



The Prom Fart

By Richard Miller

Dedications and Acknowledgments

This story was written in loving memory of Kristy Czerwinski, the incredible girl who, so long ago, taught me what it means to be in love, and then later, what it means to lose that love. Lessons, both of them, that have stayed with me my entire life. So, to you, Kristy, I say this: even though you are gone now, the memories you and I created live on. They are alive and well inside my heart, and hopefully, with this story, they will endure for a long time to come. The magic of it all will not be lost to time. Thank you for having shared such a wonderful part of life with me.

A special 'thank you' goes to Mr. Herman Raucher, an amazing author, without whose influence, this story would not exist. Thank you, Herman, for the incredible art you have given to us all. I hope that I can one day live up to the impossible standards you have set.

A guy never forgets his first car.



Chapter 1

He walks into the study and slowly gropes his way to the desk in much the same way a blind man would, one without the benefit of a cane. Could have flipped a switch to light the room, but didn't. Too much light. Too harsh for this time of night. A soft glow suits him fine, so he tugs on the desk lamp's chain and is instantly rewarded with exactly that: a warm, incandescent globe of light that blankets the desktop and not much else, leaving most of the room lost to darkness.

Tonight, he is dressed in the same attire as he was last night – and the night before that, and the one before that, something his wife calls the 'uniform': white t-shirt, white boxers, white socks, and ugly slippers.

(sigh)

Yeah.

The slippers.

The ones that look like two wide-mouth bass that have swallowed his feet as if they were bait. A Christmas present from one of the kids, but he can't remember which. Doesn't matter. Either way, it's an obligation now, to wear them until the fish either 1) die, or 2) wear out, whichever comes first, at which time he will soak them in gasoline and toss them into the fireplace. His idea of a fish fry, and one that will not happen soon enough.

But fat chance of that happening.

Why?

"These bastards are tough. They'll never die, and they'll never wear out. Fucking things will outlive me, even."

Why?

"Because they hate me as much as I hate them. They'll live forever just to spite me."

It's a strange arrangement, he and the slippers, and unfortunately, *they* hold all the cards. They know he won't toss them on a whim or during a weak moment.

Why?

The phone call...

"Hey, Daddy!"

"Hey, baby girl."

"How's my favorite person in the whole world?"

"I'm fine, honey" (he lies)

"Still wearing the slippers?"

"You know it, pumpkin. Every night."

"NO WAY! You serious?"

"As cancer."

“Aaaaaaawwwwwwwww. I’m so glad. I finally managed to do something right for once in my life. I love you, Daddy!”

“Love you, too, sugar booger.”

(click)

Yeah.

The phone call.

(another deflated sigh)

“It’s just the sacrifices we make for the ones we love. No way I can lie to her about wearing them. Never lied to her before, and I’m not about to start now, so it’s hopeless. I’ve got no options here; I *have* to wear them. Would break her heart if I didn’t.”

He looks down at the satanic beasts, his feet buried up to the ankles in their mouths. The fish look back at him with their orange, demonic eyes. Eyes that tell him...

*“Get used to it, bitch. We ain’t going nowhere. We’re in it for the long haul!
BBBWWWWAAHHHAAAHAHAHHAHAHA!!”*

And the worst part is, he knows they’re right. He knows he’ll never be free of them. It’s a life sentence now. Just one more depressing fact to add to an already dismal and somewhat unremarkable life. His life. A life, it seems, where disappointment has long since become the standard.

But, as bad as the slipper situation is, it used to be worse. Much worse. Way back when their tails wagged every time he walked, like maybe five years ago. Mercifully, however, they finally stopped when the batteries died, but not both at the same time. The left one first, and then the right one maybe a year later.

And to him, this was a victory. That, even in defeat, you can still win. Sure, a small one, maybe, but in his book, a win is a win. What’s more is, he knows the whole thing could have been worse, like if the slippers could’ve talked. A chill runs through him as he pictures the scene in his head...

“Dude, buy some odor eaters, for fuck’s sake! This shit stinks! You’re killing us down here! And how ‘bout cutting the toenails once a year! What are you, a sloth or something? Gonna climb a tree and eat some leaves, are ya?”

So yeah, it could have been worse.

Kinda.

Chapter 2

The uniform.

And the thing that truly completes this domestic ensemble? The finishing touch?

The robe.

The blue, terry cloth bathrobe he's worn every night of his life for the past... Hell, he doesn't even remember how long he's had the fucking thing. So long that he doesn't remember ever *not* having it. Seems like forever. Doesn't even remember where it came from or how he came about owning it. Probably another Christmas present from the kids, but, in this case, one he loves and cherishes. One that has practically become part of who he is. And the best thing about it?

"It doesn't talk or wag anything."

So yeah, his beloved robe with its ancient collection of stains, and with each stain, a treasured memory. Well, mostly treasured, that is: baby vomit and poop; pet piss; 4th of July BBQ sauce; beer of every type and description... A veritable record of his long, somewhat sad, domestic existence. Could have used a trip to the laundry room ten years ago, but hasn't seen a washing machine yet, and probably never will.

Why?

For the same reason he loves it so much: his wife hates the thing, with a passion...

"Why don't you wash the fucking thing, already!?! Christ! It's got like a quarter-inch crust on it. I can't believe you can bend your arms!"

She waves a disgusted hand at it...

"And it's got...it's got...SHIT growing on it! Like mushrooms, or fungus, or something! And is your nose broken? The thing REEKS, for God's sake! If I were Stevie Wonder, I would know where you were in the house!"

"Like I said, a win is a win. And in my life, they are rare, the wins.

Rare, indeed."

For him, life at times seems like a never-ending series of defeats. Be that as it may, he still tries. He never gives up hope.

Why?

Because, in his heart, he wants to believe that his life can't possibly be one long, continuous losing proposition. So, as rare as they may be, the occasional 'win' gives him hope.

“And without hope, what else do I have? I mean, what’s left?”

And the thought of losing that hope is a little more than he can bear, which is why he’s always quick to defend the robe and its permanent crust...

“Gives it character. You know, personality. Makes it stand out from the rest” (as if he attends conferences where blue terry cloth robes are a dress code).

So, he defends it, the uniform, and with the uniform, the robe. Because with the robe, there is always the hope of the occasional win.

“It happens sometimes. Maybe not often, but sometimes it does. Sometimes I win.”

And he thinks...

“So maybe my life isn’t as bad as what I make it out to be after all.”

But then he looks down at the fish slippers...

“Or, maybe it is.”

Chapter 3

With the light situation handled, he opens the top right drawer of the desk and begins the search. He knows he's seen it and is pretty sure that it's here, in the drawer, as best he can remember. He's looking for the spare AAA Auto Club Membership card, Emergency Roadside Service. It's for his wife, Ellen. She managed to lose hers and now needs a replacement.

"Truth be told, it probably got sucked down into that black hole she calls a purse, and she's too lazy to look for it."

But he'll never instigate *that* argument. Not on your life. It's a battle he can't possibly win, and the consequences of losing are too dire. Much too dire. Namely, no anniversary sex this year. Just like last year. And, like the slippers, she holds all the cards. Well, maybe not cards, per se. It's more like 'pussy dangling on a stick', so to speak, so yeah, she holds all the 'cards'.

Fact of the matter is, he was supposed to look for it a month ago, but is only just now getting around to it...

"Look, it's a long honey-do list. Longer than most. I know, we compare them. Could be you're just a little too demanding."

"Could be you're just a little too useless! Must not want your anniversary sex this year, just like last year. Or have you forgotten?"

He cringes at the mere sound of the words, at the very thought - missing his once-a-year obligatory sexual favor, just like he did last year. An all too painful memory that still festers in his mind to this day. Punished because he made the fatal mistake of doing the unthinkable, doing the one thing you NEVER do in a relationship...

He told the truth.

And as every man knows - or should know - that's the one thing you never do, EVER. It has NO place in a marriage, NONE! It is good for one thing, and one thing only - grief of the worst kind. The very worst kind, as he so unfortunately found out in an incident that still burns inside his memory to this day, remembering it as if it happened just this morning...

* * * * *

She bounces into the living room where her husband is sitting in his easy chair, completely absorbed by the latest issue of Car and Driver magazine, a publication he has subscribed to for over twenty-five years now...

"Honey!"

He replies without looking up, unwilling to divert his attention from the full color layout of Ferrari's latest automotive wonder, the new GT 308. Red, of course...

"Yeah."

"What do you think about my new hairstyle? You haven't said a word about it since I had it done!"

He finally looks up at his wife standing there in front of his recliner, hands perched on her hips, tapping a foot, and patiently awaiting her husband's attention...

"Well, that's because I wasn't sure about it until I got the phone call."

"Phone call? What phone call?"

"From that Dutch boy. You know, the one that stuck his finger in the dyke?"

"The Dutch boy? Why would he call?"

"Wanted me to tell you something."

"Tell me something? Tell me what?"

"He wants his hair back."

* * * * *

"OK, so maybe I could have said it better, like..."

(leaping from his easy chair, dropping the latest issue of Car and Driver as he does)

"OH MY GOD!!! LOOK AT YOU! I can't believe my eyes! You look...you look...INCREDIBLE!! You're stunning! It's like I'm looking at Sharon Stone's twin sister or something! Oh, and by the way, did you lose weight? Your clothes look like they're hanging on you!"

Cha-ching!

"And my reward? A job. Not for me, mind you, but rather, for my poor, mostly unemployed penis. A blowjob. A job that has to last me a good long time, like, maybe forever.

But yeah, that's what the smart guy would have said. And you know what? I used to be smart, I was. But marriage has a way of changing things, and always for the worse, it seems."

The whole thing causes him to stop and think...

"My poor penis. Must think I hate it or something. The thing is, it wasn't always unemployed. There was a time when it could barely keep up with the workload, I remember. But like I said, marriage changes things."

It's a perplexing situation, to say the least. A conundrum, even: owning something that, for so many years, provided him with some of the best, if not most memorable, times in his life, only to hang listless and dormant now, and about as useful as an inflatable dart board. Still, it somehow manages to cling to his body, steadfast in its reluctance to leave. It sticks around for no other reason than to serve as a cruel reminder of what his life once was

as compared to what it has become; a haunting echo, as it were, from the days when his life was good. In time, evolution will resolve the situation, the way evolution does, by gradually shrinking the unused organ until gone, but that takes millions of years, and he just doesn't have that kind of time, so he considers his options; namely, finding a surgeon and having the thing removed. Would make sense, but more than that, it would make his life so much easier since you can't miss using something you no longer own - you know, knowing sex is no longer an option?

"And you know what? I'd do it, I would. But as sure as I do, she'd complain about that, even..."

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Sit on the toilet and pee like a woman. That's so embarrassing! (like she's going to invite the neighbors over to watch him urinate). Why can't you stand and pee like a man, like Roger, Diane's husband?"

"Told you, had my dick removed."

"What? Why?"

"Useless baggage. One less thing to get cancer and kill me. WAIT! How do you know how Roger pees?"

"Er... Diane, she told me. Yeah, that's right. She told me."

"Oh, that's just great. Like I can't connect *those* dots.

Fuck!

And the really sad part? I did have it removed, and what do you want to bet I would have contracted dick cancer and be out of my misery by now.

Fuck!"

"Just kidding about having it removed - my dick, that is. I still have it. Why, I'm not sure. That 'hope' thing, I guess. Like, maybe one year I'll actually do something to earn my anniversary sex, in which case, having a penis will come in handy.

So yeah. That hope thing."

Chapter 4

I never did get dick cancer, so I'm still here. Still alive, still suffering from terminal domestication.

And I find little comfort in any of it.

Well, except for one thing - the dog, Max. He still loves me. I guess because I'm the only one who feeds him, but that's beside the point. The fact is, he loves me, and that's what counts.

Well, the kids love me too, but only when they need something - money, borrow the car, co-sign a loan, bail money - something. But Max? He simply loves me. Of course, he loves me more when I fill his food bowl, but that's to be expected. He's a dog.

And there he is now, Max, lying in his usual spot in front of the fireplace, waiting for someone to light it. He loves that - lying in front of a warm, toasty fire, all nice and cozy. Only problem is, there hasn't been a fire since February, and here it is mid-August, the height of the New Orleans' summer. Won't be a fire lit for another three months, at least.

Still, he waits.

Not exactly the smartest pup in the litter, if you know what I mean. It's either that or he's extremely patient. Haven't figured out which.

I call to him...

"Here, Max! Come here, boy! Come on! (slapping his hand on his thigh) Come on, now!" (whistling, clapping both hands)

But the dog doesn't budge. The only thing that *does* moves is his eyes. He gives his master a sideways glance, a food check, but there is none, so he continues the all-important task of weighting that section of carpet down. It's his one talent in life, lying on the carpet the way he does. It's his way of earning his keep by ensuring the carpet doesn't lift and cause unsightly wrinkles or bugles, a known problem with the carpet in our house...according to him.

"OK, so he only loves me when I have food. Or, I dunno, matches to light the fireplace. Still, that's something, and something is better than nothing.

In my book, anyway.

Like I said, a win is a win.

And they're so very rare these days, the wins."

Chapter 5

He searches, and searches, and once he's done, he searches some more. He shuffles the mess and junk of the drawer first this way, then that, from one side to the other, lifting folded papers, opened envelopes, personal-sized address books from the bank, coupon books, still flat coin sleeves - basically, every standard article of drawer junk ever invented or devised, but no membership card. Yet he knows that it's here, somewhere, so he continues to rummage through the clutter and the mess.

And that's when he spots it.

Well, not exactly 'it'. Not the AAA membership card he's looking for, but something else. A vaguely familiar corner, like maybe the corner of a photograph. He thinks he knows what it is, so he carefully exhumes it from the rest of the drawer clutter, taking care not to damage it as he gently frees it from the pile of rubble.

Sure enough, it's a photograph, a 5 X 7 color. He lifts it from the drawer, holding it with the hand that isn't holding the coffee cup, and just stares at the image in front of him, an image he was woefully unprepared to see tonight - tonight, or any other night, for that matter. His reaction is instant: the shoulders slump and the face sags, while the rest of him deflates like an air mattress with a hole in it, a big one, causing him to look something like a plant wilting in fast motion. Suddenly, the reason he came into the study to begin with no longer mattered; its urgency lost now to something far, far more important, to a priceless moment in time. A moment that, when it happened, was the most important of his life up to that point; an event so critical to his life at the time, so pivotal to his entire future, he finds it hard to believe that he had almost forgotten that it ever happened.

That is, until now.

And there it is, that priceless moment of his youth, so perfectly captured and preserved by the photo he now holds in his hand. The year? 1977. Thirty-two years ago, almost to the day. A long time ago. A very long time. A lifetime, in fact. But as long ago as it's been, he recalls every detail of that moment as if it happened just yesterday.

What a night.

What a memory.

What a wonderful time to be alive.

He sets his coffee mug on the desk and grabs the high-back desk chair next to him, slowly lowering himself into the seat with all the articulation of a middle-aged man suddenly turned old.

And getting older by the minute.

He sits in his chair, in the quiet of the study, alone, and just stares at the photo, completely transfixed by the image it contains; an image from a time in his life he had almost forgotten. A memory, like so many others, that had faded over time, year after passing year, to the point that, if not for the photo, would have been simply lost in the clutter and noise of his life. A memory that, if not for the photo, he would find hard to believe ever really happened.

But it did.

It did happen, and the photo in his hand serves as undeniable proof of that fact...

"Christ, that was a long time ago."

His brows furrow, and the middle-age creases in his forehead deepen even more as he struggles with the reality of it all...

"Eight, ten years, maybe, but thirty-two? Where? Where did they all go?"

He grabs the mug and takes a sip, then leans further back into the chair. He lowers the hand holding the photo and directs his gaze, instead, to the murky darkness of the room. He's still transfixed, only not so much on the photo now, but, rather, that period of his life...

"Can it really be that long ago?"

He suddenly feels ancient. Ancient and a little defeated. A lot defeated, actually, and he wonders...

"Where did it all go? The years, the fun, the excitement?"

The photo is of him and his wife, Ellen, at her high school prom. He was eighteen, she seventeen. The photo was taken by the photographer commissioned for the event, and quite the photo it is. Timeless and perfect. Perfect in every way. Perfect lighting, perfect background, perfect tux, gown, hair, smiles... All so very perfect, and on such a perfect, magical evening.

And all of it so very long ago.

"My God, where did it all go? What happened to it all? To the magic, the dreams... What happened to the romantic dinners, the midnight movies, the concerts, the beautiful summer nights at the lake... Where? Where did it all go?"

Gone.

That's where it went.

All of it.

And all of it, so long ago. A lifetime ago, it seems. His lifetime.

The thought of it all saddens him, deeply. His heart sinks, and a lump begins to form in his throat. He gently, and ever so lovingly, sets the photo on the desk and then cradles the coffee mug he's been neglecting with both hands. He leans back even further into the chair's cushion and brings the mug to his lips. He takes a long, thoughtful sip, and as the warm liquid travels down his throat, his mind begins to wander. And wander, it does, like some kind of time machine, as it begins to rewind back through the years to another place and time in his life. He thinks about that night, the best night of his life, and hers; a magic moment for both of them, now forever frozen and captured by the photograph lying on the desk.

A photograph.

A reminder of what that was like, that period in life. To be young, and at an age where your only goal is to simply enjoy living, to explore life for every wondrous thing it has to offer - every emotion, every feeling, every adventure and experience... The wonders of youth and the coming of age.

It's a time in your life when, by definition of age, you are an adult, but in namesake only. Realistically, you're still just a kid to the world. You are far too young to be taken seriously by anyone or anything, and you're still a few years away from having your first credit card, even. Your job is a temporary one in which you earn just enough money to cover beer, drug, and dating expenses with a little left over for a car note and insurance. Mom and Dad

take care of college tuition when the time comes, but not right now. You just finished twelve years of school, and it's time for a break. Not much, just a few years. You know, so you can have a little fun and enjoy your youth before you become old and responsible, and strapped by a mortgage, kids, PTA meetings, career paths, struggling for promotions.... In other words, adulthood.

Yeah, adulthood.

It's a permanent affliction; a place that, once you enter, you can never leave. That door closes behind you for good.

It's a point in life that, when crossed, changes everything - the fun, the parties, friends, endless summer days... Everything that makes up the carefree days of youth, all gone now. All gone and forever lost to time; incredible moments of your life that exist now only as memories.

And sometimes...just sometimes...those memories are captured in a photograph.

He lets out a long, sad sigh as he takes another sip from the cup and does his best to make some kind of sense of it all...

"How did I let it all slip away? How did I not see this coming? At what point did I contract terminal domestication?"

He picks the photo up again and studies it, almost hypnotically.

He remembers what a knockout she was and what a dashing figure he cut. Together, they were the teenage idea of the American dream, what life as an American is all about at that age. You get that one, maybe two years you can call your own and enjoy your youth, your only purpose at that point being to live life to its fullest and experience everything it has to offer; to have fun and sow your oats.

To simply be young.

And for him, that part of life started there, that night, in that incredible moment captured by the photo he now holds, Ellen's prom. The best night of his life, and hers.

But the fact is, it was a night that almost wasn't. A night that came so very close to never happening.

So very close.

* * * * *

At this point, I have to stop for a moment. Before I continue with the story, I have to tell you a little about Ellen, my wife. And for the life of me, I don't even know where to start. But I need to.

How can I explain Ellen to you? Hell, I can barely explain her to myself, even after all these years. But it's important that you understand her, or else you won't really understand the story. Not for what it really is - a tale of teenage horror and crisis; a single moment in your life, at an early age, whose outcome could completely alter your entire future and change the whole trajectory of your very existence.

But I don't know that I can explain her, or adequately describe her, even. I don't know if I'm that good a writer - if *anybody* is, for that matter. The best thing I can do is to at least try. No promises, though, just my best effort. That's what you get.

So here goes...

Chapter 6

Ellen - to me, anyway - was one of, if not 'the', luckiest person I ever knew, or ever hoped to know. She was like that. Had it all. Everything a girl could ever want or ask for. But you'd never know it, not listening to her. Always complaining, and, for sure, never satisfied. But that's just the nature of people, I suppose. No one is ever satisfied. No one, it seems, is ever content or happy with the hand life has dealt them. We're always going to find something to complain about, no matter what.

And that's just how people are.

And this was true of Ellen, only more so than most people. And the irony of it all is that she had the least number of reasons to complain of anyone I knew. Almost without exception, any other girl on the planet would have killed to be her, to have what she had.

And that's the simple truth of the matter.

Because when you stripped it all away, Ellen's only legitimate complaints were reduced to the ones we all have - why can't pizza promote fat loss, or why can't tans be permanent? Those kinds of things.

But, yeah, she had it all: great house in one of the best neighborhoods - a neighborhood every kid wanted to be from, great family, family life, and a great dad, one who worshipped and spoiled her. A dad who bought her a horse when she was fourteen. And her first car? A brand new, 1980 Z28 Camaro. Lemon yellow with all the extras, including the expensive graphics package option. One of the true muscle cars when they were still full-size.

And college? While I was practically living out of my car, she had a nice, fully furnished, one-bedroom apartment located in the nicest part of the city. No dorm for this coed. No sir.

And the girl herself? In a word?

Stunning.

In two words?

Stunningly stunning.

A sexy, honey blonde with glacier blue eyes. Perfect teeth, ass, legs, hair, tits, lips, smile, nose... We're talking about a girl who could make a lawn bag with head and arm holes look like a fashion statement.

Jaw-dropping, eye-popping, drop-dead gorgeous and sexy.

But she was more than just looks.

A straight 'A' student from grade one to college senior, it took her a little less than three years to graduate from college, like maybe two and a half. After graduating, she took a year off, then returned to school to earn her master's degree. From there, she left college for a six-figure job in corporate America.

She was intelligent, alright. Genius IQ. She had - I want to say an 'incredible mind', but I think 'interesting' would be a more appropriate description. Both words apply, but for the moment, let's go with 'incredible'.

Here's the thing - incredible can go either way, incredibly good or incredibly bad, and in Ellen's case, (purses his lips, puffs his cheeks and blows) I don't know. She was somewhere in the middle, I guess. At times her intellect was

a good thing, and then at other times, it was a bad thing, and still, at other times, it was a *really* bad thing. Ellen's mind simply did not work the way mine and yours do. In fact, I would go so far as to say that her mind was a life form in its own right. A scary one at that.

It's like this...

On one hand, you have Ellen - incredible, sexy, beautiful Ellen - and on the other hand, you have Ellen's mind. And while I never once had a problem with Ellen - that simply wasn't possible - I had all *kinds* of problems with her mind. Anybody would. At times, it was a thing to be marveled, and at other times, it was a thing to be feared, the stuff bad dreams are made of. Real bad. And the worst part is, you never knew which version would show up, the marvel or the nightmare.

But the problem here is that you can't separate the two. It's a package deal. Where you find one, you find the other, the 'one' being Ellen herself, and the 'other' being Ellen's mind, and to have the one, you have to take the other. No choice, it's a matched set. Like I said, a package deal.

And while I'm on the subject, there's one other thing I need to mention about Ellen: she didn't attend a normal high school like you and me. She was enrolled in a magnate school. That is to say, a school for the intellectually gifted.

Now, ordinarily, I would say that this was a good thing, her going to a special school and all, simply because she would be around her own kind, kids like herself, geniuses. But this wouldn't be completely accurate - that she would be around kids like herself. At least not in one sense...

Ellen didn't fit the mold.

You see, all the other kids pretty much looked the way you would expect them to - dorky, geeky, bleach-white complexions, bad hair, thick glasses, pocket protectors, and, for sure, no sense of clothing fashion or style. In short, Alfred E. Newman without the cool factor.

But that wasn't Ellen.

Far cry from it.

Intellectually, maybe, but that's where all similarities end. Physically, she was a round peg in a square hole among the nerds. She simply didn't belong. Which was sad, in a way, because even among the misfits, Ellen was a misfit.

You have to understand that at that age, kids fall into two general categories:

- 1) the cool kids
- 2) the nerds - the not-so-cool kids.

I was a category one, a cool kid. Long hair, motorcycle, drug-fueled - a real card-carrying member of the counterculture. Pure anti-establishment and typical of the disease that affected the wayward youth of the day.

That was me.

And then there was Ellen.

Her body and looks were a one, but stood in stark contrast to her mind, which was decidedly a two.

Quite the paradox.

The whole thing was odd, to say the least. She didn't fit in with the cool kids and didn't fit in with the nerds, which forced a category three into existence, a category in which there was but one member, Ellen. And I can't imagine what that must be like, other than to say that, in a sense, she was all alone in the world.

At least on the inside. On the outside, she had me. And I had her, and life was good.

...almost.

The fly in the ointment? Double dating. An occurrence that happened all too often. I say 'too often' because we only double-dated with her friends, never mine. Mainly because her friends were respectable and parent-friendly, whereas my friends were a bunch of mug shots waiting to be taken, future 'most wanted' flyers, you might say.

Now, the problem with Ellen's friends, which, by the way, were limited to her schoolmates, is that these kids were wound too tight. Too tight for their own good or anyone else's, for that matter. To say these kids were high-strung and oversensitive would be a tremendous understatement, like saying Hitler had humanitarian issues.

And this was awkward, to say the least, on the double dates. For example, trying to strike up a conversation with one of them while waiting for our food to arrive at a restaurant. I never once had a clue as to what any of them were trying to tell me. I saw their lips move, but that was about it. These kids communicated in a language all their own, and one completely foreign to me. So, most of the time, I would simply smile and nod, never knowing if they had asked me a question and were waiting for a response. Like I said, I never had a clue as to what they were saying, and in all honesty, never wanted to know. In fact, I always worried about that - the day these kids started making sense to me.

And this is where I cannot adequately emphasize the importance of heavy drug use, of which without, the double dates with Ellen's friends would simply not have been possible.

And that's the beauty of drugs. Simply put, there is nothing a drug-induced stupor cannot see you through, and that includes Ellen's double dates - *especially* Ellen's double dates. They were ssssooooo not a problem.

For me, anyway.

Now, an interesting side note here. Sad, but interesting.

One day, many years later, mind you, maybe like ten years or so, I came across an article in USA Today that actually mentioned Ellen's high school by name, but in a bad way. The article was in regard to the high rate of high school suicides that occur in the country every year, and sadly enough, Ellen's high school held the top spot, #1 on the list, the highest suicide rate in the country.

And it's a fact that I can personally attest to. In the two years I dated Ellen while in high school, four of her friends committed suicide. Friends we had double-dated with. People I actually knew.

I didn't get it then, just like I don't get it now. But like I said, these kids were wound way too tight, and at some point, something's gotta give.

Now, the good thing about my and Ellen's dating years is that we only double-dated maybe 40% of the time, which meant that 60% of the time, I had Ellen all to myself, big tits and all.

* * * * *

I met Ellen when I was seventeen, almost eighteen, and had just graduated from high school. She was sixteen with two years left to go. I hated my high school, which was different from Ellen's, obviously. Hated it so much, in fact, that I refused to participate in any of the functions, and this included the senior prom. Which left us with Ellen's.

And thank God for that.

Because that one night - Ellen's prom - left an indelible mark on the two of us that would last a lifetime. A lifetime together that nearly didn't happen, and all because of a fart, of all things.

A fart.

The 'prom fart', as I call it.

But more on that later. First, I need to finish telling you about Ellen, Ellen 101, so to speak. And forget 102, because you don't even want to know.

* * * * *

Now, as far as girlfriends go, when you're seventeen, Ellen is the living end, the veritable girl of your dreams. She was, I'd say, as good as good could ever get.

For the most part, anyway.

I say 'for the most part' because the old adage is true, the one that says that there are no free lunches in life. Everything has a cost, and a HVG (high-value girlfriend) is no exception to the rule.

And the lesson to be had here, boys and girls, and you folks watching at home, is this: you want to drive a Ferrari? Then bring lots of cash, because, make no mistake, the price of admission is steep. Exactly how steep, I really didn't know. Not at first, anyway. But it didn't take long to figure it out, and by the time I fully understood what the cost was, it was too late. I was in too deep. I had already crossed that point, the point of no return. I was gone, and there was no coming back. The reason being that once you drive a Ferrari, a Ford or Toyota will never do. Never again. You are ruined for life.

And this was as true for every red-blooded American boy as it was for me. There is simply no going back, ever. It's just the way we're wired, just one of the many unwritten rules that apply to every teenage guy's world.

But, for the benefit of those of you reading this that don't quite understand this dilemma, I will elaborate some and I'll use the car analogy to make it all a little easier for you to grasp, since cars are something we can all relate to.

Read on...

Chapter 7

Cars and women.

The two loves in a man's life, with boats coming in a close third. But basically, it's cars and women. And it's funny how the two have so much in common, and yet, at the same time, are nothing alike. To the point that you cannot replace one with the other. Not yet, anyway. But who knows, maybe that will change in the future, but as it stands now, at a minimum, a guy tries to keep one of each in his life; which brings up the basic difference between the two: while a woman is a 'nice to have' item, sometimes, a car is an absolute necessity, a 'gotta have' thing. No getting around it. Too many guys live without a woman in their lives, but I assure you, each one of them indeed owns a car.

And how many guys do I know would pick their car or truck over the woman? You know, if you put a gun to their head and made them choose?

That's right.

And why not? I mean, cars don't have periods, no PMS, don't cheat on you, never lie, don't give you ulcers, don't talk back, don't get jealous, don't mind if you look at other cars, don't preach to you about your drug use, don't complain when you stay out all night with the guys, are always 'ready to go' when you are, don't come with in-laws, don't have other cars telling them what a piece-of-shit you are... Jesus, the list goes on and on and on.

So, can you blame a guy?

Really?

Yeah, that's what I thought.

The defense rests.

But anyhow, that's kind of how I've always viewed women, in a way, in respect to cars.

This is how I see it...

You see, on one hand, you have the Toyotas, the DADs (dime-a-dozen girls), as I call them, the girls next door. That type.

And these girls, the DADs, are low maintenance, and actually, I'd go so far as to say NO maintenance. None. No changing the oil, checking the tires, doing tune-ups...nothing. Maintenance free. You just hop on and ride them for everything they're worth, like you rented the things. Rent-A-Bitch, if you will. Or, Date-A-Bitch, for those of you whose sensibilities are easily offended (then why are you reading this story, for God's sake?).

And you ride these girls long, and you ride them hard, and you keep riding them until their wheels finally fall off. That, or they simply break down - tapped out, spent, and basically, just plain used up. In other words, nothing left to offer. They've given it their all, bless their hearts, and there's nothing left to offer.

And when that happens, they finally give out, you simply coast 'em to the side of the road – engine smoking, tires wobbling, radiator steaming and hissing, transmission rattling, rear bumper half hanging off and shooting sparks - and park the ol' gal.

Then, go find another one that still has a few good miles left in her...er, 'it'.

Repeat as needed.

And that's easy enough to do. They're everywhere, the DADs, and they're cheap. Plenty to be found.

And that's the DADs, the Toyotas.

And the thing is, if that's all you ever drove, Toyotas, then you would never once miss the pleasure of, say, a Ferrari, for example. You have nothing to compare to, no frame of reference other than to maybe, on occasion, see one going down the road. And when this happens - you actually see one - you simply admire it from afar and daydream about what it must be like to actually own one, thinking maybe one day you yourself will know what that's like.

But for most of us, the Toyota guys, that day never comes. So, instead, we do the only thing we *can* do. We turn to the magazines. I'm talking about magazines like Car and Driver, for example, that let us ogle these magnificent creatures the only way we can, with our eyes, making the car magazines something of a National Geographic inasmuch as they show us places we will never be.

But it's not just the cars the guys admire from afar; it's women, too. Guys turn to magazines like Playboy and Penthouse for the same reason – they show us places we'll never be.

And even though we will never actually 'be' there, per se, it doesn't stop us from daydreaming and fantasizing, staring endlessly at the glossy, color pages that let us imagine ourselves behind the wheel or between the legs.

But magazines don't keep you warm at night, or hug you back, so yeah, the Toyotas. Good, dependable transportation you can count on. Not only do they serve an important purpose in life, but I can't imagine having gotten through my teenage years without them.

Then, there is the Ferrari. The legend in both performance and style. Christ! You never even have to actually drive the fucking thing. If all you ever did was sit in the garage every night and stare at it, admiring its exquisite lines and curves, knowing the potential of its powerful V12 power plant, that's enough. Not only has it earned its keep, but more importantly, that special place in your heart, as well. In fact, I once read somewhere that exotic car owners rarely put more than 2,000 miles on their machine, so, enough said. I rest my case.

And that, my friend, is the high value girlfriend, the HVG. In other words, the Ferrari. And that was Ellen, the car dreams are made of. My dreams.

Now, the problem with all of this is that once you have owned a Ferrari, you're ruined, for life. You can never again go back to the mundane world of rental cars. In other words, the DADs. It's just not possible. And even if you somehow found a way to do that, go back, you're only fooling yourself. Because deep inside, you know - and will always know - who your one true love really is. Because, sadly enough, you can never forget them. You can never truly erase them from your mind or remove them from your heart. They are a permanent part of you now, and always will be.

And this can be a problem, but only in one regard – you somehow manage to lose your Ferrari. If this happens, you will no doubt have to return to the world of DADs, and for the rest of your life, you will live that lie, the one where you tell yourself that you love your Japanese car; love it every bit as much as you did your fine Italian import.

And the biggest mistake you could ever make? Somehow accidentally mentioning the Ferrari to the Toyota. You know, like maybe talking in your sleep or something? Maybe accidentally mentioning it during a conversation? BIG mistake, with a capital 'I fucked up'. A mistake you will pay for the rest of your life.

Fortunately, most guys manage to hang on to their Ferraris, at least that I'm aware of. Still, sometimes the unthinkable happens, and some poor soul manages to lose his beloved car, having somehow let it slip through his fingers. And that's when you begin living the lie, the Toyota lie, as I call it.

And what is the Toyota lie, exactly?

That's where you stand in the driveway, can of wax in one hand, polishing cloth in the other, and tenderly, ever so lovingly, caress and rub the Toyota's bland, everyday finish. Only, it's not the Toyota you are rubbing. Not at all. It's the red Ferrari you once owned that you are polishing to exquisite perfection. Caressing it, stroking it, rubbing it, running your hands over every inch of its sexy, seductive body panels... If only in your mind.

And you know what? The Toyota need never know otherwise.

Yep, living the lie.

However, for as long as you own a Ferrari, this is never an issue, going back. It's not even a thought you dare entertain. Way too scary, although, from time to time, you may experience the occasional bad dream. You know the one, where you're stuck in prime-time traffic in your dull, twelve-year-old Toyota Corolla with its oxidized gray paint, plain black vinyl floors, and a pine tree air freshener that needed replacing eight months ago.

You know the dream I'm talking about. It's the same bad dream all of us Ferrari owners have at some point. We've all been there, and it goes something like this...

Chapter 8

The nightmare...

So there you sit, the hottest day of the summer, stuck in gridlock traffic and wishing your A/C would somehow magically start working again. But why should it? It hasn't worked in over three years, so why would today be any different? Frustrated, you then make the mistake of looking out over the sea of stationary cars surrounding you and realize that not a single one has moved in the last fifteen minutes or so, causing you to wonder what, exactly, separates prime time traffic from a shopping mall parking lot at Christmas.

But that's easy. Cars in the parking lot tend to move more often.

But you're bored. The woman you were trying to flirt with in the car next to you has flipped you off. Several times. And the sad thing is, she's fat and ugly, something you normally consider low-hanging fruit.

But not today, so your ego tries to deflate even more, but that's just not possible. And making matters worse is the fact that the car's radio only picks up AM stations now, having lost its FM capabilities at about the same time the springs in the driver's seat began poking through the worn-out upholstery foam. So, rather than listen to Paul Harvey drone on and on, you decide to pass the time by doing 'stuck in traffic' stuff like singing 99 Bottles Of Beer On The Wall, only, you don't feel much like singing. So instead, you try to think of another comparison...

"Prime time traffic versus...versus...Airport Long Term Parking!"

But again, too easy. Same answer. Cars in long-term parking tend to move more often.

At that point, you simply give up. And since none of the power windows work, you have no other choice but to sit in the hellish heat of the all-black interior and simmer in your own pools of sweat. That's about the time you begin to think back to better days. Days, for example, when you used to cruise this very same stretch of road in your beautiful, red convertible. A Ferrari Testa Rossa, no less, the Miami Vice car. The one Sonny drove.

Gone now.

Along with your prestigious, six-figure job in corporate America. Both, casualties of an out-of-control cocaine habit, a story you have recounted time and time again at the local FLA (Ferrari Losers Anonymous) chapter meetings, your way of helping others avoid the horrible mistakes you have made. At least that's what you tell everyone, but actually, you're just there for the free donuts and coffee. Things that, for you, are something of a luxury these days.

And that's where you find yourself tonight, at the local loser meeting, eating loser donuts, and drinking loser coffee. And this - consuming the loser refreshments - somewhat obligates you to participate in the group, so you do. You stand, flatten the curled edges of your 'Hi, My Name Is' sticker, and proceed to give your testimony to the other sad, pathetic ghouls that haunt these late-night support groups. And it's always the same thing. Always the same sad collection of faces week after week, with everyone sitting in their usual spot within the circle of folding metal chairs. And all of this taking place in the middle of some dimly lit, mostly dark, and always gloomy high school gym.

They chew their stale donuts, the ghouls do, washing them down with coffee that's known better days, and listen on as you tell your story of woe...

"Hi, everyone. My name is Fred and I...I... Well, I lost my Ferrari."

The members respond in unison with a somewhat tired and catatonic...

"Hi Fred!"

The fact is, you are there tonight because you were given a special invitation to join this cozy little gathering; only, what you don't know is that your invitation was by design. That is to say, you were invited for a very specific reason.

Because, you see, of all the losers in the group, you win the prize, top loser. You are there for the expressed purpose of making all the other losers feel better about themselves and their own miserable lot in life. Of course, no one tells you this because you're not a real member. Not really. What you are is a motivational tool, the ultimate example of 'don't be this guy'.

And this is your life now, the life of a one-time Ferrari owner turned Toyota driver.

Mercifully, that's about the time you wake from the dream.

Or was it a dream?

Probably, but you're not taking any chances. Like a maniac, you race through the living room, through the kitchen, and finally, to the door leading to the garage and throw it open. And there she is, right where you left her, all safe and sound. It was only a bad dream after all. Relieved, you walk up to her, and ever so lovingly, give her a kiss on her gleaming, freshly waxed and polished, red hood. And then you tell her again just how much you love her.

And then you sleep just fine.

It was just a dream.

A bad one, sure, but still, only a dream.

Just the same, you will always live in the shadow of that fear - the day you lose your job as an investment banker due to company downsizing, and suddenly find yourself working at Marty's Car Wash Emporium for minimum wage, the car wash you once used. The place you would bring your own beloved Ferrari to have pampered and spoiled.

But not anymore.

Goodbye, Ferrari, hello used rental car. A Toyota, no less.

And at that point, life will never be good again. Sure, you could endure the loss of the job and income, but what really hurts? The real dagger in your heart?

Losing the love of your life.

Repossessed.

And that hurts. It hurts because you can never get her - or 'it', rather- out of your heart, no matter how much you wish you could.

And the thing is, afterwards? After that loss? No matter what Toyota you end up driving, or what cool accessories you buy for it, at the end of the day, it's still a product of Japan, a DAD.

And you know what hurts even more? The first time you have an urge to put a gun to your temple? The day some guy pulls into the car wash you now work at, driving the Ferrari that once belonged to you, the car you once owned, now parked in some other guy's garage. Your heart sinks to new lows knowing she's someone else's true love now; that it's *his* polishing cloth gently rubbing and caressing her every sexy line and curve now, the way you once did.

He tosses you the keys, the ones that were once yours, and warns you that he expects nothing less than perfection; that he better not find so much as a single fingerprint or smudge once you're done. And you understand this only too well. You understand it because it's the very same words you once used.

And as the new owner – the 'new guy', if you will - drives away in his perfect car, you look down at your hand, the one holding the crisp, new one dollar bill he gave you as a tip. You stare at it knowing that any other man would have balled the bill up and tossed it in the trash out of anger, having been crushed by the cruelty of the gesture. But not you. You won't toss it. Instead, you shove it in your pocket, actually grateful for the generosity. Grateful because it puts you one dollar closer to affording a Smith and Wesson.

And in the meantime, maybe sucking on your Toyota's tailpipe doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

Chapter 9

And that was Ellen, the Ferrari. Only, mine came with two major problems:

- 1) It was capable of original thought, and
- 2) It had acquired the capacity of speech.

And maybe that would have been the smart play here, to have just stuck with the Japanese cars. Lord knows my life would have been a lot easier, not to mention cheaper. But it's all academic now. At this point, it is what it is, and in my particular case, I never did go back to the DADs, the Toyotas, and 30 years later, she's still parked in my garage – or, living room, rather - planted on the sofa, rollers in her hair, miracle cream on her face, and watching something unbearably sappy on the Hallmark channel.

And sure, maybe childbirth and the effects of gravity (everything larger, hairier, and closer to the ground) have taken a toll on her once majestic curves, she is still a fine automobile of legendary heritage.

And I still own her.

She's still mine.

And this may simply be due to the fact that, at our age, we've become too fat and lazy, too complacent. Neither of us wanting to bother with the ugly, complicated ordeal of divorce.

Yeah, divorce.

That's the process - still using the car analogy - whereby you get rid of one car, one you hate, and replace it with another, hopefully better car. One that you love.

An upgrade.

But you won't do that, upgrade. Too risky. You could end up with something even worse, so you simply keep what you have and somehow find a way to deal with it - the devil you know versus the one you don't.

Because, face it. At our age, *everything* is high mileage and damaged goods; only, you can't see it. Not the damage, anyway. Not at first. It usually takes a while before you spot it. That's because the blemishes – the dents, the rust, the faded paint - have all been smoothed over and hidden with Bondo, Bondo and fresh paint. You know, that truth in advertising myth? And it doesn't stop there, with the dents and rust, it's everything. There is virtually nothing about a woman that cannot be painted over, dyed, smoothed out, stretched, reshaped, replaced, repackaged, or just plain outright removed. It's become a mega-billion-dollar industry now. Even as you read this, factories everywhere are working overtime to make sure that women have everything they need to catch the eye of a potential 'buyer': pantyhose, padded bras, wigs, hair extensions, girdles, makeup, hair color, eyeliner... Not to

mention the fake stuff like eyelashes, fingernails, breasts... These days, you can't be sure the color of her eyes is real, even.

In the end, it's all an illusion, a smoke-and-mirrors thing, meaning that when it comes to shopping for a used car, guys don't even stand a chance. We are simply no match for people expert in the ways of deception. I'm talking about people who have spent their entire lives practicing and perfecting every skill needed to sell us men a bill of goods. The fact is, and always has been, that guys never have a clue as to what it really is they've just driven off the car lot. That grief, the act of discovery (also known as buyer's remorse), doesn't come until later. Much later.

It's a scary business when you stop and think about it - going out in the world and looking for a new companion at our age. Scary business, indeed. And what's worse is, there's nothing you can do to make the whole sordid mess any easier, or, at a minimum, at least make sense. No magic pixie dust you can sprinkle, or voodoo charms you can wear to protect you from the horrors that await. It's all part of that strange and little-understood aspect of human behavior known as the mating ritual, something none of us has any control over. It's in our DNA.

Now, I'm sure this process - this ritual, if you will - has changed over time as we humans have evolved and become more civilized, but there was a time when all a guy had to do was spot a woman in the wild, club her over the head, and then drag her by the hair back to his place - or cave, rather. No Starbucks for coffee, no dinner and a movie, just raw, savage, animal instinct. Too, too easy. But that's all changed now. Since then, we've 'improved' things. For example, we no longer call this primitive process the human mating ritual. These days, it's known as 'dating', and with technology being what it is now, this is how it works...

The Modern Day Mating Ritual

You're all alone now, lonely and depressed, and longing for the companionship of a female of your species. That being the case, you power up your laptop and log onto an online dating website, one of many, and spend hours and hours poring over the prospective candidates, looking at glamour shot photos taken ten years and forty-five pounds ago, and reading the very carefully, very deliberately, constructed 'bios'...

"I'm attractive, outgoing, open to new ideas and adventures, passionate, caring, loving, giving... Someone who is looking for a friend and lover, another person to experience the wonders of life with, and simply enjoy our time together."

Yeah, right. Good luck with that.

You see, the problem here is that when they write this stuff, it's not really from firsthand experience. They really don't know 'how' to be any of that. But that's OK, because for them, the I'm-over-30-and-my-resale-value-has-plummeted gals, it's not about the honesty. It's more about figuring out the exact words they need to string together in order to get some poor, naive bastard to press the 'contact' button on the screen.

And you know what? It may not be a matter of these women intentionally lying to rope you in. Not at all. In their heart and mind, they really would like to be all that. I mean, who wouldn't, right? It's that wishful thinking thing, that 'I'll be a better person this time. I'll get this one right, you'll see!' pipe dream they all maintain in their mind. But, there's that one teensy weensy flaw with all this that monkey wrenches the whole deal. That pesky thing called reality, a place these women have never been.

Oh, sure, they'll maintain that facade for a while, maybe for the first couple of months or so, with the really good ones lasting a bit longer, like maybe a year or more, but face it. That's a hell of a lot of effort to expend on keeping the illusion alive, and sooner or later, it becomes more work than what any of them are able - or want, even - to keep up with over time. In some cases, they simply decide to drop the charade altogether because, well, they just don't care. They feel they've sunk their vaginal fangs far enough in that it's now safe to be who they really are, that it's over for you, that you're in too deep. Something I call the 'I'm getting regular sex syndrome'.

Yeah, the 'I'm getting regular sex' syndrome.

It's a weird affliction that somehow manages to blind a guy to a woman's endless collection of flaws and shortcomings, making her survival in the relationship possible. For a while, anyway, but sooner or later, the cracks in the ice begin to appear, and before you know it, that thing that once set your heart on fire and made your pulse race becomes the reason you quit answering the phone.

And changed jobs.

And moved to another state without giving anyone your new address.

And legally changed your name.

And spent the money on plastic surgery, and...

You get the picture.

But no matter how well they hide it, make no mistake, the damage is there. The dreaded baggage, the permanent emotional scarring, the festering psychological tumors, need for revenge... It's all there. All the defects. The crunched hoods, the dented quarter panels, the cracked windshields, the ripped upholstery... In other words, a DAD some other guy coasted to the shoulder of the road and abandoned in favor of another one not so used up.

So, yeah. The defects are all there. All there and waiting, biding their time and lurking, waiting for the opportunity to come out of hiding. And when they do, they raise their hideous heads and reveal themselves, you quickly learn that you're married to none other than Medusa herself, only she says her name is Margaret, or Debbie, or Rebecca, or, yes, even Ellen.

Again, it's scary shit.

I mean, you could be the pope himself, and you will still end up paying for every wrong thing every man on the planet has ever done - or ever thought of doing - to the woman you are now involved with, the one you met on the dating website.

So, what it amounts to is this: if I were to write a book on dating for guys, you know, all the do's and don'ts? Tip #1 would read something like this...

Dating Tip #1

When meeting a woman for the first time, the first date, always be sure to bring a small vial of holy water along. Then, at some point in the evening when the opportunity presents itself, for example, some type of distraction that causes your date to turn her head (Oh my God! Look at the size of that rat!), quickly shake a few drops of holy water on her and repeat three times:

"The power of Christ compels you".

If her head starts spinning on her shoulders like Linda Blair, call the waiter over immediately, pay your portion of the bill, and then quickly drive away. Your date is over.

And while the sex with women like this can be off the charts, in the end, it's simply not worth the eternal damnation you will suffer afterwards. Take it from me, I would know.

And that's the dating thing. Dating, of course, being the way you upgrade after a divorce.

So, whether you simply stay in the marriage and do your best to deal with it and make it work, or you grow kahunas big enough to take the upgrade plunge, it's pretty much a dismal proposition anyway you slice it.

But Ellen and I have a good life. I can't complain. Well, I can, but that would be like the woman complaining about not being able to afford new shoes. That is, until she meets the woman with no feet. Someone always has it worse than you when it comes to marriage - a fact Ellen makes sure I never lose sight of, bless her heart. Always quick to remind me of just how 'good' I've got it. And she does this so many times, I begin to believe it myself, to the point that when she mentions the fact that her mother is coming to stay with us for a while, rather than throw my usual tantrum, I simply respond by saying, 'Yes, dear. I'll make room in the garage for her broom.'

It's part of the brainwashing and conditioning thing women do to men, and that process starts the instant you say 'I do', when what you shoulda said is, 'I dunno about this.' But you did it. You said the words and signed the dotted line - in blood, no less, only, you don't know it. And at that point, you are now a married man. You've bought the car, and it's now time to make the payments. Payments that are not only painful, but as you will come to learn, ones you will continue to make for the rest of your natural life - life - life (demonic echo effect).

(satanic laughter)

BBBBBBWWWWWAAAAAHHHHAAAAHHHHAAAA. HHHHAAA. HHHAAA. BBBBWWWWWAAAA. HHHAAA
HHAHAHA

But no, the payments never stop. You never do pay the fucking thing off. In fact, it actually gets worse with time. The cost of ownership grows and grows and grows, and you notice that the growth rate seems to somehow be related to expanding waistlines, your wife's, since the two seem to increase at about the same rate, a rate that can only be described as 'frightening'. And what really sucks? At some point, you don't even get to start the damn thing up and take it for a ride; those days having long since come to an end. In fact, you never even venture into the garage to admire it anymore, all incentive to do so having dissipated over the years. It is now, to you, nothing more than an ongoing, never-ending expense. Month after endless month, payment after painful payment. It never ends. And while it never ends, it does change. It changes inasmuch as the payments become more and more expensive with each passing year. So, what happens is, you pay and pay, and then at some point, you begin to wonder why. I mean, what's the point? After all, who in their right mind is going to repossess a dated, 30-year-old car that has long since quit running, and at the same time, has become horrendously expensive to maintain? And, I might add, is in serious need of cosmetic attention. And God forbid you ever need to take it to the Ferrari dealership to be 'worked' on, because paying the repair bill means taking out a second mortgage and maybe a second job, even. And for what? A car whose stock has plummeted to an unbelievable all-time low?

It's about this time in exotic car ownership, the declining years, that you start noticing all the newer, younger Toyotas in the mall's parking lot. The 'wandering eye', as it's known. It's not something you consciously do, mind you. It's just something that happens, maybe as a result of wishful thinking, or wondering what your life may have been like if you could have somehow come to terms with owning a Japanese car, instead. That kinda thing. But it's a little too late for that. Too late, because your car shopping days are over now, my friend. Shoulda spent that money on a gym membership or invested in some hair plugs, or maybe both.

So, yeah, I've paid. Plenty. And at times, the price has been quite high, not to mention painful.

Did I mention painful?

But again, it's not a complaint. Not really.

Well, it is, but not a valid one.

Why do I feel that way? That the complaints are neither here nor there? That they don't really matter?

Because.

Because the road Ellen and I have traveled over the years is no more fraught with bumps and potholes than the next couple. Because, face it. The bumps and potholes are just a fact of life. A fact that affects me, you - everyone. No one is immune.

And complaining about it doesn't change a thing. They will always be there, the bumps and potholes. They never go away. And, in my humble, personal opinion, they are the only thing, in fact, that is predictable about life - that from time to time, you will surely hit one.

And this is true no matter who you share a name or bed with.

And Ellen and I have hit plenty...potholes, that is, and we're still together. And you know what? Just between you and me? I'd do it all again. For better or worse.

Why?

Because, for some reason I can't explain, I still love her. She's still my Ferrari, and I still own her.

...I think.

So, do I have complaints? Sure, I do. Just like you. Are they valid? Not in the least. Why? Because they are just part of the landscape. The cost of doing business, if you will.

And what a funny business it is, the business of life.

So delicate and so frail.

* * * * *

He gently sets the mug on the desk and rubs a finger over the images in the photo, as if in doing so, it would somehow magically transport him back to that time, to that memory; to that wonderful, magical night. A night that came so very close to never happening. So very close.

Why?

(sigh)

Ellen. Or, rather, Ellen's mind. Like I said, it's not wired like Mine and Yours. And this was something of a problem. A big problem. It made dating a scary proposition at times, like crossing a mine field without the benefit of a map showing you the locations. They are there in front of you, the lethal mines, but you can't see them. You find them the hard way, the old-fashioned way - you step on one. You do your best not to, but life doesn't work that way. Or, at least, mine doesn't. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that I had some God-given talent for finding every one of the fuckers.

Yeah, that's what I said...lucky me.

The thing is, you never know exactly what form a mine will manifest itself in, making it nearly impossible to see them coming. Not only that, but the mines vary in their destructiveness. Some never go off at all, while others may be mild, doing little more than singeing your socks and shoes. Still, others are fairly severe, causing Ellen and me to actually break up at times. Fortunately, the damage those types of mines cause, while painful, is never permanent. In time, you heal from the shrapnel enough to reach for the phone and dial the number, the one you know will stop the horrific hurt threatening to rip your heart in two. And, because you were the first to call, you automatically lose the standoff. Which means that not only do you swallow your pride and shoulder the blame, but in the process of groveling and begging for forgiveness, you are forced to make promises that only an idiot hopelessly in love would ever make. The kind of promises that, should your friends ever find out about, would make you the new owner of the dating dunce cap. A dubious honor I came to know only too well. Too well, indeed.

But you know what really gets me about all of this? Years and years later, after Ellen and I had been married for a while, she told me something about all the breaking up/making up we did. Something that, after she told me, I wished she hadn't. It happened on an otherwise uneventful Sunday when the two of us were sitting on the couch together. Me on one side, reading the latest issue of Car & Driver while she busied herself on the other end applying some obscenely expensive miracle cream on her face. Suddenly, and without warning, she turned to me and said...

"You remember all those times when we were dating, and something stupid would happen, and we'd break up, and then it was a competition to see who would call who first? You remember?"

"How could I not. After all, I was always the loser. So, what about it?"

"Well, every time you broke down and called me first, I was just moments away from picking up the phone and calling you."

And that was enough to make me put the magazine down and look at her. I just had to ask...

"And out of nowhere, you decide to tell me that now?"

"I had to. You looked a little too happy and self-satisfied over there with your magazine."

And that was Ellen. Always full of surprises, and rarely, if ever, were they pleasant. And with Ellen, I wouldn't for a moment put it past her to make something like that up for no other reason than to get under my skin. Still, I have to consider the possibility that what she was telling me was true. I was such an idiot back then, and I'm not so sure that's a fact that has changed much over the years. And somehow, I get the feeling that it all has something to do with owning a penis.

(sigh)

Some things never change, I suppose. But I see I've gotten off track here, so back to the story...

* * * * *

Before we continue, I have to first tell you about the last category of land mines, the ones that there is no recovery from. So destructive is the detonation that it changes your life forever. It is an explosion no relationship can survive, and as a result, brings a permanent end to whatever the two of you once shared. It is an event that only happens once in a relationship, and as such, becomes the last memory you have of something that once meant so much to you. In some cases, having meant more to you than life itself. It is an event so horrendous in nature that some people never do recover from it, and it becomes the baggage they will carry with them for all their days to come.

It was this type of mine that threatened to end mine and Ellen's future together. In the end, we somehow managed to dodge that bullet, but the memories of that event still send shivers down my spine on the rare occasions I revisit that memory. And, as is true of all the mines I have encountered, this one was completely unpredictable, something straight out of left field – something straight out of hell, is more like it.

This is what happened...

Chapter 10

Prom night, 1977.

I check my bow tie in the rear-view mirror one last time to make sure I don't look like Bozo the Prom Date, and I exit the car. I walk up to the front door, take a deep breath, and ring the bell. The door opens. It's Ellen's mom, thank God.

It could have been worse. It could have been her husband, Ellen's dad, a Marine colonel who no doubt knows at least four hundred different ways to end human life with nothing more than the contents of his pocket - a coin, a paper clip, lint, a bazooka (pocket model)...

The problem here is that he is a guy, which means that he knows what I know - that it's prom night, so at some point, sex will be involved. Sex with his precious, unblemished, innocent daughter, Ellen. The object of his love, affection, and inherent need to brutally kill anything that would even remotely think of violating her. Namely, me.

And right now, I put my odds at about 50/50 that I leave the house...well, not dead.

Because really, I'm justified homicide in his mind. Practically his civic duty, even, to rid society of an unnecessary and undesirable life form. In his book, I rank right there at the top of the list just below diseased rat infestations. So, yeah, in his mind, changing my status as a living thing would be a service to the community. One that would probably earn him yet another ribbon to add to his already extensive collection. One for 'gene pool' cleansing.

And, Jesus! The guy already looks like Patton when he wears his dress uniform jacket. I don't even know where he would fit another medal or ribbon, but in my case, I'm sure he'd make room. And I bet that if I looked close enough, I could spot at least three other gene pool cleansing ribbons. One for each of Ellen's previous boyfriends.

And that's Ellen's dad, Colonel Gene Pool Cleanser.

And now I'm thinking maybe 40/60.

And that's being optimistic.

I step into the foyer, and instantly, Ellen's mom begins showering me with compliments. She's a wonderful woman, Ellen's mom. And, it's easy to see where Ellen gets her outstanding looks. Her mom is one of the most attractive women I have ever seen, but you have to deliberately look at her to see this. It's almost as if she goes to lengths to downplay her beauty so that she simply looks like...well, someone's mom.

But I see it, so that beauty is not lost on me. Not for a moment.

And the woman's crazy about me, which is probably the only reason I've survived Ellen's father this long. But Ellen's mom was once our age and isn't so old that she's forgotten what that's like. And I would never sell her short - the woman knows what time it is. She knows what Ellen and I probably do - that we do the very same things she probably did at that age. So, you see, I know what time it is, too, and she knows it. It's just an unspoken understanding we have, she and I.

And, the woman adores me, which brings me to my one and only redeeming quality in life: women like me. And if you've got that going for you, really, what else do you need?

So anyway, as I'm standing there waiting for Ellen, her mom does her head-to-toe inspection of me, making whatever adjustments necessary as she does – smoothing wayward strands of hair, flattening my lapels, straightening my bowtie - until finally, I'm photo-ready and she begins snapping away.

And she does this, snaps the photos, I'm wondering if maybe I shouldn't ask her to send some copies to my parents. You know, just in case I don't survive her husband tonight?

Just a thought.

I take in another deep breath and try my best to unknot my entire being when all of a sudden, I spot her, at the top of the stairs, just standing there as if to let me absorb the impact of what I was seeing.

And what was I seeing?

The most incredible example of female beauty I would ever come to know.

She's dressed in a green satin, perfectly fitted evening gown you would only expect to see on a Hollywood goddess, her long blonde hair perfectly framing that exquisite face as it cascades down to her bare shoulders.

Like something right out of Greek mythology.

The goddess of beauty herself.

And I guess at that point, my expression must have been like that of a child's. You know, the first time they crank the handle, and Jack comes popping out of the box? Something like that. I don't even think I was breathing at that point, but what I lacked in breath, I made up for in heartbeats. A few thousand per second, by my count.

It was Ellen's mom that broke me out of the trance...

"Rick, your hand!"

"Huh?"

I just look at her. I have no idea what she's wanting, so she shows me. She holds her hand out to me as if inviting me to dance.

I get it now. I nod to let her know I understand and then turn to the stairwell. I extend my own invitation to the princess at the top of the stairs, which must have been a cue of some sort for Ellen's dad to make his appearance from somewhere to the side, not visible from where I stood.

He steps into view in full military dress, no less, including cap, red sash across his chest, and saber at his side. He looks like something out of a West Point recruiting poster, one of those enduring images you never forget. The kind that makes you proud to be an American and reminds you of just how great this country is.

He takes a step toward Ellen, stops, and then quickly snaps to attention. And then, with the precision of a Swiss watch, makes a sharp, crisp, ninety-degree pivot so that he is now standing smartly at her right side.

Another crisp snap. His arm this time, held straight out and crooked, awaiting his daughter's arm.

She gazes for a moment at her handsome, debonair escort, glowing with pride and admiration as she does, and then complies by looping her arm through his.

A proud father and his adoring daughter.

A moment not even Norman Rockwell could capture.

The two look straight ahead, and with complete synchronicity, begin a slow, deliberate procession down the stairs in what I can only imagine must be some type of military protocol march. Like maybe one the Marines use at parades and things, presidential inaugurations, maybe.

One foot down, pause, next foot down, pause, repeat. Again, all executed in perfect military precision and synchronicity, to the degree that Olympic synchronized swimmers have nothing on these two.

And I must admit, I was impressed. Completely. It was like I was watching the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. The whole thing gave me chill bumps as I watched on, making me feel more like a spectator in the crowd than an actual participant in the whole thing. And look, I know it was just my imagination, but for a moment – just for a moment - I could swear I heard bagpipes and snare drums playing as I watched the two make their descent down the staircase. It was that spellbinding. I can only imagine this must be what a royal coronation must look like. A royal wedding, maybe. No doubt something the two had practiced to perfection.

And how small and insignificant do I feel?

The two reach the bottom of the stairs and stop. Ellen's dad, as per the protocol, sharply removes his cap and places it under his right arm. With his left hand, he takes Ellen's right and holds it out toward me.

A formal presentation.

A transfer of the honor.

She takes a step forward. I accept the presentation by replacing his hand with my own, and in doing so, completed the transfer...the honor.

And what an honor it was.

He then returns his cap to its rightful place atop his head and executes a military-grade salute of the sharpest, most perfect type, the example they use at the academy, no doubt.

I didn't want to move. I just wanted to stand there and look at her.

Forever.

But that would be a luxury we couldn't afford. Up to this point, we were perfectly on time, and I had every intention of keeping it that way. Our first stop of the evening would be Antoine's, New Orleans' most premier four-star restaurant, where we had reservations. Something I had to make three months in advance, as required, and we better not be so much as one minute late.

And then I had a thought...

I turn to Ellen's father and return the salute. It simply seemed like the appropriate thing to do since he was still frozen in his rigid salute posture, his saluting hand still in place as if super-glued to the brim of his cap.

I was right. It was the expected response, me returning the salute.

He responded by snapping the saluting arm back to his side and assumes an equally rigid 'at attention' stance, his eyes pointed straight forward as if watching a distant flag wavering in a breeze. Maybe the flag on Iwo Jima. Who knows.

I wanted to tell him 'At ease, soldier', but I don't know the protocol, and for this guy, an offending violation of said military tradition requires, at a minimum, a running through of the saber, a saber I knew was way too easily accessible. Not a good idea. Even if he gave me three steps, as the song goes.

And I'm thinking...do they really make pocket model bazookas?

30/70.

I lift Ellen's delicate hand to my lips and gently kiss it. I kiss the hand of a princess. My princess.

Ellen's mom breaks in...

"You guys need to get going, but first, I want to take some pictures."

And with that, she arranged us as needed and snapped the photos. After she takes the last photo, I guide Ellen to the front door, open it, and urge her through. Then, once on the front porch, we said our goodbyes, exchanged hugs and kisses, listened to mini-lectures, and then started for the car.

But we didn't get far.

Ellen froze in her tracks. She clasps a disbelieving hand over her mouth and just stands and stares at the spectacle in front of her, my new car, the Pontiac Grand Prix I had bought just for the occasion.

After a moment or two, she turned to me, tears in both eyes, and simply said...

"You didn't!"

I nod...

"Yeah, I did."

I hadn't told her about the car. I wanted to add to the magic of the evening by keeping it a surprise. And a surprise, it was. One that literally brought tears to her eyes - that I would go to those lengths to make her night special.

It had the exact effect I had hoped for.

The car was still running with the passenger door already open and awaiting its first passenger, Princess Ellen. Every light the car had - interior, exterior, door - was lit and glistening off the car's polished and waxed finish like midday sunlight reflecting on a lake. It looked like something straight out of a TV commercial, beautiful and dreamy.

I grabbed her hand and led her to the waiting chariot. Three 'oh my God's' later, I stood at the passenger door, bowed, and waved a hand that beckoned her to take her rightful place - the seat next to mine.

She sits, careful to gather her beautiful gown around her legs so as not to let the door close on it. I close the door, walk around, and then take my place alongside her in the driver's seat.

We turned and looked at her parents standing side-by-side in the doorway, their arms around each other's waist, and waving us goodbye. We wave back, and then I let the car slowly, if not majestically, roll away from the curb and start us on our journey.

Our evening together, Ellen and I, had officially begun.

And oddly enough, with so much to absorb at that particular moment, my most prevalent thought was...I'm not dead.

Not yet, anyway.

But then, the night has only just begun.

Chapter 11

We turn out of Ellen's upscale neighborhood and onto General Degaulle Blvd., the main, not to mention largest, thoroughfare in the area; a beautifully landscaped and manicured stretch of road that leads straight to the Greater New Orleans bridge - the GNO, as we call it.

Turning on to Degaulle meant that we were now on our way, so I pushed the cassette tape into the deck and the car's incredible sound system instantly comes alive with Supertramp's 'Dreamer', mine and Ellen's favorite. One of many.

*Dreamer, you know you are a dreamer
Well, can you put your hands in your head?
Oh no!
I said, dreamer, you're nothing but a dreamer
Well, can you put your hands in your head?
Oh no!*

And that was the entire tape, a collection of all of mine and her favorite songs. Had taken me three days to compile and complete, not to mention the state-of-the-art audio equipment I had to buy to do it, but so worth the effort. And the money. But that was only part of it. After the tapes, it was the car. The maniacal, relentless buffing, polishing, waxing...every new car inch, the bumpers, tires, grill, vinyl top - everything. Whether it needed or not. Which it didn't, being showroom new and perfect. Still, I put out the effort. I did it on principle alone. Simply put, I could not do enough to ensure that the evening would be perfect in every way. And part of that meant a car completely devoid of any smudges, fingerprints, and dust specks, even.

Beyond perfect.

That was the goal.

We'd get this chance one time, to have a night like this. Just once and then never again. Gone. The past. So, what is it that I wouldn't do to make sure that this was a night to end all others? A once-in-a-lifetime night? And in the future, once the night was over, we'd be back to our usual dating routine: the midnight movies, the restaurants, the lake front, late nights on the levees, drive-in movies...all the regular things we'd done every weekend since we've been dating. Not that there was anything wrong with any of it, there wasn't. It was all great. But we would do it all being the same two teenagers. The same old, familiar places, the same two people. All very nice and enjoyable, but still, the same. All the things we took for granted. The routine. Nothing really special about any of it, except for maybe the birthday dates. But tonight was different. Tonight, we were not the same two teenagers doing the same tired teenage stuff. Tonight, she was a princess and I, her handsome prince. Her knight in shining armor. The magician spinning his magic.

The magic man.

* * * * *

Driving along, making my way toward the GNO bridge, I suddenly notice something - or, rather, don't notice. It's the windows, they're not there. I had put such a tremendous effort into cleaning them spotless, that they literally disappeared, and I was only just now realizing it. I don't know how I didn't notice it before. I guess because I was so caught up by the spectacular view of General DeGaulle Blvd. at night, which, for me, was something of a new experience, seeing it for the first time without the usual layers of bugs and grime. And, I have to tell you, it was breathtaking. The yellow glow of the sodium vapor streetlights lit up the street and the immaculate landscaping of its super wide neutral ground in a way that made it look completely fantasy-like and surreal. Dreamlike, almost, and so very beautiful. It was as if I had never seen it before, even though I had traveled that same stretch of road literally thousands of times. But tonight, because of the virtually invisible windows, it was like I was only now seeing it for the first time. It was as if I was looking at the road leading to Oz or something. Or, I dunno, maybe Oscar night in Hollywood. Yeah, like Oscar night, with Ellen and I being the only attending stars, the only ones invited.

Chapter 12

Now, I fully realize how time has a way of whitewashing memories - bleaching out the blemishes and defects. I know this. And normally, I would say that was the case in regards to my memories of that night, but it isn't. It actually was that perfect. Almost like her and I had ordered the event and had checked off all the right boxes:

- ✓ City – check
- ✓ Girl – check
- ✓ Boy – check
- ✓ Car – check
- ✓ Music – check
- ✓ Romance factor – check
- ✓ Ambience – check
- ✓ Weather – check
- ✓ Band – check
- ✓ Food – check

And then finally, the really important stuff...

- ✓ Drugs – check
- ✓ Great Teenage Sex - check, double check, triple check

But things didn't turn out that perfect because that's simply how it all worked out, how the chips just happened to fall.

No. Not at all.

It turned out that way because the two of us pulled together and did our part to ensure it happened just the way it needed to, the way I had hoped it would. Even when the evening threatened to go all wrong, the way it almost did, we still managed to pull it off. She did her part, and I did mine.

And to that end, in a way, I got the short end of the stick. Really short. But then, the guy always does. Just one of the rules of life when you own a penis. Been that way since the dawn of man and not very likely to change anytime soon.

So, I deal with it.

I mean, what else am I gonna do?

And Ellen's part? Buy a gown and look good in it. Wow, what a trooper, that girl. Because, when you reduce it all down to the actual effort expended, for her, that meant buying a gown. The rest of that formula was simply business as usual. No effort needed. God took care of all the rest.

The God of hot, fine-ass blondes with big, firm titties, that is.

But on the other hand, for me, it took almost the same amount of effort as it did to build the pyramids. Maybe more. Actually, a lot more. First of all, I had to find the car, which meant I had to sell my soul to get my parents to co-sign for it. Then, once purchased, I had to properly prepare it for the event, which meant relentless washing, waxing, buffing, polishing, vacuuming – in general, cleaning it to perfection. After that, it was shopping for, purchasing, and installing the high-end, audiophile quality sound system, an absolute must if the evening was to turn out the way it needed to. Then, after the whole car thing, it was all the ancillary stuff - pick out a tux, rent it, make all the reservations (and pay for them), buy the audio system I needed to make the tapes we would listen to, devote the time and effort necessary to record the tapes, look for, find, and obtain all the drugs we (I) would need to see us through the event, and lastly, cut my beloved long hair.

Ouch.

(sigh)

No choice on the hair reduction. It was part of the deal I struck with my parents in exchange for co-signing the car loan. Blackmail, to be sure, but again, what else was I gonna do? The proverbial rock and a hard place, that's me.

Oh yeah, almost forgot - the flowers. Roses. Red. Ten dozen of them all piled into the back seat. And last, but not least, the corsage. The most expensive one the florist had. Ten times more expensive than the rest. Didn't look any better than the others to me, but it didn't matter. I needed the bragging rights. Like I said, beyond perfect. That's what I was shooting for here.

And then there was finding the money to pay for it all, the most painful part of the whole process.

Why?

Because to get it, the money I would need, I had to say goodbye to my first love in life, my motorcycle. Had to sell it, and that's all I'm saying about it. It's a sore subject with me to this day, so don't even ask.

But I *will* say this much - when the bike went, it took a huge chunk of my heart with it, and to an extent, my outlook on life. It's a teenage guy thing, so I don't really expect you to understand. I understand it, and that's enough.

And all I gotta say about all of this is that prom night sex better be good. BETTER than good. Like, brain damage good. Like, 'I can't believe I survived that' good.

And actually, it was.

But man, oh man, the shit guys do for pussy. We're such idiots. Don't any of us realize how much better off our lives would be if only we had our dicks removed at birth? I mean, c'mon...

* * * * *

Doctor to newborn baby, a boy...

“Welcome to life, my son, good to have you here.”

“Thanks, doc. Good to be here, I guess. Don’t know. Too early to tell (looking back at where he just popped out of). Pretty cool place I was in, if you know what I mean. Kinda like to go back, really.”

“Yeah, I know. You’ll be spending most of your life trying to do just that - get back in, which is why I wanted to have this little talk.”

“Whadda ya mean?”

“Well...”

He stammers for a moment, thinking of exactly how to explain the problem...

“...that’s going to cause you a lot of problems, trying to get back in.”

“Why?”

“Because, you see, getting back in will not only be some of the best times you will have, but more often than not, will be the worst. It will ruin your life. It will cause you to drink, use drugs, lose your job, your friends, and cost you vast sums of money. Every penny you have, and don’t have. And in the end, you will wish that you’d never been born. That, in fact, you had never met me.”

“Jesus, doc. That sounds pretty fucked up. Isn’t there anything I can do about it? Because really, you’re making me not wanna be here - like this was a really bad idea.”

“Well, fortunately, there is something that can be done. But not by you. I’m the one who has to do it.”

“Do what?”

“Well, frankly, I’d have to remove your penis.”

“Penis? What the hell’s a penis?”

“That’s the thing that makes you want to get back in.”

“JESUS, DOC! GET IT OFF OF ME! CUT THE FUCKING THING OFF, ALREADY! DON’T LEAVE ME LIKE THIS! HELP ME OUT HERE, FOR FUCK’S SAKE!!”

* * * * *

(sigh)

Life’s not easy when you’re a slave to an erection. And being a teenage slave only makes matters worse.

And, I ask you - how lopsided is that field? You think for one moment Ellen would ever think about selling her horse just so I could nail her?

Yeah, right.

Fucking penises.

And can you believe there’s such a thing as ‘penis envy’, even? Now, how stupid is that?

Yeah.

Pretty fucking stupid.

Chapter 13

So, there we are, the two of us, Ellen and I. A storybook date on a storybook night. And it just doesn't get any better than that.

And if you don't think so, think again.

Christ. What I wouldn't have given to be able to freeze life at that point. The never-ending date with Ellen on the never-ending night. To spend the rest of my days doing just that - taking Ellen to the prom for all of eternity, forever young.

But that isn't how life works. The evening was just beginning, and at some point, would eventually come to an end. It will be over, and all that will remain are the memories.

And isn't life funny that way - that even though you know how important the evening is, its real value is not fully or truly realized, or understood, even, until so many years later when, for whatever reason, you think back to that time, to that moment in history.

It is only then, after experiencing so much of life, that you can look back with the true wisdom of hindsight and experience, and for the first time, truly see things for what they really were - what that night really meant to your life. What that was like. Who it is you once were. Who she once was.

And the complete story told by a single photograph. The prom photo.

Did I even realize when the photo was taken just how important to me it would be one day?

Of course not. It was simply something to show friends and family, and then put away and forgotten. Maybe tucked away somewhere in a drawer.

So many things are forgotten over time as the years pass. Important things, lost as new memories replace old. And on those few occasions that you do remember - maybe while listening to a particular song, or looking at an old photo - the feelings come back and warm your heart, and maybe bring a tear - or tears - to your eyes.

And then those same memories sadden you as they remind you of the temporary nature of life. That everything changes. Even the things you wish would not. That, in the end, given enough time, everything is lost. Everything you hold dear, including life itself.

And it all causes me to wonder... Did I truly appreciate those moments when they were here? Or, did I just take them for granted?

And the answer, in my case, is 'yes'. Yes, on both counts - yes, I appreciated them, some of them, maybe most of them, even, but I also took way too many things for granted, the way we all do. It's just one of those things in life, our nature. It's not that we lose the ability to appreciate, we don't. It's more a matter of simply forgetting to. Forgetting to stop for a moment and appreciate the things we should. Or, maybe we simply become too busy, too preoccupied with life in general to stop and remember, too blinded by all the noise life creates.

And that begs another question: do I appreciate all the moments of my life now? Twenty years from now, will I find a photo I took yesterday and be saddened by the fact that those days are gone, and that maybe I should have appreciated them more while they were here?

I don't know. I don't have a good answer to that question. But then, I doubt anyone does.

Time is a funny thing. There is an old saying that even the mighty pyramids fear time, but time itself fears nothing.

And my own thoughts on the matter? Simple: Time giveth, and time taketh away.

And so it is with memories, those precious moments of our lives. Time brings them to you, and likewise, time takes them away.

But tonight isn't about recalling memories. It's about creating them. Creating memories that, I'm sure, will one day make me both happy and sad.

Which brings me to the whole purpose of this extraordinary night.

There we were, Ellen and I, in the process of grabbing one of life's moments and hanging on to it for as long as we possibly could, neither having said so much as a single word at this point.

Not one.

It wasn't about being in an uncomfortable silence or something. Nothing like that. It was more a matter of being so overwhelmed by it all. So much so that it simply leaves you speechless, not wanting to talk. You simply don't want to blemish the moment with clumsy words, because really, none are needed.

Times like these aren't about words. It's about the things that aren't spoken, the feelings. Like the mutual love and desire that exists between Ellen and I, the electrifying intensity of a romantic love at that age. It's about the sheer wonder and magic of it all - the feelings, the music, the car, the beautiful summer night, and most of all, the person sitting next to you and the anticipation of the evening that lies ahead.

Simply overwhelming. For both of us, and the silence said it all. Because it, the silence, said more than any words the two of us could have possibly exchanged. We were both there, both feeling, experiencing, and thinking the same things. And both of us doing our best to absorb the experience of it all.

To live the moment.

And words would have simply gotten in the way. Simply put, there were no words either of us could say that were worth missing so much as a single moment of the magic. It was just something we both knew and understood, one of the nicer, if not amazing, aspects of my and her relationship - the silent communication between us. The knowing without having to say it.

So very nice.

So very special.

And I can't speak for Ellen since we never really talked about it, but the butterflies in my stomach were almost unbearable. I felt as if I could throw up at any given moment, it was that bad.

But I knew that she felt the same for the simple fact that she kept her head turned away from me, choosing, instead, to stare out at the night through the passenger window. That one simple act spoke volumes. It told me a lot.

What it told me is that she didn't want me to see her face. Mainly because the look on it would have told me more than she would ever want me to know. It would have told me that she was completely swept away by both me and the magic of the moment.

And this was something she couldn't allow to happen - letting me know how helpless she was under my spell; how completely at my mercy she could be, so lost in the feelings I caused deep inside her. It was simply something she could never admit to. To her friends, maybe, but never to me. And the only thing I can think of is that she was scared of being so weak, knowing I had that kind of power over her, and that I could own her so completely.

And I understand this. For one thing, that's a very dangerous place to be, under someone's thumb that way. Especially at that age, the age of first loves, and likewise, first broken hearts. Very scary stuff when you're a teenager. Especially for her - to love something so very much, wanting it so badly, and at the same time, knowing it could be taken from her in an instant. Gone, just that fast.

The breakup thing.

The inevitable event we all experience at some point during the dating phase of life. However, it's usually only something one of the participants in a relationship fears, the loser, the new owner of a broken heart.

And nobody wants to be that guy...or girl.

And this was something Ellen never wanted to be, weak for me. She hated that - that I could have so much control and power over her. It was simply a position she never wanted to be in, being too big a liability for her young, tender, teenage heart.

Because, if it all went bad, she would be devastated, ruined. The pain would be unbearable, more than she could endure. For any girl in that position, really, but especially for her because of how she was and how her mind worked.

And she knew this.

And most of the time, this wasn't a problem - fearing her own vulnerability. The reason being that *she* was the one who always held the winning hand, holding all the right cards. I was crazy about her, so hopelessly in love with her, and was a fact I couldn't hide even if I tried. I was the weak one, and she knew it. And in knowing it - not having that fear of losing me - she found security. She found a safe haven her heart could take refuge in. And for her, this made the prospect of teenage love a whole less scary road to travel.

But not tonight. Tonight, she has lost that advantage and no longer has a safety net. The feelings are simply too strong and overwhelming for her to hide. So much so, that her weakness for me, that vulnerability, would be only too apparent, leaving her with no place to run or hide other than to do what she's doing - keeping her head turned so I can't see it in her face, to see that weakness. And that's her only play here, to circle her wagons.

You see, with Ellen, everything was always a precarious chess game between us. To her, anyway. Always the brilliant strategist with all the right moves. Always so careful so as not to give the opponent, me, the upper hand and advantage.

And she was correct in being this way - always covering up and protecting her flanks. Because I assure you that I would have taken full advantage of knowing I had that kind of power over her. But never once did I ever feel that way, that I was ever in that position. She always played the game too well. To the point that it was me who constantly feared losing her. It always felt as if it were my neck stretched out across the chopping block, not hers.

The simple fact is that I was completely at her mercy. I knew it and so did she. And she played that card for everything it was worth. I mean, she played me like a piano. And all I could ever do, in turn, was to take her abuse and hope for the best, that there would be something left to my poor heart once she was done trampling on it, done constantly getting her way.

So anyway, that's it in a nutshell - why she hid her face. Because she knew. She knew that if I had the first clue that the shoes were now on the other foot, I would pounce on the opportunity; that I had years of scores to settle, and the idea that I now had the means scared her to the core.

And rightly so.

So, yeah. Smart girl.

Like I said, with Ellen, it was always a game of emotional chess. A game she was good at, like she invented it or something. And me? Well, you do the math. The penis owner math.

* * * * *

I reach over and place a hand on her green satin thigh to touch her in a way that tells her all the things she wanted to hear, the subtle language of even the slightest physical contact between two lovers.

She immediately responded by placing her hand on top of mine for the same reason - to tell me all the things I wanted to hear.

And that's all it ever takes between her and I, that silent communication that says so very, very much.

So very much.

It's Peter Frampton now, singing 'Baby I Love Your Way' like he wrote it just for Ellen and me, and just for this night. A song I could have easily written for Ellen - the lyrics, anyway.

I exit General Degaulle and enter the GNO onramp, our destination now a mere river crossing away.

We are truly on the road to Oz, now.

Our next stop?

The Emerald City and all the wonders it holds in store for us.

A Bridge Too Far

Chapter 14

The Greater New Orleans Bridge, or, as we locals like to call it, the GNO. It's the thing that connects the west bank of New Orleans to the east bank, the east bank, of course, being New Orleans proper, the city itself.

Now, if you've never seen it, the GNO, it's the stuff postcards are made of. At night, anyway. During the day, it looks like your typical industrial metal 'we gotta have it, so...' thing, but at night it looks like something out of a Disney theme park. Everything bathed in a golden yellow sodium vapor lamp glow, with the skeletal structure outlined in bright, carnival-like white lights. Very Eiffel Tower-like, and all of it, the whole spectacle, visually echoed by the muddy waters of the Mississippi River below.

Quite a sight.

The other thing about crossing the GNO bridge is this - from its elevated, central view to the city, you see all the splendor of New Orleans: the river boats; the Superdome; the levees; French Quarter; Canal Street; the Central Business District; Riverwalk; Warehouse District... All the things that make the city what it is. And this is our destination for the evening, downtown New Orleans, the French Quarter, to be exact, and on such a beautiful, southern summer night. Mine and Ellen's night. The most important night of our two teenage lives, and there we were, in the process of living it, the two of us so electrified by it all, and filled with anticipation of what the evening would no doubt bring.

And that's when it happened, that little 'click' you hear the instant you step on a land mine. That tiny announcement that your life has just ended, and badly. Say goodbye to the future you once thought you had.

This time the land mine arrived in the form of - of all things - a fart. A bad one. A really bad one.

And this is where words fail me, in two ways. First of all, in just how bad the fart was, and secondly, the extreme, nightmarish problem it inflicted on my life.

First, the fart...

Groundbreaking. This thing would qualify as the standard by which all farts in the future would be compared to, because frankly, the bar had just been raised to impossible new heights. So much so that if this thing were a ten, the next foulest fart on record would only rate a four, maybe, and that's being generous. I've encountered week-old dead things that smelled less offensive. It's like, you could hang rotted fish scented air fresheners up by the dozen and not mask the smell. Seriously, this thing should have been captured by scientists so that it could be studied, duplicated, and weaponized for military use. For sure, it would end the need for nuclear weapons.

That's how bad it was.

And the worst part of it all? It wasn't me. And I so wish to God that it would have been.

(sigh)

You see, if it were me, it wouldn't have been a problem. Well, it would, but at least the evening, and indeed, the relationship itself, would survive. There would still be hope for a future between me and Ellen. Sure, I would have to endure seeing her face scrunch in disgust, pinching her nose, and covering her mouth with my tuxedo handkerchief.

Then, there would be a chance that she'd vomit all over the floors of my new car. After that, after the vomiting, she would lay into me unmercifully for having so horribly blemished our otherwise picture perfect evening.

Granted, it would be bad, the verbal and psychological beating I would have to take, but at least the evening, and more importantly, the relationship, would survive. It would survive, and in time, mend from the disaster. But make no mistake, I would pay, and pay dearly.

At first, there would be the unanswered phone calls, as usual, and then, if she saw me at all, it would only be to impose the cold shoulder treatment on me, something she knows I hate - the sulking, pouting, 'I so can't stand you right now' silent treatment. Always a joy.

And then there would be the 'looks'. The ones that cut right through me. The ones that literally leave my heart splayed open and bleeding. The ones she's so good at, they could be considered an art form, one that makes me want to crawl somewhere and die. In fact, given the choice between 1) an Ellen look, or 2) curl up in some corner and die from festering boils, I'd go with #2, the festering boils. A no-brainer, actually, when you consider that the boil option represents the lesser amount of suffering.

And sex?

Yeah, right.

I could completely forget what sex is like before she ever granted me *that* blessing again - if ever.

And then there would be the months and months of restitution that would follow: reservations every weekend at New Orleans finest, most expensive restaurants – four-star only; double dates every weekend with her friends; candy, cards and flowers every time I pick her up for a date; \$300 front row seats to Kenny G (who I hate) concerts; Saturday nights aboard the river boat President, the deluxe dinner and dance cruise - deluxe meaning costing more money than I make in a month, so, goodbye drug budget for a good long time. Like, maybe forever, which would be the true purpose of the reparations, to hit me where it really hurts, no money left over for drugs. First the sex and then the drugs, which leaves me with what? Holding hands and watching TV?

Criminy.

And the worst part? She would deliberately be at least thirty minutes late every time I picked her up for a date, meaning that I would be left sitting on my hands on the living room sofa that entire time while her dad, Col. Gene Pool Cleanser, sat in silence opposite me in his easy chair, never once making even the slightest effort to talk or otherwise socialize with me. Never once blinking as he stares holes in me, his hands clutching the chair's armrests with a death grip as he mentally reels through the various scenarios on how to terminate me without Ellen hating him for the rest of his life. Needless to say, it would have to look like a plausible accident. That's a given. But also, it has to be an accident so devised that his genius daughter could never see through it, meaning it would take time to formulate. But how much time? How long would I have before I start my car one day and it goes all fireball with me in it?

I can picture the whole thing in my mind - Ellen's dad sitting on the bed next to her, one arm around her shoulder, with his free hand feeding her a steady, nonstop stream of Kleenex as he tries his best to console his grief-stricken, completely distraught daughter...

"...a faulty fuel tank seal, allowing gas to drip onto the hot muffler. Which, of course, ultimately caused the massive explosion and mile-high fireball mushroom cloud that followed. A manufacturer's defect is all, sweetheart. Just a freak accident. Unfortunately, these things happen from time to time. Just a freak accident."

He tells her this as he wraps her in his arms, drawing her close, her tear-soaked face pressed into his dress uniform jacket as he gently rocks her...

"We'll get through this, pumkin, you'll see. It won't be easy, but we'll make it. In time, we'll get past this, just you wait and see."

Fuck!

This is so fucking bad.

Yes. It would take some thought and planning, but the guy didn't graduate from West Point with honors for nothing, mind you. This is doable. It's just a matter of time and opportunity.

Yeah, time and opportunity.

Fuck!

A half hour of having to be in the same room as this guy every time I pick her up for a date. In teenage boyfriend time, that translates into something like four hours, maybe more. Way too much time for this guy to think and plot.

Way too much.

But make no mistake about it, the reprisals would be bad, and the punishment period? Long. Weeks, maybe. Months, probably. Still, the relationship would survive, and in time, we might even look back on the whole thing and laugh.

OK. So, we wouldn't look back and laugh. Well, not her, anyway. Still, the evening, and everything it meant to us, would be salvaged. We'd pull together for the bigger good and get past it. I know we would. The blemish would still be there, mind you, but it would not be terminal. 'We' would survive.

And you know what? If it were any other girl, for example, Stephanie, my previous girlfriend, it would not have even been an issue at all, regardless of who ripped it, me or her. We would've simply busted out laughing, both of us pointing fingers and blaming the other person, while hanging our heads out the windows like a couple of dogs until the car aired out and it was safe to stick our heads back in. Something like that.

Good ol' Steph. I remember the times she and I would play 'Dutch Oven'. For those of you who aren't familiar with the game, that's when the two of you are lying in bed, like after having sex or something, and you fart. What you do then is you pull the blanket over the other person's head until they tap out by yelling 'uncle'.

Too funny.

And, of course, Stephanie would always lose, poor girl, which is why it was always so much fun to play.

For me, anyway.

So, with Steph, not only would a fart not have threatened the entire evening, but I think it would have actually added to it - you know, starting the evening out on such a funny note and all. Like the car version of Dutch Oven, except that instead of yelling 'uncle', the loser would be the first one to roll a window down.

But that's not how tonight has played out. I didn't do it, and it isn't Stephanie sitting next to me. It's Ellen, the loaded gun. The minefield I tiptoe through every single day of my life.

And now this.

We're playing the car version of Dutch Oven, alright, Ellen and I, only, I'm the loser here. Maybe it's Stephanie somewhere sticking pins in the ass of a voodoo doll that looks like Ellen, I don't know. After all, Ellen was the reason I broke up with her, and now she's getting her revenge. By way of a fart, no less. Makes sense, because for the first time, she not only wins a fart contest with me, but, as a bonus, she gets her revenge on her replacement as well.

And I can't help but marvel at the irony of it all.

Good shot, Steph. Guess I deserved that one.

Fuck.

Chapter 15

Voodoo doll or not, I've got problems. Big ones.

If only it had been me, for Christ's sake. I really didn't need this. Not tonight, or any night, for that matter, but *especially* not tonight. It's like, could I possibly have any worse luck? What? Did I kill women and children in a previous life, and this is like a karma thing? I mean, really, what's the deal?

Fuck!

And it wasn't even me! It was Ellen!

This is so bad, sssooooo fucking bad.

And this brings me to the second part of the equation - the nightmarish problem part. The 'end of life as I know it' part.

The problem here is that this is not an event Ellen can endure if it all goes sideways. Or, even if she did, or could, nothing would ever be the same again. Not her, not the relationship, and for sure, not our future. In fact, I see our chances at surviving this at somewhere, well, WAY BELOW FUCKING ZERO!!!

FUCK!

This wasn't just bad on one level; it was bad on many. Too many.

The first problem would be Ellen herself. Like all her genius, high-IQ friends, she was wound way too tight, but only at times, and you can best believe that this is going to be one of them.

The second problem was the pedestal I had placed her on, the icon of teenage girl perfection pedestal. The idea here is that she was, in my eyes, the epitome of female physical beauty and perfection. Flawless in every way, and the mere suggestion that anything that foul could ever be produced and subsequently emitted by an otherwise perfect female specimen - maybe the most perfect ever known to man - is simply, well, unthinkable. In fact, I can't even wrap my mind around it, making that association: an indescribably toxic odor coming from that unbelievably beautiful, unimaginably perfect ass. Those are simply dots that just don't connect. Not in my mind. Not today, not ever.

And that was my image of her, the one I carried around in my heart, and she knew it. And this image, this pedestal I placed her on, meant everything to her. And the idea of falling from it would be one of her worst fears, if not *the* worst.

Why? Why was that status so important to her?

Because...

That pedestal was the one and only thing that ever gave her any degree of security when it came to me. She knew that I could have my pick of girls, just like she knew that she was probably difficult to be with; that maybe she wasn't as easy to be around or as much fun to be with as other girls. Normal girls. She clearly understood that her odd - well, maybe not 'odd', but for sure, *unusual* - mind made her, in a way, substandard. And this understanding caused her - despite her incredible beauty and other stellar attributes - to have a poor opinion of herself. Not exactly the healthiest of self-images, you might say.

And then there she is, this oddity, this 'defect', so to speak, in a relationship with me, a really cool, good-looking, and charming guy no girl could resist. A fact she was constantly reminded of every time we went out and girls would come up to me and flirt.

And the thing is, she was as crazy about – and, as helplessly in love - with me as I was with her. And this is where the fear came from, the insecurity. Knowing the devastation her heart would suffer if she were to ever lose me, learning firsthand what the horrific, nightmarish pain of losing your first love is like.

Yeah. Losing your first love.

It's something you instinctively know, deep inside, that:

- 1) It's something you never want to experience, and
- 2) That it's something you never fully recover from.

You never really do get over your first true love. Those feelings never really go away. At best, they simply fade into the background over time, but make no mistake, the pain - or, rather, the memory of the pain - from the loss is something that will stay with you for the remainder of your days. The pain itself eventually subsides, at least the worst part, the 'I just want to die' part, but the memory of that pain lasts a lifetime, with the scars it leaves behind becoming a permanent part of you, of who you are.

Somehow, it's just something we all instinctively know.

And she knows this.

And so do I.

* * * * *

Now, the third problem would be Ellen's nerve endings themselves. Everyone the girl had was on the outside of her skin, and a thinner skin than hers, you simply could not find. She was, without a doubt, the most sensitive person - male or female - I have ever known, or ever will. I mean, even cut flowers I would bring her, eventually wilting and turning brown, made her cry. Take any emotion ever experienced by anyone, multiply it by a factor of a thousand, and this is what Ellen felt. She was an emotional magnifying glass, an amplifier of unbelievable magnitude.

And that's just Ellen. That's how she is.

And this was always such a huge problem, that mine field thing. To say that my heart stayed in my throat the entire time I was around her would be a huge understatement, kind of like saying water is wet. HUGE understatement. It was that bad.

The fourth problem was the evening itself. Every girl's dream, and tonight, Ellen was living it, living the dream. Perfect and storybook in every way. A story to tell her kids, and then later, her grandchildren. The unforgettable prom night story.

Oh, she could still tell it, mind you, only the story would have to be severely sanitized. She'd have to leave the most significant part of it out, the part I'm telling you now.

And what's worse? She would have to do *anything* and *everything* I demanded just so that I would never spill the beans; that I'd keep her dark secret exactly that, secret. And this would work very much in my favor, like permanent blackmail at its best.

And I'm sssoooo OK with that.

She wouldn't be OK with it, of course, but that's her problem. The simple fact is, there are a few rules in life that cannot be changed or circumvented, and one of them is that there are no free lunches in this world. Everything has a cost, and that includes ripping the foulest fart on record in my new car. On prom night, no less.

Especially ripping the foulest fart on record in my new car. On prom night, no less.

So, in the future, should she find my blackmail...er, 'terms', rather, unreasonable, all I have to say to her is this – next time...

TRY HARDER!! HOLD IT IN, FOR FUCK'S SAKE! EVEN IF YOUR EYES POP OUT OF THEIR SOCKETS AND YOU INFLATE TO THE SIZE OF A MACY'S DAY PARADE BALLOON, HOLD THE FUCKING THING IN!!

And if you don't?

Well, now, like I said, everything has its cost.

Advantage, Moi.

* * * * *

And finally, the last problem, Ellen herself, having to live the rest of her life knowing that it was all her fault, that *she* was the one who ruined it all. Ruined it not only for herself, but for me as well. After all the effort and money, not to mention the sacrifices I had to make, just to ensure her prom night was perfect. Beyond perfect.

And if you're Ellen, how do you even begin to live with that?

Answer: You don't.

Naturally, I would do the right thing and try to take the blame - you know, throw myself under the bus, saying it was me, that I was the one who ripped it. But that wouldn't wash with her. Not with Ellen. For her, it would simply be a permanent emotional scar. A bad one. Crippling, even. One she would never get over, ever.

Chapter 16

And that's where we are now, current situation. In the process of creating one of life's golden memories, the first one to come to mind one night when you're curled up in a chair in front of the fireplace, and you set your bestseller down to think back to that time in your life, your magical senior prom.

And why do you hold that memory so dear?

Because it was that good, is why. Better than good. Better than any fiction you are ever likely to read. Because it was real. Because it really did happen, and it happened just that way.

Again...

When it comes to senior proms, you only get that opportunity one time in life and then never again. That's it. You get that one shot, that one chance to make it happen, and then once done, once it's over, it's gone for good. Forever relegated to nothing more than a favorite memory of your youth. Gone now, and forever lost to time.

And, of course, in time, there would be other priceless memories. For example, your wedding day or your children's births. And then after that, it's the birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas mornings, baptisms, graduations, etc., etc. Plenty of memorable occasions to be had, but none to compare to that one magical night. Compared to it, the rest, by far, pale in comparison. At least where your heart is concerned.

Why?

Not to take anything away from the importance of your child's birth or any of the other special memories, mind you. Not at all. But here's the difference between the two: the birth of your child represents a new beginning in your life, a new and wonderful chapter. A chapter you will know and experience for a good, long time, like, for the rest of your life, God willing.

But prom night, on the other hand, represents something different. It represents an ending, and a sad one, at that. Mainly because that's it. Game. Fucking. Over. The beginning of the end to a very unforgettable and irreplaceable period of your life. The last paragraph in the book that is the story of your carefree days of youth. You write it, you read it, and then you put the book down. It's over, done. Just a memory now.

And that's life. That's how it works, just a memory now.

* * * * *

So, that's where I'm at now, tying my brain in knots trying to figure out how I can save this priceless moment in life. So much effort. So much planning, cost, sacrifice, preparation, anticipation... And now, all of it in perilous jeopardy. All because of a fart.

Fuck!

And you know what? I still can't make that connection - that something that foul, that vile, a gas that toxic, can come out of that body, out of that perfect ass. It just doesn't seem possible. It just doesn't compute, period.

But, it did. So, whether I can wrap my mind around it or not, the reality of it all is this: I got problems, and they're not going away simply because I want them to.

And the clock is ticking.

I knew that at any moment, the mine I just stepped on could go off; that at any moment now, I could suddenly hear the unmistakable deep, hiccup-like heaves, and look over at Ellen, only to see her shoulders shuddering with each one, with each of her sobs. And after that? The unstoppable deluge of tears that would follow.

And that would be the point of no return. The point at which the evening would be officially over, even before it really had a chance to start. Because no amount of consoling or reasoning would prevent the inevitable U-turn I would have to make to bring Ellen home.

Oh, I could try, and you bet I would. I would do everything in my power, make every effort I could think of, battle the eternal flames of hell themselves, even, to salvage the evening. But nothing I would try and do would matter. Not in the least. Not where Ellen is concerned, because in her case, emotions trump everything - reason, logic, desperate pleas, bigger goods, noble causes...everything. Nothing ever works when you're trying to disarm one of Ellen's emotional meltdowns, and don't even ask me how I know.

This is so, so bad.

And what's more? My foot - figuratively speaking - is going numb trying to keep the land mine's plunger down.

I risk a sideways glance in Ellen's direction to check for any telltale signs of the impending emotional collapse, and saw none, which means I have a little time. Not much, but still, some is better than none. It goes without saying, though, that time is not my friend on this one. I need to do something, and I need to do it fast.

But my brainstorming is cut short by yet another problem, like I didn't have enough to deal with already. It's my eyes. Not only were they stinging and swelling from the toxic fumes, but they were beginning to tear to the point that my vision was becoming blurry. It was my guess that I was probably having trouble keeping the car moving in a straight line. My fear was that I might be veering side-to-side in the lane, which only added to the gravity of the situation when you consider that the GNO is heavily patrolled by bridge cops constantly on the lookout for drunk drivers. Which could very well be what I looked like, I don't know. It's hard to tell because seeing the road was becoming a real problem. Whatever the case, one thing was certain: getting stopped by the cops was just about the last thing I needed to happen. If the cops did stop me, they would search the car, in which case, my next mailing address would be a jail cell. Arrested for possession of every illegal substance known to man, and a few that aren't.

And I keep thinking the same thing over and over... What's next?

Chapter 17

Incredible. How, exactly, does this happen? How do you go from having the night of your life one moment and living your worst nightmare the next? And I can't help but think about just how unfair all of this is. Like, did I not do enough? Do my utmost to make this night turn out right? Yet, here I sit in my tuxedo with Ellen next to me, with her about to go into meltdown any moment now, thus ending everything I hold dear in life. But what difference does that make when I have a bridge cop directly behind me, about to light me up and send me to jail for the rest of my natural existence? Either way, I lose. It's like I'm trying to punch my way out of a paper bag. A really thick one.

And making matters worse is the fact that bridge traffic is crawling at 25 mph, no doubt from all the prom night traffic headed into the city, making my already agonizing trip across the GNO that much worse. Worse, because the longer it takes me to cross the bridge, the greater my chances are of getting pulled over. And right now, I estimate the chance of that happening at about three bazillion percent.

But wait, there's more. The next song begins to play, and it's the Rolling Stones' 'Angie', a song that never fails to make Ellen cry. So now she's going to start crying, and I have no way of knowing whether it's because of the song, or because the land mind just went off, and it's time to turn the car around and take her home.

I'm sunk. My life is over.

But you know what? I'm not going down without a fight. There must be a way out of this. There just has to be. And if there's not, and I'm going down in flames anyway, no matter what, I will do so kicking and screaming. You can bet I will firmly plant my foot in life's crotch before I crash and burn. Life may win the fight, but it will do so doubled over in agonizing pain.

And then I think...for every lock, there is a pick; for every problem, a solution. Brain, don't fail me now.

I risk another glance Ellen's way and everything remains status quo. No tears yet. Not even from the song. True, she has her head turned to me, but I would still see it in her shoulders. They always heave with each of her sobs. But at the moment, there's no movement. Not so far, so I have at least that much going for me. Still, the fuse is burning, and I have no way of knowing just how long that fuse is. Maybe not long. And then there's my eyes. They're really burning now. I want to wipe the tears away so I can at least see the road a little better, but that's out of the question. My luck being what it is tonight, Ellen would no doubt turn her head at that exact moment and catch me in the act. And if that happened, it would all be over. Genius she is, she'd instantly put two and two together, and I'd be busted. Then the crying, and then the dreaded U-turn.

Chapter 18

The never-ending chess game Ellen and I play. Always so complicated. This is the way it works: as long as I don't acknowledge the fart in any way, there's hope. It's the 'if you didn't see it, it didn't happen' thing. Or, in this case, smell it. If I didn't smell it, then she didn't really fart. It's simply how the human mind works, wanting to grasp at anything and everything it can in order to make a bad situation better. In this case, the evening was so critically important to her, Ellen would convince herself that I probably hadn't noticed anything, and, to that end, there were a couple of facts that would give her reason to feel this way:

First of all, she had been successful in releasing the fart without a sound, not even so much as a 'pppffffttt'. And God only knows what kind of superhuman effort that took, because, judging by the intensity of the smell, it had to be enough gas to inflate a weather balloon. Maybe two. And, given the fact that she had to release it all at a really slow rate, slow enough not to make a sound, I would say that it had to go a full 9-12 seconds, minimum. Be that as it may, she still managed to pull it off, thus eliminating any undeniable audio evidence that it ever happened. And thank God for that talent; otherwise, she'd be at home lying face down in her bed and crying herself to sleep this very moment.

Secondly, I hadn't reacted. I offered no acknowledgement of any kind, which, for me, is highly – I repeat – HIGHLY out of character since I'm always more than quick to pounce on her defects on the super rare occasions they surface. Her farting around me was a first, and on any other night, I would have been all over that like green on grass, like a monkey fucking a football. Maybe two footballs. Either way, you better believe I'd make a major production out of it - clutching my throat, choking, gagging, gasping for air, groping around with my hands as if I were suddenly blinded... Too, too sweet. Sure, I'd pay for the theatrics later, but some things in life are worth whatever price you have to pay, and the chance of evening the score that way, taking advantage of an Ellen fart, certainly qualified. In fact, it topped the list.

But not tonight. Tonight, I had no choice but to let it go. Still, she knew this. She knew good and well that I'd jump on an opportunity like that. Yet, there was no reaction on my part. None. And in my mind, I had to believe that her strong desire not to ruin the evening would cause her to cling to the belief that she had gotten away with it, and that everything was OK, convincing herself not to ruin the evening by prematurely panicking or melting down. At least not until she had a reason to, and her catching me wiping tears from my eyes is all it would take. That one act alone would be all the 'due cause' she would need. So, you see, I was walking down a very, very slippery slope here. The slightest slip - one lax moment of my foot on the land mine's plunger - could end it all in an instant, in the blink of an eye.

A swollen, stinging, burning eye, at that.

Chapter 19

The next song begins to play. It's Fleetwood Mac's 'Go Your Own Way'. She managed to somehow get through 'Angie' without incident, and I'm beginning to feel as if my chances at surviving this are improving. I'm really enjoying the song when I suddenly realize, for the first time, what the lyrics are actually saying...

Loving you

Wasn't the right thing to do

But how can I

Ever change things that I feel

I'm completely dumbstruck. My body's covered in chill bumps. I've heard this song hundreds of times before and never once realized just how profound those lyrics are until now.

It's Lindsey Buckingham's love-torn plea to Stevie Nicks at the height of their very volatile, very incendiary love affair. Nicks, of course, being the most beautiful female vocalist to ever live.

Basically, he's telling her he shouldn't love her - maybe doesn't even *want* to love her -but he has no choice, that when everything is said and done, you simply have no say in what the heart feels or compels you to do.

And don't I know the feeling.

Sheez.

And then something crosses my mind... I wonder if *she* ever farted in *his* car, his new Ferrari, or whatever it is he drives. Dunno. Maybe she did, and that's why he feels that way, that loving her isn't the right thing to do. I mean, really. Who in their right mind needs those kinds of problems? Look where it's got me.

On a related note, Nicks eventually left Buckingham for another member of the band, Mick Fleetwood, and I can imagine how that came about. She probably farted in Lindsey's new car, and seeing the writing on the wall, that he would no doubt dump her, she did the preemptive strike thing by dumping him first. And that would have been the smart move here for her. That way, he wouldn't get a chance to explain to everyone why he had no other choice but to dump the most incredible female in rock music, because she farted in his new car.

Clever girl, that Nicks. Not only did she save face on this one, but, if you're gonna dump somebody, that's pretty much the way to do it, by way of a fart. Like it's her way of making a statement of some kind. You know, sharing her final thoughts on the matter...

"Oh, yeah? Well, this is what I think about it!"

(lifts left butt cheek off the seat for maximum effect)

BBBBRRRRRAAAAAAPPPPPPPP

And then she calmly exits the car and hails a cab; her mission here, accomplished.

And now I'm wondering if maybe that's what's in store for me. Ellen farted in my brand new car, and almost without exception, that's mandatory grounds for a guy to dump his girlfriend. I mean, look, going and finding a new girlfriend is no big deal. Doesn't even take much of an effort. But c'mon, how often does that happen? That a guy buys his first new car? Dude, that only happens once in your life, and, as any guy will tell you, your first new car ranks right up there with first blowjobs, it's that important, if not more. And then, what? Some girl blemishes that golden moment in your life by fumigating the whole car to the point you have to pull over and air it out?

Yeah. For a guy, that's an eject button if ever there was one.

And Ellen may know this. So now, it may be that she has no choice in the matter. She *has* to dump me before I dump her...

"That's right, Lisa told me he made a pass at her, grabbed her tits, so I dumped him. No choice. But get this - I knew he was going to buy a new car for the prom, so I waited until prom night to do the deed. Then, when the time was right, I did it. I told him we were done, to pull over and let me out. Then, just before I got out, just to add insult to injury, I lifted up off the seat and ripped one, a good one, like the mother of all farts, right in his new car. And look, it was bad. I mean, real bad. A real eye burner. I'd spent the day eating cabbage, boiled eggs, and beans just to make sure it was. Will probably never get the smell out. Probably have to donate it to charity because he'll never be able to sell it, even. Serves him right, that cheating bastard. Can you believe that guy? Lisa? My best friend?"

I can just hear it now. She's going to do whatever it takes to save face because the last thing she wants is for me to go around telling everyone the truth, tell everyone what *really* happened...

"Yeah, can you believe that? Farted right in my new car, on PROM NIGHT, no less! Fuck! All that effort and money, wasted. So naturally, I did the right thing. I simply did what any guy in my shoes would have done. I dumped her. Dropped that bitch like a bad habit, I did. No choice. That's the rules, right?"

And once something like that gets out, that you got dumped because you farted in your boyfriend's new car, it spreads like bubonic plague, and is every bit as deadly. She would instantly become the most undatable girl in town, in the whole state, even. For sure, she'd have to move. That's a given.

Look, I love this girl. More than I can tell you. But teenage rules are teenage rules, and if I didn't dump her, and word got out about what happened, then I might be the one who would have to move, and I like it here. I know everybody, and everybody knows me, so I really don't feel like starting over somewhere else.

But as things stand, nobody knows about this but me. And Ellen, well, she knows, but she certainly isn't going to tell. That is, unless she's planning on dumping me over this to save her reputation. But I have no way of knowing that for sure. Right now, there's no way for me to tell how all of this is going to turn out. I don't know. But if that's the case, that this is all going to go sideways and she's going to kick me to the curb, then I need to act first, and fast.

But I'm torn. I really don't know what to do here. It's all so complicated and confusing, and making matters worse is the fact that I'm pretty stoned right now, which doesn't help any. Luckily, I don't get the chance to fret over the whole thing for too long, because about that time, the car behind me begins flashing its lights. At first, I thought it was a cop, so I check the rearview mirror and see that it's some kind of station wagon, and, to the best of my knowledge, bridge cops don't drive family cars, at least not on duty, so my heart begins beating again. Still, something's wrong.

Whoever it is behind me keeps flashing their brights, flashes them frantically as if desperate to get my attention. Obviously, they want something. What, I'm not sure, but I think I'm about to find out because they give up on the lights and pull up alongside me, along the left side, my side, thank God.

I'm not sure what all of this is about, but it can't be good. You can pretty much rest assured that it's not a car full of my friends wanting to tell me to have a good time tonight. No, it's something else, like maybe another land mine.

Yeah, another land mine.

Like I needed that.

Chapter 20

I was right. It is a station wagon. One of those Town and Country things with that lame stick-on, fake wood stuff on the sides. The husband's driving. He's making sure he matches my speed and stays alongside while the wife mouths something to me through her window. Of course, I can't really hear her, but I can guess as to what she's trying to tell me. It'd be hard not to since she's pinching her nose with one hand and using the other to crank a pretend window down, like we're playing charades or something, and the word I'm supposed to guess is 'MY GOD, SAVE YOURSELF! ROLL THE WINDOWS DOWN!'.

I picked up on at least that much -- 'deadly fumes' -- from her slowly mouthed words, but if that wasn't clear enough, she uses lipstick to write something on a shopping bag and then holds it up to the window...

ROLL DOWN YOUR WINDOWS

YOUR CAR IS FILLED WITH

DEADLY FUMES

SAVE YOURSELF

Yeah, right, lady.

I appreciate her concern, I do, but really, does she not think I don't know my car's bursting with toxic gas? Really?

Criminy.

So anyway, I wave to her and give her a friendly nod, and then mouth my own words back to her...

I know. Windows don't work. Thank you anyway.

She takes the sign down and looks at me, somewhat puzzled. She doesn't get it. She can't understand why I don't just pull over and open all the car doors. It would simply be the sane thing to do.

Frustrated, she turns to her husband, and the two just shrug at one another and drive on. As they pass me, I see no less than five kids' faces plastered against the rear window, each one pinching their nose with one hand and pointing at my car with the other.

Fine. I get it, smartasses, my car stinks really bad. I flip them off. They flip me back, the little fuckers. Two words for their mother: Birth. Control.

Christ! The smell is so bad that it's affecting the traffic behind me, even. It's like I'm the mosquito control truck or something.

I do a quick 'Ellen check' and find, to my relief, that nothing's changed. She saw none of that.

And I think... There is a God.

But that notion, that God is feeling sorry for me, maybe, and giving me a helping hand here, is short-lived because bad just got, well, not worse, because things can't really get worse. It's more a matter of it being the same bad, just more of it, because now, as if I needed it, I have another problem. It's my hand, my left one, the one closest to the power window buttons on the door's armrest. I look down at it, and I see that the forefinger is extended while the rest of the hand is slowly inching its way to the one thing that could offer me some kind of relief, an open window. Doesn't matter which one - driver's side, passenger side, front, rear, sunroof... Any one of them would do. Wouldn't even have to open it much, just a crack, because at this point, anything would help. Anything at all.

And my hand knows this. It's acting on its own, though, without any conscious effort or cooperation on my part. Some kind of primordial, self-preservation instinct, I guess. Whatever the case, I need to stop it. The hand is desperate, and I understand this, still, I can't let it reach the power window buttons, end of story. The hand simply doesn't understand what's at stake here. Look, I'm desperate too, but not *that* desperate. Not yet, anyway.

You see, the problem here is that a suddenly cracked window without explanation or justification would be the trigger I'm so desperately trying to avoid, and a suddenly cracked window could -- no, WOULD -- be the catalyst that ends it all. It would serve as undeniable proof that I know she farted. So, not only do I have to somehow stop the hand, but I need to do it in a way that Ellen won't notice.

Damn. I know I need to do this. I know I need to somehow stop the hand, but for some reason, I'm hesitating. Probably because I can't help but think about how nice a blast of cool, reviving, life-saving fresh air would be right about now, knowing fully well that it would bring an instant end to the nightmare I'm living.

I look down at the slowly creeping hand and see that it's closing in on the buttons. It's got maybe 4 to 4 1/2 more inches left to go. So close now that the index finger bends into an arch shape as it prepares to make the critical, life-saving button press.

Life-saving in its mind, life-ending in mine. Thus, the conflict of interest here between us, the hand and I. I know it means well, but again, it simply doesn't understand. But whether it understands or not, this needs to stop, and fast. But it won't be easy. It's going to come down to a battle of the wills, mine versus the hand's. Its motivation? Immediate relief from the suffering. Mine? My entire future.

I look down at it, at the threat on the end of my arm, and focus all my powers of concentration on the thing. I call on every ounce of willpower I can possibly muster and do my best to mentally overcome the controlling instincts at play here. But it's a struggle, and a fierce one, at that. I force the hand to retreat two inches, only for it to break free and not only retakes the ground it lost, but advances by an additional half inch or so, and every time it does this, it gets closer and closer to its endgame. It soon becomes an intense give-and-take struggle for that small piece of real estate between the index finger's tip and the closest 'down' button - a struggle that I'm beginning to wonder if I can even win.

But no way I'm giving up. The hand MUST be stopped. No matter what the cost, I have to keep this thing from reaching the window buttons. Losing this battle is simply not an option, so I redouble my efforts and try again. After a few moments of intense tug-of-war with the thing, the hand finally falters and begins losing ground. It loses ground, but not enough. It's still too close to the buttons for *my* comfort, so I launch another assault. And another, and another. My attacks are relentless, and before long, begin paying serious dividends. The hand is moving further and further back, almost to the point at which it started. But the fucking thing simply refuses to give in, and once again, begins advancing toward the window controls. I concentrate even harder. I picture Ellen suddenly erupting into tears and imagine myself swiveling my head around, looking for a place to make the dreaded U-turn, cursing the day I was born as I do.

And that clenched it. The mental imagery gave me the advantage I needed to put me over the top and 'will' the rebellious body part all the way back to the safety of my left thigh. Once there on my thigh, I lift up ever so slightly from the seat and slide the hand underneath and sit on it.

That was close.

Too close.

Now that the threat's been eliminated, I relax some and reward myself with a quiet, hopefully undetectable, sigh of relief and hope there isn't any noticeable sweat on my face from the struggle. Even if there is, there's nothing I can do about it because I'm not about to take that risk, the risk of getting caught mopping the 'evidence' away. In this case, I'll simply have to hope for the best.

Yeah.

Hope for the best.

How stupid does that sound right about now? That's all I've done for over a month, for Christ's sake, and frankly, I haven't seen any 'best' to any of this yet.

This is one of those times that absolutely screws my head on sideways. Ellen knows good and well she farted. In fact, had to go to extremes just to muffle the thing and keep it silent, which had to take nothing short of a superhuman effort. Because what I can say with some degree of certainty is that this was no small affair. This was a major gas leak. We're talking construction worker ginormous. Like, the winning entry in some redneck, blue-collar bar fart contest.

The thing is, she knows very well what she did. And if it wasn't for the smell and eye burning, she would have gotten away with it. No harm, no foul. And maybe I could dismiss the eye burning to something else, like all the weed I smoked before picking her up. Still, there is the undeniable evidence to contend with, and that is, the smell. A smell so bad, it defies description. The kind of smell you have to experience to believe, because otherwise, anything I have to say about it would simply sound like drug-induced exaggeration. So, in my mind, she HAD to smell it. And if *she* smelled it, she has to know that I did too, meaning, she's gotta know that I know she farted. But if that were the case, she'd be a mass of tears and snot right now, but she's not. And I have to tell you, I just don't get it. I really don't understand. And even though I can't wrap my mind around all of this, one thing is for sure: if we somehow manage to survive this mess, you best believe I will never, NEVER, ask her about it, no matter how curious I ever become about it in the future. There are simply some sleeping dogs best left undisturbed, and this is one of them.

Chapter 21

The hand thing was a close call, but I got us past it, and I keep reminding myself that 'bad' is always temporary; that no matter how bad things may get, in time, it always goes away. You eventually get past it.

And this is what I keep telling myself with every 'thump' I feel as the car passes over yet another section joint of the bridge. And with each one we cross, each thump, I know that I'm that much closer to getting us out of this. It's like a countdown timer, only I'm not sure how many thumps I have left before I can breathe easy again, literally.

And with every thump of the tires, the better I seem to feel about things. Like, I can do this. I can make this work. All is not lost. Not yet, meaning, there's hope.

But my newfound optimism is short lived. A bridge cop just pulled up behind me, and from the rearview mirror, I can see that he's talking on the radio.

...on the radio.

Never a good thing.

Sure enough, he lights me up.

And that's it. At the tender age of eighteen, my life is over.

Chapter 22

The blue and red lights flashing behind us finally motivated Ellen to turn her head toward me for the first time since we've been in the car. The look on her face is one of concern, concern bordering on the edge of worry. Which is okay, because it could have been worse. Ordinarily, I would have expected her to be angry about this, getting pulled over on our way to the prom, but instead, she's simply concerned. I can tell the difference between the two, concern or worry, by looking at her eyebrows, a definite giveaway to her mood. Kind of like a mood ring, only with her, it's eyebrows. Mood eyebrows, I guess. For example, if they're furrowed and arched, it means she's either concerned, worried, or just doesn't understand. Which is a whole lot better than when they're either as straight across her forehead as a ruler, or slanted downward toward her nose, both modes being a no-fail indicator that she is either 1) perturbed (straight), and greatly so, or 2) just outright angry (slanted down). Then, there is the third mode where her eyebrows slant upward toward the middle of her forehead. It is this mode, the third one, that defines her 'Oh, you have hurt me so bad' look, and is typically followed by an unstoppable deluge of tears.

So yeah, mode one isn't so bad, not when you consider the alternatives.

At any rate, I make an effort to ease her concern somewhat by assuring her that this is probably nothing more than one of the bridge cops' routine stops they make on prom night, randomly pulling cars over that they know are headed to one prom or another. It's their way of trying to prevent someone's prom night from turning into a permanent bad memory, or worse, by ensuring that, if nothing else, the bridge is safe from drunk drivers. And, this actually works. Everybody knows the cops do this, so we avoid driving over the bridge while we're really loaded. Otherwise, it's pretty much a guaranteed overnight stay in the city's worst hotel, the parish jail. Not only the worst hotel, but also the worst food.

...or so I've been told.

Anyway, that's what I tell her. And that may actually be the case, that I'm simply one of their random pullovers tonight. On the other hand, maybe not. This may not be random at all. It could be that I was right about me maybe swerving from side to side in the lane because I couldn't see the road well enough. Either way, this is not good. It's bad. How bad, I have no way of knowing just yet, but something's telling me that I'm about to find out.

I pull over to the service lane, and, as expected, the cop does the same. I watch him in my review mirror and see that he's grabbed a metal clipboard from his dash, a citation book, which tells me that he's already prepared to write me a ticket. And if that's the case, that's bad enough, getting a ticket. I've gotten too many already this year. It's like I'm collecting these fucking things. It's bad enough that, being a teenager, I already pay the highest insurance premiums on the planet, but add a shoe box full of tickets to the mix and, well, you get the picture. So, no. I don't need another one. As it is, I'm probably putting my insurance agents' kids through college, for Christ's sake.

But it's not the ticket I'm worried about. Well, yeah, I'm worried about it, but not nearly as worried as I am about the possibility that the bridge cop is gonna want to search me. And that alone would be bad enough. I'd probably be looking at eight to ten, out in six for good behavior. But if he searches me, he's gonna want to search my car as well, and if that happens, then it's Goodnight Gracie. May as well pull the shades down and turn out the lights, the show's over. And folks, on your way home tonight, don't drive *too* safely, because the life you save may be some poor teenager who just wants his suffering to end.

I check the review mirror again and watch as Officer Fuck Monkey (my pet name for cops) puts his hat on and exits the cruiser. I grab my registration and insurance card and get out of my own car. I meet Officer Monkey at my trunk.

"Good evening, Officer Fu..."

I catch myself. I do a quick check of his name plate...

"...er, Jenkins."

"And a good evening to you, too, Sir. License and registration, please."

I hand them over to him, and he promptly returns to the cruiser and closes the door. A moment later, he's on the radio again. This time, to check my license, running it through the system. In the meantime, I lean back against my trunk, fold my arms across my chest, and watch the cars as they pass, hoping none of them are people I know. I really don't need this to get back to my parents, or, worse yet, Ellen's father, Col. Cleanser.

Many of the cars, if not most of them, are couples heading to one prom or another. It's the weekend in New Orleans when most schools have their proms, a fact easily confirmed by watching the cars as they pass and noticing how many of them have at least one tuxedo and one gown each inside. More, in the case of the double daters. The double daters, of course, being the guys who have no car at all, or a car so ratty, their dates refuse to be seen in it on prom night. Any other night's fine, but not for their once-in-a-lifetime senior prom. So, what happens is the guy without a car, or a really ratty car, hitches a ride with a friend or someone who does have a prom-friendly vehicle. Someone like me, only, no way was I going to be stuck inside a car with a couple of Ellen's loser friends.

I know, I know. I really shouldn't say stuff like that. And, you're right, they're not really losers, not the way my friends are. They're more like...like...social spasmods, I guess you could say. Spasmods being one level higher than drooling retards and lepers on the 'people I don't want in my car' list.

But I can't worry about that right now, retards drooling on my new seats. I've got bigger problems. Too big. So big that I'm beginning to feel like the guy with his head in the guillotine waiting for the blade to fall, and any moment now, Officer Fuck Monkey is going to show up and pull the lever.

To take my mind off the doom and gloom I'm sure is coming my way, I watch the cars as they pass and count the ones that have prom goers in them, about a three out of five ratio from what I can see, with all them, all the couples inside, smiling and laughing, and basically having a great time. That is, until they see me lit up in the flashing lights of a cop car and looking something like, well, the guy in the guillotine. I see their necks crane and their heads swivel to get a better look as they pass, with every couple inside looking at me with the same pity-filled expression on their face, that 'Oh, that's so fucked up. What a way to start prom night' look. I return their look with one of my own. The one that says 'You don't know the half of it'.

About that time, I look through the rear window and see that Ellen has turned in her seat to watch the drama as it unfolds. I do a quick eyebrow check and see that what was once concern has now escalated into worry. Which, still isn't bad. The eyebrows could have been in 'I'm so fucking mad at you!' mode, but they're not. Not yet anyway, but I'm sure that will change once the cop arrests me and hauls me away. Then she'll be mad at me for life. Probably won't even write me while I'm serving my life sentence, knowing her.

I notice the cop as he begins to make his way back to my car. And then I notice something else, the smell. Even out in the open air, it's suffocating, and I can't help but be impressed. That was truly one for the books.

The cop approaches me and hands me my license and registration back. He pulls out the metal ticket book I saw him grab earlier and begins to write...

"Mr. Miller, the reason I pulled you over is that you don't have a license plate on your car."

"License plate? It's a new car!! I just bought the fu...er, thing! It doesn't have a plate! I'm waiting on one!"

He lifts a cautioning palm to me, like he's signaling for traffic to stop...

"Please calm down, sir. There's no need for hysterics here."

Easy for him to say. But maybe he's right. After all, he hasn't asked me to empty my pockets or anything. Not yet.

So anyway, I quit ranting, but I'm anything but calm. He lowers his hand and returns his attention to his previous task, writing me a ticket, and continues to speak to me without looking up. He tells me...

"I understand, Mr. Miller, but you should have been given a temporary tag to display in the rear window until such time that you receive the permanent plate."

He calls me 'Mr. Miller'. How weird does that sound? I ask the guy...

"A temporary tag? What the hell does that look like?"

So he tells me...

"It's a piece of white cardboard with printing on it about the size of a normal plate."

He uses his hands to approximate the size of the tag. This is starting to sound familiar...

"WAIT! I GOT THAT!"

I push myself off the trunk and point to my car...

"It was on my rear window, and I took it off to clean the glass! I didn't stick it back up after I finished! I didn't know I needed to, but I got it! It's in the back seat!"

He walks to the rear of my car, peers in, and sees the temp tag lying flat on the rear speaker deck.

"I see. Well, in that case, tell you what I'll do..."

He flips the citation pad closed and crosses his arms as if to strike some superior, 'voice of authority' pose, like some Department of Public Safety ad, the ones that attempt to make everybody a safer driver. This guy, with that pose of his, would be ideal for the purpose. The caption would read, 'If you violate a traffic law, this man will know. Avoid the introduction. Drive safely and obey all traffic laws.'

Yeah, that's him, Joe Police Academy. While the rest of us are out partying, getting high, and getting laid, he probably spends his evening in front of the mirror perfecting the look.

Poster man uses a forefinger to tilt his hat back a little further and then, with that same finger of authority now pointed at me, says...

"Promise me you'll stick it back in the window first chance you get, and I'll forget the whole thing. Deal?"

"Oh, man! Deal! And thanks! I really appreciate it!"

"Not a problem. What prom are you headed to?"

"Ben Franklin."

"Oh, yeah? I'm impressed."

"Well, don't be. It's not me, it's my girlfriend. She's the genius. I'm just the idiot who forgot to put the temp tag back in the window."

"I see. Anyway, there's something I need to ask you."

"Okay. What?"

He pauses for a long moment - just for drama's sake, I guess - and then gives me the standard issue 'suspicious cop' stare. You know the one, where one eye's slightly closed as if to increase the other eye's ability to see through any lie I will tell? Yeah, that one. It's like a built-in lie detector that only cops have, and right now, this one's got *his* directly trained on me. So, he asks...

"Have you been drinking tonight?"

"Drinking? No. Not a drop. I don't even like the stuff. I..."

I was about to say 'I do drugs', but again, I catch myself...

"I don't drink. Ever."

Well, that's good. The reason I asked is because it looked to me like you were having some trouble keeping the car moving in a straight line. That's why I pulled up behind you in the first place. But then once I got behind you, I noticed that you didn't have a license plate. That, and the fact that there was a really bad odor coming from your car. Really bad. Got a couple of calls about it from other drivers, even."

Jesus! This thing is so bad it's actually been gassing other cars, to the point they pull over the first chance they get and call the police, the fastest way they can think to get the warning out. I can just picture it in my mind - some guy at a pay phone holding a handkerchief over his mouth, standing next to his car with every door open to air it out, while the rest of the family is standing at a safe distance, doubled over, and puking.

And now I'm wondering if Ellen and I are EVER gonna make it to the prom. For all I know, there's a dozen government vehicles rushing to the scene this very moment to put one of those biohazard tents over my car, while people wearing space suits are at both ends of the bridge with flares and orange tip flashlights waving traffic away. And if that isn't enough, there'll be a chopper overhead with a PA system telling everyone to go home and stay inside with the windows and doors closed until the threat's been neutralized. The threat, in this case, being Ellen's ass, and how do you neutralize that? A pair of inflatable rubber panties to contain the fumes? And if they try that, I already know the panties aren't gonna be enough. They're gonna need one of those sealed white hazmat suits to put her in. The kind they use to transport people with bubonic plague or some other lethal virus. But I doubt that even that will be enough. What will happen with the suit is that she'll inflate to the size of a giant Michelin tire man, and before they have a chance to tie some ropes to her, someone is going to lose their grip, and she'll float away like an over-inflated helium balloon. And if that happens, then local law enforcement will have no other choice than to bring the military in, who will promptly scramble a couple of fighter jets to intercept her before she has a chance to enter commercial airspace lanes and cause a major aviation disaster. What will happen is that one of the fighter's

incendiary rounds will hit her, and with that much gas, under that much pressure, the love of my life will go up in flames like some kind of airborne roman candle. And not just any roman candle, mind you. One of the high-dollar jobs. The kind that'll set you back a hundred bucks or so, but comes with a money-back guarantee that it can be seen from space.

But even if they do somehow manage to hang on to her and keep her from floating away, they'll want to air lift her to some secret underground facility in Montana, and stick her in one of those airtight laboratory observation rooms with glass walls so they can study her. And if they do that, how long will they keep her? And, will they let her have conjugal visits?

I don't know, but either way, this is bad. Ssssoooooo fucking bad.

I cross my arms and tilt my head down in complete and utter defeat. I let out a long, pathetic sigh and just stare at my shoes. I mean, what else am I gonna do? In the meantime, the cop that's going to put me away for life is waiting for an explanation, so I tell him...

"Yeah, well, about the smell..."

And that's when I proceeded to tell him the story. He stands there, listening on, arms crossed and wearing the typical cop poker face, and showing no signs of either belief or disbelief.

Once I finished telling Officer Monkey the story, he took his hat and ran a befuddled hand through his hair, no doubt doing his best to wrap his mind around the story I just shared. But after a long moment or two, I guess the whole thing finally registers and he responds...

"Whoa, that's quite a story, AND, quite a problem."

"Tell me about it."

"Whatcha gonna do?"

"Dunno. I'm not really seeing any options here other than to maybe let the air out of my tires or something."

"Let the air out of your tires?"

"Yeah. That way I could call a cab and explain the flats off as just freaky bad luck, you know, four flats at once? I could blame it on the dealership, maybe, putting defective tires on the car. Like maybe they received a bad batch from the factory or something. Like maybe the Quality Control guy caught his wife cheating and committed suicide that week, and they hadn't had time to replace him. Something like that. But Jesus, I hate to do that. I bought the car just for the prom! Had to cut my hair just to get my parents to cosign, for Christ's sake!"

I lean back against the car trunk again, cross my arms and legs, and then let out a big huff. I just look at the ground. The sullen look on my face pretty much said all there is to say. I say something else, but I say it under my breath. Not for the cop's benefit, but for my own. I mumble...

"What else am I gonna do?"

The officer puts his hat back on and begins tapping a thoughtful forefinger against his chin...

"I got an idea. Harry, the other bridge cop patrolling tonight, he's good with this kind of stuff. The guy's smart. Super smart. A real thinker, if you know what I mean. I can give him a call. He'll know *exactly* what to do. If anybody can figure this out, it's Harry. He's your guy."

And that's what he does. He grabs his portable radio mic and makes the call. Not two minutes later, a second cruiser pulls up and parks behind the first. A second cop, a bit older and heavier, and greying on the sides, walks up to us. The first cop makes the introduction...

"This is Harry. Tell him what you told me."

And I did. I repeated the story to Officer Harry, who stood listening in pretty much the same manner as the first cop. Same pose, same poker face, and once I had finished, the same look of utter dismay. He puffs his cheeks out and blows as he tilts his hat further back on his head. He parks his hands on his hips, cinches his lips tight, and begins shaking his head side to side as if to say... 'Okay. I've heard it all'. But for Officer Harry, there's no time for that, for being taken aback by the sheer magnitude of the problem. The clock's ticking on this one, and he knows it, so it's time to roll up the sleeves and go to work. And with that, the good officer puts his problem-solving machinery in high gear. He takes his hat off, and, with one hand cradled on his hip, and the other fervently massaging his forehead, he begins pacing in a tight circle next to us as he twists the problem every which way in his mind in search of an answer, a solution.

And, it's a tough one. Tougher than most. Tougher, probably, than what even *he* expected. But that's OK. It's easy to see that this guy lives for this kind of stuff. He's that kind of person, you can tell. And, it's amazing just to watch the guy as he struggles with it all. I can almost see the gears spinning as he desperately does his best to put an end to the nightmare I'm living.

So, that's what we do, Officer Jenkins and me. We anxiously watch on as Harry continues the pacing, massaging his forehead as he does, and mumbling out loud to himself as if debating the merits of one solution or another. It's obvious that he's quite perplexed by the whole thing, and I'm watching him with every finger I have crossed, and maybe a few toes, as well, and hoping like all hope that this isn't the 'big' one, the problem that finally stumps him.

And this continues for a while, the pacing in a tight circle, with Harry abruptly stopping at times and turning to us with an 'I got it' finger held up as if he's found the solution, but in each case, he's quick to shake his head as if to dismiss the idea and continues the brainstorming. That is, except for the last time. The last time he stops, he again holds a finger up, only this time, instead of shaking his head, he rushes over to us with a smile that almost looked wider than his head, if that's even possible. Finally, the light bulb had lit, and once again, Harry the brain had added yet another 'eureka' moment to his collection.

Harry bends over, hands on his knees, huddle style, and beckons us to join him, which we do, both of us, Officer Jenkins and I, literally on the edge of our seats with anticipation, anxious to hear what Harry has come up with.

Once huddled, Harry, using his hands to gesture with, began laying out the plan like a football coach explaining the winning play with only eight seconds left on the clock...

"OK, guys, here's the plan. What you do is this: when you get back in the car, you say something like 'Hey, sweetie, it's a little chilly in here. Think I'll turn the A/C down a little'. You tell her this so as to prevent her from getting suspicious. That way, it opens the door for taking corrective action without any risk. With me so far?"

I nod my head...

"Uh-huh. I think so."

"Good. So, what you do next is, instead of turning the A/C down, what you *really* do is switch the air control from recirculating to outside air."

"Outside air?"

"Yeah, outside air. You have to understand that the whole problem here is that the A/C is set on 'recirculating', and what that means is that the same polluted air is being blown round and round inside the car. It never leaves because it's got nowhere to go. Lessee, you got a Pontiac Grand Prix, right?"

Again, I nod...

"Uh-huh".

"Okay, that means you have a lever instead of a knob. So, what you do is, you slide the lever over from 'inside air' to 'outside air', and voila, you're good to go, my man. What happens is, when you move the slide to 'outside air', the car lets fresh air in, while at the same time, exhausts the old, stale air out. And bingo! Problem solved! All you have to do is make sure you make the switch without her knowing it. That's why you tell her what you do, that you're simply adjusting the temperature control, when what you're really doing is adjusting the air flow. Get it?"

"Yeah, OK. I get it... I think."

The winning play now delivered, Harry stands upright with his hands triumphantly parked on his hips, quite satisfied that he's resolved yet another major crisis for some soul in desperate need. This time, a teenage prom couple. One whose night – and possibly their entire future – has just been saved. And Harry's thoughts on the matter?...

"Just doing my job, son. Just doing my job."

The three of us upright ourselves from the huddle. I know Harry's plan is going to work, it has to, but still, with the kind of luck I'm having tonight, I simply have to ask...

"And you're sure this'll work?"

He juts a pointed forefinger at me, and in his most commanding, most authoritative cop voice, says...

"You bet your bottom dollar it will! Trust me on this one. I'm a bridge cop. I know about these things."

I give him an acknowledging nod, and then offer my grateful hand to him and we shake...

"Man, thank you so much. (big sigh) You just saved my life."

He beams a smile at me...

"Oh, just being my usual indispensable self is all. Besides, that's what we're here for. To serve, protect, AND... save prom nights."

I smile at him. More than that, I give Harry the biggest and most appreciative smile I know how to give, and then I turn and shake Officer Jenkin's hand as well. In turn, the two smile back at me and wish me the best of luck.

I turn and begin heading back to my car when something suddenly occurs to me. Why I didn't think to do this before, I don't know, so I do it now. I turn and face the two of them again and ask them how I could possibly repay them for their help. Again, Harry takes point on this one and he tells me...

"You make sure you two have the time of your life, tonight! That's how."

And then he points that same authoritative finger at me again...

"AND THAT'S AN ORDER!!"

I just smile back at them with the most genuine, heartfelt smile I have ever given, and then return to my car.

I get in, and Ellen looks at me with that mortified look of hers...

"What was that all about?"

"Stupid me, I forgot to put the temp tag back in the window after I cleaned it."

"Temp tag? What's that?"

"Some kinda new car thing."

And then I add...

"You know what, it's a little chilly in here. Think I'll turn the A/C down just a smidgen."

"Please, I'm a little cold, too."

And with that, I executed the plan as discussed. I slide the air control lever over to the right, to a little picture of a fan with the words 'Outside' printed in white lettering underneath it.

Perfect.

Harry's solution worked like a charm, worked exactly as planned, and in no time, no time at all, the once nightmarish predicament hanging over my head became nothing more than a memory. A memory that was quickly exhausted out of the car and into the warm, sultry New Orleans night. And I think... Just gotta love those boys in Detroit.

I put the car in drive, pull out into the bridge traffic, and once again, continue our journey. I push the cassette back into the deck and its Heart singing 'Magic Man'.

Yeah. Magic man.

I so get that.

I turn and look at Ellen, and I find that she's no longer staring out the passenger window. Instead, she's looking at me. Looking at me with that look, the one that tells me that I am, indeed, her magic man. I reach over and hold her hand in mine, and then give her a look of my own, the one that says... 'Think of me as Allstate, my love. Because tonight, you are in good hands'. The song continues as Ellen and I jet off into the wondrous New Orleans night...

Oooooohhhh oooohhhh

Try to understand

Try, try, try to understand

He's a magic man

Ellen leans over and kisses me on the cheek. I, in turn, give the volume knob a healthy twist and the gas pedal an even healthier push as the French Quarter, our destination for the evening, quickly comes into view.

We exit the bridge, enter the French Quarter, and as we do, the reality of it all suddenly hits me - we made it. This is actually going to happen.

Imagine that.

Chapter 23

I'd like to say that the rest of the evening went as planned, but it didn't. To say that would not be entirely accurate. Not entirely.

Truth is, it was better than that.

Way better.

Better than anything I could have planned or even imagined. You know, like the old saying, 'truth is stranger than fiction', only, none of what was to follow was strange, so replace 'stranger' with 'more incredible' and you have it - my enchanted evening with the girl of my dreams, more incredible than fiction, even.

Now that I think about it, maybe that's not entirely true, about the evening not being strange, I mean. Fact is, it did get strange, but only in one regard. The sex. That got a little strange.

OK. It got a lot strange.

But aside from the sex, the evening was nothing short of incredible. Much, much better than anything I had hoped it would be. And I'd tell you about it, but really, you wouldn't believe me. Hell, I hardly believe it myself, and I was there. Or I was, anyway. That is, until the Quaaludes kicked in.

And the cocaine.

And hashish.

And LSD.

And...

Alright. I'll tell you about it. Well, some of it, anyway. You've stuck with the story this long, so I'll fill you in on at least the parts you *may* believe. That, and the parts not subject to the statutes of limitations.

But after that (sigh), I don't know. I think some things are best left to the reader's imagination. Besides, I don't want to be responsible for anyone's permanent emotional trauma just for the sake of telling a story.

That said...

* * * * *

So, there we were, Ellen and I, jetting off into the beautiful New Orleans night. And the closer to the French Quarter we got, the more the magic of the city saturated the two of us with its unique, intoxicating charm.

Like no other city in the world.

Our first stop, of course, was world-famous Antoine's for dinner, an unforgettable experience in and of itself. A \$750 bill, and Ellen touched little more than her wine, which was probably the most expensive part of the meal,

anyway. Chateau so-and-so, from like 14 BC or something. Like, Moses himself crushed the grapes, to hear the waiter tell it.

I'd been happy with a bottle of Mad Dog, and probably \$300 richer, but I didn't see anyone else there drinking it, so I didn't even bother to ask. Probably wasn't even on the wine list, is what I'm guessing.

The thing is, Ellen never eats in front of me. Will in front of anyone else, but never me, and for the life of me, I have no idea as to why, so don't bother asking. Simply do what I do, write it off to the 'Ellen' thing, and leave it at that. It makes life a whooollleeee lot simpler. Some of the finest cuisine in the world, and all she did was push it around the plate with her fork.

Christ.

At any rate, for anyone who can afford it, I highly recommend Antoine's at least once in your life. Maybe like a 'bucket list' thing or something. If for no other reason, for the bragging rights alone. But seriously, it's the best New Orleans has to offer, and that's saying a lot.

And while it's hard to argue with anything a New Orleans 4-star restaurant does, there were three things that somewhat annoyed me about Antoine's, and they are:

1) The violinist. This ranks number one on my list, the top spot. This guy really grated my nerves. Dressed in the expected tuxedo with long, flowing gray hair, he looked like Ludwig himself, as if he just stepped off the plane from Vienna, on loan to the restaurant for the evening.

At some point during the meal, the guy wanders over to our table and just stands there, playing the most god-awful music on his violin. I'm talking about stuff that would make a coma seem like an exciting thing to do. It's like, if sleeping medication made a noise, this is what it would sound like. It even made the food I was chewing at the time suddenly lose its flavor.

Yeah. It was bad, AND it had to stop.

So, what I did was I grabbed the guy's elbow, the one holding the bow, and stopped the assault. Ludwig just looks at me, partly stunned, but mostly dumbstruck, and I ask him...

"Don't you know any Black Sabbath? No? How about Deep Purple? Know some Deep Purple, do you?"

I start air guitaring the opening bars of "Smoke On The Water", but he just gives me a disgusted, insulted sneer, then flicks his head in that snobby way snobby people do, and moves on to the next table. And thank God for that. I was beginning to wonder if the guy would ever leave, or if that was his mission in life, to spoil mine and Ellen's once-in-a-lifetime chance to enjoy a meal at Antoin's. So, so irritating. Why these people even let him do that, I'll never know. But anyway, he got the message.

2) The drinking water. Now get this - every time I took a sip from my water glass, this guy, another tuxedo, appeared from out of nowhere with an elaborate silver platter, and replaced the entire glass with a fresh one, like I had just turned it into some type of biohazard with my substandard, middle-class mouth or something. The person

who did this was dressed in the standard issue black and white tux, but secretly, I bet he was wishing he had one of those nuclear waste suits, is the impression I got.

This waiter, or 'water removal specialist', or whatever he is, was beginning to really get on my nerves. He did this, replace the entire glass, each and every time I took a sip, and I was beginning to get a complex over it until I realized that it wasn't just me he was singling out, but that he did it to everyone.

Whatever.

Sheez.

Still, I can't imagine how much that must cost, wasting all of that water, because you know good and well they must fly the stuff in fresh every day from some bubbling mineral spring hidden deep within the Swiss Alps.

3) The bread. Now, to tell you about the bread they serve there is simply not possible. That would require inventing new words just to describe the experience, it's that incredible. But as unbelievably delicious as the bread may be, you really don't want to eat it simply because every time you take a bite, another tuxedo suddenly appears as mysteriously as the first one and scoops up every single crumb that fell on the tablecloth.

Now, as annoying as this quickly became, it was also quite remarkable to watch.

Look, this guy was good. Like he was the top graduate at some culinary institute in Paris that specializes in bread crumb removal skills. And I can't even imagine how many hours a day this man must practice just to keep those skills that finely honed. It has to be like training for the Olympics or something.

I became so intrigued with this guy that I actually began to spread crumbs around the table in deliberate, strategic ways so as to make his job as difficult as I possibly could. It became a challenge, in a way: me and my crumbs versus the scooper and his little silver spatula thingy and tiny whisk broom. But no matter how hard I tried, I simply couldn't make the guy falter. Not even once, and not even in the slightest. This guy was good. Every time I broke a piece of bread off the loaf, the tuxedo-clad arm magically appeared from nowhere, and in a single, sweeping blur of motion barely detectable by the human eye, every single crumb disappeared, and so did he. Simply amazing. I've never seen anything like it before, or since.

But you know what? Since that night? I've sat and wondered about that, about the crumb scooper guy. Like, how much does a job like that pay? And how do you even go about getting it? Do you like demonstrate your abilities using a mock setup in front of a panel of judges? And how does a resume like that read... 'I scoop up breadcrumbs. I started out by scooping dog poop off sidewalks, but after graduating from the Culinary Institute for Scooping Arts, I have since advanced to breadcrumbs.'

And what's more, is this - I have read the classified ads *plenty* of times, and never once have I ever seen a help wanted ad like that: 'Wanted: Bread Crumb Scooper. Must have own scooper and crumb broom'.

Jesus. I can just imagine that, me doing that for a living and meeting Ellen's father for the first time...

"So, tell me, Rick. What is it, exactly, you do for a living?"

"Well, sir, right now I scoop up breadcrumbs, but I'm hoping to one day work my way up to 'Drinking Water Replacer'.

Yeah, right.

So anyway, I kept messing with the scooper guy until finally, Ellen became frustrated with the whole thing, and using her fork like a catapult, shot a piece of lobster at me that scored a direct hit in the middle of my left eye. Hit me so hard that I let out a blood-curdling scream that literally stopped the entire restaurant dead in its tracks. Everyone instantly froze, with some people actually holding their forks mid-air in front of their open mouths. Even the head chef came running out through a swinging door somewhere to see what had happened. As I recall, he was wielding one of those huge meat chopper things, a cleaver, I believe they call it, as if he was expecting trouble. Anyway, like I said, not a single person so much as flinched, and no one – NO ONE - made so much as a single sound. Everyone had turned their attention to Ellen and me and just stared. Needless to say, the silence was deafening. You could actually hear people's watches ticking.

I really didn't know what else to do at that point, so using the hand I wasn't holding over my left eye, gave everyone a reassuring wave, letting them know that everything was OK, that the situation was now under control...

"I'm okay, folks. Just had a sudden eye cramp, is all. Sorry."

I then turned to Ellen, glaring at her, and for once, gave her one of 'my' looks...

"How embarrassing! Sheez! I can't take you anywhere!"

She responds by using her thumbs and forefingers to pinch her cheeks and make that childish 'pig face' at me while sticking her tongue out and crossing her eyes. Look, I said she was intelligent. I never said anything about her being mature, like me.

* * * * *

Oh, yeah. One last thing that I forgot to mention...

Everyone there was dressed in formal, black-tie affair tuxedos and gowns. That is, everyone but the two of us, Ellen and I. When I say 'tuxedo', I'm not talking about something like that after-dinner-mint green (Ellen's color choice, not mine) colored rent-a-clown thing I had on. No. I'm talking about the same black and white get-up every guy in the place, including the staff, saw fit to wear. That is, every guy but me, Bozo the prom date. And how stupid did I feel? I felt so bad that I double checked my jacket sleeves just to make sure the rental price tag wasn't still hanging off them, because really, I didn't need to feel any more embarrassed than what I already did.

About the clown suit I was wearing...

Ordinarily, I would have felt like an idiot, and did, but took some degree of comfort in the fact that, as stupid as I looked, Ellen looked even worse.

Looking around the room at all the other women dressed in their elegant, tasteful, very conservative formal gowns, I noticed that Ellen, by comparison, in her fairly loud satin, looked something like a green foil-covered disco ball, like a Christmas ornament on LSD, maybe. Something like that.

So embarrassing, like... 'Hey, looka! It's the Clampetts!'

I know you think I'm exaggerating, so consider this - when I handed the waiter that leather thing you use to put your payment in, he said, and I quote...

"Will there be anything else for you this evening, Jed...er, Mr. Miller?"

I kid you not.

And another thing...

Making matters even worse was our age, the only two people there born after the invention of the wheel. So, needless to say, Ellen and I were pretty much the center of attention. We didn't exactly 'blend in', if you know what I mean. Not for another century or so.

Anyway, despite the shortcomings, Antoine's was still quite the experience. And, as much as I would have liked to have stayed and enjoyed it a while longer - seeing how I would probably never do it again - Ellen and I were on a somewhat tight schedule, and it was time to move on. We had a lot of ground to cover tonight, and not a whole lot of time in which to do it. Not enough time, in my opinion. I would have liked more. A lot more. But it is what it is, so we - or I, rather - finished desert and summoned the waiter for the bill.

I finished my flaming cherry something-or-other, paid the bill, and just as we got up to leave, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye, a distinguished looking elderly couple at another table close to ours.

Like everyone else in the restaurant, they were watching us, and as they did, I could see the husband lean forward toward his wife and whisper something in her ear, all the while keeping his eyes glued to us with his sideways stare. Of course, I couldn't hear what the guy was saying, but I imagine it sounded something like...

"And the thing is, there's no law preventing them from reproducing."

Fucking old people. What a bunch of constipated snobs. Not my fault your penises don't work anymore, and even if they did, you got nothing to use them on. Nothing! I mean, c'mon.

And I think that's the problem here, these people's attitude toward us. At least the guy's, anyway. They look at Ellen and know good and well that's who I'll be putting the bricks to tonight, and then they turn and look at that crepe paper covered bag of ancient fat they'll be lying next to tonight, and, well, easy math here, my friend. Easy math, indeed.

And you have to wonder whose bright idea that was to begin with, old people. Probably some kid, I bet. I say some kid because without old people, you don't have grandparents, and without grandparents, you don't get as many presents come Christmas time. Grandparents increase your present count significantly, and when you're a kid, present count is everything. So yeah, this was some kid's idea.

Jesus, kids and old people.

Here's what I don't get - there's all kinds of laws and restrictions limiting what underage people - i.e., kids - can and cannot do, but overaged people? In other words, *old* people? Nothing. Not a thing. They're pretty much allowed

to do whatever it is they damn well please, like get in front of you and drive twenty mph under the speed limit when they know you can't pass them, like they've been given special privileges to annoy drivers born in this century or something.

I'm sorry, but that's just wrong.

And maybe I'm helpless to correct that wrong in the bigger scope of things, still, I'm not without options here. Not completely.

I have a plan.

As Ellen and I made our way to the front entrance to leave, me knowing all eyes were on us, I reached around and put a hand on her very shapely ass and began rubbing it as we leisurely made our way out. My way of saying, 'Yeah, that's what I'm working with, fossil dick.'

But the gesture was about more than simply rubbing their faces in it. Much more. I was halfway hoping I could coax another toxic cloud of mustard gas out of that 'blow hole' of hers and clear the place out. You know, leave them a little something to remember us by, a small memento of our evening together? I mean, what's the point in having a weapon like that if you never use it, right?

But, of course, I got nothing. Nada. Apparently, Ms. Biohazard's gas factory wasn't going to cooperate. Seems it's not an 'on demand' feature of hers, I guess. It's either that, or I'm the only one she sees fit to fumigate that way. It's one of the two, with the latter probably being the most likely candidate.

Lucky me.

And one last thing about old people and I'll shut up...

This nursing home thing? It isn't working. They're still getting out somehow and finding their way into mainstream public.

Someone needs to look into this, is all I'm saying.

...fucking old people.

* * * * *

So anyhow, we left the restaurant and strolled down Bourbon Street, hand-in-hand, on our way to our next stop, our next destination for the evening. And as we did, I couldn't help but think about that crumb scooper guy. I can't seem to get him out of my head. I guess because just as we made it to the front of the restaurant to leave, I spotted him off to the side next to the hostess's station, casually leaning against the reservation book podium, looking like he owned the place. So satisfied with himself at having beaten me the way he did. He was looking at me with this

crooked smirk on his face, and as I passed, he held his hands out to his side, palms up, and made this stupid face at me as if to say, 'That's all you got?'

True, we were limited on time, but I would have liked to have stayed a bit longer. I hate losing at anything, and I think that given enough time, I coulda beat this guy. I coulda beat the scooper dude. All I needed was just a little more time, is all.

You have to remember - he does this every day for a living, so of course he's good. With all that practice, how could he not be? Still, I know in my heart I could have taken him. Just a little more time. That's all I needed, a little more time.

But really, it's a stupid notion - me continuing to challenge the guy that way. No way I could win. Not without a pair of safety goggles or something. Because Ellen's a dead shot with a fork, as my left eye so unfortunately found out. Like, who woulda thunk it, right? And had I continued to egg the guy on, she probably woulda taken out my right eye as well, and where would that have left me? I'll tell you where - losing. But more than that, I'd be having a helluva time walking right now, because I can hardly see out of my left eye, as it is. The thing won't quit blinking, so I just keep it closed. And then to lose the use of my right eye, too?

Apparently, Marge never sat Ellen down and gave her that standard 'mom' speech. You know, the one where she tells you that it's all fun and games until someone puts an eye out? The speech you get after she finds out you and your friends have been playing 'old west shoot out' with the BB guns everyone got for Christmas? Yeah, that speech.

My mom gave it to me when I was thirteen. Of course, I completely ignored it, which is why Sammy, the kid who lived next door at the time, wears an eye patch to this day. Still, that doesn't excuse Ellen. I was a delinquent. I never once pretended to be an example of righteous anything, much less living. But Ellen, on the other hand... Well, you simply expect more. She should know better, is all I'm saying.

But, whatever.

And something else. A side note to the Sammy story: he later came and thanked me for accidentally shooting his eye out. Come to find out, they gave him a choice of eye patches, and he picked the black one with the white skull and crossbones on it. Big hit with the girls at school. That whole 'bad boy' thing, I guess, because, while all the rest of us fifteen-year-olds were curious as to what sex was like, Sammy was finding out firsthand with every girl in our class. And not only in our class, but every other class as well. Inside a month of getting the patch, Sammy became nothing short of teenage royalty, the stuff legends are made of, and at such an early age, no less. So, yeah. The way I see it, the guy owes me.

At any rate, I still can't get my left eye to stop blinking, and in the meantime, my face muscles are getting tired from holding that one eye closed. Not to mention how stupid I must look with my face scrunched up that way, like I'm some kinda stroke victim or something. And I'm wondering if maybe I should stop somewhere, and like Sammy, get an eye patch.

And I'd do that, I would. I'd stop at one of the Mardi Gras costume shops here on Bourbon Street, the street we're on, and buy or rent one, or however that works. The only reason I don't is because I doubt they'd have a color that matches my tux, which means I'd have to listen to Ellen nag and complain about it the whole night...

"Oh, that's just great, Rick! So what? That's what our prom photo is going to look like? You with a stupid eye patch? Why do you always do this to me!"

"Calm down, already! Why are you making such a big deal out of this? I mean, I can take the patch off for the photo, for Christ's sake!"

She swings her purse and nails me in the side of the head...

"Oh, yeah. Right. So, then what? You'd have to make that stupid face again, holding your eye closed for the photo? That's just fucking great, Rick! I can just hear everybody now...'Did you see Ellen's prom photo? Her date? That cerebral palsy dude? She's dating the mentally retarded now. Some Down Syndrome guy she met or something."

"Look, this is your fault! You started this when..."

But I don't get a chance to finish the thought. The purse makes another round and finds the side of my head again, only, the opposite side this time, so now both my ears are ringing. And I'm thinking...this is getting old, Ellen and the purse thing. Bad enough she's blinded me, and now what? She's trying to take my ears out, too?

And from this, the injuries she's inflicting, I come to a firm conclusion. Next senior prom? I'm wearing a football helmet. One with eye protection. I don't care what *she* has to say about it.

Of course, I'd have to paint it after-dinner-mint green, but...

And, lest we forget that *she's* the reason I have to wear the fucking patch to begin with!

(big sigh)

And that's the way it is. With Ellen, it's always going to be a no-win situation, so the eye patch idea is out. A non-starter, even, because frankly, I just don't feel like listening to her complain all night. Considering everything I've already been through this evening, I just don't have the constitution - or enough drugs - to deal with that mess, with the 'Ellen' attitude. So yeah, she wins again. The score is now:

Ellen: 4,543,678

Penis Owner: 0

Chapter 24

After Antoine's, it was the elegant and illustrious Monteleone Hotel for the prom itself. Music that night was provided by the local band, Zebra, by far the best, most popular band in the city. And for good reason. They are beyond fantastic and were, in fact, the de facto standard for any serious event in the metroplex. If Zebra wasn't playing, you might reconsider attending. Probably not worth the price of admission.

And they were great. Beyond great. Not only did they play their own incredible hits, but they did perfect covers of everyone - Roy Orbison, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Elton John, Aerosmith, Bad Company, Tom Petty... Jesus, I mean, what didn't they play?

Incidentally, they hit it major big a few years later with their famous debut album. Monster record deal, too, and rightly so. Excellent. If not there already, be sure and add it to your 'must hear' playlist. You'll thank me later.

* * * * *

Once the main prom activities came to a close, Ellen and I proceeded to a room in the hotel, something prearranged by a bunch of her friends, as it turns out. Seems that everyone chipped in for it, including Ellen, so we were somewhat obligated to make an appearance, and so we did - for whatever that was worth.

When we got to the room, the only thing we found was a frightening mass of teenage carnage. No less than twenty motionless bodies, all laid out in different states of undress, and strewn about everywhere. And I do mean everywhere. At least ten kids face down on the floor, with another ten lying limp across the various pieces of furniture - the bed, dresser, end tables, chairs, vanity countertop - any available horizontal surface, and none of them showing any apparent signs of life. It was as if a van full of crash test dummies had smashed into the room and then exploded - half-dressed, intoxicated, sexually violated, and no longer conscious teenage test dummies at that. The worst kind.

I look around the room, and all I can think is... Whoa! This is what a train wreck looks like when done right.

I was impressed.

Conscious or not, these kids were definitely having themselves quite the prom night. Not my kind of prom night, mind you, but hey, to each his own. Different strokes and all...

And look, I'm not passing judgment here. Not at all. For one thing, because I can't. I've worn *those* shoes all too many times. More times, in fact, than I care to have Ellen throw in my face. Like, what? I'm the freaking poster kid for drug moderation or something?

But, anyway...

Apparently, Ellen and I were running late and missed out on whatever detonation caused the body count. It was a mess, to say the least, a crime scene of some sort, to say the most. Merely walking across the floor was a major effort, like negotiating an obstacle course of some kind, it was that bad. Probably worse. I wasn't too far behind these kids myself, so my memory is somewhat sketchy here on that one.

What I do remember, though, is that walking across the room in search of survivors took an effort, doing our best to avoid stepping on any errant body part that might be sprawled limp and lifeless across the carpet. It was like crossing a floor filled with chalk outlines, only someone forgot to remove the bodies, and after about the third time I had to free Ellen's high heel from a hair entanglement, she had had enough and wanted to leave.

And really, so did I.

I wanted to leave as well, mainly because I never once lost sight of the fact that the meter on tonight was running and, well, there simply wasn't that much entertainment value to be had here. That is, aside from some really cool - albeit embarrassing - keepsake photos. Embarrassing, and at the same time, a little historic, too, since what I was seeing in front of me probably represented the first time these overwound, academic oddballs had ever let their hair down. With disastrous results, maybe, but then, what else would you expect from a bunch of kids completely ignorant in the ways of chemically retarded brain function? If only they had consulted an expert on the matter beforehand - myself, coming to mind - they may have gotten more bang from their prom night buck other than just blank memories and next morning hangovers. At a minimum, I could have at least given them the benefit of my 'don't try this at home, kids, I'm a professional' speech. At most, I could have confiscated their drugs and spared them some grief. I could have at least done that much for them because, well, that's just how I am, always willing to help in any way I can, including subjecting myself to severe chemical intoxication in order to dispose of the drugs properly. Just my way of keeping other teenagers, teenagers who do not possess the vast wealth of experience I do, safe from the dangers of drugs.

Just the kinda guy I am, is all.

At any rate, the whole thing was a mess, to be sure, but, be that as it may, I wouldn't say the calamity was completely without merit. Not when you consider that each of these kids can now safely cross that item off their 'do this once and never again' list. So, the disaster, as bad as it was - and granted, it was bad - was not completely without some kind of benefit. Not completely, just mostly.

Chapter 25

At this point, Ellen and I left the hotel and decided to take a stroll down Bourbon Street itself, where, at Ellen's insistence, I hired one of those horse-drawn carriages. You know, the ones that take tourists through the French Quarter to see the sights. There are about three of them that do this, with each one coming complete with its own ancient black guy dressed in a tuxedo and top hat. Tuxedo by Antoine's definition, not Ellen's.

I've seen these things ever since I've been coming to the French Quarter, and for the life of me, I can't tell one black driver from the other. Like, maybe they're really all the same guy somehow. In each case, the black guy not only drives the carriage and directs the tour, but also doubles as a kinda verbal encyclopedia of every historical fact there is to know about the French Quarter.

Like I said, seen these things a thousand times, and it never once occurred to me to take the tour. And really, wouldn't have taken it now if not for the fact that Ellen, the tourist, absolutely insisted on it. Why, I have no idea. Just another 'Ellen' thing. But, to her credit, I'd have to say that in the end, I was glad we did it, oddly enough.

Sure, it was cheesy, in a cheesy, touristy sort of way, but still, it was actually pretty cool. I had never done that before, but - and don't tell anyone I said this - I really enjoyed it. In fact, I'd do it again. That is, so long as no one I knew was around to see me, but my luck being what it is, one of my cool friends would spot me and snap a photo, and I don't even know *how* much weed it would cost me to buy the 'evidence' from them.

Very romantic, though, I have to admit.

Ellen and I snuggled in the leather seat of the carriage, holding each other close under a glowing, New Orleans moon, and enjoying every moment of the ride. With our arms around each other's waist, and our heads tilted against each other, she and I simply lost ourselves to it all – the enchanting scenery and atmosphere of the French Quarter, the rhythmic clip-clopping of the horse's hooves, and, the gravelly sound of the old black historian educating us on all the things we already knew, but loved hearing anyway. It was a moment unlike any Ellen and I had shared before. This was something different. It was as if, for this one moment, Ellen and I weren't at odds with each other. No petty bickering, no moody attitudes, no nagging, and, for once, no over-complicated chess game. In this moment, we were simply two young people in love, and sharing the kind of peaceful, heartfelt moment that rarely comes around in a person's life. But it did ours. It came into our lives, and we clung on to it, that priceless moment, for as long as we possibly could, knowing all the while that it would eventually slip from our grasp and come to an end.

Which it did. The old man broke us from our trance when he opened the carriage's half door and ushered us out onto the cobbled street. The ride had come to an end, and with it, so our special moment together faded off into the cool, New Orleans night. And even though it was gone now, I somehow knew that it would never be forgotten.

And it never was.

What a night it's been. In a word, extraordinary. Extraordinarily good, and extraordinarily bad, with seemingly no gray areas in between, just extremes. Fortunately for us, though, the extraordinarily good by far outweighed the bad, making the whole effort – all the aggravation, work, effort, sacrifice, and money it has cost me - so worth it. More than that. The evening has actually turned out even better than what I could have possibly hoped for. And the thing is, the best is yet to come.

And something else - that old black guy, the carriage driver? He was great. Absolutely perfect for the cause, like he was born just for that purpose. He's one of those people, one of many, who make a trip to New Orleans a unique experience, and one you're not likely to forget. And these people I'm talking about? The performers, the musicians, the restaurant staff, street vendors, mimes, sidewalk artists, magicians, parking valets...they are all, part and parcel, as much a part of the French Quarter as the Bourbon Street sign itself.

And I appreciate that, the old guy's contribution to it all, to the city's culture, which is why I bought a couple of his tacky, tourist-priced t-shirts once the tour was over. Ones that said, 'Mom and dad went to New Orleans and all I got was this T-shirt'. Then, on the back, it read 'I asked for some drugs and a prostitute'.

Yeah. That's what I said.

But anyway, I did it. I bought a couple of the old guy's t-shirts. It was the least I could do. That, and slip him a fifty-dollar tip. Like I said, I appreciate people like him. He and everyone else who make the city I love so much what it is...

Like no other place on earth.

Chapter 26

After the carriage ride, Ellen and I made the short walk to the Canal St. dock and boarded the riverboat Natchez, where I had made reservations for the hour-long dance cruise. Not that we danced, because we didn't. Too danced out from the prom, so instead, we spent the hour relaxing in the upper level's chaise lounges, alone (we were the only two on the upper deck), and nursed a couple of Hurricanes as we watched the banks of the Mississippi lumber by at a lazy, Big Easy pace.

We leaned back in our chairs and sipped our drinks as we listened to the blissful sound of live jazz as it rose up to us from the ballroom below. Add to that, the gentle splashing of the giant paddle wheel, and you have the perfect soundtrack for doing what Ellen and I were doing – holding hands in our comfortable silence as we took in every bit of magic the night had to offer: the ambience; the feelings; the sounds; the emotions...and, most of all, the things we said to one another without saying a word. Again, the silent communication that exists between her and I. It is something I have never quite understood about the two of us, but then, I don't think understanding it matters. It simply is what it is, and what I can say about it is this: once you experience that with someone, it becomes your gauge for determining whether or not you are with the right person. It is something that, before Ellen, I had never experienced, and that fact alone tells me everything I need to know.

So anyway, that's how we spent our time on the Natchez: enjoying our drinks, listening to jazz, and gazing down at the city as it reflected off the waters below. All the while, the cool river air bathing us in a sultry, deep southern comfort you can only find, like so many other things, here, in the city of dreams, New Orleans, Louisiana.

You know, lounging so lazily and peacefully on the upper deck that way, completely seduced by the soothing sound of jazz as we watched life on the Mississippi Delta slowly slip by, it's easy to see why Mark Twain was so enamored with it all, with this part of the southern lifestyle.

Life along the Mississippi.

I get it.

I really do.

Chapter 27

Once we left the Canal St. dock, Ellen and I caught a streetcar and rode it the length of world-famous St. Charles Ave., probably the most beautiful, as well as historic, street in the city. Maybe the world.

Amazing.

I've probably ridden that route, on that very same streetcar, a thousand times over with Ellen, and I swear, it was like I'd never ridden a streetcar in my life, or ever seen St. Charles Ave. before, for that matter. Incredible, the things we grow numb and complacent to with familiarity. The things right in front of us, staring us in the face, day in and day out, yet we never really 'see' them. Not really. That is, until something comes along and opens our eyes to them. Then, and only then, do we ever really see it for what it truly is.

Such a magnificent treasure, a streetcar ride down St. Charles.

We actually did it a few times that night. How many times, I don't know, which means I - correction, WE - were having one hell of a time, because honestly, I don't even remember it. Ellen told me all about it the next day, and all I could say was, 'Wait, we actually did that, and no one called the cops?'

And that's the one and only downside to recreational drug use. While they provide you with the best times you will ever know in your life, the problem is, you don't remember them. Any of them. Someone else has to tell you about it sometime later, and hopefully, does so without the use of photos, meaning it's my word against theirs.

But anyway, that's how I personally gauge good times, by how much of it I can remember. Draw a complete blank? That's a 10. Anything less than that, like vague impressions, or faint memories of what *might* have happened, and that's a clear indicator that not enough drugs were involved. Shoulda spent the extra money, my friend.

And, if the complete lack of any recollection isn't enough to confirm you had a great time, you can always get a corroborating second opinion by the looks you get from everyone the next day. People you know, people you don't know, and worst-case scenario? People you definitely *never* want to know. For example, fat, ugly girls you don't remember who proceed to tell you what a wonderful time you showed them the night before, and ask you if you want to do it again. Those kinda people.

And the streetcar thing?

A definite 10.

* * * * *

Once Ellen and I finished cruising St. Charles Ave., we made our way to Café du Monde for beignets and coffee.

Now, I've lived in this city all of my life and done everything there is to do here several times over. Hundreds, maybe thousands of times, even: Mardi Gras; Pat O'Brien's; Fat City; the lake front; Saints games; concerts; race tracks; live jazz; all the restaurants; all the parades and festivals... So very much to do, and of everything I've done, Café du Monde forever remains at the top of my list. And rightly so. Not only is it the food, but it's the atmosphere as well. Nothing feels more like New Orleans than sitting at a white linen-covered table while eating a beignet, sipping

the best coffee you've ever had, or ever will, and listening to the sweet sound of jazz as you gaze around at the crowd inside; people you know have come from all over the world just for that pleasure, to experience Café du Monde. It's not all of them, but still, it's a bunch, and you can easily spot them, the tourists, because they stand out. They have that touristy look of curiosity about them. That, and their out-of-place mannerisms, not to mention the heavy accents, are dead giveaways that they're not locals.

I'm not saying they came all the way to New Orleans *just* because of the café; that wouldn't be quite true. They came to New Orleans for the same reason everyone does – because, once again, it's like no other place on earth. Be that as it may, you can best believe that Café du Monde is on each one of their 'things to do while in New Orleans' list, maybe even at the top of it, just below Pat O'Brien's and world-famous Bourbon Street.

And that's an incredible statement in its own right – that people flock to the café from far and wide - when you consider that there are only two items on the menu: beignets and coffee, and has been that way since they opened their doors for business back in 1862.

And trust me on this, two items are all they need. The experience is that remarkable.

The place is not a restaurant, per se, not in the classical sense of a building you enter; rather, it's more like an open-air café, just as the name implies. 'Open' as opposed to 'outdoor' because the entire dining area is contained underneath an enormous, yellow and blue striped, circus-tent-like canopy. Very airy, but at the same time, it seems like you're 'inside'. The advantage of this arrangement is that you can enjoy your beignets and coffee year-round in complete comfort, no matter what the weather is doing. In the sweltering heat of the New Orleans summer, you sit under the protection of the canopy and enjoy the cool, refreshing breeze the ceiling fans provide. Likewise, in the winter, overhead space heaters keep you nice and cozy warm. And, on the really harsh winter days, which are rare here, the canopy's heavy canvas walls are rolled down, and it is the only time the cafe is not truly open. But even then, you still don't feel closed in because of the walls' enormous, clear plastic panels. In fact, the walls are mostly clear plastic with the canvas simply acting as a frame.

The interior itself is lit by strings of marquee-like clear light bulbs that all radiate from the edges of the canopy and converge at its peak like so many spokes on a wagon wheel. Very romantic and dreamy at night, with everything being bathed in a warm, soft, incandescent glow.

Also, the place - unlike most of the other restaurants - does not have piped-in music to provide atmosphere. None needed. On any given day, at any given time, the sound of jazz drifts in from the surrounding French Quarter and permeates the place like the smell of honeysuckles on a summer breeze. It floats around you like an invisible sonic mist and, ever so gently, immerses you. And it does this in such a subtle way, you don't realize just how absorbed by it you've actually become. The sound somehow magically melts into all the other sensations around you, and simply becomes part of the café's unique and wonderful atmosphere as if it were the aroma of the beignets themselves. Quite the experience, I assure you, and one well worth the effort of traveling from the farthest regions of the world to experience firsthand.

For the unfortunate readers who don't know for themselves what a beignet is, I'll tell you. It's basically a puffy, pillow-shaped doughnut of sorts, roughly the size of a pack of cigarettes, only thicker. They're actually a kind of fried bread with a very unique New Orleans-style flavor, cooked to a luscious deep brown and served on thick, heavy white China plates. They come in orders of three and are served to you plain.

And they're wonderful that way, plain. However, the real magic of a beignet is in the powdered sugar you sprinkle on top of them. And not just any sugar, mind you, but rather, special, locally produced sugar from the historic cane fields scattered throughout the state.

Each table has at least two (you can ask for more) heavy crystal, old-fashioned sugar dispensers that look no different than the ones used at other donut shops for coffee, only these don't have a flapped pouring spout. Instead, the tops have holes much like a Parmesan cheese shaker, and you sprinkle as much or as little of the white confection as you like. The beignets are brought to you piping hot straight from the fryer, and the powdered sugar melts on them until the dough is saturated, and then it begins to make a white pile on top of them that looks something like a sugary snowfall.

Simply indescribable.

These things literally melt in your mouth, and there is nothing I can compare them to that will even begin to clue you in on what the experience is like.

And if that wasn't enough, then there is the coffee, or Café au Lait as it's called (coffee with milk), made with sweet, creamy boiled milk and also served in heavy, white China cups. For the life of me, I wish I could adequately describe it to you, but I can't, other than to say that it's the best tasting beverage - hot or cold - that I have ever had. And it's only those of you reading this that have actually been there and drank it - the Cafe du Lait - know what I'm talking about.

So, you take all these ingredients - the atmosphere, the impeccable service, the ambience, the music, the people, the food, and the coffee - and you add it all together, and you get exactly what I described earlier, my favorite New Orleans experience. Hands down, the best the city has to offer.

In my opinion, anyway.

In all, an evening at Café du Monde is an event like none other, and the only thing I can think of that could possibly enhance that experience is the person you share it with. Which, in my case, was the girl of my dreams, Ellen, sitting across the table from me.

And here I am, taking all this in, completely amazed at how good life can be at times.

My god, this girl is so very beautiful, and under the romantic glow of the lights above, didn't even look real to me. I'm sitting here looking at her the way I have a thousand times before, only tonight, at this moment, I can't help but think that *nothing* in real life is *that* beautiful.

But she is. And there she sits, this thing of wondrous beauty, across the table from me, sipping from her cup with her gaze fixed on me as if she's thinking the same thing about me as I'm thinking about her. And no doubt, the two of us sharing the same unspoken sentiment...

Isn't life wonderful?

Chapter 28

So anyway, once we left Café du Monde, I could tell Ellen wanted some time alone with me, and really, so did I. That being the case, the two of us walked the short distance to the beautiful and historic Royal Sonesta Hotel on Bourbon Street, where I had a room reserved for the night. Pricey, yes, but for the money, we got an incredible room with an even more incredible balcony that overlooked the nightlife of the French Quarter below.

Quite an experience - beautiful New Orleans night, with all the sights, sounds, and wonderful aromas of the French Quarter there below you. It just doesn't get better than that.

Wait. I said that wrong. It does. It does get better. There's sex with Ellen to consider.

Which brings me to one of the more interesting moments of the night - disassembling Ellen, which was pretty cool, actually.

The way that worked is that she stood there, fully dressed, while I carefully, almost surgically, piece by piece, undressed her, meticulously handling each item of clothing to make sure it was properly hung or folded according to her instructions.

The idea here is that we had to be ultra-careful in removing everything so as to repeat the process in reverse order once the evening was over and it was time to take her home. It was critically important to my health and well-being that I return the Colonel's precious package in the exact condition in which I had received her. No clothing wrinkles, suspicious stains or odors, hair out of place...nothing. Everything had to be perfect.

And Ellen understood this. She fully understood that my continued existence in this world depended on the two of us erasing any and all evidence of the multitude of assaults against her father's sensibilities we were about to commit.

So, I meticulously, if not methodically, undid her piece by piece, taking my time as I did, and enjoying every moment of the effort. And, with every new 'thing' or inch of skin exposed, spent the requisite time touching, admiring, kissing, caressing, and otherwise showing it the attention it so richly deserved.

A half hour later, there she stood in front of me, as naked as the most naked thing that was ever naked. Peeled like the proverbial banana, and I, the more than satisfied peeler.

Wow. I had to sit down on the edge of the bed and just stare at her, stare at her like a blithering idiot, like someone who had never seen a naked girl before. This thing - this girl, this woman - simply took my breath away. And the idea that what I was looking at belonged to me - heart, mind, body, and soul - didn't even register with me. Just didn't even seem possible. So, I just sat and stared, and I kept staring for as long as I possibly could, afraid I'd wake at any moment, only to find out that I was right. That I was only dreaming.

And Ellen, bless her magnificent heart, just stood there in front of me, allowing me to drink her up with my eyes, and letting me get my visual fill of her.

And you know what? I could have stayed like that for the rest of the evening. For the rest of my life, even, just sitting there staring at her wonderful nakedness. Fortunately, however, I didn't get that chance. Ellen's needs eventually took precedence, and I have to tell you, Ellen is a needy woman. Very needy, praise the lord.

For her, it was time to move on to the main attraction...so to speak...so she walks up to me and snaps her fingers in front of my face, thus waking me from my blissful stupor. The 'Ellen' stupor, as I so often call it. It's kind of a trance-like thing Ellen's naked body does to me, and is something I seem to have very little control over.

Actually, no control.

And this is about the point in the story that I can no longer share the details with you, the 'unbelievable' part I mentioned earlier.

Besides, I'm not sure how much of what I did to that woman...er, girl, as it were, is even legal. Maybe none of it, I don't know. But what I can say is that this was the part of the evening where the gentleman in me, like Elvis, left the building.

Jesus, the things I did to that girl. And the amazing thing is, she lived through it all without any long-term emotional or psychological scarring - as best I could tell, though she told me later that she had to wear orthopedic panties and bras for a month afterwards.

Just kidding about the bras and panties...sort of.

At any rate, I think it's safe to say that she and I established new standards for teenage sex that night.

But we did so at a price.

Because everything in life has a cost attached to it, and prom night sex with Ellen was no exception. I ended up having to pay for the bed the two of us demolished. Eight hundred dollars, which meant I had to do without drugs for an entire month. Another way of saying that is, I had to contend with Ellen sober for an entire month. Quite the price, I admit, but money well spent just the same.

Just kidding about the sober thing. I still got my drugs, but I had to get my dealer to extend me credit for a while. It was either that or buy a gun and ski mask, one of the two, because dealing with Ellen in a non-altered reality simply was not an option for me.

Thinking about it, though, you would think the hotel would have at least let me keep the headboard. You know, as a kind of souvenir? Something to stick in the trunk of my car so I could go around showing my friends? After all, I paid for it, didn't I? But when I asked the manager about it, he refused the request, saying something about putting it on display in the hotel's 'hall of fame', or something like that.

About the bed...

I realize you're curious to know, but sorry folks. That will simply be a story whose details will only ever be known to two people, me and Ellen.

Which reminds me...

I have to take a moment here to explain something for the benefit of those who don't know this for themselves. And that is, that there is something really cool about that kind of sex. It's not just the sex, but the girl, your partner, as well.

Amazing.

It's only when you share that kind of sexual experience that you ever really get to know the other person. I mean, *really* know them. She can be the worst kind of ultra conservative, frigid, librarian type of prude you can imagine,

and the instant the clothes come off, all of that changes. You may have thought you were dating a sexual mannequin, but what you end up in bed with is the epitome of carnal evil itself.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is when you really get to know them, the other person - when those primordial instincts take over, and the raw, crude, animalistic need to reproduce and continue the species kicks in and starts driving the bus.

And that's all it takes. Just one time, and after that, any pretenses between the two of you are lost forever. Because there is no way of ever denying the ugly truth. You know her now. *Really* know her, and likewise, she knows you.

And it doesn't matter how hard she tries to pawn herself off as some kind of sexually shy, reserved, born-again Mary Poppins; you know better, and conversations from that point on between the two of you change forever. For example:

Before

"Hey, sweetheart, what's say we grab a bottle of wine and head to the bedroom and, you know, have some fun (wink, wink)."

After

"You filthy, nasty slut. Don't look at me that way. You know exactly what you had me do to you, you disgusting slut. You know it, and I know it, so what's say we go and do it all again. Just give me a moment to go to the kitchen and grab the... 'accessories'."

Accessories, in this case, meaning all the required small appliances, as well as utensils like tongs, spatulas, rolling pins, cooking oils, bottles of various sizes and shapes, large fruits and vegetables, Saran Wrap, cable ties, duct tape, latex gloves, protective eye wear, etc., etc.

Those kinds of things.

It's strange, the effect that kind of sex has, but in a nice way. Nice because it creates an unusual, but very close, wonderful bond between the two of you. Like, 'you know all my dark, ugly secrets, and I know yours'. Like, you two 'get it', and no one else does. Not really.

And that knowing, that carnal knowledge, that bond between you, becomes the very adhesive that holds the relationship together. Through the good times, sure, but more importantly, through the bad times as well. It's what brings the two of you back to the reconciliation table in times when life tries its best to drive a wedge between you.

And how nice is that?

And that was Ellen and me. I 'knew' her. I knew all her dark, dirty secrets, and likewise, she knew mine. And, she also knew that with me, her secrets were safe. That sexually, she could be whoever and whatever she wanted to be, and that it was safe to do so; that I would never tell. For example, as in the case of this story. I never once

violated that confidence in telling it, nor will I ever. I cherish that special bond I have with her way too much to ever betray the trust this girl, the love of my life, has placed in me.

And she knows this - that those are secrets and memories I will carry to my grave.

But yeah, Ellen with no clothes on was quite a thing to behold. And my God, the things that would come out of that girl's mouth...

"Bigger. Use something bigger. It'll fit. Just push harder. Use your foot if you have to!"

(sigh)

Like I said, quite a thing to behold.

And something else...

I can't help but ponder the utter irony of it all. It simply boggles my mind beyond measure every time I think about it; it really does. I mean, here is a woman who, sexually, has no inhibitions or limits. None. A woman sexually capable of things that, if I told you about, would make the hairs on your arm stand straight. Yet a fart? Her fart? Nearly ended everything the two of us share.

Like I said, I don't get.

I don't get it now, and doubt that I ever will. It's simply part of that never-ending, overly complicated, mental and emotional chess game Ellen and I play. The chess game that is our relationship, the deadly minefield I hold my breath and tiptoe through every day of my life.

But what am I gonna do? I so love that girl.

Chapter 29

Now, the next part of this story clearly illustrates why men need women. No getting around that fact. Because basically, guys are idiots. If left up to us, no doubt life on earth would end, and would have done so a long time ago. It is only because women provide us with that missing element we so desperately need, the element of intelligence and common sense, that we get as far in life as we do.

And tonight, I was no exception to that rule. Mainly because Ellen had the good sense to leave a wakeup call with the front desk one hour before it was time for me to bring her home. Otherwise, if left up to me, we would have stayed in bed enjoying both the sex and drug buzz for another day or two, completely unaware that days had passed, even. And I'm sure she felt the same way, but she's a woman and, unlike yours truly, had the willpower and fortitude to get out of the destroyed bed and begin the ever-critical reassembly process; that is, restoring herself to the condition she left home in. And bless her heart, she let me lie in bed until the last possible moment, when finally, she needed my help with the gown. I got up, helped her with the dress, and then began my own reassembly, doing my best to make sure I left with as many articles of clothing as I had arrived with. No small task for me in my current state, I promise.

At that point, there was not much for her and I to say, so we each performed our own reconstruction in relative quiet. While the evening had been so intoxicating in so many ways, the reality of it all coming to an end was more than a little sobering. I finished dressing, and as I did, watched as Ellen leaned forward toward the mirror and put the final touches to her hair and makeup. Which, to me, was a disheartening sight. One that told me mine and her time together was quickly coming to an end.

After a while – a short while, at that - she was done. And I gotta hand it to her, the girl did a remarkable job in restoring herself back to marine-dad perfection. Erasing, as it were, any evidence of the many, many crimes we had committed against fatherhood over the course of the evening.

And there she was, now, restored to her previous goddess-like perfection, no different than when I watched her descend the stairways.

So anyway, we gathered our things, what few there were, and headed toward the door. I took one last look at the hotel room, smiling at the sight of the wrecked bed, and then reluctantly closed the door behind me as I left. We then made our way to the front of the hotel and waited for the valet. An all too short of a wait, because soon enough, sooner than I would have preferred, he rounded the hotel corner and parked the car in front of us. I tipped him for the service. Gave him a choice - my last ten dollars, or my last two Quaaludes. He took the drugs, same as I would have.

That matter settled, I opened the passenger door and Ellen, as before, gathered her gown around her legs and took her rightful seat. I closed the door and made my way to the driver's side, but before I opened the door, I stopped for a moment to take in the sight before me, Bourbon Street at that time of the morning. Something I had never seen before.

Oh, I had seen Bourbon Street plenty. More times than I care to recall, but never sober, and never at that time of the morning.

It was a somewhat somber scene - the world-famous Bourbon Street, a long-established icon of the city, in its venerable predawn mode. It was like looking at a four-day-old cut rose in a vase - a thing that, not long ago, represented something beautiful, but whose beauty was now succumbing to the inevitable ravages of time. Tired and wilted, and maybe a little brown around the edges, its time of being a magnificent thing of beauty soon over.

But, unlike the rose that, soon enough, will find its way into a trash can and then forever be forgotten, Bourbon Street, in all its splendor and wonder, would again bloom to full beauty in a mere matter of hours.

And then the cycle would repeat. A kind of perpetual motion, in a way, and one unique to the French Quarter.

It's just the rhythm of the city I live in, New Orleans, Louisiana, the Big Easy, the place where people come from all over the world to live their dreams, if only for a short while, Ellen and I being two of them.

And I gotta tell you, the city did not let us down, having made mine and Ellen's hopes and dreams for the night a reality, a veritable dream come true. In fact, I don't think she and I could have lived an evening like that in any other city on the planet, because New Orleans is all about the decadence and the sin, as well as the dreams, the ultimate in adult playgrounds. And tonight, it had all belonged to us, to Ellen and me. We owned it. It was *our* playground, if only for this one single night.

And play, we did.

And now it was time to say goodnight to it all and go home.

I opened the driver's side door and took my place next to Ellen.

Chapter 30

My plan was to make the trip back to Ellen's house last as long as I could, the goal here being to get her home at least a half hour before sunrise, the Colonel's wake-up call. The guy wakes automatically at the crack of dawn, and this morning, when he gets out of bed, the first thing he will do is go to Ellen's bedroom to make sure that the apple of his eye is where she should be, tucked safely and soundly in her bed.

And that was the one last task to be completed in the whole prom night effort, and one, I might add, critical to my continued longevity, to have Ellen back home and in her bed before Col. Gene Pool Cleanser cracks her door open to check on her come morning, the one last item remaining in the prom night to-do list, the last box to be checked. Something I equate with the last stone of a pyramid being set in place, the finishing touch, like the star that goes on top of a Christmas tree. And hopefully, when Col. Cleanser goes to plug that tree in this morning, that star will be shining bright. As brightly as if it were the one leading the wise men to Bethlehem.

Anyway, that said, we leave the French Quarter and just a few minutes later, merge onto the GNO bridge. No sooner than I had gotten on the bridge, when I noticed one of the police cruisers pass in the opposite lane, and, as a matter of habit now (go figure, huh?) I watched it in my rearview mirror. I watch it because I want to see what it's going to do. What I don't need right now is to be pulled over again. Time-wise, I'm already cutting things way too close, and I simply can't afford any kind of delay here.

But I'm worrying unnecessarily, I think, because there is no reason for a cop to pull me over. As promised, I placed the temp tag back onto the rear window once we parked the car for the night at the hotel we stayed in.

But I watch the mirror anyway because... Well, just because.

Sure enough, the cop car makes a U-turn as soon as he passes me, and is coming up behind me fast. He's coming up behind me, but he doesn't turn his lights on, so I dunno. Could be that he's after someone else, someone up ahead of me. At least that's what I tell myself, even though I know that's not true. There's barely any traffic on the bridge right now, and there are no other cars around me. None.

I check the mirror again, and I see that he's closing the gap between him and me. I glance at Ellen, and I see the worried look on her face, which, in all probability, looks a lot like the worried look on mine.

Damn! So close. A nearly perfect prom night so far, only for this to happen, for it to end this way. But why? I don't get it. My driving's fine. I'm five mph under the speed limit, and the temp tag is right where it should be, so I just don't fucking get it.

I check the mirror again.

He's directly behind me now, and...

He's on the radio.

Fuck.

On the radio.

Never a good thing.

I tell Ellen to grab the registration as I prepare for the inevitable. She opens the glove box, grabs it, and hands it over to me.

I check the rearview again.

The cop is gone, vanished. So now I'm confused.

But I'm not confused for long.

Suddenly, the police cruiser emerges from my blind spot and pulls up alongside me the same way the husband did in the station wagon, only it's no station wagon, and the face I see behind the wheel is no concerned husband. It's Harry, the bridge cop who, only hours earlier, saved my life, and he's now wearing a smile that stretches from one ear to the other.

And I understand it, the smile.

Because one look at me and there could be no doubt in his mind that I indeed followed his direct order to the letter - to have the time of my life. And how would he know this? Two ways. First, the time. It was now five thirty in the morning, and the only people driving home from the French Quarter at that time were the degenerates, like me, who had just finished having one hell of a night.

The second clue would be the fact that to him, I must look something like the destroyed bed Ellen and I left behind at the hotel, like a 100% cotton shirt that got left in the dryer for a couple of days, something like that. In other words, one look at me, the human unmade bed, and he would know that I, the king of prom nights, had quite the memorable evening.

Also, I'm quick to remember that the only reason I did, I did have the time of my life, is because of the man driving the cop car next to me, Harry the brain, the saver of teenage lives, and likewise, of once-in-a-lifetime prom nights.

As I think about this, what an incredible night it has been, and the fact that it was only because of Harry that it happened at all, I'm overwhelmed with the genuine, heartfelt feelings I have for this guy. How odd, the way his and mine lives crossed paths that way, but odd or not, I'm glad they did, thank God.

I look to my left just in time to see his smile dissolve into a satisfied grin. A somewhat mischievous grin at that. The equivalent of a wagging finger saying 'Tsk, tsk. I *know* what you've been up to'. He sees me looking at him and gives me a nod, and then a thumbs up. His way of saying 'Good job'. I smile back at him and return the thumb gesture. He then wags that authoritative cop forefinger of his forward, but I'm not quite sure what he's trying to tell me. But I find out soon enough.

He hits the gas and speeds past me, then pulls into my lane just ahead of my car. A few seconds later, the second cop, the one who initially stopped me, Officer Jenkins, joins his buddy's procession, and the two light up the cruisers like Christmas trees, like something straight out of Close Encounters.

And that was what the whole thing was about, a police escort across the bridge, no less. That's why, when he was behind me, I saw him talking on the radio. He was calling the other cop to join him.

As I mentioned, there isn't much bridge traffic at that time of the morning, it being a Sunday. Still, what little there was quickly pulled over to the side and got out of our way. As they did, I could see the other drivers craning their

necks as best they could to see who it was receiving the celebrity treatment. One of those drivers, as it turns out, was none other than that snooty ass, nerve-grating, violinist from Antoine's. Oh, he recognized me, alright. I could tell by the mortified look on his face, and you can best believe I was going to take full advantage of the situation. What I did is, I scrunched my face into a scowl and pointed to it as if to say, 'That's right, bitch. You remember this face the next time you see it walk through the door'. And what do you wanna bet he spent the rest of that morning practicing 'Iron Man' or 'Sweet Leaf', or one of my other Sabbath favorites.

Fucking Ludwig Von Nerve Grater.

So anyway, we reach the General De Gaulle exit, and I flash my bright lights at my two new friends to tell them 'thanks'. Thanks for the escort, but more than that, thanks for making the unimaginable prom night I had just had possible. Thanks not only from me, but from Ellen, as well. Two people who will forever be in their debt, only, Ellen doesn't know this. And, if I have my way about it, she never will.

I turn my blinker on and take the exit, and as I do, the two cruisers give me a parting whoop whoop with their sirens, their way of saluting the two new prom night legends.

Hell of a guy, those two cops.

And don't you know, that after that night, I never once referred to a cop as a fuck monkey again.

Lesson learned.

Chapter 31

The remainder of the drive home was uneventful and nice, and at the same time, somewhat saddening. Nice, because the two of us spent that time, the drive back, in our very comfortable, preferred, even, silence. We simply held hands while we listened to our favorite songs, and did our best, both of us, to try and absorb everything that had just happened.

And what was it that happened?

I'll tell you what.

We did it. Ellen and I actually did it. We survived prom night. Mission accomplished, memory created.

And, we did it together, she and I, as a team, as the loving couple we are.

That was the nice part of the trip back. The sad part was the realization that it was over now; that the pinnacle of our teenage lives had been reached, and that our fifteen minutes in the sun was now over, and would never again be repeated.

How sad.

How very sad.

But, to that end, the two of us could at least find comfort in the fact that we did not squander the opportunity placed before us. That, in fact, we did it justice, and I can't imagine two people having done it any better than her and I. We'd be a hard act to follow, and in that thought alone, I could find some peace with the idea that it was behind us now; that together, Ellen and I had just created the memory of a lifetime.

Our lifetime.

And so it was that everything that happened tonight was now an unspoken fact of our two teenage lives, and I'm sure, like me, Ellen was spending this time, the trip home, digesting it all so that it could be duly stored away in her heart for all of time.

Because, come what may in our lives, hers and mine, there would never be another prom night, that event now being part of our histories, both individual and combined. It was now a permanent part of us, her and I, and whether we went on to make it as a couple or not doesn't change a thing. That shared memory - that bond, that link between us - would endure for all the remainder of our days. She was now as much a permanent part of me as I was of her.

And that was something not even time itself could ever change.

* * * * *

David Bowie was just finishing up with 'Heroes', my personal favorite, when I pulled up to Ellen's curb.

I, I will be king

And you, you will be queen

Though nothing will drive them away

We can beat them just for one day

We can be heroes just for one day

And you, you can be mean

And I, I'll drink all the time

'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact

Yes, we're lovers, and that is that

Though nothing will keep us together

We can beat them forever and ever

Oh, we can be heroes just for one day

Whacha say?

Yeah, heroes.

That was Ellen and me, just for one day.

Or, one prom night, rather.

I open her door and extend my hand to her. She takes it, and I proceed to escort the teenage goddess back to the heavens from which she had descended.

We stand at her doorway facing one another, her hands holding mine, and we simply stand and look, look into each other's adoring, overwhelmed, and, by this time, completely spent teenage eyes.

Again, no words necessary. But if there had been any spoken, it would have simply been to say, 'what a night', and not much more. I take a long and hard last look at her, doing my best to permanently burn the image into my mind, because never again would I ever see what it was I was seeing in front of me now, Ellen, the queen of my prom, the owner of my heart. Tomorrow, she would once again be Ellen, my girlfriend, with all that entails, but right now, at this moment, she was my very own personal princess.

I pull her close and hold her tight, never wanting to let her go, and it was at that moment, I believe, standing on the porch holding her that way, that I became a man. For in that moment, I came to know what it truly means to love a woman in the way a man should. What it is, exactly, a woman can mean to a man, and what it is she can do to his heart. This is what Ellen gave to me tonight, a knowledge that, in a way, only *she* could give me. Maybe as my reward for having given her that storybook night, my gift to her. And her gift to me? Tears. Streaming down my cheek as I held her so close. It was something I couldn't hide, so I didn't even try. Because basically, they were not tears to be ashamed of, and in that sense, I wore them well, and proudly.

Time was running out. I let her go, holding her at arm's length from me, and took one final look. And what I found when I looked at her was the same tears on her cheek as I had on mine. I lifted her hand to my lips and, ever so gently and lovingly, kissed it.

And, of course, this triggered the crying, so she turned and hurried inside before the deluge got worse, which I'm sure it did, but not in front of me.

So, there I was now, on the porch, alone. She was gone. So, I just stood there and stared at the closed door in front of me. I dried my eyes, and before I turned to make my way back to the car, I blew her a kiss. 'I love you', I said, although the only thing that heard me was an empty porch swing. That, and what little remained of a beautiful New Orleans night. A magical night. One that could only be made possible by a magical man. A magical man and his princess.

And that was it. I had gotten Ellen home safely and on time, the last item on the list checked off, the last and final stone of the pyramid, now firmly in place.

My job here was done.

Chapter 32

Ordinarily, I would have driven straight home and fallen into bed, clothes and all, and gone comatose, maybe not waking up until the next day or so. But not this morning. Sleep was not something I was quite ready for.

Not yet.

Ellen lived just a stone's throw from the river, the Mississippi River, so that's where I headed, the Algiers levee, one of the most picturesque spots on the whole New Orleans west bank. Surrounded by beautiful parks teeming with ancient oak trees, and sporting a spectacular view not only of the Mississippi River, but the city itself, as well. It's always been a favorite of mine and Ellen's. Many a time it's been when she and I would spread a blanket out on top of the levee and watch the river drift by as we shared a sloppy-good, delicious New Orleans po'boy. Just the three of us - Ellen, myself, and the city of dreams.

I park the car and make my way to the top of the levee. I removed the bow tie, took the jacket off, and carefully placed the two on the grass, and then took a seat. I reached into my pocket and extracted an empty baggie that, only hours earlier, contained a whole ounce of marijuana. I then reached into the other pocket and pulled out a sizable pill bottle, but same story; empty. Damn, that Ellen. The girl is an absolute drug pig. I'm going to have to sit her down and have a serious talk with her, because obviously, she has substance abuse issues.

I think about it for a moment, and then dismiss the idea - confronting her, that is. She'd only deny it. Chronic drug users always do, or so I'm told. Personally, I wouldn't know.

About that time, a light bulb goes off, and I think to check the tuxedo jacket, and Bingo. I strike pay dirt. Not much, but a single joint is better than none, and is a hard, fast fact that any teenage drug user will quickly attest to - that some is always better than none, word to your mother.

I waste no time. I find my lighter and fire up.

I take a long, lazy pull on the reefer, and as I exhale, I gaze out over the river. Sitting there atop the levee, in my tuxedo, on the bank of the Mississippi River, I was alone in my thoughts. It's as if I had the entire world to myself, shared only with a beautiful New Orleans moon and a night sky full of stars, my only companions now.

I look out over the river and turn my attention to the GNO bridge. From where I sat, I could see the exact spot that, only hours earlier, I had been pulled over. In fact, from my vantage point, I could see it all - the bridge, the French Quarter, Canal St., the river boats... A visual rewind of the whole evening there in front of me.

I take another long pull on the joint and replay it all in my head, careful to recall and savor every detail. I wanted to remember it all, every precious moment. And that's exactly what I did, sat enjoying the high and recalling the evening. A perfect ending to a perfect night.

* * * * *

Eventually, a large, lazy sun began rising above the horizon, and as it did, began bathing everything in an orangish-gold warmth. Soon, the city would wake and begin a new day, with the one being replaced, prom night, just

a memory now. Down on Bourbon Street, only the stragglers and confused would be left wandering the venue: the unbelievably intoxicated and bewildered who, thank god, stood no chance of finding their car, and the tourists hopelessly lost because either 1) their car was towed, or, 2) had no idea as to where they parked, or, 3) their car was stolen, with #3 being the most likely scenario.

With the sun coming up, I realized that somewhere in Algiers, a highly decorated Marine Colonel was sitting at the breakfast table drinking coffee and reading the morning paper, satisfied that his beloved daughter was home safe and sleeping the night off. I also knew that at some point between sips of his coffee, his thoughts would no doubt turn to the various ways in which he could earn his next gene pool cleansing ribbon. Faulty brakes, leaky fuel line, plastic explosives wired to the stereo...

Whatever the case, the sun was now telling me that my own fifteen minutes of fame had expired, and it was now time for me to find my way home as well. So, I stood, bid the city farewell, and then made my way down the levee where a beautiful, brand-new car awaited me. A car that, for all practical purposes, had served its purpose, its mission in life now complete.

I made the drive home in silence with only my thoughts to keep me company, and of all the things that crossed my mind, one single thought stood out from the rest - that I was too young to fully appreciate the evening I had just had. But only because I lacked the wisdom that comes with age. So, as I drove, I wondered if that day would ever come, the day I would sit in my middle age and recall that night, that time in my life. And if I do, what then would I have to say about it? What would the things be that I would see and understand then that I cannot now?

I wonder.

I wonder about so many things. And most of all, I wonder about Ellen and I, and whether or not we will make it, if she and I have a future together.

I wonder.

I finally make it home, park, go inside, and collapse on the bed, clothes and all.

And I slept.

For two days, I slept.

I slept, but I didn't dream. I remember that much. But then, why would I? After a night like the one I just had, how does a dream compare to that?

Chapter 33

He wipes the tears from his eyes. He looks at the photo one last time and gently kisses it before returning it to the obscurity of the desk drawer. He wonders if anyone will ever lay eyes upon it again, or, like everything else in life, simply get lost and forever forgotten over time, one day finding itself buried beneath the rubble of some landfill, the two beautiful teenage faces still glowing and beaming their smiles, only now, they do so under the weight of used coffee grounds, rotted banana peels, disposable diapers, and all the other things having been discarded as worthless trash and garbage.

And it's something he finds difficult to wrap his mind around, how something so priceless, at least to him, will one day be reduced to nothing more than yesterday's unwanted garbage. And what kind of statement does that make about the temporary nature of life, how everything, no matter how priceless to you, how utterly important it was in your life, will one day become meaningless and forgotten, as if it never even happened

But it did happen. He knows it did, because he was there, and the photo stands as undeniable proof of that fact. A photo whose value he now realizes has, like everything else he holds dear in his life – his kids, his memories, his marriage, and even his robe and fish slippers - has an expiration date, one that can neither be altered nor changed, no matter how much he wishes it could.

How sad.

How very, very sad.

Life. Even on its best day, it's still a fucked up affair, and one that will ultimately extract its cost from each and every person who participates in the madness of it all. A madness he sometimes wonders if it was even worth it. But then he thinks about those rare moments that, in fact, make the answer to that question - the question of 'would I do it again?' - an unequivocal 'yes'; moments, for example, like the one captured in the photo he just tucked away, a photo of a memory, a memory whose life will no doubt end in a landfill somewhere.

...a landfill.

* * * * *

He grabs another tissue and, once again, dries the tears from his eyes and cheeks, lest his wife, Ellen, ask about it; about why, in all these years, she's never once seen him cry. Not until tonight.

He grabs his coffee mug, turns the desk lamp off, and begins the trip to the living room to join his wife of thirty years on the sofa.

That's when he enters the kitchen and sees it. The sight. A sight he has become all too familiar with over the years - Ellen, butt naked, and bent over in front of the open refrigerator door, her hand desperately trying to negotiate the clutter of the bottom shelf in an attempt to locate that one last piece of New York cheesecake she's certain is hiding there.

He gingerly tiptoes his way across the kitchen, careful not to disturb the mission she's on, when, just as he walks past her protruding ass, it happened. She ripped one. A good one. Maybe like an eight on the ten scale. At least in volume, anyway. Probably scared the dog. Maybe the neighbors, as well. Strong enough, even, to blow the bangs from his eyes.

BBBBBRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAPPPPPPPPPP!

He just stands there in his uniform, coffee mug in hand, and looks down at the offending body part.

And he thinks... Good one.

Now, from his point of view, all he could see was an ass with a pair of legs attached to it. The same ass he's been looking at for a good long time now. Yet, despite the familiarity, he never tires of the sight.

Why?

Because it's *his* ass. The ass *he* owns, and probably always will. It's still *his* Ferrari, still parked in *his* garage.

And the fart? Business as usual these days. In fact, he's pretty sure Ellen makes a special effort to bless him with these little treats of hers.

There was a time when she would actually be embarrassed by them, glowing red with embarrassment. Later, she simply excused herself, almost as an automatic response, never bothering to take her eyes off her bestseller, even, to do so. More like a casual passing remark, 'excuse me'. And then later, that would change to 'oops', and later still, degraded to an indifferent 'deal with it'.

"But these days, I think it's a deliberate effort. Some form of rebellion, maybe. With Ellen, who knows?"

That's just married life, I guess.

Still, I remember a time when the very same incident threatened our future together, her and I."

(sigh)

"But marriage has a way of changing things, and always for the worse, it seems.

Still...

I remember.



Kristy Suzanne Czerwinski Meyer

March 4, 1961 - April 21, 2016

It is from Heaven you came, and so it is, to Heaven you have returned.

Sleep well, my princess

*There are places I'll remember
All my life, though some have changed.
Some forever, not for better;
Some have gone and some remain.*

*All these places had their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall.
Some are dead and some are living,
In my life I've loved them all.*

*But of all these friends and lovers
There is no one compares with you.
And these mem'ries lose their meaning
When I think of love as something new.*

*Tho' I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before,
I know I'll often stop and think about them,
In my life I love you more.*

*Tho' I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before,
I know I'll often stop and think about them,*

In my life I love you more.

In my life I love you more.

In My Life

John Lennon, Paul McCartney

