

My Soul Up There

• *Book 1* •

A novel by
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Prologue

There's a little black spot on the sun today

That's my soul up there

It's the same old thing as yesterday

That's my soul up there

There's a black hat caught in a high tree top

That's my soul up there

There's a flagpole rag and the wind won't stop

That's my soul up there

– Sting, *“King of Pain”*

Chapter 1

I was born near a small town in northeastern Alabama, October 26, 1963. My mama was young, only sixteen when she had me. My daddy didn't marry her until I was almost a year old. That makes me illegitimate, not that it was all that unusual for that place and time, and not that I particularly care, either. I guess mama and I lived with Grandma—her mama—until then. I don't remember that far back. Mama was nice, but I don't really remember her that much, either. I wish I did.

Grandma told me a lot about her, and sometimes I think I can remember when she was there—I've seen the pictures of her and me—and in them she was always smiling so prettily. And she was *very* pretty. I guess I get most of my looks from her. I've seen pictures of my daddy, too, though I remember him better than I remember mama. He's a pretty good-looking guy—I can see why my mama might have loved him at first.

I was their first 'attempt'. An accident. I have a younger brother, and his name is *Kerwin*, of all the ridiculous things to name a child. I haven't seen Kerwin since we were kids, fighting with each other. They took him to live with mama's brother in Roanoke, Virginia, and we haven't 'kept in touch,' much. What I mean is that we haven't seen each other since then, period. But we didn't get along very well, back then, so I guess it's just as well.

We were pretty poor, mama, daddy, Kerwin and me, Kerry Lynn. That, too, wasn't all that unusual. Back then, I guess the 'woman' wasn't supposed to work (yeah, right!). Well, at least in Alabama in the 1960's it wasn't considered 'right' for a woman to have a job if she was married and her husband wasn't sick, or crippled, or something. Daddy worked in the paper mill. Most of the men in the county worked there, and I guess things were OK, money-wise, at first. We lived in a really 'nice' mobile home, and daddy had a brand-new pickup truck. Mama's car wasn't new, but at least she had one.

Kerwin was born about a year and a half after me, and Grandma told me it was after Kerwin that things started to change. Daddy started drinking a lot (more), and even I can remember he was mean when he got drunk. Mama wouldn't put up with his meanness, so he stopped coming home after work and started staying out with his 'good buddies'.

Mama and daddy had terrible fights all the time. I remember them yelling and screaming at each other, and I remember how scared I was. I used to hide in the bedroom, scrunched up under the bed with Kerwin. I sometimes wish I could have done something to stop them from fighting. They were always fighting over Kerwin and me, and sometimes I think if I could only have told them to stop, they would have. But I was too young, though. I think it was after then that he stopped coming home, so much. I don't know where he went, of course, or what he did, but Grandma told me he spent a lot of time at the bar down the road, and that he was 'sleeping' with the girl who waited tables there.

Daddy was nice to me, most of the time. Well, anyway, when he was home he was nice to me. When I was four or five, I remember one time he gave me a giant teddy bear. Why? I don't know. But I thought that stuffed bear was the greatest, and I do know that I slept with him, ate with him, and almost took him to school with me, too. I wonder what happened to him? Brian, was his name. Anyway, Brian Bear was the best present of many that daddy had given me. Almost every weekend he'd come home on Saturday afternoon and he'd bring me something. I think he'd bring us all something, but what I remember most is waiting in the front yard for him to drive up. You know, it's pretty strange to have your own daddy coming home on a Saturday afternoon when he wasn't even traveling for a living. Now that I think about it, it's not normal, at all.

I wonder what mama thought?

Mama's name was Carole, Carole Anne, keeping in line with the fine old Southern tradition of giving dual first names. I'm a victim of that, as well. Daddy's name is Jimmy—no second name, I guess. Mama's maiden name was Potter, and daddy's last name is MacDonald. We had cousins living nearby, and Grandma and Grandpa did, too. Grandpa died of some kind of lung disease when I was seven. We all cried at his funeral, except daddy, who wasn't there. And of course mama wasn't, either. It was well known that Grandpa and daddy didn't get along with each other. Grandpa always thought that daddy was a cheating, dishonest liar. (Am I redundant? If so, blame Grandpa. That was a direct quotation.) Well, I don't have personal knowledge of the cheating part. But if you listen to Grandma, and I guess I have, then he did cheat on mama. As far as the part about being a liar—who knows? You see, mama was Grandpa's

favorite, because she was such a pretty girl. But he probably wouldn't have liked *any* boy that mama would've married. Again, so said Grandma, and I guess she knew.

Grandma's dead, now, too. I loved her best, no doubt about it. Really, it was because she took care of me after mama died. Oh! I never said that mama's dead. I've never thought too much about it, but I think it's somewhat strange that nearly all my family is dead, now. Just daddy, Kerwin, and me, we're all that's left. Well, I do still have cousins, and of course mama's brother and two sisters, and his wife and their husbands. It's mama's brother (I think I already said that—yes, I did, sorry) that has Kerwin. Craig Potter and his wife Susie. They have two kids of their own. Grown, by now. Actually, I suppose Kerwin's grown up by now, too, since he's just a year and a half younger than me. Yes, well, I guess the real question is, have I grown up? But I won't answer that. You'll have to be the judge.

Talking about my childhood has been pretty difficult. Most of it is very vague and fuzzy to me. Most of what I can tell you comes from Grandma, and though I think she tried to tell me the truth, I don't think she remembered things quite the way they really happened. How ironic. Don't we all remember things more the way we want to, and not so much the way they happened? I know I do.

I don't want to talk about how mama died, but I think this is the place to do it, if I ever plan to tell what happened. Daddy is, of course, in prison, but that won't last forever. Anyway, he was acquitted at the trial, so even if I tell, nothing will happen. Oh, why is he in prison? No big deal. He robbed a store and killed the clerk while trying to make his getaway. In Alabama, they throw away the key when you do something like that. But as I said before, it won't last forever. And I'm stalling, because this is *hard to do*.

Daddy killed mama. I know he did it because I was there. I didn't tell anyone, though, because he told me he would kill Kerwin and me if I did. I haven't told a soul about this. I was *five fucking years old!* Boy, does that make me angry now! **He killed mama!** They said he did it, the sheriff and his deputies who came to the house, and they did their best to collect enough evidence. And there was a *ton* of that.

They asked me if I saw anything, but daddy had already shown me his gun and I knew if I told them anything, he would come and kill both Kerwin and me. Kerwin hadn't been there—*he hadn't seen*—so I couldn't get him killed by telling what I knew. I just pretended I hadn't seen or heard anything. But the sheriff didn't find the gun. They *never* found the

gun. But I know where it is, and they won't find it, either.

I don't hate daddy. He told me he didn't mean to do it. They were fighting, again, but that time it was really bad. I was hiding under the bed, but I came out when it got quiet. I thought they had stopped fighting.

I had just walked into the living room when I saw the gun go off. Daddy just stood there, stunned. He looked at mama, crumpled over, dying, bleeding all over the floor, then at me, then at mama, again. I saw his expression, but at five, I couldn't understand it.

"Kerry Lynn," (that's my name: Kerry Lynn MacDonald) he said, looking back to me, "you didn't see *nothing*." He said it as a statement, not a question.

I said, "No, daddy, I didn't." But both of us knew I'd seen him fire the gun.

"You didn't see nothing," he said again. He pointed the gun at me, and I knew what he was saying. He was saying that he would kill me—kill Kerwin and me—if I ever told anyone.

"I won't tell no one, daddy," I think I said. "Don't shoot me, daddy, *please!*" I'm pretty sure he smiled, then. But he didn't shoot me, though. I don't hate him, but what a slime-ball!

Since they never found the gun and had no witnesses—I was too scared *and* too stupid to say anything—the jury couldn't convict him. I just tried to forget the whole thing. Kerwin and I went off to live with Grandma and Grandpa, after that, and I don't know what happened to daddy. I'm pretty sure the sheriff told him, 'You better not so much as show the hairs on your ass around here,' (that, according to Grandma) so he split. That was just as well. But I still sometimes remember him bringing me presents, and when I do, I don't hate him, so much.

I don't especially remember school. I guess I did OK. I've been told I'm pretty smart, and I have learned a few things. I'm still alive, and that's not as trivial as you might think. But I don't want to bore you with how smart I might think I am, because there's another thing I've learned; smartness is relative.

Back to school. Where we lived, we had to ride the bus. In those days the buses were old and creaky (maybe they still are) and most of what I remember is that they were hot! Really, I don't remember it being especially hot when we weren't on the bus, but the bus was always hot. So much for the damned bus being hot.

There were only sixty-two kids in my elementary school, so we had three teachers and they taught all of us. We weren't all in the same room, but I was in the first and second grades with kids that were in the third

grade. The fourth and fifth were together, and the sixth got a teacher all to themselves. I guess since there were almost twenty of them they rated their own. Anyway, I had the same teacher for all of elementary school, and her name was Mrs. Kuykendall. I liked her, and she liked me. She was the one who always told me I was so intelligent. She said that if I worked real hard I could go to college. In that part of Alabama, I can't say I know of even one person who went to college, but I'm sure some did. Most of the time they thought you were doing well just to graduate from high school, which I did do. You see, I skipped the fifth grade and went directly from fourth to sixth. When I was in high school she (Mrs. Kuykendall) arranged it so that I also skipped the tenth grade, too.

Grandma was very proud of me. She bragged about me to everyone, and some of the kids didn't like me because their parents were always asking them why they weren't as smart as Opal Potter's granddaughter. They also made fun of me because they said my daddy killed my mama. I knew, of course, that it was true, but I denied it anyway. Though I was supposed to be good enough to get a college scholarship, and I wasn't really different from any of the other kids, they used to say I came from nothing but 'murderin' white trash'. I tried not to think about it, too much, but I couldn't wait to get out of school, finally. By that time Kerwin was living in Virginia, and Grandpa was dead. All Grandma and I had were each other. She told me not to listen to the kids, and I did a pretty good job of ignoring them, too. Most of the time.

But I didn't end up going to college, though.

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I met Kerry in the Rich's department store in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. I was shopping on my lunch hour and mistook her for a salesclerk. I was a little embarrassed to have made such a mistake, but she seemed like a nice girl, and also seemed to have some interest in me. Considering how stunningly beautiful I thought she was when I first saw her, I am even now a little surprised I ever said another word to her. Surely she couldn't *possibly* be interested in me. In retrospect, I think I was foolish to feel that way, but at the time I wasn't very confident of my abilities to charm the opposite sex.

She was standing near the cash register in the men's department, and I was looking for a dress shirt. It wasn't that I couldn't find one, it was that I needed to find a dressing room to try on the shirt I *did* find. I had asked

her where the changing rooms were.

"What makes you think *I* know?" She looked me over, carefully, and obviously amused, but somehow she didn't strike me as the truly nasty type.

"I'm sorry," I said, ears reddening. "I thought you worked here."

She just shrugged. "Everything's relative." She folded her arms, and I noticed how they framed and cradled her very nice bust. I looked, as *any* man would, but I tried not to look like I was looking. No good. She had done it specifically to get my attention, and she was obviously, then, going to point it out to me. "I'm up here!" She placed a finger lightly under my chin and drew my face up, but only slightly. She was positively gleeful. The bitch! She wasn't playing fair. My eyes came up, meeting hers as closely as I dared, and I'm sure I blushed a little more. Then, I became angry to have become so embarrassed, and that she had contrived to make it happen.

My face darkened. "As I said, I'm sorry if I mistook you for someone who gives a damn."

But at my words her expression suddenly softened. She paused, measuring me, I'm sure, and then looked up past my shoulder. "The changing rooms are over there, buddy." She pointed, lazily, and I followed her finger with my eyes. "Behind that rack with all the neat hound's-tooth sport coats on it." I started to turn, but she smoothly placed her hand on my arm, stopping me. "Need any help picking out a shirt?"

It seemed like a very personal thing to say, but her smile and amazingly bright green eyes were taking me in. I found myself agreeing. "What are your qualifications? Shirt selection is a fine old art, and I can't just entrust *anyone* with the keys to my sartorial kingdom."

She laughed, eyes sparkling. Then she stopped, smile fading a moment while she regarded me more carefully. Those green eyes were so deep I instantly fell in. She smiled again, a very toothy grin. She was very pretty. "I like your sense of humor," she said. Looked around. "Do you have a pen?" I took it out of my shirt pocket, gave it to her. "How about a piece of paper, maybe?"

"What do you need a piece of paper for?" I fished in my pocket and handed her some receipt or other that I found there.

"I want to give you my phone number, silly." She turned to write something down, using the counter behind her. I noticed she was left-handed. In a moment she finished writing, and handed me both the pen and scrap of paper. "You *will* call me sometime, won't you?"

"Sure," I said, but I doubted her sincerity, so I followed with, "How about tonight, then?"

“Better make it early, buddy, ‘cause I usually work nights.” And with that, she walked away.

I have to admit I was stunned. Well, a little, anyway. And my basis for that assertion is that I didn’t follow her, which I wanted to do, and I hadn’t even thought to ask her name as I stood watching her retreating figure disappear through the dress slacks. Well, it didn’t matter, really, since she had written it on the slip of paper:

Kerry MacDonald 892 - 6914

But, I sputtered mentally, you don’t know *my* name! I guess I was going to have to take the bull by the balls, so to speak, and take the initiative. I remember it plainly—the prospect of actually picking up the phone and calling her loomed terrifyingly large in front of me.

I almost didn’t do it.

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Grandma wanted me to go to college. For a while, I wanted to go, too, but we didn’t have any money. That meant I had to apply for a scholarship. But my grades weren’t quite good enough to make a scholarship a done deal. The scores on the college entrance test I took, also, weren’t quite as good as they needed to be, so I didn’t get the scholarship. I then got the crazy idea I could work a few years to earn enough money to go, but the times and the place were against me.

Well, I *did* get a job. It was practically the only one I could find since we were in the middle of a recession. The local clothing factory put me on a waiting list, but with so many adults (with families) needing jobs, neither they nor I gave it much hope. So I started waiting tables at the very same bar where my daddy used to screw the waitress (who had done pretty much the same job—except for the screwing part—that I was doing). The owner was still the same guy, and I’m pretty sure he knew about my daddy and his thing with the other waitress, but he never said anything about it.

I looked older than my real age. I was tough—I’m pretty tough now—and I found I could handle myself with most of the drunk guys who’d be in there nearly every night. And I remember Joey, the bartender. He wasn’t very smart—pretty slow, actually—and he was very impressed that I had gone ‘all the way’ through high school by the age of fifteen.

Getting through high school was something Joey hadn't been able to accomplish, so at the age of forty, or so, he was still only making just above minimum wage, tending bar.

Joey. I've not thought about him in a long time. He was big, and dumb, and he was incredibly strong. I'd seen him bounce a rowdy drunk right out on his ear. Nobody ever messed with Joey, though he was so kindhearted and gentle he would've rather walked barefoot on broken glass than hurt me, or allow someone else to hurt me. He was even gentle with the drunks, but since they couldn't feel much of anything, usually, he knew he didn't have to be *that* gentle.

Joey was very nice to me. On Fridays and Saturdays the bar stayed open past two o'clock, and Joey would always insist that he take me home. He told me once how much he treasured me, and that he would die if anything bad ever happened to me. I think he really did love me, but he felt I was so far above him that he'd never have a chance. He was almost twenty-five years older than me—he was old enough to have been my *father*—and had been raised to honor and respect women. Unfortunately, in my life I've not met very many men you could truthfully say that about.

I don't know why I'm talking about Joey, since nothing ever happened between us. He was just someone I knew who was truly nice to me, and I wanted someone besides me to know about it.

I haven't given many details up to now. I don't have that many that I could give. There were some good things that happened, some bad. Some really bad—but I'm over them. It seems pretty boring to me, now. A baby girl was born to an unwed mother in a backwoods podunk town in the hills of northeastern Alabama. Her daddy was sometimes nice to her, but he did some bad things and they eventually put him in prison. She went to school, did better than most of her schoolmates, but she couldn't do much with what she learned.

That was my childhood. Maybe I've left out some things—maybe I will remember them later, who knows—but I need to set the stage for what happened once I left home. Since I've already written some things down, I know that most of it—'it' is my life that I'm talking about—hasn't been very good.

But then, you'll have to be the judge.

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My name is Marcus Anthony Huffman.

I was born. Everyone comes into life that way, and with the exception of the effects of my mother's smoking while she was pregnant with me, my arrival was essentially a non-event. I was about three weeks premature, weighed five pounds, seven ounces at birth, and was kept in the hospital two weeks to 'help fatten me up'.

I was the youngest by more than ten years, and I'm pretty sure I wasn't planned, either, since my mother was thirty-eight and my father almost fifty-six. When I was born, my eldest brother, William, was just graduating high school, with my next oldest brother, Paul, a star sophomore halfback and already an all-state track champion. William was not the athlete—he was more the money conscious business type—a prime MBA candidate once he graduated from Georgia Tech or Emory University. Four years younger than Paul I had a sister, Suzanne, and much to my mother's (continuing) chagrin, she was definitely *not* shaping up to be the socialite beauty that mother had been, and had expected of her daughter.

We lived in Atlanta, Georgia, and lived well, occupying a rather large Tudor-styled home not very far from the site of the famous Battle of Peachtree Creek. My father was a very successful owner of a small plastics company. Over the years the family business has grown, somewhat, to the point that they have just recently taken the company public. My father would have been proud. My mother, though, still lives in the same house, and the grounds and the woods surrounding it still have the look and feel of home. The neighborhood has done anything but go down hill. She still refuses to sell, though she would reap a fortune with the appreciation that has ensued in the last forty years or so.

My father is dead, now. He died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-four, not especially young for such things to happen. Brother Bill is running Huffman Plastics now, and Paul is executive vice president of marketing. Both have their fine homes and families in fine neighborhoods, with their expensive cars, and their equally as expensive country club memberships, and my mother is both pleased and satisfied. With them, that is.

Bill went away to college, Yale, a place he got into by luck since he expected to study engineering at Georgia Tech. Yale was by far my father's preference, since he had gotten all his schooling at that other famous school. No, I know what you're thinking. Though my father was very big on getting the proper education, he claimed he learned everything he knew in the school of 'hard knocks'. (I figured you'd heard of it.) My father felt that if you weren't lucky enough to make it on your own, then the next best thing was to go where those who'd already made

it went, and thereby have some of that 'luck' rub off on you.

Paul, being the star athlete, had 'luck' of an entirely different nature, and he eventually attended Stanford University on a football scholarship. For my father, again, that was good. William, as he was called by my father, had needed my father's money for school, which my father was *not* against since Bill tended to do all the right things at the right time, and therefore uphold the family name quite admirably. Paul was also dear to father's heart since he had, too, made it on his own abilities. William drove the five-year-old car—but Paul's was a brand new Corvette. Bill thought he was smarter than Paul, and fully expected to inherit the business. Well, he did, and he and Paul do make a good team. But, they aren't me.

I had some very large shoes to fill as a child. With my parents, it seemed as if all the best things had already happened (in the way of children), so that by the time I arrived, it seemed self-evident to them that there wouldn't be any way I would measure up. Measuring up is important to The Huffman Family, Inc., and I was just too little (no pun intended) and too late to get the job done. My mother did defend me, weakly, saying that she could see some things in me that she thought would surprise everyone, though I *don't* know what she saw, nor who the 'everyone' were to which she was referring. She probably only meant my father, since he seemed to be the keeper of the family male pride. Well, if there was the male pride, what about the female pride?

Suzanne was my only sister. I think perhaps she was accidental, as well, and I'm not still too sure she was legitimately my father's child. Anyone in the family would say that that is a terrible thing to say, but Suzanne was different from the rest of us. (If I ever thought I might not be of genuine Huffman blood—too bad—I look more than passingly like my father.) Suzanne had a basic resemblance to my mother, (so I guess that part of her genealogy was never in question, ha ha) but it was hard to see where my father's genes came into play. I *am not* being unfair to Suzanne, though. She was my favorite baby sitter, and some of my best childhood memories are of the two of us sitting up in her bedroom, playing her 45's.

Suzanne was athletic along the same lines as Paul, but in our family the females were strictly for show, and not for go. Her desire to participate in sports was not well received, though she was permitted to pursue whatever other activities she wanted. But apart from being physically talented, Suzanne wasn't very interested in boys. Mother, when she had it explained to her, finally, professed a total lack of understanding. To my mother, women simply had no other purpose but to marry *men* and raise families, hopefully ones on the Social Register. But with my best sister

Suzanne, relationships with men were the problem. Suzanne was gay—lesbian—and it nearly ‘killed’ my mother, as they say, when she found out.

Acceptance of individuality is not a general characteristic of my family. I saw alienation happen to my sister, and later experienced some of it, myself. I think I’ve dealt with my split from the family, though. After all, it was mostly my doing. But I’m not sure I’ve adequately dealt with Suzanne’s. Her patent unacceptability as a part of the Huffman tribe led to a tragedy that still scares the living hell out of me. Especially now.

My relationship today with mother could best be described as cordial, but distant. She accepts that I prefer to be independent of the family business, though she *still* doesn’t totally understand it. Well, there are times that even I don’t understand it, myself. I visit her occasionally, mostly at random, non-eventful times. ‘Family things’—I stay away from. She’s usually glad to see me, and frequently offers money, which I have learned to accept, graciously. Don’t misunderstand, I don’t *need* it, but if her guilt is assuaged by offering me a few thousand here, ten thousand there, (I’m not kidding a bit! I use at least one check a year just to handle the extra tax burden) well, who am I to refuse? In the long run, however, one can only use just so many cars, stereos, rooms full of furniture, beach condos, clothes and lengthy vacations in Europe. Most of those things are expressly not to my taste, but I still have indulged myself on occasion.

In other news, both Bill and Paul have approached me numerous times to come ‘onboard’ at Huffman Plastics to ‘help them out,’ but though I know they think they’re doing the right thing in asking, it’s not the right thing for me. I tell them I just don’t want to work in the plastics industry. They say they understand (or maybe they say they don’t understand, I don’t remember which) but they still want me to take the empty corner office they say they’re saving for me, and join the growing, happy, Huffman Plastics crew.

I don’t take their offer—and I won’t—because I have spent my entire life in the shadows and under the bright lights of my brothers’ successes. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to compete with them, and if I took the job offer at Huffman I would forever be caught between trying to succeed in measure equal to Bill and Paul, or forever be bucking them and not being a good team player. I am, and can be, a team player, but with respect to my family, you can forget it. My philosophy has been to earn my successes, accept my failures, and to hell with what the family thinks about it. I won’t submit myself to their scrutiny. Pleasing myself isn’t that easy, but it’s a lot more satisfying. At least I don’t have to explain

anything (to myself) if I don't accomplish what I set out to. The same couldn't be said of them.

I miss Suzanne. She wasn't pretty, like mother, but she had a warm smile and quick wit, and she loved me as I loved her. Suzanne never expected anything of me but to be just who I was. She was like a surrogate mother to me, so as a youngster I looked up to her as most kids do to their 'real' mothers. She did have her own life and interests, but even if she was busy, she *always* had time for me. Mother, on the other hand, always seemed to have some place to go, someone else to see. When I cut my hand trying to cut up a watermelon, mother only scolded me for being so clumsy and making her late to her bridge party. It was Suzanne who took me to the emergency room for ten stitches. Afterward, we stopped and got ice cream cones. It didn't matter that I had slipped with the knife. I was only eight, after all, and she had only reacted as any good parent would to a non-fatal accident. All she'd said was, 'Be careful next time, Markie!' and we both laughed. Until now, I thought I had forgotten about the whole thing, but I'm still extremely careful with knives, even today. God, it's because of memories like these that I miss Suzanne so terribly.

Mother and father sent Suzanne away to college. It was 'the least they could do,' and I muddled through the last part of elementary school and junior high without her. Initially I was sure she would turn down their college offer, but we talked about it, and though I was heartbroken and depressed when she went away, I understood her motives. They really weren't all that different from what mine are now in accepting money from mother. She knew then, as I know now, how to take things when they're offered—that is, if they will fit with your goals. Suzanne wanted a good college education since she wanted to be a teacher, and she explained to me that the only way she could afford to go to college was if our parents financed it for her. So it was good-bye, Suzanne, and I was left alone, then, with mother and father.



I worked as the night waitress in the bar steadily for about a year. In that year I saved about \$2,000 of the \$8,500 that I earned. The rest went for food, clothing, and a car. The car was by far the most expensive, but I had to have transportation. Even if I was able to save twice as much the

following year, it was going to take about five years to save enough for college. But for me that was just too long to wait. Grandma was getting sick often, and if she ended up in the hospital, college would become nothing more to me than a fleeting, distant dream. And as the months went by, the very idea of even getting into college started to look less and less likely. Maybe I never really believed it could happen. I don't know.

I remember being depressed about it. Before I started to work in a real job, I don't think I realized how important going to college might be. Because then I saw what my life would be like if I just kept on doing what I was doing. I saw what others' lives were like, and I saw what little future they all had. I saw that I didn't want it to be *my* future, but I didn't know how to change it.

I think I started to drink, about then. I know I was underage, but most of the people I knew thought of me as older, and I had no trouble getting something to drink after work. Well, the bar was closed, and no deputy ever came around after the parking lot emptied. I don't remember getting drunk. I mean, I know I did, but I think I must have blacked out a lot because I often woke up in the back seat of my car, miles from nowhere, not remembering anything of the night before. Maybe a little worry started in the back of my mind then, maybe not. In any event, getting drunk was an easy way to forget *everything*.

I don't think Grandma knew about my drinking. I worked diligently to keep her from finding out, but now I wonder what she must have thought about my coming home near dawn all those nights. I'm sure that I did, and I'm sure she knew about it. Funny, she never said a word. Maybe I wish she had.

Sometime in this stretch, though I don't know how, I started dating a boy. What I mean is, between all the time I spent waiting tables and getting drunk on a pretty regular basis, I'm not really sure how this boy even managed to meet me. Sammy Something-or-other was his name. He was a year or two older—I think he actually thought I was older than him—and I remember he used to come around on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I would get off work at nine-thirty.

He had a job at the shirt factory, making decent money, and he used to take me to the movies or dinner in Huntsville. Afterward we'd get a bottle. I'd get drunk, and then he'd fuck me (or I'd fuck him, whatever) in the back seat of his car before he took me home. Don't act so surprised. I wasn't a virgin anymore—no, *far* from it. I don't remember losing my virginity, specifically, but it was *long gone* by then. He was my first real boyfriend, though, if you count real dates with movies and burgers at McDonald's (always my favorite). Oh, and don't forget the fucking.

Fucking. I like the word. It has a depth, a satisfying, thrusting sound that never fails to warm me down there. When I was on my back with my knees in the air, believe me, I was *in control*. All I ever had to do was snap them suckers closed and things would go my way. It worked, certainly, with Sammy What's-his-name. Don't get me wrong. I really liked the guy, but I was hardly in love. He wasn't old enough, or rich enough, (what a laugh! he was almost as poor as I was) or even handsome enough to get my attention. What I really think made ole Sammy come up short (hah! a joke) was the size of his dick. Maybe I didn't know better then, but I think I still had a feeling that if nothing else, some guy was going to come along with a lot more money and a pecker big enough for me to feel it. Sorry, Sammy. You *were* a nice guy, but it just wasn't going to work out.

You know, it's strange, but back then I never really thought of myself as pretty. Now, much, *much* later I realize I have a face that probably could have gotten me my way even if my body had been substandard. And that isn't even the case, either. But I'm still glad I never learned to take advantage of my looks. Why? Well, it might have affected some of the *good* things that happened later.

Being pretty is a good thing, I think. Expecting something for what is just an accident of birth is something else. Grandma always talked of 'Gifts from God'. But I don't know Him, personally, so I can't say one way or the other. Your looks and your body can be your 'gift' or your burden, whichever you want them to be, but even if God didn't exist, who says they aren't gifts, just the same?

Don't think less of me because I can use God and fuck in the same sentence (because I just did). I think you need to be on good terms with both of them if you want to get by. The fuck part I've pretty much figured out ... but I'm still working on God.

I'll get back to you.

• • •

It took me more than a week to get up the nerve to call this Kerry MacDonald person who had been so rude to me, but who had laughed and smiled so delightfully when I'd made a joke. Yes, plainly I was overwhelmed. She was *gorgeous*.

She had reddish-blond hair that was long and shined (or so I dreamed) and the most captivating emerald green eyes I have ever seen. To this day. I hadn't seen enough of the rest of her to render a strong

impression, except for the most pleasing size of her breasts, which she had been so blatantly crass in pointing out to me. I remember thinking, as if it were only yesterday, that I couldn't believe a woman as beautiful as she had given me her number, and had seemed so sincere about it. Ah, but that must be it. She was just leading me on so she could embarrass me again. She couldn't be serious. She couldn't possibly be interested in *me*. Could she?

Pretty defeatist talk, isn't it? Maybe so, but it's an accurate picture of how screwed up I was, then. How old was I? Twenty-six, so that made Kerry about twenty. As she says, she looked older. I can't say I thought she was my age, but ... I was intimidated by the thought of dealing with such a beautiful woman as she appeared to be.

I found it very difficult to call her. It's hard to say now why I was so besieged with doubt, but certainly few events since have been as excruciating as picking up the phone and dialing 892-6914. It was a Wednesday afternoon, I had just gotten home from work, and I wanted to give it at least one try.

The phone rang several times, though. I was deflating, fast, but as much from relief as from disappointment. Then, after what would have been the next to the last ring, she answered. Her voice was so groggy when she spoke, I was immediately unsure if I had dialed the right number. I asked to speak with Kerry MacDonald.

"That's me." She had a frog in her throat, and cleared it, which took more than one attempt. "Sorry," she apologized when she could finally speak. She sounded as if she had been asleep.

"Kerry, you don't know my name, but we met in the men's department of Rich's the other day, and—"

"—Hey!" Her voice suddenly brightened. "I'm *so glad* you called!" She paused, then went on, "I've been waiting for you to get off your butt and call me. I knew you were shy, but I didn't think you were *that* shy. Hey, buddy, I'm really glad you called me!"

"Yeah," I said, but I was starting slowly. "Uh, you ... uh ... embarrassed me when you made such a big deal about my asking you where the changing rooms were."

"I know. Sorry." That was all she said, because I waited.

"It's OK," I lied.

"Hey, you know *my* name, right?" she asked. I said I did. "Well, why don't you tell me yours so we can get to know each other a little better." I told her my name. "Hi, Marc, I'm Kerry. It's damned good to meet you."

As we talked, I began to think something was pretty unusual about this girl. She was much more glib and freewheeling than I was used to,

but still it didn't take me very long while talking to her to decide that pursuing her probably wasn't going to work in the long run. What a shame. She seemed like a very attractive woman to me, at least what I had seen of her, and although she was conversing very easily about what were only rather superficial things, she seemed intelligent, as well. And, more importantly, she seemed to want to talk to me. To me.

She asked me what I did for a living, and I told her. She said it sounded interesting and I almost laughed. She asked why I thought my work was something to laugh about. Was it *that* boring? She said she was interested in what I did, and then I forgot my self-consciousness a few minutes to talk about something I knew something about. I hadn't realized it, but she listened to me talk, and asked more questions about my job. Where did I live? Did I have any hobbies?

I told her I was a computer systems consultant and software developer. I explained I often went to companies that were looking for better solutions to computer automation. I *still* think it's pretty boring and that my explanation was too pat, sounding too much like a marketing brochure. I told her I lived alone in an in-town condo; that my mother and two brothers lived in Atlanta, as well; that I had dabbled as a musician, and played a little golf, now and then. Nothing, I thought, anyone would be interested in.

"I think the work you do is fascinating. I have always been amazed at people who can turn ideas into programs, and all that stuff." Even over the phone, she sounded as if she was sitting there next to me, and I could feel her slow smile. "You should be very proud of what you do."

We had only talked about ten minutes, but I already began to feel we were becoming friends. I am still unable to explain it. I had hardly asked any questions of her, at all. So I asked what she did for a living. It seemed only polite to return with something 'safe'.

She replied, "I work in personal services."

"What's that?"

"Well-ll," she drawled, "it's kinda hard to explain." She was being evasive, and I didn't see the necessity. I expressed some mild skepticism at her answer. She changed the subject. "Tell you what. Why don't we get together after you get off work? I'm assuming you work regular hours, or something." I said I did, and told her that I was already home. She went on, "Great! Then maybe we can get together, get something to eat, and—who knows?—talk some more." She paused. "Is that OK? I'm guessing that since you called me, you'd probably be free ... or at least reasonable." She laughed at her joke. "Is that OK?"

She had stunned me again, only this time I had time to recover before

answering, inanely, "Sure." It wasn't my best comeback. But she only returned it by asking what time I was coming by to pick her up. "Uh," I fairly stammered, "where do you live?" She indicated a well-known street in the Piedmont Park area, and I was pretty sure I knew where it was. She gave me the address and an apartment number, and pointed out that I should *still* have her phone number in case I got lost.

"So anyway, Marc, when are you coming by to pick me up?" She seemed to want to know, and I hadn't said.

"Well," I thrashed about in my mind for a good 'date-type' time, but found only indecision and insecurity, dancing together. "You did mean tonight, didn't you?" I needed to be sure I hadn't misunderstood.

She laughed brightly, "Of course, buddy! You can come by anytime after seven-thirty. Is that OK?"

I didn't understand why this girl wanted to go out with me. It didn't make sense, and that made me more unsure despite her reassuring tone of voice. But in the end, seven-thirty was OK with me, and we reached that sometimes awkward point in any first phone conversation: The closing. I said, "Well, I guess I'll see you about seven-thirty, or so."

And she said, "I'm looking forward to it." The sultriness of her voice tickled the hairs on my scalp, producing an instant feeling of pleasure, but without another word she hung up the phone.

Chapter 2

Grandma died in the winter of the year I turned seventeen. I was still living at home, and so I was the one that found her.

She hadn't been feeling very well for a few days. She didn't seem *that* sick, but evidently she was hiding a lot from me. I wasn't paying much attention to her since I had been pretty busy at work, lately, but still she seemed OK to me. I had gotten in pretty late the night before, and didn't get up until around eleven. Grandma was still in bed, which was unusual for her. I asked if I could make her some breakfast. She said she wasn't hungry, so I only made something for me. I turned the TV on to watch something while I ate, and in a little while Grandma came out to the living room to watch, too.

I remember we talked—you know, about everyday stuff that doesn't really matter—and she still seemed pretty much OK. I wish I had known how sick she was! I had suggested that we should take her to the doctor, but as I expected, she refused. She didn't like doctors—at all. And there was no use arguing with Grandma.

She sat and watched TV while I cleaned up my breakfast dishes, and I left her to go take a bath. After my bath I got dressed to do some grocery shopping before I needed to get off to work, which was around three. On my way out the door I kissed her and told her that I'd bring home some ice cream for us. When I got back about an hour and a half later, she was ... well, that was when I found her.

I really wanted to cry at the funeral. I certainly felt like crying, but for some reason I don't understand, still, I *couldn't*. Standing there in the church with everyone all around me, all I felt was a complete numbness. I felt totally detached from reality. I've felt that numb feeling before—and since—and I know it pretty well. What I know is that it's a good indicator of how bad a shape I'm in, but there and then ... I just stood there as

impassive as a stone.

Grandma had had many friends, and there were also a few relatives—cousins and such—scattered around. Most of them were there, and they tried to be supportive and understanding, but they couldn't possibly understand. **I wanted to cry! I wanted to *bawl* like there was no tomorrow!** But all I could make myself do was stand there and look down at the lines and wrinkles of her cold, still, peaceful face, and feel *nothing*. Nothing at all. It was awful; it was terrible; I should have been mourning her death, but I couldn't.

I think Grandma would have understood me—how I felt. She could always tell how I was feeling, and I wanted her to be there so I could ask her what it all was supposed to mean. A couple of times I found myself looking back to her pew in the church, expecting to see her sitting there, fanning herself with a program. I hadn't been to church in a while, but when I was a little girl I used to go all the time. It shocked me when I realized she wasn't there. That she wasn't *ever* going to be there, again.

I wanted to be mad at her, then. Really angry! But, I couldn't let myself do it. She had worked so hard all her life to raise and support her family, but in the end she had just gotten sick, and died. And there I was, the only one she had left to take care of her, and I hadn't done it. It was all *my* fault! **I should have been mad at me!**

And I was. Oh, I was! I hated myself. Hate doesn't even begin to describe how much I despised being me, just then. I couldn't stand it. The funeral wasn't over, but I couldn't stand to stay there another moment and face myself and what I had let happen. If I had only ... If I had been there ... If, if, if. ***Fucking IF!!*** The preacher was up there saying some nice things about Grandma—I wanted so badly to cry for her—but my anger and hate toward myself made me want to die, instead. Right there, no getting out! I remember yelling out something that I never actually heard, and then running from the church. Outside, I didn't even stop to get in the car, just ran out to the road and ran toward ... ran toward nowhere. I don't remember where I ran, or how long, or how far. I just ran and ran, and ran. My high heeled shoes must have come off somewhere along the road, and still I ran.

It was dark when I remember finally stopping. I guess no one had followed me. I don't know if I would have stopped, or even noticed them if they had. The bottoms of my pantyhose had long since worn away, and I realized suddenly that the soles of my feet were very bruised, even bleeding. My left big toe was in fact cut badly, and a small pool of blood was collecting darkly around it as I stood. I couldn't really see the blood,

but as I moved, I could feel a warm, sticky wetness between my toes. It was cold, and I started to feel it. I didn't care if I was hurt. There was little, if any pain, and anyway, no amount of pain was going to satisfy me, just then.

I must have stood there a long time, shivering and hugging myself for warmth. I think I was crying then, too. I also heard the echoes of someone's screams and with that sudden realization became aware that they were *my* screams. I was screaming for Grandma. When I stopped to listen to the echoes, my mind returned to the moment. I gingerly checked to see if my foot had stopped bleeding. The pavement didn't seem very sticky, anymore, but I was feeling cold, and weak, and very lightheaded.

I sat down in the middle of the road. If any cars had gone by while I was just standing there, I don't know. I was lightheaded, panting, and my dress was sweat-soaked and filthy, no more than a rag anymore. Finally, I felt I *could* cry. I was ashamed to be crying, but powerless to stop it, and thankful that no one was around to hear me. The tears on my face were cold as they dried. A breeze was blowing, lightly, and I gulped in the damp, cold air to help clear my head. My shivering was getting worse, though, and I finally began to focus on my growing need to get *warm*. It took some time, a few minutes—or more, I don't know—until I could think clearly, a little.

Better check out the foot, first. My big toe *was* cut. It was a large, deep, jagged—nasty—gash, but it seemed to have stopped bleeding. My other foot had some small cuts, but except for huge bruises covering both soles, otherwise I wasn't hurt too badly. The toe, though, was going to require a visit to the hospital for stitches. Next, then, I *had* to find some warmth, or I was going to freeze.

I looked around. Where the fuck *was I*? In the dark I couldn't be at all certain where I was, and there were no lights around—anywhere—that might indicate a house nearby. I called out for help, as loudly as my extremely hoarse vocal chords would manage, but in my ears those cries sounded truly *pitiful*! I know didn't deserve pity, but I needed help. Once, I even called for Grandma, and when I realized what I had done, I started crying, again. This time I knew I was crying in self-pity, and when I realized nothing I could do or say was going to bring Grandma back to me, the tears began streaming even more.

Grief is an extremely *lousy* emotion. Looking back, I see what I was going through, and I can tell you that I wasn't crying *just* for Grandma, or just for me. But I can't tell you any more, right now. We're *all* weak. I don't care how tough you are, or think you are, we're *all* just too fucking

weak! Weakness must be hidden. If they find out, you're finished. They'll eat you alive and spit out the bones. No more *you*. The weak ones lose; the weak ones forfeit; the weak ones get the shit kicked out of them, every time.

I wasn't, and I'm not going to be one of the weak ones. I got over being weak a long time ago, and it hasn't been back, since. It won't *ever* be back. The last time I was weak I got fucked, both literally and figuratively, and no bastard will ever get me in that position *again!* I'll *kill* the son-of-a-bitch before I let him take advantage of me, again. *That's* what weakness is! When you're weak they take advantage of you and suck the living core out of your existence. When you don't *exist*, you wither up inside and die. Nothing to hold the skin together—you're hollow inside. Grief gives me that hollow feeling, and it's almost driven me insane.

Sitting there in the middle of the road, I felt like I was going to go insane. With nothing inside, there was no place for my mind to go. I was completely lost in a horrible, empty void. I was standing on the edge, and when I looked over, there was nothing. *Nothing there.*

That empty nothingness scared the living shit out of me. It was insanity, and death, and all the other things your mind can grasp, but for which there *are no words*. And looking back on that awful moment, I will be forever grateful that a car drove by, just then.

The guy was on his way home, and as he came around the bend in the road, there I was, sitting right in the middle of it. Luckily, he had the presence of mind to stop before he ran me over. I was dazzled blind by his headlights as he got out of the car. He said something, but I didn't really hear it.

"I said," he repeated, a *lot* louder, "**Are you all right?**" I couldn't see him, blinded as I was. For a moment I was afraid to answer. He came around the car to stand in front of his headlights and kneel down carefully next to me. As his face got close to mine, I could see it, but just barely. I just looked at him, dumbly. "Missy? Are you all right?" He placed his hand on my shoulder, and I could feel it. He was *shaking*, too. I must have scared him more than I was scared, myself. Then suddenly I realized he was an old man, maybe in his eighties, and his eyes showed such a deep concern that I felt pity toward *him*. "Lord," he held me by the shoulders and I thought he was going to cry, too. "You look a terrible mess."

I was crying again as he picked me up.

I don't remember exactly where he took me to get my cut toe looked at, or how or when I got home, but I *do* remember being laid on the front seat of his old car, and the billowing of the heater in my face, and the

smells in the car: the farm; stale cigarette smoke; stale sweat. And I was home again, safe. I think I fell asleep before he even put the car in gear.

When I woke up late in the afternoon of the next day, the first thing I went for was *the bottle*. My buddy. I spent all the rest of that day and as much of the next week as possible, completely drunk out of my mind. Fortunately, I *was* at home and didn't hurt anyone or anything but myself. I think I tried, halfheartedly, to kill myself with the booze, but I was obviously unsuccessful. (As you can see.) But, I guess the less said about *that*, the better. The one good thing about the booze though, is that the first thing that goes when you take a drink is the resistance to take the second drink. After the second drink ... then everything *else* goes, as well.

Eventually I woke up, mostly sober but with a hangover bad enough to bring a grown moose to his knees. The hollowness and self-pitying anguish of the day of the funeral were gone, but I had to take time out to throw up. When I finally got the dry heaves stopped, I found I had time to think about what I was going to do now that Grandma was gone. Now that I was alone.

The house, I knew, was left to me in Grandma's will, but I didn't want to stay there. Only Grandma had tied me to this place, such as it was, and now that she was gone I figured I might just as well hit the road. College? Well, I had completely written it off. That being the case, it also meant I had about \$5,000 of 'free money' in the bank. I never had any great attraction to the waitressing job in the bar, except perhaps some affection for Joey, the bartender, so I decided I might just as well pack up the car and get the hell out of Dodge. The house, the land, and whatever money she might have had—I could not have cared less about them. Yeah, I know, it was a mistake—maybe—but at the time all I wanted was to get my wretched little white-trash slut ass out of there. The bright lights, and big city of Atlanta had always seemed like just *the* place to be, so I started the car and didn't stop until I saw the skyline of 'Hotlanta' rising up out of that huge sea of trees.

Atlanta seemed like just the thing to get my mind off Grandma and Alabama. Compared to most places I'd been, Atlanta was bigger—much bigger—and filled with a lot more people than I'd *ever* seen in one place, at one time.

I took my time when I got to town. I spent the whole first day just driving around, looking at things. That night, I got a hotel room right downtown in one of the best places, and I ordered room service food—and a bottle of booze—to celebrate my liberation. I was a good girl with

the alcohol, though, and I got up early the next morning, only modestly hung over. I ran a very hot tubful of water, and was the bath sumptuous! The bath was marvelous! The bubble bath smelled like *Chanel No. 5* and I was in heaven! I must have spent an hour lounging in that enormous tub, listening to the radio. There was room enough for two—or maybe even three—people, and I had it all to myself. I felt so good I even had a drink, or two.

Later, when I had checked out and was back in the car, I decided that my five grand could do a lot of things. First, it could get me an apartment, buy me some clothes, and keep me alive until I could get a good job. I figured I could hold out as long as three months before I would *have* to do something. And there was no way it was going to take that long to find the right job, either. I was pretty sharp. I had some skills, I thought ... well OK, maybe I only knew how to wait tables, but even if I had to go back to *that* I would be a whole lot better off in the big city than I had been back in Alabama.

To make a long story short, I didn't find that 'good job'. I had started my search by perusing the newspaper for office or secretarial jobs. Even for entry-level positions, I was still only seventeen, and in Atlanta they want you to be older than that. It didn't matter I was a high school graduate. That, it seems, is only one of the *minimum* requirements for employment in most places. I considered lying about my age—and I did in several places—but then again, my apparent lack of skills beyond serving drinks and sandwiches proved to be just as ineffective. I became convinced they had a conspiracy against poor white girls from down on the farm. So in defeat, I started to look for jobs in the area where I knew I had some skills. Waiting tables and schmoozing the customers for tips.

Surprise, surprise! Suddenly my age didn't matter, so much. Surprise, surprise! Suddenly I was considered *experienced* for the position. Hah! But I *was* a little smarter, and I did *not* take the first cocktail waitress job I was offered. I looked around awhile to see if I could find something that would pay well enough to let me keep my really fine midtown apartment, in that really fine fifteen story high-rise apartment building right off Peachtree Street.

That was when I met Danny. Danny Golden. Actually, I think his last name was Gardenio, or Goldenni, or something like that, but he always insisted upon being Danny Golden. Danny was tall, very thin, and kind of good-looking in that rough-cut way that only a woman could *ever* call handsome. He was getting a little bald right in front, and he had oriental-looking eyes and a long, thin mustache. He eyes twinkled when he smiled,

and I thought his deep, baritone voice was going to melt my knees the first time I heard it.

I really liked Danny. Danny was the manager of a topless-bottomless place that was within walking distance of my apartment. I went in there the first time looking for a job, but he was in no hurry to offer one. I thought he was a nice guy, though he talked like he was from the streets, which, I suppose, he was. All the girls I saw running around seemed to like Danny, too, and I found myself stopping by there a lot in the late afternoons when I had nothing better to do.

He always got me a drink, and it was always on the house. I tried to pay for my liquor, but Danny pretended insult at the suggestion. We talked about a lot of things, and more than once or twice he surprised me with the depth of his wisdom and insight into my situation. He gave me a lot of advice, and I found I was listening. And learning.

The talk *did* get around to a job offer, eventually. No, he didn't want me to dance on stage, though I wasn't sure at first why he was trying to steer me away from it. I think I would have much rather been a dancer than a waitress, and I told him that. But Danny was adamant.

"Sugar," he always used that word with me, and he said it with the 'R' removed, as in 'shugah'. "I'd love to use you on stage. You'd knock them *out* with that cute ass of yours," he patted me there, a friendly pat, "and those really fine tits you got. But the *other* girls out on the floor," meaning the waitresses, "would skin me for sure if I let a new girl take a slot on the stage." He put his arm around me, squeezed my shoulder, "Sugar, you got to earn your spot up there in the lights."

He always glamorized the job the dancers did. He made it seem important, as if you'd reached the pinnacle of your career. Personally, I didn't see it that way. They were up off the floor where the cigarette smoke was thicker, and they were shaking their tits (and everything else), bare-assed, for a living, night-after-night. The girls 'on the floor' got to keep their pubes hidden in black tap pants and sheer tights, and although they ruined their poor feet shagging drinks, I was told the tips were excellent. In all honesty, I wasn't that interested in working in a topless place. And it wasn't the nudity, either. I relayed that to Danny, who said he understood.

"Sure, sugar, I understand," he said, but he didn't elaborate. He only smiled, eyes twinkling, "You can believe I don't want no one working here who don't want to. You got to be *happy* 'bout what you do." He put his long, thin, wiry arm around my rib cage. "Sugar, a pretty girl like you don't *got* to do nothing you don't *wanna* do." I felt him cop a feel along the side of my right boob, "If you don't wanna wait tables—you don't wait

tables. Whatever you wanna do, you can *do* it." Except, apparently, dance naked. Something about it sounded like fun. He went on, "But I do got a job for you, here in the club." Waiting tables? I asked, and started to turn him down, but he cut me off. "No, unless it's what you wanna do. It ain't, is it?"

I pulled out a cigarette. No, but damn it! I said, what do you think I've been doing for the past two years? He didn't reply immediately. He seemed to be waiting for something to fall into place that only he could sense. When I put the cigarette in my mouth, his lighter instantly came out and he lit it for me. I puffed, agitated, a few minutes.

Finally, giving me a calculated, measured look he said, "Right, right," and he copped another feel, this one more obvious than the first. "Ain't it *time* to move on?" I didn't understand what he was driving at, and I told him as much. "I ain't drivin' at nothin'!" He squeezed me tightly, right breast fully in hand, and I thought my ribs would crack. That boy was stronger than he looked! "I'm talkin' 'bout you bein' my assistant. Since I met you I seen how smart you are. I need someone smart like you to keep things running when I ain't here." You're kidding, I told him. I took a sip of my drink, the alcohol and nicotine combining to give me a good, warm buzz.

"I ain't kiddin'. No way." His hand cradled my boob, gently, but like velvet iron. "You just missed my last assistant. She left just 'fore you came by the first time." He nodded, smiled, "She's now managing her own club, just like me." He winked, conspiratorially. "If you're good at managing a successful club like this," he waved his free arm around, then pointed at himself, "like *I* am, you can make *big* money, sugar. Big money." He whispered to me, "Big money." And I felt his fingertips massage my nipple. I had to repress a shudder of excitement—true sexual desire—that suddenly welled up as he coaxed my erect, throbbing nipple into tingling, almost delicious pain. Big money sounded good. No, it sounded wonderful! All I wanted to know then, after a pitch like that, was just exactly *how much* 'big money' was he offering me?

"How much you makin' now, sugar?" He released his grip on my boob, reached in his pocket and pulled out—I swear—the largest wad of bills I'd ever seen. He began peeling them off—\$50's and \$100's—as if he were going to hand the money to me right then. I had to tell him I was unemployed, though. Making *nothing*. "Don't matter, sugar. How much do you *wanna* be makin'?" He handed me a pile of bills. Must have been \$500 or \$600, at least. I was so amazed I couldn't bring myself to do anything but hold the pile of money in my hand. What's this for? I asked, incredulous. He replied, eyes twinkling, "If you take the job, it's your first

week's paycheck. Most of the girls around here get paid in cash."

It was a *lot* of money. And it was \$800, to be exact. I couldn't see him paying me \$800 a week straight off the street. I didn't have any experience managing a nightclub. I was very, very young, and lastly, I wondered what a guy like Danny Golden would want for his \$800. But I didn't ask him about that. I *couldn't* ask him. In my mind was the fear that if I questioned his motives or his generosity he would just yank back all the money he'd just given me. And then I'd be back out on the street again with nothing to show for it. Money doesn't last, and *my* money was nearly gone. So I took the job. I didn't know what kind of job being Danny's 'assistant' was, but I was going to be doing it starting the following morning.



Suzanne stayed away a long time at college. She found she had a desire to become politically active, so she started working for the reelection drive of a city councilwoman—a friend, as they say—and she only attended the university part-time. Eventually I got used to being alone, at home. Sure, both mother and father were there, but I think father did his best to ignore me. I wasn't as 'smart' as Bill; I wasn't as athletic as Paul. But, I suppose, to him I was still better than Suzanne.

My interest in playing music completely turned father off. The friends I used to bring over to practice in my room (over the garage and away from the rest of the house), were generally *not* welcome in the house proper. He actually *told* me once that we couldn't come through the house on our way to and from our practices. I guess I was fortunate that we had a back stairway behind the garage that led up to my room. My friends, though, pretended to 'understand' the restriction. We joked about it, often, and they tried to make my father's rejection of me seem 'normal,' somehow. Some of them, perhaps, had felt rejected by their own families, as well.

I played the drums. My best friend, Tom Germaine, was the bass player. The two of us were the backbone of the group, and we played together almost as if we were one person. Still do. He *always* seemed to anticipate exactly what I was going to do, and I always seemed to know just what he was going to do, as well. Guitar players have come, and guitar players have gone. Some have been good, some only average, but none have ever played with us as together as we play.

Suzanne's involvement with the city councilwoman didn't last more than a couple of years. They fell out, as sometimes happens, and Suzanne threw herself into school again to try to finish as quickly as possible. Amazingly, she did finish school, and came back home to Atlanta. She was twenty-five, I was a freshman in high school, and we were just like the 'long lost brother and sister' made so popular in the plots of old movies. She lived at home awhile with mother, father and me, but my parents still wanted to treat her as a teenager—as they treated me—and she fought with them over a lot of things like curfews, her choice of friends—her clothes. They fought over really stupid things that Suzanne felt were her choices to make, as indeed they were. What I think, is that my parents (father, mostly) really didn't want her living there, and were trying to get rid of her. Well, it finally worked, and she found her own apartment and moved out, again. And I was left alone, again, to do the suffering over it.

Suzanne had become estranged from our parents—and from me again—and I couldn't do anything about it, such as move in with Suzanne. I wanted to, and even Suzanne thought it was a good idea. Actually, what she thought was a good idea was to *get me out of there!* And so did I, particularly—and *still* do—but my father wouldn't have any of it. It was simply, you're too young ... you're just a child ... and you're our responsibility. Never mind that Suzanne was an adult, and cared for me—loved me—and wanted to see me get out of a bad situation. But, it ended up as my tough luck. Sorry, for you we have *nothing!*

I tried to visit her as often as possible. It was difficult because my father, again, strenuously objected to my taking the bus over to Suzanne's apartment. It's too far ... you never come home when we ask you ... we *don't* know what kind of friends she has ... blah, blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera ... et cetera. He once even said he thought she was a bad influence on me. Imagine! *My* older sister, who had been my baby-sitter when I was a small child; who'd fixed my lunches in the summer while mother was out playing tennis; who'd taken me to the emergency room and out for an ice cream cone when I cut my fucking hand! ... she was supposed to be a *bad influence?!?* I patently disregarded his opinion of Suzanne, of me, of *everything* after that. He was the original prick bastard son-of-a-bitch, if ever there was one. I don't think there's any doubt about it, he fucked us all up, a lot. Bill, Paul, and mother just haven't got around to admitting it yet.



Danny paid a lot of attention to me the first few days at the club. He showed me many things about how to run the club. How to open up and lock up; how to make drinks; payday procedures; raid procedures. I thought it was going to be an interesting job, but after a few weeks of doing nothing but tending bar, wiping down tables, sweeping the floor and watching the door, I was beginning to think he really wanted me for something *other* than as his assistant. Actually, it was all the lavish attention he gave me that tipped me off.

He was always following me around. While I worked, Danny would be leaning up against a table, leaning up against the bar, leaning up against me. He was always touching me. It's not that I don't *like* being touched; it's that he was very familiar with me, and in time the familiarity increased to the point where I found myself actually getting nervous every time he came around. And he came around a lot. If I bent over to pick something up, he had his hands on my ass. He would put both his hands on my hips, from behind, and rock me backward and forward so that I would lose my balance and then he'd have to hold me up just to keep me from falling on my face. If I stood at the bar by myself, maybe smoking a cigarette and having a scotch, Danny couldn't be far away. Pretty soon he'd have his arm around me, fingers slipping inside the waistband of my jeans, pulling my T-shirt out and touching my bare belly, his hand sliding up, like a snake, to squeeze my boobs, tweak my nipples, anything.

As much as possible I tried to ignore him. I don't know why I never objected, vocally, but I guess I was taught not to talk back to my elders. Danny had to be at least thirty-five, and I guess he qualified as my 'elder'. I never pulled his hands away, never tried to let him know I was uncomfortable—nervous—that I really wanted to be left alone. It's possible my lack of strong objection encouraged him. Maybe he wouldn't have taken 'no' for an answer under *any* circumstances, but there's little doubt I ever said anything to stop him.

I went to him one day, after I had worked in the club about two months, with the intention of quitting. At least that's what I started out to do. He must have sensed I was unhappy about something, because that day he strangely kept his distance and was nicer than ever. I was still determined to tell him how I felt, and to quit, but before I could screw up my courage to do it ...

"Sugar," he *still* used that name with me, "I think you're the best lookin' thing around this place." I was stopped cold, suddenly. "I just can't keep my hands off you." No shit, Sherlock. "It's so bad, in fact, that I can't have you around this place no more." What? Was I being *fired*? I know I was planning to quit, but being fired was not what I had in mind. He allayed my fears, though, somewhat. "You're real good at what you do around here, and I hate—really *hate*—that I'm so goddamned attracted to you. It'd be better if you weren't so cute, if you know what I mean."

I wasn't sure I knew what he meant. All the girls around the place were pretty, some of them, I thought, much prettier than me. But regardless, I wanted to know what he was talking about, so I asked him.

He replied, "I want to see you on a more personal level, sugar," he cleared his throat, "if it's all right with you."

I didn't know what to say. Danny was older—he was a *man*. I still thought of boys as just—*boys*—and I couldn't see a man such as Danny, dating a girl such as myself. Never mind the age difference, I felt he was plainly and completely out of my league. And after some more confused moments of thought, that was what I told him.

He smiled. "Let *me* worry about that, sugar." His arm went around me, but he didn't go for the boob. "If you go out with me, just once, I think you'll see that you ain't out of my league, at all."

I had *no* idea.

But what was it he said? That he couldn't have me working there anymore? I thought I had heard him say something like that, and I was still scared I was losing my job.

"It's true, I'm sorry to say, but I can't have you workin' here no more." I expressed my unhappiness at becoming unemployed. "Don't sweat it, sugar," he assured me, "if you need money, I'll give it to ya, no problem." But I didn't want his handout. I didn't want to find out what he *really* wanted, and I didn't want to owe him anything, either. And I told him that, too. "You won't owe me a thing," he countered in response. "Money ain't no problem. I got *lotsa* money, more'n I need, and if you go out with me, you can have as much as you want." He thought a moment. "In fact, you can *keep* your 'salary' here at the club. Just don't show up for work. I want you rested up for when we go out on the town." He grinned. "Sleep till noon—pamper yourself."

It sounded too good to be true, and suspiciously so. Why, if I saw it and knew what it was, did I not even *try* to get to the bottom of it? Why did I not find out what he really wanted from me? Now, it's so simple. My past speaks for itself, and I have no one to blame but myself. But at the time, I was all dazzled and caught up in the heady excitement of dating a

real man—a man with money. Money he wanted to spend on *me*. I thought I was finally over being poor and not having very much, and that I had truly made it in the big city. I was trying to live that dream of adoration and success I've had many times, and the taste of that dream suddenly coming true clouded my mind and shielded me from the truth. Now, I'm ashamed of what I've been. I have to ask for forgiveness for the things I've done—the *wrong* things I've done—and it shames me.

Please forgive me.



I was nervous that evening when I walked up the two flights of stairs to Kerry's apartment. After my phone conversation with her, earlier, I had been very busy fantasizing over how well our date was going to go. She was beautiful, she was witty, and she seemed to like me. As near as I could tell, it couldn't have been a better combination of factors leading toward a success in the date department.

I tried the doorbell, but it didn't seem to work. So, I knocked instead. There was no answer after the first few moments of waiting, so I knocked again. Nothing, again. Damn, it was just after seven-thirty. I was right on time, and my excitement and anticipation of a good first date were already beginning to wane. The more I knocked, the more deflated I became. Finally, just about the time I was ready to give up, there came sounds from inside, but my sudden relief turned to apprehension when it occurred to me I might have the wrong apartment.

I heard some noises at the door, just inside. Then a muffled voice. I wasn't sure I heard it right, so I inanelly said, "Hello?" Then I heard the voice more plainly.

"Go away." It sounded female, almost recognizable, and it sounded as though it came through stifled sobs. I heard her sniff back a plugged nose. "Please go away."

The voice almost seemed familiar. "Kerry?" I timorously ventured. "Is that you?" My fear was that I had found the wrong apartment, and my hope was that this voice that *sounded* like the voice I had heard on the phone about an hour and a half ago wasn't one Kerry MacDonald.

She didn't respond immediately. I waited. Then, in a small voice of despair, I heard her say, "Yes." I was relieved I had found the right apartment, but quickly becoming worried.

"What's wrong?" I waited a moment. "Kerry? What's wrong? Can I

come in? It's me, Marc. Marc Huffman." I sincerely hoped she had not forgotten me. I know my fear was an insane, irrational one, but it's one I've had before.

I got no reply from the door. The silent moments stretched on for some minutes. I stood there outside the door, in an open hallway where the breeze blew by, waiting for some reply, and also fearing the reply when it would finally come. I was, somehow, certain a reply was coming, if only I had the patience and perseverance to wait for it. Then, after what seemed like more than five minutes of tense silence, my persistence paid off. Marginally.

"Go away. *Please?*" It was a plea, not an order.

I wasn't sure how to proceed. On the one hand, I didn't want to become part of whatever problems she might have, but on the other I just couldn't see myself *actually going away if she really needed help*. And it was my need to help her that kept me there even when she was telling me to leave.

I decided to take the tough approach, and foolishly. "**Kerry! Open the door!**"

"Get fucked, asshole," was the prompt reply.

So I backed down. "Please? If something's wrong, I can help." Sure, I knew how much I could help. Probably not very much. I got no immediate reply. Instead, I heard crying. Crying has always melted me, but this time it also made me more determined. "I'm *not* going to go away," I told her. "I'm going to stand here until you open the damn door and let me in."

"Get fucked!"

"I'm serious. Kerry, *please*, open the door!"

There was a short silence, then, "I don't want you to see me. Please go away."

Now it was my turn, "Get fucked, yourself. Kerry, open the goddamn door!" I was getting angry with her, but was still determined not to just go away and leave her. Then, something was happening on the other side of the door, and I had some reason for hope. She had apparently stopped refusing, and I expected the door to open any moment. Well, I wasn't wrong. But I can't say I expected to see what I saw.

Kerry was standing there in the open doorway. She was holding a light, blond silk robe closed in front of her, and indeed, she had been crying. Her face, though it appeared to be made up, was puffy and bruised-looking, and her mascara had run, and run so badly that her cheeks were streaked with dark brown stains. Her lower lip looked twice the size I remembered it to be. The dark eye shadow made it difficult to

tell, but she definitely had a swollen, blackened right eye.

I was so completely unprepared for the sight in front of me that I just stood there staring at her with my mouth gaping open, and a totally shocked expression on my face. She just stared at me, as well. It seemed that by my seeing her, she thought I would, in fact, go away. But I didn't understand the situation—so how *could* I just leave? She looked like she really needed someone's help, and I just knew I would be the only someone she saw that night who would be in a position to render it.

I didn't have to ask to come in. After a few airless moments she just turned away from the door and I was drawn in by the vacuum. I must have closed the door behind me, but I really don't remember it.

The apartment was nice. I do remember that much. The furniture was expensive, and there was a lot of it. The carpet was wool, and thick, and I could see the indentations left by her stocking feet as she walked away, silently. I was inexorably pulled after her, but I still hadn't found the voice to speak, yet.

Her hair was long, and shone with a red-gold fire, but it was very disheveled and looked as though she had lain on it. I continued to follow her, still mesmerized by the whole unfathomable turn of events, as she disappeared around the corner of the next room. I heard the clinking of glass as I rounded the doorway, and there we were, in the kitchen, and she was at the counter pouring something into a heavy, cut crystal glass. It took only a moment to notice it was a bottle of scotch from which she poured.

She never turned around. Instead, she took a cigarette out of a pack lying on the counter near her, and retrieving a lighter from the shelf above her head, lit it. After a long, deep drag, she picked up the heavy glass and downed the liquor in a single gulp. Then she reached for the bottle to pour another one.

"I don't know what to say," I said, finding my voice but not knowing what else I could possibly utter.

She thought of something, though. "Pretty *fucking* nice, don'cha think?" She spoke indistinctly, back to me, the combination of the swollen lip and the booze working against her.

I knew better than to respond, but watched her back as she poured another drink and drained that one, as well. I didn't know how many she had had, but I figured I hadn't seen her first—*or* her second. Probably not even her fourth or fifth.

"You want a drink?" She was definitely drunk, since her speech was noticeably slurred. I think I said no. "Cigarette?" She held the pack up, back still to me, perhaps thinking she was being hospitable, or something.

I didn't normally smoke, but I think I was about ready to start, anyway. I turned it down, though. She made ready to pour another drink. "Too bad. Good booze; good smokes; maybe a good fuck, too." She turned toward me for the first time, then. "You wanna fuck me, maybe?" There was a certain, derogatory emphasis on the word 'fuck'. I didn't like the implication.

Under the circumstances, though, I couldn't imagine something further from my mind, so I didn't even try to hazard a response. I don't think she expected one, either. She started crying, then, as she listened to what she had said. It was like the supreme joke to her. It meant that not even *she* could conceive of someone wanting to make love to her under these circumstances, and the thought of that rejection made her want to cry, then made her give in—to really cry.

It wasn't fair. Just when I finally had gotten the nerve to call this girl, and then when she had been so cheerful and friendly on the phone—to walk into ... *this!* ... well, it just wasn't fair. But, standing there and looking at her and her obvious injuries, I realized things had been *so much* more unfair to her that I felt a genuine pity and empathy toward her.

The moment was a hard and painful one. She was facing me, literally, and I had to face her; face what was going on; face what was happening. She had let me in, and her eyes seemed to ask for my help, though all she could do otherwise was stand in front of me, crying silently, with her expensive cream silk robe hanging open, and take slow, deep, careful puffs off her cigarette. It was unquestionably a look of hurt and pain that flowed from her darkened, wet, mascara-stained eyes, but also I saw a look of pleading, of childlike need that shocked and shamed me into making a decision.

I finally got the strength to speak. "What happened?" I asked her. The whole situation seemed to border on the surreal, and not for the first time did I feel I was in a movie, a *film noire* of the most melodramatic sort. But all thoughts of melodrama aside, her situation appeared real, and serious, and I feared the role I might have to play before the night was over. Still, when I got no direct reply, I repeated the question, "What happened?"

She stopped crying then, sighed heavily, and seemed almost to laugh. "Got beat up." She spit the words out almost matter-of-factly. "What the fuck does it look like?"

"No," I said. "What happened? How did you get beat up? I don't understand."

"You *wouldn't*." She took a drag off the cigarette, exhaled slowly. "It don't matter, I can't see you anyway."

"Can't see me? What? Why not?" I was lost. "I don't understand."

Not at all.

She took another puff. "Can't have a real date. Can't go out just for fun. Can't see *you*." She gestured angrily with the stub of her cigarette, "Don'cha see? He won't let me have any fun. Can't have any fun or he hits me."

"He? Who?"

She thought a moment, perhaps considering whether to answer, or not. "Never mind," she finally said. She took a last drag, threw the butt in the sink. I heard it sizzle. "Look, you gotta go," she said, her head shaking from side-to-side, her expression completely devoid of hope. "He might come back. Bad if he found you here. Bad for you," she pointed at me, then at herself, "and more bad for me." Her eyes welled with tears, again. "Please, *just go*."

I was afraid, then, of the truth.



I stopped going to the club so often after Danny 'fired' me. I was both flattered and amazed that a man such as he was interested in a young girl, such as me. I didn't consider myself especially attractive, or especially talented at the things girls can sometimes be talented at, so it was very difficult to get used to being Danny's girlfriend.

He spent a *lot* of money on me. I didn't know where he got it all, even if the club was as successful as he claimed. In my stint as his 'assistant' I never saw more than an average amount of bar business. Saturday nights were jammed, but the numbers just didn't add up to me. I tried to ask him about the money, but his quick (too quick) look of anger stifled any further attempt. I learned fast that *money* was the one thing I didn't question around Danny.

Actually, there were several things you just didn't ask, money being only one. You didn't ask him where he went; where he was going; when he would be back. If he disciplined one of the girls, and I saw it a few times, you *never* asked him why or what for. A lot of subjects were strictly off-limits. But if you learned to keep your mouth shut, Danny could be—and often was—an extremely charming and animated host and companion.

Our first few dates were memorable. We went to some expensive restaurants, even a touring Broadway show, and he bought me dresses and coats, and lacy silk and sheer undergarments to wear on our nights

out. It seemed, in the first couple of weeks, as though we were going out every night, but it wasn't long before things tapered off, some, to a more usual two or three nights a week.

I was completely and utterly swept off my feet. I know it sounds trite and cliché, but I can't describe with words the feeling that come any closer to that special feeling of being carried away by the moment, by the whirlwind of events, by the flash, the charm, the 'velvet steeliness' that was quintessentially Danny. Just a boy from the streets, Danny was often rough, but Danny also could be so smooth and slick that you couldn't find a handhold. I *so much* wanted a handhold on Danny Golden, and I may have even thought I had one, at one time.

Of course, he and I had a physical relationship. It seemed only natural that if he took me out, fed and entertained me, I should reciprocate with something. It was no problem. Danny was strong, he was experienced, and I was excited to be loved by such a strong man.

There really was never any doubt, even on our first date. We went out late, around midnight. He had a steak, I had lobster, and when we got into his car to go home he established how things would be.

"Take off your panties," he told me. He was smiling, but his smile ended just below his eyes. He had his arm around me, fingers lazily stroking my shoulder. "Give 'em to me." I was surprised at his request, but not shocked. In fact, it made my heartbeat accelerate, and I got a little warm inside.

I didn't comply immediately. Instead, I batted my eyelashes alluringly, feigning some objection to his request, and he played along, becoming more amorous and affectionate in his attentions. I was tickled to be the object of such affection, and I wanted to excite him as much as he was exciting me. My playing around worked, and by the time I got around to finally slipping my panties off my hips, I think he was about ready to chew them off himself.

Ceremoniously, I presented them to him. The thought of being uncovered under my dress, and vulnerable, did anything but turn me off. Danny accepted my underpants with a satisfied smile, then promptly tossed them out the window. We were still in the parking lot, and I noticed a couple walk by the car. Both the man and the woman looked down at my panties lying on the pavement, and though they shared a look over their discovery, they avoided eye contact with either of us as they passed.

Danny started the car. I snuggled close to him as he backed out of our parking space. Once on the street he casually placed his hand on my leg, and as we drove up the street toward my apartment he slowly and lightly

caressed the inside of my thigh. My dress was pretty short, and it didn't take any effort at all for him to work his hand all the way up between my legs. With a forceful thrust, his finger found me. I was nervous, then, a little, but I tried to relax and just let the situation develop. His hand was active, and he was pretty skillful, and when we got back to my apartment, I was very, very ready to let him do *anything* he wanted.

I think for the first time, ever, I felt truly like a woman. And though Danny controlled *everything* when we were out together, I thought I controlled *everything* once we turned out the lights. It was new, *very exciting*, and a most lovely, romantic affair, for a time.



I stayed in the apartment with Kerry, drunk as she was, even with the vague threat of 'someone coming back' always present in my mind. I guess I just couldn't quite believe I could become the recipient of a violent act should I continue to hang in there as I had earlier decided. Kerry had obviously been hit, and from the look of her face, several times, and *hard*. But somehow it didn't seem quite *real* to me. It should have been very real, and very frightening if nothing else, but I seemed to detach mentally from the thought that anyone could ever hit *me* like that. Again. It just wasn't going to happen.

Kerry was indeed, very drunk. She should not have been coherent, but the level of her clarity surprised me, even so. She clearly wanted to continue drinking until she passed out, but I eventually pulled her away from the bottle and steered her into the living room, where I could try to get a handle on things.

She barely cooperated. She hadn't numbed the pain totally, yet, and she resented my interference with that pursuit. I needed to talk to her—some way, somehow—but if she passed out drunk it wasn't going to be possible. But I was sober, she was plastered, so I won the contest.

She flopped onto the couch, and slid over so she was lying on her side, eyes closed. I sat next to her on the side away from her head, and tentatively shook her by the hip. I was a bit nervous at touching her, but I felt I *had* to act. My shaking roused her, and she turned only her eyes up to me. I'm sure the view wasn't very clear.

"Oh, you're *still* here." She sounded almost disappointed to discover it, though it had only been moments since I had coaxed her away from the kitchen. I simply stared at her. She objected, "Don't look at me that way."

"What way?" I needed to draw her out. "I'm not looking at you any particular way. I'm just looking." I *was* looking, but I wasn't understanding anything.

"Go *away*. Leave me alone." She closed her eyes. "Don't get involved with me. I'm bad luck." Her words rang as irony, not truth.

"You know, you're probably right."

Her eyes came open, her head turned toward me, a little. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Hey, *you* said it. I just agreed with you." I got no response.

I was thinking, what business was it of mine to get involved here? She was living in this situation—if that's what it could be called—and if she wasn't doing anything about it, then why should I? But at the same time, my gut told me that physical abuse—violence—wasn't the right thing, wasn't the appropriate response in *any* situation, whether or not she did anything to escape it or avoid it. I could no more picture hitting someone, a man, a woman—*anyone!*—than I could picture what she could have said or done to legitimately provoke a blow to the face that could blacken an eye. And she definitely *had* a black eye.

Just the mere thought of someone *hitting her on the face*, of someone slapping her hard enough to cause her lip to bleed, made me want to return the violence, multiplied, until they understood the seriousness of the insult they had leveled. Insult? I was ashamed to be a man. It was an insult to *all* men. All of us. If we're so strong, what could someone like Kerry MacDonald *possibly* have done to us to warrant such an unfair, violent reaction? What she represented to me were the gentle things in life. The soft, kind, playful things that help us forget how hard and unforgiving the world is. She represented the things that need to be held, treasured, protected from the world.

One look in her pretty green eyes, red and swollen though they were, and I knew I *needed* to protect her. Not only for me, but for all of us. Treasures are rare and valuable, and if we waste them and destroy them so casually, we show we really haven't learned anything for all the 'civilization' we think we've built. I was angry that this one small treasure should be wasted.

I shook her again since her eyes had drifted closed. She was nearly to the stage of falling asleep—or passing out. I knew if she did pass out, there was going to be little else I could do. If that happened, all that was left for me was to wait for her to wake up, and the longer I stayed the more risky I deemed the situation would become. Slight though my apprehension was, I *still* recognized there was a violent and abusive element on the loose, and I specifically didn't want it directed toward me.

I didn't want it directed toward Kerry, either. At that moment, especially *not at Kerry*.

"Kerry, wake up." I shook her, again, more insistently. "Wake up." Then she was awake again, but sluggish when she moved. "I don't want to leave you here." I was speaking from my heart.

"What? I live here."

"Bullshit! Do you want him to hit you again?" I can only assume that she didn't, but she was surprisingly long in replying.

But she did, very softly, "No."

"Well, then ..."

"If I leave, he'll find me. He *always* finds me ... always takes me back ... always the same. Can't leave ... can't ... can't ..." She seemed to fade out, but struggled to stay awake.

"I can make it so he can't find you." I was foolishly certain of my ability to protect her. But really, money is the most effective insulator in the world. I never cared that much for it—there's always too much hassle following it around—but in that moment, I was *very* glad I had it to use. But I don't think she believed me. "Don't worry about it," I explained, "we can get you far enough away that he will not find you. You'll be safe." She eyed me unsteadily. "I know you don't have any reason to trust me," I gauged her reaction to my words, "but I'm telling you the truth. I *can* get you out of here. Just come."

I think she wanted to say no, but she held her words and seemed to think—in what must have been a very bleary and confused way—of just what she should do about it. I wasn't sure I could trust her judgment, under the circumstances, and was prepared to insist more strenuously that she leave the apartment with me, but it wasn't necessary.

"OK," she nodded, and her head seemed to clear, fractionally. "I gotta get outta here. *Can't stay*." Unsteadily, she started to sit up. I had to help her.

Her shoulders were very warm, almost hot, and I suddenly noticed the strength of presence that she held for me. With my hand on her arm, she seemed *very there*. It was a strange sensation to the point that it felt eerie, preternatural, as if some aura enveloped her that only I could detect. It was strong, too. Like strong, spectral electricity. And I was taken aback by the sensation.

"Clothes," was all she said, though, breaking the connection. I guess she meant she needed to get dressed.

Well, to that I would have agreed.

I was amazed she could even function. In my presence, alone, I know she had consumed about five doubles of scotch, and with that much high-

proof alcohol I would have been under the table. Kerry, on the other hand, was merely very drunk.

She didn't take long to get herself together. I don't think she had thought of taking anything, but I suggested we could probably afford to fill a suitcase or two if we hurried. So without further comment she pulled two very nice Hartmann bags out of the back of the closet. I took one over to a dresser.

The first two drawers contained a bunch of stuff that looked very much like sex toys, and for various reasons I elected *not* to pack any of them. The next drawer down contained clothes, though, so I stuffed handfuls of bras and panties into the bag. Further down, I found a drawer mostly full of jeans, and below that, one full of different kinds of skirts and some casual-looking blouses. I didn't have room for everything, so I took a representative sample of every kind of thing I found (except the sex toys), and in so doing filled the bag completely.

Kerry was grabbing dresses and such out of the closet, and was sincerely attempting to stuff them in her suitcase, hangers and all. I had to intervene, and was pretty ruthless in deciding what was to go, and what wasn't. She took no particular offense at my 'help', though, and returned to the closet to throw pairs of shoes at me. There was obviously way, way too much of everything to fit such a small portion of the remaining bag, but I sorted and packed, and before I completely ran out of space, selected a few pairs of what looked like comfortable, everyday shoes and sandals (sandals pack very economically) and zipped the bag closed. It and its companion fairly bulged at the seams.

Kerry was just standing there in her robe, surveying the room and looking around as if she was trying to decide what to pack next. Now that we were moving, I was hesitant to slow down and let any of our fine momentum slip away. I snapped her back to the present.

"Get dressed!" I framed it as an order, hoping she'd comply without question.

"Wait." She seemed to agree, but looked around, frowning. For what, I couldn't guess.

I couldn't see messing around anymore. "Let's go, girl. Get dressed!" I found a pair of jeans laying on the bed, so I threw them at her.

She tried to catch them, but missed. Then she nearly fell over when she leaned down to pick them up. After retrieving them, she decided she didn't want to wear jeans, after all, and went to the dresser I had previously rifled through to find something a little closer to what she had in mind. After some minutes of fumbling around in the lower two drawers, she became convinced that the particular article of clothing she

wanted to wear simply wasn't in her dresser, anymore.

"Where's my short jeans skirt?" she asked, holding up a washed and faded blue denim jacket. "I got the jacket here. Where's the fuckin' skirt?"

"In the suitcase, I think." I pointed toward the bag in question, on the floor next to the door. She started to go for it, but I held her back. "Forget it. It's packed, already. Wear something else."

She considered my request. "OK," she said as she bent to rummage through the dresser, again.

"Hurry up!" I was getting more impatient.

"Aw-right! Gimme a fuckin' minute!" She threw things out onto the floor. Skirts, pants, jeans and the occasional bra or pair of panties littered the floor at my feet. I wasn't sure whether to be perturbed, or amused. To be truthful, I didn't see anything about the situation that could even remotely be called 'amusing,' anyway. So I was perturbed, instead. But not that it did me much good.

In a few minutes we were finally 'ready'. Kerry had dressed (as I had watched) in a pair of white jeans that were pretty tight (I know, since I had observed her struggles to get into them), a coral pink sleeveless blouse, and the faded denim jacket she seemed to like so much. She couldn't find the particular pair of running shoes she wanted, but eventually she settled for a slightly worn pair of 'last year's model'. She *was* wearing a bra and panties under the robe, and I have to admit it was a bit 'unusual' seeing a near total stranger prance (stumble?) around the room in her underwear. She didn't seem to care at all that I was there to watch, which I found to be even more interesting.

The two bags were no fun to lug to the car. As I was struggling to lift them up into the trunk, I asked if she had a car around anywhere. She only said, 'I used to,' and that seemed to be the end of that. But I didn't relax, though, until we were both seated in my car and I was backing out of the parking lot. It meant we had safely made our getaway, though I really didn't know where we would go from there.

As I guided the car down the street toward—somewhere—she leaned her head against the window, and in a moment was fast asleep. Passed out, maybe, from the booze she'd drunk, but asleep.

I was pretty much operating in total automatic overload mode by that point, and I don't know what—or if—I thought anything about my first experience with this woman. The only place we *could* go, I guess, was my place. The apartment (my condo, actually) wasn't all that far from Kerry's midtown apartment, and the trip only took fifteen minutes.

I couldn't believe it. It was only about nine o'clock and our date was essentially over. She was passed out drunk in the seat next to me; a pair of

overstuffed suitcases was in the back; we were missing dinner reservations at a pretty nice place; my gate card wouldn't work the first five or six times I tried to use it. The guard came over after he saw someone was apparently stuck at the gate. Thankfully, he recognized me. But even if he hadn't, I suppose my resident's card would have gotten us inside the premises.

Kerry had to be helped from the car. I was finally able to rouse her with some effort, but she was unsteady and not fully conscious, so I had to put my arm around her to help her walk to the elevator lobby. Once again, I felt the electricity of her touch. I had to leave her leaning against the wall so I could go back to the car for her suitcases. As I returned to the elevators, she seemed a little more awake and aware, and though she didn't say anything, she pulled the hair out of her eyes and sniffed back her runny nose. I considered them both excellent signs of life, considering the circumstances.

Once we were inside the apartment and the door was shut and locked, Kerry seemed fully disposed to make herself completely at home. She found the remote control to the TV, turned it on, and deposited herself on my couch in front of its large, glowing blue face. And she hadn't said a word since we left her apartment.

I was hungry, though. I watched after her as she went for the TV, but decided that for the moment I would be more usefully employed if I fixed something to eat. It wasn't very late, so I figured I had time enough to fix myself pretty much whatever I wanted.

There was a frozen pizza in the freezer, so I cranked up the oven and got me a beer out of the refrigerator. While I waited for the oven to heat, I joined Kerry on the couch.

She looked at me unsteadily, and her eyes seemed to have trouble focusing. "C'n I have a beer?" she asked—more a mumble. She sounded very *drunk*.

"I suppose so," I sighed, "but I would have thought you'd have had enough already." I headed into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

"*Thirsty*," was all she said.

"I got Coke."

"Like beer, better." She gave me an unreadable look, and seemed to think a moment. "Oh, just fuckin' forget it. Don't bother."

But I was already returning with the beer she had requested. I extended it toward her, but she just looked dumbly up at me, and waved her hand in front of her face.

"It's OK. Don't bother." She looked away.

My hand stayed out, *with* the beer in it. "Take it." She made no move. "Look," I said, "I won't bug you about the beer if you can find a way to be nice to me." I shook the bottle, "So just take it."

Feigning reluctance, she did. Amazingly, the beer found its way to her mouth, and she took a sip and turned back toward the TV. "Deal," was all she said in thanks. Reluctant myself, I returned to my seat next to her on the couch. It was a very uncomfortable moment.

We watched TV awhile in silence, and in that silence I was growing more and more irritated and agitated by her drunkenness, her indifference toward me, and her general lack of communication. I'm not sure, though, what I was expecting her to do or say, considering the shape she was in. She seemed awake, possibly alert, but totally withdrawn into herself, apparently not wanting to do anything but watch the damn TV. Of course, there wasn't *anything* I could do about it. I was essentially paralyzed by her presence, and since I felt so *odd* about it, all I could do was sit there, tense and angry, and watch her watch TV.

In a few minutes the oven was ready, so I put the pizza in. Still nothing out of *the girl*. Fifteen minutes later the pizza was done. Still no word. I brought the pizza to the living room, with another beer for each of us, and we ate the pizza. Still, I was waiting for some kind of answer to a question I had not even gotten around to asking yet.

After the pizza was gone, and she had downed most of her third beer, she finally turned toward me, and amazingly she looked like she wanted to talk. I merely waited, silent as well.

"Good pizza," she said, and smiled, very slightly.

"You're welcome," I mumbled, not very satisfied.

She seemed to consider the import of my response. It took awhile. "Don't feel so good," she finally said, and touched her lower lip and eye with her hand to illustrate what she meant. "Hurts."

I felt sorry for her, and ashamed, too. "Do you want anything for the pain?"

"Nah," she waved the beer bottle, "got something." A big sigh.

I considered. "Can I ask what happened?" I was foolishly attempting to have a coherent conversation with a drunk person.

She took another sip of her beer, then shook her head. I started to protest, object—whatever—but she stopped me. "Tomorrow. Tired now."

"I've got to *work* tomorrow," I said, but she didn't understand me. "Look ..." I searched for a way to put it "... don't take this personally, or anything, but I'm not sure I can trust you here, alone." She wasn't up to the mental requirements of the question, as evidenced by the blank look

she gave me. "Can I trust you?" I asked, instead. That was an easier question.

"Sure," was her prompt answer.

"You won't just rip me off?" Then she started to see my point. and when she realized what I was driving at, she was suddenly almost to tears, and I was *absolutely* blown away by her abrupt change of mood. I was too long in making the attempt to allay her fears and her tears, and then I did see a tear on her cheek. I hate tears. They *always* break down my resistance, and it's not fair.

"Don't cry," I said, and I was angry. I was worried she might rip me off, then take off. I was worried she would take advantage of me, then shit on me. I was worried I would never see her again if I left her here alone while I went to work. I was worried that since I didn't know her very well, and if I didn't get a hold, and hold onto her while I had the chance, I was going to lose her. I don't think she had any idea of that last worry, but I *know* she understood my lack of trust. And let's face it, there wasn't *anything* she could do in the shape she was in to inspire that trust. There just wasn't that much time left in the evening. Her actions up to that point; the getting smashed; her taciturn nature; her unexplained injuries. All of these combined to put me in a substantial quandary. How was I going to trust her?

"Talk *tomorrow*," she said. I said nothing. She finished, "OK?"

I had to think, so I couldn't answer. She interpreted it as anger, or maybe cruelty on my part.

"**Then fuck you!**" She jumped up and stormed across the room, toward the door. Her emotional blitz blew me away again. What was going on, here?

"Wait a minute!" I said, "Can't I even think for a minute? Jesus! Just cool it a minute. Let me think!"

She stood at the door, arms folded, and waited, swaying ever so slightly. Apparently she was willing to let me have another chance at answering. Nice of her.

It only took a few moments. "Come here," I motioned to her, "sit down. *Relax.*"

Reluctantly, she complied. When she sat down, she was pouting and sullen and refolded her arms under her breasts in the same fashion she had when we first met. I remembered it, and noticed it again. I guess my stare was pretty obvious, because in a few moments she looked down at herself.

She smiled, and unfolded her arms. "Like my boobs?"

I was embarrassed, as before, but this second time didn't knock me

off track. "You have very nice breasts, yes."

"Thanks, buddy," she grinned, unsteadily, but the grin faded in a moment. She changed the subject. "**Fuck it all!** I'll just go back."

It took me a second to realize that the subject had been changed. "Do you *want* to go back?" I asked. I knew the answer.

She cleared her throat, shook her head, "No." She seemed to be close to tears, again.

"I agree." I stood up so I could walk around, something I do sometimes when I need to think. "This whole thing makes me very uncomfortable." I paced around, she followed me unsteadily with her eyes. "I want to help you out, but you got to admit that if you were in my position, you'd be pretty unsure of whether you were doing the right thing, or not." I got no response. Too complicated, I guess. I continued. "I see you're in no shape to be having this discussion, but I don't know what else to do." She just looked at me, eyes closing, little by little. I came over to the couch, grabbed her knee to get her attention, "You know, if I didn't want you to be here, you wouldn't *be here*." She was silent, apparently uncomprehending, and I had run out of things to say, temporarily. I let go of her knee. Then I paced again, thinking, and she again tried to follow my progress with her eyes. I don't know what she was thinking, if anything. I guess I wasn't angry with her, just very undecided.

Well, it wasn't very long before I saw I was being forced into a position I didn't really want to be in. I was going to have to trust her, or put her out. So, it was simple. If I could feel good about putting her out, then that's what I would do. If not, then I was going to have to let her stay here. At least for the night. If I trusted her, and she took advantage of that trust, then she didn't deserve anyone's help. But, on the other hand, I really didn't have any reason *not* to trust her. She was just a girl with some problems, maybe some serious problems, and I was stuck with her now that I had chosen to rescue her. My lack of trust was just my problem, I guess, and I was just going to have to get over it. For the time being, anyway. Yeah, I guess.

"OK," I said, after some minutes of pacing in silence, "I guess I don't have much choice, here." I looked down at her. "Do I?"

She finally seemed to be following me. "Sorry, Johnny," she said.

"You aren't making this any easier, you know," I added, "and don't call me 'Johnny'. My name is Marc."

"Fine, Mr. Marc."

"Look," I said, "I don't see any reason for you not to be nice to me, so I would appreciate it if you would just can the sarcasm."

She shook her head and sighed. But otherwise, no reply.

“What I was saying was, since I have little choice but to let you stay here, then, I would really like for you to be my guest.”

“I can stay?”

“You can stay.”

She smiled at that, and invited me to sit next to her on the couch. I did, and in a few minutes she put her head on my shoulder, and was quickly sound asleep.