

Paradise
And Other
Stories

By R. A. Conti

Paradise and Other Stories
by R. A. Conti
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T-Fury

1.

“Excuse me; is that a T-Fury skirt?” Stephan asked. The woman was standing alone at the high table. He stopped as soon as he saw her.

She smiled and said, “Yes it is. My daughter has several of these, but this one’s my favorite.” The skirt was heavenly blue with stylized stars, planets, and little rocket ships. Although the print pattern looked busy and playful, the fabric draped softly over her abdomen, thighs, and legs in a sexy but also nerdy way. It had instantly become his favorite, as well.

“You don’t see those a lot,” he said, still checking her out.

“You mean on a woman my age in a place like this?” she said, smiling. All the other women were wearing tight skirts and tops that over-accentuated their physical features.

“Are you waiting for someone?” he boldly asked.

“Yes,” she answered, and then noticed the look of disappointment on his face. “I was waiting for someone to notice my skirt.”

“That would be me,” he said, relieved. She smiled again.

“My name’s Andromeda,” she said, offering her hand for him to shake. Her name surprised him. She noticed his reaction. “I could show you my birth certificate,” she said with a wry smile on her face.

“It’s a beautiful name. Are you a heavenly being?” he asked. He tried to look into her eyes, but glanced down at the skirt.

“What do you mean? Oh.” She realized what he meant and smiled.

“A galaxy?” he clarified his question.

“Yes; I am. And what are *you*?” she asked, teasingly. He had to think fast.

“An astronomer, looking at the most beautiful galaxy I have ever seen.” What the hell, he thought, flirting was fun. He might as well go all in.

“Well, mister astronomer-” she started to say.

“Stephan,” he interrupted, smiling.

“Would you like to go from astronomer to astronaut, and explore this galaxy?” He had no idea if she meant what he hoped she meant.

“Well, my rocket ship is in the shop right now, so I’m not able to do much exploring,” he said, smiling.

“You’re in luck, I have mine. Shall we take off?” She grabbed his hand and started toward the door. When they got outside the cool night air freshened them up.

“Okay, here’s the deal. Everybody calls me Andy. I’m divorced. I have two daughters, Jessica and Emma. One is in college the other is a junior in high school. I’ve been looking to meet somebody different and interesting.”

“Just different and interesting?” he asked. She looked puzzled. “Most women would say tall, dark, and handsome.”

“Oh, right. I met him. Married him. Divorced him. He *was* tall dark and handsome but not much else,” she said, matter-of-factly, without sadness or regret.

“I’m sorry,” Stephan said.

She waited for him to say more. When he did not continue, she went on, “Here’s where you’re supposed to say something like ‘He must have been crazy,’ or ‘He was a lucky man,’ or something like that.”

Stephan smiled at her, and looked down at her skirt, again. “I’m the lucky man,” he said, shyly. She blushed and squeezed his arm. It seemed he got beneath her flirting repartee and touched something inside her. “Is there someplace quiet nearby where we can sit and talk?” he asked.

“Indeed, there is,” she said. She took his arm and started to walk down the street.

“Who says *indeed* anymore?” he teased. She smiled again. He liked her smile. “So, what does Andy do when she’s not dazzling astronomers?”

“I run a small software firm. We write the software that runs the software.”

“You mean like machine language?”

“Kind of. Are you an IT person?”

He nodded. “I was on track to become a highly-paid IT person. But I watched my colleagues burn out one by one. I didn’t want that to happen to me.”

“What did you do?”

“Quit, and then bought a small pet store.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. It’s not like those huge pet warehouses. It’s an old-fashioned place. I have a few birds, some tropical fish, and an occasional hamster.”

“No dogs or cats?”

“No. I don’t handle them. I just refer people to rescue shelters.”

“It sounds wonderful,” she said, enthusiastically.

“It is. I’ve been happy there. And I’m making a profit. Of course, every once in a while I refuse to sell one of my fish because I’ve named him or her and we’ve bonded; but mostly I let them go when I have to.”

“I like what you just said,” Andy said, smiling.

“You like fish?”

“About being happy. No one says that anymore.”

“Would you say it, about yourself?” he asked, pointedly. She was quiet.

“I haven’t asked myself that.”

“Do you have an answer?” he gently pressed.

“Um...if I was to be honest, I’d have to say, no.” Her smile was gone.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought I was successful. I was proud of what I’d done; my company sells a good product; but I’ve come to realize something.”

“Which is...?”

“The only way to have a career is to give up your soul,” she said, grimacing. She looked at him; he gazed into her eyes and saw hurt there.

“And you’d like to get it back?” he asked. She nodded. “Is this how you were planning to do it?” He was referring to her T-Fury skirt. She smiled and nodded again.

“Yes, but I wasn’t sure it was gonna work,” she said, surprising him. She seemed like a strong, self-assured business-woman; a person who would know something was going to work before she even tried it. They sat quietly.

“This is happening very fast,” he said.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“We’re connecting.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. But this can’t be real. *You* can’t be real. I’m just having a wonderful dream,” he said, awed by his own candidness.

“I’m *very* real,” she said, then paused and looked at him. He did not reply. “I could *show* you how real.” He gave her a puzzled but interested look. She was delighted she had surprised him.

“Would you like to see my daughter’s collection of T-Fury skirts? She has some of the leggings, too.” Stephan sat there, stunned, unable to answer. There was a long pause. “If you don’t want to...,” she added, shyly.

“Are you absolutely certain this isn’t a dream?” he asked, feigning seriousness.

“Yes. Do you want me to put it in writing?” She mimed reaching into her purse for a pen and paper.

“That’s okay...about those skirts.”

“I might have one that fits you, since you like them so much,” she teased.

“Do you have a dressing room, where I could try one on?”

“Matter of fact, I do.”

2.

“I’ve never connected with anyone so fast. I’m terrified,” he said.

“You’re scared of *me*?” she said, as if his comment shocked her.

“No, I’m scared of *us*,” he answered, surprising her. Were they already an ‘us’?

“Thanks for saying it. Me too.”

“I guess that means we’re on the right track?” he said, and then looked at her. They had just had sex. She leaned over and kissed him.

“Stop talking.” She said. He assumed she wanted to make love again.

“I’m afraid that if I stop talking, this dream is gonna end.”

“No,” she said, and then pulled him close and kissed him, “I think it’s just beginning.”

3.

“Mom! Mom!” Jessica shrieked. “Why is there a naked dude in the shower? I thought it was you, so I

walked right in.”

“Oh, that’s Stephan. He spent the night.”

“*Here?*” Jessica’s disbelief delighted her mother.

Andy smiled; pleased she had shocked her daughter. “Um, hm.”

“With *you?*”

“Who the heck *else?*”

“That’s awesome, Mom. Can I meet him?”

“Sure. That is, if he didn’t have a heart attack when you burst into the room. Weren’t you supposed to be away for a few days?”

“Yeah. Weather sucked. Too risky to go scuba diving.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m not,” Jessica teased; delighted she had caught her Mom with a man.

4.

“Yeah, your Mom and I met last night,” Stephan said, casually. Jessica and Stephan were chatting over breakfast. Andy kept looking for hints Stephan was uncomfortable with her daughter. He seemed genuinely at ease.

“Well, I have to go and open my shop,” he said as he arose from the table.

“Shop?” Jessica asked.

“He owns a pet shop,” Andy said.

Jessica suddenly became serious. “Oh? Where do your pets come from?” she asked, cautiously.

“Well, all the fish are tank-raised. I won’t handle anything that’s taken from the wild. My birds are from an excellent breeder. I’ve been to his aviary. He’s got the happiest birds I’ve ever seen.” Jessica listened. He was saying all the right things.

“That’s good,” she nodded, and then added, “Very good.”

“Jessica wants to be a biologist who restores damaged ecosystems,” Andy said.

He became grim. “Well, unfortunately, there’s no shortage of those.” Jessica immediately approved of him.

5.

“Mom, where did you find his guy?” Jessica asked, after Stephan was gone. Andromeda told Jessica how they met. “So you went to a club wearing a T-Fury skirt hoping to pick up a guy? Wasn’t that a little risky?”

“Yeah, and it worked,” Andy said, smugly. She was proud of her boldness. That would show Jessica she was not the only desirable woman in the household. “The skirt grabbed him; but the truth is we connected while we talked.”

“I’m glad. I like him. When’s the next date?”

“He asked me to drop by his pet shop, if I can get away for a couple of hours.”

“Mom, *make* the time. I think he’s worth it,” Jessica urged.

“You like him, huh?” Andy asked. Jessica smiled and nodded. “I do, too.”

“Oh, what a surprise,” Jessica teased. You only slept with him on your first date.”

“Technically, it wasn’t a first date. It wasn’t a date at all.” She was having fun shocking her daughter.

“So you slept with him *before* your first date?” Jessica asked, incredulous. Andromeda smiled and nodded. “I’ve done that a few times, too,” Jessica said, just to shock her mother. “Sometimes there never was a first date. You know how it is.”

“Yeah. Men!” They both giggled and then left for the day.

6.

“*Noah’s Ark?* Does that make you Noah?” Andy asked, grinning. Stephan held the door for her as she walked in.

“Thanks for dropping by,” he said, smiling. Even though they hit it off last night, he wondered whether she would come by.

“Cute place. You’re right, it does have the feel of an old-fashioned pet store,” she said, as she looked around.

“I wanted a place where a kid could come in and buy a goldfish in a bag. And then buy a bowl and some rocks. And then take everything home and have something *alive* to relate to. Something that share’s his or her evolution; the same life-force.”

“Wow, you’re a regular philosopher,” she teased him,

“Not really. But I do have strong feelings about how a kid should grow up.”

“And how is that?” she asked, impressed by the depth of his feeling.

“Less digital, more natural. I guess that’s how I would sum it up.”

“Great slogan for a bumper sticker,” she said. He grimaced. “Sorry, I’m not making fun of you. I think it’s wonderful.”

He showed her the fish tanks, bird cages, food, and other pet essentials. It was all thoroughly accessible. It did not have that big chain-store feeling of vastness and impersonality.

“We have pets because they are a reflection of our personalities; so why buy our pet supplies from the same kind of warehouses where we buy our electronic toys? Warehouses don’t have

personalities. And, frankly, pets are not gadgets or toys.”

“I can see why you’re happy here. It feels right.”

“Thanks. Interest you in goldfish? You might like Sandra, here. She’s a charmer. I’ll give you a very special price,” he said, pointing to a tank that contained at least twenty goldfish. She had no idea which of them was Sandra, but it did not matter. She realized he was happy. She envied him.

She declined the goldfish. “Gee, I would hate to come between you two. It seems like you have something *special*,” she teased.

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad if you’d let me visit her once in a while,” he suggested. She thought about it.

“So whose fish would she be? Yours or mine?” she asked.

“I was hoping she would be *ours*,” he said. She was delighted that he had just signaled he wanted to see more of her.

“I don’t know. It feels right,” she said, “But it’s almost *too* perfect.” She did not mean the goldfish.

“You feel that way, too?” he asked. She nodded. “Now you know why I kept saying it felt like a dream.” He paused, not sure if he should add anything. But he could not resist. “There’s nobody else I’d rather share a dream with,” he added, speaking softly.

“But the reality is...well...reality,” she said. He was not certain she preferred reality to a dream.

“Ah, reality; does anybody know what it is?” he asked.

“There’s that philosopher again,” she teased. He grinned. “Next you’re gonna say ‘What does it all mean?’” she added, seriously.

“Not a question you’ve asked yourself lately?”

“It doesn’t mean anything at all,” she answered, and hoped he would not think she was a pessimist. It seemed she was now talking about philosophy.

“Do you mean that in a dark way? Like life is meaningless and we should live in despair?” It was not a question he would normally have asked a woman he just met, but Andy was no ordinary woman.

She smiled at him. “No, I mean it in what you might call a *light* way. What’s the point of asking? Just live. Celebrate.” There was a long pause. It was a good answer. She realized something inside her had changed. He was different and he made her feel different, too.

“Speaking of celebrating, do you want this little goldfish or not?”

“I’ll take her. Do you deliver?” she asked, teasingly.

“Depends. Will I get a tip?”

“Oh, yeah.”

7.

“I need to tell you the truth about me,” Andy whispered to Stephan, who was lying next to her. She sounded nervous. In the few weeks they had been together, they had fallen into an intimacy deeper than he had ever known with any other woman. He wondered what she could possibly have left to share with him.

“I’m dead,” she said, solemnly. “I’ve been dead for many years.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, puzzled. Andy was the most alive woman he had ever met. She had a passion for life he had never seen in anyone else.

“I have a son. He’s fifteen. He was born severely deformed and has been living in an institution his whole life.” Stephan listened patiently. He tried not to react to what she said. He wanted to hear her out.

“It was my fault.” She was close to crying. He touched her face hoping to soothe and calm her. Having a handicapped child was no big deal. Hiding him, or hiding from him, was. “I found out I was pregnant right after my husband left. I hoped my pregnancy would somehow bring him back, but it didn’t.” She stopped and fought to hold back tears so she could finish the story.

“I went into a deep depression and my psychiatrist gave me anti-depressants. She told me they were safe for fetuses.” She paused again, closer to tears, and whispered, “One of them wasn’t.” She cried for a moment, and then continued. “Joseph was severely deformed at birth. His hands and legs were useless. He couldn’t make any noises with his mouth. But his internal organs were okay. He could live a long time with the proper care.”

She looked at Stephan to see if he seemed shocked or disgusted. She would not have blamed him if he just got up and left. The pained expression on his face surprised her. He was not feeling pain for Joseph’s deformity; it was sympathy for her suffering.

“I stopped going to see him around his second birthday. I couldn’t look at him. Every time I saw him I knew his deformity was my fault. I had been selfish; I had put my anguish about my divorce and depression before my pregnancy. He could be a normal fifteen year old boy. But he’s in a motorized cart that carries him around.

“He’s smart. His brain is normal. It took them a while to figure out how to teach him; but once they developed a technique, he started learning stuff. He can read and write. He uses a stylus and keyboard to type out words.” The worst of her anguish had passed, but she was still wary of Stephan’s reaction. How much more would he listen before he became disgusted with her and left, forever?

“He had excellent people taking care of him. I convinced myself he didn’t need a Mom. I told Jessica and

Emma to tell him I was dead.” Stephan pulled her closer and kissed her. She started to cry. She had never experienced such acceptance before.

“Jessica went to see him last week. He told her, point-blank, he knew I was alive and wanted to see me. Jessica doesn’t know how he found out about me. No one ever told him. He just *knew*. I have to go and beg his forgiveness. I don’t know how I’m going to do it.”

“I’ll go with you, if you want.”

“No, Emma and I will visit him. But could you to stay with me at the motel? I’m going to need you.” She looked into his eyes, hoping he still wanted to be with her. “I’ve never told anyone else about this.” He assumed she meant past boyfriends.

“You weren’t ready to tell them?” he asked.

“*They* weren’t ready to hear this. My relationships would get to the point where there should be no more secrets. I would look at my boyfriends and realize that, once I told them, they would never see me the same way again. So I dumped them.”

“I don’t see you the same way, either. I see you as a tortured but brave woman who has the strength to ask forgiveness. I admire you.” Her eyes widened and she stared at him in disbelief.

“So now you know that I’m not just the cutie in the T-Fury skirt that you flirted with in a club one night; and then went home with her. I got some serious shit going on,” she said, and tried to smile through her tears. He just hugged her.

8.

Joseph smiled at Emma when they walked into his room. Then he looked at his mother, who seemed terrified. She had wondered whether he just

wanted to tell her how much he hated her for abandoning him.

He started typing and letters appeared on the computer screen above his head. He spelled out *Mom*. She started to cry and rushed to hug him. “Joseph, I’m *so* sorry. I was wrong. I should not have abandoned you. You have every right to hate me.”

He typed out, *I don’t hate you.*

They began a tentative conversation. They told each other a little about themselves and their lives. After some chit-chat, Andy apologized for not being able to take care of him at home.

This is my home. Why would I want to live with you? My friends are here. We play chess and watch movies, he typed.

“So you’re not bothered by your handicap?” she asked, surprised.

What handicap? You’re the handicapped ones; you are all exactly alike. I’m unique. There is no one else on Earth like me. His statement stunned Andy. Was he just being kind or did he genuinely feel that way?

“Is it okay if I come to visit you?” she asked. He nodded. “I haven’t played chess in years; maybe you could teach me?” His face lit up and he nodded again.

“I’m sorry, Joseph. I wasn’t ashamed of you or anything like that. I was ashamed of myself. I should have been thinking of you when I was pregnant; but things were really bad. I put myself and my emotional needs ahead of just being a good Mom.”

She held his hand and looked deeply into his eyes. She saw herself in there. He did not blame, or hate her. “Will you forgive me?” she whispered to him. He nodded. “I don’t deserve a son like you.”

He smiled and then he typed, *you’re right, you don’t.*

9.

“I heard you had an old-fashioned pet store, but I had no idea it would be this charming,” the woman said as she came in the door. He was cleaning one of the tanks in the back. She stood with her back to him, admiring one of his special birds. She turned.

“Alexa?” he said, stunned. How the hell had she found him?

“Yes. In the flesh. Which is all yours, by the way.”

“What?”

“Don’t I get a kiss, for old times’ sake?” She came over and gave him a token kiss on the cheek. “So how are you?”

“Um, what brings you here?” *Why the hell have you come back into my life?* He thought.

“Just moved here. New job, downtown. I heard about this place and I wanted to check it out.” *And check you out,* she thought.

“So you’re living here, now?” he asked, still in shock. She nodded. “With your husband?” She shook her head.

“We divorced about a year ago. Kids were in college. We decided we didn’t need to be together anymore. Then I started looking for you.”

“Looking for me? Why?” She had started to alarm him.

“You’re asking me why?” she said, and her facial expression changed from business-like to sultry. “You don’t remember why? What we had, what we were with each other; that was the best time in my life. I was stupid to walk away from it.”

“But you did walk away. Is this a visit for old times’ sake?” he asked, trying to take control of the conversation.

“No. It’s not about old times. It’s about new times. Picking up where we left off.”

“But that was twenty years ago!”

“I never stopped loving you. I realized that after I was already gone. I made a stupid mistake which I have regretted since then. Now I’m here to fix it,” she explained as if it was simple, and he would see how logical it was.

He began to realize she was serious. “Fix it? How?”

“I want you. I want you back. I want you, *now!*”

“That’s not possible,” he said, bluntly, and then backed away from her.

“I’ll make it possible.” She moved to kiss him but he put out his arm to stop her.

“Didn’t you assume I would be married, with kids of my own?”

“I don’t care whether you marry me. I want you to fuck me, like you did before.” She tried again to kiss him.

“But that was twenty years ago!” he repeated, louder than the first time.

“So what? Some things never change.” She reached for his crotch.

“Yes. I’m afraid they do!” he said, as he backed away.

“You mean you don’t love me anymore?” she asked, in mock disbelief.

“That’s right,” he answered sternly.

“But what about our love?” she asked, pouting.

“It ended. *You* ended it. I moved on.”

“I need you. Are you married?”

“No. But I am with someone.”

“So I have a chance?” Her face brightened at the prospect of a challenge.

“No, you don’t,” he said, coldly.

“You mean you would choose someone else over me?” she said, feigning disbelief.

“Yes.” He tried to sound as convincing as possible.

“I don’t understand how you could say that; after all we were together.”

“But we’re different people now.”

“You may think you are, but I know you’re not. Neither am I. My fire is still burning. It never went out. Are you telling me this isn’t the day you’ve dreamed about for the past twenty years?”

“I never dreamed about it. I never even *thought* about it,” he said, emphatically. He decided it was time for her to leave. He started pushing her toward the door. She started to unbutton her jacket.

“I’d be happy to refresh your memory,” she said.

“Please don’t do that.”

“Why? Are you afraid you won’t be able to resist me when you see me naked? You never could before.” He saw she had no blouse under the jacket, just a revealing low-cut bra.

“Alexa, please leave. I have a store to run.”
And a life to live – without you!

“Okay, I’ll leave, but only if you promise to have a drink with me.”

“No. Just go.”

“Well, then, I’ll finish taking my clothes off. You got a back room? You don’t want your customers seeing a naked woman. It might be bad for business.”

“Please. Just. Leave. Now!” *She’s insane!*
He thought.

“Only if you’ll promise to meet me at six at the bar down the street.”

“No.”

“All right. Have it your way. I’ll just come back here every day until you fuck me.”

“What?”

“Fuck me! Remember? We used to go at it like bunnies. I get hot just thinking about all the sex we had.”

“Did you come here because you’re horny?”

“Oh, no, Stephan. I didn’t come just to *fuck* you. I came to *get you back*.” He pushed her toward the door. “Ok, I’ll leave now, but you better meet me at six.”

10.

He called Andy at work. “An old friend just came by. Well, she wasn’t just a friend. She was the love of my life – twenty years ago.”

“That must have been special,” Andy said, wondering why he called her about this.

“It was terrible.”

“Who was she?”

“Her name is Alexa. She and I were inseparable when we were in college.”

“Hot stuff, huh?” She still could not understand why he called her.

“I think there’s something wrong with her. She wants to pick up where we left off. The only way I could get rid of her was to promise to meet her for a drink. I don’t want to, but she threatened to come back to the store if I didn’t.” He did not mention how she wanted him to fuck her.

Andy finally understood his distress. “Do you think having a drink with her will get rid of her?”

“Honestly, I’m afraid not.”

“Did you tell her about me?”

“Of course. It didn’t matter to her. She just kept pressuring me.”

“What if I come along?”

“No way! I don’t want to drag you into this.”

“So meet her, and just get rid of her.”

“*If* I can get rid of her,” he said, grimly, and then hung up.

11.

“So, did you tell your girlfriend about me?” Alexa asked. He nodded. “Was she jealous?” He shook his head. “Oh? Then let’s do something to make her jealous.” They were in a booth at the back of the bar where it was dark and people could kiss, if they wanted to, and nobody would notice. She leaned toward him. He pulled back.

“No. I agreed to have a drink with you, and then I’m leaving.” *Have a nice life*, he thought. *Get out of mine.*

“You can’t do that.”

“I *will* be doing that,” he said, coldly.

“There’s something you don’t know.”

“Then tell me quick, so I can leave.”

“After we split up, I found out I was pregnant. You have a son. His name is Anthony,” she said, hoping the news would shock him.

“I don’t believe you. And may I remind you that we didn’t split up; you ran out on me. Why didn’t you tell me back then?”

“I knew I had fucked up when I left you. I thought you would think I was trying to trick you into getting back together. I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I don’t believe you now,” he said, coldly.

“Would you believe a DNA test?”

“I’m *not* giving you any of my DNA.”

“Kiss me.”

“What? No!”

“Kiss me, right here. Not a big sloppy kiss. Just on my lips. Maybe you’ll remember how my kisses use to excite you.”

“I’m leaving. Please stop bothering me. I don’t want to see you again.” He got up and left. She did not follow him. She had other plans.

12.

“A son?” Andy said. He nodded. “Do you believe her?” They were having dinner at her place. She was eating. He was not. She could see how distraught he was.

“No,” he said, looking down at his mashed potatoes and peas.

Andy finished chewing. “So why would she bring this up now? The kid’s all grown up. Her ex was his daddy; not you. All you did was provide the sperm.” She put another forkful in her mouth. As she chewed she thought about what he told her.

“I told her I didn’t believe her. I told her never to come back.”

“But you think she will?”

“I *know* she will. I don’t think she’s done,” he said, grimly. She felt sorry for him.

13.

The next day Alexa came into the shop with Anthony in tow. “This is your son,” she said, brightly. Anthony looked embarrassed. Stephan did not greet him, and avoided eye contact. “You and I made him,” she said.

“I still don’t believe you,” he said. He avoided looking at Anthony, but also felt sorry for him. *This must be awkward, to say the least*, he thought.

“So you don’t believe he’s your son?” she challenged him.

“He’s *your* son, not mine.” He said it quietly, so he could control his anger.

“You wouldn’t like us all to be one big happy family?”

“I don’t need a happy family.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this; rejecting your son! And you’re rejecting *me!*”

“I never rejected you. You rejected me. That was twenty years ago. We both should have gotten over it by now.”

“Well, I haven’t. I still love you,” she insisted, like a broken record.

“No. You only *think* you do.”

“How can you say that? We were *happy* together.” She tried to plead with him, but not appear desperate. Anthony watched in silence.

“If that was true, why did you leave?”

“I was fucked up.”

“I think you still are,” he said, coldly. Anthony wished he could be somewhere far away.

“No I’m not! Don’t say that! I know my own feelings.” She paused, trying to find a compelling argument that would win him over. “I know *your* feelings. Deep down inside you still love me. *I know it!*” She glanced at Anthony, who again looked away.

Stephan did not know how he could get rid of her. Then Anthony spoke up. “Mom, why don’t we leave him so he can think about all this? It’s a lot to take in all at once.”

“What a good idea!” Alexa said. She abruptly turned and walked out with Anthony behind her. Stephan hoped he would never see her again. But he also felt this was not over.

14.

He heard the door open and someone called out his name. It was Anthony. Stephan immediately became cautious. Anthony had not said much when he and Alexa were in the store. He had no reason to

believe Anthony was like her. Nevertheless, maybe he had come to confront Stephan.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked, as they shook hands. “I wanted to apologize for my mother and tell you what happened.” Stephan relaxed, a little. “She’s been bipolar for several years. She won’t take her meds. She drove my father away. She found about you from the College alumni directory about six months ago, and became obsessed with seeing you again. I tried to tell her you wouldn’t want anything to do with her after all these years, but she insisted she could get you back.

“She hoped to guilt-trip you by using me. I didn’t want any of this, and I thought I talked her out of it. But one day she left, and I found out she had rented a hotel room here. I knew what she was up to, so I followed her; but that played right into her scheme. I tried to talk her out of seeing you; but she demanded I come with her. I had to let it play out, so I agreed.

“I have tried several times to institutionalize her but she wouldn’t sign the papers. Now the psychiatrists have proof that her fantasies are not just fantasies. This was harmless, but others could be dangerous. She could get an idea in her head, then walk off and disappear, and we would never see her again. Now, I can put her in an institution that’s not just a warehouse. She’ll have a job and friends. She will stay on her meds, and she will be safe.”

“You must feel terrible about this.”

“I do; she’s my Mom and I love her. But I have no choice. I have to see that she’s taken care of. Anyway, you helped a lot, even though you didn’t know what was happening.”

“I could write a statement for the doctors if that would be helpful.”

“It might. Thanks.” He turned to leave.

“Anthony, wait. There’s something I wanted to tell you. She was telling the truth about how much we were in

love. She was the most incredible woman in the world. I was crazy about her. I would have done anything for her. We thought we couldn't live without each other. Then one day she just left. She took a big part of me with her. I literally cried for months after she was gone. I looked for her and tried to figure out why she ran away; but I never found a reason. Now I think she was having mental problems, even back then. I would have welcomed her back. I'm sorry I can't do that now. Sorry for her," Stephan said, and then paused to look at Anthony.

"She might never again find the kind of love we had," Stephan continued. "But I've found a woman who's as incredible as your Mom was." He hoped what he had said had not overwhelmed the boy. "And I need to apologize to you. When I insisted I was not your father it wasn't because of you. Your Dad was your only real father. He provided his love. That's the most important thing. All I did was provide the sperm. That's all I meant."

"I'm glad you said that," Anthony said, then looked into Stephan's eyes and added, "Thanks for your understanding." He turned to leave. Just as he was going out the door, he paused and said, "And thanks for the sperm." He smiled and was gone.

15.

"Oh, hi, Stephan. My Mom's not here," Jessica said.

"That's okay. She wasn't expecting me. Do you know when she'll be back?"

"I think she'll be gone all week-end. She mentioned something about an old girlfriend coming to visit. I think they went down the shore together. You know how it is. *Old* friend, *old* times;

that sort of stuff.” Stephan sensed Jessica was playfully teasing him about being old and nostalgic. He decided to tease back.

“Did she take that T-Fury skirt?” Stephan asked. Jessica grinned.

“No. She said she only wears that for you. When she wears it at all.”

“You mean when I let her, before I take it off her, don’t you?” he said. Jessica grinned again.

“She likes you. I’ve never seen her this happy with anyone.” Stephan sensed the conversation had segued from playful to serious. Jessica had given him an opening to share his feelings for Andromeda.

“You know I feel the same way about her, don’t you?” he asked.

Jessica smiled and nodded. “It’s been obvious for some time, now.”

“I’m glad,” he said, then paused. “Does she know how I feel?”

“I can tell you that, yes, she certainly does.”

“Tell her I dropped by,” Stephan abruptly said, then left. Jessica wondered if she had somehow embarrassed him.

16.

“That was sweet,” she said. They had been fooling around. It was not foreplay because they had not planned to make love. It was merely play. There was an easiness and familiarity to what they did. They had all the time in the world. She eventually opened, and he languorously entered her, and then slowly and softly made love to her. He moved off her after he finished and they both were on their backs, looking up at the ceiling.

“I owe you an explanation,” she began.

“For what?” he said.

“About where I was last weekend.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“In a way, it is. This is a part of my life you should know about.” He remained quiet. “I was with someone else. He and I go back a long, long way.” She paused so she could gather the courage to begin her story.

“His name is Eric. Our lives have been intertwined since Middle School. He was the first boy I ever loved. His parents pressured us to break up. I’m talking extreme, nasty, and *very* mean pressure. The more they pressed, the closer we became. We eventually forged a powerful bond that cannot be broken.

“I can’t imagine my life without him. He is me, and I am him,” she said. “I don’t know how else to say it. Without him, I’d be somebody different. You probably wouldn’t like me. I would never have put on that T-Fury skirt. I would have been wearing the same clothes as all the other desperate women in the club that night; and you would have walked right by without even noticing me.”

Neither of them said anything for a time. Andromeda thought this would be the end with Stephan. He would just get up and walk out of her life.

Instead, he asked, “Are you in love with him?”

“I’m *in* love with you. But I do love him. I always have and I always will. That’s just the way it is, and I won’t change it; not for you, not for anybody else. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I think it’s beautiful. Look, he could easily be a she; maybe your oldest girlfriend and we wouldn’t be having this

conversation.” She was stunned that he saw it that way.

“Well, yes, but there’s one big difference. I wouldn’t be having sex with my oldest girlfriend.” He nodded. “So, you don’t have a problem with this?” she asked, incredulously. “I thought you would feel threatened.” He shook his head. “Everybody except my Mom and Dad gave us all kinds of shit. You’re the only other person that hasn’t.”

She looked at him as if she was seeing the real Stephan for the first time. She never dreamed she would find a man who would accept and support her unique intimacy with Eric. She had kept it a secret from all her other boyfriends. She was not even sure why she had told him. It was just something she felt she had to do. For the first time she realized Stephan loved all of her. He was willing to accept all of her. She started to cry.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes. You know how I said I couldn’t imagine my life without Eric?” she said. He nodded. “I just realized I can’t imagine my life without *you*, either.” He kissed her. They lay together without saying another word and eventually drifted off to sleep.

17.

“I’m your new Lab partner,” Andromeda said. Eric did not even look up when she spoke. Her voice grated on him.

“Don’t need a Lab partner. I already know all this stuff backwards and forwards,” he protested. She stood there waiting for him to be a gentleman and invite her to sit down. He did not.

She asked, “Okay if I sit down?”

“Whatever,” he said gruffly. She sat down. He stared at the beakers and other lab supplies in front of him and ignored her.

“My name is Andromeda,” she said, trying to be friendly. He smirked but did not look at her.

“Really?” he asked, derisively, and looked up.

“Yes, really.”

“You named for the galaxy?”

“Actually, no; the galaxy was named for *me*,” she said, smiling. It was the funniest reply he ever heard. In that moment his whole life changed. He did not realize it, but he immediately fell in love.

They became friends, but not best friends, at least not right away. As they matured into adolescence they grew closer and closer. They heard about sex from their friends and decided to try it with each other just to see what all the excitement was about.

They went up into the attic of the old mansion, found a cozy area, cleaned it up, and put down a thick blanket. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. She started touching him everywhere on his body. Before, when they had touched each other, there were places they did not go. They did not know why, but it was no longer important.

They touched each other’s arms, hands, legs, even feet, but they did not stop there. She touched his ass and he touched her breasts. Then they touched each other’s crotches. Something happened at that moment. They made an instantaneous connection, deeper than they had already known. She pulled down her shorts and panties. He pulled down his shorts and boxers. They stood there with their sex organs exposed to each other for the first time.

He was erect. She reached out, unsure if it she should touch it. He reached toward her breasts,

and knew nothing could keep him from touching them. They looked into each other's eyes, and knew what they would do next. She reached for her shorts. There was a condom in the pocket. She took it out and handed it to him. He unwrapped it and tentatively worked it onto his penis. It was shiny with lubricant, and she reached up to touch it. She held it. He held her hand in his. Then he sat down next to her.

They both knew they were ready, although they did not yet know what they were ready for. They were about to find out. She lay down on her back. "I think we start like this," she said, as she opened her legs. He knelt between her thighs and aimed his penis at her vagina. They both held their breath. "I'm ready if you are," she said.

He eased the head of his cock inside her. She remained absolutely still. He kept pushing in. Then he felt an obstacle and paused. "You have to push hard," she said. He pushed and felt the obstacle give way. She said, "Ow!" and he immediately stopped.

"Oh, God, did I hurt you?" he asked.

"I'm okay. It's supposed to hurt, the first time. Don't stop." He pushed all the way in. Little sparks had set her insides on fire. It was like no other feeling she had ever experienced. He hesitated, afraid he would hurt her again. "Do you know how to do it?" she said.

"I think so," he answered.

"Go ahead." He pulled his penis a short distance out, and then pushed it back in. She grunted. He did it again. "I think you just keep going like that. It feels great," she said, encouragingly. That was all he needed. He made sure his knees were solidly on the floor and he could swing his groin back and forth as he fucked her.

He felt himself ready to come. "I think I'm gonna..." he said, grunting.

“Good. Keep going.” He pumped faster and deeper and exploded into the condom. Then he lay on top of her. “I love you Eric,” she said.

No one had ever said those words to him before. His parents believed words of love were unnecessary. They felt they showed their love for Eric, his brother and sister, by giving them food, clothing, and shelter. He tried to reply, but just stuttered. She stopped him.

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t want to.”

“But I *do* want to,” he replied. He had a hymen of his own; an emotional hymen. It was not like the wall in her vagina, which was there to keep objects out. It was a wall to keep feelings in. She broke it.

He had felt her ‘I love you,’ in the deepest place inside him. He had never felt anything there before. He never even knew there was such a deep place. She had found it. He resolved to keep her there for the rest of his life.

They dressed and then she left and went home. He stayed to straighten up. He had been inside her and felt her inside him. Their bodies had merged and they were no longer two but one. Even in their separate homes they felt each other.

18.

They liked it and kept doing it and eventually his parents found out. He was from a strict religious family and they were outraged and angry. They forbade him to have any contact with her. Eric and Andy did not stop and they got caught again. His parents called her parents, who were not angry. To her parents they were just doing what kids have always done.

His parents tried to control his every movement, but he and Andromeda found a way to meet at her house when her parents were at work. She assumed her parents knew, but they were discreet. Eric's parents accused them of being irresponsible and immoral. They started a smear campaign to demonize Andy's parents. They were afraid of what his parents might do, so they asked her not to see him anymore.

Eric and Andromeda did not stop; they just were together less often. The fewer times they were alone, the more intense their trysts became. They thought of each other constantly even when they were apart.

It reached a crisis when he decided to run away. He asked her to go and she refused. They were too young. He asked whether he could live at her house. Her parents said it would be okay; but they warned him it might be temporary, at best. Since he was underage there could be legal problems when his parents found out. He changed his mind about running away.

Eric's family finally moved away. By then Andromeda and Eric were old enough to drive so they met halfway between their towns. They would meet on weekends when they were supposed to be with friends, or on school trips.

That is how their tradition of occasional clandestine meetings started. They had wonderful, intense, and ecstatic weekends of making love and immersing themselves in each other, then long separations. Each time they were together they had to make it so intense that it could carry them through the separations.

He was in a car accident on the way home from one of their trysts, and was in the hospital. She found out and panicked. Her parents tried to help her find a way to see him. Nothing worked out. It was months before they were together again.

The next time they saw each other they agreed what they had was so special they would never stop. They pledged to somehow stay together; no matter how difficult that would be, even if they saw each other only a couple times a year.

They hoped that when they finally got to college they would be free; but that did not work. His parents sent him to a college so far away that they would need airplanes to see other.

As a last resort, his parents decided to get him married. They thought it would force an end to the affair. After the wedding, they manipulated every facet of his married life. It seemed like Eric and Andromeda could not go on. Then he managed to get a job that required him to travel. He found ways to come her city so they could be together. They swore never to let their relationship end.

It was certain that Andromeda's husband Kevin would find out. He did what any husband would have done; he forbade her to see Eric. But Eric had fought his parents, so they figured she could fight her husband, too. That is what she and Kevin fought about.

She refused to stop seeing Eric. When he came to town, she defied her husband, and they spent a weekend together. She got pregnant with Joseph. Kevin walked out.

She could have raised two daughters on her own; but he harassed her and forced her to hire lawyers to fight him all the time. He threatened to take their daughters away from her. Her life came apart and she became depressed.

So she and Eric still saw each other whenever they could because they were so special to each other. It reminded them of why they defied his parents and her husband. It was not just love; it

went deeper. It was a shared struggle. But they struggled for a reason; they wanted to be free, and to be together.

They had a bond. It was not love. It was *life*. A life force they shared from the beginning that became stronger with each struggle they endured. It was a like a fire they kept burning all these years that they would never allow to go out. It was them.

19.

“He is me and I am him,” she said to Stephan. “Our world comes into being when we meet, and ends when we separate. We are the only people in it. We’ve kept it going for a long time, and we will keep it going as long as we can.” She paused, and assumed she had already said too much, and Stephan would just get up and leave. But he sat there. She thought she had not made herself painstakingly clear so she explained more.

“So when you get me you also get him. That’s just the way it is and it’s not going to change. He is so much a part of me that I would not be the person you’re attracted to if it wasn’t for him.” Neither of them said anything for a time.

“So, would it be possible for me to meet him?” he said, shocking her. Even her daughters had never met him.

“Did I just hear you right?” she asked, in disbelief. He nodded. “You don’t have a problem with this?” He shook his head. “Everybody except my parents gave us all kinds of shit. You’re the only person that hasn’t.”

“We’re not kids anymore. We know how difficult life can be. If we were twenty I might be insanely jealous. But if he means so much to you that you’ve fought to be with him all your life, how could I not admire you both? I wouldn’t dream of splitting you up. Instead, I’d like to meet him. Especially if it meant I would be getting to know you better.”

“But you get this, right? We spend time together. We make love. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“What, that you and he have sex? You *bonded* over sex. But I do have one question. If his wife died or divorced him, would you want to be with him?”

“When we were teenagers we assumed we would do the happily ever after thing; but now we’re much older and we know that happily ever after doesn’t exist. For us, it’s happily right now.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” he asked, pointedly.

“A year ago, I would have said yes. Then I met you, so now the answer is most definitely no.”

20.

“I need to be sure I have this right,” she said, as she was pouring his coffee. “You don’t feel I should belong *only* to you?”

“I think people should be together because they *want* to, and not because they have to. Not because they made vows, or something like that. I get that you want to be with him. I get that you want to be with me. I also get that he and I are not competing for you.”

“There is one thing I need to make clear. I want to be with him sometimes, but I want to be with you *all the time*. I want to marry you.”

“Did you just ask me to marry you?” he asked, astonished. She nodded. Then he just sat there quietly drinking his coffee. She wondered whether his silence meant he was thinking about everything so he could decide. He was quiet for a while.

“You wanna think it over, and get back to me?” she asked, hesitantly.

“No,” he said. Did he mean, *No, I don’t want to think it over*; or, *No I don’t want to marry you*? She was afraid to ask. She would allow him more time to decide, no matter how long it took.

“Let me tell you why,” he said. She thought he was about to blow her off. “You weren’t afraid to wear that odd skirt. You’re not afraid to love somebody just because of who he is and how he fits into your life. You’re not afraid of life, like everyone else is. Why would I want to change that? It’s why I love you. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

21.

“Do you, Andromeda Jenkins, take Stephan Burko to be your lawfully wedded husband?” the Justice of the Peace said. She stood there in her T-fury skirt, eagerly waiting to respond.

“Yes,” she said, as she looked at Stephan.

He stood there in dark pants and his favorite T-Fury t-shirt, the one with the Monarch butterflies on it. He had wanted to marry her in the tights that matched her skirt. Jessica and Emma loved the idea; but Andromeda talked him out of it. She joked that she was the only heavenly being in the family. He reminded her that he was an astronaut. There was a lot of her galaxy yet to explore; and he looked forward to spending the rest of his life exploring it.

The Justice of the Peace repeated the question. Stephan said, “Yes,” and they were finished.

Happily Ever

1.

“Jeffy! Oh, Jeffy!” Jefferson cringed when he heard his old nickname. He wanted to ignore it, but turned and saw Aunt Beth smiling at him.

She was five years older than was. They had spent part of their childhoods together. It had been years since they last saw each other. He noticed her face still had soft child-like features, although she was almost sixty. Her hair was long and gray, and it flowed luxuriously down to her shoulders. He smiled and hugged her. They talked for a few moments, and then drifted apart.

He felt uneasy at Aunt Ellen’s funeral, and tried to avoid saying hello to too many people, because he did not know who most of them were. He had been out of touch with the family since his parents’ funerals ten years earlier. Many of the aunts and uncles looked familiar; but the cousins were tough. They were all grown up. He did not know which adult used to be which little cousin.

2.

He thought about Aunt Beth as he drove home. He remembered he was attracted to her every time he saw her over the past thirty-five years. It was not once but many times. It seemed strange that he had forgotten it until now.

It was even stranger that he could not determine what it was about her that attracted him. He thought it might be something in her face, or maybe her eyes; and then realized he had felt something when she called out his nickname.

She had a vulnerable hopefulness in her voice. He did not know why that attracted him. He

remembered he had been curious about her, in the past, but never acted on his curiosity. When he arrived home, he admitted to himself that her voice had smitten him once again.

3.

He went to visit Aunt Ellen's husband two weeks later. Uncle Jason had invited some of the family to look at Ellen's things, and help him decide what to do with them. When he arrived at the house, several other relatives were there, including Aunt Beth. Uncle Jason brought out several bottles of liquor. They drank and reminisced about Ellen.

When it was time to leave, they discovered it had started to snow. The others did not have far to go and said they would be okay. Aunt Beth walked toward her car, and Uncle Jason stopped her, "Beth, you can't drive. Stay here tonight."

She shook her head. She did not want to spend the night with her brother-in-law in the house where her sister had just died. Jefferson offered to drive her home. After a few objections, she gratefully agreed. He helped her into his SUV, and they said goodbye to Uncle Jason.

After he felt comfortable navigating the snowy roads, he began to talk to her.

"It was great to see you again at the funeral. In fact, I thought about you all the way home." She sat quietly in an alcohol haze, and enjoyed the ride. It was nice to be in a big car that could go over the snow as well as through it.

He interpreted her silence as an invitation to continue. "Afterwards, I remembered the strangest things. You know, I've always hated that nickname, *Jeffy*, but when you said it, I just about melted into a puddle on the floor. Later, I recalled the same thing happened to me every time I'd seen you in the past thirty-five years."

"You melted in a puddle?" she said, distractedly. "Wasn't that messy?"

He ignored her wisecrack and went on. He told her how he was attracted to her whenever he had seen her in the past. "I would be unable to get you out of my thoughts for weeks. Then I would get angry with myself for daydreaming about you, and would force the feelings to go away. They did, for several years, until I saw you again at the funeral."

Beth stirred and turned to look at him. "Attracted to me? Jeffy, why are you telling me this?" she asked, bemused.

"You're the only person that's ever had this effect on me. I'd like to find out why."

"You know, I should probably slap you right now," she said, firmly; but she was not angry.

"I feel something when you say my name. I think have feelings for you. I've pushed them away before, but I don't want to, now. Since we're not kids, and we're both unattached, I want to find out why I feel the way I do."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know. But the only way I can ever understand it is if I can share it with you."

He fell silent. She sat quietly. He wondered if she was thinking about him, or just lost in a pleasant alcohol fog. "Are you okay?" he asked, to break the silence.

"Yes. Well, *no*. I'm very embarrassed. You're my *nephew*! You shouldn't be saying this stuff to me."

"I know. But I had to. Are you mad at me?"

"Well I really have no idea what you're talking about. I never looked at you the same way."

"I know. I'm not asking you to feel that way now. Just trust me. There's something in you that does something beautiful to me. Maybe it's love."

"Did you just say *love*?" She thought she

was so drunk that she had not heard him right.

“Yes”

“You didn’t have anything to drink at Jason’s, did you?” she asked, reproachfully. He shook his head. She fell silent and he concentrated on his driving. They arrived at her house. The snow was thigh-deep. His SUV had difficulty entering her driveway.

“I think it’s too dangerous for you to drive all the way home. You should stay here tonight. You can leave tomorrow when the storm’s over and the roads get plowed,” she said.

“Thanks. That might be a good idea. I wasn’t looking forward to driving home. I’m tired, anyway.”

Her house was small and cozy. He complimented her on her décor, although she did not have much furniture. She mentioned that she liked things to be simple.

“Hang your coat there, and put your boots near the radiator.” He took off his boots, and set them aside. He was wearing thick gray socks that insulated his feet from the cold floor. She offered a hot drink but he declined.

“Look, I’m really tired,” she said, apologetically. “I’d like to stay up, but it’s been an exhausting day. I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. This is a cozy place to be in a storm. Thanks.”

“You’ll find blankets and pillows in that closet. Take what you need.” She headed toward the bedroom. He thanked her. The room was cold. He would need extra blankets.

Just then, the bedroom door opened and she stuck her head out. “Did you actually say all of that stuff in the car?”

“Yes,” he answered. She mumbled something he could not make out and closed the door. He started toward the linen closet. She opened the door again, and peeked out. “That’s the coldest room in the house at night. It’s always

been that way. There are twin beds in here. You'll be warmer. You're family, right?"

He had not expected her to react to his talk in the car by inviting him into her bedroom. He did not know how to respond. She picked up his hesitation, secretly pleased she had surprised him. *Let's see how he likes crazy talk*, she thought.

He regained his composure. "Oh, are you sure?" he stumbled over the words. "I don't want to put you out. I'm used to sleeping in the cold, anyway." He tried to smile but could not look directly at her. He felt uncomfortable.

"I'm sure. Let me put on my pj's, and slip under the covers. I'll call you. Put the light out when you come in, okay? Oh, the bathroom's right there."

He nodded and went into the bathroom. Just as he finished he heard her say it was okay to come in. He noticed the room was warmer. She had the covers pulled up to her neck and smiled at him. "You can sleep right there," she said, and pointed to the other bed.

"Thanks." He went to the bed, switched off the light, undressed, and laid down. After he settled in, he whispered 'good night,' but she was already asleep and did not answer.

4.

He smelled coffee the second he awoke. He got out of bed, put his clothes on, and then went into the kitchen. She was standing there in a heavy, ugly bathrobe that covered her from her neck to the floor. He could not even see her feet. Her hair was disheveled. He wondered if she was deliberately trying to make herself unattractive.

"Radio says the roads are still not cleared.

They're asking people to stay home," she said, sleepily.

"Well, I'm in no hurry to get back, but I don't want to impose on you."

"Oh, you're not. There's not much breakfast food around. How about some toast?"

"Yes, thanks. That would be fine." She got bread, butter, and jelly out of the refrigerator; then made the toast, and put it on a plate. He was still uneasy about their conversation last night.

"All yours" she gestured toward the counter where the toast, butter, and jelly waited.

"Coffee?"

"You bet." He took care of his toast and walked over to her small table. She was already sipping her coffee. There was a cup waiting for him.

After he took a bite of toast she asked him, "You *did* say all that stuff last night?"

He smiled and looked at her, "Yes. Yes I did" He thought she might be expecting him to apologize, but was hesitant to say any more.

"You know, I was sort of drunk, so I wasn't sure. Did you mean any of it?"

"All of it"

"You're attracted to me?" she asked, bluntly.

"Yes. I always have been."

She looked at her coffee cup for a few moments, and then looked at him. "Always?" she asked, a doubtful tone in her voice. He nodded. "Well, what do we do now?"

"We talk, if that's okay."

"Of course we talk. I mean...do we start dating?" He suddenly was unsure he was awake. Maybe he was still dreaming in the bed next to hers.

"We could," he said, then paused. He did not know what else to say. "That would be nice, actually."

"You didn't plan for this, did you?" she naughtily said. She could see this had already gone way beyond

where he anticipated. They fell silent. He munched his toast. She sipped her coffee.

“So, Aunt Beth, tell me about yourself. What’s been happening for the past forty years?”

She was still in a teasing mood and replied, “From now on I am *not* ‘Aunt Beth.’ Comprendo?” He smiled and nodded.

She told him about herself. He was amazed at how hard her life had been.

She had had three marriages, 4 kids, and somehow survived one year to the next. There were hard times with crummy jobs that just barely paid her bills, and almost never any stability or security. Just at the point in a relationship or a marriage where she felt secure and confident enough to let go of all her fears, something happened. She got pregnant; a husband took off; or a different one came back; a marriage fell apart. One of her children died. Catastrophes always happened just when she reached the point where she thought it was safe to relax and stop worrying.

She was in tears when she finished the overview. “Life hurts a hell of a lot, doesn’t it?” he said, deeply moved. She nodded through her tears.

She stopped crying, and looked at him. “Could you hold me?” she asked, softly. He stood up from the table, went to her, and touched her for the first time in his life. She needed to a man to hold her. He understood. She put her arms around his waist, and held on tightly for a while.

“I never told anybody the whole story before. I would just tell little pieces. I felt that people didn’t really care, so I didn’t bore them.”

“I wasn’t bored. Thank you for telling me.”

“Do you feel like lying down? All this crying has drained me.”

“Sure; whatever you want.” She took his hand, and led him to the bedroom.

She lay down, and then asked, “If you could hold me again, that would be really nice.” He lay down next to her and enfolded her body with his. He was afraid she was going to cry again, but instead, she began to talk.

She told him about her childhood. She was the youngest of twelve kids, with five years between her and her closest older sister. However, she had no happy childhood memories. She had mostly been in the way. Her older siblings did not mistreat her; they just let her know she really was not worth bothering with; she was not important to them. They always told her to go away, or get lost whenever she tried to be with them.

She tried to hang around with her Mom. Sometimes she was happy to have Beth’s company. Other times she got in the way. She was not a mean Mom; she just always had to run off to do something for somebody else. As Beth grew up, she wondered when somebody was going to do something special for *her*?

She eventually became old enough to see that no one in her family was ever going to do anything special for her. She would have to get a family of her own, where she could be the center. Her first husband, Ray, fell in love with her the first time they met. Her innocence charmed him. Beth realized this was what she had been longing for. They married as soon as she was out of High School, and stayed together for several years, and through several children.

However, she was never the center. She came to understand that Moms are invisible. They exist, but unobtrusively. The kids were the center. They would always be.

“So you don’t remember me at all?” he asked.

“I didn’t pay much attention to my relatives. You were just one of the nephews. I had lots of them. And you were five years younger than me.”

“We must have seen each other sometimes?”

“Of course; at family gatherings,” she said, and then paused reflectively. “I do seem to remember you. You were kind of quiet. You would often just sit and watch things.”

“I guess you were one of the things I watched; a lot!” he said, playfully.

She giggled, then turned to him smiling, “Well, maybe now you will get to watch me all you want.” He was not sure if she was being flirtatious, or subtly telling him she had already decided to keep him at a distance. He frowned. She noticed. “What’s wrong?”

This was the first time he needed courage to speak to her. He did not know what to say. She looked puzzled. “Loss for words?”

“Beth, I don’t know what’s happening, or how far it might go; but I want to let it.” He seemed nervous.

“Wait, Jeffy. Don’t panic. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I just want you to understand that I really don’t know where this can go either, and I don’t want to hurt *you*.”

“Oh, thanks. I guess I did panic. I’m not asking for any kind of commitment. I just want to get to know you.”

“Okay,” she said, contentedly, and then smiled sweetly.

“It’s almost noon. The roads must be better by now, I should go.”

Beth did not respond and was silent for a minute or two. He thought she had fallen asleep.

“Okay, if you have to.” She sounded disappointed. Then they got up and walked into the living room. Neither said anything. He put on his boots and coat. She stood watching him. When he

was ready, he turned to her and smiled.

“Thanks. Really. You’ve been very understanding,” he said.

“And thanks for holding me and listening to me. It was really nice.” She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

“I’ll call you tomorrow. Maybe we can get together.”

“Oh, no, not until this snow is gone,” she cautioned. “Call me later in the week.” He nodded and left. She watched as he backed out of her driveway and drove down the street. Then she poured herself some coffee, and sat down at the kitchen table. She stared into the cup for a moment, and then began softly crying.

He had awakened feelings that had been buried inside her for a long time. Those feelings had nothing to do with him. She liked the way he held her. It brought back sweet memories of other loves, and other times; of feeling secure in the arms of someone who loved her; and of the way, whenever she surrendered to happiness, chaos seemed to follow.

She thought she had put all that behind her when she had given up trying to be happy, just to avoid the suffering that inevitably followed. Jeffy almost made her want to try again for happiness. The more she considered how vulnerable she felt, the sadder she became. She sat and wept for an hour or more, then dried her eyes and got up to shovel snow. Maybe the cold outside would bring her to her senses.

5.

“Did you know they’re dating?” Aunt Milly, the self-appointed family matriarch said. She was on the phone with her sister Chrissy.

“Who are you talking about?” Milly’s evasiveness annoyed Chrissy.

“Beth and Jeffy,” Milly barked their names, as if she did not want to utter them at all.

“Oh. Beth and Jeffy.” Chrissy paused, trying to ascertain who Milly was talking about. Then it dawned on her, “*Our* Beth and Jeffy? My *sister* and my *nephew*?”

“Yep” Milly answered, delighted she had shocked Chrissy. She got ready to launch into a tirade. Chrissy interrupted her before she could begin.

“That’s sweet.”

“Sweet? She’s his *aunt*.” Milly replied, her voice as stern as she could make it.

“Yeah, but she’s only five years older than him,” Chrissy answered pragmatically, untroubled by Milly’s outrage.

“Still, it’s *not right*.” Milly sensed she was not making her point, so she began to speak louder. Chrissy grimaced. Milly, as the oldest sister, thought she should run the entire family. However, it was so big, with siblings, nieces and nephews, children and grandchildren, that it would have been utterly impossible for any of them to be the boss. Their Mom had given up long ago, just as the grandchildren started being born. She found it easier to let her kids take care of their own lives.

Milly did not, however, subscribe to the same philosophy. The family let her have her say whenever she got excited about anything, then went and did what they wanted. Nevertheless, she could stir things up and come down hard on someone if she decided to. Chrissy felt this was one of those times.

“Why? Neither of them is married. It’s not like they’re cheating,” Chrissy argued.

“But they’re *family!*” Milly had become

frustrated and tried to show it in her voice.

“So?” Chrissy said.

“They’re *blood* relatives!” Milly finally became exasperated. Chrissy felt guilty. This could only be bad for Milly’s blood pressure.

“Oh, you mean ince-” Chrissy tried to be more serious.

“Don’t say it!!!” Milly shrieked.

“They won’t be having any children so what difference does it make?” Chrissy felt guilty for being so obstinate, but she wanted to make her point, so Milly would clearly understand.

“Well, Jeffy’s my *nephew*. I don’t want him to become my brother-in-law, too.” Milly did not realize how trivial this sounded. Chrissy grinned, glad Milly could not see her.

“Well, I think it’s nice that they’re spending time with each other, although it really surprises me. They always seemed so different.”

“Well, they must have found *something* they like about each other!” Milly used her best lascivious tone-of-voice to suggest what she thought they liked about each other.

“Yeah. Wonder what it could be?” Chrissy pretended not to understand.

Milly grunted, and gave up on Chrissy. “It’s *not right*.” she said, and hung up.

6.

One windy March evening, as they were cozy in bed, they watched the shadows of tree branches that swayed just outside the window. The streetlight made the shadows seem huge and they teased each other by pretending there was a boogeyman creeping outside.

“So, is this your teenage fantasy come true?” she said, provocatively.

“What?”

“Well, you’re in bed with your older auntie. That must have been what you wanted when you were a teenager.”

He suddenly understood why her voice attracted him. When he was eleven and she was sixteen, she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He would stare at her at family gatherings, and hoped she might notice him and be curious about the quiet boy who sat all by himself. He heard music whenever she spoke. His memory of her voice encapsulated a vision of her that he had kept inside for decades. He did not know it then, but he was in love with her. He recalled what he saw in her, and how he felt when he was around her.

“You know, I’m not sure what I wanted.”

“It wasn’t sex?”

“I don’t recall knowing very much about sex at that age.”

“But you *felt* something?”

“Oh, yes. But the feelings were so deep that I’m only understanding them now. I guess I had a crush on you. A really big crush. I don’t know what else to call it.”

“Really? Me? You’re sure about this?”

“Yes. I can see you right now in my mind the way I saw you back then. My God, you were beautiful. You were radiant, glowing with a light I could not name, but which I not only saw, but felt, deep inside me.”

“But when I was sixteen I was a gawky, clumsy girl who couldn’t do much of anything. My Mom was always telling me how useless I was.”

“You were the most beautiful creature I ever saw,” he smiled, lost in his memories. “An angel or a goddess.” She began to blush. “Your voice was

melodic and sweet, tinged with romance, excited and hopeful. It was the voice of a dreamer. It enchanted me then. It enchants me now.” He sat up, looked down at her, and repeated, “It enchants me now.” Then he kissed her.

She did not believe what he said. Back then, whenever she looked in the mirror, all she saw was a pimply girl, with unkempt hair. She never saw a goddess. Nevertheless, she liked his description. She snuggled closer to him, as if trying to share his vision of her, trying to see what he saw.

“You seem to remember it all so clearly.”

“Yes. I see everything now.”

“But that was a long time ago. Why did it take so long for us to get together?”

“Because you were so magnificent that I couldn’t even imagine myself with you. It was literally unthinkable to me back then. I guess I just buried the vision,” he paused, “and all my feelings. And besides, we were related.”

“Yeah, we still are.”

“But it makes no difference now. We’re free. We can be happy together. Maybe even get married if we want to. And all because of your voice, and the buried love it awoke in me.”

7.

Uncle Jason called him. “Been hearing stuff about you and Beth.”

“Who told you?”

“Your Aunt Milly. She used to call Ellen all the time with all the family gossip. Now she calls me. I can’t figure out how to get her to stop.”

“So what’s she saying?”

“She thinks it’s wrong”

“Oh. I was hoping nobody would care,” Jefferson said, apologetically.

“Oh, I don’t care. Neither do the others. I always liked Beth myself. She’s had a rough life. Maybe you can bring her some happiness.”

“Thanks.”

“So what do you two do?” Jason asked, hesitantly.

“Beg pardon?”

“When you’re together? You like sports? Movies? Sex?”

“Uncle Jason, what else has Aunt Milly been telling you?”

“She noticed Beth seemed very happy lately and asked her what was happening. Beth told Milly you two were dating.”

“I’m guessing she told Aunt Milly a bit more than that.”

“Um, she did. I guess that’s what’s got her upset, although I’ve never known Milly to be prudish before. Beth told her the two of you were sleeping together.”

“Oh, God.” He said, mortified.

“Yeah. Now everybody knows. Milly doesn’t waste any time.”

“Have you heard from anyone else?”

“Not yet. But I want to tell you how I feel about it.”

“Uh-oh.”

“No, it’s not like that. If the two of you want to be together, it’s okay by me. Just don’t hurt her. She’s had enough of that.”

“I won’t hurt her. I love her.”

“That’s what I told Milly. I don’t think she believed me,” Jason said before he hung up.

8.

In the early spring, he helped her plant a

garden in the backyard. They were outdoors so often that he met all her neighbors. They all assumed he was her new boyfriend. Nobody knew they were related. They liked him, and wished both of them well.

Aunt Milly was still upset. As the oldest sister, she thought she held sway over the rest of the girls in the family, except for Beth. She was already married and out of the house when Beth was born, so they had had little contact. The family treated Beth more like one of the nieces than one of the sisters. That meant that none of the sisters could influence Beth, not that they wanted to. They did not see anything wrong with Beth and Jefferson. Of course, they did not tell Milly their true feelings.

Milly decided to set a trap. Her husband, Jay, was about to turn eighty so she planned a huge family party for him. She knew Beth would come because Jay was her favorite brother-in-law, so she would not stay away and hurt his feelings. Jefferson urged her to go and said he could conveniently be out of town and unable to attend the party. However, he was also concerned that if Beth went alone, she would face Milly's disapproval and he would look like a coward. He did not want anyone to hurt her.

9.

The sisters had decided, among themselves, to make certain one of them was always with Beth and Jefferson. The uncles got in on it too. They all agreed that under no circumstances should Beth be alone, and it was preferable that she and Jefferson were always with a chaperone, to shield them from Milly.

It worked until Milly figured out what they were doing. She sat down in one of the big garden chairs and summoned the two of them. Chrissy and Rachel followed. Her brother Max also followed to where Milly sat.

When Jefferson and Beth stood before her, all she did was shake her head and mutter, "The two of you. Tsk,

tsk.”

Beth looked straight at Milly and said, “Milly, you’re my oldest sister, and I love you. But this is my life, not yours, and I’m free to live however I want. If we want to be together, it’s really no concern of yours. I’m sorry this upsets you, but this is the way I want it to be.”

Milly did not hesitate. She started right in, “But he’s your *nephew*.”

They had prepared themselves for this argument. She replied, “Yeah, funny isn’t it? My own nephew!”

Milly stayed grim, and stern. “What about me? What about the rest of the family? What are people gonna think? What are they gonna say about us?”

“I don’t know, Milly. I don’t know *what* anyone’s going to say. Jeffy and I have discussed this and we feel no one’s gonna say anything because it’s no big deal. No one is gonna care. Probably nobody will even notice.”

Milly was unyielding. She had yet to play the respect card. “My friends know. Can you imagine how embarrassed I am? Do you want to see my feelings get hurt?”

Jefferson spoke up. “Don’t be mad at her, Aunt Milly. It’s really all my fault. I came on to her.” This silenced Milly for a few seconds. He realized that she had assumed Beth had started the relationship, because she was older.

“Well, Beth, you could have said no!” Milly asserted. Beth shrugged. It was true. She could have resisted, but she did not. It had nothing to do with anyone else. Milly was silent. They assumed she was trying to decide what else she could do to berate them.

“I want to talk to these two, *alone*,” she said sternly, and waved her arm to dismiss the others.

Chrissy started moving away, but the others looked at Beth and Jefferson for guidance. “Go!” Milly shouted, angrily. They slowly walked away, afraid they were leaving them at the mercy of Milly’s wrath.

She gestured for Beth and Jefferson to come closer. They were afraid this was the end. They looked at each other for strength. In a few seconds, one of them would surrender and it would all be over. Jefferson reached for Beth’s hand. Milly noticed this.

She looked at them and, in a calm voice, said, “I suppose you two think you know what you’re doing.” It was a statement, not a question. They nodded, weakly. “Well, you’d better, because if one of you hurts the other, you’ll *both* answer to me.” She almost whispered the last part; they were not certain they had heard her correctly.

“Now help me up. Let’s go back to the party.” Milly ordered. Beth and Jefferson stood there stunned. Milly had to ask them again to help her up. She was quietly pleased that she had gotten through to them.

10.

It was their first Christmas together. They were snowed in at her house. Jeffy thought it was great, but Beth was unhappy. They would miss the family gathering. She did not like missing the annual holiday parties, which she both loved and dreaded. It was wonderful to see everyone, but she was terribly aware that everyone was growing older. After every gathering, she always wondered which one of them might not be there the next time.

She did not share this with Jeffy. Even though they were only five years apart in age, his attitude toward life was the direct opposite of hers. He was an optimist. He kept looking forward, as if he felt the best was yet to come. Small events in his life delighted him because they brought

him variety.

Beth had stopped looking forward many years ago. For her their love was a refuge, and Jeffy was someone she could cling to in the darkness. For him, their love was a celebration. She did not understand this, but she played along, pretending to celebrate with him.

One day he asked her to marry him. This made her realize that he had forgotten most of what she had told him the first time they spoke. Her mind was flooded with memories of the times in her life when she completely surrendered herself to happiness, and how each of those times turned into a disaster soon after. If he had paid attention, and remembered her history, he would have known she could not marry him. She said ‘no’.

Their relationship changed, despite the effort both of them made not to allow it to change. She did want to marry him, deep down, despite her fears. She began struggling within herself, trying to find a way to do it. Jeffy noticed that she seemed preoccupied. When he gently teased her about something, which she had enjoyed when they first met, she became provoked, and accused him of acting superior to her.

One day he gently asked her again to marry him, and it was more than she could bear. She screamed at him, “Don’t you know what will happen? Don’t you remember what I told you? The answer’s *no!*”

“Beth, you’re going to have to tell me what’s wrong. Now. If you don’t, both of us will go crazy.” He spoke quietly to calm her down and she heard the firmness in his voice. “So, why do you keep saying *no?*”

“Jeffy, we can’t get married. We’ve been

acting as if we were young lovers, caught up in our private ecstasy, looking forward to a blissful life together. But that's not what's ahead for us."

"You make me feel like a young lover. I like it," he said, completely missing her point.

"Look at me. Listen carefully." Her voice was firm and direct. "If we get married, we won't have a long, blissful life ahead of us."

"Why?"

"I've been happy before. But every time I thought everything was perfect, something terrible happened. My whole life came apart. I can't let that happen again."

"Sounds superstitious, to me."

"It's not. If we want to go on being together, we can't go any further. We can't get married."

He consulted his aunts to see whether any of them could help him understand her attitude. They told him about her history of falling in love, then later standing helplessly by while her life unraveled. They told him she had always been fatalistic, and that he should just let her go, as all the others had done. There was no way to change her. He did not want to change her; he wanted to marry her. To him, she was perfect just as she was.

11.

He decided to schedule a surprise wedding. He invited the family, a preacher, and got lots of food. He set it up for a Saturday when they had made plans for Beth to come to his house and pick him up.

As she turned onto his street, she noticed an unusually large number of cars parked along the block. *Somebody must be having a party*, she thought. *How nice.*

She pulled into his driveway and shut off the engine. She had looked forward to this date all week. They had been unable to see each other since last Sunday, and she had missed him.

Beth walked toward the front door and turned the knob. It was unlocked. She and Jeffy had exchanged keys awhile back, but he still left it unlocked when she came over. He told her it was because he was so excited to see her that he did not want any unnecessary obstacles in the way. She thought he was cute.

As she pushed the door open, she called out, "Jeffy. Jeffy. I'm here!" He answered from the kitchen, and she walked toward the back of the house. He stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, and smiled as she approached. She felt her heart leap with pleasure at finally being with him again. He kissed her, took her hand, and pulled her into the kitchen. She smiled, and wondered what he was up to.

As soon as she was in the kitchen, a chorus of friendly voices cried out, "Surprise!" Her entire family was there; all of her sisters, even Milly, who smiled at her.

"Jeffy, my birthday's not for another six months," she protested, embarrassed by the attention.

"This isn't your birthday," he said. She looked puzzled. "It's your *wedding* day." She did not react at first because it took a while for her to grasp what he meant. She looked at her sister Chrissy, and noticed she was standing with a clergyman.

"My...wedding?" she said, and then began to sob. She looked at Jefferson, who smiled. She was torn between sadness and rage. "My wedding? *Jefferson!* How could you?"

She turned and ran back outside. He looked at everyone, and then apologized for the delay in getting the wedding started. He invited them to start

eating and hurried after Beth.

She stood next to her car, and cried, and did not hear him approach. “Beth?”

“We can’t get married. I told you! Didn’t you listen to anything I said? Didn’t you believe me?” She blurted out the words and then collapsed in his arms.

“Actually,” he spoke softly, “I did believe you. But I thought you were just nervous about getting married again. I thought if I surprised you, you wouldn’t refuse and after we were married everything would be wonderful.”

She stopped crying, and looked up into his eyes, “It wasn’t nervousness. It was *fear*. Couldn’t you tell?”

“Yeah, but I still thought it was fear of *getting* married rather than being married.” She vigorously shook her head. “But I guess I was wrong.”

“So you decided to trick me?”

“It seemed like a good way to get you to overcome your hesitation.”

“You thought I’d be so shocked that I wouldn’t be able to say *no*?”

“Something like that.” He admitted, and then hung his head, as he realized he was about to lose her forever.

“Jeffy, we can’t get married.”

“I wish we could. I love you.”

“I love *you*, and don’t want to leave you, ever; but I know what will happen if we get married.”

“Tell me again.”

“We’ll be happy for a while, then things will start to change, through no fault of yours, or mine; then maybe a serious crisis, like one of us gets sick, or something, finally...”

“Finally?”

“It will end. It will all come apart. Just like all the other times. And I don’t want it to.” She began to cry in his arms, and he hugged her as tightly as he could. She winced in pain. “Easy.” she whispered, “I’m breakable.”

“Actually, Beth, I don’t think you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think I finally understand why your voice has always affected me.”

“Oh? Why?” she asked, through her tears.

“Because you sound the same to me now as you did forty-five years ago.”

“So?”

“When people suffer as you have, they usually build shelters to protect themselves. The more life assaults them, the deeper they hide in their shelters, until they are just not alive anymore. They give up. Their voices grow old and tired. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“No.”

“Your voice sounds as sweet to me now as it did back then.”

“So?”

“Don’t you see? It *shouldn’t*. It should be old, weary, and full of pain. But it’s not. Your voice still has all the innocence and charm I heard when I was eleven. I’ve been in love with you for decades. That sixteen-year-old Beth who was looking hopefully ahead to a wonderful life – she’s here *right now*! All the stuff you’ve lived through hasn’t destroyed her. Don’t you see how miraculous this is?”

She began to cry. “What’s wrong? Why are you crying, now?” he asked.

“Because I finally remember who she was.”

She paused to wipe her tears. “And I think she’s fallen in love with you, without me even realizing it.” They clung tightly to each other and stood there looking into each other’s eyes for several minutes.

Finally, she spoke again, “Let’s go inside. Everyone’s waiting. Besides, if we don’t get

married, Milly will kill both of us.” He pulled back from her, and there was a huge smile on his face.

They calmly walked back into the house, were married, and lived happily ever after.

(Really!)



Love and Time

1.

“Here you go,” the waitress said as she handed Brian his credit card and receipt. He signed and gave it back. She looked at his signature and said, “I went to school with a guy with your name.”

“You mean college?”

“Oh, no. Elementary school.”

“Where you from?”

“I grew up in Kensington.”

“You don’t mean Zachary School, do you?”

he said, amazed.

“That’s the one.”

“That was forty years ago! I hardly remember anybody from back then.”

“Do you remember Gloria?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. Gloria Caton; later Gloria Lord. First girl I ever fell in love with. I have no idea what happened to her.”

“She got married right out of high school. Her husband was slightly older than her, a friend of the family. He was a schoolteacher. They had three kids. He died five years ago.”

“You a friend of Gloria’s?”

“I *am* Gloria,” she said, shyly.

“Oh, God! I’m embarrassed now.”

“For what?”

“For mentioning I was in love with you way back then.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” she said, as she blushed. He smiled when he noticed. That made her blush some more.

“Look, I’ve got to be going. Would you like to get together and reminisce about school? I never

meet anyone from back then. It would be fun to see what we remember.”

She pretended to hesitate, and then nodded.

“Good. Here’s my number. Give me a call.” He handed her the paper, eased himself out of the booth, and then stood up and looked into her eyes, “Nice meeting you. I hope we can see each other again.” She nodded and said good-bye. He left.

2.

Gloria had a problem. She liked him and agreed it would be fun to talk about their school days. But he had admitted he was ‘in love’ with her back then. This stirred her curiosity. She did not recall him from school except for his name. She also did not remember much about herself from back then. Maybe he did. She wondered what he could tell her about herself as she had been many years ago. If he had been ‘in love’ with her, what did he remember about her? She decided to find out.

She did not want to seem too eager so she waited a week, and then called him. He seemed relieved to hear from her. He had probably given up on her.

“I have an idea,” she said. “I’d love to spend more time talking to you, but I don’t want to go to another restaurant and sit and talk. My apartment is a few blocks from the cafe. I get off at seven on Thursdays. Why don’t you come by and we’ll walk over to my place. It’s more comfortable. And we can talk all we want.”

“Sounds great!” he replied. She thought he sounded a little too enthusiastic. Why did he think she was inviting him over? Did he think something else was afoot? It had been a while since she had spent any time with a man. She felt a need just to sit and talk. She hoped he was not expecting anything more.

3.

He came by the next Thursday night and they walked five blocks and three flights up to her place. She unlocked her door, stepped in, and flipped on the light. The place had a lovely simplicity about it. All her colors were pastels. She liked to drape scarves over things. She liked candles, too. He felt comfortable.

She picked up a photo. "My kids," she said, smiling. Then she picked up another photo and showed it to him, "Arnold. I miss him." Brian did not know what to say, so he just nodded somberly.

"Well, I'm a tea person. I have lots of tea around. Would you like to share a pot?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; great," he replied. She gestured for him to follow her into the small kitchen. She filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil.

"You want to pick one?" she asked, showing him an entire shelf filled with various teas.

"I'm not much on teas. They all seem interesting. What would you normally make at this time of night?"

"Oh, this one," she showed him a box covered with Chinese lettering.

"What is it?"

"I can't describe it; but I love it." She prepared the pot and poured the boiling water into it. "It's best when it steeps for a while."

"Okay." She gestured for him to sit in one of the chairs next to the small table. They both sat down. She glanced down at his left hand and did not see a wedding ring. "You married?"

"Yeah. But I wish I wasn't."

"Why?"

"Neither of us is happy," he said, a tone of regret in his voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“We never were. We got along okay, but there’s no spark between us.”

“You don’t love her?”

“I care about her as a person.”

“Does she know this?”

“More or less,” he said, nodding. “We’ve always had a difficult time communicating, even on the smallest things. I assume she knows. It’s obvious enough. What about your marriage?”

“We were in love the whole time. I’ve looked at my friends’ marriages and it seems mine was unusual. Nobody seems to be in love anymore.”

“It’s true,” he said, and then grimaced as if the truth was painful to share.

“So what are you doing about it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you been hoping to meet someone else you could fall in love with?” she asked, trying not to sound like she might be interested.

“Yes, but it never happens. What about you? Are you seeing anyone?”

“No. I’ve dated a few guys, but they wanted to marry me.”

“That was a problem?” he asked, surprised.

“Yeah. They wanted a wife, or mommy. Not a lover. They were nice and all, but I knew I’d be unhappy.” She looked at him and wondered if she could ask him the question she wanted to ask. He looked puzzled. She was quiet.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to ask you about Gloria as she - *I* - was back then.” She noted a look of surprise sweep across his face. He shrugged. “It’s just that I don’t recall much about myself,” she added, apologetically. He understood what she meant.

“Well, I don’t know when I first noticed you. I think it was Third or Fourth Grade. You were a new kid in my class. Even though you were a gawky girl, there was something different about you.” She grimaced, he smiled.

“I think it was a glow. Where the other girls were just kids, you were something else. I think, in a way, you were already a young woman. As time went by I remember suspecting you knew stuff the rest of us didn’t.”

“What kind of ‘stuff’?” she asked, smirking.

“Well, you have to understand that I didn’t know about girls, or dating, or any of that. You seemed to be comfortable with all of it. It was as if you knew how boys and girls related to each other, while the rest of us, especially me, didn’t have a clue.”

“Are you trying to say ‘sex’?”

“No. I had no idea what sex was until much later. Ironically, when I learned about sex I think my attraction to you went away. It was *before* I found out about sex that I was so hung up on you. And I knew you into Jr. High. I can remember when you and George Norcross were going steady.”

“George Norcross?”

“You don’t remember him? You guys dated for a while. I don’t know what grade we were in. I knew him before the two of you got together. But I stopped being attracted. Maybe I just got old enough to realize it was hopeless, so I gave up.”

“That’s a shame,” she remarked quietly. He did not know how she meant that. “You seem kind of nice, now; but I don’t remember you at all from back then.”

Gloria did not believe she had ever been the person he was describing. She assumed he had just

confused her with someone else. But fortunately (for both of them) the Gloria he remembered still existed deep down inside her. When this childhood Gloria heard herself described, she perked up.

“I’m not surprised. I was the one who was infatuated, not you,” he said, grinning.

“But your infatuation lasted a long time, didn’t it?” she asked. The childhood Gloria was coming back to life.

“Probably five years, at least.”

“Oh, my! And I never knew. I guess I should tell you I’m sorry.” The young Gloria teased him, as she would have teased the boys back then.

“It’s about time!” he responded, grinning again. Young Gloria was delighted.

“Hey! I meant it,” she said, smiling. This was Gloria, the fifty-ish woman.

He decided to tease her a bit more. “You ruined my young life.”

“You seem to have gotten over it.” Now old Gloria and young Gloria were interacting. Gloria felt a surge of playfulness and self-confidence.

They paused for a few moments and sipped their tea.

“So what about now?” both Gloria’s asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Since we met a couple weeks ago, have you been thinking of me?”

He had been thinking of her, but not because she revived his boyhood infatuation. He had been thinking of her because it had been a long time since he had met a woman his age that seemed nice. But which answer was she looking for? He nodded, trying to avoid having to speak.

“Oh, that’s nice.” She paused and shyly looked away from him, then turned and said, “I don’t know if I should say this, but I’ve been thinking of you, too.” Young

Gloria smiled. The old lady still had some coquettishness left in her!

Shit! How was he supposed to respond to this? Should he stress he was a moral person and was still married, however bad it was? Or did she hope he would say what she already suspected, that he was attracted to her? If he said that she might think he was a pig for betraying his wife. He decided to risk the truth.

“Um, yes, I’ve been thinking of you. I hope you don’t mind.” Her face brightened and she smiled. Inner Gloria was ecstatic. *Yes!*

“I hope *you* don’t mind. I had to get that out of the way,” she said. He wanted to ask her why, and then he realized this was the way the Gloria he knew so long ago would have behaved. She never hesitated to say or do whatever she wanted. “Do you want to sit on the sofa?” He did not answer. She pushed, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to give you the wrong impression; I’m not divorced yet.”

“Brian, your divorce has nothing to do with me.” Her statement shocked her. Inner Gloria was delighted.

“Okay, then.”

“Come sit with me,” she said; and then arose from her chair and pulled his arm to get him out of the other chair. They went into the living room. She gestured for him to sit on her sofa. He squeezed as far into the corner as he could go. She grinned, and then sat next to him, with only a couple of inches between them. He began to perspire. “Something wrong?” Young Gloria was in control. He did not answer.

“This is what you always wanted, isn’t it?” she said, bluntly. He started to regret he ever told

her about all that. She waited for him to reply. “Well, back then, it was you who wanted this, now it’s me. Or maybe I should say it’s *both* of us? By the look in your eyes I think I can tell how you’re feeling.”

He realized she was serious, something he would have never expected her to be when they were in school together. Back then, part of his fear had been that she would go out with him, but then dump him because he was boring or weird. Somehow he knew that would never happen now.

Brian leaned toward her so they could kiss. It was a sweet, gentle kiss, more like a hello than a lover’s kiss. She put her arms around him. “That wasn’t so bad, now, was it?” He smiled and shook his head. “Good, can we do it again?” This kiss was more passionate. They responded to each other. They felt their fifty-ish bodies begin to tingle.

They slowly broke the kiss and she sighed. “That’s more like it. You had me worried with all that stuff about being in love with me back in school. I thought you were just making it up. But I felt it in your kiss.” He remained silent and did not even look at her. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I was just thinking. If we had done that back in school, I don’t know how I would have reacted. I probably would have gone right into orbit. Maybe never come back down.” She smiled. “I guess I should say *thanks*,” he added.

She was flattered that he thanked her for kissing him. “So you still like me, then?” she asked. He smiled and nodded. “Good; wanna go steady?” He grinned, not sure if she was teasing him. “Great. But now it’s time for you to go home.”

“Sure. It’s late.”

“Uh, that’s not why I’m telling you to go home.”

“Oh...well, goodnight, then.” He stood up and leaned over to kiss her good-bye. She held him a little

longer this time.

“See you soon?” she whispered. He nodded. “I’ll call you.”

4.

He never intended to look for anyone else, no matter how unsatisfying his marriage was. Yet he and Gloria hit it off right away. He knew next to nothing about her; what she liked, enjoyed, or despised; or whether they had anything in common. It did not matter to him.

When kids were attracted to each other they did not try to figure out what they had in common. They mostly did not care. Attraction was not about companionship, but about passion and mystery. They would loosen their passion and dive headlong into the mystery. They would never imagine doing it any other way.

Nor should he. There was no reason to. He did not need to think ahead. There was no ‘ahead’. All he had to do was show up and be with her and enjoy her company. He did not think about where it would go or why it would go anywhere. Right now, they did not need anything else.

Maybe it was the freedom and spontaneity he saw in her all those years ago. It made sense that he would notice her freedom. He had not been free; and had never even felt free; especially not to express his feelings. Back then she was a girl who freely expressed what she felt, without doubt or hesitation; so unlike him.

If she was that way then, why could he not be that way now? There was nothing to stop him. He never needed permission; not back then and not now. He was the one who had held himself back. He was the one who had preferred wishes and

daydreams to real tries to be with her. What did he want, back then? He wanted her to notice him, but he was afraid. If he had expressed interest in her, the result could have been humiliating; she could have just made fun of him.

5.

She told her kids she was dating someone who she went to school with, but they were uninterested. She had met several men since their dad died, but Gloria never seemed to give any of them a chance. Before the kids even knew the men, they were gone. They assumed she did not want to get too close to anyone, or that no one pleased her like Arnold had. She never told them how the men just wanted mommies.

They did notice one thing that was different this time. Her mood had changed. She was cheerful and hopeful. She had never seemed depressed, but now she seemed almost giddy and girlish. They assumed it was the onset of senility.

6.

Her neighborhood had many small cafes, coffee shops and a Chinese restaurant. They met once a week to chat and spend time together. They sat for hours and helped each other reminisce about their time in school many decades ago.

Gloria did not invite him back to her place. He did not give it much thought, at first. But after a month he began to wonder why. One evening he walked her home and offered to escort her up the stairs to her apartment. She thanked him but said she was okay. He hesitated a bit then asked if there was anything wrong. She did not know what he meant. He explained that she had not invited him back to her place and he worried he had somehow offended her when he was there the first time.

Nothing offended her, but she was behaving

differently this time. She had dated a few other men in the years since her husband had died and always opened her life to them. They had been nice guys, so she made them welcome, and they dropped over whenever they wanted to. This seemed natural, but it quickly drove all the romance out of the relationship. The men would feel so at home they would just want to spend time with her at her place. This is how she found out they wanted mommies.

While she opened her life to them, they did not open their lives to her. They just settled in and took root. Maybe they thought this is what she wanted, or maybe they just liked being with her in a household situation.

They never lived with her, but that was because she dumped them before things got that far along. The men never understood that she wanted more. They would ask what more she wanted, and then she would kick them out. If they did not already know what more there was to a relationship, she was not going to teach them.

She told Brian she did not want that to happen again. He wondered whether he should be flattered that she was thinking ahead to something deeper with him; or should he interpret what she told him as a sign that they would never have anything more than a casual friendship? He was even more confused because they hugged and kissed whenever they met or parted. They would often hold hands while they walked or sat at one of the restaurants. He liked her a lot, and wanted something more. Nevertheless, he decided to let her set the pace for now since she had made mistakes before. She would know what to do and when to do it.

7.

It was the dog's fault. If she had not died, Brian and Marcia would not have discovered their marriage had also died. They had both loved Maya. They shared all their playfulness, affection, and happiness with her. All the warmth in their lives came from Maya.

She was a devoted pet and anchored both of them. Her antics delighted them. Her affections pleased them, and they felt fortunate just to have her in their lives. As all pets do, Maya had kept them in the present moment; where there was a dog to pet, or feed, or walk, or just hang out with. Once she was gone, they recognized the fun of living was gone, too. After she died, their lives became empty.

Brian's accidental meeting with Gloria gave him the opportunity to explore himself through a new relationship. Marcia had not yet tried any exploration. She wanted to, but no opportunities presented themselves. As she sensed Brian moving further and further away from her, she, at first, thought she might be responsible. Maybe she was pushing him away? Even though she knew nothing about Gloria, she could see Brian had withdrawn into himself. They were never cold or hostile to each other. He was always cordial to Marcia and never did anything to annoy her; she found herself wishing he would. At least that would show her she was still part of his life. But Brian remained polite and kept his feelings to himself.

Marcia wondered how to handle this. The obvious path was to find someone else. But she did not merely want to replace Brian; she wanted to find someone to start a whole new life with, a life in which Brian would have no part.

She was a schoolteacher. She began to watch her students, who, being in Eleventh Grade, were always dealing with romantic issues. How did they get together? What attracted them to each other? What connected them? How long did they stay together? What disconnected them?

Who got hurt?

Some of them skated effortlessly into, and out of, relationships; they never got hurt, and never hurt anyone else. Others become obsessed with someone, and struggled to hold onto him or her. They almost always failed, and suffered denial and remorse as they blamed the object of their desires for their failure to connect.

Marcia also tried to gather information about the other teachers. Were they married, separated, or divorced? If they were single, were they seeing new people? How did they find new people to see? None of them would speak directly about their personal lives; but if there was a crisis in their personal lives, then they could not keep quiet. They shared stories of hurt, betrayal, loss, and constant anxiety. Nobody was in a healthy, loving partnership. She wondered if they existed. Maybe she should just dive in and take what she could get, which is what she did.

On one of the nights Brian was out (with Gloria, although Marcia did not know it) she convinced a divorced friend to take her someplace where she could meet men her age. Preferably unmarried men, but she was willing to keep an open mind. They went to a bar frequented by people who had reached, or were just past, their prime.

There was more flab than you would find in a twenty-something bar; more baldness, too. The women wore sexy clothes, but were afraid of looking too good, lest the men think they were trying to bait them with sex. The men dressed casually, trying to appear as if they were not there because they were desperate. They tried to give the impression they dropped in for a drink, or to see a friend.

Her friend Betty steered Marcia toward a

booth. For the first half hour Marcia felt nervous and exposed. They talked casually while their eyes roamed the room. She checked out the men. Most of them were with friends, as were most of the women.

Then a new customer came in and walked over to the bar. He was a slender, tall black man with a trimmed goatee, and loose casual clothing. His hair was a little mussed, as if he had not combed it in a while.

He knew the bartender. They exchanged greetings and the bartender served his drink. He sipped and looked around the room as if he was just a casual visitor curious about the clientele. He did not notice Marcia and Betty, although both hoped he would.

Marcia could not stop looking at him. Betty smiled, "Like him?" she asked. Marcia nodded. "You can just go talk to him, you know. You don't have to be shy."

"Should I?" Marcia asked, hesitantly. "He looks interesting. Maybe he's a teacher like me. What would I say?" She was nervous.

"I think you have an excellent opening. Just tell him he looks like a teacher and see what happens."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't want to seem like a fool."

"Listen, Marcia, if you don't go over to him, I will. So either get moving, or let me take a crack at him." Betty's frankness surprised Marcia. She did not know whether Betty was trying to push her, or scare her off.

"Okay," Marcia said, and then slowly got up. She walked toward the bar, and hoped he would not notice her until she got there. She carried her empty glass, decided to ask for a refill, and then start a conversation while she was waiting. Fortunately, the bartender was busy and would probably take a few minutes to take care of her.

She reached the bar and held up her glass. The bartender noticed her and came over to ask what she wanted. She named her drink and he went away. She took

about five breaths to calm herself, and then turned to the stranger. “You a teacher?” she smiled and asked.

“Why, yes. How did you know?”

“Oh, we can spot each other, don’t you think?” she boldly replied. He grinned and nodded. She extended her hand for a handshake. “Marcia Nobile, Eleventh Grade, MLK High.” He nodded as if he was impressed.

“Rob Fortuna, English 101, Community College.” They smiled at each other and shook hands.

“Wow, Community College. What’s that like?”

“I get some amazing students. You only see kids in a specific age range, but mine can be almost any age.”

“Makes it interesting?”

“Really does. I learn a lot from them.”

“Oh, all teachers say that!” she teased, smiling.

He smiled back, “I know. It’s true, though.”

“That’s great. Sounds like a challenge.”

“Oh, it is. But *you*; Eleventh Grade. That takes courage. I couldn’t do it.”

“The kids like me. I don’t know why. Maybe I have a rapport with them, although I don’t feel it,” she said, proudly.

“Rapport. Remember when that was the norm and not the exception?”

She blushed and acted shy. “Well, I’m not quite old enough to remember that,” she joked.

He grinned, “No. I can see that. I didn’t mean to imply you were.” He paused. “Seriously, though, remember when you were a kid? Weren’t teachers different back then?”

“Everything was different back then,” she said, smiling. He smiled back.

“It’s hard to converse here at the bar; would you like to find a seat?” he asked. Marcia nodded. They looked around. Marcia made eye-contact with Betty, who smiled in a conspiratorial way. “There’s a free booth,” he said as he pointed toward the back of the room. They walked to the booth and slid into the seats.

They spent the next hour and a half chatting about teaching, students, colleges, and places they lived when they were growing up; with occasional side-discussions of movies or books. They had not seen or read all the movies or books that came up; but at least they had heard of many of them. They both enjoyed the conversation.

Marcia noticed Betty walking toward the booth. “I’m leaving,” Betty said. Marcia introduced her to Rob. “You okay getting home?” Betty asked. Rob immediately offered a ride. Marcia felt comfortable enough with him to accept. Betty said good-night and left.

As soon as Betty was out the door, it dawned on Marcia that she was now alone. Nobody here knew her. If anything happened, nobody could even say for certain they saw her.

Her worry surprised her. Rob did not seem be a threat. She was likely more of a threat than he was. She relaxed and they continued their conversation for another half hour. Then Rob mentioned he had an early class and asked if he could take her home. She said that was fine and they paid their bills and went out to his car.

It had not occurred to Marcia until after Betty left that she could not have Rob drive her home. What if Brian was there? What if he saw them, or Rob saw him?

She gave Rob Betty’s address, hoping Betty was still awake. They continued chatting until they reached Betty’s house. Rob stopped the car and turned to her. “I haven’t had such a great conversation in years. I would

love to see you again.” She turned toward him. “Do you go to the club often?”

“That was my first time.”

“Well, could we meet there?” he asked.

“I can’t say. I often work through the evenings.”

“Oh,” he seemed disappointed.

“But if you want to give me your phone number, I could call you next time I’m free.” Marcia could not believe how bold she had become. His face brightened, and he took out a pen and paper to write down his number. She took it, and got out of the car. Rob waited until she got inside the house and then drove away.

Betty had been expecting her. She knew Marcia could not let Rob take her home. She got her car keys and they went out and got into her car.

“You like him?” Betty said. Marcia nodded. “Are you attracted to him?”

“I could be, I think.”

“Good,” Betty said.

“But what if he’s married?” Marcia asked, anxiously.

“What if? Is that your problem or his? *You’re* married,” Betty pointed out, bluntly.

“I don’t know how far I’d go with a married man.”

“Marcia, you don’t have to decide that now. Don’t even think about it.” They pulled up in front of Marcia’s house. She got out and thanked Betty. Betty just smiled, “You *better* thank me,” she teased. Marcia smiled and went into the house.

8.

Marcia was walking in the park. It was a sunny, peasant early spring afternoon. Children

were running around playing. Dogs were doing the same. She stood watching the dogs and thinking about Maya.

She felt a presence at her side and looked down. There was a black Lab looking up at her. She reached down to pet the dog. “Don’t touch me!” it said and then moved away. Marcia recoiled, and the dog continued, “Marcia, what the hell do you and Brian think you’re doing? Didn’t you learn anything from me?”

“Uh, Maya?”

“Yes. Are the two of you downright stupid?” the dog asked, accusingly.

“Look, Maya, the marriage is over. It’s been over for a long time.”

“No, you’re wrong. You still love him,” the dog insisted.

“No I don’t. I’m seeing someone else.”

“Yeah. Rob, but you *don’t* love him.”

“Not yet, but I might. It’s not a problem right now. I like him. That’s enough.”

“You’re wasting your time. You could be with the man you really love,” Maya argued.

“Look, he doesn’t love me. He’s seeing someone else.”

“Yeah, Gloria,” Maya said.

“Gloria? How do you know her name? *I* don’t know her name.”

“Never mind. Just listen to what I’m telling you. You’re making a mistake.”

“No. There’s nothing between us. No spark, nothing.”

“I know that’s what you want to believe, but it’s not true,” Maya insisted.

“Yes it is.”

“Brian still loves you.”

“He doesn’t. It’s been over, since before you died.”

“Well, Marcia, you’re wrong.” Maya glared at her,

and then opened her mouth and closed it over Marcia's leg, so she could feel her teeth.

"Maya!" She yelled. "Maya!" Marcia was shaking. Someone was telling her to wake up, that it was just a dream.

Her eyes opened and she saw Rob's face. She seemed disoriented. "You were having a nightmare. You okay?" She nodded. "Want to tell me about it?" She sat silently for a few moments then told him.

"It was about my dog."

"You never told me you had a dog."

"Maya. She died several months ago."

"Oh, sorry. What was she doing in the dream?"

"She was talking about Brian and me. I argued with her and told her she was crazy. Then she bit me," Marcia said, dimly aware of how strange the dream sounded.

"Why?"

"Just to convince me I was wrong, I think."

"So how do you feel?" he asked.

"I still think *she* was wrong. Brian and I are finished; we have been for a long time."

"Do you think he loves you?"

"No, of course not."

"But he knows what's going on, right? He knows about us. You know about him and his girlfriend?"

"Maya knew her name was Gloria. I didn't even know that." Marcia said. She fell silent and he patiently waited to hear more of her story. After a few uneasy moments of silence, he assumed she had told him all she wanted to, so he asked her a question that had been on his mind for weeks.

"You know, I've been wondering why you

two haven't gotten a divorce."

She glared at him, and anger welled up inside her, "What's wrong? You don't like our arrangement?" She blurted the question as if it was an accusation. He tried not to be put off by her angry response.

"I'm just concerned about you. Are you happy?"

She became angrier, "Yes, dammit! I'm happy. Is that what you want to hear? I'm *fucking* happy!" It was the first time she was angry at him; and he suspected this had less to do with him than with other issues in her life.

He did not like what he saw. He felt she lost all sense of logic and reason and plunged into a chaotic emotional darkness. The Marcia he saw in her eyes was a woman he was not eager to know. She was like an animal, one that might easily turn on those it loved. He felt it best to drop the subject, for now.

9.

Marcia was in the kitchen when Brian arrived home. She looked up as he came in. He sat down at the table. They had been living separately in their house for weeks. It did not bother either of them. They spoke only when necessary, and were always cordial with each other. Marcia was preparing her salad, with her back to him, and started talking.

"Maya was in my dream," Marcia said. "She told me something strange." She paused, hoping he would ask her what it was. He did not say anything. She continued, "Yeah, it was *really* strange. She said ...she said ...that you still loved me." She did not know how he would respond. She expected a derisive laugh, or a burst of anger and denial. He remained silent. She was embarrassed to go on, but she had to ask, "Do you?" She turned around to face him. He looked at her and slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She remained calm. "It's okay. That's what I told

Maya in the dream.”

“You were right.”

“But she insisted *she* was right. Now I’m confused. I don’t know what the dream meant.”

“It probably doesn’t mean anything.”

“I miss Maya. That’s all the dream was about.” He did not reply and there was a long silence. She looked at him but his eyes were downcast.

Finally he spoke, “Marcia, I’ve been seeing someone.”

She interrupted, “I know,” she said softly. “So have I.”

They paused again. “So what do we do now?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Shouldn’t we just get a divorce?” Marcia did not answer. She walked out of the room. He waited for her to come back and finish preparing her salad, but she did not return. He got up and looked for her, and found her crouched down next to Maya’s bed. She did not notice him when he came over and stood next to her.

“Her name is Gloria, isn’t it?” she asked. Brian nodded.

“How did you know?” he asked, puzzled.

“Maya told me,” she said, “in the dream.”

“Oh,” he replied. She stood up.

“I’m going to finish my salad.” He did not reply but stood there after she left the room. *We’ve reached the point where we can’t turn back*, was all he could think. He was not certain he was ready for whatever was coming next.

Marcia and Rob got together a few days later. He picked her up after school. She kissed him, and apologized for yelling at him. They went to a fair. Rob noticed she seemed tense and began to realize she was forcing herself to have a good time. He wanted to comment on her behavior but realized he did not know how she would respond.

Until recently, they had enjoyed an idyllic relationship. Each made the other feel thirty years younger. They almost believed they were sharing their first romance. But while they felt much younger, they could not escape the reality that they were not innocent playful kids. They were both old enough to have learned a lot about life. So when something was wrong, they were much more sensitive to it, whatever it was. They did not discuss the Maya dream. Instead, Marcia began to ask him personal questions.

“Why has a wonderful guy like you never married?” she asked.

“I had a wife,” he answered coolly. She looked surprised. “A long time ago. We were both eighteen. Jennifer was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Every curve of her body was exquisite. I couldn’t get enough of just looking at her. And she was crazy about me. It was wonderful...,” his voice trailed off. She sensed the memory had reminded him of an old hurt. “Two wonderful years together, then she was gone,”

“Died?”

“Oh, no. Ran off with my best friend, Ralph. A kid I knew since first grade. The only close friend I ever had. Somehow they fell in love and I didn’t notice. They betrayed me.”

“God, that’s so awful. What did you do?”

“Blamed myself. Somehow, this was because I didn’t know enough about people and couldn’t see their flaws. So it was my fault.”

“But it wasn’t!” she protested, taking what she thought was his side.

“Didn’t matter. I just closed myself off. Sure, I wanted to fall in love again, but I couldn’t. I was sure I would just make the same mistakes all over again. So I kept my feelings in check.”

“You didn’t see any women at all?”

“Actually, I did. They were for companionship. No intimacy, no depth. Sooner or later they realized it and left. That’s how my life went on for years.”

“But you’re not like that with me. Why?”

“Oh, that’s easy. *You* made the choice. You chose me. If you hadn’t spoken to me at the bar, nothing would have happened. But you did, so the pressure was off me. You made the first move. Maybe I could trust you. Maybe you could make the right choices. Maybe this time it would be okay...”

“And, is it?”

“Oh, yes. You have no idea.” He started to weep, because of Marcia. He loved her for setting him free.

11.

However, she was not free. She kept having the Maya dreams. The scenarios were different but the messages were the same. Maya tried to convince her she still loved Brian and needed him, and could get him back if she tried. She knew that argument, no matter how many times it repeated in the dreams, was a lie.

They were through; but it was okay. They did not hate each other. Their love had just gone cold over the years, and they had moved on and found love elsewhere. She had found Rob, and Brian had found Gloria. It was no big deal. It

happened all the time. Why could Maya not accept this?

She did not tell Rob about the recurring Maya dreams, but they were driving her crazy. They wore her down and left her feeling helpless and alone. She often seemed distant and lost and Rob became concerned. Whenever Rob asked her what he could do, all she asked for was his affection. She always thanked him; assuring him he made her feel a lot better. Rob did not know whether she had a history of depression or other mental problems. So he just watched her, and hoped whatever it was that bothered her would go away.

The Maya dream made her reluctant to sleep and caused her to develop insomnia. She started to take sleeping pills. The overdose happened by accident; but it could also have been a suicide attempt.

Brian and Gloria had just entered the movie theater when his cellphone rang. After he said hello, the man at the other end called him by name. "My name is Rob. You don't know me." Brian knew right away who it was. Rob told him Marcia had an accidental overdose and was at the hospital. Brian panicked. Rob said she was conscious and asking for Brian; would he come to see her?

"Of course," he replied, nervously. He hurriedly explained the news to Gloria, who also became upset. She knew little about Marcia, but the thought of someone possibly trying suicide scared her, and she wanted to be sympathetic.

When they reached the hospital, Brian parked and leaped out of the car. Gloria did the same. He had expected her to wait for him but did not stop her. They went in the emergency doors and asked the nurse where Marcia was, and then hurried toward her room. It was not until Brian stood face to face with Rob that he realized what a damnably awkward situation it was.

But Rob was calm and business-like. He explained what happened. Then he urged Brian to walk over to the

bed where Marcia could see him and say hello. Brian did not hesitate. He stood at the bedside and looked down at Marcia, who was pale and weak. She tried to smile. He took her hand. He did not know what to say.

They had not considered themselves to be a married couple for a long time. It seemed strange for him to stand there as the worried husband. That role now ought to belong to Rob. Brian wanted to show her how concerned he was, regardless of the way their marriage had declined; but he said nothing. He just stood there and held her frail hand. He did not know what to do next. Should he just wait until she let go of him? He hoped Rob would come over and rescue him. But Rob stood in the corner.

Everything was quiet for several minutes, until Marcia became drowsy and closed her eyes. Brian quickly removed his hand from hers. She was asleep.

He walked over to Rob and shook his head. "I don't like this," he said. "This has never happened before. Something's seriously wrong with her. Any idea what it is?" he asked. Rob shook his head. Gloria stood there and listened; as she heard Brian's concern, she reached out her hand and gently took his, hoping to soothe him and give him some strength.

"What's her prognosis?" Brian asked.

"Oh, the physical worst is over. But the doctors still have to find out what made her do this," Rob said, grimly.

Gloria spoke up, "Brian, maybe we should let her rest." At first he resented her suggestion to leave, and assumed it came from jealousy. They said goodbye to Rob, and left. He barely made it to

the car before he started to cry. Gloria tenderly held him. A few minutes after he stopped crying he apologized, which surprised her.

“For what?” she asked.

“For all this.” He meant the emergency, Marcia’s suicide accident, his holding her hand, the brief awkward chat with Rob.

“I’m glad I was here for you,” was all she could say. Then she offered to drive them home.

12.

Marcia had daily sessions with a therapist, Alexis Green, but said little, at first. Alexis tried several ways to get Marcia to talk about the reasons for what happened. Marcia refused to believe it was an attempted suicide. She insisted it was an accident. It was not until Marcia became convinced that Alexis was not a threat to her that she began to talk about it.

She told Alexis about the Maya dreams. Whenever Maya would tell Marcia that Brian still loved her, Marcia would immediately reject the idea. Some of her rejections were angrier and more forceful than others. Maya never understood, and kept coming back dream after dream with the same message. Several times she tried to strike Maya, but the dog just disappeared from the dream. It became so bad that Marcia began to hate Maya, and to dislike other dogs. But the dream torment did not stop.

Alexis carefully explained to Marcia that everything in the dream came from within her own mind. They needed to explore what Maya represented, and what message Maya was trying to send. There had been so many dreams in which Maya appeared that Marcia felt the dog had somehow gotten inside her head and would not leave her alone. She did not want to find out why this was happening; she just desperately wanted it to stop.

Alexis suspected the dream itself reflected other

deeper issues from Marcia's life. Maybe the dreams were releasing feelings she could not handle. But what feelings were they? Where did they come from? Alexis did not know how much she should probe. Marcia was defensive, fragile, and overwhelmed. Could Alexis' probing push her too far?

13.

Rob was cautious around her. He fussed over her and treated her well, but seemed emotionally distant. It took her awhile to notice this, but when she finally asked him why, she regretted having asked at all.

He told her that her overdose accident had unsettled him and he worried that their romance might not continue. His frankness shocked and hurt her. He stressed he had loved her, before; but he was no longer sure how he felt about her.

She mentally reviewed the past few weeks, since her release from the hospital. They had picked their relationship up right where it was before the suicide accident. They were having fun, and having the same engaging conversations that had first drawn them together. To her, everything seemed okay.

But not to Rob. The accident had shaken his trust in her. If it happened once, could it happen again? If he had missed the signs of trouble once, could he catch them next time? And if she was becoming chronically unstable, could he be her anchor?

What he liked about her was her independence and assertiveness. What if they went away? What if she now wanted to cling to him? That idea disgusted him. The thought of this

delightful, sexy, funny, smart, and enchanting woman reduced to a child-like dependence repulsed him. He wanted to be a lover, not a daddy.

She gradually noticed that he had cooled toward her, but she did not mention it. Rob wanted to end their affair, but was afraid. He hoped his cooling off toward her would result in her initiating a breakup, and it would happen soon. He felt uneasy around her. He thought he might miss something; maybe a cue, a clue, a sign, that would foreshadow another suicide attempt.

Neither of them mentioned the accident, but Rob could feel its presence whenever they were together. He found it difficult to make love to someone who might have tried suicide. When he fucked her it was usually swift and sloppy, with just enough energy to quickly get them off. There was little lust, thrill, and joy left.

Afterwards, he always felt he had done something wrong, that he had used her, and he felt ashamed. But she did not notice. She took whatever sex he gave her. She never noticed anything was missing. Maybe that was because, he sadly realized, she had become a different woman. She might not realize it, but he did. She frightened him.

Rob called Brian, who assured Rob there was no mental illness in her family. Brian hinted that Rob should not worry, and suggested she was still recovering from the suicide accident, which might explain her changed behavior. But it was difficult for Rob to accept the possibility the changes were not permanent. He told Brian how uncomfortable he was around her. He admitted she frightened him. He was afraid of what she might do to herself. He did not want to be the one who had to pick up the pieces.

“What I don’t understand,” Rob said, “is the dog. Why is the dog such a problem for her? I thought she loved that dog.”

“She did. They adored each other.”

“Then why did she get so upset about a dream with the dog in it?”

“I don’t think any of this has anything to do with the dog,” Brian said.

“But she told us the dog dreams were driving her crazy.”

“Yes. I talked to Alexis about this. She told me it’s likely the dog represents something from within Marcia’s mind, something that tried to communicate with her. Subconsciously, she knows what it is, but she can’t accept it. And when Maya kept telling her I was still in love with her, she knew that was so absurd it just sent her over the edge.”

“Why?”

“Alexis said the statement was so contrary to her beliefs that it frightened her.”

There were several moments of silence. Rob was trying to decide whether he should be honest and tell Brian he was planning to end their affair. Brian had already sensed this and asked Rob if that was what he was going to do. Rob sighed. “I think I have to.”

“It’s okay, you know.”

“But what if it hurts her more?”

“I think whatever’s hurting her has nothing to do with you.”

“You don’t think she’d go crazy?”

“I know this might sound cold, but from what you’ve been telling me about the way she’s changed, I’m not sure she would even notice you were gone.”

“Maybe I won’t say anything, I’ll just stop calling her and seeing her. Maybe she’ll forget all about me.”

“It’s possible. I know it’s sad, but it might

be the only way to protect her, and disentangle yourself.”

“Thanks. I hope I didn’t bother you. I won’t call again. I hope you and Gloria are okay.”

Rob hung up. Brian replaced the phone in the cradle. He felt sorry for Rob. It was obvious the guy wanted to love Marcia, and that it was hurting him to let her go. But Rob was also being realistic. There was not much he could do to help her or even prevent another suicide incident. He probably felt useless.

But what would she do? Would she try to return to Brian? Was that what the Maya dreams wanted to happen? They were still married, so he had legal responsibilities for her. She would probably remind him of that. Plus, where else could she go? Brian began to feel he hastily encouraged Rob to end the affair. He should have been firm. Rob had her, and he should keep her. Period. But it was too late.

Gloria understood the impending breakup, no matter how gentle, could create big problems for her and Brian. She pointedly asked Brian what he was going to do about Marcia. When he said he did not know, she suggested that Brian commit her to a mental hospital for a while. Brian was aghast. Gloria’s suggestion seemed insensitive and cold. She reminded him it might be exactly what Marcia needed. Brian said he would think about it while he waited to see what happened as Rob tapered off his involvement with Marcia.

14.

It was the dog dream again, but it was different. This time, Maya was not in the dream. Brian was the dog. He came up to Marcia and she petted him. Then she looked straight into his eyes. “You’re not Maya,” she said. She stared longer. “You’re Brian!”

Marcia petted him again and quietly spoke to him, “I’m so alone. I don’t think there is anybody in the whole

world that cares about me. Maya did, but she's gone and you're not Maya, anyway. But why are you here?"

He tried to answer and found all he could do was bark. He could hear English, but he could not say a word. She smiled as she understood his difficulty. "C'mon, doggy, you can say it! Keep trying." But he gave up when he realized only a miracle could enable him to answer.

Then she walked away and the dog followed her. They walked a couple of blocks, and then turned down one of the side streets. As she walked along she recognized it was Wister Street, where she grew up. When she reached the middle of the block she saw her old house. She paused and the dog paused alongside her. It was dusk. The streetlights came on; there were only a few cars, and no pedestrians.

She heard a commotion from inside the house and tried to see what was happening. The front door opened and a short, stocky man came out. She recognized her father. He yelled, "Get out here!" Then a girl, about four or five, timidly came through the door. She was crying. She carried a pillow, blankets, and a teddy bear. As the father and daughter went down the steps Marcia could hear him yelling, "I told you what would happen, didn't I? I guess you didn't believe me. But if you don't listen to me, this is what you get."

It was an old wooden porch with latticed panels hanging between the floor and the ground. He swung open one of the panels. "Get in!" he yelled. She began to cry louder and looked at him. Marcia could imagine the girl was pleading with her eyes for her father to stop. She had learned her lesson; he would follow through on his threats. She

would not forget.

He said it more sternly, but not as loud this time, “Get...in!” She went under the porch and he fastened the lattice-cover behind her. Marcia stood there in total disbelief. Why was he doing this? Why was she seeing this? Should she rescue the girl? The father went back into the house.

Marcia could hear the girl whimpering. Her heart was pounding with rage. What kind of a beast would do something like this? She had not noticed the dog had left her side and was trotting toward the house. She asked, “Brian? What are you doing?” as softly as she could, but he kept walking. She was afraid to follow him. What if that mean father saw the dog? He probably had a gun or something.

She tried to work up the courage to rescue the girl; the dog disappeared. Marcia did not want to lose him. She stepped as lightly as she could and crossed the yard in a minute or two. She reached the lattice cover and crouched down. “Hello?” she whispered. “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to help you.” As her eyes adjusted to the dimness under the porch, she could see the little girl was sitting on a blanket. The pillow, teddy bear, and another blanket were on the ground next to her. Then she noticed that a dog; Brian, her dog, had wrapped his body around her on three sides.

“Are you okay?” Marcia asked. The girl nodded. “Do you want me to get you out of there?” The girl shook her head. “You’re sure?” She nodded.

Then Marcia could hear the man bellowing inside the house. “I should go. I don’t want him to find me here.” The girl nodded. “Good-bye.” Marcia whispered. She stood up, and then paused. “By the way, what’s your name?” she asked.

The little girl whispered, “Marcia.”

Marcia’s head was spinning. She tried to compose herself so she could leave as quickly as possible. When she

was back on the sidewalk, next to a tree that partly shielded her from the house, she started to cry.

She woke up crying. Rob was holding her. She had fallen asleep while they were watching TV. Her head was in his lap. “What’s wrong?” he gently asked. She did not answer. “That dream?” he asked. They both knew what ‘that dream’ was. It was always on their minds; every time they went to bed they wondered whether it would return.

Marcia dreaded it because it hid itself somewhere deep inside her and there was no escape from it. Rob dreaded it because it might set her off. She might try to hurt herself again. If she did, he would end their affair. He knew she might feel he was abandoning her, but they would have no future anyway. His only choice would be to leave.

She stopped crying and began to smile. “Yes,” she said, through her sniffles. “It *was* that dream, but this time it was different.” Rob tensed up. “It went all the way to the end.”

“What do you mean; the end?”

“There was a lot more to it than what I dreamt before,” she explained.

“So what happened?”

She carefully told him as much as she could recall. As she was recounting the story, he noticed that she seemed at ease. The dream had changed, and so had she. He had no idea what this meant.

15.

She called Alexis and asked for an appointment. She described the dream and Alexis asked for some details and clarifications. Then Marcia fell silent. She looked at Alexis expectantly. Alexis looked back at Marcia. “What are you thinking right now?” Alexis asked. Marcia did not

answer immediately. Alexis asked again.

“I don’t understand it; but you can tell me what it means, can’t you?” Marcia said. Alexis looked puzzled. She would rather help Marcia extract the meaning for herself, although it might take a while. But that could be risky. Marcia had tried suicide. What if she became so frustrated by not finding the meaning that she tried it again? Alexis did not want to be responsible for that.

“It seems clear to me. But I must ask you to hear me out. Do not interrupt me or stop me. It is only when you hear every detail that you will understand it for yourself.

“The kid in the dream was you, right?” Alexis stated. Marcia nodded. That was obvious. “The man was your sadistic father.” Marcia nodded again. She understood that much by herself. “Did he punish you like the girl in the dream?” Alexis asked. Marcia nodded again. Alexis paused.

“Why did he do it?” she asked. Marcia froze. “Come on Marcia, you have to tell me, it’s important.” Marcia looked angrily at Alexis, and felt Alexis was letting her down. She wanted Alexis to explain the dream, all of it; but now she had brought Marcia into the explanation, and Marcia did not want to be too close to the dream.

“It was punishment,” Marcia quietly said. Alexis nodded, and then waited for Marcia to go on. She remained silent.

“Obviously, but for what?” Alexis asked. Marcia sat up straight and her back stiffened. This was starting to hurt.

“He would punish me for stuff I never did. He would use any random act as an excuse for punishment. I never knew when it would happen.”

“Why do you think he did it?” Alexis asked.

“He said it was for my own good; that I was a bad girl and I had to learn how to follow rules and behave.”

“*Were* you bad?” Marcia shook her head. “Did you do anything at all to cause your punishment?” Marcia

vigorously shook her head again. “Was *any* of this your fault?”

“I don’t know.”

“You *do* know. Tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk about this. I want to find out about the dog.”

Alexis switched subjects, hoping she was finally getting deeper inside Marcia. “Do you remember there being a dog?” Marcia nodded. “Whose dog?” Alexis asked. Marcia shrugged her shoulders. “Not your dog, then?” Marcia nodded.

“But it was there every time this happened,” she said. “I remember it was a big dog, but it would somehow slip in through a gap in the lattice. It kept me alive and protected me all through the nights. I remember the heat from its body, like it was a stove. It would just wrap itself around me and we would stay together. I probably would have died, or at least caught pneumonia or something. It always left right before my father came out to get me.”

“Your father never saw it?”

“Never. The dog was smart.”

“What was it about the dog that saved you?” Alexis’ question puzzled Marcia. Was it not obvious?

“Heat.”

“No. That wasn’t it,” Alexis said. Marcia felt confused and became wary about where this was going.

Defiantly she asked, “Okay, what, then?”

“It was the dog’s devotion to you. It’s love. It may have been the only genuine love you experienced in your young life. And it wasn’t even your dog. To a little child, the continual appearance of a protector must have seemed almost like magic. It made you feel important. Even when the dog

wasn't there, when your sadistic father wasn't punishing you, I bet you thought the dog was somehow looking out for you, even if you couldn't see it." Marcia nodded, as she began to understand.

"Later, when you and Brian fell in love, what happened? Your only experience of love was your protection from this dog. You transferred all your feelings, like trust, need, warmth, protection, and maybe salvation, from the dog to Brian. Of course you did this unconsciously.

"Later, Maya came into your life and you had a real dog to be with. I think you saw her, possibly from the very beginning, as the same magical dog that had taken care of you." Marcia quietly listened to Alexis. "When Maya died, after a long life with you, that magical dog died too, and I think that was a shock to you. You and Brian had already been drifting apart, but Maya compensated for that. When she was gone, you realized that not just one but *both* of your sources of love were gone.

"You started dating Rob, but you had no idea where it was going, if anywhere. I think your subconscious was uneasy, and had to remind you that you *need* that love. Your bond with Brian was the strongest in your life. If you broke that, you risked losing all the love you ever had. It would all get wiped out. Even though your conscious mind was okay with the reality that your marriage was breaking up, your subconscious wanted you to realize you still needed that love.

"That's why the dog in the dream kept saying 'Brian still loves you.' It was trying to shock you into realizing the exact opposite was true. *You* need Brian. But you didn't need Brian because of Brian. You needed Brian because of love.

"I think your subconscious was trying to tell you that if you went out looking for another man, you had to bear in mind what it was you needed from him. You needed

that unique love, devotion, and protection that you first got from the magical dog, long ago. You did get it from your real husband, who gave you what you needed, at least for a while; and then you got it from Maya.

“If you let all that go, you were in great danger. In a sense, the concise message was ‘remember *who* you are.’ It was okay to go looking for another man; but when people fall in love they often forget who they are, and they change themselves to adapt to the new person. Your subconscious did not want you to do that, because if you did, your new romance with Rob would probably be disastrous. You wouldn’t even know why.” Alexis paused to let her words sink in.

“So now you know,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“Ashamed.”

“Really, why?”

“I almost died.”

“But you didn’t die. Do you think that was an accident?”

“Yeah, I assumed I was just lucky.”

“Your subconscious was in control. I think it took drastic action to get your attention.”

“So that’s all it was?”

“It’s not such a little thing, you know.” Marcia stood up and reached out to shake Alexis’ hand. She smiled, thanked Alexis, and hurried toward the door. Alexis called out to her. “We’re not done,” she said. Marcia stopped and turned around. “Come back one more time so we can finish. You’re gonna be okay.”

16.

“Let’s talk about your marriage,” said

Alexis. Marcia did not respond. She sat stiffly, waiting for Alexis to continue. Finally, Alexis went on. "Why did you and Brian grow apart?"

"I think that's normal. Doesn't that happen in all marriages?" Marcia said.

"We're not talking about all marriages; just yours. And, no, it is not necessarily normal."

"Well, it just happened, I guess. I don't know why."

"So there's no reason? That seems unlikely," Alexis pressed.

"Does there have to be a reason?" Marcia asked, annoyed.

"Did you love Brian when you married him?" Marcia nodded. "Did he love you?"

"Oh, yes."

"You seem sure."

"I am."

"How did you know?"

"He made me feel safe, protected, and cared-for."

"Just like that mysterious dog when you were a little girl?" Alexis asked. Marcia nodded. "That's what we call unconditional love. Have you heard of it?" Marcia nodded, again. "Brian made you feel unconditional love?"

"Yes. It was wonderful. *He* was wonderful. I was happy."

"And how did you make *him* feel?" Alexis pressed.

"I don't understand."

"He gave you the love you needed, right? What did you give him?"

"I gave him myself, I guess."

"Just yourself?" Alexis asked. Her questions were starting to annoy Marcia.

"What do you mean, *just* myself?"

"What did *he* need?"

"Me," she answered, as if it was the most obvious idea in the world.

“Are you sure?”

“Well, he *married* me, didn’t he? So I guess that meant he needed me,” Marcia answered, irritably.

“Well, maybe. What if he married you because he somehow felt how much you needed him, and was flattered, and wanted to give you what you needed?”

“So what? He *married* me. Isn’t that the point?” Marcia repeated.

“He married you and then you two grew apart. *That’s* the point, Marcia.”

“Oh. Why?”

“We’re back where we started,” Alexis said, then sighed. Marcia’s obtuseness was frustrating her. “Would you say he gave you *all* the love you needed?” Alexis asked. Marcia nodded; annoyed the conversation was repeating itself. “What love did you give him?”

“I...I...I don’t know. I never thought about it before. *My* love?” She quickly felt her answer was inadequate, but did not know why.

“What love was that?” Alexis asked. Marcia was confused. *What kind of question is that?* she thought. *What sorts of love are there?* Alexis saw Marcia did not understand what she was trying to get at so she quietly asked, “Did you give him the kind of love *he* needed?”

“I thought it was *me* he needed.”

“And you felt that was enough for him?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Marcia answered, frustrated by Alexis’ badgering.

“But what if it wasn’t?”

“How could it *not* be?”

“Don’t answer with a question!” Alexis said, sharply. “What if it wasn’t?”

“What are you getting at?” Marcia almost shrieked.

“What I’m getting at is that the love was all one-sided. You got what you needed from him, which was good; but you never stopped to think about the love *he* needed from *you*. I bet you never even thought of *how* you should love him. I bet you didn’t even know him.”

She paused and hoped her words would sink in. When she sensed Marcia still had not understood, she went on. “What I think is that he replaced that dog that protected you. And you ‘loved’ him like that dog. Brian was never a person, to you, was he? He was just a loving, devoted, protective dog.”

Marcia sat stunned. She wanted to walk out but did not want to humiliate herself by running away. She was certain Alexis was wrong, but she could not think of an argument against what Alexis had said.

“He wasn’t just a dog. He was my husband, dammit! He loved me!”

“But did you love him like a husband, or like that dog? Or like you loved Maya?” Marcia became overwhelmed. She broke down and cried.

“Marcia, you never stopped being a little girl. You probably made Brian feel special that he could love and protect you the way you needed, even if he didn’t know about your past. But that specialness isn’t love. He gradually learned you were never going to give him real love, which was what *he* probably needed and wanted. But he stayed with you anyway, and just endured the increasing separation. He never wanted to hurt you and knew you wouldn’t deliberately hurt him. And the two of you had Maya as a buffer between you. When she died, he probably realized how lonely he was.”

“And then he ‘accidentally’ met Gloria.”

“You don’t think it was an accident?”

“I don’t care. He didn’t have to start seeing her. *That* was no accident. That was deliberate.”

“And what about you?” Marcia looked at Alexis, unsure what she was asking. “Rob? Isn’t that his name?” Marcia nodded. “Was he deliberate?”

“Yes.”

“And how does he make you feel?”

“I like him.”

“And he likes you?” Marcia nodded. “What about love? Could you love him?”

“I guess so.”

“Could he love you, do you think?” Alexis asked. Marcia nodded again. “Like a man, or like a dog? Which would it be? Which do you want?”

“Like a man, this time.”

“Good. We’re done here.”

17.

She told Rob everything Alexis had explained. He felt such a sense of relief that he cried. “Thank God, thank God. I loved you but didn’t feel I could handle you. I almost left you!”

“Do you still love me?”

“Yes.”

“Will you marry me? My subconscious demands it,” she said, smiling. Rob understood that she was right. Her happiness and security needed a rock-solid commitment of love. She needed to be able to feel what she felt from that dog so long ago. He was more than happy to comply.

She told Brian they wanted to get married, and therefore she needed a divorce. He was happy for her. Her suicide accident had scared him and he believed she might be mentally ill. She was okay now and there was no hint that she had ever been anywhere close to suicide.

On the day their divorce was final they

agreed to have dinner with their new lovers. Gloria was a bit uncomfortable. All she knew about Marcia was the suicide. She could not talk about that. She wondered what else they could talk about. Rob and Marcia had already scheduled their wedding, so they mentioned some of the plans they had made. It was an animated conversation with much laughter and a feeling of good-will all around. Suddenly Marcia became quiet and thoughtful. She waited for the others to notice and stop talking.

“I have an idea!” she said. “Why don’t you two get married when we do? Wouldn’t that be great?” Brian looked at Gloria, whose face had gone pale. “What’s the matter?” Marcia asked, “Was I too bold?” Gloria shook her head. Nobody spoke. They were waiting for Gloria to explain.

“There won’t be a wedding,” she said softly. Marcia was surprised.

“What? Why not? I thought you two loved each other?”

“We do,” Brian said.

“But there won’t be a wedding. There will *never* be a wedding.”

“Why?” Marcia asked, puzzled.

“Two reasons. I love Brian and I want to be with him for the rest of my life, but it doesn’t matter whether we’re married, or not, just as long as we’re together.”

“And the other reason?”

“I had one husband in my life. I never want another one. I loved my husband more than I can ever describe. I want him to be my *only* husband. You understand?”

“No, not really,” Marcia said.

“Well, you don’t have to.” She reached for Brian’s hand. They looked into each other’s eyes.

Marcia looked at the two of them then said, “Gee, I’m sorry, Brian.” Gloria looked at her and seemed angry, but said nothing.

“I’m not,” Brian said. “I think Gloria’s lucky. I wish somebody had loved me as much as she loved her husband.” Marcia knew she was the ‘somebody’ he meant, but she did not become angry. Thanks to Alexis she understood her failure to love him. Brian, her marriage, Maya and that part of her life was finished. She was about to start over with Rob, and she would not make the same mistakes.

Marcia thought about the dog that had given her love and protection when her father tortured her. Later, Brian’s love for her brought the dog’s love back to life within her. She realized that, because it took many forms, love transcended time.

Gloria’s love had only one form: her late husband; but for Gloria, love also transcended time. His love would always be with her. Marcia realized how extraordinary this was, and envied Gloria. She looked at Gloria’s and Brian, and then reached out to clasp both their hands; and smiled at them.

Paradise

I had spent three intense and frustrating days diagnosing and repairing some sophisticated electronic equipment and my brain was fried. I decided to take the slow, scenic route back home so I could unwind and clear my head. I avoided the interstate, and took the old highway that wove through small towns and past lovely old farms.

As I leisurely drove down the road, I noticed something up ahead. It was farm country, so I thought an animal had wandered onto the road. As I got closer, I saw it was a person. When I was very close, I saw a woman. She excitedly waved for me to stop.

She was very distressed. I asked her what was wrong. She ignored my question, and pleaded for a ride. I told her to get in. She seemed to be about sixteen, but I wasn't sure. I'm not good with kids' ages. I suggested I take her to the local police, so they could help her.

"Please, no," she shouted. "Just let me ride with you. Please." I didn't want to force her out of the car so I drove on. She didn't tell me her name, where she was from, or her destination. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Now that I had her, would I be able to get rid of her?

"My name's Dave," I said, trying to be friendly. She didn't reply, so we silently rode along. I pulled into a roadside restaurant around lunchtime. As we entered the lot, she slid down in her seat as if she was trying to hide. She refused to go in, so I brought her a sandwich. I tried to talk while we ate, but she wouldn't tell me where she was going.

A few hours later, I needed to stop for the night. I offered to drop her somewhere, but she wouldn't tell me where I could leave her. I realized I was stuck with her and worried about how I was going to handle it. I told her I couldn't afford to get us separate motel rooms, so I would just get her a room, and I would sleep in the car.

She firmly refused. “You come in,” she said. There was a bed and a large couch so I told her to take the bed. I went out and bought a couple sandwiches for dinner. We ate in silence and wondered how I was going to get rid of her. It occurred to me that I could just sneak out after she was asleep. But I didn’t think that would work, and it seemed cruel.

I settled down on the couch, and she turned out all the lights. I thought she would get into bed, but I heard her move around, and I wondered if anything was wrong. I didn’t speak because I didn’t want to frighten her. I let her think I was already asleep. Then she went into the bathroom. She was in there for at least fifteen minutes. I heard water running and then she came out and got into bed.

It dawned on me that the clothes she wore were only ones she had. She probably washed them so they could dry overnight, so she would have to sleep naked. In the morning, I woke up and she seemed to be asleep. Then I heard her move, and I pretended to be asleep. She went into the bathroom and got dressed.

As soon as we were back on the road, I offered to buy her some clothes. I told her I would give her money, and she could go into the store and get whatever she wanted. She told me she wouldn’t go in unless I came along. She looked at several aisles of clothing but then selected a package of panties, and another one of very large men’s t-shirts, and that was all.

We got back into the car, and when we were on our way, she thanked me. I said, “You’re welcome,” and saw it as an opening to start a conversation. I still didn’t know her name, or where she wanted to go.

She still refused to talk. I needed a distraction, so put on some classical music, and she started to cry. I asked her what was wrong. She told me it was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

Around lunchtime, I stopped to get sandwiches. I got back to the car, handed her a sandwich, and she said, "Nora." I must have looked puzzled. "My name, it's Nora," she repeated.

"Nora, what?" I asked. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Just Nora." That was all we said for the rest of the afternoon.

When we stopped that night, she was okay with the lights. She wore her new underwear, and obviously felt comfortable around me. She wouldn't let me sleep on the couch. "It's your turn to have the bed," she said, and then curled up on the couch. I was grateful.

Next morning, as we started out, I tried to get her to tell me where she wanted me to drop her off. She just shrugged. Late in the afternoon, I tried again.

"Look, if you want to go somewhere, I'll buy you a bus ticket; maybe even a plane ticket, if that's what you need." She just said a quiet *no*.

She was still in the car when I pulled up in front of my house. She looked at it and smiled. "Looks nice," she said, and then opened the car door and started to get out. I turned to her and tried to explain why she couldn't come in.

"Wait. It wouldn't be right for you to stay with me. You're a young girl, and I'm a middle-aged man. I could see if my sister will let you sleep at her house."

"No! Please let me stay. I'll sleep on the couch." She pleaded. She was adamant, and hard to refuse. I wasn't sure if what I was doing was legal. I had picked up a runaway, and now I couldn't get rid of her. I also hadn't reported her to the police. What if someone was looking for her? Would somebody think I had abducted her?

The next day I went to see my sister Marjorie and told her the story. She was amazed that Nora was still with me. “You brought her all the way *here*? From God knows where? And she hasn’t robbed you, or seduced you yet?”

“This isn’t funny. I don’t know what to do with her.”

“You don’t want her to stay?”

“Of course not. I don’t know anything about her. What if she’s in some kind of trouble? What if I’m now in trouble? I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to leave her alone.”

“So you want me to take her, don’t you?” I nodded, pleadingly.

“I’ll pay room and board, if that helps.”

“I tell you what; bring her over to talk to me, and I’ll see how I feel about her.”

“Okay,” I said, “Maybe she’ll feel comfortable enough to trust you and we can find out more about her.”

“Maybe.”

Nora liked Marjorie, and we learned more about her over the next few days. She told us about the place she escaped from. It was called *Paradise*. Once she started to talk about it, she didn’t stop until she had told us a truly horrifying story that seemed impossible to believe. For her, and all the other girls, it was anything but a paradise.

When she was five, she was abducted her from her real home by some men who were part of a religious cult. They took her, and some other girls they also abducted, to a secret compound deep in the woods. They wanted to expand their numbers, so they planned to use these abducted girls for breeding stock. They took them young, so they

wouldn't have very clear memories of their former lives.

Their leader, Adam, was a charismatic fanatic. The girls were used for breeding as soon as they began to ovulate, regardless of how old they were. He 'married' the girls to his male followers just to maintain the illusion that there was some order and legality to it, but it was rape. All the men used all the girls. The goal was pregnancy. The girls earned extra privileges when they got pregnant, like not being raped again until their babies was born. The girls tried hard to get pregnant, so the men would leave them alone.

They started using Nora when she was around twelve, but she didn't get pregnant. At first, they weren't too concerned, because she was still young and the loss of a couple reproductive years didn't matter. They could get still plenty of babies out of her. But she continued not getting pregnant. Nobody knew why. They accused her of doing something to prevent pregnancy, but she wasn't doing anything.

She knew she was worthless to them if she couldn't breed, and became afraid that they were going to get rid of her. If they released her to the outside world, other people would find out about what they were doing. Adam accused her of witchcraft. She thought they just might kill her.

One day she was working in the field. The woman assigned to work with her injured herself and went to get first aid. Nora was alone. She realized it was her opportunity to escape. She left the field and started to walk. All she had were her clothes and shoes.

She went into the deep forest that surrounded the compound, and came out near a road. She had no idea how far she had gone. Luckily, I was driving toward her and she flagged me down. If she had waited longer for ride, the others might have caught her, taken her back to the compound, and punished her. That's why she wouldn't let

me drop her off anywhere. She wanted to get as far away as possible.

The three of us discussed what we should do about Paradise. I couldn't find it on any map. Marjorie thought we should try satellite views. Nora asked what they were. I explained how they could see any part of the earth from overhead. She was fascinated, and asked me to show her more. We looked at the heavily wooded area where I found her. If there was a compound, it was well hidden.

She had never seen a computer before. (It was possible Adam had one, but she wasn't sure.) She became fascinated by the stuff I showed her. I taught her basic computer skills; how to do searches, write documents, and save them, etc. She immersed herself in research. She wanted to catch up with the world.

She looked at anything she could find on-line about the area where she thought Paradise was located, but found nothing. We assumed they had camouflaged it so it couldn't be seen from above. There didn't even seem to be an access road that lead off the highway. We could find no local records. It was as if the place did not exist.

However, she found evidence of other compounds like Paradise. She was appalled that other such places existed.

After several weeks of unsuccessful research, Marjorie and I thought we should contact the local police and see what they knew. Nora was adamantly against it. We tried to persuade her that the fact that men were raping twelve-year-old girls made it mandatory that we do something to save them. Nora begged us not to take any action.

"But it's illegal!" Marjorie insisted. "And immoral!" Nora argued that the girls were taught

that what they were doing was for the good of the whole community, and they were married.

“So we should just do nothing?” I asked. Nora looked at both of us with an agonized look on her face.

“Get the cops to start a huge search from where you picked her up,” Marjorie argued. “Get planes and helicopters to fly over the forest until they find it.” She was adamant.

Nora pleaded. She had learned about the chaos that happened in other compounds when police came in to arrest the leaders. “Please don’t. If you turn them in, they’ll know it was me that reported them. They will find me, and take me back.”

We told her it was virtually impossible for them to find her. But she was smart. She had learned how much information was available online. She believed they *could* find her if they really wanted to. She begged for more time to do research. Marjorie was uncomfortable. “So you want to just leave those other girls where they are?” Nora nodded, and then looked at me for support.

“This might seem cruel, but I care more about Nora than the other girls. And they don’t seem to be in any immediate danger.” I could tell Marjorie was unhappy, but we took no action.

A year after I found her, we saw a TV report that the FBI had raided a radical religious compound. Nora recognized Adam and some of the others as police arrested them. She was furious with me. “You promised not to tell the police!”

“I didn’t, and neither did Marjorie. I don’t know how they found out,” I told her. She probably felt we somehow betrayed her, but she said nothing. As we watched the story unfold, day-by-day, I could see she was concerned, but her anger seemed to diminish. I didn’t realize there was an idea forming in her head.

Two weeks later, she asked me to take her back to Paradise. I was stunned. “I thought you were afraid.”

“I was, but the police got Adam and the other men. I want to testify against them. Besides, Paradise is my home. Those people are my friends. They know me, and I think they’ll trust me. I’m probably the only person who’s been outside. I can help them.”

I reluctantly agreed to take her back. We went to the local police and they directed us to Julia Morgan, the State official in charge. Nora told Julia about her escape. I could tell Julia was skeptical of Nora’s story. I guess others had seen the news and claimed to somehow be connected to Paradise.

Julia took us into the town. Several people recognized Nora and enthusiastically greeted her. She tried to assure everyone, especially the young girls, that the rapes wouldn’t happen again, and that they would be safe if they stayed and helped the community.

The State planned to relocate everyone and close the town, but that would be costly. Nora argued that the people should stay in Paradise. The community was self-sufficient; everyone had jobs. She wanted there to be an election for a town council. Julia was impressed with Nora’s ideas and said she would coordinate outside resources so that the people of Paradise could get the help they needed.

The second day she was back, Nora saw Huey. She was one of his wives.

“I heard you came back,” he said. “I missed you.”

Nora smiled.

“Huey, I didn’t run away because of you. I ran away because of all the *other* men.”

“I know. That’s what Clara told me.”

“Are Clara and Melissa here?” They were his other wives.

“No, they left. They wanted to get away. Julia helped them find someplace to go on the outside.” Huey seemed sad.

The first thing people decided to do was change the name of the town from Paradise to Edentown. Nora taught them about the world outside. She took a few of them away, so they could see it. They discovered computers and cell phones.

They set up committees to work out what they had by way of resources and what they needed. They figured they had several commodities they could sell or trade. They wanted to be as normal a small-town as they could be.

Nora decided to stay and asked me to live there with her. I wasn’t sure why. “This is my real home,” she said. “I belong here.” I was shocked. I didn’t know whether she wanted me so she could be near me, or because she needed me to help her people. After I thought it over, I decided not to stay.

They needed Nora; but they didn’t need me. More to the point, it was obvious *she* no longer needed me. I guess that is what hurt the most. For the past year, I had felt needed. I protected her, took care of her, and finally brought her back home. I guess I also fell in love with her, just a little. I think I assumed we would eventually become a couple, as unlikely as that seemed.

As I drove away, I knew I would never see her, or Edentown, again. Her life had come full circle; so had mine. I was alone again. My year with her seemed like a dream. I had been happy. Now I was going back to being sad.

Before she came into my life, I was sad because of my loneliness, which seemed permanent. I had felt sorry for myself, and the emptiness of my life. That was the sort of sadness that had no happy memories to offset it.

This was a new kind of sadness. I had lost Nora, but I still had my memories of her needing me; and I never wanted to forget that. That was paradise, for me.

In a sense, Nora and I each had our own paradise. She now lived in Edentown; and I lived in, I don't know, reality, I guess. I comfort myself by remembering that if there is any sort of paradise at all in our lives, for most of us it is, at best, temporary. Hardly anyone gets to live there forever.

Debbie

Chapter 1 of a novella called *Sister 'Hood*

Debbie was so tired that she dropped her keys twice before she could get the door unlocked. She pushed it open and slid her luggage into the dark hallway. As soon as she was inside, she slipped her shoes off and sighed as she felt the plush carpet under her feet. The apartment seemed quiet. She assumed Sandra was out.

Debbie turned a lamp on and looked at some mail piled on the kitchen counter. She realized she was so tired that she would be nonfunctional unless she first got some sleep, so she walked toward her bedroom. The plush carpet muffled her footfalls. She always liked the soothing silence the carpet seemed to create.

As she drew near Sandra's door, she heard noises coming from inside the bedroom. One of them was male. Sandy must be 'entertaining', she thought, and smiled. Well, that was good. The girl had been working hard for months. Debbie was glad Sandy was using the time Debbie was away to have some fun.

Then she heard a male voice say, "Oh, God, that's good!" Her heart froze. It was Ben's voice. Was Sandy 'entertaining' Ben? She stood quietly and waited for more sound to confirm or dispel her suspicion.

A moment later, she got more confirmation than she wanted. Sandra cried out, "Oh, Ben!" Debbie knew what she had to do.

She placed her trembling hand on the doorknob, but did not want to turn it, because she did not want to confirm what she suspected. The door quietly swung open. She saw Ben on top of Sandy. A second later, Sandy saw her. "Oh, my God! Ben, stop!" He grunted, and did not want to stop until he was ready. She pulled on his hair. "Stop! Now!" she ordered.

Debbie struggled to contain her rage. “I never would have thought either of you would do this,” she said. Ben’s head popped up.

“Deb?”

Sandra whispered, “Yes, Deb. Get off me, Ben.” He rolled off and turned toward Debbie. He immediately saw her rage, and felt her disappointment.

“You two...you’ve *betrayed* me. I’ve told you both how much trust means to me. If you wanted each other you could have just...well, *told* me.”

“You said you weren’t coming back until the weekend!” Sandra said, apologetically.

“My client was called home. I left early. I’m glad I did.” She paused, and waited for either of them to respond. “Aren’t you going to tell me *why?*” she asked.

“I came over to return some of your books,” Ben started to explain. “Sandra asked me to have a drink and stay to chat for a while.”

“This is not chatting, is it?” Debbie asked, coldly.

“Well, we got to talking,” Sandra explained. “I remembered what you’ve told me about how sweet he is, and how happy he made you. I started feeling warmer toward him. I began to see why you liked him so much. I was drunker than I thought. I decided to find out even more about him. I tried to get him interested in me.”

“Seems like you succeeded.”

“Don’t blame her. I was drunk too. I succumbed to her almost immediately.”

“Didn’t you stop to think about what you were doing?”

“Oh, yeah,” he answered eagerly, as if he

had suddenly found a way to soothe her. “We stopped, and talked about *you*.”

“Me?”

“But we were so drunk and turned on that we just agreed that we didn’t want to hurt you, and that if you never found out, it would be okay. Just this once.”

“But I’ve found out. It’s not okay.”

“I guess if we had been sober we would have realized that,” Sandra said, contritely. Debbie scowled at them. They averted their eyes, ashamed for what she had caught them doing.

“You know, when this happens in the movies, the victim does one of two things. She bursts into tears, and runs away; or she pulls out a gun and shoots somebody.” They sat bolt upright when she mentioned the gun. Neither would have thought such a reaction would occur to her.

“But I’m not going to run away, although I am crying. And I’m not going to shoot, mainly because I don’t have a gun.” They looked relieved. “Instead, I’m coming over there and I’m going to slap the shit out of both of you.”

She was at the bedside before they could object. She raised her arm to slap Sandra, who flinched before she was even touched. Debbie did not hold back. She smacked Sandra twice, and then went after Ben. She wanted to hit him so hard she would obliterate him from her life. She was afraid of how many slaps that might require so she stopped after a few, and then broke down and cried.

She sat on the bed. Sandy and Ben moved to put their arms around her. “Don’t!” she said sharply. They looked at each other. “I told you both how much trust means to me. But you both betrayed my trust. That’s not okay. I don’t ever want to see either of you again!” She jumped up and started out the door.

“Where are you going?” Sandra asked.

“I’m moving out.”

“What? Where to?”

“Jessie has an open apartment in her building. I’m going to see if I can get it.”

“But you don’t have to leave!”

“So *you*’ll leave, then?” Debbie shouted.

“But this was my place first!”

“Right. And it’s yours again.” She turned and walked toward the door, then paused when she reached the doorway. “I hope you two get married, and live in the suburbs, and have kids, and grow *fat*, and *old*, and *weak*, and *die* of a heart attack, or cancer, or *something*!” Then she stormed out.

She called Jessica after she had calmed down. Debbie asked about the apartment, and Jessica was eager to help her get it. They arranged a visit for the next day. Debbie had settled most of her stronger emotions by the time she saw the apartment, so she could focus on the place, which she liked immediately.

It was at the top of the building, on the third floor, and was bright and airy. Much different from the place she was living in with Sandra. There was no plush carpeting, but that was easy enough to correct. She told Jessica she wanted it. Jessica explained the residents’ group would first have to meet her for an interview. Debbie immediately became uneasy, but Jessica assured her she would easily pass the interview, and could probably move in a few days.

Her interview was a few nights later. She arrived early and only Jessica was there. They went into a large open space on the first floor and sat down on some folding chairs. The place looked a little shabby, but it seemed clean. Debbie hesitated

to ask, but she wanted to know what to expect. Jessica did not share very much information. Within a few minutes, three other women came in and Jessica introduced Debbie to Anna, Mags, and Kabira.

Anna seemed to be in her mid-forties, older than the others were. Her hair was gray and she wore one of those large flowered skirts that were in style ten or twenty years ago. She wore a huge man's shirt that hid her figure, but her casual dress and friendly smile made Debbie like her immediately.

Mags was younger, late twenties, probably. She was short, dark-haired, stocky and energetic. She did not smile much, but Debbie heard gentleness in her voice that seemed to contrast to her somewhat stiff bearing.

Kabira was a brown-skinned woman, probably from India or the Middle East. She had a lovely oval face and two dark eyes that seemed to flash. Debbie expected her to be a quiet, withdrawn sort of person. However, when Kabira spoke, Debbie was astonished by her perfect southern accent. Kabira grew up in the Deep South. Her mother was a professor at a southern university and her father was a carpet broker who traveled back and forth to Asia and India several times a year.

Linda came in late. She was a young, round black woman. Her skin looked like carved onyx, or ebony. She had a mellifluous voice that seemed perfect for radio. In fact, she worked in the radio industry; she answered phones. She hoped to get on the air someday, but not much had happened so far.

Her roommate, Zarina, was her cousin. She was a cop who was on a double-shift and could not attend.

The last woman was Nadine. She owned a group of antique/curio shops that looked like unique, quirky, one-of-a-kind places. However, she set them up and ran them according to a strict, detailed marketing plan. She hired women who could act like charming old ladies from

another time; they smiled, were always friendly, and addressed everyone as ‘honey’ or ‘sweetie’. They complemented the women customers on their clothing, and always said something motherly to the men. It worked. Her stores were all profitable.

Debbie’s interview and evaluation turned into a celebration as the women welcomed her to their co-op. She moved in a few days later.



Afterword

Thank-you for reading my stories. I hope you enjoyed them. Please feel free to leave a comment on my blog. RichardConti.blog

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