"This isn't jail," he stated. "We do this mainly to protect others. If you were determined to use, and smuggled drugs or alcohol in here so you could, in practice there isn't anything we could do to stop you. Hell, even if I searched your duffel bag very thoroughly, you could still probably be hiding something in it, and I'd never find it. As far as searching your person," he paused, shaking his head, "no one can take away your right to privacy. No one." He cleared his throat. "No member of the staff should ever touch you in *any* suggestive or inappropriate manner. *Especially* if you don't want them to."

"That's fine," I said, shrugging. "I'm not too keen on the idea of being searched, anyway, but it's been done before."

"In a treatment facility?" He seemed incredulous—instantly concerned.

"No, no," I *had* to smile, then, as I shook my head at his foolish concern, "in jail."

"Oh," was all he said. He didn't press me for the details. "Well," he stood up straight, "I've decided I'm not going to search through your duffel bag, nor am I going to make you take a blood-alcohol test, either. I

think I'm going to trust you, instead." Then he stopped talking.

I didn't know whether to thank him or hit him. Thank him for making my entry into recovery a little bit less painful, perhaps, or hit him for trusting his 'instincts' with an alcoholic. I know for a fact that you can *never* trust an addict. (And alcoholics are addicts.) It doesn't matter what they say, or even (most of the time) what they do, you just simply should not *ever* place anything of value into the hands of someone who's only thinking about getting high. About taking their next drink. And that probably goes doubly even for their own *lives*. This man, my therapist, was willing to place my life and well-being into the hands of a thoughtless, irresponsible, untrustworthy drunk. Namely me.

"I guess I should thank you," I said, but my words were saying that I *wasn't* thanking him.

"I don't want you to thank me; I just want you to get better. If you can do that, then there'll be no thanks necessary." I asked why. "Because you will have done all the work. If anything, I should thank you, but that wouldn't be right, either. You're not doing it for me."

"Because I'm supposed to be doing it for myself, aren't I?" I half expected to get 'points' for supplying the correct answer, but I didn't.

He shrugged, and gave me a baleful, sad, serious look. A look that sunk straight into my heart. "In the end," he said, "if you don't decide to do it *only* for yourself, then you won't do it at all. Period." But he brightened then and smiled, very suddenly. "But this is too nice a night for us to spend it all bummed out and worrying." He rolled his eyes toward the window, and the obvious rain streaking down. "Come on to group." He beckoned to me, sounding very up-beat, "We're all waiting on you."

But I remained on the bed. "What do you mean? *Who's* waiting on me?"

"The rest of the group," he quipped, and checked his watch. "The session started at eight o'clock, and right now you're holding us up." It was about eight-thirty.

"I really don't feel much like meeting any group of people, tonight." I then tried to give him my best, tired, 'pitiful me' look.

But he wasn't biting. "I know," he nodded, slowly. "It's OK. No one ever does when they first get here. But everyone still wants to meet you, anyway. Come on, the first night really is the easy one." How little did I know the truth of *that!*

"You *told* them about me? They *know* about me?" This kind of attention always makes me nervous—and suspicious. I remained where I was.

He shook his head, smiled. “No,” he drawled. “I only told them there’s a new person coming to group, tonight.” He held out his hand to me. “Come on, they really want to meet you.” I merely looked at him, not moving. “*Come on*, you’ll feel better once you’ve met the group. I promise.”

Oh, OK, I thought, why not believe him. After all, how bad could it be? I took his hand and stood up.

As we walked down the hall toward the room where the group met, he put his hand briefly, lightly on my shoulder. I thought about what he’d said, about touching and everything, but I sensed absolutely no threat or danger. He was just my friend—already he had become my friend—and that thought began to make my foray into this strange experience called ‘recovery’ a fraction less scary. And then as we passed the long row of windows I could see outside that the rain had stopped. This, and feeling his gentle, relaxed presence made me feel perceptibly better. I was there, and I was ready—as ready as I was ever going to be—and as I listened to the carpet-muffled sounds of our footsteps down the hall, I did feel better. I almost smiled. Almost.



The following night with Joan did not develop into much more of an intimate encounter. She seemed to show exceptional skill, however recently acquired, not to make me feel I was being put off, or denied, though. I was disappointed, even so, but my interest in the dark-haired, doe-eyed beauty was all the more heightened by the gentle tug-of-war we initiated.

When I arrived at her house Saturday evening, she met me at the door and brought me inside to their living room. It was nicely furnished and looked and smelled pretty much like middle-class living rooms all over America looked and smelled.

I discovered she had a brother, who was sprawled out on the couch watching TV. He was, she explained, a sophomore at Clemson, and since school had not yet started, he was home cooling it a few days. His only acknowledgment of me was a cursory glance, and he returned to his program, politely bored. I was quietly curious why he should be sitting at home on a Saturday night, but Joan only shrugged and said she thought he was probably going out with his friends, later. She seemed to have little interest in her brother’s plans, though, and the subject was quickly

dropped.

Where to go? I wondered. That problem was easily solved: Joan's loft over the garage, which turned out to be her true home when she was at home. It wasn't large at all, mostly because of the steeply peaked ceiling that sloped down to the floor, but it was carpeted thickly in burnt orange shag, popular at the time, and was lighted by three oblong lamps that hung on chains from the central peak of the A-frame roof. We had to enter her loft via an outside stairway that led up from behind the house. The garage seemed an obvious addition to the property, and since it was obviously *not* her bedroom, I asked Joan how she had happened to acquire the loft as her own personal workplace.

"We bought this house *because* the loft was to be mine," she replied. "My parents have always encouraged me to write since I was first in school. My father has written for real estate trade magazines for the past twenty-two years. When he got the opportunity to relocate to Atlanta this past year, it was decided I should get the first pick for places to write—undisturbed."

"What about your father?" I asked. "Where does he do his writing?"

"Oh, he has his own office in the house. It's right off the master bedroom, toward the back. That's what makes this house so special for us: *Two* writer's lofts."

"How did you find this place?" It seemed like a pretty unusual house to me.

"Well, another family of writers used to live here." She seemed proud. "The man was a famous novelist, and his wife wrote children's books and painted. They moved," she explained, "to a more exotic locale to aid their creative juices."

"So, how are *your* creative juices?" I waggled my eyebrows at her.

"They're fine," but she had missed my oblique pun completely. "Let's listen to some records." She had changed the subject.

Joan's stereo was small, but good quality for the time, and we sat together on her thickly napped, navy blue corduroy love seat and shared a few preliminary kisses. We talked some more, mostly about the house, and a little about her family. I found out that the brother we had seen was her only sibling, and that he was, of course, attending Clemson University. I asked her if she wanted to go to go to Clemson, too, when she graduated.

"Maybe. It *is* where all my family has gone." She thought a moment. "It's a nice school, and it's not far, either, from most of my relatives."

"Oh, where do they live?"

“In Clemson, silly.”

“Oh, that figures.”

Joan laughed, a very nice laugh, and mollified my bruised pride with a kiss. “My brother lives with my aunt and uncle when he’s going to school. Their kids are all grown up and have left home, so he stays in one of my cousin’s rooms.” She decided to turn the conversation toward me, for a change. “What about your family?”

So I told her some things. That I was the youngest, by several years; that my father was dead; and that I had two much older brothers. I wasn’t very interested, though, in talking about myself, but Joan seemed interested in listening to me talk. When I asked her about it, she said:

“Writers must be the best listeners. It’s the only way to hear what’s really being said.”

I put my arms around her and nuzzled against her neck. “What am I saying, now?” I asked.

And she just shrugged, and gave me nothing but a slight, but highly cognizant smile in return.

Once I got Kerry home that Saturday night, I put her to bed on the couch again. I didn’t even try to get her undressed—it was the furthest thing from my mind at the time—I just dumped her on the couch, clothes and all, and put the blanket over her. I don’t think I was angry with her, just mainly disappointed and perhaps saddened a little by the irresponsibility of her actions.

Sheree and Tom had tolerated her drunkenness. Kerry was difficult, and at times even hostile, but since we were their guests, and since I was such a close friend, they permitted her the luxury of being herself, even if that self was falling-down, stinking drunk.

Once I got Kerry inside from her self-imposed exile out-of-doors, I relegated her to the couch—sans alcohol—and she accepted the assignment, albeit grumpily. The rest of us sat around and talked, and smoked more dope. She spoke, once or twice, (and was surprisingly coherent, too) but mostly she just slumped there, silent and with drunken, drooping eyelids. It wasn’t long, then, before she slowly slid over onto her side, and quietly, thankfully, went to sleep.

We stayed until midnight, almost. Since I had not gotten quite enough sleep the night before, by midnight it was beginning to look as though we were either going to have to leave, or I was going to have to join Kerry on the couch. The invitation was made to stay, of course, but I declined it. I didn’t really want both Sheree and Tom to have to deal with the hangover Kerry would surely be having the next morning. But, then

again, I didn't particularly want to have to deal with it, either. Sheree helped me carry Kerry to the car, and hugged and kissed me goodnight. As I got in the driver's side and closed the door, Tom leaned in on the edge of the car door, and smiling a little sadly, mirroring completely how I was feeling, clapped me tiredly on the shoulder. I started the car for the long trip home. I was so tired when I finally got Kerry to bed I almost fell asleep with my clothes on, too. But I didn't. I just pulled them off and left them in a heap on the bedroom floor, and crawled in. I turned the alarm off, and hoped she'd sleep until noon—or later—and give me the rest.

When I woke around eleven, I found Kerry in bed with me. She was also naked, which I suddenly discovered when I went to put my arm around her, and was sleeping very soundly. Even when I put my arm around her waist, she didn't waken, so I just rolled back over, sighed, and tried to get back to sleep, myself. I don't remember when I fell asleep after that, but I do remember waking up again.

I was awakened the second time by someone fondling my penis with her hand. Apparently, I was hard—probably from some dream I had been having—and this person who was in bed with me had seen it as an opportunity to explore my body without interference from me. I'm not sure I would have complained or interfered *had* I been awake, but once I was awake ...

"Good morning," Kerry smiled, her face close and watching me intently. She gave me a friendly tug under the covers.

"Hi," I said. I couldn't resist smiling, myself. "How're you feeling this morning?"

"Considering it's not morning anymore, pretty good, now." She massaged me, so delicately and expertly, and I responded, of course. She went on, "I was pretty sick earlier when I woke up," and she yawned, "but I took about five aspirin, and I'm feeling much better now, thank you."

"Do you get drunk like that every Saturday night?" I placed my hand in the small valley of her waist, and felt the soft, very warm skin just above her hip.

"Only every *other* Saturday, unless there's a moon out. Then it's every Saturday." She made a joke of it. "I believe there *was* a moon out last night, if I'm not mistaken."

"You sorta ruined the party, you know."

"I don't necessarily buy that," she argued. "Things weren't exactly love and kisses, you know, what with the big argument they had over Tom going on the road with the band, and all that. Y'all were so interested in your own 'entertainment,' I had to provide some of my own."

"What's so entertaining about Sheree's and Tom's argument?"

"That's my point exactly, buddy. It's not entertaining, at all." She tugged me much harder. "You see, somebody can argue and carry on in front of guests, and it's OK. If I get a little drunk, then it's a problem, and then *I'm* spoiling *your* party." She snorted, "Get a grip." She had one, and on me.

"I'd say you were more than 'a little' drunk, Kerry."

"So what if I was?" She let go of me, suddenly angered. "Sue me, but get off my fucking back!"

I wanted her hand back, but not her anger. "OK, OK," I reversed my field, "I don't want to argue about it. They were wrong; you were wrong; *I* was wrong. That means *no one* is to blame—or maybe *everyone* is to blame. So can we just forget it?"

"Oh, ho!" She gave me a wry smile. "You just want me to put my hand back on your dick, is what *I* think."

"So what if I do?" I gave her ribs a gentle squeeze with my hand, and couldn't suppress a grin. She had read my mind, almost.

Instantly, she jumped back and called out, "**Ouch!!** *Shit!* Don't *do* that! It hurts like a motherfucker!"

"What's the matter?" I was horrified that I'd hurt her. It wasn't what I'd intended at all, and her sudden reaction scared me so quickly and badly I jerked my hand away. Something I didn't want to remember just flitted through my mind, and I was both shocked and angered. Just as quickly, I put the memory back into its dark hole, and concentrated on Kerry's pain and hurt.

She sucked in breath and held her hand on her ribcage. "It's OK, Marc," she grimaced, eyes closed. "I've got a bruise, or something, there, and you must have got me in just the right spot. It's not your fault."

"Gee, I'm sorry," was all I could manage.

"Not your fault."

Kerry held her hand on her ribs a couple of minutes, breathing heavily and in obvious pain, and I wondered seriously that she might have a broken rib or something. I hadn't squeezed her *that* hard—certainly *not* hard enough to break a rib—so as I watched her try to stifle the pain, I wondered just what kind of person *would* hit her that hard. And I saw absolutely no reason for it.

Eventually, the pain seemed to subside, and she moved in close to me again. I put my arms around her, most carefully, and held her a long, long while. I gently kissed her on the forehead and rubbed her back between the shoulder blades—but with extreme caution lest I reawaken some other injury—and she relaxed again, more completely, and I think in a few

minutes was sound asleep.

I was the first to awaken the third time. Kerry had thrown off all the covers, and I got a nice view of her shapely legs and the smooth, naked side of her body. Her arms were drawn up to warm and protect her breasts, her face buried in my shoulder, and I smelled the flowery scent of shampoo in her hair. Her perfume, likewise, wafted my way, and with the combination of naked flesh and various heady scents I found my interest returning, and mostly in the form of a newly raging erection. I had to work hard to keep it from poking her, and possibly waking her. My covert gyrations, however, to prevent her waking from its rude intrusion, proved to have just the opposite effect, and in a few minutes she awoke anyway. Kerry stretched briefly, and rubbed her fists in her eyes. Those eyes then came open to see me watching her.

"Hello, again," I said.

"Hey," was all I got from her as she stretched sleepily.

"You fell asleep," I said, rather inanely.

"Why didn't you wake me?" She frowned. Puzzled, it seemed.

"You're very pretty when you're asleep."

"Right, sure." She seemed not to accept my explanation. I was beginning to understand that she had a hard time accepting compliments, something I really wished she could do. Once in awhile it would be nice to have the luxury of saying something nice to someone and not have them tell you you're wrong. Over the long run, that kind of thing makes it more difficult to actually *be* nice.

I sensed she wasn't in a very good mood, for some reason. Maybe she was just hung over, or something, or maybe she was angry because I'd hurt her sore ribs. Hurting her made me very ashamed of myself. The strength of that shame was almost more than I could take, and my erection faded quickly as I lay there and reflected on it. Several silent minutes then went by while I held her loosely and contemplated my unintended infliction of injury, and she lay there and alternately yawned, frowned, and rubbed her eyes.

In time, she seemed to sense my troubled mood. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm really sorry I hurt you." I found it hard to look her in the eye.

"What?" She seemed confused. "No! You didn't do nothing to me! It ain't your fault *at all*." She pecked me on the mouth to reassure me. "It's my fault I never said anything to you about it." She shrugged, "I guess I figured it would go away eventually on its own, or something." She smiled, trying to get me to smile. "I guess it hasn't *quite* gone away, yet, though." She kissed me again. "I can't believe you're worried about

poking my sore ribs. Forget it, buddy, it's no big deal. Just forget about it."

But it was difficult. For some reason I couldn't identify, it hurt me almost as much as it had hurt her. How could she simply forget the pain and go on with her life as if nothing was wrong? How could she forget being beaten and abused, and turn around to kiss and hug me with no further thought about it, in complete and total relaxation? How could she trust me not to hurt her, again? But Kerry, it seemed, could do it. She simply forgot about her injury, then, just as quickly as she had told me to, and poutingly informed me she was getting cold. She snuggled up under the covers to get skin-close to me.

"I'm naked, here," she cooed in my ear, "and you need to get naked, too."

"Kerry," I still couldn't quite get over how she was hurting, "I'm sorry I hurt you."

But now, it seemed, Kerry became angry. "Look!" She held me at arm's length, and glared. "I told you it was no big deal, so will you *lighten up*, here?!? It's not your fault! I told you it wasn't anything you did, so will you please believe me and **just fucking forget about it?!?**"

"I want to," I said, pulling her slowly back to me, which she permitted, despite her anger.

Then she seemed to calm herself, almost in an instant. "Then do it." She smiled, rubbing her body against mine. "I'm still naked, here, boy, and you're not." She plucked at my shorts, reminding me of her request of a few moments ago. "Just relax, buddy," she whispered, "everything's gonna be fine."

And my state of nakedness was then accomplished with a little help from *the girl*. That help also brought back my 'peaking interest,' so to speak, and in a few minutes we were starting to get back into the swing of things. So to speak.

We kissed. She was the same person I had kissed the day before, and I recognized a couple of little things that have always characterized her kisses in my mind. She loves to explore with her tongue, and when we kissed that morning, it was quickly slipped into my mouth, and slowly run over and around my tongue. I liked it, a lot. I offered my tongue to her, less confidently, perhaps, but with the same gentle interest. She eagerly took it, and happily sucked on it.

Kerry seemed to get into the sucking part quite a bit, and I found that the mental images it provided helped me to get back into the mood, as well. I slowly pulled back from her, and she reluctantly let my tongue slip from between her lips, the tip of her own tongue following.

Experimentally, I touched the tip of my finger to the tip of her pink

tongue, and she hungrily pounced on it, drawing it deep into her mouth, which was soft, wet, warm, and an *extremely* erotic place for my finger to be. It made me think of something else, and that thought was the one that *really* got me excited.

With eyes closed, Kerry sucked contentedly on my finger. She seemed to enjoy it immensely, and in return my enjoyment was growing, as well. This time, I didn't try to keep from poking her, and her knowing smile from beneath closed eyelids told me she was very aware of my savage erection. She opened her eyes, and that flash of light I'd seen the other night sparked in them for an impossibly short instant. Optical illusion, I guess, nothing more. But I *had* seen it, I was sure.

"You have the most beautiful green eyes ..." I told her, and I found myself drifting down into their mesmerizing, emerald depths. She only purred in response. In rapt attention, then, I counted the freckles that sprinkled her nose, and spread, like darkened stars on a tanned-pink sky, across her cheekbones.

I had to get my finger back, though to leave that inviting and sensual haven meant momentarily breaking contact with the energy—the force that was Kerry. Slowly and carefully I drew my finger back. She reluctantly allowed it, but fought me anyway, keeping a strong vacuum behind it as I pulled. It felt like sex, almost. As it finally came free, her now empty mouth came forward to press against mine, and we enveloped ourselves in a long, deep, desperately hungry kiss.

A kiss tells you so much. You can't hide your ultimate feelings behind a kiss. When it's short and polite, it conveys your coolness, your aloofness. You remain independent. When it's warm and soft, but the lips are dry and you don't expose your tongue, you're affectionate, but unfamiliar or undecided. You may be warming, but you don't risk opening up to accept the other's closeness.

A kiss on the cheek is brotherly or sisterly. Friends kiss each other on the cheek. It says you have genuine, warm affection for the other person, but to get any closer would be embarrassing or inappropriate. You can kiss your lover on the cheek, but it doesn't mean the same thing. When you kiss your lover, it's meant to excite, to caress. It's a promise of more closeness to come. A kiss on the neck can almost be the most sensual touch you can offer. To go further brings the sexual aspect to it. Sensuality, much written about but hardly practiced effectively, is so vastly underrated and neglected, many people think closeness begins and ends with the sex act.

Sex is also much written about, and even more talked about, dreamed about—fantasized about. It's the goal, the purpose and the reason for

existence, if what you read and hear is taken at face value. We're obsessed with that most basic and deeply intimate activity. It's often withheld as punishment. It's sold; it's bartered—and it's stolen. But it's not the sex that's stolen, it's the choice; the volition that's denied. When a woman with love in her eyes opens her body to you, and gently and reverently you join with her, the bonds between you are strengthened, extended into the continuum of human existence, and together you seal a pact with the future. But if she's denied the choice of giving, of the decision to be open of herself—to be giving and receive in return—the promise and the pact are broken. The pain caused may not always be physical, though physical violence may leave visible scars. But the emotional scars, the loss of self, of individual sanctity; these scars can't be seen, felt with the hands, can't be healed with time.

I think Kerry loved and trusted me from the moment we first met. I felt such an awesome responsibility for that trust, and I was frightened and unsure if I truly deserved it. What could she see that I could not? What did she know that I did not? When I saw her look of complete openness, of total honesty holding nothing from me, I cowered from its childlike lack of suspicion, its unconditionality; its vulnerability. I didn't trust myself, so how could *she* trust *me*? Why would she trust me?

As we lay there on that Sunday afternoon, her body pressed so closely to mine, I felt the weight of her love crush down upon me, and was shamed and humbled under it. The depth of Kerry's belief in me, her guileless, childlike innocence and her vulnerable intimate acceptance shook me so completely and devastatingly that I cried. It had been so long since I had last really cried, for any reason, and as we held each other and kissed, and when I saw the look of bright, happy affection and simple, quiet love in her eyes, I cried.

Kerry didn't ask why I was crying. She seemed to understand—to know—and she stroked my hair and kissed away my tears. She let me know I was safe with her. My secrets, my shame, and my pain were all safe and protected by her love and her caring. Without speaking she told me it was all right, that she forgave me for things she didn't even know, and that I would never have to carry alone the burden of my own sins and failures whenever I was with her.

In those moments I could have forgiven her anything. To be given such gifts, to be loved, cared for, and trusted so completely, made me realize that ultimately, it was *this* that was love. Anything else would be mere crass feeding of the tactile responses of the nervous system. None of those other things were love. Love was the sharing, the forgiving, the trusting and the abiding respect. All these things that are given with a

look, a gesture, a quiet touch in a silent moment; all these things are love.

Our close contact did not break. Our touch did not fade. Our caresses did not cease. Our kisses were not stilled. And our love grew. It was small, a fragile infant calling out in the chill, damp darkness that was the barren plains of our souls. But it was there, and it was alive, and it was telling us we could be loved, and we could love in return. And it promised and it offered, and it gave itself that we could receive and understand. And as we drew together, as I entered her with such fragile tenderness, I believed in that small spot of hope, and took it into myself for safekeeping. For whatever else happened, I was holding the bright, warm mote of the love that was ours. In her faith and vulnerable innocence, I accepted the gifts that she offered; the responsibility *we* meant to each other; the *us* that had just been born.

Chapter 8

I auditioned for the band at the very next rehearsal. I was incredibly nervous despite massive encouragement from both Marc and Tom. I knew the song I planned to sing, but I still had practiced it over and over, trying to learn it even better. I was very intimidated by Troy Dancer, but it was something I was just going to have to get over. And fast.

The rehearsal was Tuesday night, as planned. Marc came by the apartment after work to pick me up, and we rode over together. I was a mess—a total nervous wreck. I was so spastic I didn't know if I could make it there without throwing up in the car. And I don't think Marc quite realized just *how* nervous I was, either. If he had, I think he would have stopped on the way to let me barf. I held it, though, but just barely.

Troy Dancer and Mel Howe were over an hour late, and in the waiting I paced about and fretted. My two guys (Marc and Tom) tried to relax me by telling dirty jokes to distract me, and I was thankful for it, but I couldn't stand all the waiting and waiting until I could sing.

When they did finally get there, Dancer was messed up. He had apparently taken some kind of pharmaceutical, most likely sopors or 'ludes, and was in practically no condition to play. And I was immediately and thoroughly disappointed.

Mel apologized for Dancer's condition. She was thankfully straight, the one who had driven them over, and confided in us that she was mad as hell that Dancer had gotten so messed up. I told Marc I didn't think I could audition under the circumstances, and he was sympathetic, but he left it up to me to decide. He seemed disappointed, too, and as they warmed up I took my solitary place at the soundboard.

They played terribly, and it was all due to Dancer. He couldn't play a solo to save his life. He was constantly forgetting the chords and the cues, and when he sang he was very off-key—his words slurred and indistinct.

Tom wanted to call the rehearsal after only a half hour of playing. He

told Dancer he thought he was wasting our time, and if he was going to get messed up before our rehearsals, we might as well hang it up right then and there. Mel had to intervene in the loud and threatening argument that ensued. She told Tom to cool it, and forcibly restrained Dancer, who was ranting and raving, and was about to get his clock cleaned if he didn't get out of Tom's face. I had completely forgotten I'd planned to audition, when Tom spoke up.

"Well, if you're too fuckin' stoned to play," he spoke to both Dancer and Mel, "we might as well listen to Kerry sing."

Mel looked at me, and seemed to think a moment. "Can you sing?" she asked me.

"I'd like to try," I said, timidly, and then I was supremely nervous all over again.

She thought a moment longer, then smiled, "Good," she said, but tightened her grip on Dancer, "this should be interesting." She spoke in Dancer's ear, still holding him tightly. We all could hear what she said. "Since you're obviously in no shape to play—or sing—let's let Kerry try it." He was silent, and struggled weakly in her grasp. "What do you say, Troy old boy?" She called him 'Troy,' not Dancer.

There was a long pause while his nearly incapacitated mind considered what she was asking. "Lemme go," he insisted, feebly.

She lowered her voice, "You gonna be cool?" He halfheartedly struggled, testing her resolve. "I ain't gonna let you go if you don't calm down and be cool. So what's it gonna be?"

He resisted, but his resistance was fading. "OK," he relented, and was immediately let go. Mel must have trusted him a lot more than we did. But he didn't get out of line again. He calmed down and returned to his place in front of his microphone. "What's she gonna sing?" he asked Tom.

"She's right here, asshole." Tom pointed at me, still angry and ready to fight Dancer at any moment. "Why don't you ask her? She can talk, you know."

Dancer didn't want to look at me. I don't think he liked me, very much, and he sneered at Tom and acted just like a five-year-old by refusing to acknowledge my presence. What he feared from me, I couldn't possibly have guessed. I was antsy and nervous, tied up in knots inside, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Come off it, Troy," Mel warned him. He plucked disconsolately at his guitar, and we all waited.

Finally, he turned to look at me. "Can you sing?" he asked me, but he didn't wait for an answer. "OK, so what're you gonna sing for us?"

I came hesitantly around to the front, facing the band. "Karla Bonoff,

You Got Me in Trouble Again."

He waited about two seconds, shrugged, and nodded. There were only three mikes, Dancer's, in the middle, Mel's, to the left, and Tom's, to the right. I was afraid to get too close to him, but he willingly enough gave up his microphone and stepped back a few feet to give me room. I was about to die of stage fright when Dancer struck up the first chord, but after that it was too late. I sang:

“Well I wake up in the night now,
Don't you know I think of you.
It's the fire in your eyes,
That keeps on cutting through.
There's nowhere I can run to,
I can't escape the thought of you.
I never really was a bad girl,
But you got me in trouble again.”

By the end of the first verse, I wasn't nervous anymore. I wasn't singing perfectly—I was too new and uncertain for that—but I did do the song some justice, and I got a total thrill when Mel came in behind me at exactly the right point, and together we sang, 'I never really was a bad girl, but you got me in trouble again'. I'll never forget the feeling of how we sounded together.

I *did* mess up, though. There was a guitar solo in the middle of the song, and Dancer did his best to play it. It was obvious he had only just heard it before—not played it—and in the shape he was in, he made a rather bad job of picking it out for the first go-round. I was so busy listening to him try to play it that when it was my cue to sing again, I completely missed it.

I was mortified, but the band kept playing, and when they came back around to another point where I could come in again, Mel made sure I got the cue.

After that screw-up, though, I was a total wreck. Missing my cue had unnerved me completely and I just couldn't get back the confidence to

sing out and hold up my part of the song. When we finished, finally, I was totally depressed and angered at myself, and felt quite sure I'd failed the audition.

When the song was over, Dancer waited just a few seconds, then asked what was next. He completely ignored me, not saying a word about my singing—either pro or con—and seemed ready to return to his place at the microphone and get on with the rehearsal. I was crushed by his offhanded dismissal of me—and my singing—though secretly I think I really agreed with him. I *had* botched it, and my one-shot audition was over. I tried to bear up under the shame and embarrassment, but I just had to get out of there. In a panic, I ran out the door and down the corridor.

Tears were coming to my eyes as I bolted out the front door and into the parking lot. I had put so much effort into being good, and when the time came to just *do it*, I'd failed. I was humiliated and ashamed, and thought I must be the worst female vocalist to have ever picked up a microphone. I wanted to cry, but I was angrier than that, so I wiped at my eyes in disgust and stifled the emotions and the self-pity I was feeling. I was thinking, 'poor me,' but another part of me was saying I had gotten just what I deserved.

As I stood there in the dark of the parking lot among the handful of cars there, I wanted a cigarette, but I didn't have them with me. They were back in the studio with the rest of them—the band. If I wanted them, I had to go back in there. And that was something I didn't think I could do.

In about five minutes I heard the door open behind me. It was Melinda Howe. She didn't say a word, just simply came alongside me and pulled a cigarette out of a pack she had. I looked after her, forlornly, and she wordlessly offered one to me. I took it, and she lit the two cigarettes off her lighter. We puffed in the silent dark together.

Eventually, she spoke, "I really have to apologize for that asshole, back there."

"No." I shook my head, sighing. "It's all right. I screwed up." But it *wasn't* all right, though.

"No," she said, puffing deeply and exhaling into the dark, "he's a complete bastard, and he will walk all over *anyone* if he thinks he can get away with it." She puffed. "Sometimes, I don't even know why I'm still living with the guy. He's so insensitive. All he ever thinks of is himself. All he can do is put others down and shit all over their feelings."

She poked me lightly on the shoulder, a friendly gesture. "You, on the other hand, were *great!*" I disagreed, shaking my head. She poked me again, harder, and with the hard, bony tip of her finger. "No, don't just

shake your head at me, girl, *I know*. You did extremely well for your first try. All you need is a little more practice." She grinned, and I could just make it out. "Well, maybe a *lot* more practice ... but you can do it, I'm telling you!" I still shook my head. "Kerry, just stop that! I don't want to see or hear you telling yourself you can't do it. You *can* do it, and I want you to come back inside and prove it to the rest of the band. Just forget Troy Dancer. He may *think* he's the band, but he's only the guitar player. Without us, he's nothing more than an unemployed musician, which is exactly what he was before I got the idea to form this band."

She paused then, thinking. "Even if he decides to dump us, I may stick around, anyway. I want to play in a good band, and I'm determined not to let Troy Dancer get in the way. Marc and Tom are two of the best backup men around, just don't tell them I said that!" She grinned, again. "I want a real band for a change. If Dancer doesn't want you to sing, and I suspect he may be too egotistical and insecure to let that happen, then we'll just have to tell him to get screwed and go form our own band. We can always get another guitar player—a better one, too. One who isn't such a complete asshole." There was another lengthy pause, and she poked me in the shoulder, yet again. "What do you say, Kerry?"

"I really screwed up the song."

"You can say 'fuck' to me, if you want. My ears won't melt." She laughed, and that made me smile.

"OK, I *really* fucked up the song."

When we went back inside, the atmosphere was distinctly cooler than when I left it. Nothing was happening, and Dancer was making sure of it. I sat back down at the soundboard without a word, and though they tried to start another song, Dancer refused to play. I gave the rest of them credit, however, since they kept on playing, regardless. After they played the first verse without vocals, Mel jerked her head at me, telling me to get out front and sing. I knew the song, somewhat, but I was still afraid to get up in front and just sing it. She was insistent, though, and by halfway through the second verse I was singing again. By the start of the third verse, then, Dancer was playing again, too, though he refused to join in and sing backup, which we could have used.

I sang, more or less handling it, for the rest of the rehearsal, and by the time we were through for the night, I think I had been, by general consensus, invited to join the band. Well, at least by a vote of three to one. I felt so good I just had to celebrate.

Dancer said he had someplace to go, declining our offer to go out for a drink. He asked Mel to go with him, but she only threw him the car keys and said she was going out with us. We left Marc's car in the parking lot

and all piled into Tom's van.

It didn't take long to find a bar. We went to the back and found a booth we could all fit into, and when the waitress came around, the first pitcher of beer was ordered. Our glasses were filled, and the party began.

I was beside myself with excitement. I had never done anything like this, ever, and I was totally pumped up with adrenaline at the prospect of becoming a bona fide lead vocalist. Dancer's attitude, though, concerned me.

"Whatta y'all think?" I couldn't suppress my excitement, my enthusiasm.

"You were good," Marc said, using his usual deadpan voice that meant he was understating how he felt. The rest agreed.

"I think we have a band, here," Mel nodded, and took a large sip from her beer. "Did you hear how Kerry and I sound together?" she asked Tom.

"Like *twins*," he smiled, and winked at me. "Do me a favor," he toasted me with his half-filled glass, "don't give up singing any time soon."

"Do you really think I was good?" I just had to hear them say it again.

"You were great!" Tom beamed. "I have to admit I was skeptical when you first said you wanted to audition." He paused to drink some of his beer. "A lot of girls say they can sing, and say they want an audition, but you were so much better than I ever imagined ... you've convinced me that we'd be fools not to have you join the band." He looked at Mel, then at Marc. "Don't you all agree with that?" Yes, completely, totally, they both said.

I glowed. My grin was ear-to-ear, and I finished my beer with a satisfying gulp. Then I poured another. The night was just beginning. "I want to take lessons."

"Good idea," Mel nodded in agreement.

"I don't think my voice is very strong." I sipped from my beer. "Toward the end I was straining a little on the high notes. I think a good vocal teacher could help me build my voice up. If y'all are serious about my singing," and they all nodded, again, "then I want to do it right."

"You must have sung before," Tom mused. "I mean, I can't believe you sing that well and yet you've never performed before."

"Only in high school," I shrugged. "I sang in the choir, and a couple of times they gave me a solo. That's all." I was being modest. I was considered one of the best singers in the school when I was a young senior. Since the school was so backwoods, and small, at the time I didn't think much of what they said about me, but I always felt I *could* sing, if I

wanted. It just seemed as though I would never, ever, get the chance. But, it looked like that was about to change.

But, "What about Troy Dancer?" I asked.

"What *about* him?" Marc said, looking at Mel.

She shrugged, took a puff of her cigarette. "I don't know. He always talks so big, but inside he's really scared. You all may not know it, but he was kicked out of *Breakdown*." They hadn't known. I hadn't heard of the group *Breakdown*, but the others seemed familiar with them. She went on, "His drug usage and patent unreliability were getting in the way—causing big problems. Well, when they finally found a guitar player to replace him—he was out." She hooked a thumb in the direction of the door.

"What are they doing, now?" Marc asked her.

"Well, the drummer was good buddies with Troy. So when Troy left, the drummer went with him."

"So, why isn't that guy playing drums for him, now?" Marc wanted to know.

"They were such good buddies because all they did was get stoned together, all the time," she explained. "Dancer and the drummer, Jerry Jones. They *did* try to start another band, but the two of them were nothing but poison together. All Jones wanted to do was get stoned and lay around his apartment, and even though Troy wanted to do the same thing most of the time, that doesn't make for a very good band."

"No shit." That was Tom.

"When did you hook up with Dancer?" Marc asked her. "If you don't mind my asking."

"I was the keyboard player in the band he and Jones tried to start. The others split and Jones left Atlanta to join a band in Florida somewhere, so that left just Troy and me." She finished her beer. "He moved in with me about two months ago, and he's been a complete mess ever since." She snubbed out her cigarette. "*More* of a complete mess, I should say. I had hoped he would straighten out once we got the band started, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen."

"Can't you talk to him?" Marc asked.

"I'll try," she shrugged, again, "but don't get your hopes up. He's pretty stubborn when it comes to getting his way. The fact he refused to go out with us tonight should tell you something." Mel gave me a long, sad look. "I think, Kerry dear, he's going to have a lot of problem with *you*."

"Why?" I ventured, suddenly worried.

"He wants to be the lead singer. He's pretty good, but I don't think

he's as good as you *could be*. He's too messed up all the time; he won't take lessons or practice. If you practice hard, and start taking lessons, too, in time it could easily be *your* band, and not Troy's."

"No way." I shook my head. No way.

"I'm just telling you his viewpoint, that's all. He *knows* talent when he hears it, and I know he heard talent tonight. You remember when he started playing again after we got you back up there?" I said I did. "Well, he wanted to stay out and make you look bad, but it was too good. He couldn't help joining in, and I think it's going to be *pure hell* living with the guy for the next couple of weeks."

"I'm sorry, Mel." I hung my head.

"*Don't be sorry!*" She leaned forward and pulled my face to hers. "It's *his* problem, not yours. **Goddamn it, Kerry!** Don't *ever* apologize for being good at something. There are people out there who would kill to have the talent you have. There are people in bands *today* that don't have the talent you do, and never will, and they're playing anyway. *Don't apologize.*" She swallowed the rest of her beer. "Don't apologize, and *don't quit*, either!"

I wasn't sure what to think. "I won't," I said. But I had been given a lot to think about.

It was like a fairy tale—not really real—and I was afraid to think of myself in such a positive light. I thought down that path lay pride, and pride would hurt you if you let it out. If you had too much pride, you were going to fall, and when you fell, it was straight to hell. I think my daddy told me that, and it has always stuck with me. When I thought about what the others were saying to me, and about me, I hated my daddy for taking away my own self-pride like he did. The son-of-a-bitch had stolen everything from me he could, and still after all these years he had the most basic and necessary thing that I needed. The ability to have some pride in myself.

As I listened to them talk, mostly about the music, I drank another two or three beers. It was all I could do.

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I was very proud of Kerry. She surprised me so nicely at the rehearsal, and I had nothing but praise and compliments for her performance. True to her form, however, she tried to deny and deflect everything I said, and it was frustrating to get her to admit she was actually good at something. I never understood why the girl just couldn't

break down and accept that she had the talent to sing.

Troy Dancer didn't quit the band, and he didn't insist on Kerry quitting, either. He was mostly just uncooperative over the next few weeks, but he gradually woke up to the reality of what was happening, and eventually accepted Kerry as our new lead vocalist. Of course it didn't mean he no longer sang. He was a pretty good vocalist, and we needed his talents and participation. Once he came around to the possibilities that having Kerry sing presented to the band, he was back to singing and playing with all the enthusiasm and optimism the rest of us already had.

Time passed quickly for us, Kerry and I. Kerry stayed at home in the apartment, and she seemed to be practicing all the time. The stereo was on all day—nonstop—while I worked, and every day when I got home she would present me with a new song or something that she had learned. And she got a *lot* better. Kerry also seemed to be drinking less, too, but it was hard to tell. Since she was so involved in her music I think she forgot the alcohol for a time, and tried hard to concentrate only on her singing.

Kerry and I relaxed into a comfortable, amicable existence together. I was extremely busy at work during the month of October. She practiced all day, and when I would get home in the evening she was there for me, cheerful and friendly—and continually, perpetually horny.

That was quite a switch from anything I'd ever experienced before. It was also the most difficult adjustment I think I've ever had to make. Virtually every evening there she was, *oh-so comfortably* clothed in lots of not-much, and ready to pull me to the floor the very moment the door was closed.

We had a lot of discussions about the size and depth of her sexual appetite. She understood and grudgingly accepted that she may be 'a little' out of the norm, but she manifestly stood by her right to ball my brains out whenever she felt like it. But I'm not complaining. Male pride, and our own all-consuming drive to get laid prohibit me from sounding as though I'm *complaining* about our relationship. The relationship was fine. I think I even got used to it, eventually.

At the end of October Kerry had a birthday coming up. It was her twentieth, and though I might have preferred it, the party planned for her was not kept secret. Since we were having it at my condo, and Kerry was living there with me, there was little point and no practical way to keep it from her.

When I first told her what I was planning, she tried to tell me not to

do it. She said she didn't want a party; that it was too much effort; that it was no big deal—all those things. I ignored her protests and her pleas, and informed her that on the night of her twentieth birthday there was going to be a party at the apartment, in her honor, regardless of how much she complained to the contrary. She could choose not to come, of course, but we were going to get together for her birthday, anyway. In the end she only smiled and said it was OK with her, she guessed.

Tom and Sheree were the first to show up. Sheree burst through the door and laid big hugs and kisses on both of us. Tom followed right behind, carrying a very large box wrapped up in brightly colored paper. It was obviously a present for Kerry. Kerry was amazed at the size, since it was almost as tall as her, and she needed Tom's help to carry it over to the corner, where it started the pile. Two other friends of mine, Richie and Kim Boston, were next to arrive. Richie worked with me, and though neither he nor Kim knew Kerry, they were always 'in the neighborhood' whenever a party was going on. Richie handed Kerry a small gift that she deposited next to Sheree's and Tom's. Introductions were given all around, and Sheree was quick (as ever) to make sure everyone had a beer. Next at the door were two friends of Sheree's from her office. They were both young, about Kerry's age, and made the party get lively in a hurry. Then from Tom's recording studio came the receptionist and her boyfriend, whom we had met a few times, and it was just about that point when the first joints were brought out. It looked as though the party was going to be a huge success.

Beers were flowing, and joints were smoking sometime later when Kerry asked me if Mel Howe and Troy Dancer were coming.

"Didn't you invite the rest of the band?" She looked the small crowd over.

"Of course," I said.

"Then where are they?"

"How should I know?" I shrugged. "Mel said they were coming, and I even heard Dancer say he was looking forward to this, if you can believe that."

"No," she shook her head, but grinned, "I can't, really."

"Well, they'll be here, don't worry. Just chill out, Kerry," I gave her a small pat on the behind, "and try not to get too drunk."

And *bang!* Her smile was instantly gone. The words hadn't come out as I'd intended. All I'd meant to say was that I was excited by all the presents she'd gotten, not the least of which were my presents, still hidden away, and I didn't want her to get so drunk she couldn't enjoy all the fun. Well, I suppose if I had said that, it might have been OK. But Kerry's

feelings were hurt, and I expected her to lash out at me as she had done so often, and so easily. She had a beer in her hand, but truthfully I think it was only her first, and she just stood there staring at me. The sad look in her eyes said that she was genuinely and truly hurt by what I'd said. I wanted to apologize, but the moment was tense and uncertain for me—I just couldn't do it. Kerry looked very forlorn, like she might cry at any moment, but she didn't. She just gave me the saddest face that I'd ever seen, and in a few moments shuffled dejectedly away. I felt terrible.

Damn it! I wish she had just told me to get fucked, and it would have been over, just like that. Hostility I'd learned to deal with, but not the long face and look of utter dejection and disappointment that I received. I just stayed where I was, more or less in the corner and out of the mainstream of the party. But it didn't take long for Sheree to sense something in the air and come running.

"What's the matter?" she asked me, lacing her fingers around my arm.

"Nothing," I said. I didn't really want to involve her in my problems.

"I saw Kerry over there on the couch." She pointed with her head in Kerry's general direction. "She looks like someone just killed her dog, if you know what I mean."

"I think it was me," I confessed.

"Why? I saw you talking to her a few minutes ago. What'd you say to her?"

"I made some comment about her drinking. I told her not to get too drunk tonight, and spoil the party."

"Did you, now?" She raised eyebrows; shook her head. "She should have told you to fuck off."

"I wish she had," I had to agree. "It would have been easier to deal with. Sheree, I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, but she *does* drink an awful lot. And I think you know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, you're right about that." She looked up at me. "But was it worth it to you to rub her nose in it, tonight?" I had to agree, again—it wasn't. "Damn it, boy," Sheree went on, "don't you know how tough it's been for her? I'm surprised she's survived at all, and all you're worried about is the fact that she might get a little drunk, tonight? She may have a drinking problem—I think you're right about that—but she's not drunk."

"Yet." I felt very strongly it was only a matter of time, and not much time, at that.

"But if she did get drunk, now," Sheree sniffed, "who'd be to blame?"

"Not me."

"Right. Not you." She shook her head. That and the irony in her voice

told me she didn't believe me.

"Sheree, I don't ever put a drink in Kerry's hand—I don't have to. She knows where the liquor is, and needs *no help at all* to find it—ever!—I can tell you that."

"So, what are you gonna do now? Get drunk yourself?" She eyed me, apparently thinking she already knew the answer to the question.

I started to walk away, feeling even worse than before. "No, I'm not," I mumbled, but almost entirely to myself.

"Look, Marc," Sheree chased me, but didn't continue her attack. "Just take it easy on Kerry, all right?"

I stopped. "I can take it easy on her. I already said I was sorry." But I lied. I'd only *thought* about apologizing.

"Good." Sheree looked almost hopeful. "'Cause Kerry has a lot on her mind, right now."

"She does?" I'd have thought she had it particularly easy, so I was quite curious to hear Sheree say otherwise. "Like what?"

"Like you. Like, the band, maybe. And like that fat lip and black eye she arrived here with. You remember them?"

"Yes, but they're all gone, now."

She snorted, "On the outside, maybe," and suddenly walked away.

Kerry was aloof, quiet, and avoided me a long time. I was very sorry I'd hurt her feelings, though my words had been true. I desperately wanted to make up with her. I needed her to be near me, and with me. A couple of times I tried to approach her, but she either moved away, or excused herself to go to the bathroom, or something like that. She really wouldn't talk to me, despite my efforts. I *was* sorry. I did feel remorse for my ill-considered, cruel-sounding words. I just wanted her to tell me off, and then forget the whole thing. It was easier to accept her anger and be done with it, than it was her silence and her being so closed-off from me.

I watched Kerry from a distance. She smiled, laughed, and joked around with everyone, including Mel Howe and Troy Dancer, who had gotten there very late, but not too late, but she wouldn't come near me. I felt very left out and forgotten, but to some degree I think I probably deserved it. Kerry wasn't drinking very much at this party, and I was amazed she could keep so much in control. But at the same time, I wondered how long she could keep it up. Sooner or later, maybe even yet this night, she would get drunk again. It was nothing more than just a matter of time.

After we had all eaten the pizzas I'd ordered—and there were a lot of pizzas consumed because of the extreme munchies we all had—it was time for cake and ice cream. Sheree and Tom worked together to light the

twenty candles on Kerry's cake, and when the entire crowd finished singing *Happy Birthday* Kerry easily blew out all the candles. No big surprise, there.

I helped Kerry cut the cake and dish it out with the ice cream, but she didn't have much to say, though she wasn't overtly hostile toward me. I felt pretty bad, and I hoped I conveyed that feeling to her on the few occasions she would actually look at me. I saw no glimmer of empathy or understanding, only sadness. Once all the dishes of ice cream and cake were distributed, we both stood together in the kitchen and had our own deserts. Now out of the mainstream of attention, it was also a good opportunity to talk to her privately.

"Kerry, I'm sorry."

"Me, too." She didn't look at me, just concentrated on her cake.

"No," I said, "I'm serious. I want to apologize for what I said earlier."

"I understand that," she replied, still not looking at me. I did not understand, though.

"I'm confused," I told her. "What is it you understand?"

"I understand you think you need to apologize to me, is all." As if that explained it. She paused, and I thought she would continue. She did. "But you're right, you know."

"About what?"

She licked her lips, still not looking at me. "I *do* drink too much." I had nothing to say. I didn't dare open my mouth since she was talking to me, finally, and seemed serious about it. "I can't help it." She finally looked up at me, and we shared a moment, communicating with our eyes and our souls. "Please try not to hate me for it."

I had to set my plate down so I could hug her. "Oh, Kerry!" I buried her face against my neck. "I don't hate you."

She sighed, and I felt small tears wetting my shirt. I wondered if her makeup would run, but I decided it wasn't going to be a problem, even if it did. Then she said something I didn't pick up.

I let her go so she could talk. "What did you say?"

"I said," she wiped a tear or two off her cheek with her fingertip, her face brightening, fractionally, "I said, I love you."

In that moment, which will always be crystal clear in my mind, I saw a completely different person. I don't know what the change was, nor exactly how it had occurred, but when I looked into the sparkling green eyes of *the girl*, at that moment, I saw looking back at me a person who had not seemed to be there moments before.

She was larger, and stronger, and she was in love with me. I had heard it, she had said it, and it was only the most wonderful thing I have

ever heard. It had all happened so quickly. Only six weeks before she'd been bruised and beaten, and now she was here, with me, and telling me that she loved me.

I couldn't quite fathom it. It was an awful lot, awful quickly, and I panicked for an instant when I stood there, bathed in the glow from her eyes, and I found I couldn't say a word. I wanted to tell her just what she'd told me, but I didn't want to say it if I didn't mean it. Too many times we get caught in the moment, get carried away in the giddy warmth of it all, and don't think about what we're saying until it's too late. I didn't want to make that mistake. I sensed if I spoke too quickly, too hastily, I might regret it. If not that night, then surely later. A lot hung in the balance.

She was waiting for my answer. I could sense it. I felt as safe with her affections as I was ever going to be with anyone, and if I were going to take that huge step forward, then I was going to have to trust her. I looked in her eyes, but I saw only love, and trust, and respect. She was waiting, but she was patient, and wanted me to give her an answer I could be comfortable with. She wasn't looking for just some glib, pat response, and I realized the enormity the moment held for me. I was stalling, I think. I had decided, but it scared me silly, just the same. Could I even say it? I wondered. Would it be the right thing? Would it be a mistake? Would, could, maybe ... oh well ...

I put out my arms, and as she melted into them I said to her, "Kerry, I love you, too."

• • •

Though I was in love with Marc from the time we first made love, I never told him until the night of my twentieth birthday. I remember that night very well. I remember I was very, very angry with him for most of the evening after he jumped on me about my alleged high consumption of alcohol. I say 'alleged' since on that particular evening I had been making an extra special effort *not* to get drunk. I don't remember why, exactly, but at the time it seemed very important to try to keep fairly sober. I knew Marc had been out shopping for birthday presents, and the very thought that someone was as interested in doing something nice for me as Marc seemed to be, tickled me to no end. It was the first time anyone had ever given me a birthday party, with all the cake, ice cream, presents, and general fun time. I know it sounds a little corny, but that seemingly small,

nice gesture meant so much to me I was determined *not* to risk ruining it by getting drunk. I really and truly wanted to be completely in control and aware of what was going on. Really, I did.

Marc saw me with a beer in my hand early in the evening, and made some comment to me about ‘don’t get drunk on me, tonight’ which cut into me like the sharpest knife imaginable. I was really hurt. It felt like no one *ever* noticed when I did something right—like all I ever did was wrong, or maybe the right thing, but at the wrong time. It reminded me of when I was a little kid, and that’s exactly how it made me feel—like a little girl. I never seemed to do the right thing; I was always getting yelled at; always being put down; always being punished without understanding the reasons why. And here I was, an adult! Trying *so* hard to be good. And then Marc tells me not to get drunk, when I *wasn’t* and when I wasn’t even *going* to ... well, it caught me by surprise and it hurt a lot.

Marc can always hurt me very easily. And I don’t know why he affects me so. Lots of other people—*most* people in fact—don’t seem to affect me at all. When I see them, when they talk to me, I hear them but they don’t get inside to where I am. Their words don’t penetrate to where they can hurt me or affect me in any way. It’s a numbness, a thick, hazy, mental curtain that I have erected toward the rest of the world, and it has served me quite well. And continues to serve me, in fact. But Marc—Marc gets inside the curtain. I think he has *always* been inside the curtain with me, which may explain why only he can hurt me.

That *may* be it, then. Marc *is* inside with me—the two of us, together—like siblings in the same twin bed. Neither can move without waking the other. If one tosses, the other is sure to get poked. It may seem our relationship should be just a matter of love, or of trust, but I don’t think our relative positions have anything to do with either one. I certainly don’t think it was any conscious, voluntary decision on my part to allow him into that ‘zone’ around me. No one would be so stupid as to decide to give up the one thing that was *theirs*, and theirs alone, and certainly not easily. I’m not saying I resent Marc, or want him out. It’s just that he is *so damned close* to me—that old twin bed theory, again—that there is nothing he can do or say that *won’t* affect me in some way. That’s all. Now, when I think about it, it should terrify me to know he’s so close, so intimate. He’s inside my very skin and I didn’t even put him there. At least, I don’t *think* I put him there. I can’t say. I don’t know.

I don’t know why he affects me so drastically, I only know he does, and I am going to have to come to terms with it. Either that, or we won’t make it. *I won’t* make it.

The party was *very* nice. Marc's insensitivity to my feelings notwithstanding, I had a wonderful time. Everyone had a wonderful time. So wonderful, in fact, that by the time we were ready to cut the cake and serve up the ice cream, I had mostly forgiven Marc for hurting my feelings. The truth was, I didn't think he'd really meant to hurt me so badly. I just don't think he realized how serious I was about being a good girl.

I accepted his apology when I finally stood still long enough for him to give it. I guess I did understand where he was coming from, and it has been pretty well established that I drank way too much, so on the whole ...

I remember telling Marc that I loved him, and it was the first time I ever said it to him, too. I also remember, and *much* more plainly, that Marc told me he loved me, too. Of course, I've been told that by *a lot* of other guys, usually under 'extenuating circumstances,' but I've never believed it. Not for an instant. But I believed Marc. I could see in his expression, in the look of caution and concern he displayed when he realized what I'd said to him—that he had taken me seriously, and he believed me. So when he replied to my risky statement, and validated my feelings toward him, I believed him, too. I loved Marc Huffman. Marc Huffman loved me. *Loved me!*

It's about damned time, too. I mean, it's about time *someone* got around to falling in love with me. It's not that I haven't tried, it's not that I haven't looked. It's not that I can't be loved. It's not that I don't deserve to be loved. Is it?

I've read love is measured not by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others. I think I know what that means, but very often I'm not too sure. Like right now. How do you get someone to love you? What do you do? Is it what you do, or who you are? Both? Or neither? It seems pretty obvious that only by loving do you receive love in return, but does love mean you must love others even if others don't love you?

Yes, I think that's it.

Man, that's a tall order. You have to be willing to put yourself and your feelings out there and *love* the other person if you expect to have any hope of them loving you. What a risk! You really have to trust the other person with your *true* feelings before you can expect them to trust you with their true feelings. That's so hard it almost doesn't seem worth the effort. The risk is too great, the pain too hard to bear. And **bang!** If you aren't willing to risk rejection and hurt, you guarantee the other person won't risk rejection and hurt by you. You don't love, and you make

certain no one loves you.

Damn it! I've tried to love. I tried to love my mama and daddy, but they wouldn't love me back. I tried to love Grandma, but she died. I tried to love Danny Golden, but he sold me to other men, who didn't love me. Once or twice I thought I loved the men who bought me—thought they loved me since they were so nice and gentle, and treated me so well—but I found out the score on that one, soon enough. You think they love you, and then when you ask them to help you out with something where you don't pay them right back for services rendered, they're suddenly too busy, or can't make it, or just stop calling.

I've been all wrong about this love thing. I'm not sure I *can* love anyone. I have to ask myself, have I ever done anything I could call love, or have I always maintained a ledger where I've balanced off what I did for them against what they've done for me? Haven't I always made sure that I never did more, or went any further, than they did? Would I be willing to do something for someone without expecting something in return? Could I keep loving someone even when they wouldn't love me back? Would I express my love to someone whom I knew didn't love me? No. I haven't, and I'm not sure I would. Maybe not even for Marc.

Damn. I wonder what he'll think when he reads this?

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After the cake and ice cream were consumed, it was time for Kerry to open presents. The crowd was fairly small, about fifteen people or so, and it was possible for all of us to find seats in and around the living room, where Kerry took her place of honor on the floor next to her pile of presents.

She crossed her legs in front of her, pulling her feet up under her thighs, and picked up a small, wrapped package with a card attached to it. She opened the card and read the message inside.

I stood off to the side and watched her. She is easily the prettiest girl I've ever seen. Sitting there, indian-style, in her faded jeans and loose cotton sweater, her nearly waist-length Irish red-blond hair pulled back into a snug ponytail, I found myself observing her most closely.

On her feet were clean white sweat socks, and her toes wiggled occasionally. It's strange to be seeing someone in such small detail. She slid her small, slim fingers under the edge of a brightly wrapped package. Her fingernails, often bright red, were plain—only covered with clear

lacquer. When she saw what was in the box, she smiled, first, then laughed, sharing a joke with the present's giver.

Kerry's voice, I noticed suddenly, was as distinct and unusual as the rest of her. It was, at times, pitched fairly high, almost like a small child. But then she could lower it to a husky, very sexy tone. Her laugh was happy, relaxed, and the sound of it tingled goose bumps on the back of my neck. Her accent, I noticed, most definitely originated in Alabama. I hadn't thought about it before, but despite her rural Southern upbringing, she did not sound at all like an uneducated, country person. No, not 'redneck,' at all. I'm not even too sure why that thought occurred to me, either. I guess it just seemed kind of mysterious, because Kerry always reflected so little of her true origin. I watched her tongue slide over her prominent front teeth, then flip out quickly to wet her pale, pouty, soft lips. She had a very sensual, expressive mouth, and she smiled, so slowly, so slightly, eyes intent on the unwrapping of her present. It made me want her.

I had only placed a single small gift in the pile, and she got to it, eventually. I had also attached a card, and she tore it open with the same determined enthusiasm that she used to attack everything else. I'm fairly sure she didn't know whose present she was opening. Then I watched her carefully read what I'd written on the card. She paused a few seconds at the end of it, her mouth pursed in solemn, serious concentration, her lower lip clenched between teeth. Then she looked up at me.

Our eye contact was powerful. Kerry and I were very close in those few seconds, though neither of us spoke. From what I saw in those shining, luminous green eyes, I knew the hurt and anger she'd shown earlier was gone. In their place was a look of gratitude and thanks, and also love. She looked down at the card, then back up to me. She smiled, then, the twinkle in her eyes intensifying briefly, and I made out the words 'thanks, buddy' that crossed her lips, but silently. I said 'you're welcome' back, just as silently.

Kerry then opened my present, which was a wristwatch. Well, a Mickey Mouse wristwatch, to be more precise. It wasn't new, or an especially expensive item, either. It had belonged to me, something I had picked up at Disney World a couple of years before. The only unusual thing about the watch was that Mickey's head nodded as it ticked. It was one of my all-time favorite things, though I never wore it. I want to say I don't know why I gave it to her, but that wouldn't be true, though. I know exactly why I gave her the watch. I know why I *wanted* to give her the watch.

She took it out of the box, which was the original, and held it up for

the others to see. Someone asked her what it was, she told them it was Mickey Mouse, and his head 'wagged'. I could just see his head nodding from where I stood. Sheree asked to see the watch more closely, though I knew she had seen it before. In fact, both she and Tom had been with me when I bought it. She glanced at it, apparently recognizing it and remembering how much I had liked it when I first got it. Sheree turned then, and looked in my direction. I saw her ask me something, but I couldn't quite make it out over the general noise of people talking. I had to move over to the couch where she sat with Tom. I asked her what she said.

"Is this the watch you got at Disney World when we were there two years ago?" Her attention was drawn away momentarily by someone who wanted to see the unusual Mickey Mouse watch. She handed it off, and turned back to get my response.

"Yeah," I told her. "I figured she could get some good use out of it, since I never wear it."

"I thought you were going to keep it mothballed until it became a collector's item." Sheree Germaine, blue eyes so large and pretty, raised an eyebrow to me as a question.

"I was," I said, and shrugged, "but I changed my mind."

"I'm glad," was all she said in return, and we both returned our attention on Kerry, who was just getting the watch back.

Several people were commenting on the watch. 'It's neat.' 'Where'd you find it?' 'I like the way his head moves.' So forth. Kerry was very obviously tickled. I'm not too sure all the attention was sitting very comfortably on her, but the sheer unadulterated niceness of her birthday party was something she couldn't deny or ignore.

She put the watch on her right wrist, something that struck me as odd, but of course, I knew she was left-handed. She smiled again at me, and winked, not providing further comment. There were other presents to be opened, and some of them were much larger than mine.

The last present was the one Sheree and Tom had brought in. I have to confess, I knew what it was, since it was ultimately from all of us in the band. I think I gave Tom two thirds of the money for it, but who's counting? The box was *huge*. That was part of the joke, too. Actually, the items inside, two of them, needed the big box. Well, the bigger one did, at least. Otherwise, if we hadn't put them in a box it would have been too obvious what the present was, and our little surprise would've lost some of its impact.

Kerry had to stand up to open the thing. She found the card they'd attached to the top, and ripped it open. She read the card, thanked Sheree

and Tom, and tore open the wrappings. Once she got the box open, it seemed mostly empty. It wasn't, she found, but the thing inside was tall and skinny. She pulled on it, and though it was heavy, all the weight was in the bottom, and it came out of the box easily without much effort. I know she knew what it was, as did most of the others. Kerry set it on the floor.

It was a microphone stand. A good one, too. Kerry laughed, and thanked Sheree and Tom, again. She held out her hand, and Tom shook it with mock seriousness and much pomp.

"It's great!" Kerry admired the thing. "It's just what a singer needs. Now I have something to hold the microphone when I sing." She began to clear away some of the boxes and wrappings. It was pretty obvious she thought the stand was all that was in the box, but she wasn't quite right about that.

"Uh, Kerry, dear," Sheree pointed out, "there's something else in the box."

"There is?" Kerry was surprised.

"Look in the bottom," Tom said, pointing. Kerry had to actually put her head down in the box to see what was still hidden down in the bottom. I found some humor in the sight of Kerry's ample rear end in the air, feet on tiptoes with her head down in the bottom of that huge box. I touched Sheree on the shoulder, and told her to smack Kerry on the ass. Sheree turned me down, thinking it cruel or undignified, or something. Oh, well. The moment was short-lived, anyway, as Kerry pulled herself out of the box along with something she found. She knelt down immediately, and set the thing in front of her.

It was a black plastic case, built to withstand a lot of abuse and rough treatment, about fifteen inches long, ten wide, and about four inches deep. There were two black plastic clamps holding the thing closed, and she opened them. The inside was lined in dense, gray foam rubber, and this foam rubber protected a long cylindrical item. The singer's 'instrument'—a microphone.

This was the big gift. I know how much the damned thing cost, and it was no small amount. What we did was get the best stage microphone we could find. It came complete with traveling case and three different windscreens, to use, I guess, depending on the circumstances.

"Happy birthday, Kerry," I said, "and welcome to the world of professional music."

She took the microphone out of the case. It was made mostly of black anodized aluminum, and I could see it was rather hefty. The thing was probably indestructible, and I was glad. She looked at us, dumbly.

"I don't know what to say," she said, her jaw slack with awe.

"How about 'thanks'?" Tom replied, grinning. Sheree punched him in the arm.

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Sheree and Tom (and I guess also Marc) gave me a microphone and stand for my birthday. At the time, I had no idea how good it was, though it came with its own heavy-duty plastic carrying case. Later, I compared it with a lot of other mikes, and found out really *how much* the damn thing cost. I could have rented an apartment for about three months on what they'd spent. I mean, it was *very nice*, indeed.

I got to try it out at the next rehearsal, and was amazed at how clear and sensitive it was. I could whisper and it would pick it up. I could sing my loudest, and it never distorted, like some other microphones would. It was heavy, solid, and obviously built to take years of use and abuse, without breaking. And that was a good thing, too.

You see, I have this bad habit of dropping my microphone, on occasion. I had broken one or two, too, during rehearsal, and I was scared to death of breaking my brand new, super-expensive microphone. I tried singing without removing it from the stand, but I found my performing style was severely cramped as a result. I *have* to move around when I sing. I can't just stand in one spot and sing into the mike just sitting there on the stand. But, of course, when I finally got the nerve to actually hold the thing while I sang, it wasn't long before—guess what—I dropped it. I almost died to think I might have broken it. I felt I didn't deserve something so nice if all I was going to do was drop and break it. I remember flinching when the mike hit the floor. I think I expected to get hit for it. Flinching embarrassed me, and I almost cried.

I just stood there in horror, looking down at my brand-new microphone laying there broken (I presumed) on the floor. The rest of the band still played, and I had already missed my cue, per usual. Everyone's mood was loose enough that they went on with the next verse as if I were singing. I guess they were listening to how they sounded, although this time without their lead vocalist. Almost shaking, I picked up the microphone. I was afraid to start singing, for fear I'd discover I'd broken it. Shaking for real, then, and gulping to keep from throwing up, I inspected the mike for damage, but not even a scratch was visible. I was very relieved I hadn't damaged it on the outside. But the chorus came up,

and I felt I had to try it. I had to sing.

Of course the thing still worked. No good stage mike worth its salt would be damaged by simply being dropped. The rehearsal went on, and it wasn't the last time I was to drop the thing. Not even the last time that night. Eventually, I got used to it. Not used to dropping my mike, just used to the idea that I couldn't break it. The goddamned thing was tougher than I was!

But not forever.

• • •

I had a strange dream. It was about Suzanne, and I remember waking up thinking she was still alive. But, Suzanne *isn't*. I remember the crush of pain and sadness that came over me when I awoke and realized she'd been dead a long time. In my dream, she was alive and happy. She and I were in the park, playing on the swings, and oddly, we were both small children. She wasn't older than me, and I wasn't just a baby to her. That part was *very* odd, but I know it was Suzanne in the dream. I remember her eyes, and her face, and her hair. It *was* Suzanne.

It was Suzanne!

The grief, the loneliness and the aloneness of her loss is still with me, just as fresh and painful as it was on the day they told me she was dead. I found myself going back into my dream, trying to bring back and relive the wonderfulness of her being alive and with me. I could almost touch it—the memory. In my dream Suzanne was giggling, and calling my name. She always called me 'Markie,' which I didn't like all that much, but I would give *anything* to hear her say it, today. Anything.

In the dream she had a light, small child's voice. Still Suzanne, but I definitely remember in reality she had a fairly deep, raspy, almost masculine voice. I know, she was pretty butch, but she loved me, and I loved her, and none of that mattered. None of that mattered as long as we had each other. I dreamed we had each other, as the brother and sister we were. We must have been the same age in the dream, surely only a dim wish of mine. It was a pale blue dress she wore, and her brown hair was cut very short—like my own. I was in jeans and a T-shirt, and we both were barefoot and completely carefree. I smiled as I remembered Suzanne's skinned knees. The scars she had as an adult only confirmed that she had gotten down and dirty with the best of them (the boys, that is) when she was a child.

She pushed me on the swing. As small as she was, as small as we both were, she seemed powerfully strong. She easily got me going, higher and higher, and the thrill and the fright of going so high, I remember very plainly. The swing back, then the *push!* from behind, making me shoot forward. Then the swing up, up, up! and the free fall as I swung back down. In the dream, I was not afraid of the fall. Suzanne was back there, laughing and calling out my name—urging me on—and she would catch me. I wouldn't fall; she would catch me.

We got a call from the family a few days before that first Thanksgiving, Kerry and I. They had persuaded Rennie, my nephew, Paul's oldest son, whom I like a lot and is one of two family members I *will* talk to, to do the dirty work of calling me and extending an invitation to my mother's house for the holiday. I don't know who the devious one was behind the idea, but it was most likely Paul. Mother seems to be lost in her own world, removed from reality, still thinking all of us as a close, happy family, though we *never* were. I'll bet she still thinks father is alive. And I don't know what she thinks about Suzanne.

Anyway, Rennie caved in to family pressure and called me. I was glad to hear from him, and until he called I had not said anything to anyone in the family about Kerry.

"Marc," he said after I said hello, "it's me, Renfield."

"Renfield, indeed," I replied. "What's going on?"

"Nothing much, dear *uncle*," he teased, "but I've been asked to call you to invite you to the *Annual Huffman Family Thanksgiving Dinner*." It's said just like that, with caps on all the words. I swear to God.

"Hah," I snorted. "Not a chance."

"I figured as much," he sighed, sounding characteristically effeminate, which *is* Rennie. Renfield G. Huffman, five years younger than I am, is gay, and it amazes me that (in light of Suzanne) the rest of the family doesn't seem to realize it. "But you know, Marc," he sounded serious, "we all *do* want to see you at Thanksgiving dinner."

"Sure you do," I agreed, facetiously, but I wasn't any more convinced than he was. I changed the subject. "How is 'mother,' anyway?"

"Mine, or yours?"

"Let's try for both, while we're at it."

"Fine," he seemed to smile into the phone. "*My* mother—your sister-in-law—is doing quite wonderfully." He paused. "She's a little more gray, plays too much tennis, but has the most exquisite tan I've seen on a woman her age."

"How nice," I think I said.

"Now *your* mother," he deepened his voice, "just bought a Louis XVI settee for twenty thousand—actually a steal—and is in the process of finding a decorator. She wants to redo the great room, I believe."

"I'm glad to hear she's in such good health."

"Indeed," he said, "her checking account is quite healthy. So how are you?" He paused, maybe waiting for an answer from me. I said nothing right away, since I *always* think about my answer to that particular question—how I am. I don't know, maybe I think they actually want the *truth*, or something. Rennie went on to fill the vacancy, "Still doing computer consulting for that company in Midtown?" I told him yes, I was. "Anything else going on I might be interested in?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Oh, don't play so *dumb* with me, uncle, dear." He sounded exasperated. "I talked to none other than your old friend Melinda Howe the other day, and she had quite some tale to tell of my favorite uncle."

"How in the hell did you meet up with her?"

"I thought you knew," he replied, cryptically.

"Knew what?"

"Well," he said matter-of-factly, "she's a customer at the bank."

Rennie, though quite young, has a very respectable position as a 'Junior Assistant Branch Manager,' or something. It doesn't pay all that well, but it sure looks good to the family. After all, banking involves the daily handling of large sums of money, and money is what the Huffman Family is all about. Everyone in our family banks at this particular bank, including yours truly. I have direct deposit, or I use the teller machine, so I rarely have the opportunity to go in and visit my nephew in his nice glass and steel office.

Rennie went on with his story. "She made a special point of coming in to see me. I mean, I was with another customer at the time, and she waited over fifteen minutes for me to be free."

"Oh?" I mused. "And what did she have to say?" As if I didn't have any idea.

"Well, for one, she said you were playing in a band, again. She said she was in this band, too, along with that really fantastic guitar player, Troy Dancer. She mentioned Tom Germaine, which I expected, and also something about a certain female vocalist." He stopped, but I had nothing to contribute. After some seconds of silence on the line, "Nothing to say, hmmm?"

"I don't know," I replied. I paused. "It depends upon what she told you. Yes, we do have a band, and yes we're in rehearsal trying to get ready for four gigs we have lined up in December."

"Uh-huh," he said, "and this vocalist—is she good?"

"We're *all* good. This band is coming together very well."

"Good! I'm delighted to hear it!"

I hate words like 'delighted,' especially coming from another man. I had to remember, though, to whom I was talking. "I'm *so* delighted to hear that you're delighted, Rennie."

"Well fuck you," he shot back, "you homophobic, retard, thick-necked, ex-jock asshole." He laughed aloud at his rapid-fire invectives.

"I am *not* an ex-jock!" I laughed, too.

"So, are you going to marry this girl, or what?"

"What girl?" I was momentarily confused by his changing of the subject.

"Good God, Marc, you are *so* dense. The singer, Kerry MacDonald."

All right, so I knew to whom he was referring. "Did Mel Howe tell you that?" I asked him, but I knew. The slut! Did she have no respect for my privacy? The answer to that question, of course, is no. Ah, well.

I didn't answer his somewhat indirect question about my relationship with Kerry, at least not right away, because of two things. One, Kerry was there, watching TV while I stood in the kitchen talking on the phone. We were very friendly with each other, and life was indeed, idyllic, if that's the proper word. And two, there had been no discussion of any kind about the permanence or likelihood of our continuing indefinitely as a couple—an item. I had not even considered the idea of marrying Kerry. You just don't reach that conclusion so quickly.

All right, enough being defensive. Rennie only wanted to know what was going on with the girl I was seeing, and he was only *teasing* me about the marriage part. So I said, "No, not yet."

Rennie seemed to have understood my answer, given out of context though it was, and 'hmmmed' in response. "Ah ... she's there, isn't she?"

"Yes," I said.

"And while you two are living together and she's getting you laid regularly, you wouldn't exactly say you're ready for the altar. Am I right?"

He was such a perceptive asshole! "Yes," I said, "that about covers it."

"Great!" He was joyous. "When can I come over to meet her?"

"Never," I said. I *was* teasing, though.

"Great!" he replied. "How about tomorrow night?"

"Fine," I said, "anytime." But I know I sounded less than enthusiastic about it. Rennie though, wasn't about to be put off so easily by my sarcasm.

"So, Marc," he changed the subject, again, "back to the reason I called.

You *will* be there for Thanksgiving dinner, right?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I'm sorry," he tapped the receiver, "there seems to be some static on the line. I didn't quite catch that last part. I think you said, 'Sure, I'd be delighted'."

"No, I don't think so."

"And you'll bring Kerry, of course?"

"No, I don't think so."

He sighed, steeling his patience for me, "Marc," he told me, "I love you. You're my uncle, but despite that, I love you like a friend."

"So?" I asked him.

"Well," he continued, "I wouldn't hurt you. Do you trust me? Do you believe I wouldn't hurt you?" I believed him, and said so. "Good." He paused, one final time. "Please come to your mother's house for Thanksgiving dinner with us. Bring your vocalist girlfriend, Kerry, if she doesn't have plans of her own. We really do want to see you."

I took some time to think. Like it or not, I did trust Rennie, and I really wanted to say yes, if only because it was *him* was doing the asking. I rationalized that if Rennie and Frank (Rennie's roommate) were there, it couldn't be too terrible to stand for a little while. Mother, I saw often enough for my needs. And, I suppose, often enough for her needs, as well. Bill and Paul, and their families ... well, for the most part I can take or leave them. They weren't the problem. Father was dead. He wasn't going to be the problem, either, unless his ghost came back and yelled at me from the top of the stairs while we ate. And I might just yell back at him to go fuck himself if he did. That would be all right with me. But something inside told me not to go. I tried to put my finger on it, since I *wanted* to go, but at the same time I *didn't* want to go. I was afraid to go, but for the longest time I couldn't quite see what it was that made me afraid. Why should I be afraid?

Not the house. I liked the old house. Mother still kept my room upstairs over the garage mostly the way I left it, though *cleaner*, certainly. The woods behind the house were still there, and even the remnants of my tree house were still up in that ancient white oak. My younger nephews wanted to build it back up, to have something to do when they were at Grandma's. (Oh, lord, if they could only have called mother that! But alas, no way. It was 'Grandmother,' or nothing.) Bill would not permit anyone to climb the tree. Too dangerous, he said. Paul might not have agreed with him, since Paul built the tree house in the first place, but he worked for Bill. So, I guess he just knuckled under and went along with whatever brother-man (boss-man) Bill said.

The front yard was still there, too. It was quite big enough for us to toss the football around, and sometimes Paul and my nieces and nephews still did. Poor Bill. He never did athletic things. Not born to do it; not coordinated enough; not strong enough. Two of his boys played high school football, too. I guess I'm only surprised he let them. He's a lot like father, in many respects. I feel sorry for him.

There's nothing to fear there, and still I'm afraid. There's nothing to hate, there, but still I hate it. I haven't been home for Thanksgiving dinner in years, but still they ask me. They know I won't go there on Thanksgiving, but still they insist. And still I turn them down.

"No, Rennie," I finally said. "Tell them I'm *not* coming." He started to protest, but changed his mind. I heard a very hard sigh.

"I understand, Marc," he said. "But can I still come over and meet your new roommate, sometime?"

"Sure," I said, "anytime."

We said good-bye, and I hung up the phone. Kerry was curious about who was on the phone, but I just told her it was a relative, and let the subject drop.

I have avoided it, but there's something I have to write. I haven't said what happened to Suzanne. I knew eventually I was going to have to get to it, but I don't even now want to remember it.

It happened when I was in high school. I was sixteen. It was Thanksgiving, and the whole family was getting together for dinner. One o'clock—prompt—in the big, formal dining room at the house. Everyone was there, I remember, including Bill, Paul, their families, father, mother, Suzanne, and me. The whole thing centered on father and Suzanne.

She showed up late. I remember she pulled into the driveway at a quarter after one, fully fifteen minutes late. Mother was unhappy, but she welcomed Suzanne to the table, anyway. Father said nothing right away, but his distaste was plainly evident. Suzanne was given a seat right next to me, and I was ever so glad to see her. We really had just started to eat, and all the dishes of food were still warm, so I took a little time to help her get her plate filled. For the most part, everyone seemed happy to have us all together, finally. But father, though, wasn't happy. And he wasn't going to let it lie, either.

He started by complaining about Suzanne being late. "You could've had the decency to call and let us know you were going to be late."

"I'm sorry, dad," she explained. She always called him 'dad,' though I think he detested it. Both Bill and Paul always called him 'father,' as did I. "I had trouble with the car. I couldn't get it started." That wasn't too

surprising, since her car was old and not very reliable. Father had refused to give her the money for some decent transportation. I thought it was *his* fault her car wouldn't start.

"You should get that car of yours looked at, if it's so feeble it won't start." He obviously thought she was being negligent.

"Jesus Christ, dad!" She shook her head.

"Don't use that language at the table, Suzanne. I hate it when you curse like that." He paused, but he wasn't finished yet. "If you just had the brains or the foresight to get that piece of trash fixed now and again, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Well, that hurt Suzanne. And I'm not at all surprised. Father went right for the throat. I know it seems kind of unbelievable, but he called her stupid right to her face. The man called his daughter stupid! But Father was like that. You disappointed him or failed him in his expectations, and *you* were stupid. *You* just didn't see the importance of anticipating his desires. He was always right, he was always the judge, you were always thoughtless, you were always wrong. You were always stupid.

She didn't launch into a counterattack, though. She knew everyone in the family was sitting there, and she had the consideration and the restraint, unlike father, to just let the whole thing go. "I'm sorry, father," she said, barely restraining her temper, but doing so magnificently, "but I couldn't afford to get the car looked at."

"Don't use that insolent tone with me, young lady," he told her. He was very angry, and spoke in that quiet, pressure-filled tone that said all hell was about to break loose.

"I am **not** being insolent!" she yelled, but maybe a bit too loudly. She hated to be called a 'young lady'. It was one of her buttons. You know, one of those 'buttons' your family can push when they really want to get you going. Father was an expert at pushing our buttons. What a prick.

Oh, and mother? She was there. Did she speak? Did she say anything? Hell, no. It was *father's* house; it was *father's* meal; father's table; father's chairs; father's this, father's that; *father's fucking everything*. Not a peep from any of us. Personally, though, at the time father had me totally cowed. I wouldn't get the nerve to tell the son of a bitch off until well after he was dead. By that time, of course, it was too late to make it mean anything. Bill and Paul? I think they sided with father.

Father was on a roll, a terrible, seething roll that was simply going to crush Suzanne. Smash her flat.

"Why aren't you dressed?" He pointed his knife at her, accusatory and accusing. The rest of us were in coat and tie, including all the nephews. Mother and the wives and the nieces were all in frilly, fancy,

flowery dresses with puffy sleeves and lace around the neck—so Southern and so Southern aristocracy—something I never thought we were, or should have been, either.

Suzanne sat there in a black T-shirt, ripped, faded jeans and a leather vest. On her feet were engineer's boots! Her hair was butch-short, as she always kept it, and always liked it. I told you she was gay—and damned proud of it, too. To me, and to the rest, I suppose, it was just Suzanne. The outfit fit her—her personality; her ambiance; her disposition; her persona. I thought nothing of it, but I had to admit her clothes weren't in line with the rest of us, nor were they what father wanted her to wear.

"This was what I wore to work," she was explaining. Man, she was doing a lot of explaining. "I didn't get off work until eleven-thirty, and by the time I finally got the car started I had no time to go home and change. I didn't want to be late, but I was, anyway."

"It seems to me you could have thought far enough ahead to have taken nice clothes with you to work." He stabbed at something on his plate, and snorted. "Or maybe, just maybe, you could have worn something more suitable in the first place." He never let up on her. I looked around the table. Everyone was just sitting there, looking down at their food, afraid or unwilling to say or do anything.

"Look, dad," she held her hands out, trying to end the argument that he seemed to be carrying all by himself, "I'm *sorry* I was late. I'm sorry I didn't have time to dress. I'm sorry I didn't call. I'm sorry about *everything*."

What his problem really was, I still don't know. He pronounced, "Sorry, I'm afraid, is just not going to cut it this time."

In a fury, she stood up. "**Jesus H. Fucking-Christ!** You are one cold, hard, cock-sucking bastard prick son-of-a-bitch! Why the fuck can't you just **leave me alone?**" Fully enraged now, too, father stood up. But he said nothing. He 'allowed' Suzanne to continue. She did. "Can you hear yourself? Do you fucking *know* how you sound? I was fifteen *fucking* minutes late to dinner, and you sound like I just went on national-**fucking**-TV and told them how you used to fuck me in the ass!"

Whoof! Father reacted as if Suzanne had just punched him in the gut. At the time I did not immediately associate what she said with anything even remotely like the truth, but judging his reaction, I wasn't so sure. Yeah, you hear something like that, but your mind just buries it. It doesn't seem to fit 'normal life' anywhere, so you pretend you didn't hear it. Father could have passed her tirade off as nothing more than an invective intended to vent a little anger and rage, but I think it may have hit home. No one knew, I'm sure, and I can hardly even think about it.

Father said nothing for a long, tense several moments, the expression on his face going through several successive changes. At first, I thought he was going to come across the table at her, and I'm sure he was considering it, but I also think he was weighing the damage he would do (to himself) if he gave anyone any reason to think Suzanne's disclosure might be true. Yeah, he was a crafty old bastard. The only thing he did wrong as far as I could see was to have had any initial reaction to her words, at all. I don't think anyone else was looking at him when his blood pressure fell and his eyes bugged open. But I was. Then, seconds later, he was composed in anger, again, and already seemed to be planning how he could utterly and totally discredit and dispose of Suzanne.

Suzanne, too, was staring at father, her mouth a thin line, breathing heavily through her nostrils. Her hands were planted on the edge of the table, and I saw she was shaking. I don't know what she was thinking. I don't know if she was afraid, or if she was also planning her next move.

Then father smiled, and seemed to relax. "I know you're trying to draw me out, Suzanne, but it won't work. I won't let you disrupt the family's Thanksgiving dinner this way." He had quieted his voice noticeably, and alarmingly. "I *am* surprised at the filthiness of your mouth, though. You can still amaze me with your ability to both look and talk like a sailor. I know we didn't raise you to act to us this way, so it must be those *friends* of yours." The liar. He shook his head. "Suzanne, you degrade us with your gutter-talk, your dress, and your immoral lifestyle. I find it hard to accept that you could have come from this family." He concluded, "I wish you hadn't come here, today."

"Well, I wish I hadn't even been born," she replied.

Father snorted. Smiled. "Maybe you're right." He sat down, concentrated on his now-cold food. "Of course, it's *still* not too late to do something about it." And Suzanne was dismissed.

There was total silence for a long minute. And *no one* said anything. Not Suzanne, not father, not Bill, not Paul, not their wives, not any of the kids. And not mother.

Finally, Suzanne spoke, and so quietly I wasn't sure I'd heard her. "If that's how you feel about me," she turned from the table, her plateful of food completely uneaten, "then I will." She left the dining room and I heard the front door slam closed.

I never saw her again, alive.