

Songs of Sadness, Songs of Love

by

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Acknowledgements

My previous writing experiences as a university professor have been of one mode: expository prose in scholarly contexts. *Songs of Sadness, Songs of Love* is my first attempt at narrative prose. I hope that fact isn't too obvious.

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To my love song, Ruthie.

1

Ryan walked up Cutland Street toward his house, deep in thought with his left hand in the front left pocket of his jeans, his paralytic right arm hanging at his side. He was still thinking about what he and his best friend Tyler West had just finished talking about: school!

School opens next Monday.

If *Returning to School* were a blog title, the host would be a fiendish devil who hates teenagers.

Resumption of school had been their primary but certainly not their favorite conversational topic for the past week. Damn it to hell, Ryan thought! Why does school have to start so soon? They had asked each this question other many times.

More importantly, in addition to signaling the end of summer and its many freedoms, the beginning of school this fall was unique; it signaled moving up the educational ladder from elementary to middle school. Neither Ryan nor Tyler would admit it, but starting at Mark Twain Middle School was a scary, even a chilling idea.

Everything at Mark Twain was going to be different and strange and, moreover, Twain Middle School was huge, four times larger than Ridgeview Elementary School!

Entering a new school seldom comes easily for many kids, but it was especially difficult for Ryan. Mark Twain was a monstrously large building in Ryan's eyes; there would more corridors to navigate, more people, more classes, and more teachers; a teacher for every subject. Every school routine would be new.

Ryan knew, sadly, that the Ridgeview teachers who had helped him over the years would remain at Ridgeview. They were special. He hadn't needed to ask them to help him, thank God; that would've been too embarrassing. The Ridgeview teachers just knew, somehow, when he needed help. Call it educators' intuition.

At Ridgeview they had helped him in the cafeteria by carrying his lunch tray, and by helping him put on his boots in snowy weather, by helping him zip up his winter parka, and by helping him put his winter mitten on his right hand, and the like.

Who would help him at Mark Twain? Not knowing who would assist him with these two-handed jobs made him nervous and

fearful. Embarrassment, just around the corner, was waiting to pounce.

All of the unknowns at Mark Twain meant he'd have to endure, all over again, the excruciating and painful embarrassments of needing, but not wanting to ask for, help with tasks that most of the other students would consider simple.

Ryan knew his right arm made him different from the others in his classrooms at Ridgeview; this difference made him less than normal, he knew. The other students wouldn't know about his fears because he was an ace at hiding them.

As he drew closer to his house, he saw an unfamiliar car in his driveway. It was a big, shiny job; the kind of car he had heard his Dad daydream about. "Someday," his father had said often, usually after having seen a brand new BMW, Cadillac, or some other shiny car drive past. "Someday, we'll have a new car."

Walking up the steps to his front porch, Ryan could hear his mother's voice coming through the top screen of their storm door: "Yes, " she was saying," I'm sure Ryan can handle it. And, I appreciate your sensitivities by coming to discuss Ryan."

What could the *it* be, Ryan was wondering, as he opened the door and entered the living room? There he saw his mother and the driver of the car in his driveway. It was Mr. Higbee, the circulation manager of the *Columbus Chronicle*, the local newspaper Ryan had been selling on the streets of downtown Columbus all summer.

“Mr. Higbee has a regular delivery route for you,” Ryan’s mother said, “and he was just visiting with me about whether you could handle it.” Aha, Ryan thought, now I know what the *it* is.

Mr. Higbee entered the conversation with, “Hi, Ryan; your mother and I were discussing whether your, . . .er . . . your physical circumstance would get in the way . . . er, you know . . . might be an obstacle preventing your being a successful carrier.”

“No sir. There’ll be no problem. I know I can do it. I’m sure I can handle it,” Ryan affirmed.

He wondered silently, What the friggin’ hell are they thinking about?

He had learned how to accomplish any number of tasks using just one good arm: he could shoot both a rifle and a shotgun; he mowed lawns; he taught himself how to tie his shoes; he dressed

himself; he played softball and then, later, baseball in the Columbus Sports and Parks Department's summer programs.

A few of the things he hadn't yet learned how to do were how to tie his necktie before church on Sundays, or how to sharpen his pencil using the manual pencil sharpeners in his elementary school classrooms. These activities required two workable hands.

Given his accomplishments, nevertheless, Ryan thought it was just plain dumb for anyone to question whether he could handle a paper delivery route. How hard could that be?

"I knew you'd say you could manage the job," Mr. Higbee said. "I've watched your 'can do' attitude this past summer. Can you be ready to start the first of the month?"

"I sure can," Ryan said, his readiness and enthusiasm reflected in his voice. As usual, Ryan could disguise any uncertainties.

2

The first day of school began with Ryan's routine breakfast: cereal, milk, orange juice, toast and jelly. Ryan took a larger than normal bite to finish off his toast when he heard Tyler knock on the screen door.

"Coming," Ryan said. He rushed to the door to open it for Tyler.

"Hi, Mrs. Graves," Tyler said to Ryan's mother as he entered the living room, "Hi, Mr. Graves."

"That's a good looking shirt you got there, Tyler," Mrs. Graves replied, "is it new for first day of school?"

"Yeah, my mom got it at Macy's, I think," Tyler reported.

Macy's, Ryan thought! For Pete's sake! Who gives a hot damn where the shirt came from? Ryan believed that no matter what kind of shirt he wore, whether new or old, whether from Macy's, Dillard's, Sears or Wal-Mart, his right arm would mess up the whole look.

Tyler would look good on the first day of school, while Ryan knew he would look like a freak with a skinny right arm more appropriately sized for a five- rather than a ten-year old. He had

hoped that on first day of school the temperature would be cool enough for long sleeve shirts; no such luck, screw it all to hell!

“Guys,” Mr. Graves said, breaking in on Ryan’s thoughts, “behave yourselves today. First impressions are awfully important. You only have one chance for a first impression. Don’t make the teachers think that you’re a couple of goof offs.”

“And Ryan, come straight home after school,” Ryan’s father reminded him, “the *Chronicle* truck with your newspapers is supposed to be here by 4:00 this afternoon.”

“I know, I know,” Ryan replied, wondering why his Dad always thought it necessary to remind him about the obvious.

“Don’t forget your new notebook, either,” Ryan’s mother added.

“Right. Mom.” Ryan said as he grabbed the new black three-ring notebook, then, turning to Tyler “Come on, Ty, let’s get this first day over with.”

Off they went on their way, walking the mile and a half to Mark Twain Middle School, their conversation filled with wonders: “I wonder which Ridgeview kids will be in any of our classes?” “I wonder if Linda Reed (Ryan’s primary love in fifth grade) will be in

any of my classes?” “I hope I have gym class last period so I’ll have plenty of time to shower and put my clothes back on.”

When they arrived at Mark Twain, Ryan was stunned by the size of the crowd of students waiting by the front doors. “Holy shit,” Ryan said to Tyler, “how many hundreds of people go to this school anyway?”

As is usually the case with 11-, 12-, and 13-year olds, the mass of students pressed against the glass doors to Mark Twain came in a disparate, chaotic collection of diverse individuals.

Some were tall, very tall, well over 6-feet in height. On the other hand, some were barely four feet tall. They ranged from the morbidly obese to the anorexic. Some had acne, others didn’t. Some wore braces on their teeth, giving them that tight, pursed-lip smile so common among those who were trying to straighten their teeth but didn’t want any one else to know about it. Some were from countries other than the United States and not only was Mark Twain Middle School a new experience, but the English language was a new experience for them as well.

The older students, especially the eighth graders, were enjoying their seniority. They were loud, bustling about from group

to group, the girls huddling in boy-watching bands, giggling and snickering as only 12- and 13-year old females can. The boys were walking the Back-to-School-Strut, yelling insults at each other, laughing uproariously at each barbed and obviously very clever comment.

The incoming sixth graders exhibited no such bravado. They just stood there, some in small groups, others all by themselves, not yet having learned alternate ways to mask their insecurities on the first day at a new, huge, school.

Finally, a bell rang, and the four glass double-doors opened magically.

Like cattle being herded into sorting chutes, the school year's new student body edged and shuffled slowly into the building, the neophytes being pushed and elbowed to the perimeter of the press of humanity.

Once inside the school building, Ryan retrieved from his backpack the schedule of courses that had been mailed to him earlier. Following the directions included in the packet from Mark Twain, Ryan's first move was to make his way to room 114, his

home base; there, he would meet Mrs. Henderson, his home base teacher.

He would also learn whether any of his friends from Ridgeview would be in the same home base. This knowledge was more important to Ryan than it would be to many at Mark Twain. People he knew were safe; people who didn't know him would stare. He hated stares.

Arriving at the door to room 114, Ryan let out a short gasp. The room was almost full; most of the desks were already taken. Ryan made a quick assessment of the remaining open seats, averted his eyes from the desks to his shoes, then made his way to a vacant desk on the third row by the windows.

He knew some had stared at him. He always knew. He could feel it.

Ryan settled into the relative security of his desk, waiting for Mrs. Henderson to begin the "welcome to the new school year" crap he'd heard before.

He was familiar with this routine; he knew, however, that a new school year --- especially this school year ---was not a "great adventure;" it was not "a road to travel, not a final destination;" it

was not “a freedom enjoyed in our country and coveted people around the world.”

Who gives a rat’s ass, Ryan would think as Mrs. Henderson began her first day comments. Ryan’s biggest concern was a familiar one for him. Whenever he was in a new setting with new people, his biggest worry was how to stand, walk, or sit so that his right arm was less obvious to others.

Ryan had heard about ostriches protecting themselves by sticking their heads in the sand; he sometimes laughed at himself and the lengths he went to hide his arm. He was convinced, nevertheless, that the ostrich strategy worked.

Ryan went through his first day at Mark Twain in a back-to-school trance. He struggled to manage his way through the halls to find the next classroom. In each class he scanned all the first-year faces to see if any of his friends from Ridgeview were in the class. Each teacher called roll in order to determine the accuracy of the roster the Principal’s office had provided. Each teacher had distributed textbooks, adding with each successive class to Ryan’s left-arm load.

Fearing he might drop a book, some books, or all of his books in the corridor was as real an experience as actually dropping them. The fear of being the center of attention was as horrific as actually being the center of attention. These were emotions that had haunted Ryan for years.

With a big sigh of relief, Ryan's first day at Mark Twain came to a close. Tyler and Ryan met by the flagpole in front of Mark Twain as they had agreed that morning. They hurried home, admitting that they couldn't remember which class was their first period, which was second period, what the teachers' names were, where they were supposed to sit in each class, how to carry all the books, how to work the combination lock on their lockers, or whether they were supposed to eat at first, second, or third lunch shift.

Ryan remembered one thing for sure, though something that surprised him; sitting beside him in one of his classes --- calling to mind exactly which class was more than he could handle after the first day --- there was a strikingly good-looking blond girl who introduced herself when it was her turn as having previously

attended some school in some city other than Columbus. He remembered her.

Chapter 3

Tyler went in Ryan's house just long enough to drop off some of Ryan's books he had carried; then he went home to report to his family how day number one had gone.

"Ryan," his mother's voice came from the back of the house, "there's a bologna sandwich for your snack . . . in the kitchen. How did your first day go? Do you have any homework?"

"Oh, okay, I guess," Ryan replied with clearly limited interest in answering his mother's question.

Ryan's mother entered the kitchen where Ryan was biting into his sandwich, wiping her hands on her apron, like she's done a million times a day, he thought.

"Do you like your teachers?" she asked.

"They're okay," Ryan continued in his non-communicative fashion.

"Did you make any new friends," his undaunted mother continued?

"Mom, like it was just the first day! Jeez!"

Ryan took another bite from the sandwich, filling his mouth so full that even his mother could see he couldn't talk or answer any

questions. While he was chewing away, he thought, I could tell her about the blond; no, he decided, that would be TMI: too much information.

Before Mrs. Graves could come up with another question, Ryan heard the *Chronicle* truck stop in front his house, then he heard a big *whop*, a sound made by a bundle of 63 newspapers landing on his driveway.

“Oh no,” Ryan said to himself, “I forgot the paper route.”

He went out to the end of their driveway and grabbed with his left hand the criss-crossed wires holding the bundle together. He managed to get the bundle up to the front porch where his mother was waiting, a plastic bag of rubber bands in her hand. “Here, son,” she said, “I’ll help you roll your papers.”

Together, Ryan and his mother rolled the newspapers, then stretched a rubber band around each one. A rolled newspaper is easier to toss to a customer’s porch; plus, it’s not going to blow away.

It took Ryan and his mother 20 minutes to roll all 63 newspapers. After his mother helped him load the newspapers into his delivery bag --- a yoke-style bag with separate sacks, one in front

and one in back. By the time Ryan was ready to begin his deliveries it was almost 4:30 p.m.

He walked the five blocks from his house on Cutland Street to the street that was the beginning of his route. Before he had delivered his first newspaper, he was ready to go home. He had a headache and his back hurt; he had already gone through a tense day. But, remembering his “I can do it.” spoken to Mr. Higbee, he made himself move on and he finally approached 205 Holt Circle, the house where his first delivery customer lived.

He delivered papers to the remaining customers on Holt Circle, then completed the deliveries on Widener Street and Jennings Avenue. By the time he tossed the paper onto the front porch of the last customer on Jennings, Ryan’s headache and backache were worse. He willed his feet to go forward; by the time he arrived at his house, it was 6:00 p.m., dinnertime. Suddenly, Ryan was aware of the growls coming from his stomach. He was famished.

The smells of dinner were familiar: fried potatoes, a pot of navy beans that had been cooking most of the day, and fried country sausage patties. Ryan plopped down at his regular place at the table while his mother put plates, napkins, knives and forks on the table.

“You really look dog-tired tonight,” mother said as she looked at Ryan, resting his head in his left hand. “I am, mom,” Ryan said. “I think I’ll go to bed right after dinner.”

“What, no homework tonight?” Ryan’s Dad said as he came in through the back door. “We had homework every single night when I was in junior high . . . er, I mean middle school,” Ryan’s Dad continued,” and there were no exceptions. Not one. None.”

“Hi dear,” Ryan’s mom said, giving her husband a kiss on his cheek as he was sitting down.

“Our son has had a big day.”

Ryan’s father had no reply, understanding that his wife was protecting Ryan from any more history lessons in the form of “back in my day” stories. He sat down quietly at his place at the dining table.

The Graves family ate dinner, mother and father doing most of the talking. Ryan felt as if he was still trying to regain consciousness having just awakened from a long night’s sleep. Everything was a blur. He was trying to see through a fog where there was no fog.

When he finished eating, Ryan took his plate and silverware to the kitchen counter by the sink, then he went into the living room where he stretched out on the sofa.

Ryan had barely closed his eyes when he could feel his mother shaking his shoulder.

“Son, son . . . wake up, son,” Mrs. Graves said, “it’s the *Chronicle* office on the telephone.”

With more pain in his legs than he might have predicted, Ryan stood, a little shaky at first, then shuffled to the telephone.

“Hello, this is Ryan.”

“Ryan, this is Owen at the *Chronicle*. Five of your customers have called to report that they didn’t get their newspapers this afternoon. If you have a piece of paper and a pencil, I can give you their names and addresses.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Ryan asked.

“Well,” Owen said, “you ought to have those five papers somewhere. Didn’t you think it was strange that you still had five papers after you finished your deliveries?”

“Yeah, kinda,” Ryan said, more than a little weakly.

“Here’s what happens,” Owen began. “I give you the names and addresses of those who didn’t receive their newspapers today. You take them a paper. Then, tomorrow, you concentrate real hard, leaving a newspaper for every customer who has paid for one. Can you handle this, do you think?” Despite being bone-tired weary, Ryan was still alert enough to detect Owen’s condescension.

Screw you, Owen Butt-face, or whatever your faggot name is. . . you fat-ass jerk, Ryan muttered to himself as he made his way to the garage where he had left his delivery bag. Sure enough, there were the five newspapers. He grabbed the bag, then stepped back in the house for a moment.

Grumbling, Ryan explained to his parents why he was leaving the house with the five newspapers, still rolled up with rubber bands. “Son,” his Dad began, “you need to be more careful . . .”

How his father finished the admonition would forever be a joyful mystery to Ryan, who had a Walter Mitty talent to enable temporary deafness when it was most useful to his purposes. Ryan didn’t need any more cautions tonight, neither from Owen nor his father.

Ryan spent 30-minutes delivering the five newspapers. When he arrived home he went straight to his room, kicked off his shoes, pulled off his clothes, threw them in the corner of the closet and plopped on his bed

His brains were scrambled; his body was spent. He had all he could handle today, trying to learn everything that was new in his life, both at school and on his newspaper route.

4

“Ryan, telephone; it’s Tyler” Mrs. Graves called to Ryan, who had been out of bed for no more than ten minutes. Ryan put away his toothbrush, wiped his mouth with his towel, and then walked to the hallway where the telephone was waiting.

“Hey Ty.”

“Hey,” Tyler began. “I have an appointment with the dentist this morning so I won’t be walking to school with you, okay?”

“What if I said, ‘No, it’s not okay?’”

“Too bad. I have to go anyway. I can’t say I’m sorry I can’t be there for the first two periods at school, though. Ha, ha.”

“You’re lucky. Okay, then, I’ll see you either at school sometime later today or after we get home this afternoon,” Ryan said, then he replaced the telephone handset. Ryan explained to his mother why he was leaving without Tyler, then started his walk to Mark Twain.

The crowd outside the doors to the school was larger, it seemed, than yesterday’s. Where do all these people come from, Ryan wondered?

He started to weave his way through the outer fringes of the growing throng.

Just like yesterday, the doors opened and the ensuing scene duplicated the one from the day before: the mass of individual people became a single, amoeba-like, animate object floating its way into the building. Ryan ambled his way through the doors, down the hall to the locker room serving the students whose last names began with A to N; once there, he found his way to his locker, number 305.

When locker assignments were distributed in the first home base meeting, the teacher demonstrated how to unlock and then relock the combination lock. Ryan had trouble following the demonstration, given his anxieties. Nevertheless, here he was at locker, number 305, just waiting to open it and leave his jacket and the books he wouldn't need until after lunch.

Ryan struggled to hold the lock and simultaneously turn the dial, all with one hand. Was he supposed to turn the dial in the center of the lock clockwise or counterclockwise? How many turns of the dial: three or four? How important was the zero on the dial? How important was the notch above the zero? When and in what order was he supposed to stop at the three numbers ---those "secret"

numbers that represented his combination he was to share with no one?

Feeling like a total idiot, Ryan couldn't get his lock to open. He had tried several times, each time jamming his face closer against the locker door so that those around him couldn't see that he was having troubles. Opening a combination lock shouldn't be *this* difficult, he told himself. His eyes were beginning to tear up, the specter of inferiority looming over his shoulders. He had to get the damn lock to open; he only had seven minutes between the opening of the building doors and the beginning of his first period class.

One gasp short of hyperventilating, Ryan felt a nudge at his left shoulder. "Can I help?" came an offer from an angel from heaven. In this case, the angel's name was Joe Decker.

"Oh, thanks a lot," Ryan whispered. "I don't know why, but I can't get this lock to work."

"I can do it," Joe said. And he did, with ease. From that day onwards, Ryan and Joe became good friends.

Ryan reluctantly hung his jacket and its long sleeves in his locker, put the books he didn't need until after lunch on the bottom of the locker, and then took off for his first period class, English.

When he walked into room 114, which was his home base classroom as well, Ryan realized no one from Ridgeview was in the class with him.

What a bummer, he thought.

Mrs. Benton had a worksheet for the class to complete. He would soon learn that the teacher-made worksheet must be the first step to educational excellence, a learning nirvana, an academic Garden of Eden, or so it seemed. Not knowing any better, Ryan assumed that teacher training classes at the university consisted of Worksheets I, Worksheets II, Worksheets III, and so on.

After the students had ample time to write the part of speech above each word in the concocted sentences on the worksheet, they exchanged papers for scoring. Ryan felt lost. He learned more about *definite articles* and *indefinite articles* than he thought anyone needed to know. He had never heard this terminology. Furthermore, he thought, who really cares? Will anybody except an English teacher ever ask me to talk about the differences among as well as the proper grammatical uses of *a*, *an*, and *the*?

Just when Ryan was rolling his eyes upward seeking some kind of heavenly assistance, there *she* was again, across the aisle

where she sat yesterday: the beautiful blond girl from some school in some city other than Columbus. Their eyes met and she smiled at him. *She smiled at me*, Ryan thought, as if he were seeking confirmation of the fact that she was actually paying attention to him.

He could feel his face redden and he thought he might pee his pants! He tried to hide his right arm underneath his new three-ring notebook.

The remainder of the class period was of little academic importance to Ryan. He kept sneaking glances at the blond girl.

Mercifully, the bell rang, signaling the end of the first period, so he packed up his textbook and notebook then made his way toward his second period.

Second period was his math class, the subject that had always been troublesome for him. Adding to his anxiety was the fact that 6th grade math was taught by Mavis Jacobson, *Miss Mavis Jacobson*, the meanest and the most feared and teacher at Mark Twain Middle School, according to the urban myth which had been circulating around Columbus ever since her first year on the faculty, probably 103 years ago Ryan thought.

Miss Jacobson took rapid, forceful steps when someone called her *Mrs.* Jacobson. “It’s *Miss* Jacobson,” she would correct them, a wrinkled smirk on her face.

Rumor had it that Miss Jacobson never drank water, milk, coffee, or tea with her meals: her drink of choice was vinegar. She bragged to her students: “Young people, I never get angry but I always get even.” She laughed slyly, pretending what she had just said was a joke.

By mid-October, however, several male students who had been put on Miss Jacobson’s hit list decided *they*, not Miss Jacobson, would get even.

Their plan was sheer genius.

When Jim Slater pulled on his left ear, the guys started to hum, quietly, their eyes innocently fixed on Miss Jacobson.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMM”

“Do I hear something?” Miss Jacobson scowled.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMM”

“All right, now, who is it?”

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMM”

“Quiet! I’ll get you! You’re not fooling me!”

“I think it’s the lights,” Charlie Flickner offered, “some ceiling lights make humming sounds.”

At Charlie’s comment, everyone innocently looked above at the lights, their gazes accompanied by another chorus of “Hummmmmmmmmmmmmmm.”

When Slater pulled his left ear again, the humming stopped as suddenly as it had started. It was a supreme test of willpower for the class to keep from laughing, at least until class ended and they went into the corridor.

Miss Jacobson wasn’t likely to have been employed by any other profession, owing to several notions: who would hire anyone whose interpersonal skills were so abominable? Adult co-workers in the private sector wouldn’t tolerate her bad behavior. It’s easier to intimidate 12- and 13-year old students, satisfying whatever ego need she had to be in control. Further, math teachers are usually in short supply.

She ruled her roost, like a despotic, ruthless tsar. She made every attempt, on purpose her students believed, to prove that she was the Alpha female, not just in the math department but also among the whole faculty at Mark Twain.

5

Sometime in November the students in Miss Jacobson's second period math class were converting fractions to percentages and vice versa. Ryan was sitting at his desk, his right arm tucked between his desk and his right side. He didn't want his right arm to dangle at his side.

Leaning over his worksheet, right arm tucked under, trying to make the correct conversions, he was barely aware that Miss Jacobson was standing in front of him.

"What's wrong with you, young man?" Miss Jacobson demanded loudly.

"Huh?" was the only thing Ryan could think of to say because he was so confused by her question,

"Don't 'Huh' me, mister," Miss Jacobson shot back. "I asked, quite simply, 'what's wrong with you?'" her lips quivering, "don't you understand English?"

"What's wrong with me?" Ryan replied.

"Yes! Finally we're communicating. I asked first, 'what's wrong with you?'" Miss Jacobson said. "I've been watching you since the first day of school. You always sit with your right arm

pulled up underneath you . . . trying to protect it, babying it. You need to try to exercise that arm if you ever plan to use it again,” and with that point being made, Miss Jacobson slapped Ryan’s left arm; she slapped it hard for emphasis, as if Ryan didn’t comprehend what she was saying.

The sound of flesh on flesh was so loud most of the other students looked up from their seatwork, trying to figure out what was going on. Ryan sat there, big tears welling up in his eyes, then splashing onto the worksheet; the tears were not caused by the physical hurt from the slap, but from the embarrassment he was feeling. All of his classmates knew what had just transpired in their math class.

Not only had Miss Jacobson slapped him, but also she had brought attention to the physical flaw Ryan tried to hide every day of his life, the flaw that made him different and inferior, possibly even grotesque. Ryan had been publicly humiliated, his greatest fear.

After the slap, Ryan sat there, wishing he could disappear; he was also wishing Miss Jacobson would die on the spot.

God, Ryan prayed to himself, please strike this bitch with a bolt of lightning, NOW!

He thought the bell signaling the end of second period would never sound. Of course, it did, but not soon enough to soothe his deeply hurt feelings. Why, Ryan asked himself the remainder of the school day, why would a teacher want to attack a student?

Ryan finished the day of school with mixed feelings: he was elated when the day was finally over and he was as angry at Miss Jacobson as he had ever been with anyone. He was certain that she had shamed him in front of the class on purpose. What motivated her to do that was more than he could understand.

He hurried home in order to deliver his papers to the customers on his route without delay, looking forward to spending a quiet evening in the safety of his home. He was home by the time the *Chronicle* truck delivered his papers.

“How was school today?” Mrs. Graves asked.

“Fine,” Ryan answered.

“Now, son,” Mrs. Graves said “I’ve been around you long enough to know that when you answer ‘fine,’ to a question about your progress in anything, ‘fine’ usually means a whole lot more.”

“Well,” Ryan went on, “with the exception of Tyler, I don’t think many people like me.” No sooner had Ryan confessed his fear

to his mother, the *Chronicle* truck coasted to a stop in front of the Graves' house. Ryan's bundle was dropped out the truck window. He retrieved the bundle and carried his newspapers toward his front porch.

He put half of the newspapers in each of the compartment-like bags of his yoked sack, then began the walk to his route. By the time he finished his deliveries and walked home, his mother was putting the evening meal on the table: meat loaf, mashed potatoes, red cabbage, and biscuits.

Ryan washed his face and hands, then sat down at the dinner table, where his mother and father, already seated, were waiting for him to join them.

"How'd it go at school today?" Mr. Graves asked.

"Fine," Ryan answered, as briefly as he could.

"How was English?" his mother asked, knowing she'd need to use follow-up questions to his "fine," and that Ryan liked English with a history of doing well in the language arts.

"Fine," Ryan dittoed to her question.

"Just 'fine'?" said his father.

"Yeah," Ryan said, "just fine."

“What about math?” his father continued.

“It’s okay,” Ryan replied, a little softer this time. Tears began to form in his eyes. His mother saw what was happening and said “What’s up? I don’t believe math was really ‘okay,’ was it?”

“No,” Ryan admitted, his voice trembling.

“What happened?” asked his father.

Ryan began to explain what they were working on in math class, and then he started relating the episode with Miss Jacobson. Ryan’s mother put her hand on Ryan’s shoulder, smiling at him with a nurturing and sympathetic smile.

Ryan looked back and forth to his mother and to his father. Ryan noticed his father didn’t raise his eyes from his plate of food. Mr. Graves sat there, raising his fork to his mouth, his temples beating in synch with his chewing, 1-2, 1-2, 1-2. Ryan thought his Dad’s forehead was getting red.

When the meal was finished, Ryan went to the family room to watch whatever was on television. His parents were in the kitchen, sharing clean-up duties, talking quietly. At 9:30 p.m. Mr. Graves entered the family room reminding Ryan that it was bedtime. Ryan

was ready for sleep and didn't use any of his customary delaying strategies.

The next morning, Ryan felt his mother shaking his shoulder. He was confused; rather than sensing the familiarity of his bed, he was sleeping on the couch in the family room. How did I wind up on the couch, he wondered?

“Well,” his mother began, “I've never known you to walk in your sleep before. I hope tonight you can spend all of your sleeping time in your own bed.”

6

The weekend for most students in middle schools and high schools is a blessed event.

Without the annoying interruptions caused by the teachers and classes at school, Saturday and Sunday provide time to talk about more important news with friends at the mall, at the movies, on the telephone, and sometimes at church.

Ryan had Saturday and Sunday newspapers to deliver, but walking his route would only take little more than an hour each day.

The remainder of the time was his to spend as he wished, unless his mother or father had a chore for him to complete.

Ryan's mother was mindful of the fact that attending a new school and having the simultaneous responsibilities of new job, his newspaper route, had been stressful for Ryan. Saturday was a day she tried to reserve for Ryan to take it easy, maybe talk with Tyler, perhaps watch football on television, and maybe even take a nap.

Sunday morning was a little more organized. While he was putting on his Sunday clothes, Ryan smelled pancakes, the Graves' routine Sunday morning breakfast.

"Good morning, son," Mr. Graves said as Ryan pulled his chair from the table.

"Mornin' Dad," Ryan replied.

"Who's ready for one of these beauties?" Mrs. Graves greeted the men as she walked to the table carrying a plate heavy with pancakes.

"Betty, you make the best flapjacks I've ever tasted," Mr. Graves flattered his wife.

“Thanks, dear,” Betty replied, “but you don’t need to try to butter me up. I know these aren’t quite like the ones your mother made.”

No, they’re not, thought Ryan. Grandma Graves’ pancakes were smaller; his mother’s pancakes were so big that one filled an entire dinner plate.

“We need to leave early this morning. I have a short meeting of the church finance committee this morning,” Mr. Graves announced.

True to his word, Mr. Graves shepherded Ryan and his mother to the family car well ahead of their normal leaving for church time. When they arrived at Asbury United Methodist Church Ryan went to the room where his church school class met; he was early and this room was as good a place to wait as any.

When he walked into his Sunday classroom, Ryan learned that he wouldn’t be alone: there sat his long-time church friend, Lily Hollister.

“Hey, Ryan, why are you so early this morning?” Lily asked.

“My Dad has a meeting.”

“Mine, too,” Lily commented, “my Dad’s chair of the finance committee.”

“Small world,” said Ryan, “that’s my Dad’s meeting. He’s on the committee.”

Ryan and Lily had known each other forever. They had grown up together as members of Asbury United Methodist Church. They attended church school together; their families sat together at church dinners and programs. Often, Lily and Ryan were the only ones who attended youth group meetings on Sunday nights.

They had been sharing impressions about Mark Twain Middle School for a half hour when Lily brought up one of the more important questions either asked or answered when middle schoolers get together, “Are there any good looking girls in any of your classes?”

“No.”

“Oh, Ryan, come on,” Lily said teasingly, “not even one girl you’re sort of interested in?”

“No,” Ryan answered, knowing he wasn’t telling Lily Hollister the truth,

To the contrary, he was more than simply curious about the blond girl in his English class. He was not, however, about to tell anyone about his curiosity. He was not going to confess his inquisitiveness about her because he had no doubt that the most repulsive feature of his upper body would likely scare her away.

It's impossible to be rejected, Ryan believed, if you stay in the background and nobody sees you.

7

The first after school party at Mark Twain was scheduled for the third Friday in November. The only school parties Ryan knew anything about were the ones sponsored by the Ridgeview Parent-Teacher Association: pot luck suppers, cakewalks, school carnivals, and such. He thought they were dumb and didn't understand why his parents acted as if they enjoyed them.

The November party at Mark Twain would include, he later learned, boy-girl dancing. This party didn't sound like it might be so dumb after all, Ryan admitted to himself. He wondered, however, who might be his dance partner.

"Mom," Ryan asked one night as the after school party approached, "who do you think I should ask to dance with me?"

"Well, all of the girls from Ridgeview will probably be there. Why not ask Carolyn Robertson? She'd dance with you and I know you think she's cute."

"Can't," Ryan commented, "they moved to St. Louis last summer."

"So, you could ask Marti Kingsley, Virginia Fremont, Gloria Jones, Lydia Morris . . ."

“Nah, I never see them anymore; besides, Lydia’s hanging out with some of the rich kids from Northridge Elementary School.” Ryan wasn’t exactly bubbling over with confidence. “I don’t think the others like me much anymore.”

“Ryan, there are girls from four different elementary schools who are now attending Mark Twain Middle School. I’m sure there will be at least one girl at the party who’ll dance with you,” Ryan’s mother said, “and if there aren’t any girls available, you could ask Tyler to be your partner for at least one dance.”

She chuckled, thinking she had put a very funny and witty face on Ryan’s problem. The conversation came to a halt with Mrs. Graves’ suggestion.

“Thanks, mom, thanks a lot. You’re as funny as a wheel chair with square wheels,” Ryan replied.

As they always do at all schools, the days at Mark Twain Middle School went by, too fast for the students who were doing well, and too slow for most of the teachers as well as the students who were near the bottom of the learning curve. The day for the

Friday party finally arrived, however, at the same day and time for everyone.

After school Ryan looked for Tyler so that they could go to the gym together. Tyler was nowhere to be seen, so Ryan bravely ventured forth alone.

Walking into the gym, Ryan saw romance at work, what with couples, threesomes and foursomes already forming in the spacious gymnasium. There were a few boy-only and girl-only clusters, but they were in the minority. Ryan started looking for a group he could connect with.

There was a lot of conversational buzzing throughout gym. A faceless voice came over the public address system. “Hello? Test, 1-2, 1-2.” Satisfied that the PA system was working, the voice announced, “Please remember to remove your shoes. We need to protect the finish on the gym floor. And now . . . the first dance will be . . . girls choice!”

As soon as the voice finished the announcement there was a stampede of girls, mostly 6th and 7th graders, racing around the gym looking for a partner. The 8th grade girls were already with their

partners. The voice continued making announcements, alternating between boys' and girls' choices, for over an hour.

After spending most of his time at the party surveying the gym filled with dancing partners, Ryan saw *them!* Lily Hollister was talking *her*. The Blond. The Blond who smiled at him. The Blond who had previously attended some school in some city other than Columbus.

Lily and The Blond were talking with the animation one sees when good friends talk with each other. Ryan wasn't sure what to do with himself, so he edged his way to stand behind some big guy who could serve as a partition. He peeked around his human wall so that he could see Lily and her friend once more.

If this were a movie, Ryan thought, I'd be entering the most popular club in town and I'd notice where Lily and The Blond were standing. A hot band would be providing background music. Then, Ryan continued with his reverie, I would slide over to them and say something cool, like "Nice hair, Lily; who did it, the guy who mows your lawn?" Lily and The Blond would laugh.

I'd be checking out The Blond, too, paying obvious attention to her boobs, letting her know by my smiles that I am thinking how

hot she is. She would smile back at me, letting me know it's okay to fool around with her!

Nothing that romantic happened.

It was time for another dance. Ryan watched some of his classmates clutch each other's butts and move around slowly.

Ryan just stood there, hoping Lily would come over to his side of the gym and tell him her blond friend would like to meet him.

Instead, the big guy Ryan was hiding behind took a step backwards, stepping on Ryan's left foot.

"Oooow," Ryan said.

"Don't touch me, fag" the big guy offered.

Ryan pretended that the hurt was minimal as he walked over to the table where the soft drinks and cookies were spread out. He took a can of Pepsi and two cookies, then went to his locker for his jacket. Thanks to Joe Decker, Ryan had untangled the mystery of how to open a combination lock one-handed.

Ryan put on his jacket and took his Pepsi and cookies to Mark Twain's entrance. From this vantage point he had a good view of the driveway where his parents would appear in thirty minutes or

so. He sat on a bench by the wall of the foyer to wait for his parents and then decided he'd start enjoying his refreshments.

Looking through the glass doors at the school's entrance, Ryan told himself that the cookies were pretty tasty, even for store-bought, then he took a swig from his Pepsi can. He turned to his right when he heard foot step on the cement floor. It was Lily Hollister, headed back to the gymnasium after going to the girls' bathroom.

"Hey, Lily," Ryan called. "Could you hear me in there?"

"No; why?" she answered.

"Well, I cold hear you out here," Ryan said, then started guffawing.

"That's a dumb joke, Ryan," Lily answered, veering from her original path in order to walk toward him.

"I saw you in there. Who is she?" Ryan asked, motioning with his head toward the dance.

"Who?" Lily answered.

"The blond girl. You know. The girl who's new in town."

"Oh, you mean Haley Foster?"

“Yeah, I suppose, if that’s her name” Ryan said. At last, he thought. She has a name.

“She’s in my Consumer Science class,” Lily said. “Her family moved to Columbus in August.”

“What else do you know about her?” Ryan continued.

“Aha,” Lily said with a knowing tone in her voice and a smug smile on her face. “So there *is* someone you’re interested in, despite what you said --- or didn’t say --- when I asked you at church.”

“Well, I think she’s hot,” Ryan confessed. “Will you do a favor for me?”

“Sure. You name it.”

“Will you ask her if she likes anyone? I don’t mean does she have friends, like you; I mean, is there like some guy she likes?”

“I’ll try to find out,” Lily said.

“One more thing: please, please, keep this a secret,” Ryan said, his voice a bit lower. “Don’t tell anybody I asked you to ask her, okay? And don’t let her know I’ve asked about her.”

“No problem,” Lily agreed. Then she smiled.

Chapter 8

Halloween came and went. Ryan enjoyed Thanksgiving at his grandparents' farm, along with the extended Graves family. Then, as the third week in December came nearer, Ryan and his friends started making plans for the two-week vacation between the first and the second semesters.

He planned to go rabbit hunting with his friends Tyler and Bug. Bug's real name was Rexford, but since he had always been small in stature his older brothers called him *Bug*. Their *Bug* nickname for either Rexford or Rex lasted.

When Bug was still in diapers his older brothers had wrapped a belt round his right arm and chest, attempting to induce left-handedness. This would help Bug to become a left-handed pitcher, the premier baseball position more important than all the others, or so the older brothers believed.

In later years, however, Bug had no interest in baseball or any other sport. He remained left-handed, nevertheless.

During the holiday, Ryan could sleep a little later. He and his buddies would go to a movie sometime. If the Columbus armory was

open, they'd play basketball on the armory's court. And, Ryan would deliver papers every day, but that really didn't take that much time

Lily Hollister had told Ryan earlier that Haley Foster didn't have a boy friend. Consequently, Ryan fantasized many times about calling Haley on the telephone, using as his reason for calling her was to ask if they had an assignment for English class during the holiday break. He always thought better about calling her, though.

Calling her is a dumb idea, he would say to himself. What if I phone her and she doesn't recognize my name, he worried? What if she does recognize me, on the other hand, and think I must be a real loser for calling her about a school assignment? The first holiday vacation plan that Ryan and his friends made was the easiest to complete: go to a movie. After the movie Ryan, Tyler and Bug were waiting for Tyler's mom to come pick them up in her SUV.

While they were standing outside the theater, Frank Alvis, an older student at Columbus High School, came up to them. Everybody knew Frank. He was a neat guy. He was the type of person parents would point out to their sons and tell them, "There's that nice Alvis boy. Just behave like him and you'll do just fine."

“Hi men. How was the movie?” Frank asked all three of them, not one in particular.

“Okay. Good. Fine,” all three said in disjointed unison.

“Have you ever thought about joining an Explorer post?” Frank asked Ryan and his friends. “It’s part of the Boy Scouts.”

Frank went on to describe a number of the activities Explorer Post 9 enjoyed through the year. When he mentioned monthly campouts, Ryan, Tyler, and Bug became more interested. Sleeping in tents and cooking over an open fire sounded like fun.

“We meet at First Baptist Church at 7:00 every Monday night,” Frank continued. “Why don’t you come for a visit?”

They visited the Explorers’ meeting the next Monday, were pleased to discover they already knew several of the guys in the Post, and on the spot they became three of the newest members of Columbus’s Explorer Post 9.

Chapter 9

School and Ryan’s regular routines resumed the first Monday in January. About the only positive thing Ryan could identify with his return to school was going to English class and seeing Haley Foster.

She was Ryan's height, had blond hair, blue eyes, and, unlike Ryan, she'd never had a single zit. Ryan thought she had the most beautiful skin he had ever seen. He also believed she was one of the nicest and prettiest girls in school.

Haley had a timid and somewhat wistful smile and she wasn't stuck up, not like some of the other good-looking girls at Mark Twain.

In English class he looked at Haley. He looked at her a lot, pretending to be thinking about whatever the topic was in English class. He remembered what Lily Hollister had told him about Haley last December, just before the holiday vacation: she doesn't have a boy friend.

Meanwhile, also back in their regular routine, the Explorer scouts resumed their Monday night meetings and learned how to do a lot of outdoor activities: how to treat rattlesnake bites, although there were no rattlesnakes anywhere near Columbus; how to tie a variety of knots, despite the fact that this activity required two hands, relegating Ryan to the role of spectator; how to pack clothes in a back pack so that they wouldn't wrinkle, a sartorial feature Ryan believed unnecessary when camping in the woods.

One Monday night the routine took an interesting turn, as Ryan was to discover later. Mr. Ford, the leader of the Explorer post, reminded the veteran members that it was time for the Post's annual chili supper. What is this, the newer members wondered?

"This is an important event, guys," Mr. Ford said to everyone. "It's our primary fund raiser. The more tickets you sell for the chili supper, the more money we have to finance our campouts as well as the trip to the district Jamboree."

Some guy Ryan didn't know very well, Darren was his name, asked whether parent and family tickets cost the same as the tickets for the general public.

"Mr. Foster," Mr. Ford answered in a pretend formal voice, "if your family eats the same things the general public eats, yes, they'll pay the same price for their tickets."

"Okay, just asking," Darren Foster said, defending what he thought other might consider a lame question.

Foster? Darren Foster? The name *Foster* sent Ryan off on a daydream. Could Darren Foster be related to Haley Foster?

Three weeks later at the chili supper, Ryan got his answer. He saw Darren, two adults whom Ryan assumed were Darren's

parents, two younger girls who might be Darren's younger sisters, and another girl, closer to Darren's age: it was Haley Foster!

The six of them were entering the church's fellowship hall where the chili dinners were to be served on long folding tables covered with white butcher paper.

The Fosters found seats for all of their family except Darren, who was joining Ryan, Tyler, Bug and the other scouts who were serving tables for the evening.

Ryan went to the serving window at the kitchen, hoping he might be able to take something to the Foster family's table.

"Ryan," Mr. Ford commented, "please take off your jacket and out on an apron if you're helping to serve tables." Ryan recoiled within himself. I can't take off my jacket, he thought. *She's here!* I'll look like a freak!

Jackets, coats, and long-sleeved shirts were parts of Ryan's ostrich strategy. The right arm sleeves would help him hide his right arm. The ostrich strategy had taught him that if he could cover and disguise that which was ugly, it wasn't there I phone her.

Rather than remove his jacket and expose his arms, especially his right arm, in front of the Foster family in general and

Haley in particular, he decided that he simply wouldn't serve tables. He couldn't allow Haley to have an open look at the part of Ryan's body he wanted most to hide. How can I get out of this predicament, he wondered?

“Ryan,” Mr. Ford began, “remember the rules: everybody helps. You either serve tables or you wash dishes. What'll it be for you?”

It was a solution with dignity and honor! God bless you Mr. Ford!

Ryan answered, “I'll wash. I know a lot of guys don't like to wash dishes, but I like to.” So, Ryan's predicament was dealt with and no one was the wiser about his fear.

There was only one catch: if he was in the kitchen washing dishes and Haley was eating dinner in the fellowship hall with her family, not only would she not see his right arm, which was a good thing, but neither would she see the rest of him, which was a bad thing!

To hide from Haley what he thought was his ugliest feature, he put himself in a position where she couldn't see him at all.

Ryan decided his martyrdom might be the best he could hope for, under the circumstances, but his decision to wash dishes depressed him.

Chapter 10

Sunday morning Ryan woke up to the weekly smell of pancakes throughout the house. Lately he had grown weary of the smell because it clung to his clothes. “Mom,” Ryan grouched, “I get tired of going to church every Sunday smelling like I’ve been working at The Waffle House all morning.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?” Ryan’s mom replied. “Your father loves pancakes and Sunday is the only day in the week when we have time to enjoy them. Plus, what’s so wrong about working at The Waffle House?”

Yeah, right, Ryan thought. He was certain his parents didn’t understand why he didn’t want to go to church, sit with Leonard, Dale, or Lily, and watch one or all of them wrinkle their noses and say to him, “Pancakes again?”

Ryan’s father polished off his pancakes with gusto. Ryan pushed pieces of pancakes around his plate, then took his plate and his silverware to the kitchen. Ryan seldom saw his mother eat anything in the mornings. She seemed to be busy always relaying food from the kitchen to the dining room.

Sneaking into his parents' bedroom to spray some of his Dad's cologne on his shirt, Ryan shot a rapid glance at the mirror on his mother's dresser. He gave his reflection a quick once-over, combed his fingers through his forelock, struck a different pose so that his right arm would be less obvious, then he gave his shoulders a what-the-hell shrug and hurried out the front door to join his parents for the drive to church.

After parking the car in the lot behind the church, Mr. and Mrs. Graves went to the church parlor for coffee and conversation; Ryan went to his church school classroom. As he entered the room, he saw Lily Hollister was already there, motioning for him to come sit beside her.

Ryan took a quick sniff of his shirt to check-out the pancake smell, decided the aroma had weakened enough, then he walked to Lily's place in the circle of chairs and sat beside her.

"Haley said she saw you at the scouts' chili supper," Lily said, too matter-of-factly to suit Ryan.

"Oh yeah?" Ryan replied. "What did she say?"

"Maybe you didn't hear me," Lily said, cupping her hand by her ear, "but Haley told me she saw you at the chili supper."

“Is that all she said?” Ryan asked.

“Well, no,” Lily said, assuming a pose of super-seriousness.

“She asked me if I knew if you always had boogers coming out of your nose.”

“Damn it, Lily, quit it! What did she really say?”

“Okay, okay; don’t cuss in church. She said she thought you were nice and good-looking.”

“Really?” Ryan asked. “Don’t kid me.”

“No, I’m not kidding you.” Lily said.

“Come on, Lily, don’t tease me,” Ryan went on.

“Ryan, for God’s sake,” Lily said, “I’m not a CD-player with pierced ears and a perm. I’m not kidding and I’m not teasing. Haley said she thought you were cute. That’s all. No more, no less. She wondered, though, how come you disappeared so fast at the chili supper.”

Ryan sat there, not knowing what to say, which way to turn, or which itch to scratch. He was speechless, as well. Haley Foster had seen him. She told Lily she thought he was cute. She wondered why he disappeared.

Ryan's throat went dry. His eyes watered. He needed a drink, a drink of anything wet.

"Where were you? Where'd you go?" Lily asked.

"I didn't leave. I was in the kitchen, washing dishes," Ryan rasped.

"What happened? Did you draw the short straw and wind up on the clean-up crew?"

Ryan decided against telling Lily the truth. Lying was his usual way of avoiding conversational topics he didn't want to deal with, like those topics concerning his physical appearance. Rather than explain to Lily that he went into the church kitchen to hide because he didn't want Haley to see him in a short-sleeved shirt, he lied to her.

"You might think I'm crazy, but I really like to wash dishes; lots of the guys don't. So, I volunteered."

"I don't think that makes you crazy," Lily said, "weird, yes, crazy, no. However, it sure puts you in a small minority of my friends, though; I've never heard any sane person at school say they liked to wash dishes! Your mom must've dropped you on your head when you were a baby."

“Lily, please don’t tell Haley you and I talked about her,” Ryan said, not quite in a whisper, but almost.

“Don’t be such an ignoramus, Ryan,” Lily shot back, “I won’t breathe a word to Haley. Why would I want to do that?”

Lily looked out the window and chuckled playfully to herself, thinking about her next chance to tell Haley that Ryan Graves is very much interested in knowing more about her, despite telling Ryan she wouldn’t.

Ryan would have been mortified if he had he been able to read Lily’s mind.

All the students at Mark Twain Middle School survived the duration of the winter and the month of March, eager for June 1 and the beginning of summer. They were entering the final quarter of the school year. Even the most dim-witted students in Mildred Jacobson’s math classes knew about quarters. Four of them made a dollar. There were four quarters in a basketball and football games. There were four of them in a school year. The fourth quarter at school meant the end is in sight.

Ryan had made his separate peace with Mark Twain Middle School, its many corridors, its policies, its size, and its faculty, and even Mildred Jacobson. He still hated Miss Jacobson for what she had done to him earlier in the school year. Her calling attention to his arm, a tragic event for him, was something he would neither forgive nor forget; he knew this.

One morning Ryan's math class was working with some arcane principles concerning numbers. Once again, in a strange feeling of déjà vu, Ryan's concentration was interrupted by a sense that someone was standing in front of his desk. Voila, there was Miss Jacobson.

Ryan kept his head down. He stared at the toes of his sneakers. He prayed, Oh God, please help me, please. Please, God, make her pass me by, please God.

He kept his eyes closed and was about to shudder all over, like a dog frightened by firecrackers on the fourth of July. He took a deep breath and was about to look up when he heard Miss Jacobson begin to speak.

"Class," she began, "I want all of you people to know how happy I am with the progress Ryan Graves has made this year. He's

done a nice job. I had to give him a little love tap to get him motivated, but overall he's had a good year in this class."

BULL SHIT!! was what Ryan wanted to scream as loudly as his lungs and larynx would permit. He didn't because Miss Jacobson had thoroughly intimidated him; she had hurt him so severely, that he just sat there, staring at the back of Jim Slater's head.

Ryan couldn't tell whether the others in the class were looking at Miss Jacobson, at him, or out the window, in order to deflect their vision from either Ryan or Miss Jacobson.

Strangely, since Miss Jacobson complimented a student only once a year and never more than once, not one of Ryan's classmates said anything to him as they filed out of the room. They would have had a difficult time articulating what might have happened either to her or to Ryan between Miss Jacobson's slapping Ryan's arm, and how the slap might have hurt Ryan, physically or emotionally, so they did the only thing they knew to do: nobody said anything.

Chapter 11

The group silence made Ryan nervous and self-conscious, two emotions he was already at his young age too familiar with. He spent the rest of the day trying to figure out why nobody said anything to him. Maybe they don't like me, he thought.

After finishing his newspaper route, Ryan washed his face and hands, then went in to the kitchen where his mother was looking inside a roaster pan in the oven. Ryan recognized both the sights and smells of one of his favorite meals: pork roast, potatoes, carrots, and onions.

"What's up?" Ryan asked his mother. "How come you're fixing Sunday dinner on a Wednesday night?"

"Well," his mother answered, with her eyebrows arched in a playful manner "if you aren't hungry for pork roast tonight, I guess I could take it next door and give it to the Murrays."

"You know what I mean, mom," Ryan said. "I love this meal."

"Yes, I know you do; so does your father. I simply thought this would be a nice meal to have in the middle of the week. But the

real reason is that pork roast was on special today at Moore's Market."

Mrs. Graves put the lid back on the roaster pan, closed the oven door, then, wiping her hands on her the dish towel hanging over her shoulder, she turned toward Ryan and asked her daily question, "How was school today?"

"Well," Ryan stammered just a bit, "uh . . . er . . . something weird --- I mean something really, really weird, mom --- happened in math today."

"Oh no, not again," Mrs. Graves said in a soft and sympathetic tone.

"No, Mom," Ryan was quick to add, "it wasn't anything bad. I'm not sure what it was."

"What happened? Tell me about it."

Ryan began his story about how Miss Jacobson had complimented him in front of the entire class. He told his mother about the "love tap" comment. At the end of the class period, he explained, everyone left the room without saying a word, either to Miss Jacobson or to Ryan. No one in my math class, he told his

mother, said anything to me the rest of the day. “Is there some reason they don’t like me?” he asked his mother.

“I can’t imagine anyone having a reason not to like you,” his mother assured him.

“Well,” Ryan said as he was about to bring the math tale to an end, “I was really mixed-up by the whole thing. Why did she say what she said? We all know my math isn’t good. Why would she go out of her way to say something nice about me everybody knows isn’t true? And why was everybody so quiet?”

“I know what it was,” Mr. Graves said. He had been standing in the kitchen doorway and had heard Ryan’s rendition of The Great Math Mystery.

“Your favorite teacher was making a CYA statement for her own benefit in front of the others in the class. She was trying to establish her innocence by covering up something stupid she had done . It was CYA.”

“CYA?” Ryan questioned.

“Yeah,” his father replied, “CYA: Cover Your Ass.”

“Andy,” Mrs. Graves yelled! “Don’t use that language in this house.”

“Okay, okay,” Mr. Graves said. “I think I’d better go wash up for dinner, huh,” he winked at Ryan.

“What’s Dad talking about, this CYA stuff?”

“Well, we weren’t going to say anything about it,” mother said.

“It? What’s *it*?” Ryan wanted to know. Adults have numerous *its* they’d prefer not to discuss with their kids, Ryan observed to himself.

Mrs. Graves began: “After act I in the Mildred Jacobson Math Drama, the act in which the teacher hits one of her students, the father pays a visit to the teacher in act II in her room after school one day.”

“You’re kidding! Dad went to talk to Miss Jacobson?”

“Oh, yes, that he certainly did!”

“What did she say?” Ryan asked.

“You should have asked what did your *Dad* say,” Ryan’s mother corrected.

“So okay. What did Dad say?”

“I don’t know everything they talked about, but I know about this: your Dad told her she was a math teacher not a physician and

not a neurologist. Your right arm is paralyzed, permanently, because of a virus that affected your central nervous system. The virus destroyed the neurons that make your muscles move. We know that. No exercise or any therapy will rehabilitate your arm or cure it. He explained all of this to Miss Jacobson and he also told that if she ever touches so much as a hair on your head, he'll file a complaint with the board of education."

"Wow! Dad said that? I wish I could've been there," Ryan said, obviously excited.

"What just a minute," Ryan's mom said. "There's one more thing."

"More? There's more? Tell me fast, before Dad gets back," Ryan said.

"You can't repeat what I'm about to tell you," Mrs. Graves, "and if you do, I'll swear you're making it up."

"C'mon mom, you can trust me, you know you can," Ryan said.

"He hit her desk," Mrs. Graves reported.

"He hit her desk? He hit her desk? Is that all?"

“What I meant to say is, he didn’t exactly just ‘hit’ her desk,” Mrs. Graves explained. “He banged his fist on her desk, as a kind of exclamation point. He used his fist like a gavel, adjourning their meeting, I guess.”

“Hot damn,” Ryan said, then added an “oops, sorry, mom.”

“Don’t you say anything about this to anybody, including Tyler or Bug.”

Ryan’s Dad was usually all business and seldom laughed. He worked six days a week, rarely taking a vacation, except for religious and civic holidays. Although Ryan usually discussed important matters, like how to define oneself in appropriate ways during adolescence, with his mother, this news about his Dad’s meeting with Miss Jacobson elevated his Dad’s status in Ryan’s eyes.

“I wish he would have smashed the Wicked Bitch of the North right in the mouth with his fist,” Ryan snarled when he told Tyler and Bug about the episode, swearing them, of course, to silence before sharing the story with them.

His mother’s relating to him the facts about his father’s session with Miss Jacobson brought a sense of closure to Ryan’s troubles with Miss Jacobson. A sub-plot of the Mildred Jacobson

Math Drama remained unresolved, however; Ryan still couldn't understand why everybody left Miss Jacobson's room in silence. Did I do something wrong, he wondered? Why did everyone seem to pretend that Miss Jacobson's "love pat" speech never happened? Do I have so few friends, Ryan worried?

12

The fourth quarter of Ryan's first year at Mark Twain came to an unceremonious end. Ryan and the other students received their grade cards in each of their classes, cleaned out their lockers, and then they left. That was it.

At Ridgeview each school year ended with a family picnic on the school lawn. Everybody walked around with cameras taking photographs, promising that they would never, ever, forget their Ridgeview days and friends. At Mark Twain, organized for older learners, it would be social death to say too much about elementary school ties. Having a picnic on the school lawn with family members? No way!

Ryan had very little on his summer calendar. He was going to play softball in the Columbus Recreation Department's summer program. He had his newspapers to deliver. He would attend scout meetings on Monday nights, and go to scout camp in the Ozarks for one week. Ryan thought he had a great schedule, especially since Mildred Jacobson was not a part of it.

Ryan's troop was scheduled for scout camp the second week of August. The first Monday in July, all of the scout troops in

Columbus marched from their regular meeting places to a small building downtown where two physicians' practiced medicine. Every scout got his vaccinations for camp, and then they all hiked back to their meeting halls.

When the time came for Ryan's troop to go to camp, the scouts and their parents congregated in the church parking lot. All of the boys were assigned to one of the volunteer drivers. Until everyone showed up, there wasn't much to do except stand around and wait, getting last minute dos and don'ts from parents.

Ryan was promising his mother yes, he would shower every day; yes, he wouldn't leave his dirty clothes on the floor of the cabin; yes, he would pin his socks together at the toes so that he would come home with pairs of socks, not odd lot singles. Looking over his mother's shoulder, he saw the Foster family arrive, and there she was, Haley, who had come to help send her brother Darren off to camp.

"Oh, my God," Ryan said, to no one in particular! He had an urge to pee but talked himself out of it. What if he went to the restroom and the Fosters left?

In science class Ryan had learned about adrenalin and how it gave people super human strength. The example of how adrenalin worked had always been about two men carrying a piano out of a burning building.

Ryan doubted he'd ever have a opportunity to carry a piano out of a burning building, but he felt as if his heart was beating faster, like it does when he runs. It must be my adrenalin, Ryan thought, as he walked to where the Foster family was standing. While he wasn't exactly helping to lift a piano, Ryan walked up to Haley and said, "Hi." To which Haley answered "Hi."

"Your brother . . .Darren . . . he's going to camp?" Ryan asked.

God, what a stupid thing to say, Ryan thought! Why else would the Foster family be here? I'll bet she thinks I'm a dope, Ryan told himself.

"Yes," Haley said, "he is."

Ryan saw that she was very shy, obviously more reluctant to talk than he was. They aimlessly wandered away from the adults toward the back of the parking lot, where there were big trees, shade and some privacy.

The two of them stood there, shifting their weight from one leg to the other, clearly ill at ease. Their conversation consisted of simple sentences or questions with one- or two-word replies. Haley gave Ryan quick, nervous grins during their abbreviated conversation, glancing at her mother, then her father, then Ryan, then her mother, then her father, and so it went.

“Haley, “ Mr. Foster called to her in a firm voice. That’s all he said, *Haley*, assuming, correctly as it turned out, she knew what his one-word comment meant. Haley looked at Ryan, shrugged her shoulders nervously, shot him a quick grin and then went back to where the adults were so that she could stand beside her mother.

The last scout finally arrived, everyone was assigned to a car, and off they went for a week at camp. Ryan noticed that Mr. Foster had gotten in the car with Mr. Ford, the troop leader. *What*, Ryan thought! Mr. Foster’s going to camp with us? He promised himself that he’d be on his very best behavior; Ryan didn’t want Mr. Foster to think him a jerk or a goof-off.

The days at camp were filled with more activity choices than Ryan could deal with. All of them looked like fun. The early morning bird-identification walks, the shooting range, the three great

meals every day, the daily swims at the lake, the canoe fights, and the nightly campfires. Scout camp must be a lot like heaven, he thought.

The final day at camp was a Saturday and it consisted mostly of clean-up chores. The scouts were told to clean their cabins, the washhouses, and the campus so that everything was cleaner than it was last Sunday when they arrived.

As soon after everything was as clean as the boys could manage, the cars and volunteer drivers arrived, stowed the campers and their gear, and then drove back to Columbus. Ryan's Dad met him at the First Baptist Church and then took him home where Mrs. Graves was setting the table for dinner.

While they ate dinner Ryan described the fun he'd had at camp, plus that fact that Mr. Foster attended also, and that he was some kind of scouting big shot.

Mr. and Mrs. Graves smiled at each other. "He's the father of that girl you were talking to last Sunday before you left for camp, right?" Mrs. Graves asked.

"Yeah, her name's Haley," Ryan replied. "Don't you think she's cute?"

The Graves smiled in agreement. “That she is, son, she’s a very attractive young woman,” Mrs. Graves said.

The next morning the Graves enjoyed their normal Sunday morning routine, and then drove to Asbury United Methodist Church. As usual, the Graves and the Hollisters were among the first to arrive. Ryan went to his church school classroom and there was Lily, idling time away before the class started. Ryan sat beside her and began talking right away: “When did you last see Haley?” he asked Lily.

Lily replied, “I’ve seen her only once during the past week, but we’ve talked to each other every day on the telephone. Is there anything you’d like to know?”

“Hell yes,” Ryan said. “You know I do, don’t you?”

“Ryan, quit cussing in church or I won’t tell you anything,” Lily said.

“Oh, Lily, get off your high horse,” Ryan argued. “Tell me what you and Haley talked about, please. Did she say anything about me?”

With a sigh, Lily said to Ryan, “Okay, but be nice. Don’t get your shorts in such a wad.”

“I am calm, I am collected, and I’m very suave,” Ryan said, almost indignantly.

“Thank you very much, sir,” Lily said to Ryan in an almost school-marmish manner. “I’ll bet you are. The facts are this,” Lily continued, “Haley likes you; she thinks you’re cute, cool, nice, and some other words I can’t tell you because you’d get big-headed.”

“I like her, too,” Ryan said. “I like her a lot. I wish we lived closer together so that I could walk by her house, hoping she’d be outside. Maybe we could meet somewhere and get a coke, or something”

“Haley would like that, I’m sure, based on what she’s said about you in our conversations this past week,” Lily told Ryan.

Expressing his fondness for Haley seemed to make Ryan braver. “Maybe it’s my adrenalin pumping again,” Ryan said to Lily,” but would you call Haley and ask her if she’d like to meet me somewhere for a coke?”

With a frown of not understanding where Ryan was going with his conversation Lily replied, “I don’t know what your adrenalin has to do with it, but I’ll ask her.”

“When?” Ryan asked sharply.

“Soon,” Lily said. “Don’t nag or push me.”

“I won’t. I promise,” Ryan said. “And I have one more question: has she said anything to you about my arm? Does she think I look like a freak?”

“Oh Ryan,” Lily complained, “Why would you say a thing like that? I don’t think you look like a freak and I’m pretty sure Haley doesn’t either. And, to answer your question, Haley hasn’t said one word about your arm. I’ve already told you some of the things she said to me about you; plus, she thinks you’re handsome. I won’t tell her you’re border-line retard.”

Being a bit stunned and amazed at what he had just heard, Ryan didn’t know what to say to Lily. He had never thought he was good-looking; he certainly wouldn’t have used the word *handsome* to describe himself, either. The only person who ever called him *handsome* was his mother, and she’s totally biased, Ryan knew. Maybe Haley has a vision problem, he thought, in a lame attempt at internalized humor.

Ryan ignored the ‘retard’ comment, “If you’ll drop a hint to Haley about our, you know, maybe our getting together for a coke or something,” Ryan said to Lily, “I’d sure appreciate it.”

“...a coke or something’? Maybe you two should just go ahead and get married,” Lily chided Ryan.

“Really, really funny, Lily, like a broken crutch, or a hearse with a flat tire. Now you’re just being dumb,” Ryan said.

Lily laughed, long and with gusto. Ryan stood there with his brow wrinkled.

The following Monday night Ryan walked to First Baptist Church for the Explorer Scout meeting. This was the first time the troop had been together since they returned to Columbus from summer camp.

“Men,” Mr. Ford began, “this troop brought a great deal of distinction to itself during last week at summer camp. I’m proud of all of you.” Mr. Ford went on to describe how many in the troop had met the qualifications for a variety of Red Cross waterfront awards; ten of Ryan’s fellow scouts had met the requirements for 34 merit badges; two senior members had been admitted to the Order of the Arrow.

As Mr. Ford read the name of each scout there was much applauding and whooping. When the ceremonial name reading and medal awarding was finished, Mr. Ford announced that there were

refreshments, and he turned to the kitchen-serving window. As the serving window rolled up, Ryan could see Mr. Foster standing behind the counter, a variety of ice cream tubs in front of him.

The scouts needed no directions about the serving of the refreshments so they walked double-time to line up for their ice cream. Ryan was toward the back of the line, right behind Darren Foster.

“Hi, Darren,” Ryan said, tapping Darren on the shoulder.

Darren turned to see who was behind him. “Hey, Ryan,” Darren said, “how you doin’?”

“Okay, I guess,” Ryan said, “but I’m not looking forward to the beginning of school.”

“Me neither,” Darren laughed. “But, I think my sister will look forward to seeing you more, you know, when school starts up.”

“Really?” the surprised Ryan said.

“Sure,” Darren replied. “Haley’s pretty private, you know, but the other day she asked me like whether I knew much about you since we’re in scouts together. A simple question like that from my sister means a lot more than she’s actually saying.”

Ryan almost gabbled Darren around the shoulder to give him a big hug, but decided he'd better not. "That's nice," Ryan said instead. He thought, Darren must think I'm thickheaded since I didn't add much

They talked about summer scout camp, naming the activities they liked and didn't like, but Ryan really wanted Darren to tell him more about Haley.

"Step it up," someone behind Ryan and Darren shouted. They had been so deep in conversation that they hadn't realized the line leading to the ice cream had moved a good five places ahead of them. Darren and Ryan closed the gap, took the ice cream Mr. Foster handed them, then they went in different directions to look for a place to sit.

Ryan sat at the end of a table and stared at his styrofoam bowl of ice cream, not sure what flavor it was because his attention was focused elsewhere. He replayed the mental recording of his conversation with Darren and decided, given what Darren said about Haley's comments about him, the beginning of the school year might be something he could look forward to with a smile after all.

13

The Wests moved to an acreage in the country three weeks before classes were to resume at Mark Twain Middle School. Tyler would attend a rural school outside the Columbus city limits.

This was a change in his life that Ryan recognized as almost tragic. Tyler had always been there to help Ryan to deal with those situations that had potential embarrassments.

Tyler was always there to tie Ryan's shoes, to help Ryan put his right hand in a mitten or pocket, to help him get his feet in his Wellington snow boots, to help him put on his ear muffs or stocking cap, depending on the severity of the temperature outdoors, or to put a worm on the hook of Ryan's fishing pole. These were simple tasks, unless they had to be accomplished with one hand.

Ryan wasn't so self-absorbed that he selected his friends merely on the basis of how many two-handed chores they could do for him. It was a question, rather, of his feelings of trust and his comfort level. Ryan was embarrassed, and sometimes ashamed, to ask anyone to help him with a menial chore, unless the person was a close friend.

Long-time friends understood Ryan's needs, he knew, and wouldn't make fun of him when he asked for help. When one of those friends moved out of Ryan's life, uncertainties and anxieties moved in.

Over the years Ryan's parents had tried to dissuade him from believing he might be the object of contemptuous or hurtful humor. "People will be happy to help you," they had said many, many times. "Just ask them."

"I don't think so," Ryan had replied just as often.

Ryan returned to his second year at Mark Twain with Bug being his closest friend, since Tyler had moved. It didn't take long for their friendship to deepen. They became inseparable; when people would meet only one of them, they'd ask, "Where's Bug?" or, "Where's Ryan?" Bug or Ryan always knew where the other one was, a fact that surprised no one.

Bug and Ryan also became primary confidantes for each other. Ryan had already told Bug about the Mildred Jacobson Math Drama, despite his mother's cautions about telling no one about the fist banging!

Bug had already asked Ryan whether he was growing pubic hair. Are Fiona Jenkins' boobs real, they wondered? When might they shave their facial hair for the first time? Does the first shave stimulate faster beard growth? If you could do it with anyone at Mark Twain, who would it be? Should we try out for the basketball team? Who's the smartest person we know? Ryan had also asked Bug for his opinion of Haley Foster because, as he confided, he thought she was pretty special.

Their discussions ranged from the perfectly normal questions regarding social, psychological, and sexual development, to some urban myths that have limited bases of fact but have maintained their popularity generation after generation. Ryan also had some questions from another category.

"Bug," Ryan would ask, "do you think I could be another Pete Gray?" Pete Gray lost his right arm in a childhood accident and was a one-armed pitcher who made it to the baseball big leagues. Ryan envied those classmates who had an idea, no matter how germinal, about a potential career. Not seeing many one-armed role models, Ryan fell back on baseball card trivia. Being a special friend, Bug assured Ryan he had the right stuff to be a big league

pitcher. “Lefties are always needed in the big leagues,” Bug would say, shoring up his support for Ryan, “and you’re a lefty. You’ll make it.”

Hello baseball fans, this is the St. Louis Cardinals television network, and here to bring you tonight’s game is the Cardinals play-by-play announcer, the Cards former third baseman, Scooter Jensen!

Hi, everybody, this is Scooter Jensen in St. Louis and do we have a game for you tonight! Welcome to tonight’s game, the seventh and deciding game of the I-80 World Series between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Kansas City Royals.

The starting pitcher for the Royals for game number seven is right-hander Ricardo Graham, a 15-year veteran who has 267 wins during his MLB career, 22 of those victories coming this year. He is hot and the Cards need to be ready for Graham’s fastball, clocked as fast as 96-miles per hour.

Ryan Graves, a relative unknown lefty, will be on the mound for the Cardinals. Graves was called up for post-season play from the Cardinals’ Triple-A franchise in Memphis, so the Royals haven’t

seen his stuff. We're told Graves is the complete package with a 95-mph fastball, a wicked curve, an effective slider, and a change-up that's almost impossible to hit.

Graves had an 18-3 record at Memphis, and perhaps the most remarkable thing about him is he's a one-armed player, owing to a childhood disease leaving him with a paralyzed right arm. This youngster is unbelievable. It's going to be a great game. Stay tuned. And now, a word from Budweiser beer, the American lager.

The mall represents a giant opportunity in an individual's growth and development today because it's the first place many adults will allow their children to go to alone.

It starts simply. While the mother is shopping for a dress at Macy's, the son or daughter will say, "Mom, can I go next door and look at the new cell phones?" the mother says, "Yes, but be back in 30 minutes."

Yelling "Okay," the child is off and running, goes to look at the new cell phones, says to the clerk, "No thank you, I'm just looking," and pretends that mother isn't next door.

In only a matter of days or weeks, the request for individual responsibility and freedom is phrased differently: “Mom, Carrie is going to the mall to look for some new jeans and wants to know if I can go? Carrie’s mom will drive us there and pick us up. Can I go, please?”

Mom, sooner or later, will approve the request.

The purchase of the jeans takes 10 minutes, leaving the remainder of the allotted time for all of those other activities similar adolescents are engaged in on the town square in rural America. The social and commercial processes and products are the same; only the size of the arena of activity differs.

It was against this background that Bug said to Ryan, “Let’s go to the mall and see what’s going on.” Having nothing more pressing on his Saturday morning schedule, Ryan agreed, “Let’s go.”

Bug and Ryan secured their bicycles at the bike stand by the west entrance to the Galleria Mall then entered the roof-covered marvel of a synthetic outdoor shopping arena.

They stopped by the hot pretzel stand first, delicately squirting mustard on the soft, salty treat, bought a soft drink, then sat on an available bench. Watching the crowds walk by, Bug and

Ryan were surprised when two familiar faces emerged from the human mosaic: Lily and Haley.

Bug motioned to Ryan: you have mustard on your upper lip. Ryan didn't get it. Bug leaned toward Ryan with a napkin in his hand and tried to wipe away the excess mustard. Ryan dodged, not knowing what Bug was trying to accomplish, bumping into an older woman and dislodging the armful of packages she was trying to wrestle back to the parking lot. All of them fell onto the floor.

An embarrassed Ryan helped her pick up the boxes and bags and arrange them in some semblance of order.

Lily and Haley were watching this slapstick comedy routine, their hands covering their mouths but not tightly enough to completely muffle their squeals of laughter. As the reassembled woman resumed her walk toward the parking lot, Bug tried to break the ice: "Been here long?" he asked Lily and Haley.

"No," Lily answered, "maybe half an hour."

Trying to regain his psychic balance, Ryan turned to Haley, "Shopping for anything special?" he asked.

"Yes, anything on sale," Haley said, "we're bargain hunters."

There was no mistaking Haley's delight in seeing Ryan, despite his inelegant encounter with the woman and her shopping bags. Ryan saw the gleam in Haley's eyes, and looked away. He didn't want her to think he was staring at her too long.

His sideways glance didn't last long. When he returned his eyes to Haley she was still looking at him, and with a special smile he thought.

As soon as the girls excused themselves ---"We've got to go; we have only 15 more minutes," --- Ryan and Bug returned to their bicycles. "Man," Ryan said, "what a stroke of luck! I never thought I'd see Haley today."

"You're right," Bug offered, "this is your lucky day. You make a fool of yourself knocking down a woman at the mall and Haley smiles at you for being good-looking."

Ryan jabbed Bug's shoulder, they both laughed uproariously, retrieved their bikes, and pedaled home. Ryan thought that this had been a special Saturday morning.

14

Ryan was convinced Haley had a special feeling for him. When he and Bug had accidentally met Lily and Haley at the mall a couple of months go, Haley had smiled at him non-stop. That's what he persuaded himself to believe.

Smiles are expressions of pleasure, he argued, therefore, Haley was revealing her inner feelings of happiness, possibly delight. Ryan wouldn't have entertained any suggestions or evidence to the contrary.

If anyone had pointed out that some smiles, like the one depicted in da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, are difficult to interpret, Ryan would know that Haley's smiles, as far as Ryan was concerned, weren't vague, at all.

Had anyone tried to explain to Ryan that in the animal kingdom the baring of teeth, even when it's somewhat like a smile, may in fact, be a snarl, a threat or a warning, Ryan would have said, "No, you're wrong."

Ryan was certain that Haley's smiles at the mall were for his benefit, telling him, "Ryan, you are really cute. I'm pretty sure I like you."

As the Thanksgiving holiday approached, Ryan had a brainstorm. Flushed with the success of his first meeting with Haley outside of school when he and Bug were hanging out at the mall, Ryan called Bug.

“Bug,” Ryan opened the conversation, “I have a great idea.”

“You’re going to convince the school board to adopt a five-month school year?”

Ryan groaned, “Of course not, stupid. This is serious.”

“So is a five-month school year,” Bug replied. “But, go head, let’s hear it,” he said, “I’m all ears.”

Ryan began, “Wouldn’t it be cool if you and I accidentally met Lily and Haley at the Heartland Theater at the mall? I could spend 90 minutes with her and maybe, just maybe, I might hold her hand.”

“Since when did a simple smile mean ‘I love you with all my heart, Ryan?’” Bug questioned.

“I think Haley really does like me,” Ryan asserted. He was also thinking it would be easier for someone to have romantic feelings for him in the darkness of a movie theater where his right

arm would blend in with the surrounding black, and she wouldn't see it.

According to the plan, Bug called Lily. "Lily," Bug started to explain, "I'm really calling for Ryan. He'd like to see Haley again."

"I can well imagine," Lily said, "he's been interested in Haley since the first week of school last year."

"Ryan, who is really Mr. Casanova, thinks it would be great if the four of us would be at the mall at the same time to see a movie at The Heartland. What do you think?"

"I'll ask Haley," Lily said, "and I'll let you know."

Ryan was less than pleased when Bug gave the report about his conversation. "When, when is she going to ask Haley if she wants to meet at the movies? Next week, next year?"

"You know Lily as well as anybody at Mark Twain knows her," Bug said. "I'm sure she'll talk to Haley soon. I'm betting she wants to get this movie-thing with Haley taken care of soon, or else you'll be unbearable. All of us know when you're in a snit. That's a bad place to be in for everybody around you!"

Three days later Ryan came into the house from delivering his newspapers. His mother was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

Another one of his favorite meals. It's hard to disguise the aromas of Italian sausage, garlic, basil and oregano: spaghetti and meatballs!

Ryan had heard his father sing "In heaven there is no beer, that's why we drink it here . . ." Ryan knew, however, that spaghetti and meatballs were in heaven, most likely served once a week.

"Son," his mother called to him, "Bug called not 10- to 15- minutes ago. He wants you to call him."

After Ryan finished washing up for dinner, he called Bug, "What's up," Ryan asked?"

"I talked to Lily after school today. Haley can't meet us at the mall for a movie."

"What did she say," Ryan asked?

"Here's what Lily told me: I told Haley that Ryan wants to meet her soon, along with you and me, of course, at the movies. I asked if she was okay with this plan."

"No, I can't go," was all she said, then she had to hang up the phone so that she could help her mother with something."

"Sorry," Bug said. "I was hoping Lily's news would be better."

“Well, yeah, me too,” Ryan said, clearly disappointed.

He tried to enjoy his evening meal with his usual gusto for spaghetti and meatballs, but he couldn't quite raise his pleasure meter to its customary level. He thanked his parents for the meal, carried his dirty dishes to the kitchen, and then went to his bedroom to think things through.

“What's going on,” he asked himself, sprawled over his bed? “I see Haley at the mall and she seems happy to see me. Then she shoots down the movie plan. Maybe I expected too much.”

Ryan sat up and reached for his cell phone. He dials Lily's familiar number, and a voice answers, “Hello.”

“Hello Mrs. Hollister, this is Ryan. Is Lily home?”

“Hello Ryan, dear,” Mrs. Hollister said, “she just quit a call on her cell phone. I'll call her. You need to stop by someday after school; we haven't seen you for too long.”

“It's hard for me to come by after school because of my paper route, Mrs. Hollister; but, I'll see you at church Sunday.”

Lily finally wrested the phone from her mother. “Hello,” she said?

“Hey Lily,” Ryan began, “Can you help me out a little bit?”

“Of course,” Lily said. “What is it you either need or want to know about Haley?”

“It’s all screwed up,” Ryan complained. “I thought she liked me, the way she smiled at me at the mall. Then when we try to set up a meeting at the movies, she just says ‘No,’ and that seems to be all there is to the idea.”

“Ryan, don’t be such a doofus. I know Haley likes you. A single ‘No’ isn’t a catastrophe. It isn’t ‘The End.’”

“Well, it seemed pretty final to me,” Ryan commented, “but I’ll try again if you think it’s worth the effort.”

15

Just a few weeks later the youth group at Asbury United Methodist Church was planning its annual Christmas party. The various committees --- entertainment, music, games, decorations, and food ---- gave their reports and everything seemed to be in order.

With two weeks to go before the party, Lily stopped Ryan after church. “Why don’t you invite Haley to the Christmas party,” she asked? “I know she’s interested in you.”

Forgetting his earlier disappointments with Haley, Ryan decided calling her to invite her to the Christmas party was a good idea . . . as soon as he got home from church, in his room where he would have some privacy.

Calling Haley about the party was safe. What is there about a church Christmas party she could possibly object to?

After Ryan’s dad parked their car in the driveway, Ryan dashed to his room. Sprawled out on his bed, he carefully pushed the touch-tone buttons on his cell phone, “Hello, Haley, this is Ryan.”

“Well Hi, Ryan, it’s good to hear from you,” Haley answered.

Ryan explained about the Christmas party at his church, told her who would be there, a list that included many of her friends, at that she'd be home by 11:30 p.m.

“Let me go check with my parents,” Haley said.

She returned in less than four minutes. “I’m sorry, Ryan, but I can’t go,” Haley said. “but it was nice of you to ask me.”

“You can’t go,” Ryan asked?

“No, I can’t go.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said and then he disconnected the call without waiting to hear Haley’s reply. Ryan thought to himself: she couldn’t have asked her parents whether she could go. It didn’t take enough time for her to ask them. I’ll bet she didn’t want to go. Why didn’t she tell me the truth? Why the lead-me-on smiles? Why lie to me? Why doesn’t she like me?

Ryan decided he would pass on the church Christmas party. He wasn’t trying to make a statement; he just didn’t feel like going to a party where most people would be having fun, and he’d still be in the dumps because of what he interpreted as one more rejection from Haley.

Bug and Ryan discussed the rejections thoroughly, trying to resolve the disconnect between Haley's ultra-nice behavior with Ryan which were followed by the rejections, the movie and the Christmas party.

"Lily has said all along that my interest in Haley was 'mutual,'" Ryan had said to Bug. "Was she telling me the truth?" do you think.

"Haley is shy, sure, but she talks to Lily, I know, based on some other things Lily has said," Ryan complained. "If anybody knows what's on Haley's mind it would be Lily. Lily was the first friend Haley found at Mark Twain."

Neither Ryan nor Bug had an answer to the Haley perplex.

The school year moved ahead, anyhow, nature paying little attention to adolescent angst. Ryan saw Haley several times during the year and tried to look away before they established eye contact.

Sometimes Haley was faster than Ryan; before he could avert his eyes from her, she would give him a friendly smile. Once or twice she even waived. Ryan started to think that possibly he had misjudged Haley, but then he would remind himself that only

mentally ill people enjoyed rejection, so he kept his emotions in check.

Lily was wondering why Ryan's interest in Haley, once full of ardor, had cooled so fast. "What happened, Ryan?" Lily had asked several times, "I thought you and Haley were going to become an item?"

"Nothing's changed," Ryan would answer, "I think you just misinterpreted me. I never was really that interested in her." Ryan knew this was a lame answer, but he didn't want to discuss his inability to develop a connection with Haley. Not even with Lily, who had been his friend longer than anyone else on the whole planet.

Down deep Ryan was afraid to approach a possible reason for Haley's behavior. But, it was an old but familiar bugaboo, and it kept raising its head.

Maybe Haley's parents had seen Ryan and Haley talking at a school event; did they ask Haley, "Who was that young man you were talking to, the one with the small arm? What's his story?"

That could have embarrassed Haley. Avoiding the embarrassment would be easy for her; by-pass its root cause.

Ryan went through the remainder of the school year satisfactorily. His grades were in that broad range of *acceptable*, mostly C's and B's. Boy Scouts provided a healthy and creative outlet for him. He breezed through his newspaper deliveries like an old pro. He and his parents maintained their pattern of regular attendance at Asbury United Methodist Church. Ryan and Lily were still friends, but Ryan never mentioned Haley.

Summer came and went, a montage of fairly happy memories for Ryan. He and Bug went fishing, bike riding, playing baseball, and watching movies at the mall. They experimented with cigarettes. They went swimming and had great tans, they thought.

Ryan told his parents he'd like to stop delivering newspapers; they told him could retire at summer's end, August 31. School began the day after Labor Day.

A couple of times during the summer he saw Haley. One time he was arriving at the Columbus Municipal Swimming Pool and he saw Mrs. Foster driving through the exit with a carload of girls, including Haley. His chest tightened a little when he saw her. Her blond hair was bobbing up and down on the sides, and she was

smiling. Ryan always thought she had a great smile; her smile was usually a bit tentative, but it was cute nevertheless.

The second time he was walking toward his parents' furniture store; they wanted him to dust all the furniture on display on the second floor of Graves' Furniture Company.

As he was walking east on Main, he looked ahead and saw Haley walking toward him, headed west on Main.

With no place to go but straight ahead, they neared each other. "Hi Ryan; having a good summer?" Haley began.

She slowed down, as if to stop and chat. Ryan didn't break his stride and he walked past her saying "Oh, it's okay, I guess."

Ryan wanted very much to turn around to see if she had stopped, still hoping for a conversation maybe. Plus, he wanted to kick himself. His reply to Haley was curt and rude, he knew. Why did he behave so stupidly? Haley was, after all, a nice person. She's as attractive as ever, he thought.

Next time, Ryan thought, next time I'll be nicer. Next time, I'll smile more; I'll stop and chat. I still like her.

16

Ryan told Mr. Higbee around the middle of July he was going to quit his newspaper delivery route August 31. That would give Mr. Higbee ample time to find Ryan's replacement; it would also give Ryan a few vacation days before school started.

During his short vacation both he and Bug slept late, went to the mall almost every day and saw a couple of movies. And, they talked about their friends and about school.

The opening day of school wasn't nearly as threatening this fall. Ryan walked to school by himself, his friend Tyler having established himself as a leader at his new school out in the county. He met Bug right away outside Mark Twain. They stood apart from the crowds gathering at the doors, surveying the new students.

"Did we look that scared and that geeky when we started school at Mark Twain?" Bug asked Ryan. "You did," Ryan said, "but I didn't."

"The hell, you say," Bug replied. They both laughed that kind of gentle chortle enjoyed by two close friends. When you add up all the advantages and disadvantages, they concluded, it's more fun to be an upperclassman in school.

Ryan either knew or knew about all of his teachers in his final year at Mark Twain Middle School; the teacher assessment grapevine is a busy, if not valid or reliable, activity. He and Bug had two classes together and they both had 6th period physical education, giving them extra time to shower and change clothes, which was very important for Ryan. He knew right away he wouldn't have to worry about who would tie his tennis shoes: Bug. No problems with school so far, Ryan was thinking.

Lily was in Ryan's social studies class. It was good to see her since the only time he saw her over the summer was at church, a place where unsolicited conversations are stopped with one arched eyebrow from a mother.

After church one Sunday Lily and Ryan walked together to the parking lot behind the church where they would join up with their parents for the ride home.

"I'm glad we have a chance to talk before our parents show up," Lily said in a hushed if not mysterious voice.

"I'm serving as a messenger for someone," Lily continued, in her *sotto voce*. "Haley has asked me for some advice, but I think you're the best person to answer her question."

“Oh, what’s the deal? She asked you the question, not me,” Ryan said. “What makes you think I can provide a better answer than you can?”

“I think you have a better answer because her question is about you,” Lily said.

“About me?” Ryan asked, mustering up a quizzical expression.

“I think you might like what she asked me,” Lily began. “Haley and her family are members at First Christian Church. The youth group is having a Halloween Party.”

“So, are they running out of spooks and Haley wants me to balance the supply and demand?” Ryan asked in a sarcastic manner.

“Why are you being such a smart ass? Haley asked me whether I thought you would attend the Halloween party if she invited you,” Lily explained, trying to be patient with her long-time friend.

“Oh, okay. So, what did you tell her?”

Lily put her hand on her hips, “I told you just a few minutes ago I thought you were the best person to answer her question, not me. I haven’t told her anything.”

Ryan tried not to look either too surprised or too pleased. He had thought about Haley over the summer vacation and he hoped they might communicate better when school opened in the fall. After the last time they met on the street he promised he wouldn't be rude again. He remembered reminding himself she was not only nice, but also really good-looking.

Ryan smiled to himself. The conversation with Lily was a good omen.

“Tell her yes, I'd like to go to the party,” Ryan said.

“I will,” Lily chirped, “I was hoping you'd say yes.”

Ryan's parents were scrunching along in the parking lot gravel toward their car; Lily's parents were a convenient 10- to 12-yards behind them. Everybody gravitated toward their family automobiles, expressing social niceties about how good the sermon was and how pleasant the mid-October weather had been.

“How was Lily today?” Mrs. Graves said, readjusting her seat belt in preparation for the ride home.”

“Real good, for sure. As a matter of fact we had a great talk,” Ryan said, in an unusually forthcoming answer to his mother's

question. Ryan's reply wasn't lost on Mrs. Graves who was fully aware of what was for Ryan downright talkative.

She glanced at Mr. Graves, who was similarly surprised by Ryan's borderline effusiveness. Mr. Graves had a what-in-the-world-is-going-on-and-I-think-I-know expression on his face.

Both of the Graves looked straight ahead saying nothing but they were silently pleased. The Graves and Hollister families had been friends forever. Ryan and Lily had been friends since birth; they grew up in the same church. Now they attend the same school.

Seeing their son in an intense conversation with Lily Hollister couldn't have pleased them more; neither could it have been more appropriate, in their judgment. Maybe there's a twosome here, they thought approvingly

17

Bug had plans for Halloween. He was going to his older brother's house to help give candy to the trick or treaters. Bug's sister-in-law was a nurse and was on duty Halloween night; Bug's brother had a broken ankle. Bug had retired from trick or treating last year and was happy this year to help his brother.

Bug and Ryan usually teamed up on decisions like dropping out of the trick or treat business, so Ryan's mother was surprised when Ryan came upstairs from the basement asking the whereabouts of his father's old baseball uniform. Mr. Graves had played baseball on an independent minor league team when he was a younger man and somehow came home with a uniform with *Merchants* across the chest and the number 6 on the back.

"Why in the world do you want that old thing?" Ryan's mother laughed.

"Halloween party tonight," Ryan said.

"And you want to go as a baseball player?" Mrs. Graves asked.

"Yeah," Ryan mumbled.

"Is this party at school?" Mrs. Graves wanted to know.

“Nope. First Christian Church,” Ryan answered in a minimalist way.

“Well now, that sounds nice,” Mrs. Graves cooed. “Are you going by yourself?”

“Meeting somebody there,” Ryan replied.

Mrs. Graves decided she had questioned Ryan about the Halloween party close enough to the edge of his comfort zone, beyond that zone adolescents become even more uncommunicative.

She believed, furthermore, that she already knew the identity of the person Ryan was meeting at the party: it had to be Lily. Ryan and Lily must have been talking about the Halloween party in the parking lot at church a few weeks ago.

Maybe the same person at First Christian invited them to the party.

“Come with me,” Mrs. Graves said to Ryan as she started down the steps to the basement. “I’ll show you where the uniform is.”

Ryan’s Halloween costumes always had a common feature: one year he was an Army soldier with his right arm in a sling; one year he was a pirate with his right arm in a sling; one year he was a

skier with his right arm in a sling. Any of these characters could've had a broken arm in actual life, and Ryan wanted to disguise himself and his arm. He was always trying to work the ostrich strategy.

Haley was in the fellowship hall at First Christian Church, waiting and watching for Ryan. The room was filling with people, making Haley and her friends at the church happy. "Good crowd, huh," Tom Hudson said to Haley as he walked by her.

By the time Haley could form the words, "Sure is a good crowd" Tom had already walked past her.

As if on cue, Ryan walked through the door, scanning the room to find Haley. She saw him first and walked purposefully toward him to greet and welcome him to the party.

"Hi, Ryan. Good costume," Haley said to Ryan, in the baseball uniform and, smiling, Ryan said in return, "Ditto. Who are you tonight? Cinderella or Little Bo Peep?"

"Whatever the judges say. If I can win as either character I'll be happy. But, by the time the party's over and I've helped with the clean up, I'll probably be Old Mother Hubbard," Haley said, with a wry smile.

“I really like your costume,” Ryan said, “it’s flattering. Looks good.”

Realizing he had said more than he might have wished, or more than what might have been comfortable for Haley to hear, Ryan said, “Let’s go get an apple.”

In one corner of the fellowship hall two types of bobbing for apples were available. There were six tables with four plastic tubs filled with water on every table. There were apples floating in the water. Some apples were hanging by a stretch of fishing line from a heating and cooling ducts.

The apple corner of the hall was busy with a horde of younger partygoers, so Ryan and Haley sat at a nearby card table with four empty chairs. Several of their friends walked by, stopping long enough for a short visit, and then went in their way.

Between Ryan and Haley conversation was relatively quiet throughout the evening. Eventually it was time for the evening’s finale, the presentation of costume awards for the most creative, the scariest, and some other categories that got lost in background noise.

With squeals and shrieks of surprise and joy, the winners went to the front of the fellowship hall to collect their awards: a

movie gift card, a free pizza from Papa Murphy's, a 12-pack of soda, five visits to a tanning salon, and three posters of some singers Ryan couldn't identify.

The DJ turned off the music, someone announced the party was over and thanked everyone for coming.

“Well, I guess that's it,” Ryan said to Haley.”

“I guess that's it,” Haley echoed. “I am glad you could come.”

“Me too,” Ryan said. “I guess I'll see you at school Monday.”

“I guess so,” Haley said.

Ryan started walking to the exit, wondering what Haley sounded like when she was happy, pleased, or even excited. He had no idea, based on the conversations between the two of them this evening. He couldn't help but wonder whether she'd had a good time. But, she did, he reminded himself, invite him to the party, and everyone knows how shy she is. Maybe that's why she wasn't talkative.

Haley extended both of her hands toward Ryan. He grasped her right hand. She started walking backwards while still facing him, toward the door leading stairs to the sanctuary.

“Where are we going?” Ryan asked.

“You’ll see soon enough. Haley replied. She had turned and was no longer facing him but was leading him up the stairs.

When they arrived at the top of the stairs, Haley opened the door and they stepped into the dark sanctuary.

“I know what you want,” Haley whispered to Ryan.

“Huh? What?” Ryan said in a confused tone.

She stood up straighter increasing her height by an inch or so and kissed Ryan on the mouth.

18

In the halls and classrooms of Mark Twain Middle School, everyone was looking forward to the Thanksgiving holiday. Christmas and the holiday vacation followed. After the Halloween party at Haley's church, Ryan hoped Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the holiday mid-year vacation would hurry so that he might have an opportunity to see Haley.

Haley was still a mystery to Ryan, an attractive, sweet, quiet, and shy mystery. He was racking his brain trying to think of any excuse that would bring them together again during the holidays. Tom Hudson, a member at Haley's church, came to the rescue.

The last Saturday in December Ryan and Bug were hanging out at the mall. They had seen a few faces from Mark Twain, and then up walked Tom Hudson. Ryan had met Tom at the First Christian Church Halloween party.

"Hi guys," Tom began. "What's up?"

"Not much," Ryan answered. "How was your Christmas?"

“Pretty good. The normal quota of underwear and socks, but one big surprise,” Tom reported.

“What was your surprise,” Bug asked?

“My Dad bought a 54-inch flat-screen TV, with HD and surround sound, for the family. The damn thing fills up most of one wall in our downstairs family room; it’s humongous” Tom said excitedly. “Dad really surprised all of us!”

“Did your Dad strike oil in your backyard? Those big bad-boy TVs are expensive,” Ryan said.

“Beats me,” Tom said, “but here’s the good part: mom says I can have some friends over for brunch and to watch the parades on the new TV. “

“Dad gets the TV in the afternoon for the bowl games, but I get it in the morning for the parades. Can you guys come? You can stay for the bowl games if you’d like.”

After both Bug and Ryan allowed as how they’d like to attend the party, Tom screwed up a wry, wrinkled smile on his face and said to Ryan, “I’ve already asked Haley and she’s coming, too. I thought you might like to know that.”

Ryan smiled; his opportunity to see Haley during the semester break was taken care of. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Tom Hudson, Ryan thought to himself!

New Year's Eve was a quiet one at the Graves household. Mrs. Graves had a doozy of a bad cold, brought on by all of the activities at church, the frenzy of Christmas shopping, and all the doings associated with a couple of big social events with two clubs the Graves belonged to. She was exhausted.

Ryan went to an afternoon movie with Bug, and then stayed home for the rest of the day and evening. He laughed when he told his friends who called him that afternoon that he was mom-sitting New Year's Eve.

Ryan was out of bed early on the first day of the New Year and there was absolutely no sound to be heard. His parents were taking advantage of the New Year's Day holiday and were sleeping in; there was no sound of traffic on Cutland Street. Silence is to New Year's Day what noise is to the 4th of July.

Ryan showered and dressed, went to the kitchen for his cold cereal, milk, and juice, then went to the family room to watch TV. He saw a commercial reminding him the Sugar Bowl Parade telecast

would begin at 10:00 a.m., the time he was due at Tom Hudson's house. He had 45-minutes to fill before it would be time to leave for the TV party.

He turned the TV off, reached for last night's newspaper, and then returned it to the coffee table. He had 43-minutes to fill with something. Ryan decided he would begin the New Year with a call to Haley, a rather bold proposition given his on-again off-again reading of Haley's interest in him. Is it too early to call? What the hell, he thought. What do I have to lose?

Ryan looked up Haley's telephone number then dialed it, hoping she would answer the ring. "Hello," he heard Haley answer. Great! She did answer!

"Happy New year, Haley. This is Ryan."

"Happy New Year to you, too," Haley answered.

"I hope I'm not calling too early. I wouldn't want the telephone's ringing to wake anybody," Ryan said apologetically.

"It's Okay," Haley said, not really answering Ryan's question.

I wonder what she means by *It's Okay*, Ryan thought? Her answer was very vague; did she mean to be vague? Not adept at

mind reading he asked Haley, “Are you still planning to go to Tom’s house to watch the Rose Parade?”

“Oh sure, but I have to leave by 10:45; my family is going to Uncle Fred’s for brunch. It’s a New Year’s Day tradition.”

Rats and screw it all, Ryan thought. He hadn’t counted on her leaving the party early. He had anticipated a longer time for them to be at the same place at the same time.

“Okay, then,” Ryan said, “I’ll see you at Tom’s house around 10:00.”

Ryan waited until it was time for him to walk to Tom’s house and as he ambled down Cutland Street he noticed again how quiet Columbus was on New Year’s Day. Most people must be sleeping late, he thought.

As he turned the corner to Tom’s street, Ryan saw Haley getting out of a car in front of Tom’s house. He looked at the watch on his wrist: 10:00 sharp. Haley saw Ryan walking toward her and waited for him on the sidewalk so that they could walk up to Tom’s door together.

As Ryan and Haley were walking together to Tom's door, Haley tripped on a large crack in the sidewalk, stumbling toward Ryan. Instinctively, Ryan caught her in his left arm, and then let go.

"Thanks for catching me," Haley said, "I almost made a grand entrance with skinned up knees and elbows."

"No sweat," Ryan said, realizing at he had just put his arm around Haley. Lord, Ryan prayed, let her trip just one more time before we ring the doorbell.

Haley rang the doorbell then Tom's mother, who ushered them in, took their coats, and pointed them toward the family room where the new TV was on display.

As soon as had they sat on the sofa directly across from the big TV screen the doorbell rang again signaling the arrival of more guests. Lily was in this second wave and walked straight across the room to greet Haley and Ryan.

Ryan scooted across the sofa pads, making room for Lily to sit between him and Haley. Haley, however, moved over to fill the space beside Ryan, leaving Lily a spot at the end of the sofa.

Happy is too weak to describe how Ryan felt. He realized that Haley had made a deliberate, conscious decision to sit beside him.

He was in ecstasy!

He and Haley sat there, watching the parade with its floats and marching bands, with Ryan sneaking peaks at his wristwatch, dreading the 10:45 Cinderella cut-off. He was hoping his watch and the time it was measuring would stop stone cold dead at the same time; he wanted to sit near Haley all afternoon, not for just 45-minutes.

“Excuse me,” Ryan said to Haley, as he stood up from the sofa.

“You’re coming back, aren’t you?” Haley asked.

“Sure,” Ryan said, “I’m just going to the food. Can I get you anything while I’m up? Anything to eat? To drink?”

“No, thanks,” Haley said. “remember I’m leaving from here to go to Uncle Fred’s for the Foster family’s New Year’s Day brunch.”

“Oh, yeah, uh, right,” Ryan said, pretending he’d forgotten all about Haley’s leaving when actually he had been thinking about the 10:45 deadline all morning.

Walking to the dining room where Mrs. Nash had set out several snacks, chips, and dips, and relishes, Ryan’s brain started buzzing; Haley had asked when he stood whether he was coming back to sit by her.

He was sure her question was expressing some genuine interest in him. This made him happy with the quality of his life. What a great way to start the New Year!

The remainder of Ryan's final year at Mark Twain was largely uneventful. He usually saw Haley in the halls between classes. Sometimes he would see her at scout meetings when the parents and families were invited to observe the award of merit badges.

Whenever Haley and Ryan saw each other they shared cautious semi-magnetic smiles.

The final event of the school year coincided with the recognition of those who were leaving Mark Twain for high school. The occasion concluded with most of the girls performing a traditional May Pole dance with long strands of colored cloths, weaving them in and out.

Ryan knew summer vacation would begin the morning after the May Pole dance, prompting him to suggest to his parents that after the ceremony they go somewhere for an ice cream celebration.

His parents agreed, thinking this was a good idea, and yes, they answered to Ryan's next question, you can ask Haley to join us.

Entering her number on his cell phone, once again Ryan was glad Haley answered his call. "Hi Haley, my parents and I are going

for ice cream next week after the Graduation Recognition ceremony. Would you like to go with us? We'll take you home when we're finished."

"No, I can't go," Haley answered quickly.

"You can't go?" Ryan asked, as if he hadn't heard her correctly.

"I can't go," Haley repeated.

"Okay, well, uh, uh, bye then," Ryan, said, taken aback by Haley's cool, matter-of-fact responses.

"Good bye," Haley replied.

Ryan was confused. She could have said, "I'm sorry I can't go," but she didn't. Why? Why didn't Haley ask her parents if she could go for ice cream with the Graves? Why did she answer so quickly? She didn't even say, "thanks for asking me," or anything else like that. How could she be so friendly at the Halloween Party and later at Tom's New Year's Day TV party and then be so short and curt now? Why do we smile at each other during the passing time between classes?

She's a mystery to me, Ryan thought. Immediately, however, he had a second thought: maybe I've been kidding myself and she doesn't like me so much after all.

The summer began at 7:45 the morning after the Recognition-May Pole ceremony. New neighbors had moved to Cutland Street and the father of the family, who introduced himself to Mr. Graves as Leonard Kingsley, stopped at the Graves on his way to work. He needed someone to mow his overgrown lawn since his mower was still in the moving van, some 400 miles away. He had seen that Ryan lived two houses up the street and thought he might be in the lawn mowing business.

"Ryan," Mr. Graves said as he opened the door to Ryan's room, "there's a gentleman here who wants you to mow his lawn. Can you throw on some pants and come talk to him?"

Ryan crawled out of bed, saw by the clock on his bedside table the time was 7:45, and he muttered something about sleeping in on the first day of summer vacation.

Rubbing his eyes, Ryan went to the front door where Mr. Kingsley was waiting. They exchanged "Good mornings" and other

niceties, then made their plans. Ryan would mow the lawn today and Mr. Kingsley would give him \$10.00.

Ryan went to the bathroom to wash up, then went to his room to put on some lawn mowing clothes. Lacking even the slightest bit of enthusiasm for his morning job, Ryan went to the kitchen for some breakfast.

Finishing his toast and juice, Ryan turned to his mother: “Mom, could I invite Tyler to come spend the day sometime this week? I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“I imagine so,” Mrs. Graves agreed. ”Let’s discuss it more after you’ve finished mowing Mr. Kingsley’s lawn.” Fair enough, Ryan thought, so he went to the garage to get the lawn mower, and pushed it to the Kingsley’s house.

He hadn’t mowed a complete lap around the outer perimeter of the Kingsley’s back yard when he reached up to his forehead to flick away a droplets of sweat from his eyebrows. He caught of glimpse of someone at the back door, clearly not Mr. Kingsley who had left some time ago for his work.

As Ryan made his rectangular paths through the tall grass, he glanced at the Kingsley’s house, seeing someone looking out the

sliding door leading to the deck. When Ryan moved his efforts to the front yard, the shadow-person moved to the front door.

He made two trips around the perimeter of the front yard, then the mower began to sputter and ran out of gas. Ryan walked back to his house, picked up the red plastic gasoline container and walked back to the Kingsley's.

There was a girl standing by the mower.

She is cute, Ryan thought to himself. I'll guess her height to be around 5-4, or 5-5, blond hair, her boobs are growing out, and she has a nice smile.

"Hello," the girl said, "I'm Emily Kingsley." Emily held out her hand toward Ryan; he took her hand and shook it. "I'm Ryan Graves. I live over there," he said, pointing to his house. "Your Dad hired me this morning to mow your lawn."

"Isn't it dreadful?" Emily asked rhetorically. "I don't think the grass has been cut for two months." "Or more," Ryan added. "I can usually mow a yard this size with one tank of gas."

"It was nice to meet you Ryan," Emily said, "I need to go in and unpack some more boxes. Dad wants all of the boxes unpacked

before my mother and brother arrive this weekend. By the way, where will you go to school this fall?"

"Columbus High School," Ryan answered, "it's the oldest and largest high school in town."

"Hey, that's great," Emily said, "me too. At least I'll know one person when school starts."

Ryan finished the Kingsley's yard, pushed the mower back to the garage, and then went inside to ask his mother again about inviting Tyler for a visit. Mrs. Graves thought it was a good idea for Tyler to come, so Ryan made the telephone call; the planning with Tyler took two minutes to schedule.

Tyler's Dad dropped him off at Ryan's house around 9:15 Friday morning. The guys sat on the lawn chairs on the front porch talking, catching up on each other's life events since Tyler's move.

"I'm a grade ahead of you now," Tyler reported, "I skipped a grade at the rural school and Columbus High has already accepted all my transfer credits."

This news from Tyler was about something Ryan couldn't fathom. How can someone skip a grade? How can anyone go from

grade 6 to grade 8? Or, from grade 7 to grade 9? Like many aspects of schools, Ryan thought this was odd.

Tyler was one of Ryan's best friends since forever and Ryan wouldn't say anything bad about Tyler, but down deep Ryan knew he was either as smart if not smarter than Tyler and the Columbus school system wouldn't allow him to skip a grade. Weird!

During the conversation about grade levels, Emily Kingsley came out of their house and walked across the street to their mailbox. Tyler saw her and said, "Whoa! Who's that?"

"New neighbor," Ryan answered, "her name's Emily, Emily Kingsley"

"Hey Auntie Em, where's Toto?" Tyler called to her.

"Tyler, don't do that," Ryan scolded, "she'll think we're a couple of low-life thugs. You don't yell at a good looking girl."

"I just did," Tyler laughed.

Emily looked up when she heard Tyler's yell; she waved, thinking it was Ryan who called to her. Ryan waved back, then stood up from his lawn chair. "C'mon Mister Smooth, let's go introduce you to Emily properly."

When the three of them were at the mailbox, Ryan said to Emily, “Emily, this is my friend Tyler; he’s the one who called to you.”

“Hi, Emily, I’m Tyler West, a friend of Ryan’s,” Tyler said, extending his right hand toward Emily for a handshake.

Emily replied with a dose of sarcasm and an extended hand, “I’m Emily Kingsley; “Well, Tyler, you must be one of Ryan’s shier friends, huh?”

“Not often,” Tyler smiled; I’m not often ‘shy’ I mean. Am I Ryan’s friend, yes.”

Emily smiled back. Ryan thought he was seeing a friendship being born . . . more than a friendship probably.

“Tyler, I think you’re a show-off,” Emily said. “Can we shake on that, too?”

“Let’s go back to my house and grab a coke,” Ryan said, interrupting the two flirts.

“No, let’s go to my house, “ Emily said, “It’s closer.”

“I agree with Emily,” Tyler said, “I’ll bet anyone with hands as soft as Emily’s will have a tidy house and a bunch of different kinds of cokes.”

Good Lord, Ryan thought! Quit it Tyler. You're making me sick.

20

The threesome walked across the street to the Kingsley's house without further debate. Tyler stepped ahead of Ryan and Emily, grabbed the latch on the screen door, opened it and said, with a flourish and an exaggerated bow, "Allow me, please."

Ryan understood at that moment how Tyler was able to skip a grade. The rural school had filled him with so much bullshit he could've convinced the school board to allow him to join the faculty as soon as he was able to spell a word like antidisestablishmentarianism, or grow hair on his legs, whichever came first.

Emily led the group to the kitchen, walked to the refrigerator, opened the door, and told the guys, "All the soft drinks are on the bottom self. Take your choice."

"Can I have a beer instead?" Tyler asked, seeing the green bottles beside the cans of cokes.

"Of course not, you fag," Emily said with a chuckle.

"Just asking," Tyler said to Emily, then turning to Ryan he said, "the hospitality here isn't what I thought it would be."

A smiling Emily gave Tyler a gentle punch to his shoulder. Ryan knew it wasn't a real punch; it was, rather, an acceptable way for her to touch Tyler. Tyler grabbed her fist and turned her arm around behind her back, holding her in a mock wrestling hold. Another safe touch, Ryan thought. These two aren't wasting any time getting to know each other.

As they walked toward the back door that led to the deck they walked past the Kingsley's family room. Tyler glanced through the door and stopped. "Is the piano in tune?" Tyler asked.

"Sure," Emily answered, "the tuner was here yesterday."

Tyler, can of coke in hand, went in the family room and sat on the piano bench. He rested his coke can on some sheet music on top of the piano. And then he started to play.

Tyler started slowly, playing bits and pieces of familiar hymns, then moved into some gospel riffs, followed by jazzed-up versions of popular, top-40 songs.

Tyler played for what seemed to be several hours. Emily and Ryan took turns singing solos and when they both knew the song, they would sing duets. Everybody had a memorable musical afternoon.

“I knew you played the guitar; when did you pick up the piano?” Ryan asked.

“At the same time mom taught me to play the organ,” Tyler answered.

“Oh, Tyler,” Emily cooed, “no one has ever made our piano sound like that. Please don’t stop.”

“I think I’d better start back to Ryan’s house. My Dad will be here soon to pick me up,” Tyler said. Tyler started toward the front door with Emily and Ryan behind him. Tyler opened the screen door, then everyone walked out to the front porch.

“Good bye, my sweet princes,” Emily said with her own inflated flourish and an embellished bow deeper than Tyler’s.

“C’mon Tyler, we need to get along,” Ryan said.

“I’m coming,” Tyler responded, then he turned to Emily, “do you mind if I call you sometime?”

“No, you can’t call me ‘Sometime.’ My name’s ‘Emily.’ Sure, you can call me anytime you’d like,” Emily replied.

“Okay, Miss Sometime, will you give me your telephone number,” Tyler asked, smiling in a proud-as-punch way, as if he had just created an original joke.

“Now I’ll really mind it if you don’t call me, since you have my number” Emily said, writing her number on the back of an envelope and handing it to Tyler.

She cocked her head a bit to the left and laughed gently. “I’ll know at last two people when school starts this fall.”

Damn, damn it all, Ryan thought, what have I done, introducing these two? I’ve made Tyler a monster.

Tyler’s Dad came to Ryan’s house at the agreed upon time to take Tyler home. “Thanks, Ryan,” Tyler said, “I had a great time. Let’s get together again, real soon.”

“I’m not the one you want to see ‘real soon,’” Ryan replied. “But we’ll get together, and next time bring your guitar, okay?”

Watching the West’s car pull away, Ryan was reminded how nice it feels to be with a friend like Tyler, a friend he’d known for years. Ryan didn’t need to be concerned about his arm or how he might appear to others. Familiarity with close friends brought Ryan a comfortable sense of protection. He liked that feeling.

Conversely, he hated it when he thought he had to explain his physical appearance to new people or new surroundings. Then he felt threatened and insecure.

He went inside to his room, thinking about Tyler and Emily and their instant attraction to each other, then his thoughts turned to Haley Foster, and his attraction to her.

Ryan hoped she was thinking about him, but down deep he doubted it. He was trying to admit to himself that she wasn't all that attracted to him.

21

A month later Tyler called, asking Ryan if he'd like to come out to the West's for an all-day visit. Ryan answered it would be great. The next morning Mr. Graves and Ryan left home early so that Mr. Graves would have time to take Ryan to Tyler's house before going to work.

"Hey Ryan," Tyler said as he opened the front door to greet Ryan. "We're just finishing breakfast; want some?"

"No thanks; already had breakfast," Ryan said as he followed Tyler to the breakfast room. The West's house was very fancy in Ryan's opinion. The house had a small extension off the kitchen, containing a table and four chairs; across the way was a separate dining room with fancier furniture. Ryan wondered how people decided which meals to eat where.

"Morning Mrs. West, Ryan said to Tyler's mom. "Hi Ryan," she replied, "it's good to see you; Tyler has been talking a lot about his visit with you at your house."

Yeah, I'll bet, Ryan thought. I'm not the one Tyler was interested in that day.

“Boys, this morning I’m going to go get some groceries at the new super market at the Galleria Mall. You want to go with me?”

“Sure, yeah,” they guys said in unison. “Help me clear away the breakfast dishes from the table and we’ll go,” Mrs. West said.

When the used plates, bowls, and silverware were put in the dishwasher, the cereal boxes and the toaster put in the cupboard, everyone went to the garage to get in the West’s car.

“This will take me about 45 minutes,” Mrs. West announced as she parked in a painted stall beside the super market. “Please be back here on time.”

The boys assured her they’d be back on time, acting a bit surprised that she would need to remind them about punctuality.

Parents! Ryan thought, don’t they get it that we can tell time, for Pete’s sake?

“Let’s go to Scheel’s Sporting Goods first,” Tyler said. “Dad said that for my birthday he’d buy me a .410 shotgun. Scheel’s has lots of guns and I’d like to do some looking.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ryan agreed, and turned right at the corner of the supermarket building. He and Tyler had taken no more

than 6-7 steps when they saw three people walking toward them.

Who is that, Tyler wondered? Two of them look familiar.

“Hey, Ryan. Hi, Tyler,” they called out. As they came into clearer view Ryan could see them better.

It was some guy with Lily on his right, her left arm interlaced with his right arm; Haley was on his left, her right arm linked through his left.

Who in hell is this guy, Ryan wondered? Ryan hadn't seen Haley all summer and now here she is with some guy Ryan's never seen.

Who is this jerk? Ryan's jealousy meter started to ratchet upwards. Soon they were near enough for conversation.

“Hi Ryan,” Haley said. “Are you guys shopping or just hanging out?”

Lily stood there smiling, saying nothing, looking back and forth at Tyler and Ryan. The Guy just stood there in total silence.

“I'm with Tyler and his mom; she's getting some groceries,” Ryan said.

“We’re going to Scheels. I’m looking for a new .410 shotgun,” Tyler said proudly. “It’s going to be a birthday gift from my folks.”

“C’mon ladies,” said The Guy, “we need to get along. I don’t mean to be rude but the cell phone store is way across the other side of the mall.”

Away went the arm-locked trio, saying in chorus how nice it was to see Ryan and Tyler, bye-bye, so long, and good-bye.

“Who was that guy?” Tyler asked.

“How the hell should I know,” Ryan shot back, obviously irritated.

“Whoa, whoa, take it slow,” Tyler said, “if your shorts are in a wad don’t blame me. I’m innocent.”

“You noticed that nobody introduced him, didn’t you?” Ryan asked.

“Frankly, I didn’t think much about it,” Tyler replied. “I assumed you knew who he was.”

“Hellfire no, I have no idea. Haley seemed to be on pretty damn good terms with him though.”

“Maybe he’s Lily’s friend,” Tyler suggested.

“Then why didn’t Lily introduce him to us?” Ryan wanted to know.

Tyler looked at Ryan, rolled his eyes and said to him, “Cool it, Ryan. This conversation is going nowhere. If you’re so damn fired up, don’t ask me anything about this guy, call Lily or Haley . . . ask anyone except me!”

“When people are ice skating in hell, then I’ll call Haley,” Ryan grumbled.

Tyler and Ryan hurried to Scheels trying to make the most of the time they still had. At Scheels Tyler looked at several .410’s and even two .20 gauge shotguns. Ryan stood off by himself, arms crossed over his chest, a petulant look on his face. He was in a dark place.

They walked to the parking lot and hooked up with Mrs. West for the ride home.

Ryan and Tyler spent the afternoon playing music on Tyler’s CD player, drinking cokes, and eating the chips that were left over from lunch. Ryan’s Dad arrived at 4:00 to take him home.

“Did you have a good day,” Ryan’s Dad asked. “Yeah, it was okay, I guess,” Ryan said moodily. Mr. Graves knew his son well

enough to know when continuing a conversation was not a good idea.

The trip to the mall with Tyler and Mrs. West was the only time Ryan saw Haley that summer. He thought about her. He thought about her a lot.

Sometimes he remembered her smiles and her special smiles in his direction. Other times he remembered her manner when declining his invitations; he especially remembered The Guy at the mall, thinking there must be a good reason the mystery man wasn't introduced.

Ryan reached in his pocket for is vibrating cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello Ryan, this is Haley. I hope I'm not interrupting anything important.”

“Hi Haley. No you're not interrupting anything, and even if you were I'd still want to talk to you.”

“Oh Ryan, you're so thoughtful . . . and sweet,” Haley said.

“It's easy for me to be that way when I talk with you. You know how special I think you are.”

“Yes, I do, and I’m happy you feel that way. All I can say is ‘Ditto.’” Haley replied. “I called because I want to apologize to you for my not introducing my cousin to you when we met at the mall this morning. Tyler was in such a hurry we ran out of talking time. I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness.”

“I didn’t think you were rude,” Ryan assured her.

“Well, at least now you that it was my cousin Trent with us, Ryan, and not a boy friend. I wouldn’t want you to wonder about the person who was with us. It would have bothered me a lot, and I mean a whole lot, if you thought that my cousin was a guy I liked,” Haley said, with that cute grin of hers that Ryan had come to enjoy so much.

“It’s you I like Ryan,” Haley said softly. “I like you more than you can imagine. If you were here, I’d show you how much.”

Bug and Ryan were, little by little, accepting the inevitability of the calendar and summer's passing. Columbus High School and the opening day of the new school year kept looming larger and larger.

Columbus High became an obsessive conversational topic between them.

Ryan's thoughts turned to his greatest dread with increased frequency as well. Once again he was approaching a circumstance where older students and the high school faculty didn't know him.

Ryan feared, as he had so many times in his life, that they would look at him and stare, wondering: What's happened to that kid? What's with the arm?

He had not learned that worrying and fretting seldom solved or cured a problem, whether real or imaginary. Nevertheless, he did, indeed, experience considerable anxiety about going to any new place, especially a new school. He had generated this anxiety ever since he was aware that people stared at him.

Sometimes, younger children would walk up to him and ask bluntly in their innocence: “What’s wrong with your arm?”

One time he overheard a smaller child ask her mother, “Why does he have a baby arm?”

The stares and the questions reminded him that he was *different*, and *different*, in Ryan’s view, was the same as *inferior*.

Ryan had two defenses that he had learned to use. One defense was his ostrich strategy; wear long sleeves, because if people can’t see his arm, it isn’t there. The other strategy was mental and it enabled Ryan to imagine that he didn’t look like what other people saw about him.

Rather, he imagined had the body type and physical appearance of a sleek tennis player, basketball player, gymnast, or baseball player.

Having this self-image helped him to see himself as a model, handsome specimen. It was a necessary strategy; this and the ostrich strategy helped Ryan to avoid many anxiety attacks.

Regardless of the coping strategies Ryan and other individuals invent for themselves, life goes on with all of its surprises, ambiguities, and predictables. The predictables are the

seasonal changes in the weather, summer vacation, the July 4th holiday, the Thanksgiving holiday, and the opening of school, definitely not a *holiday* in the minds of some students and teachers.

Neither Ryan nor Bug could delay the first day at Columbus High School. So, on the appointed date, Mr. Graves gave them a ride to CHS, but told them the ride was a school-opening, one-day luxury; after today they'd need either to walk or to find a ride with someone else.

Transitioning from middle school to high school isn't always easy for everyone, but it's still not as big a transition as the one from elementary school to middle school.

For example, Ryan and Bug knew to go to the main office to pick up their schedules and locker assignments. This was accomplished with little fanfare or hassle, except for the waiting in line.

Classes on the first day were limited to 15-minute introductory meetings; consequently, the guys were finished before noon, and then walked to downtown Columbus and headed for Broadway.

Moreland's Bookstore was busy with parents and students from all over Columbus trying either to get in to buy school supplies or trying to get out, having bought the items on their list.

Dick's Sporting Goods was equally as overrun with customers shopping for gym clothes, new sneakers, jock straps, and athletic socks.

Ryan and Bug didn't need anything being sold at either of these two stores, so they made their way to Dairy King and its sidewalk seating. They weren't the only CHS students to go for cokes at Dairy King; all of the seats at every table were taken. It was standing room only.

Ryan saw Tyler sitting with Emily at a table of older students. Tyler and Emily seemed to be having a good time; Emily put her hand on Tyler's shoulder every time she spoke to anyone. Tyler was holding Emily's hand when she wasn't talking; sometimes he put his hand on her thigh.

Jim Slater and Joe Decker were at a table with all of the most popular CHS first-year students. Thinking they would have little to no chance of finding a place to sit, Ryan and Bug went to one of the

service windows to place their orders: a medium root beer for Bug, a small energy drink for Ryan.

As they made their way back through the crowd to the sidewalk, there were Lily and Haley, just beginning to try to find a path to the service windows.

“Hi guys,” Lily said, “Have you ever seen such a crowd on Broadway?”

“Hello Lily,” Ryan said, then turning to Haley, he barely nodded to her, uttering a weak, “Haley.”

“Hi Haley, hi Lily,” Bug joined in. “this is one busy place. I wouldn’t advise your looking for a place to sit.”

“We’re not,” Lily laughed, “we gave that up half an hour ago.”

“That’s right,” Haley agreed, still looking at Ryan with her eyebrows wrinkled in curiosity. What kind of greeting was *that*, Haley wondered? Ryan was looking at the crowd and was oblivious to Haley’s looking at him.

Bug, Lily and Haley became a discussion trio while Ryan stood off three or four steps, sill pretending to be preoccupied

looking at the crowd. Lily quietly disengaged herself from Bug and Haley and walked over to Ryan.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?” Lily hissed to Ryan out the corner of her mouth.

“Nothing. Why? Should there be?”

Lily shook her head in disbelief. “You’re a real piece of work. You barely acknowledged Haley’s presence. This is a stupid way to show someone you like them. What is it with you, you dope?”

“What do you expect?” Ryan asked defensively. “I see her once this summer and she’s with you and some guy. Is he her newest interest? It looks to me like I’m out of the picture. I was pretty sure she didn’t like me anyway.”

“Ryan, you moron,” Lily laughed, “that was my older brother, back home from the mid-east, in Columbus for a visit!”

“Huh, what,” a stunned Ryan stammered. “Surely you’re kidding,” he said, almost pleading, to Lily.

“I am not kidding, and please don’t call me Shirley. Yes, he’s my brother” Lily said, still laughing, proud of her Shirley-joke.

“Oh man, I can’t believe it. I’ve gone through most of the summer thinking I had no chance with Haley because I saw the three of you --- especially the guy who turned out to be your brother, for Pete’s sake --- at the mall. I feel like a big idiot,” Ryan moaned.

“If it’ll make you feel any better, I’ll agree with you,” Lily said. “And, if you want a second opinion, you look like an idiot, too.”

“I sure do. Damn it! What can I do now?” Ryan asked.

“Haley still thinks you’re neat, at least she did before your icy, one-word greeting today,” Lily answered, “I’ll talk to her and try to clear up the misunderstandings.”

Ryan heaved a big sigh of relief. “Thanks Lily, thanks a lot. I’ll appreciate anything you can do. Let me know, please, after you’ve talked with her.”

“I will, and believe me Mr. Clueless Dude,” Lily said sarcastically, “you’ll owe me, big time.”

23

Lily called Haley that night to try to explain away Ryan's confusion and how he thought he fallen off Haley's radar screen.

Haley thought it was funny, told Lily so, and then they both had a big laugh.

"I'll say this about Ryan," Lily said after she had finished laughing, "I think you can appreciate how much he really likes you, given the intensity of his response to the Mall Mystery Man."

"You're right," Haley agreed, "I'm not upset. I'm flattered. And I still think he's neat and sweet. I really like him."

Lily couldn't wait to see Ryan to give him the good news, so she called him immediately. She explained that she had unraveled the confusion regarding Ryan's behavior and that as far as Lily could tell, Haley wasn't upset; to the contrary, "And I have this straight from the horse's . . . er, . . . Haley's mouth."

Lily assured Ryan, "she likes you and she thinks you're neat."

"Lily, you'll never know how much I appreciate your fixing this," Ryan said, "is there anything I can do to repay you?"

“There sure is, thanks for asking. For starters, don’t jump to conclusions,” Lily said. “that’s what got you in trouble this time. You’re too smart to repeat another dumb mix-up like this one, I hope.”

A reassured Ryan turned his attention to his school studies, scouts, and looking for Haley at school assemblies and in the corridors when passing from one class to another.

Life was good again.

But, school got even better in October, the month marked by the Girls Athletic Club party. The GAC party was an annual October affair honoring CHS females who had excelled in interscholastic athletics or in physical education classes.

The party was a picnic at the Rotary Park shelter house. Guests were permitted and GAC members would usually invite a parent, a brother or sister, a relation, or a special friend.

Ryan was delighted when Haley, already recognized as a leader in physical education, called him and asked him if he would go with her to the picnic.

Ryan was hoping Haley’s invitation was the beginning of some stability in their relationship. After Lily had repaired the Dairy

King Rudeness and the Stranger at the Mall Mix-Ups, and now that Haley had apparently forgiven him and had told Lily how she felt about him, Ryan was quite content.

Ryan's Dad drove the afternoon of the picnic. They picked up Haley and drove to Rotary Park with Ryan and Haley sitting in the backseat. Throughout the drive, Ryan was thinking how much better it would be when he could drive the car himself. Would Haley sit closer to him? Would their conversation be more spontaneous?

"Thanks, Mr. Graves," Haley said as she got out of the car, "my Dad will pick us up and bring us home.

"Thanks Dad," Ryan echoed, as he got out, "see you later."

Ryan and Haley walked side by side toward the shelter house, smelling the smoke coming from the shelter's chimney. There was a bigger crowd than Ryan had anticipated, and he noticed the number of older upper classmen. He had a small panic attack.

"Excuse me just a minute," Ryan said to Haley, "I'll be right back.

"Okay," Haley replied, "I'll wait here by this table."

Ryan walked quickly toward the bathrooms, looking to see which side was marked *Men*. He went in the correct door, relieved that he was alone.

He reached around with his left hand and took his right arm by the wrist. He lowered his grip, holding the fingers on the right hand together, then forced first the fingers, then the thumb and then his right hand into the front right pocket of his khakis.

Walking out of the bathroom with his right hand in his pocket was part of his ostrich strategy. Now, all of the people he didn't know couldn't see how short and small his right arm was.

The pose Ryan was trying to achieve was that of a cool, casual guy; he could live with that appearance much better than the alternative: looking like a freak.

"Ready to find a table?" the smiling Haley asked Ryan as he approached her where she had been waiting for him.

"Sure. It's your party, lead on," Ryan said.

Haley took the lead and walked ahead of Ryan to a picnic table with room for two more. Already at the table were two seniors with their mothers. The seniors looked at Ryan and Haley, then looked at each other and giggled.

“Do we look funny?” Haley asked Ryan.

“We must. We sure don’t look like seniors,” Ryan answered.

“I’ll go get us something to drink,” Haley said, “anything in particular you’d like?”

“Not really,” said Ryan, “I’ll have whatever you get for yourself.”

Wow, Ryan thought, was that was a cool move or what? I wonder how many points Lily would give me for being that swift and gallant?

After waiting several minutes, Ryan looked at the seniors at their table out of the corner of his eye. He wondered if they had seen his arm in his pocket and speculated about him. Maybe my arm made them laugh, he thought.

Ryan saw Haley nearing their table.

“Here you go,” Haley said as she placed a can of diet orange soda in front of Ryan, “I hope you like it. It’s my favorite.”

“Oh yeah, I like it, too,” Ryan said, as he smiled and lied. He hated diet sodas. He loathed fruit-flavored sodas. Trying to be suave, he would put himself in soda double jeopardy if he dared to tell the truth.

While he and Haley were sitting and looking over the park grounds, one of the seniors said to her classmate, “Look, they’re dishing out the food. Let’s go.” The other classmate said to the mothers, “You two sit; we’ll go get the food.”

As the seniors started their way to the food table, Haley rose and said to Ryan, “Why don’t you wait here, too. I’ll get our plates.” Ryan smiled and gave an *okay* nod.

The two mothers at the table obviously knew each other. While they waited they looked around the park, waving to several people they knew. Feeling a bit out of place, Ryan looked around, too: at the trees, the playground equipment, the cars in the parking lot, the birds overhead. He was trying to appear blasé and casual again.

Shortly after the two seniors brought the plates for themselves and their mothers, Haley arrived. She put her plate at her place at the table, then set a plate in front of Ryan. Then she reached in the pocket of her denim skirt and pulled out plastic knives, forks, and napkins and put them on the table.

Haley placed her right hand on Ryan’s shoulder, and then bent forward and reached down to the table to get a knife and fork

for Ryan; she put them beside his plate, then walked around the table and sat down.

Oh good Lord, Ryan thought. She touched me! She touched me in such an easy, natural way, as if she's been doing it for a long time. Ryan was certain that he had a maniacal grin and had gone bug-eyed as a result from Haley's touch. He looked to see if the seniors were laughing at them. They weren't.

Ryan smiled at Haley, who was now seated across from him at her place at the picnic table; Haley smiled back.

How could I have ever doubted Haley, Ryan thought?

This is one great picnic.

24

“Columbus High apparently agrees with you,” Mrs. Graves said to Ryan when he arrived home from school, “you seem to be awfully happy these days.”

“You’re right, mom,” Ryan answered, “my classes are okay, I like most of my teachers.”

“Your father and I were talking about you last night. We’re happy that your transition to high school has gone as smoothly as it has . . . and that you’re finding pleasure in school, as best we can tell. We’re proud of you,” Mrs. Graves remarked.

“Thanks, mom. School’s okay.”

Ryan went to school the next morning and entered the building through the door closest to the girls’ lockers. He was hoping he might see Haley before his first period class.

At the far end of the corridor he saw Haley and Lily talking; it looked like were in serious conversation. At the same time the bells rang, indicating that classes would begin in four minutes.

Damn, Ryan said to himself! He saw Haley, but they didn’t have a chance to say Hi. He hurried off to his first period class.

Walking down the halls there were posters advertising that the yearbook staff was sponsoring a dance in the cafeteria after Friday night's homecoming football game. Ryan thought, why not?

After dinner that night Ryan went to his room where he could talk to Haley in private on his cell. He touched her phone numbers.

"Hi, Haley; it's Ryan."

"Hello," Haley answered in her soft, barely audible voice.

"Friday night's football game is homecoming, and there's a dance in the cafeteria after the game. Would you like to meet me there," Ryan asked?

"Sorry. I can't," Haley said without hesitation.

"Oh, no," the deflated Ryan said. "Are you sure?"

"I 'm sure."

Damn it to hell, Ryan thought. I thought things were going well with us.

I wonder what gives.

Then he called Lily, told her about his invitation to Haley, and her quick and negative reply.

"It's nothing about you, Ryan," Lily tried to assure him.

"Trust me on this."

“Okay, if you say so. But why? Do you know something I don’t?”

“No,” Lily replied, “I don’t. Based on what I do know, though, I don’t think you should jump to conclusions . . . again.” Lily chuckled.

Ryan hung up the telephone and turned on the TV set, wondering what would cause Haley to tell him so quickly that she couldn’t meet him at the dance.

The first semester at Columbus High had been great up to now. What’s the second half of the school year going to be like, he asked himself?

Not so bad, Ryan learned, in fact, it was quite pleasant.

The Film Club at CHS was screening *Citizen Kane* the third Friday in February. Ryan called Haley to ask her if she would like to meet him there. Refreshments were free and there would be discussion groups following the film.

“Sure. Sounds like fun,” Haley said.

“Great, I’m glad you can go,” Ryan said.

“Me, too, Ryan. I’m already looking forward to it . . . and to seeing you,” Haley said with a friendly lilt in her voice.

Ryan was satisfied that Haley's homecoming dance refusal was as Lily had described it: nothing personal. That was fine with him; he and Haley were all set for *Citizen Kane* and Ryan was happy again.

Ryan's Dad drove him to the high school. He went into the auditorium for the film, looking for Haley. He looked right, then left, then to the right again, and there she was!

"Hi, Haley," Ryan said.

"Hi, Ryan," Haley replied. "Look. There are two seats over there."

Ryan, always thinking ahead about his right arm made sure that he sat on Haley's right. If he had the opportunity to hold Haley's hand during the film, he would need to do it with his left hand holding her right hand; consequently, he would need to sit on her right side.

If people only knew, Ryan thought, there's hardly a spontaneous bone in my body.

He approached every new experience by trying to anticipate how he could best camouflage his arm. In cool to cold weather, he

would hang his jacket or coat on his right shoulder, using it like it was a coat rack.

He always extended the winter season well into May so that he could wear shirts and sweaters with long sleeves to cover his arm; he started the fall clothing season before anyone else, thus making long sleeves appropriate for him.

He grew to detest short-sleeved shirts; over the years his body grew, but his arm did not, making it look even smaller.

The opportunity to hold Haley's hand, unfortunately, did not present itself. It wasn't so much that Haley was trying to deflect Ryan's first attempt on their romantic chessboard, as it was Ryan's inability to summon enough courage to make the first move.

Haley sat there with her clasped hands in her lap, engrossed in the movie.

When *Citizen Kane* came to an end, Haley and Ryan grabbed their coats and went to the cafeteria where cookies and soft drinks were being served. They found places to sit at one of the dining tables. They left their coats at the table, marking their places as "Taken," then went to get their refreshments.

“What a bummer,” Haley complained to Ryan, “they don’t have diet orange soda.”

“Oh, no, that’s too bad,” Ryan replied, feigning disappointment, “I guess we’ll have to take something else.”

“I’ll just have a bottle of water,” Haley said.

Ryan picked up two bottles of water, grasping them by their necks, while Haley picked up some cookies and wrapped them in napkins. They returned to their seats and entered the discussion about the movies while they enjoyed the cookies.

Saturday morning Ryan phoned Haley to ask whether she enjoyed the movie.

“The movie, yes,” Haley said, “but the discussion, no. It was too deep for me. How important is it to know whether the movie does or doesn’t illustrate the American dream anyway?”

“I object. You’re as smart as any of those who were in our group,” Ryan said. “I doubt that the discussion was beyond your abilities. The Film Club members have simply had more practice talking about films than you’ve had.”

“Well, I suppose I should thank you for putting a happier face on what I just said about the discussion,” Haley replied. “So, thank you, Ryan Graves.”

“You’re more than welcome, Haley Foster,” Ryan responded warmly.

Ryan and Haley continued their Saturday morning telephone discussion covering the major issues of the day, like the weather, colors of the fall leaves, favorite breakfast cereals, and favorite web sites. Actually, the topical content of their Saturday conversations were immaterial; the sound of the other’s voice, however, was precious.

This conversation is certainly more enjoyable than the rejection I received when I asked her to meet me at homecoming dance, Ryan thought. Haley remained an enigma, a lovely one to be sure, but still an enigma.

At times, she welcomed his attention; not only did she welcome it, but she seemed to encourage it, like a fine, foxy lady. At other times she was curt, to the point of being rude. Ryan thought, I wish I knew what was going on with her.

25

Friday night at the Film Club followed by the Saturday telephone conversation gave Ryan some encouragement. He almost forgot the homecoming dance rejection. Consequently, when Ryan's mother announced that she was going to be busy all day next Friday helping plan the Tuesday Club's annual Christmas bazaar, Mr. Graves said that the family would eat dinner that night at the Pizza Oven, a new restaurant in town whose word of mouth reviews had been excellent. Plus, the Graves were fond of pizza.

“Great idea,” Mrs. Graves said. “I’ll be tired that night and won’t want to cook. Furthermore, we haven’t had pizza for too long.”

Ryan saw an opportunity ready to be seized upon: “Mom, Dad, can I call Haley and see if she would like to go with us?”

The Graves looked at each other with knowing half smiles. “I don’t see why not,” Mr. Graves said. Mrs. Graves continued the good news for Ryan and told him, “You go ahead, son, and call Haley. Tell her we’ll pick her up at 6:30 Friday night.”

“I will, and thanks,” Ryan said exuberantly, with a smile stretching all the way across the lower part of his face. He went immediately to his room so that he could use his cell phone in privacy.

He entered Haley’s telephone number with care, as if he were dialing the numbers of a secret Swiss bank account. One of Haley’s sisters answered the ring: “Hello?”

“Hi, this is Ryan Graves. Can I talk to Haley, please?”

There was a hesitant, “Let me check” on the other end of the call. Ryan heard the Foster’s telephone make a small noise as someone picked it up.

“Hello,” Haley said.

“Hi Haley, it’s Ryan.”

“Hi Ryan.”

“My family’s going to the Pizza Oven Friday night. Would you like to go with us? Everybody who’s been there says it’s really good. Do you think you could go with us” Ryan asked?

“No,” Haley said, using her too familiar invitation turndown.

Ryan sat there not sure what to say. Once again Haley replies with a *No* without even asking her parents if she could go. One again

she uses a voice with no audible emotion expressed. Once more, there's no "Thanks for asking me, though."

"Darn it," Ryan said, "I was hoping you could go."

Haley spoke again: "Well, I can't."

". . ., uh, okay," Ryan said, "I guess I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Okay. G'bye," was all Haley said. Ryan, disappointed and hurt, flipped his phone closed.

He began to question his attempts to see Haley and have some time with her. It seemed to him that whenever he asked her to do something with him, she would alternate between *Yes* and *No*.

He couldn't point to any discernable pattern. Haley presented Ryan a Jekyll and Hyde personality. Sometimes she was happy and fun to be with, seemingly as interested in Ryan as he was in her. Other times, she was cool, distant and aloof.

Why in hell do I even bother to ask her to do anything with me? Ryan questioned himself. I'm not sure it's worth it. Sometimes it's *Yes*, sometimes it's *No*. What really bothered Ryan, however, was how Haley said *No*. Her turndowns were delivered in an unexpressive manner he couldn't read. Her *No* was pronounced as if

Ryan were an extraterrestrial alien or a fearsome stranger passing her on the sidewalk.

26

“Why do you call it ‘Tuesday Club’?” Ryan asked his mother at Saturday breakfast.

“Ryan, does the fact that the club meets on Tuesdays give you any kind of hint?” his mother asked back.

“Oh, mom, I know you meet on Tuesdays,” Ryan said, “but why not a different name? What not something more exciting than the name of a day in the week?”

“It’s always been Tuesday Club; I suppose it always will be, until Betty Graves’ son comes up with a good reason for the club to have a different name,” Mrs. Graves said with a jest.

“Mom, I really don’t care; I was just asking,” Ryan explained.

“The Tuesday Club bazaar is next week-end. When you and your Dad come for lunch on Saturday you can suggest some other name,” his mother said.

“No mom, I’m off the name now and I want to discuss another item of business.”

“Good, what is it?”

Gary hemmed and hawed a bit, then asked his mother, “Can I ask Haley if she could join Dad and me for lunch at the bazaar?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Graves said, “she would be most welcome. I think she’s cute; you must think something of the same, yes? But I thought you weren’t interested in her.”

“Mom,” Ryan moaned, “that was weeks ago.”

“All right, all right,” Mrs. Graves laughed, “I was just asking.”

Ryan had his mother’s blessings on his inviting Haley and now all he had to do was screw up his own courage. Last month’s turndown for pizza was still hurting.

The Tuesday Club’s annual Christmas Bazaar was a two-day fund-raising event, held in the community meeting room at Columbus State Bank, running all day Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

During the year the members created all sorts of Christmas decorations and gifts then sold them at the bazaar. Lunch was available on Saturday: sloppy joes, potato chips, relishes, soft drinks, coffee and pie.

Ryan was pleased that he had the go-ahead to invite Haley to go to lunch at with him and his Dad. He was, however, a bit leery; not many people enjoy being rejected, so he was hesitant about calling Haley.

Who would answer, he wondered, the very pleasant Haley Jekyll or the dour and non-communicative Haley Hyde? When he faced issues like this he did what he had done successfully for the past several years: talk to Lily.

Ryan explained his frustrations to Lily, who was as puzzled about Haley's behavior as Ryan was. "You know, Ryan, sometimes Haley isn't all that talkative with me either," Lily said in agreement with Ryan's questions. "I don't know whether she's going through some sort of gloomy mood stage or if she's just preoccupied with schoolwork. I'll see what I can find out."

Ryan waited to hear from Lily, and then he waited some more. Finally, with his curiosity getting stronger than he could constrain, Ryan called Lily.

"Have you been able to learn anything," he asked?

"I think I've learned all I'm going to learn," Lily answered.

"Haley told me she was sorry she couldn't accept your invitations; I

asked her why, and all she said was, ‘At the time he asked me, I just couldn’t go.’ I got the message she didn’t want to say anything else beyond that.”

Ryan shook his head, partly bewildered and partly not understanding Haley’s “At the time I just couldn’t go.”

Ryan asked Lily, “When she’s nice to me do you think it’s just out of pity for me? Do you have any idea what’s going on with her?”

“Not a clue, but it’s not pity, ” Lily replied. “She did tell me she likes you a lot. She said she likes you more than you realize, and she hopes that good things will eventually work out between the two of you. Ryan, she cried when she told me these things about you, saying she hoped things would eventually be okay with you two. As a matter of fact, she told me that she really, really likes you.”

“She what? What did you say? Well, I’ll be damned all to hell,” Ryan exclaimed, “She really likes me? You wouldn’t kid me would you?”

“Of course not,” Lily said, “we’re dealing with Haley’s serious emotions here and I wouldn’t kid or tease you about her feelings.”

Ryan, still looking bewildered, muttered to Lily and to himself, “Is there anything I can do to help? I wish I knew what’s going on with her.”

Lily laughed, “You and me both! You’re one of my oldest friends, Ryan, and I know I’m Haley’s best and maybe only close friend. I’d like to help both of you.”

“Do you think I should continue asking her to do things with me?”

“I really do; please don’t stop,” Lily assured Ryan, “I think if you did stop calling her, Haley would be mega-disappointed. She’d be miserable and maybe depressed. I’m sure she wants to be with you.”

Ryan and Lily ended their telephone conversation. He closed the lid on his phone, and then he went out to the front porch and slumped in a lawn chair. He leaned back and rested his head on the back of the chair.

What should I do, he wondered? He remembered one of his Dad’s favorite jokes about a man who was banging his head against the wall.

“I know that hurts; why do you do it,” a passerby asked?

The head-banger answered, “Because it feels so good when I stop.”

Ryan had no intention of banging his head against Haley’s wall, but he also wanted to spend as much time as he could with Haley. He was attracted to her, despite the rejections. Yet, for whatever reason, his success rate in asking Haley to go do things with him hovered around 50%. That percentage wouldn’t predict a meaningful or happy relationship. However, Lily, her best friend, exhorted him to stay the course with Haley.

Maybe she can’t accommodate herself to my physical appearance, Ryan had to ask himself? My arm could be an albatross not hanging around my neck but from my shoulder. Perhaps the way I look turns her off, he imagined. But, Lily said that’s not the case. When she’s Haley Jekyll, Ryan knew he was always overjoyed to be with her.

Sad to say, he had no immediate answer to his dilemma.

27

Ryan's head turned to the left; he saw a car parking on the street in front of the Kingsley's house. He bolted upright when he saw Tyler get out of the car. Ryan ran to the front door.

"Tyler," Ryan called out and waved. Tyler waved back, motioning for Ryan to come to Emily's house. Ryan walked to Emily's house and arrived there just as she was walking out the front door.

"Whose car," Ryan asked?

"Mine," Tyler answered, "an early birthday gift from my Granddad. He can't drive anymore. Since my dad had to take away Granddad's car keys, Granddad gave me his old Buick."

"It's not too old, is it?" Emily asked Tyler.

No, not really, " Tyler said, "it's only 12 years old. It gets me from my house to Emily's. To school, too, I guess." Everybody laughed.

"Emily and I are going to Dairy King," Tyler said to Ryan, "you want to go with us?"

"Sure, come on Ryan," Emily seconded Tyler's idea.

“No, thanks, I’ve got some jobs to take care of at home,”

Ryan said.

“Suit yourself.” Tyler said to Ryan, “Let’s go, Emily.”

Emily got in Tyler’s car, then Tyler walked around the rear of his car to the driver’s door and got in; they both waved to Ryan as they pulled away.

Ryan went home and hurried straight to his room to call Haley. He had been mentally replaying Lily’s report about her visit with Haley and what Haley had told Lily about him.

In the final analysis, he decided he would call Haley and ask her to the Saturday lunch at the bazaar.

He entered the Foster telephone number carefully.

It was Haley who answered, “Hello?”

“Hi Haley, this is Ryan.”

“Hello,” was all she said. Ryan was already sorry he had called her. The monotone answer was one he’d heard before. This voice didn’t seem to fit Lily’s information about Haley’s feelings toward Ryan.

“Haley, my mom’s club, the Columbus Tuesday Club, is having a Christmas bazaar next Saturday and Sunday. My Dad and I are going Saturday for lunch. Can you go with us?”

“ I can’t go,” Haley replied.

Ryan was angry; once again he had made himself vulnerable to another rejection from Haley.

Why in hell do I do this, he asked himself? Then he spoke to Haley, “I’m sorry you can’t go, Haley. Good-bye.”

That was the end of the conversation.

He flipped his phone’s lid closed, slouched on to the sofa, and shook his head from side to side in wonderment.

Why do I let the bitch do this to me?

Never again, he thought. Never again.

*“Hi Ryan, it’s good to hear your voice. How’ve you been,”
Haley asked?*

“I’ve been fine ... well, er, no, as a matter of fact I’m feeling great,” he replied. I’m calling to see whether you can go with my Dad and me to lunch next Saturday.

“I’m sure I can,” Haley replied. “ Is it a special occasion?”

“Oh, not real special, but kinda, a little bit,” Ryan said. “My mom belongs to the Tuesday Club and they’re having a Christmas bazaar next Saturday and Sunday. The club members are selling all kinds of arts and crafts type stuff, along with a bunch of cookies, cakes and homemade candy.

My Dad and I are going Saturday for lunch. I was hoping you could join us.”

“It sounds like fun, Ryan,” Haley said, using her cheerful voice. “I have one question, though.”

“Fire away, ma’am,” Ryan joked.

“I like your Dad; you know that. But, will you and I be able to wander off and have some private time, you know, some time with just Haley and Ryan?” Haley asked.

“We’ll make that happen, Haley, don’t worry.”

“Good,” Haley said. “I don’t want to hurt your Dad’s feelings, but, frankly, it’s you I want to see. You know how I feel about you, I hope.”

Ryan’s smile was as wide as the Missouri River when he replied to Haley, “Ditto. We’ll pick you up at 11:30 Saturday morning, Okay?”

“Sure, that’s fine” Haley said. “I’ll be looking for you, so please don’t be late.”

Ryan moped around the Graves' house and listlessly through his schoolwork during the third and fourth quarters of the school year. Eventually the end of the school calendar meant the beginning of another summer, and then another school year, and then another summer.

Ryan attended to his studies in a moderately successful way, earning mostly B's, with an occasional A. His grades weren't anything special, but they were good enough to deflect nagging from his parents. Admission to the state's major university wouldn't be a problem, either.

At least four or five times a week Ryan's thoughts turned to Haley. He couldn't help himself. He remembered her green eyes, her beautiful, flawless skin the color of buttermilk, and her blonde hair. Her melancholic grin he could never forget; she was his Mona Lisa. He wanted to be with her. He was like a moth attracted to her flickering candlelight.

He remembered his vow to stop calling her, and he was saddened by it. Why can't she like me as much as I like her, he

wondered regularly? If a genie gave me three wishes right now, he fantasized, the first one would be that Haley would like me twice as much as I like her. The second wish would be for her to call me and tell me there's been a huge mistake and she really wants to be with me.

Ryan had stopped talking to Lily about Haley, preferring to center their conversations on safer topics like church and youth group activities, movies, and music. Near the end of the summer before they began their next-to-last year at Columbus High School, however, Lily introduced the topic she knew Ryan had been avoiding.

“Ryan, the Student Government Association sponsors a Back-to-School dance the Friday night before the first day of classes,” Lily said, and Ryan knew what was coming next. “Are you thinking about talking to Haley to see if she'll be there and meet you?”

Ryan assumed the casual, nonchalant pose he had mastered years ago when trying to disguise his physical appearance; he learned that the pose also worked anytime he was faced with a threatening ambiguity he wanted to avoid.

“ I know about the dance,” Ryan said, “it’s an annual party the SGA puts on. I received a post card reminder about the dance last week.”

“C’mon Ryan, this is Lily, do you remember,” Lily asked in jest? “You didn’t answer my question about Haley.”

“I’m not calling her for anything! Why should I put myself out on a limb just to have her saw it off?” Ryan asked back.

Lily shrugged her shoulders: “Ryan, don’t be a dope. Haley phoned me last week asking if I ever saw you, how were you doing, and did you seem to be happy? Would someone who doesn’t care about you ask questions like that?”

Ryan had no reply. Lily had no idea how often he thought about Haley. She couldn’t know how often he daydreamed about Haley, wishing she had the same kind of keen interest in him that he had in her.

“She’s still has the hots for you,” Lily continued,” why don’t you call her about the dance and make both of you happy?”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” Ryan said to Lily, weakening in his earlier pledge never to call Haley again. “No guarantees, though.”

“I can’t give you a guarantee either,” Lily replied to Ryan, smiling as she told him, “but I’ll bet you won’t be sorry.”

29

On the Wednesday morning before the SGA dance on Friday night, the Friday night before classes began the following Monday, Ryan got out of bed, had a shower and then took a long look at himself in the bathroom mirror.

Do you or do you not want to call Haley about the dance, he asked the image in the mirror? Just how happy will you be if she says *Yes*? On the other hand, how depressed will you be if he says *No*?

He hoped what Lily told him would turn out to be true. Waiting an hour and a half, giving himself time to think about Haley, he decided a telephone call to her was worth the gamble.

Ryan closed the door to his room and entered Haley's number in his cell phone. He wasn't surprised that he still remembered it and he smiled.

"Hello," Haley answered the rings.

"Hi, Haley, this is Ryan. How has your summer been?"

"Hello, Ryan," Haley replied, "my summer has been okay."

Good old Haley, Ryan thought, just bubbling over with words.

“You probably know the Student Government Association is having a Back-to-School dance at Rotary Park shelter house Friday night,” Ryan asked rhetorically.

“Yes, I do,” Haley answered.

“Would you, uh, would, uh, would you like to go,” Ryan asked?”

“I think so,” Haley answered. Ryan could hear some happiness in her voice, “No, make that a *Yes*. I’d like to go.”

“You would,” Ryan asked? “I mean, good . . . uh, good, that’s great. It starts at 8:00. I’m driving now, so can I pick you up at, what . . . , say, 7:45?”

“7:45 will be fine. Thanks.”

“Okay, then,” Ryan said. “I’ll see you Friday night. Bye.”

That was too easy, Ryan thought. Thank God, Lily’s advice was good! Picking up his phone again, he entered Lily’s number and gave her the good report. He and Haley had a date Friday night for the dance. Lily was glad and she told Ryan so. Ryan told her that he was really happy.

Ryan went to the family room and sat in the recliner his Dad usually occupied when he was watching TV. Like his Dad, Ryan folded his hands behind his head, smiling as he looked out the window at the sun shining on the leaves on the trees in the Graves' back yard.

Maybe I was wrong to give up on Haley, he thought. Who knows? At least I know two things: I know Haley and I know we'll see each other Friday night. I also know I am really, very happy.

At 7:45 p.m. Friday Ryan drove the family car into the Foster's driveway. Haley was standing behind the glass storm door. Ryan got out of the car and walked to the door where Haley was standing. She opened the door to let Ryan in the living room where Mr. and Mrs. Foster were sitting, she doing needlework, he reading a book.

Mr. Foster looked up, saying "Hello Ryan; are you ready for school next Monday?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Foster," Ryan answered, then turning to Haley's mother, "Hello, Mrs. Foster." Mrs. Foster smiled broadly at Ryan, "Hi Ryan; you two have a good time tonight."

“Let’s go,” Haley said to Ryan, who started walking toward the door at her suggestion.

“Haley,” Mr. Foster said in that stern voice Ryan had heard before the cars loaded with scouts drove off for summer camp.

“I know Daddy,” Haley replied without asking what her father might have had on his mind.

“Okay, then,” Mr. Foster said.

Ryan asked Haley as they walked toward his car, “What was that last thing your Dad said.”

“Nothing serious,” Haley replied, “just my curfew.”

“So,” Ryan asked her, “what is it, what time do you need to be home tonight?”

“10:30,” Haley answered.

What the hell, Ryan thought, 10:30 freakin’ p.m.? Who is it her Dad doesn’t trust, Haley or me? In three day she’ll be a junior in high school; it’s not like she’s 13 years old.

Subtracting driving time, Ryan calculated he’d have, at most, two hours with Haley. Nevertheless, he decided he’d best not press the issue with her.

“10:30 it is,” Ryan said with a modicum of politeness as he opened the passenger door for Haley.

Haley beamed her quirky but cute smile, acknowledging Ryan’s opening the door with a “Thank you.”

Ryan entered the Rotary Park parking lot at 8:00 p.m. He opened Haley’s door and they walked toward the shelter house, the center of the music, food, and soft drinks.

Ryan stuck his right hand in the front right pocket of his khakis. He was assuming his Mr. Cool Casual persona again. “Some crowd, huh,” Haley said as they approached the shelter house.

“Yeah, I’m surprised at the size. I guess people are more anxious to have school begin than I thought,” Ryan remarked.

“Could be,” Haley said with little animation in her reply.

“Or, they just want to see their friends,” said Ryan.

“Ummm, there’s that too,” Haley added.

Ryan looked at Haley out of the corner of his eye to see whether he could read anything in her body language and figure out her flat, two- and three-word responses. All he saw was what he thought was a tentative, half grin. She’s a real puzzle, Ryan thought.

Still, puzzles or not, he thought Haley looked really nice tonight: pressed jeans, a white blouse and a brown leather vest.

I wonder if she feels okay? he wondered. Her contributions to the conversations had been terse and brief ever since he arrived at the Fosters to pick her up. Maybe she's nervous? But if she is nervous, why?

They circulated from group to group, who were sitting at the picnic tables in and around the shelter house. Ryan became more and more talkative as they moved from cluster to cluster, trying his best to draw Haley into the conversations. Her comments were limited to short and terse *Yeses, Sures, I agrees*, and the like. She seemed to enjoy the evening, but how could Ryan be sure?

Stopping at the food table, they each had a diet soda and a couple of cookies. "These cookies are really good," Ryan said, "I wonder where they came from?"

"Cookie Factory?" Haley suggested. "Or maybe the Keebler elves?"

"Either one's fine with me," Ryan said, trying to reinforce Haley's cautious attempt at humor and conversation.

“It’s 10:00, we’d better start toward the car if we’re going to get you home by your curfew,” Ryan said to Haley. Haley gave Ryan a big smile and began to walk toward the parking lot.

Ryan was careful to put himself on Haley’s right side so that his good left arm would be in the most functional position. He had wondered during the party, should I try to hold her hand? Put my arm around her?

What the hell, he told himself, as he put his left arm around Haley’s shoulders. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he felt Haley snuggle closer into his arm. Whether this was the case, he couldn’t tell; she didn’t do anything to discourage him, though; he was certain of that.

Ryan opened the door for Haley when they arrived at the car. As he closed the door after she was seated, he thought she moved a bit closer to the driver’s side.

Am I making too much of these little signs, Ryan wondered? Are they really happening, or is it my imagination? No, it wasn’t his imagination; Haley was, yes, she really was, sitting closer to him. A block from her house, Haley placed her hand on Ryan’s right thigh. Holy shit! Ryan said to himself.

When they arrived at the Foster's house Ryan was sorry the trip from Rotary Park to Foster's driveway wasn't longer. But, there they were, back at Haley's house.

He got out of the car, went to Haley's door and opened it. She got out of the car and they walked to the front door. "I had a great time tonight," Ryan said. "Me too, Haley replied, "I'm glad you asked me."

"Me too," Ryan said. "I'll probably see you Monday at school."

"I hope so," Haley said through her smile, "I'll look for you."

Hot hell and damn, Ryan thought to himself as he started the car and began his drive home. She let me put my arm around her shoulders! She put her hand on my leg! She said she was glad went to the party together! She'll be looking for me Monday!

Ryan decided the first day of school wouldn't be so bad after all.

30

Saturday afternoon Mr. Graves returned from an errand, went to Ryan's room and asked him, "Son, I'm driving out to the West's to talk some business with Tyler's Dad. You want to go with me and have a visit with Tyler?"

"Great idea. Let's go. Tyler will be a senior Monday and I should pay my respects to one of CHS's senior citizens."

Mr. Graves chuckled.

When they arrived at the West's Tyler greeted them at the front door. "Hi Mr. Graves, my Dad's back there in his office," Tyler said, motioning toward the back of the house."

Turning to Ryan, Tyler offered, "Let's go to my room." Tyler's "room" was part of a detached two-stall garage the Wests inherited from the previous owners. A wall, creating two rooms, separated the garage stalls; one room was for the Hooterville Trolley, Tyler's old Buick; the other room was his bedroom.

They watched TV for a brief time, talking idly about their younger days on Cutland Street. Tyler went to the apartment-sized refrigerator and grabbed two Cokes.

“want a beer,” Tyler asked? “I have three Bud Lights hid in the back.”

“No way, Jose,” Ryan coughed, “one sniff of beer on my breath and my Dad will kill me.”

“Okay, it’s your call. You still seeing Haley?”

“I don’t know if ‘seeing’ is the right word. We did, however, go to the SGA party at Rotary Park last night. Things seemed to go okay between us.”

During this part of the conversation Tyler had walked to the corner of his “room” where his guitar was propped. He slung the shoulder strap over his head, nestled the guitar into a comfortable position and started strumming some familiar chords. He stooped down to turn up the volume on the amplifier, which had never been turned off as long as Ryan had known Tyler.

While Tyler alternated between picking out notes to familiar songs and filling in with some chords, Ryan asked Tyler, “Have you ever thought about starting a band?”

“Nah, not really. Why?”

“I think it could be lots of fun. Nobody at CHS has a band. If we started one there wouldn’t be much competition. I could be the manager and try to get us some jobs,” Ryan said.

“Do you know Jim Crane or Jacob Lewis?” Tyler asked. Ryan’s sideways nod was a negative. “Well, Jim is a great drummer and Jacob plays guitar, more like a rhythm guitar than a solo guitar. As I remember from our Ridgeview days, you’re a hell of a singer. You could be our singer. We could copy U2 and call ourselves Me 2.

Both Ryan and Tyler thought this was super hilarious and they laughed super hard.

Laughing aside, a band was born that afternoon, a band that would enjoy its Andy Worhol 15 minutes of fame.

The first week of school was sweet. Haley and Ryan were in the same English class she on the front row and he in the back of the room in the last row. He saw her everyday and they exchanged what Ryan thought were especially meaningful smiles.

The subsequent weeks were similarly enjoyable. Ryan even started calling Haley after dinner at night, asking her how her day was, whether she had much homework, and other topics of less than serious significance.

All Ryan wanted to do was to call her and to talk, to simply hear her voice. Her declining his invitation to the Tuesday Club's bazaar and the lunch, the summer of limited contacts with Haley, faded into far away history, prehistoric most likely. Ryan was ecstatic; life was good after all.

During the third week of school the daily announcements, broadcast over the school-wide public address system, carried an item of interest to Ryan. The formation of a high school YMCA group had been approved by the principal's advisory group and a meeting of those interested in joining should meet in room 33 at 3:45 Thursday afternoon.

Ryan went to the meeting and joined the group immediately. He wasn't all that interested in the group's purposes, goals, or activities. Two items tweaked his interest: the group had a Greek name ---Delta Omega--- and a small membership pin with gold Greek letters $\Delta\Omega$ on a black background. Just like a university fraternity!

He had no intention of participating in the club's business or projects; he wanted to join only because he would have a pin he

could give to Haley. Her wearing the pin would signify they were a twosome, a couple, and a public declaration of mutual affection.

Ryan thought using the word *love* might be a bit cheesy.

After the Thursday meeting of Delta Omega, Ryan paid his membership dues and bought the pin, then later he made an after-dinner call to Haley.

“Haley, can we meet just before English class tomorrow,” Gay asked?

“I guess so,” Haley answered, “Why? What’s up? Is everything okay with you?”

“I should have explained first,” Ryan told her. “See, I’ve joined this YMCA club, Delta Omega, and I have a membership pin with the Greek letters on it and if I gave you my pin would you wear it?”

“My dad gave my mom his fraternity pin years ago when they were at the university. Mom says it was really special,” Ryan explained. “I’d like to do the same thing with you. Would you wear it?”

Here is where Ryan’s nervous system had a major shock.

Without any hesitation or pause, Haley replied: “Yes, I would. I’d like to, very much, Ryan.”

“You will . . . you would . . . ,?” a stunned Ryan stammered. “Great news. Thanks Haley!”

“Is this what you were going to ask me tomorrow before English class?”

“Not now. I don’t need to ask you tomorrow,” Ryan chuckled. “Instead of asking you tomorrow morning if you’d wear my pin, now I’ll just give it to you.”

“Okay then, I’ll see you tomorrow morning before English class,” Haley said calmly.

Ryan flipped his phone closed. Holy Jesus H. Christ, Ryan thought! I never thought it would be this easy. She’s going to wear my pin, just like mom and dad when they were at the university.

He looked fixedly out the sliding doors that led to the patio and the back yard with the dazed smile of a slow-thinking but happy dimwit.

All of a sudden Ryan was awakened from his stupor with a sensation in his groin. He realized that he had to pee . . . urgently!

31

The band born in Tyler's garage/bedroom rehearsed regularly. Putting homework on the back burner while musical fame was being honed seemed an obviously fair trade-off.

The guys liked each other immediately, creating an esprit de corps that kept them coming back to Tyler's place for rehearsal after rehearsal.

"I have a song we can do," Ryan said one afternoon, pulling a CD out of his jacket pocket. Tyler took the CD, put it on his player, then looked at Ryan for instructions.

"Track 14," Ryan said.

Tyler advanced the laser dial to track 14 and the music started. It was big band stuff with a strong baritone singer.

"Who and what is this? It's great," Jacob said with a wide grin. "That's Count Basie," Ryan explained, "with Joe Williams singing 'Roll'em Pete'."

"Let's do it," Tyler said, "it's got a kick to it and we can do it. Ryan, you know the words?"

“Of course I do. Why do you think I brought it?” Ryan answered.

Tyler replayed Track14 five times; the guys learned the tune well enough.

In about an hour the group could reproduce a reasonably identifiable rendering of “Roll’em Pete,” although Ryan apologized for not sounding more like Joe Williams.

“Damn it, Graves, if you sounded like Joe Williams you sure as hell wouldn’t be here today with us,” Jim Crane said. “You’d either be on the road or in Vegas singing with a real group.” Jacob and Tyler thought this was funny and laughed with as much animation as people can with guitars strapped across the fronts of their bodies.

“Okay, okay,” Ryan shot back, “I think I could do a good Ray Charles, maybe an Elvis, a Meatloaf, or even a Bono.”

Everyone groaned.

“I think you should try to sound like Alicia Keyes and walk like Lady Gaga,” Jim Crane said, Then he threw a drumstick that Ryan was able to avoid with a quick side step.

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Everyone laughed with nose-clearing gusto. Ryan Graves and the Columbus Three were a group; they were a tight group. More importantly, they were a musically tight group.

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After dinner, Ryan went to his room, flopped on his bed, and fell into a reverie: classes at CHS are going fine, well, maybe “respectably okay” would be more accurate; the band is shaping up, and Haley and I are not only in the same book, but we’re actually on the same page, Ryan thought,

He reached for the phone to make his nightly call to Haley.

“Hello?” Haley answered after only one ring.

“Hey Haley, were you just sitting there waiting for me to call?” Ryan joked.

“Actually I was getting ready to call Lily about our American history assignment.” Ryan detected a reserved tone in Haley’s voice

“I can you call later,” Ryan said. “Would that be better?”

“No, it’s okay, go ahead.”

“There’s a dance in the cafeteria after Friday night’s football game. Since it’s homecoming would you like to meet me there?”

“No. I can’t go.”

There it was again; that damned minimalist reply. There was no, “Sorry, I can’t go but I’d love to.” Or a “Sorry, but were going to my grandparents right after school Friday and we’ll be gone the whole week-end.”

“You can’t go, really?”

“No, I can’t go,” Haley repeated.

“Well, maybe next time,” Ryan said as he slouched onto the family room sofa, his favorite brooding and thinking place.

“Okay,” Haley said.

Okay? What the hell, Ryan thought. Why not a “I hope so?”
What about a nice “Let’s plan on it.”

Rehearsals were scheduled every Sunday afternoon Tyler’s room in the garage. Everyone gathered by 2:00 and there were some fitful warm-up routines.

Tyler led off with the intro to “Roll’em Pete” and the others joined in. For their first number of the afternoon, it wasn’t bad. Then

they went through a song entitled “Bring My Cadillac Back,” an obscure rockabilly number Ryan had heard several times on the radio. “Holiday” was next, an arrangement they’d heard on one of Mr. West’s jazz CD’s, a rerelease of *The Four Freshmen in Concert*.

Then they opted for an abrupt change of pace and glided through “Love Me Or Leave Me.” Despite earlier group protestations, Ryan tried to assume a Bono voice on this one; he earned a C+.

“Guys,” Jacob said as he and Tyler unstrapped their guitars and sat down, “Sunday afternoon pickin’ and grinnin’ is fun, but do you think we might play somewhere, anywhere, in front of an audience?”

Everyone thought this was a good idea; they needed a debut performance. They were ready to share their fun with others.

“First, we need a real name,” Jim offered. “Ryan Graves and the Columbus Three ---no offense, Ryan --- just doesn’t feel right. How about ‘Easily Distracted?’”

“I agree we need a new name,” Jacob interjected, “how about ‘Dow Jones and the Industrials?’” Jacob laughed, enjoying his own wit.

“I’ve got one,” Tyler said. “Let’s try ‘Strictly from Hunger.’”

There was no audible response from anyone. “Okay then,” Tyler said, “how about a more accurate name, like ‘Arrested Development’ or ‘They Who Run with Scissors’?” Again, there was no reaction.

Ryan decided it was his turn. “Listen you guys, we don’t need any old name, we need a special name, a name with class. How about ‘Sine Nomine’? It’s Latin for ‘without a name,’ but who’s to know?”

Everyone agreed this name sounded classy and they appreciated the irony, so ‘Sine Nomine’ was agreed upon on the spot.

Okay,” Jacob said, reminding everyone about his initial comment, “that’s settled. Now, where and when can we play?”

Jim had an idea. “I’ll talk to Ethan Willingham. As student body vice president, he’s responsible for scheduling Friday assemblies.” Since CHS had a tradition of an assembly every Friday, everyone thought getting on the agenda shouldn’t be too difficult.

The rehearsal had come to an unplanned but assumed quitting time; Jim and Jacob headed for the door. “So long, see you guys

tomorrow at school.” “See you guys later,” Tyler and Ryan said as Jim and Jacob left.

“Hey man,” Tyler said to Ryan, “before you leave I need to talk.”

“Go for it,” Ryan replied.”

“Emily’s complaining that I spend more time with you guys than I do with her. Actually, she’s pissed at me right now. Would you and Haley like to go with us for a movie and pizza next Saturday night?”

“Sure,” Ryan said. “I’ll call Haley when I get home.”

“Use your cell,” Tyler urged, “you can call her right now. I need to know. ”

Ryan agreed by pulling his cell phone out of his front jeans pocket. Actually, the reason he had said he would call Haley when he got home was because he wanted some privacy when he talked to her. Tyler needed a favor, however, so Ryan complied and entered Haley’s number. Ryan could hear the Foster’s phone ringing.

“Hello,” someone answered? It was one of Haley’s younger sisters. “Hello,” Ryan repeated, “this is Ryan Graves. Is Haley home?”

“I think so,” the younger voice screamed. “HAY -- LEEEEEE, TELEPHONE.” Ryan held his cell phone away from his ear, trying to protect his eardrums.

“Hello,” Haley spoke into the phone, “this is Haley.”

“Hi Haley, it’s Ryan.”

Haley replied with an all too laid back, “Hi.”

Not a happy “Hi Ryan.” Not a pleased “Ryan, I wish she had told me it was you on the phone.” All Ryan got was a lame “Hi.”

Based on his experiences with Haley, he knew this conversation wasn’t going to have a happy ending.

“Haley, Tyler and Emily would like for the four of us to go for a movie and a pizza next Saturday night. Are you interested?”

“I can’t go,” Haley replied.

No reason. No regrets.

There was no, “What a great idea but I’m busy at my Grandma’s that week-end.”

Just a frank and blunt “I can’t go.”

“Maybe next time,” Ryan said, “I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

“Okay. Bye,” was Haley’s terse sign off. Why so brief, Ryan wondered?

“What the hell is going on, I don’t know,” Ryan said to Tyler, “but you can count Haley and me out for the movie next week-end. You’ll have to make up with Emily by yourself, good buddy.”

Tyler and Ryan said their farewells as they bumped fists, then Ryan drove home, in a bit of a funk given Haley’s “I can’t go.” Earlier she hadn’t been able to go to a dance, and now, making it two invitations in a row, it’s a no-go decline with Tyler and Emily for the movie and pizza outing.

Is she returning to the mysterious Haley, he asked himself? The one who says “No I can’t.” without any reasons? I wish there was a special machine, a puzzle solver, I could put her through, he thought.

32

Saturday afternoon was a special time for Ryan. If he needed the time to complete a school assignment he could do it Saturday afternoon, leaving Sunday afternoon open for Sine Nomine practice. If there were no assignments, he could watch the sports channels on TV, go to a movie with some of the guys, maybe call Haley, or just hang out somewhere.

Having an open Saturday, Ryan was idling away the time going from channel to channel with the TV remote when Jim Crane and Jake Lewis appeared at the patio door. Jim had a CD in hand.

“Hey man,” Crane said, helping himself through the door. “Hi Andy,” Jacob chimed in.

“Come in, as if you weren’t anyway,” Ryan laughed. “What’s the CD?”

“This is cool stuff,” Jim answered. “Gerry Mulligan quartet. Get a load of this baritone sax.” Jim put the CD in Ryan’s player and they listened to the quartet, headed by Mulligan’s honking baritone. The three of them sat there, tapping toes. Moving heads sideways and back with the beat. Looking through the glass door, not seeing

anything but imagining being in Paris when the CD was originally burned.

“What a huge sound for just four instruments,” Ryan said, “who are the others?”

Jim pulled the CD notes out from the CD cover and started reading, “...Frank Isola, drums; Red Mitchell, bass; Bob Brookemeyer, valve trombone.”

“Could I see that,” Ryan asked? Jim handed him the notes and the plastic cover while the CD player kept doing its job. “Valve trombone,” Ryan hummmmed. “I could play a valve trombone, but not a slide trombone.”

Ryan had been frustrated since elementary school days because there were few instruments he could play with only one functioning arm. Valve trombone . . . Now this is really interesting.

From that day onwards, he became a fan of Gerry Mulligan and, especially, Bob Brookemeyer and his valve trombone.

After Jim and Jake left, Ryan was anxious to tell Haley about his discovery. He’d never heard of a valve trombone before today. Now he could see a possibility for himself as a musician. He had found an instrument he could handle. Finally!

Trying to remain cool, Ryan phoned Haley. “Haley, I have an exciting idea. Just got it this afternoon. I’d like to talk about it with you,” Ryan began. “Can we go for a coke Sunday afternoon?”

“Sorry, Ryan, but I can’t go.”

Ryan sat there, realizing that he was on a losing streak of 0 for 3 with Haley and his invitations for them to do things together. No whiz at math, he could figure easily that he was batting .000 with Haley lately.

“I see,” Ryan said, somewhat mollified that she had at least included a “sorry” this time. “Well, maybe there’ll be a next time.”

He hadn’t planned to say “maybe,” it just came out of his mouth. But the more he thought about “maybe,” the more he liked it.

Why have I tried to maintain a relationship with Haley, Ryan kept asking himself during the remainder of the afternoon? He was experiencing a feeling about him and Haley he hadn’t felt before.

He was also feeling rejected, a fear he had learned to live with due to what he thought was his freakish appearance. He had long afraid he’d never be attractive to anybody.

He was also angry, a convenient displacement. After dinner that night he called Haley.

“Hi Haley,” Ryan began, “can we meet Monday just before English class?”

“Of course,” Haley answered. “Anything important?”

“Yes, it’s important to me, at least. ” Ryan said in a businesslike manner. “ I’d like to have my DO pin back. Haley, you and I never do anything together. Your wearing my DO pin means nothing. The pin makes no statement about you and me. It’s time we moved on .”

“I know,” Haley said quietly. “I’ll be there and I’ll return your pin.”

“Okay. See you Monday.”

Ryan felt a surge of relief. Screw the valve trombone. To hell with Haley, he thought, I’ve tiptoed around her too long. With Haley’s returning his DO pin, his options were increased, he hoped. How can you be with someone if you’re never with them somewhere or anywhere?

Ryan had tried for a long time to figure out Haley’s erratic behavior toward him. Lily had told him that in private Haley had told her how much she liked Ryan, recently even using the stronger and more adult word *love*.

Nevertheless, Ryan could come to only one conclusion that made sense to him: quite simply, she wasn't as attracted to him as much as he was to her. Maybe she wasn't attracted to him at all

Their relationship was one-way. Ryan didn't enjoy arriving at a self-deprecating resolution to his difficulties, but there you are. She simply doesn't like me.

What else could it be? Who knows? Who cares?

Sure. Like I give a damn about her, Ryan thought.

Sunday afternoon at 2:00 Sine Nomine collected at Tyler's place, ready for another practice. Jim set up his drums, Jacob and Tyler plugged their guitars into the always-turned-on amplifier. Ryan wrestled the microphone stand out of the corner of the room and hooked it up to the amplifier, too.

"Guys," Jim started, "I have some good news. "I told you I'd talk to Ethan Willingham about our playing for a CHS assembly. I did and we're on!"

Minor chaos erupted. Tyler and Ryan high-fived each other. Jim and Jacob bumped fists. They hooted and changed partners for fist bumping and high-fiving.

“Next Friday, six days from now, we play,” Jim went on.

“How’d you arrange it?” Jacob asked. “Who’d you have to pay off?” Tyler asked. “Who died and can’t keep their spot on the assembly calendar?” Ryan wanted to know. “Did you kill anybody?”

“I don’t know why the opening is there, I don’t care, and ‘frankly, Scarlet, I don’t give a damn,’” Jim responded. All I know is Ethan told me we could have 20 minutes, like three songs.”

There was more hooting, whooping, high-fiving, fist- and butt-bumping. Finally, Sine Nomine was going to have its debut.

Rehearsal that afternoon was more focused than ever. An air of what could almost be described as professionalism permeated the room.

Till now, Sine Nomine had mostly been an idea. In six days, Sine Nomine would be a musical group performing in front of its best friends at a CHS assembly. They wanted to be good. They needed to be good. Sine Nomine was fun, but it suddenly took on a serious note, as well.

Two more rehearsals were scheduled for the coming week, Wednesday and Thursday nights. They selected “Johnny B. Goode” as their opening number, a high stepping, high kicking number.

The second song would be an attempt to do a classic, “Love Me or Leave me,” as a slower, but still a swinging, and jazzy piece.

The third would be the first song they ever practiced, “Roll’em Pete.” “Pete” would blow the top off the auditorium.

They had made a conscious decision to avoid covering any song that had been popular in the past 9-10 years. Why invite people to compare Sine Nomine, a high school group, to relatively current musical stars and headliners? The band would find plenty of older standards or at least older up-tempo numbers they could perform.

They had decided “Where’d you get that great song?” was an infinitely better question from audience members than a criticism like “Bon Jovi, or Kid Rock, or U2, [or whoever,] did it better.”

Friday morning finally arrived, bringing Ryan a queasy stomach. It angered him. Why in the hell do I have an edgy stomach? I know these people.

Sure you do, said the other Ryan, Ryan #2, who occupied the same space in his brain, sure you do. All 633 of them?

Well, thought Ryan #1, maybe I don't know them all. Still, though, 633 people is a huge audience!

Friday assemblies created class-scheduling challenges for the building administration, who tried to avoid shortening the same class period every week in order to provide time for the assembly.

On this debut Friday, Ryan had Journalism first period and Media Center second period. These classes didn't require any mental heavy lifting, for which he was grateful.

The bell sounded finally, ending second period, announcing the time for the Friday assembly. Ryan went straight to the auditorium, then went behind the huge curtain that separated the stage area from the backstage. Back stage he found Jim beating his drumsticks on the back of a metal folding chair.

At least drummers can deal with anxiety in creative ways, Ryan thought. All my nerves do is make me gag.

Jacob and Tyler arrived right after Ryan. "Anybody here who's not ready?" Tyler asked. Everyone laughed and agreed, "Ready or not, here we go!"

The assembly began with its traditional routines. After the Pledge of Allegiance, Ethan Willingham introduced the CHS

Madrigal Singers who performed five selections in front of the main stage curtain, songs originally from the latter part of the 16th Century.

“Man, Oh, man,” Jacob said with a wry smile, “the audience will be stretched over more than five centuries when we’re finished. Can they handle it?”

As the Madrigals filed off, the stage crew drew opened the main curtain, revealing the band. Ethan walked briskly to the microphone:

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “it’s my pleasure to present the newest band in town, Columbus High School’s own SINE NOMINE !

The band immediately kicked off with “Johnny B. Goode.” Everyone was together and Ryan was in good voice. The second number, “Love Me or Leave Me”, was a success.

When they got to the final number all four of them were sweating and smiling. What is this dream I’m having, Ryan wondered? He couldn’t wonder about dreaming for long because he heard Tyler’s lead-in to the intro for “Roll’em Pete.”

The band really burned it. They had, after all, been practicing “Pete” forever, it seemed. All those practices paid off today.

Ryan sang out: “. . . well I’m crying yes, yes; and I’m so happy crying yes, yes . . .” oblivious to the audience, oblivious to the sweat edging down his face, and oblivious to the fact that his left arm was moving in time with the beat while his right arm was just hanging there.

He didn’t think about it. He was free . . . and happy.

The audience was exuberant, raucous, loud, and wildly approving. The applause was deafening. The guys stood there, uncertain what to do next. There they stood, smiling at each other. Ethan Willingham began to close the stage curtains.

“I think we did okay today,” Tyler tried to yell over the noise.

The other three laughed heartily. It felt good. Sine Nomine’s premiere was a huge success.

The audience began to file out the doors in the rear of the auditorium. Ethan Willingham came on stage to congratulate everyone and then asked, “Can I help move the instruments?”

All of the instruments were stored in the back corner of the stage for an after-school loading into Tyler's Buick. Then everyone begrudgingly went to class. They wanted to stay with each other and talk, but that was out of the question.

Ryan went to his English class. The others in the class were already seated and listening quietly to the teacher, but when Ryan walked through the door there was another outburst of applause. Ryan was stunned. Here are 27 classmates and they're applauding me, he asked himself? Is this for real?

Ryan couldn't help himself; he looked at Haley as he walked down the center aisle of the classroom to his desk in the back of the room. *Hello Haley, you loser* he thought, *I'm the guy who's not good enough for you. Isn't that it? I bet you'll miss me now.*

Ryan continued his interior monologue with Haley. *Over 600 people thought I was okay today. Your English class approves of me, given their applause. How can so many of our classmates think I'm okay but you obviously don't? What do you think of me now?*

Haley sent a grin to Ryan, applauding like everyone else.

She still has that strange Mona Lisa smile, Ryan thought. At least I don't need to worry about figuring out her smile or anything else about her, as far as that goes.

“Ryan, as you can tell, your English class is very proud of you,” the teacher said as Ryan was sitting in his desk on the back row. “Congratulations on a job well done.”

“Thanks everybody,” a smiling Ryan replied, easily avoiding eye contact with Haley.

33

Ryan, Jim, Jacob, and Tyler became notables at CHS and in Columbus.

When two or more of them were walking together in the corridors at school, walking along Broadway in Columbus, driving through Big Boy's parking lot, watching a movie, or having pizza at Papa Luigi's, they would hear hushed tones and whispers: "There they are . . ." "There go . . ." "Isn't that . . ." "Hey, look, it's . . ."

No longer were they just four people out of a 600-plus student body. They were four special people. They had both a group identity and a more specific individual identity.

Together, they were Sine Nomine, the group that played at assembly. Individually, they were Ryan Graves, the singer with Sine Nomine; or, it was Jim Crane, the drummer with Sine Nomine, and so on.

The band continued its practice schedule, working on selections chosen from their parents' collections of CD's. They developed an extensive repertoire of do-wop and other "oldies but

goodies,” still avoiding the obvious comparisons they knew they’d lose with contemporary artists.

Saturdays became busier since they were receiving more performance invitations than they could easily accommodate. They went to Willitsonburg the first Saturday of every month to play at the boys’ reformatory; in Columbus they played for the annual meetings of several savings and loan associations; a university alumni meeting; the Junior League Christmas party; the county extension service annual meeting; PTA meetings at all three middle schools and at four elementary schools. They played for three large birthday parties at the Columbus Country Club and for the whole-hog sausage breakfast at the county fair.

When any new musical group appears on the scene in smaller communities, the group becomes everyone’s favorite for a while when entertainment needs to be booked. Items in the local newspaper reporting on a meeting where Sine Nomine provided the entertainment almost always had a photo of the band to help illustrate the story.

The four members of the band had achieved as much fame in Columbus as Jim Slater, the star quarterback or Joe Decker, the star

running back on the CHS football team. Sine Nomine had as much popularity as a high-scoring forward on the basketball team might enjoy.

Ryan hooked up with numerous girls at movies, school activities, and the like. His social life had become busier. Whenever Ryan saw Haley, he'd ask her a question in the privacy of his interior monologue: *Hi Haley, it's me, Ryan, the guy you rejected. Am I still not good enough for you? What do you think of me now?*

During that school vacation period between Christmas Day and New Year's Day, the band was sitting at a table at Dairy King one night having cokes. In walked four girls from CHS who would have been listed in the "Who's Who" social elite column of any high school newspaper in the state.

Hellos, what's up, and similar greetings were exchanged all around. Etiquette greeting needs satisfied, the new arrivals sat at a neighboring table, all except Brooke Kennedy, who took a chair from another table and squeezed in beside Ryan.

Ryan was pleased that one of the more popular and best-known girls at CHS would choose to sit beside him. He felt guilty being proud of himself for moving up on the CHS social ladder.

Being somebody, he decided, was better than being either anybody or nobody. Ryan and Brooke visited for 20 minutes about what they had been doing during semester break. Then, Brooke abruptly changed the subject and asked Ryan, “Are you going to the New Year’s Eve dance at First Christian Church?”

“No, I guess not,” Ryan said, “I don’t have a date.”

Brooke became bolder and more direct, “Why don’t you ask me?” Brooke asked.

Holy Shee-it, Ryan screamed inside his head! Brooke Kennedy just asked me to take her to a New Year’s dance. What in God’s name is going on? What’s happening?

“Okay, sure, I’ll take you. That would be a lot of fun,” Ryan answered, trying to be cool and casual about the whole thing. “That’s three days from now.”

“Good calendar skills Graves,” Brooke joked. “Since the dance begins at 8:00 New Year’s Eve, why don’t you pick me up at 8:15 or 8:30?”

“I’ll be there, 8:15 sharp.” Ryan was stunned. His eyes were wide open but he was certain he was dreaming. He just made a date

with Brooke Kennedy, for God's sake! Brooke Kennedy! She's a little bit shorter than her friends, but is really neat.

Brooke's father, Dayton, was pastor at St. Paul Episcopalian Church, one of the largest churches in town. He was in the news a lot, serving on the Columbus City Council and preaching to overflow audiences at two services each Sunday. Whenever there was a controversial issue involving the public schools, the police or fire departments, the public library, or any other public entity, Dr. Dayton Kennedy's views and advice were sought after and were included in newspaper accounts as well as the late night television and radio news at 10:00.

Brooke had appeared in some youth-oriented programs televised by Channel 7. When there was a topic of particular importance to teen-agers, Brooke was frequently on the discussion panel.

She laughed because the TV people always had to get her a pillow to sit on so that she wouldn't appear as short as she was.

Mrs. Kennedy was active in the League of Women Voters and was on television a lot promoting League information and discussion forums prior to elections.

The Kennedy family was, indeed, one of the more prominent families in Columbus. And Ryan had a date with Brooke Kennedy!

To his credit, Ryan hadn't had any spiteful thoughts about Haley all week. This fact occurred to him as he was dressing for the New Year's Eve party.

Candidly, however, he had been constantly worrying about this night ever since Brooke said he could take her. He didn't have enough time or sufficient space in his brain to think about two women!

He chose to focus on Brooke.

His reveries took him to some strange places. For example, what if Brooke was just joking with me, he wondered, and I was too simple-minded to get the joke?

What if I show up at her door and she's already in her pajamas and robe, nestling in for a quiet evening at home? If this happens, how can I show my face at school for the second semester? Everybody will know I'm a moron.

Ryan drove to the Kennedy's house trying to think of an April Fool's type joke he could say in the event Brooke was not

dressed for the party. He guided the car around the Kennedy's circular drive, parked, and then went to the front door.

After ringing the doorbell he decided his face-saving joke was too lame to use; he was prepared to face whatever or whoever met him at the front door.

Brooke came to the door and her presence answered all of Ryan's questions and allayed his fears. There she was, wearing a white shirt and a red vest; she had on black slacks and black shoes. She looked sharp.

Brooke greeted him with, "Hi. Come on in, Ryan," She was laughing quietly. "I'm not laughing at you, Ryan, I'm laughing at both of us. While I was getting dressed tonight I wondered whether you'd actually show up. I was afraid you might have been joking with me about tonight's party."

Ryan laughed harder. "I had the same thoughts," he said. They both enjoyed the humor of their uncertain evening.

The party was fun. They visited with Tyler and Emily. Jim Crane was there with a girl they didn't know; somebody said she was from out-of-town. Jacob had either brought Dorothy Nobel or

they had decided to meet at the party. Either way, they were together.

Ryan and Brooke circulated, talking to most of the partygoers. “Is your Dad going to run for Mayor?” several asked Brooke. “Who’s that with Jim Crane?” “When are you guys going to play for another assembly? You’re fantastic,” people asked Ryan.

“Want some punch?” Ryan asked Brooke. “Sure, let’s,” she answered.

Ryan quickly assumed a boxer’s stance and delivered a shadow punch to Brooke’s mid-section.

“ Ryan, that is so lame,” Brooke said with a broad smile, intertwining her right arm with Ryan’s left, and taking the first step toward the refreshments table. Tyler and Emily were already browsing over the refreshments. The table was spread with Spartan cuisine: the ubiquitous and institutional red punch with assorted cookies.

“I must say,” Brooke said, directing her remarks to Ryan and Tyler, “your band has an excellent public relations effort underway. At least once each week I see an article in the *Chronicle* reporting about some group you’ve played for and there’s usually a

photograph of all of you playing and singing like you knew what you were doing.”

“That’s the image we try to develop,” Tyler said.

“What image,” Emily asked?

“Like we know what we’re doing,” Ryan blurted out.

“I wrote a song once ,” Tyler said, “but you know I can't read music. So, every time I hear a new song on the radio, I think ‘Hey, maybe I wrote that.’”

Despite trying to hold it back because they didn’t want to encourage Tyler’s jokes, every body had a good laugh!

Some of the chaperones started to clean up the mess around the refreshments table. Ryan looked at Brooke and raised his eyebrows. “Are they sending us a message?” he asked Brooke.

“That they are, my good man,” Brooke replied, “and they’re none too subtle about it either.”

They collected their coats from the coat rack and headed out the door. During the drive to her house Brooke chatted about how much fun she’d had, how nice it was to get to know Ryan better, and how glad she was to have had the opportunity to meet the other guys in the band.

The music at the party wasn't that good, she said, but Sine Nomine can't play for every social function in town!

Driving into the circular driveway, Ryan stopped the car as close to the Kennedy's front door as possible, "Ryan, I know I'm repeating myself, but I had a great time tonight. We need to do this again, soon I hope. You don't need to get out; it's cold and I can be inside in 10 seconds."

"I had a wonderful time, Brooke," Ryan replied. "I'm glad we were both dressed and ready!"

Brooke leaned over and gave Ryan a kiss, a peck on the cheek, then she opened her door and dashed inside, calling behind to Ryan, "Call me, okay?"

Ryan drove home, glancing at his image in the rear view mirror. When the street lighting became brighter at an intersection and he could see himself better. He thought his stupid smile made him look like Alfred. E. Newman.

After trying to accommodate himself to Haley's all but reclusive habits, Ryan enjoyed Brooke's more gregarious social behavior. She was infinitely more out-going than Haley. Brooke was friendly and sociable, enjoyed going to the movies, watching theatrical productions and concerts on the university campus, and attending church and its activities.

Whenever Ryan called with an idea for something for them to do, Brooke was all for it, enthusiastically.

As Ryan and Brooke became identified as a regular couple, they became involved in a CHS social circle Ryan knew little about.

Brooke would call him and report that they were invited to Michael's house Saturday night for his birthday; or, they were going to Sophia's for pizza after the basketball game; or, they were invited to Abigail's Sunday afternoon for a trip to a state park for a birthday picnic.

The leaders of Ryan's junior class were at these parties; Ryan was accepted as one of the group, quickly and easily. His universe had expanded a great deal.

After one basketball game, five couples went to Christopher's for an assortment of snacks and sodas. Christopher was an only child whose parents provided him with cascades of the latest and most trendy of everything: shoes, jeans, shirts, plasma TV, and, it seemed to Ryan, an unlimited supply of the most popular DVD's and CD's.

As the evening lengthened, Christopher turned down the lights in the family room at the same time someone started a romantic Alicia Keys album on Christopher's CD player. Conversations became more hushed.

Brooke, who had been talking with friends in the kitchen, came to the family room and to the overstuffed chair Ryan was sitting in. She sat in his lap, putting her left arm around him.

Ryan could smell her cologne, a fragrant scent reminding him of the aroma of the real vanilla his mother had brought home from a vacation trip to Mexico. He thought the scent might have gone to his head. Is this how Dad's martinis make him feel, Ryan wondered?

"Are you having good time?" she asked quietly.

“Yes, Brooke, I’m having a good time. I think you and I usually have a good time together.”

Ryan winced. Did his last remark spoil a lovely moment, or what could’ve been a lovely moment? He was thinking what he had just said might sound way too sappy for Brooke and that she might laugh at his corny remark.

She didn’t laugh. She turned her face downwards to his, gently pulled his head closer to her, and they kissed. She drew back and smiled at Ryan. They kissed again, holding the second kiss longer than the first.

Ryan, pleasantly surprised by Brooke’s kiss, had wondered for some time when it might be appropriate for him to try to kiss Brooke.

She answered the question this night.

“I’m so grateful we bumped into each other at Dairy King over semester break and you asked me to go the New Year’s party,” Brooke whispered.

“Wrong,” Ryan answered with a smile, feigning a stern correction. “You asked me, remember?”

“Now you’re wrong,” Brooke retorted, “I said you *could take* me to the party; I didn’t say, ‘Ryan, will you *please take* me?’”

“Okay. I yield,” Ryan whispered back. “I’m as thankful, though, as you are for that night. I consider my self a very lucky person to be with you.”

“Everybody thinks I’m the lucky one because I found you,” Brooke said. “Since your band hit the scene you guys have become the most well known music group in Columbus. Does my being with you mean I’m a groupie?”

“Not ‘a’ groupie. It means you’re ‘my’ groupie. I hope it also means you’re the president of my fan club, too,” Ryan said.

“I am that,” Brooke replied, “and no one else will be admitted. I’ll be the only person in your fan club.” She lowered her face to Ryan and they kissed again.

The room was quiet. The lights were low, the conversations were muffled, and the music was soft and pleasant. Ryan wondered how long the CD would last; maybe another two hours, he hoped. He didn’t want anything to change at this moment. Stretch it out, he thought to himself; stretch it out.

For the first time in his life a female who wasn't a relative had kissed him, three times in five minutes, as a matter of fact!

Kissing Brooke Kennedy was extraordinarily more satisfying and more exciting than kissing Aunt Chloe, or Grandma Graves, Ryan decided, laughing at himself for making a mental comparison that was a no-brainer!

Later, different couples started to stand up and make going home noises. Brooke took Ryan's left hand and positioned it so that she could see the watch on his wrist. "It's 11:15, Ryan, I think we'd better go. I need to be home before 12:00."

Everyone gathered their coats, thanked Christopher for a great party, and then a procession of five cars drove away. One of the cars drove to Dr. Dayton Kennedy's house, pulled into the driveway and stopped. The driver shifted the car into neutral, and then turned toward the passenger on his right.

"Are you ready for a first for you and me," he asked?

"Well, there are lots of things we haven't yet done for the first time. What exactly do you have in mind, Mister," she answered, smiling broadly?

“How about if I show you,” he said, leaning over to her side of the front seat. “This is the first time I’ve said ‘good night’ to you and then kissed you.”

She closed her eyes and he said “Good night,” and then he kissed her gently on the lips.

She opened her eyes and smiled sweetly. “That was nice. Good night to you, too, Ryan.” She got out of the car, walked to her front door, looked back, and gave a queenly wrist-turning wave.

Brooke chuckled, and then entered her house.

Sine Nomine played for one more assembly in late January and received a standing ovation; a reception louder than before. The audience went wild! They played for a Valentine’s Day party at the Columbus Country Club and for the Chamber of Commerce annual Stakeholders’ Meeting.

Ryan and Brooke continued seeing each other, becoming increasingly more comfortable in their relationship. They both went looking for summer jobs and were successful. Ryan took a job with Klein’s Supermarket, working at the Customer Service counter 40 hours a week; one of Mr. Kennedy’s secretaries went on

maternity leave for the summer, so Brooke substituted for her for three months.

During the summer the band auditioned for a statewide Music Idol competition but wasn't chosen. They played at a no-admission revue at the state fair, but the crowd was expecting country music, not Sine Nomine's repertoire; this mix-up was definitely not one of the guys' more pleasant performance memories.

"I told you we should've worn cowboy hats and boots to the state fair program," Jim tried to explain, tongue in cheek.

"Wouldn't have worked," Tyler said, "you can put a cowboy hat on a pig and it's still a pig."

"What do we get if we put a cowboy hat on you," Jacob asked Tyler?

"Just try it and what you'll get is a punch to your pie hole," said Tyler, pantomiming a shadow boxer's one-two punch.

"Anyway, I ain't no cowboy," Tyler said, "I'm a lover. You can ask Emily." Everybody groaned.

When it was time for the SGA's party at Rotary Park the Friday night before the Monday school was scheduled to begin,

Ryan had no doubt that he and Brooke would go. Both of them were anxious to see friends they hadn't seen all summer.

Ryan had a fleeting memory, recalling that last year he brought Haley to this party. That seemed long ago. When was it; ten years ago? Some exciting night that was, he reminded himself sarcastically! How could I have been so stupid?

His life at CHS in general with Brooke in particular had made him too happy to spend much time thinking about Haley, except for two exceptions: Haley had seldom seemed happy, usually spending her life in some dark place with a half-smile and few words. It's too bad, Ryan commiserated, for anyone to go through life that unhappy.

Second, Haley had obviously made a decision that she and Ryan had no future together, and, with no doubt or uncertainty, no present, either, he laughed.

I wonder, he thought, why she told Lily Hollister several times how special I was to her and yet when we were together she morphed into a non-communicative and aloof stranger?

Ryan remembered thinking he ought to introduce himself to Haley every time he saw or phoned her. She frequently made every encounter with him seem like the first-time he had ever met him.

She acted as if I were an alien from the Planet of Oz, Ryan thought.

Brooke was on a socialization continuum some 180-degrees opposite Haley. Most people require food and water for sustenance; Brooke also required food and water, but she also needed people, talkative people at that.

This was not a complaint about her; Ryan was happy to be with someone who could converse about a wide variety of topics. He admired Brooke's ways of drawing people into conversations and asking them to explain more about their views as the interchange developed, and how she laughed easily with them when something was funny.

The SGA party was an enjoyable evening for Ryan and Brooke. They visited with almost everyone who was there. During the drive home, Brooke asked an interesting question: "Ryan, how many of your friends were at the party tonight?"

“Oh, I don’t know; I guess I didn’t know I was supposed to count.”

“Of course you weren’t, silly. As best I could tell, though, seeing how many people you talked to, everyone there tonight is a friend of yours. Your circles of friends and acquaintances have grown enormously.”

“I know, Brooke,” Ryan replied, “and I thank you for a lot of that. You’ve helped me learn how to be friendly.”

“I disagree,” Brooke said. “The band deserves the credit, not me. It has provided you with an identity you didn’t have before. It has given you self-confidence. You know you can succeed. You’ve learned how to be successful. These are characteristics that attract people to you.”

By now they were at the Kennedy’s house. Ryan got out of the car, walked around to Brooke’s door and opened it. Stepping out of the car, Brooke pretended to trip and fell into Ryan.

“Thank you for saving me from a terrible and possible life-threatening fall,” Brooke laughed, putting her arms around Ryan’s neck. She kissed him.

“M’Lady, anytime I can help, just let me know,” Ryan said back to her. He put his left arm around her, pulling her closer to him in an embrace. He leaned down and kissed her fully on the lips.

As they parted, Ryan had the controlled smile of a scientist whose hypothesis had just clarified one of the universe’s great mysteries. “Brooke,” he began, “I used to dream about someone like you. I didn’t know how or when I might meet that person, but I’m glad I found her, and I’m glad her name is Brooke Kennedy.”

“You are so sweet, Ryan,” Brooke said. “You’re the answer to any girl’s dreams, but I’m not all that interested in the dreams of other girls. I’m selfishly considering my own dreams and I want to thank you for coming into my life. You make me happy.”

They embraced and shared a gentle kiss, bringing their evening together to an affectionate close.

Walking back to the car, Ryan looked up at the moon.

He wondered if there might be another person either in Columbus, St. Louis, New York, or Chicago, or any other city, thinking happy thoughts about his life, the universe, about space, the moon, or the stars.

School opened as scheduled Monday, following the traditions and procedures that by now were well known by the seniors. The elders of the CHS population looked with amusement at the nervous first-timers, remembering their own fears when they started attending CHS.

Ryan and Brooke had two courses together: Journalism and English Comp and Grammar. The former course studied aspects of journalism as a career. Most of those who enrolled in the course had no intentions of a career in journalism; they were there because the students in the course also served as the staff for the monthly CHS newspaper, *The CHS Explorer*. The *Explorer* staff understood more about what was happening at CHS than anyone.

The English Comp course was designed as a college prep course, a sort of grammar booster shot preparing the students for Freshman English at college.

The fall semester was filled with school assignments, books to read, papers to write, stories to write for the *CHS Explorer*, football games, post-game parties, church and movies on the weekend.

Ryan, Brooke, and their friends were beginning to understand that when you're busy, time flies by.

The winter vacation was scheduled for the last eight days in December and the first six days in January. Two weeks should provide enough time to take care of some yet to be completed assignments: read what needs to be read and write what hadn't yet been written.

There would be time remaining for informal get togethers at Dairy King, watching some DVD's, and going for drives to look at Christmas decorations.

Ryan went to the mall with Brooke after Christmas. Aunt Jessica had sent Brooke pajamas that were several sizes too large; Uncle Tyler and Aunt Elizabeth sent her three pairs of socks with sizes more appropriate for Yeti.

All of these gifts needed to be exchanged, Brooke's relatives forgetting her smallish figure.

More suitable was the money Brooke received from Uncle Jason and Aunt Maria, both of whom were very successful and well off surgeons who, fortunately for Brooke, had no children.

They always sent Brooke big money for her birthday and for Christmas; since Uncle Jason and Brooke's father, Dayton, were brothers who were very close, Brooke was a favorite niece.

She had three Ben Franklins to spend!

"Ryan, I have a wonderful idea," Brooke said as the clerk rang up the two pair of shoes Brooke had just purchased.

"Oh no," Ryan responded, "if your idea involves more walkin' and gawkin' I am not in favor of it. Come on, Brooke, please, I'm draggin' now."

"My *wonderful* idea, Mr. Smart Ass, is to buy you lunch."

"You're right, Brooke, it is most definitely a *wonderful* idea. I second the motion."

They went to the food court where Brooke got a taco salad and Ryan went for the chilidog and chips. Watching Ryan pour more hot sauce --- four of those plasticized packets --- on his chilidog, Brooke blinked and said, "Good grief, Ryan, why do you punish your stomach like that?"

Ryan just looked at her. "But now I understand why you're such a hot kisser," Brooke laughed.

They finished their lunch and then Ryan took Brooke home.

“I’m headed for the couch in our family room,” Ryan said as Brooke gathered up her packages and got out of the car. “A nap is in order.”

“I know,” Brooke said, “I walked you pretty good all over the mall. You were a good boy; you deserve a nap. Call me later?”

“Didn’t plan not to,” Ryan replied.

“Good. Lose those double negatives and have a good nap. We’ll talk later.” Brooke put down her packages at the front door, then she turned, smiled, and blew Ryan a kiss. After she unlocked the door and gathered her packages she went inside.

Ryan started his drive home, somewhat bothered by Brooke’s criticism of his use of hot sauce at lunch and then later, his language when she said, “lose those double negatives.”

He decided, however, that these were insignificant issues, not worth pursuing. His feelings for Brooke and her feelings for him, their committed relationship, were much more important than a minor tiff.

35

The second semester of the senior year in high school is a rigorous test of perseverance and patience. Those students who will not seek further education but will enter the workforce immediately upon graduation find it difficult to pay attention to assignments they see as only peripherally related either to getting a job, getting married, or both.

Those planning to go to college or university want the semester to end as rapidly as possible so that they can get on with their professional lives, pursuing an academic major that will be a stepping stone to their careers.

Faculties have their plans, too, both personal and professional. Some will go to summer school to work on a graduate degree, which will place them at a higher level on the salary schedule. Some are looking forward to travel to visit relatives, to a vacation dreamed of for years, or to reading for pleasure and resting up for next fall's trials and tribulations.

However the second semester is viewed, it's simply an obstacle in the way. It sucks. Except, that is, for the selections of

those honorees who will be recognized at commencement ceremonies.

The senior class voted Brooke Most Versatile Senior Girl. She was also awarded a history medal, struck and sponsored by the State Historical Society. The award also provided a \$1000 scholarship award to be used at the college or university of her choice.

She also received a Citizenship Award, worth \$500, sponsored by the Columbus Chamber of Commerce for her volunteer activities at the Columbus General Hospital, the Columbus Children's Zoo, the Burr County Historical Society, the Columbus Public Library summer reading program, and the Red Cross summer swimming classes.

Ryan was voted Top Note in the Select Choir, elected Outstanding Student Manager by the football team, and Most Popular Senior boy, an honor that came as a total surprise to him.

When his Most Popular photograph appeared in the *Columbus Chronicle*, Mrs. Graves bought extra copies at the *Chronicle* office so that she could mail the news to the out of town relatives.

Ryan looked at the photograph for a long time. I hope Brooke is as proud of me as I am surprised, Ryan thought. He had another idea, too, and it made him feel a little bit guilty and a whole lot petty.

Haley, I hope you've seen this photo. The guy who wasn't good enough for you has been elected Most Popular Senior Boy. Are you thinking about me now? I'm gone, out of your life.

If you miss me, you can cry me a river, shave your head, or rend your clothes. I don't give a damn.

Ryan was totally obsessed with Brooke.

Why, therefore, did Haley's memory creep into his thinking from time to time? He really didn't have any feelings, absolutely none whatsoever, for Haley anymore, he told himself.

He continued with his interior monologue: *Captain's Log . . . remove Haley's name and memory from my mental hard drive.*

Ryan went to Brooke's on a sunny April Saturday with no agenda other than sitting and talking about graduation, college, what their academic majors might be, and the future. While they were sitting on the wicker furniture in the solarium, enjoying the sun streaming through the louvered windows, Mr. Kennedy walked in.

“Excuse me you two; I hope I’m not intruding,” Mr. Kennedy said, “but I have a question, a potentially major question, for the two of you.”

“Daddy, don’t be so formal,” Brooke said with a light scolding tone, “it’s just Ryan and me.”

“Okay, dear, here’s the thing: I’m scheduled for seven days vacation the week after Easter, and I have four tickets, field box seats mind you on the third base line, to watch the Cardinals play the Pirates. The Wainscotts were going with us, but something’s come up and they can’t go. Would the two of you like to go with a couple of old folks to watch the game?”

Ryan couldn’t believe what he had just heard. “I can go,” Ryan said in a loud voice. “Brooke?”

“Sure. Sounds like fun to me.”

“Mr. Kennedy, since you’re a baseball fan, I’ve got one for you. Here’s an idea. Why not combine the designated driver and the designated hitter, so that after the 7th inning the DH drives all the drunk fans home?”

“Good idea, Ryan. If I can work that joke into one of my

sermons I'll be sure to give you attribution. I wouldn't want anyone in my congregation to think I was responsible for a joke that corny."

Given his uproarious laughter, it was clear that Mr. Kennedy thought his reply to Ryan was very funny.

"So, the game is a go?" Mr. Kennedy asked.

"Yes Daddy, we'll go, but no lame jokes, please."

"I won't promise what I can't deliver," Mr. Kennedy replied. "I'll try my best to be witty and especially understated." Despite himself, Mr. Kennedy laughed at this remark, too. He left the solarium, still chuckling.

"I had another one," Ryan said, "a joke my Dad told me, but I wasn't sure I should tell your Dad, him being a preacher and all."

"Ryan, pastors are human, too, just like the rest of us. However, tell me the joke first."

"Okay," Ryan said, "here goes: A small boy was lost at a large shopping mall. He approached a uniformed policeman and

said, 'I've lost my grandpa!'

The cop asked, 'What's he like?'

The little boy hesitated for a moment and then replied, 'Well, sir, he likes Jack Daniels and women with big boobs.'"

Brooke fell back in her chair. "Ryan, that's a terrible joke; go home! I don't know if mom and I can tolerate a trip in the car with both you and Dad!"

"I just hope you and your mother can keep up with your Dad and me, two of the cleverest and funniest men in Columbus."

Two weeks later Ryan and the Kennedys drove to St. Louis for the Cardinals' game with the Pirates. Ryan sat in the front passenger seat, Brooke and her mom in the back seat. Ryan decided that Mr. Kennedy was a man he could like; they talked a lot about baseball, music, and current events.

Coming home, after watching the Cardinals beat the Pirates 6-4, Ryan and Brooke sat in the back seat. Ryan was careful to sit on Brooke's right side so that his left hand could hold her right hand. Ryan leaned over to whisper in Brooke's right ear, "Your Dad is a

cool guy.” Then he stole a quick kiss on her right temple.

“Brooke leaned over to Ryan, pulled his head down to her, and whispered in his left ear, “Yes he is, and I can tell he likes you very much. I’m not sure why, though,” she giggled.

Then Brooke quickly kissed Ryan on his left cheek.

The remainder of the return trip to Columbus was uneventful. Brooke took a nap, her head resting on Ryan’s left breast.

How happy can I be, Ryan asked himself?

Mr. Kennedy parked in the driveway and everyone sleepily got out of the car, stretched, and stood there, not fully alert, waiting for someone to suggest the next step.

Ryan spoke first: “Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy, thank you so much for a great day. I had a wonderful time with the two of you and with Brooke.”

“You’re welcome, Ryan,” Mr. Kennedy said, “we understand better why someone pronounces your name in our house every 10 seconds. Brooke, you’re right; Ryan is mega-nice.”

Brooke grimaced, “Daddy, stop it. Anyway, it isn’t every 10 seconds; it’s every nine seconds.” She smiled at Ryan.

“Ryan,” Mr. Kennedy said with a smile, “I have just one bit of religious advice to give you.”

“Daddy,” Brooke whined, “don’t . . . please?”

Mr. Kennedy stood there, grinning like a Cheshire cat, waiting for a cue from Ryan.

“What is it, sir,” Ryan asked?

“It’s this young man: When you do a good deed, get a receipt for it, just in case heaven is like the IRS.”

Brooke groaned. Mrs. Kennedy rolled her eyes and mumbled, “Saints preserve us.” Ryan laughed, probably harder than was warranted, but nobody ever called Ryan a fool.

Laughing at Brooke’s father’s jokes was simply good politics.

Graduation was a big deal. The ceremonies were held in the

CHS auditorium which was packed with families and friends of the graduates. It had been raining all day, leaving the auditorium as humid as a sauna.

After the ceremonies the parents sponsored an all-night party held at one of the local churches. After several years of having at least one graduate get drunk enough to die in an automobile wreck, the PTA decided an all-night party, with good food, loud music, and games yielding nice prizes donated by local merchants, was a smarter alternative.

A couple of hours into the party several graduates approached Ryan, asking him to sing one of his compositions. Dick Fillmore, probably the best overall musician at CHS, could play on the piano any song he had heard at least twice; he agreed to accompany Ryan's singing *I Feel You Beside Me*, a song he had written for Brooke.

When Ryan finished singing, he received boisterous applause. Brooke came to the front of the church's fellowship hall where the stage was elevated six feet from the floor. Ryan hopped off the stage and stumbled into Brooke's arms. They almost fell to

the floor.

As they disentangled, Brooke threw both arms around Ryan and gave him what was either a huge kiss or CPR. Given the intensity of her pressing her lips against his, no one could be sure which it was. A group of Sine Nomine fans was there, too, pounding Ryan on the back, congratulating both him and Brooke for a fantastic song.

“Let’s go outside,” Ryan said, “so I can get a breath of fresh air and cool off.”

“If we go outside we can’t come back,” Brooke reminded him, “that’s one of the ground rules.”

“Can an adult go with us,” Ryan asked?

“Yes, that’s all right,” Brooke said. “I’ll go get Daddy.”

Mr. Kennedy was more than happy to escort Brooke and Ryan outside into the balmy May night. “Glad to do it,” Mr. Kennedy said. “The two of you are my favorite couple here tonight. I also want you to know I’m extremely proud of you both.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kennedy,” Ryan replied.

“Thank you, Daddy. That was a nice thing to say,” Brooke complimented her father.

“Grandfather Kennedy always said ‘Success always occurs in private but failure is usually in full view.’ but he never met you two,” Mr. Kennedy said. “You have been successful, in full view, and many people have enjoyed celebrating with you. You two have futures ahead of you that are the envy, I would suppose, of many of the graduates here at this party tonight. Let me know whenever and however I can help.”

They returned to the party, Ryan and Brooke still smiling broadly at Mr. Kennedy’s compliments. Mr. Kennedy rejoined the group of parent chaperones; Ryan and Brooke walked aimlessly around the fellowship hall.

“Ryan, is it my imagination, or was Daddy talking to us as if we were a couple?”

“Well, aren’t we,” Ryan asked?

“Of course. But I don’t mean a couple who came to this party together. I mean, I think he meant, you know, a kind of permanent couple.”

“Your father is a shrewd man, Brooke. I think he spoke with enough ambiguity to explain in another year that he was talking to us as a couple, or as individuals, whatever our situation might be.”

“I hope we’re still a couple in 12 months,” Brooke said, “but I can’t speak for you.”

“I want us to be a couple a year from now, too,” Ryan said, “and I see no reason why we can’t or won’t be.”

Brooke stepped closer to Ryan, putting her hands on his shoulders and kissing him. “Do you, Ryan Graves, promise in the company of God and your high school graduation class that you will be one-half of the Brooke Kennedy-Ryan Graves couple one year from this date,” Brooke asked in a mock ceremonial voice?

“I do,” Ryan said, and they kissed again. “What about you, Brooke?”

“I do,” she said, her affirmation accompanied by another kiss.

36

One year later Ryan and Brooke, still a couple, were observing the beginning of their second year of university studies. Actually, Brooke was celebrating; Ryan was observing.

Brooke had thought about a number of academic majors: always good at math, she thought about accountancy; her classmates at CHS had elected her Most Versatile, so perhaps a degree in Political Science would prepare her for a career in city government and its wide range of public policy issues.

“Brooke,” Mr. Kennedy said, using his counseling voice, “the best predictor of what a person will do is to look at what the person has done. Let’s look at what you’ve done: you’ve taught in the church school program since you were in the seventh grade. You’ve been a steady and a valued contributor to the vacation Bible school. You’ve been one of the best and most popular teachers we’ve had at church since my arrival. That said, have you given any thought to studying to become a teacher?”

“I guess I have now,” Brooke replied. When she registered at the university, she was a College of Education student majoring in

Elementary Education. She never regretted her decision. “Why didn’t I think of teaching in the first place?” she asked herself.

Ryan, on the other hand, started out in pre-journalism. After one semester he switched to special education, planning to work with physically disadvantaged children. He wasn’t satisfied with that choice either, as important as the field might be.

“Ryan,” Mr. Kennedy said the summer before second year registration, “you’ve taken some English courses because you liked your English courses at Columbus High, and you were successful in those courses; and Brooke tells me you are an excellent writer and you love to read. Are my points correct?”

“Yes sir,” Ryan answered.

“So,” Mr. Kennedy continued, “what would logic lead you to consider as career choices?”

“Sir,” Ryan began, “I think some English majors plan on going to law school, which I don’t want to do; some plan on a career in journalism, something I’ve already decided I don’t want to do. I suppose I could be an English teacher.”

The second year of his university studies Ryan registered in the College of Education, as Brooke did, preparing to become a high

school English teacher. Like Brooke, he was happy with his decision; that was the good news.

The bad news was that most of the coursework Ryan completed in his first two semesters did not meet any of the graduation requirements for English majors in the College of Education. When he explained this to Brooke and Mr. Kennedy, Brooke told Ryan how sorry she was and that it wasn't fair.

Mr. Kennedy, on the other hand, tried to explain to both Ryan and Brooke that meeting graduation requirements was simply a fact of life, and was neither fair nor unfair.

“Ryan,” Mr. Kennedy explained with a wry smile, “consider yourself an academic red-shirt. This fall, the beginning of your second year, you'll be a red-shirt freshman.”

The fall semester of Ryan's second year got off to a smooth beginning, given the fact that Ryan took courses meeting College of Education requirements. He knew from the outset that Introduction to Zoology, an option for the life science requirement, would be a challenge. The course met every day: lecture was on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, with laboratory meetings scheduled on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Never one to worry too much about studying course materials before school, or after school at home, Ryan had completed high school without letting school assignments disturb or otherwise interrupt his social life. He tried to learn Zoology 001 by taking notes during the lectures and by participating in the lab exercises. He never revisited his lecture notes until the night before an exam.

He flunked Zoology 001. Ryan learned that hard work has a future payoff, but laziness has an immediate settlement.

He had never received an “F” at any level of schooling. This one threw him for a loop; furthermore, he was convinced his career as a teacher was over before it started. Who would hire an English teacher who had five credits of “F” on his grade transcript? Not only was his objective of being an English teacher threatened, but also receiving an “F” was hideously embarrassing!

He worried through several sleepless nights, then called Dave Wheeler, the Assistant Principal at CHS and a long-time friend of his father. After explaining his poor performance and the resulting “F” in Zoology 001, Ryan repeated his fear that no school district would hire him with that “F” on his transcript.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about how a grade earned in just one course might affect my career if I were you,” Dave Wheeler said. “You’ll be applying for a job as an English teacher, not a science teacher. Anyone interviewing you would more than likely say, ‘Young man, I had trouble with science myself.’” They both laughed.

Ryan took Zoology 001 the next semester, earning an “A.” He learned his lesson and studied every night for the rest of his undergraduate days.

Brooke finished her undergraduate degree in eight semesters --- in four years, just like the idealized program of studies printed in the college handbook --- being the model student she had been ever since she started school when she was six-years old.

Ryan and Brooke were married one week after Brooke graduated from the university. She would teach in the Columbus Public Schools while Ryan completed his undergraduate studies,

When Ryan graduated the following year he and Brooke began searching for teaching positions in their areas of interest and expertise. They both took teaching jobs in a small community, Centerville, in a neighboring state. Brooke was the new 5th grade

teacher in Centerville and Ryan was the new 9th grade English teacher.

Centerville was a small town, like a thousand other small towns with a population of 3,500 found in any U.S atlas. Centerville had an overabundance of churches; shops and businesses were arranged in a square around the county courthouse.

Men with white foreheads and browned faces could be found at the East Side Grill almost anytime the diner was open. Centerville was a wealthy community. Complaining about exorbitantly high taxes and how the “guvmint” spent money in crazy ways were popular pastimes.

Brooke and Ryan found a pleasant two-bedroom apartment in Centerville. The kitchen was small, but it was clearly big enough for a family of two. They bought a chair, a couch, a small dinette set with two chairs, and a bed and mattress at a local furniture store.

After the furniture was delivered and positioned in their apartment, Brooke made a pot of coffee. She sat on the new couch. Ryan sat in the new chair. “We are a real U.S. family now,” Ryan said. “We are in debt for the only furniture we have. I ‘m glad your mother gave us her old coffee pot to use in this new marriage.. This

coffee tastes good, by the way.”

“I’m glad you brought your CD player into this marriage,” Brooke said. “Without a TV set, we’ll be listening to a lot of music!”

“Brooke,” Ryan introduced another topic, “the coffee is good, but I’d like a beer.”

“No,” Brooke said, “Centerville is too small for you to go to a liquor store. If you go buy some beer everybody in this little burg will know about it and you’ll be the talk of the town by breakfast tomorrow.”

“We could drive to Midway Junction, It’s only eight miles east of Centerville.”

“Okay, that’s better. Small towns have large ears and bigger mouths,” Brooke suggested. “I’ll bet no faculty members in the Centerville Public Schools have ever bought liquor in Centerville. Let’s not be the first.”

Forty-five minutes later Brooke and Ryan were back in their apartment, Ryan sitting in the new chair and Brooke sitting on the new couch. Both of them were enjoying a can of Old Milwaukee Light. Ryan looked at Brooke, saying, “Brooke, if there were four potatoes in this room, which one would be the prostitute?”

“The prostitute?” Brooke asked. “How would I know? But, okay, I’ll play: which one would be the prostitute?”

“The one that says ‘Idaho.’”

“What an irritatingly corny joke,” Brooke complained, standing up, her hands on her hips. “Okay funny man, I’m cutting you off. No more beer for you unless you promise to stop telling annoying, stupid jokes unworthy of my attention, time, and intellect.”

“I promise,” Ryan said, holding his left hand over his heart. “From this moment onwards, I’ll use only the jokes I’ve read in either *Boys Life* or *Successful Farming*.”

They both laughed and laughed, long and hard. One beer works quickly with inexperienced drinkers.

With no small amount of anxiety, Brooke and Ryan showered the next morning, dressed, ate a small breakfast of toast and coffee, then pretended to read parts of the morning paper until it was time to leave. According to their contracts with the Centerville Public Schools, this was their first day of service. All CPS faculties would meet together in the morning, then faculty would meet in the

afternoon in the separate buildings where they were assigned to teach.

Despite the morning's weather forecast they heard on the radio, Ryan was careful to wear a long-sleeved white shirt, a red necktie, and his navy blue blazer and a pair of khakis. This was one of his ostrich strategy outfits, an attempt to hide his arm.

“What are you doing wearing those clothes?” Brooke asked. “The high temperature is supposed to be between 95 to 100 this afternoon.”

“I want to make a good impression; we're meeting a bunch of new people today,” Ryan explained. He was disappointed that she questioned his clothes. I'd imagine she would understand by now, he thought.

Ryan and Brooke went to the customary Welcome to the New School Year program at 9:00 a.m. the Thursday before the schools' opened on Monday. They were handed a printed agenda as they entered the high school auditorium.

The first item, “Welcome from the Superintendent,” outlined some priorities for the new school year. The Superintendent thanked the teachers and staff for their dedication and ongoing pursuit of

excellence. Other items of importance were:

- We will challenge all students. Educating our students --- all students, regardless of their differences --- is the district's first priority.
- Teachers will continue to provide for the individual attention for each student, a necessary element for a meaningful educational experience;
- Each school should provide a media-rich learning environment,
- Best practices and standards will drive all curriculum decisions, instructional practices and assessments.
- Fiscally responsible practices will be used district-wide to improve the district's financial condition.
- Thank you to our parents and our community for thoroughly supporting our district and schools.
- The district will work with the community to improve our school system.

- We look forward to another tremendous school year.

The Superintendent's comments were daunting to the new faculty, including Brooke and Ryan. Ryan was thinking to himself, I haven't even seen my classroom, I don't know where the nearest restroom is, and I haven't planned my first lesson. How can I do all of the things the Superintendent has mentioned?

Ryan was feeling overwhelmed by the Superintendent's expectations.

The second item, "Introduction of New Faculty," was the responsibility of the Assistant Superintendent. Brooke and Ryan stood, respectively, when the new elementary school teachers and the new secondary teachers were recognized. This remainder of the meeting was almost as intimidating as the Superintendent's charge to the faculty.

The Assistant Superintendent lifted up several items of interest: the New Teacher Orientation Schedule, the New Teacher Orientation Registration Form , and a Centerville Public School District School Map.

After the Assistant Superintendent was finished with his remarks, a welcome to the Centerville Public School System was offered by Shelia Thompson, President of the CPS board of Education. She reminded the faculty that achieving educational excellence is a worthy goal, but one the schools and the teachers can't accomplish in isolation. Continuing to foster and maintain good relationships with parents and the Centerville community, she emphasized, are more important than ever.

Shelia Thompson sat down accompanied with a smattering of, at best, polite applause. Her reception by the faculty was, Brooke thought, embarrassing. Why were the faculty members being so rude to the President of the School Board, she wondered? Ryan was having similar thoughts. I need to discuss this with Brooke tonight, Ryan said to himself.

The Superintendent spoke next, thanking everyone for their attention and reminding them about the back to school faculty and staff picnic tomorrow, Friday night. Then he reminded the faculty that each building would have a faculty meeting beginning later this afternoon at 1:30. Friday was scheduled for faculty to spend the day in their buildings. The Superintendent then declared the meeting

adjourned.

At lunch Ryan remarked to Brooke that he had never heard about so many committees in such a short period of time.

“You know what my dad says?” Brooke asked him.

“I’ll bet I’m about to learn,” Ryan said, smiling back at Brooke.

“My dad dislikes committee meetings as much as the next pastor. I’ve heard daddy say many times, ‘God so loved the world that he didn’t send a committee.’”

Ryan laughed. “Your dad is a cool guy who’s really smart. Should we quote him at our building meetings this afternoon?”

“Bad idea,” Brooke scoffed, “bad idea, at least for you, Mr. Newbie Newguy. But possibly a good idea when you become a 20-year faculty veteran.”

“Being a 20-year veteran faculty member with the Centerville Public Schools is an idea I have trouble wrapping my head around,” Ryan replied. “So far I haven’t taught one day. Do you believe we’ll make it to 20 years?”

“Sure,” Brooke answered. “In 20 years we’ll only be 43 years old. I don’t think we’ll be old enough or wealthy enough to retire.

Do you know what teachers miss the most when they retire?”

“I see a lame joke ahead,” Ryan said. “June, July and August?”

Brooke smiled, “No, dummy, they miss not being able to call in sick two or three days a month.”

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Ryan was assigned to teach 10th and 11th grade English at Potter High School in Centerville. Harold Potter was an early settler in the Centerville area who was instrumental in building the first schools and hiring the first teachers.

The 1:30 faculty meeting was scheduled to meet in the PHS music room since it had tiered rows and plenty of chairs for everyone.

Most of the meeting was devoted to explanations about refinements in the major medical and hospitalization group insurance. This was followed by a presentation by a representative of the state's teacher retirement program. Ryan understood very little of the information that was being discussed at this meeting.

He had two thoughts: First, why was it that the older faculty did most of the talking about the insurance issues? Second, how did the course in *The American Novel* that he completed under Professor Norman Hook, a great teacher, relate to anything he had heard in today's meetings, or vice versa?

At 3:00 that afternoon the PHS faculty meeting came to a

merciful close so that the teachers could spend some time in their classrooms. Ryan was anxious to go to the privacy of his classroom so that he could take off his tie and blazer. What's the temperature he, wondered? He was burning up; the waistband of his underwear was wet. His undershirt was wet, too.

He was accustomed to this discomfort. His ostrich strategy of covering and hiding his arm had always helped him cope with the intense apprehension he experienced when he was going to be around strangers. They didn't know about his arm and would, therefore, most likely stare at him. He hated for people to stare at him.

Hanging his blazer and the necktie over the backrest of a student desk, Ryan thought about the first day of school. What will I wear, he asked himself? You know what you'll wear, he heard his inner voice answer: long sleeves. You'd better pray for cooler weather, for your own comfort.

Ryan wasn't sure what he was supposed to do in his room the afternoon of his *first contractual day of service*. He didn't like those words, taken from his contract. They sounded so cold and far removed from the human activities of learning and teaching.

What was he going to do all afternoon? Surely he wasn't expected to put anything on the bulletin boards in his room; that's what elementary teachers do. What do I need to do?

He went to the principal's office and asked a secretary for a grade book.

"It's in your mailbox," she told him.

"My mailbox?" Ryan asked.

"Over there," the secretary said, gesturing with her head toward a bank of cubbyholes in the wall to Ryan's left. "Your class rosters are there, too."

"Oh. I see. Thanks," Ryan said, trying hard not to look too green. He walked to the mailboxes, assuming they would be assigned in alphabetical order. They were. He was mailbox number 12. Some teacher named Helen Gardner was number 11. Ryan lifted out of his mailbox an enormous pile of papers, including his class rosters, and a grade book.

Back in his room he started to shuffle through the papers he had taken from his mailbox. One paper was an announcement about the Centerville Teachers Association, urging the CHS faculty either to renew their membership or to join. The goals of CTA were listed,

most of them concerning salary improvements and additional pay for sponsoring extracurricular activities.

Two goals, new this school year, were the provision of maternity leave for male teachers whose wives had just given birth; the second new goal was to provide for a one-semester leave of absence, with pay, for teachers who had 15 or more years of service to the Centerville Public School System. This goal, if approved by the Board of Education, would provide experienced teachers with an opportunity to spend uninterrupted time to study newer curricular advancements in their respective fields of teaching. If a teacher's proposal for a one-semester leave of absence with pay should be approved, the teacher is obligated to return to his or her full-time faculty position for a period of time not fewer than two years.

Another memo explained the workings of the Faculty Hospitality Committee and the fees, \$10.00 per person. This committee was responsible for buying all of the materials for the coffee pots in the Faculty and Staff lounges and for sending greeting cards or flowers to faculty and staff who were celebrating or grieving one of life's peaks or valleys.

There was a memo from a faculty member serving as

building representative for the state education association, explaining why everyone should join; another memo was from the director of athletics explaining the excused absence policies for football and volleyball players.

Ryan sat at the teacher's desk in his classroom, sweat running down the small of his back. He had barely made a dent in the pile of papers. I know these memos are important, he thought, but la-di-da-shit, the only item from my mailbox that's related to my first priority, teaching, is this damn grade book and the class rosters.

He gathered his course rosters, inserted them into his grade book, picked up his blazer and tie, and then headed for home. His *first contractual day of service* was over, a day he had anticipated with noble expectations, and he was sweaty and exhausted.

He started the ignition in his car and turned on the radio. The dial was already set at one of the local stations. The afternoon DJ was telling a joke:

“ A drunk is driving through the city and his car is weaving all over the road. Eventually a cop pulls him over. 'Did you know,' says the cop, 'that a few intersections back, your wife fell out of your car?'”

““Oh, thank heavens,”” sighs the drunk. ‘For a minute there, I thought I'd gone deaf.’”

Ryan smiled at the joke, relieved Brooke wasn't with him and hadn't heard it. She had a hyper-extended antenna for detecting sexism.

I'm glad there's cold beer in our fridge, Ryan thought as he continued the drive home; I'm ready for one, maybe two!

The first two weeks of school passed without incident for both Brooke and Ryan. Brooke had experienced some homesickness, but it passed without any treatment stronger than a cup of hot tea with creamer and sweetener. Ryan settled into his room at PHS and was looking forward to each day in his new persona, Mr. Graves, the English teacher.

A four-drawer file cabinet was in the back corner of Ryan's room. Ryan had no idea what its drawers contained; his agenda at the beginning of the year in his first teaching position had no room for exploring the file cabinet.

One afternoon in mid-October, long after the students had vacated the building leaving it eerily quiet, Ryan decided it was time

to take a look inside the drawers of the file cabinet. He walked his fingers through the tabs of the folders, finding an interesting assortment of topics:

Teaching the Film

Ernest Hemingway

Robert Frost

Building Courtesy Committee

Grievance Committee

New Book Order Forms

Teaching the Novel

There were close to 50 more file folders in the top drawer, Ryan estimated, but he stopped at Teaching the Novel since the district's English curriculum guide included the teaching of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 11th grade classes. The only item in the file folder was a magazine bearing the title *English Journal*.

A paperclip was attached to a page in the middle of the magazine. When Ryan opened the magazine to the marked page he found an article, "Teaching the Novel in Small Groups." Ryan sat in one of the student desks on the back row and thumbed through the article's five pages.

Finding the selection interesting, he returned to the first page and began to read it more carefully. By the time he had finished reading the article, underlining certain sentences and writing notes in several places in the margins, 30 minutes had passed. This is a good article, Ryan thought; I'll use some of these ideas when we get to *Huck Finn*.

Ryan returned to the table of contents and found articles describing successes in teaching high school English courses. "Grammar: When and Why," "Making Poetry More Personal," "Teaching the Research Paper: Yes or No?" "Popular Culture in the English Class," and "Assessment in English: Whose Agenda is Being Served?"

There were several other articles, some of them columns appearing in each issue, dealing with professional growth, curriculum matters, reviews of current fiction, and the like.

Two responses were taking shape in Ryan's thoughts: I'm glad I found this magazine in this file cabinet! I need to subscribe to this magazine; it's a treasure trove of important information for me. However, if I hadn't looked in the Teaching the Novel file folder, I might not have ever learned about the *English Journal*!

Would it be asking too much for prospective teachers like me to learn about this journal in my undergraduate teaching methods courses? Ryan was peeved because he'd never heard of *English Journal* until now; he was, nevertheless, pleased he found it own his own.

Ryan looked at the clock above the door to his room. It was 5:00 p.m., later than he thought. He put the file folder with the copy of the journal in the cabinet, locked the door to his room, and then headed for his car in the staff parking lot. His head was still filled with the ideas he had read about in the journal.

After dinner that night he went to his computer to do some research on the *English Journal*; finding the information he needed, he wrote a check to become a member of the organization that published the journal. Then, he and Brooke joined each other in their living room.

“Are you about ready for bed,” Brooke asked? Then, she yawned a big yawn.

“No,” Ryan replied, “there’s no ‘about’ about it. I’m totally ready.”

They stood up from their chairs and headed for the bedroom.

Ryan gave Brooke a playful swat on her butt. “I guess you’re tired, but not exhausted, huh,” Brooke asked?

Ryan said nothing; he unbuckled his belt and smiled, lasciviously.

“Not tonight, Ryan,” Brooke said in a matter of fact tone, “I’m totally and completely bushed. What makes you think you’re the only working teacher in this family?” She wasn’t joking.

The three lunch shifts at Potter High School were 37 minutes long, 37 short minutes. Faculty at PHS had a number of options for lunch: brown baggers ate in a workroom in the media center; some ate their brown bag lunch at their desk in their classroom; most faculty ate hot lunch at a staff only table in the cafeteria; because all school campuses in Centerville were “No Smoking” zones, two or three faculty in each lunch shift skipped lunch altogether and drove around the school’s neighborhood so that they could smoke.

Ryan opted for the hot lunch, thinking he could meet more people that way. Later, he decided to eat hot lunch Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and then eat with the brown baggers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This was his strategy for meeting even

more faculty. He believed becoming a member of the PHS faculty community was an important personal goal during his first year.

Maxine Conrad, a PHS Consumer and Family Studies teacher and the team leader, was especially friendly; she and Ryan seemed to hit it off immediately. At her insistence, he had called her “Max” from day #1. She and her husband Chris, the local veterinarian, were the first to invite Ryan and Brooke to their home for dinner. The Conrads played bridge and enjoyed reading and going to movies, all interests the Graves shared. They were a natural foursome.

At the end of Ryan’s first year, he had his annual review scheduled with his principal, Andrew Madison. Mr. Madison had also completed four “drop-in” observations during the school year, one visitation in each quarter. This observation schedule would give him, he said, an opportunity to see growth over the entire year.

Believing that Mr. Madison didn’t particularly like him, Ryan wasn’t looking forward to his evaluation. Nevertheless, the date and time arrived.

“Ryan,” Mr. Madison began, “when I interviewed you last summer I was impressed with your understanding of what it takes to be a successful teacher. Your notion of the teacher/educator’s role in

public schools is what I would expect from a 5- or 10-year veteran teacher. Good for you.” He paused.

“Thank you very much,” Ryan replied. “I enjoy teaching. I enjoy it very much.”

“That’s obvious,” Mr. Madison said, affirming Ryan’s judgment. Then he introduced a new topic. “I want you to know that I’ve had numerous unsolicited comments from parents of your students. In a town this size, I’m bound to meet school patrons anywhere and everywhere I go: the golf course, at church, at the grocery store. Hell, Graves, I even had a parent come to me at a funeral to tell me what a great teacher you are.”

“How do they know,” Ryan asked? “No parents have observed my teaching style. I know a couple of my students’ parents from church and they’ve said nice things about my teaching, but that’s a small sample.”

“Ryan, what’s the first question parents ask their kids when they come home every afternoon?”

Ryan pondered the question for a few minutes, and then answered with, “What did you do in school today?” Or, “What did you learn today?” Or, quite simply, “How was school today?”

“Yep. That’s the gist of it,” Mr. Madison said, smiling at Ryan, “you get the idea. The answer to those questions is usually either a report on a teacher the kid thinks is terrible, or it’s a report on a teacher the kid thinks is the greatest teacher in the world. Based on what parents tell me, you’re in the latter category, thank God.”

“I’m not fishing for more compliments and I’m not trying to cue you to give me more bouquets,” Ryan said, “but I don’t think I’m that good. I’ve had a fairly good first year, but I want very much to be a better teacher.”

“I understand. There’s one more thing I’d like to mention,” Mr. Madison said, extending the conference. “Several faculty have told me that you’ve been an excellent hire. Maxine Conrad, especially. You’ve worked hard at your assimilation into the culture of the faculty, which is something they like. They admire and respect your suggestions at meetings, and some of them--- more than a few --- say you’re the most intelligent teacher who has ever taught in Centerville. Your intelligence, and I don’t know whether you’re aware of this, can be intimidating.”

The conference came to a friendly hand-shaking conclusion and Ryan left the building feeling satisfied and successful, but

understanding that he still had a lot of room for growth. Am I as good as Maxine and Andrew Madison say, he wondered, or am I just good for a first year teacher?

Walking toward his car, Ryan remembered something the football coach at his university said after several sports writers questioned his coaching abilities:

Things are never as bad as they seem, and things are never as good as they seem. The truth is somewhere in between.

The doorbell rang. Ryan looked at his watch and saw that it was 1:30 p.m. He put down the book he was reading and walked to the front door. There was Haley, smiling at him.

“Hi Haley,” Ryan said with surprise in his voice. “It’s really good to see you. What brings you through this neck of the woods?”

“I was just driving through town,” Haley said, “and thought I’d stop by to say ‘Hi’ to you and Brooke.”

“Brooke’s in Hillsdale today and tomorrow,” Ryan said, explaining her absence. “She’s attending an in-service workshop sponsored by the publisher of the district’s new math series. I don’t

expect her to return until late tomorrow night.”

“ . . . until late tomorrow night?” Haley mused.

“Right,” Ryan said. “Come on in and have a seat. I know it’s early in the afternoon, but can I fix you a drink?”

“Sure,” she answered, “rum and Coke if you have it.”

“Will Diet Pepsi work, Ryan asked?”

“Whatever,” Haley replied, smiling in a special way, Ryan noticed.

He went to the kitchen and poured the drinks.

“Haley,” Ryan called to her, “I can’t carry two drinks at the same time. Can you come help?”

“Whatever you want,” she said.

The wording of her answer wasn’t lost on Ryan. He wondered whether her answer was a programmed response or a spontaneous statement. Haley entered the kitchen and took the glass Ryan handed her.

“I hear you’ve established yourself as an outstanding teacher and a faculty leader at your new school,” Haley said.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” Ryan replied.

“I don’t know that I’m ‘outstanding’ in anything I do.”

“Ryan, I’ve known about your abilities since we were juniors in high school. I’ve admired you all these years --- no, I’ve loved you all these years. And, I think you are one of the best looking men I’ve seen. You’re the whole package.”

Haley took a huge drink from her drink, set her glass on the kitchen counter and walked closer to Ryan. She put her arms around him, and kissed him, her open mouth against his lips, her tongue flitting along his top lip.

Ryan inhaled deeply with excitement.

“I’m not expected home until tomorrow morning,” Haley said, as she kicked off her shoes.

She pulled her black turtle neck up an over her head. It fell to the floor. Haley was not wearing a brassiere. Ryan inhaled deeply again.

She unbuttoned her jeans, allowing them to drop to the floor. When she stepped out of them, Ryan’s eyes went immediately to her ecru-colored thong, “I assume you have a bedroom?” Haley asked.

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“We need to think about starting a Masters Degree program, somewhere,” Ryan suggested to Brooke.

“What are you talking about?” Brooke asked. “You’ve been a teacher for one year and you’re only two months into your second year. How can you think about graduate school so soon?”

“I can give you two good reasons,” Ryan stated in a firm tone of voice. “First, I need the additional study. I need to learn more about how I can be the best teacher I can be. Second, teachers with Masters Degrees make more money on a salary schedule.”

“Well, the additional salary would be nice; I’ll second that notion,” Brooke said approvingly. “If you and I made more money we could start a family. Let’s go for it.”

Northeast State University was in Stanton Falls. Although it wasn’t a major research university, Northeast had Masters Degree programs. In addition to the small town of Stanton Falls, there were numerous smaller communities within a 30- to 45-minute commute. Ryan and Brooke began reading the want ads in the Centerville newspaper to see if teaching positions were available in any of these

places.

The town of Crane advertised a need for a high school English teacher and a 4th grade teacher. Ryan and Brooke applied for these positions inasmuch as Crane was only 27 miles from Stanton Falls, an easy commute. If Northeast's schedule of courses worked out, they could take one night course each semester, then take three more classes in the summers.

The Crane superintendent of schools called the Graves one Saturday morning, explaining that he and the elementary and secondary principals were impressed with their credentials and could Ryan and Brooke come for an interview next Saturday at 10:00 a.m.? Ryan replied that they could.

After the interviews were completed, the three administrators excused themselves for what they described as a 15-minute meeting. They returned in 10-minutes and offered Brooke and Ryan jobs on the spot. Not needing time to think about the job offers, Ryan and Brooke happily accepted the offers.

"I'm glad this is settled," Ryan said to Brooke.

"Me too," Brooke answered. "Now, how can we find a place to live in a burg as small as Crane?"

They drove around the town square in Crane, looking for a realtor's office. They located Cooper Realty on the south side of the square.

After parking the car, Ryan and Brooke walked to Cooper Realty and went inside. A young woman who was either a secretary, or a receptionist, or both met them.

"Can I help you?" the young woman said, trying to hide the People magazine she had been reading.

"Yes, we'd like to see a realtor," Ryan said, "we're going to be teaching in Crane next fall and we need housing."

"HENRY," she yelled. "CLIENTS."

A man appeared, walking around a room divider toward Ryan and Brooke.

"Hello folks," he said, "I'm Henry Cooper." Henry had a large, toothy smile. Ryan thought, I didn't know a human could show off that many teeth without being part beaver.

Henry Cooper continued, "So, you're looking for what: a house, a trailer, or an apartment? Buying or renting?"

"We'd like to make an appointment to come see you next Saturday morning to look for housing," Ryan said. "We need to start

for home, in Centerville, now. We'll have more time next Saturday.”

“Okay, how about 9:00 next Saturday morning,” Henry asked?

Ryan and Brooke looked at each other. Seeing no discernable negatives in Brooke's expression, Gay nodded, ”Next Saturday morning at 9:00 will be fine with us.”

After getting out of bed at 5:45, much earlier than usual for a Saturday morning, Ryan and Brooke drove to the town of Crane in plenty of time for their 9:00 meeting with Henry Cooper. Given the extra time they had, they stopped at Curt's Place, a small restaurant on the town square, for coffee.

“I still think we need to buy a house,” Ryan said as he poured a small amount of creamer into his cup. “If we rent, all we get from the landlord is a ‘Thank you.’ We don't build any equity. If we buy a house and sell it after four or five years, we'll get some equity out of the sale.”

“I understand that,” Brooke said, “I'm just reluctant to go into that much debt so early in our marriage. I'd rather have a baby.”

Their conversation was interrupted when they heard a loud, “Hello there Graves.” It was Henry Cooper, walking toward their

booth. “May I join you? I stop in here every morning for coffee before I go to the office.”

Without waiting for an answer to his question about joining Ryan and Brooke, Henry slid into the booth beside Ryan. “I have a list of available houses I think you two should take a look at. There aren’t any suitable rental apartments on the Crane housing market right now. There’s one house in particular I’d like for you to look at. It’s a Robin Hood house.”

“What’s a Robin Hood house,” Brooke asked?

“It’s a house with a little John,” Henry answered, laughing uncontrollably. “Get it, little John?”

“We get it, Henry,” Ryan said, “we get it.” Suddenly the thought of spending the greater part of a whole day with Crane’s resident stand-up comedian almost gave Ryan a migraine.

The migraine was averted. God knows why, Ryan thought.

Henry was like a chatterbox character out of *Babbitt*, skilled at talking about community boosterisms, but he was helpful since he seemed to know about every house in Crane.

When the day was over Ryan and Brooke had bought a three-bedroom, ranch style house, with an unfinished basement and no

garage. There was one problem, though, with their new home: they couldn't take possession August 1.

"Let's go back to Columbus next summer and take courses at the university," Ryan said. "The credits will transfer to our graduate programs at Northeast State and we can see our parents throughout the summer."

Brooke agreed that this would be a good idea. So, they spent the summer in Columbus, both of them taking two graduate courses and seeing their parents with regularity. It would be a good summer for everyone.

Mr. Graves found a one-bedroom apartment for them for the summer. Although small, the apartment was cheap and within walking distance to campus.

Ryan took a course with A. Gordon Styles, one of the top ten linguists in the U.S. Prof. Styles was especially pleased with one of the required papers Ryan wrote for the class and wrote in the margin:

"This is the first time I've read such a lucid explanation of the differences between sign and symbol. Well done. A+"

Ryan was thrilled to have a scholar with the national stature

of Prof. Styles to be pleased with something he had written.

What do you think about this, Haley? A. Gordon

Styles thinks I have some talents and a promising future. Should I have him call you and tell you so?

Ryan put the paper in a special folder, asking himself about Haley and why she kept popping into his thoughts. How do I pop her out, he wondered?

At the end of the summer Ryan and Brooke packed their few household items and headed toward Crane.

They were well received by their respective faculties, who had informal get-togethers almost every week-end. The hosts provided the meat entrée while the guests brought salads, vegetables, desserts, relishes, and whatever they wanted to drink. Ryan and Brooke were received as if they were beloved veterans. They had found a most collegial community.

They were not, however, prepared for the climate. The upper north midlands can have weather at the extremes. It's not unusual for summer temperatures to reach 100-degrees and higher. The winter temperatures can be 30-degrees below zero with winds gusting to 40 miles per hour. When the wind is accompanied with snow, the

weather forecasters on TV talked about “a snow event,” usually called “a blizzard” elsewhere.

Blizzards, however, had a fortunate bit of serendipity: school was cancelled. The first snow vacation at Crane was a pleasant diversion for Ryan and Brooke. They had a leisurely breakfast, read the morning paper, and watched the network news on TV.

Brooke spent the rest of the day catching up on the laundry that had piled up almost as high as she was tall. Ryan spent the better part of the day rewriting the paper Prof. Styles had liked so much last summer. This, Ryan thought, if I’m lucky, will be my first publication in *English Journal*.

The days and weeks of the school year proceeded with success for both Ryan and Brooke. Both of them were admired professionally and liked personally by their colleagues; their students were convinced Ryan and Brooke were the best teachers they’d ever had in the Crane public schools.

One January afternoon a student assistant came from the principal’s office to Ryan’s room with a note from the secretary explaining that Professor Styles had called for Ryan.

There was a telephone number for Prof. Styles’ office at the

bottom of the secretary's note. "Prof. Styles would like for you to call him ASAP!!!"

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The last class period of the day was Ryan's planning period. When the final class period was underway, Ryan opened the center drawer of his desk and pulled out his cell phone, then he entered the number for Brooke's school.

"Good afternoon," he said when the secretary answered the rings, "this is Ryan Graves. Is Brooke available to talk?"

"Hi Ryan," the secretary replied, "the line to her room isn't in use so I can connect you now." Ryan thanked her. Then he heard the telephone in Brooke's room ring.

"Hello, this is Mrs. Graves."

"Brooke, it's Ryan. You won't believe this but Dr. Styles called the office here at school earlier today and wants me to call him ASAP the secretary says."

"You mean THE Prof. Styles?"

"I do," Ryan said. "How many Prof. Styles do I know?"

"What do you suppose he wants," Brooke asked?

"I have no idea, but I wanted you to know that he's trying to reach me. This could be something big."

"Well," Brooke said, "please call me after you talk to him."

“Don’t worry,” Ryan laughed, “I will.” He disconnected the call to Brooke, and put his cell phone in the inside right pocket of his blazer.

Ryan decided he’d better go to the bathroom. He was feeling the pressure on his bladder that he always felt when he was nervous about something. After the bathroom stop, he went to the faculty lounge and poured himself a cup of coffee, then walked back to his room.

He settled himself at his desk, cleared his throat several times, then took his cell phone out of the pocket in his blazer, and then he entered Prof. Styles’ number.

“Gordon Styles here,” the familiar voice answered.

“Good afternoon Prof. Styles, this is Ryan Graves returning your call.”

“Hello Ryan. How are things in the big city?”

“Fine,” Ryan answered. Why the crack about Crane being such a small burg, Ryan wondered?

“I’m calling, Ryan, hoping that you and your wife aren’t so settled and comfortable in Crane that you might not consider moving.”

“Oh?” Ryan said, with a questioning upturn in the pronunciation of his one-word comment.

“I have a two-year federal grant with budgetary support for two research assistants. I’d like for you to serve as one of the RA’s on this project; you can also complete your degree while you’re here on campus,” Prof. Styles explained.

“I don’t know what to say Prof. Styles,” Ryan said. “Of course, I appreciate your confidence in me as well as the offer. I’ll need to talk to Brooke tonight. I’m sure you understand this has to be a team decision. Can I call you first thing tomorrow morning?”

“Of course, Ryan,” Prof. Styles said. “Please call right at 8:00. My first class tomorrow morning begins at 8:30.”

“I will Prof. Styles, and thanks so much for thinking of me . . . and, uh, thanks again. Good bye,” Ryan said a bit breathlessly.

He put his telephone in his pocket, left his classroom and locked the door behind him, and started toward the parking lot.

Ryan realized he was euphoric.

A. Gordon Styles is one of the most distinguished linguists in the United States and Ryan was blown away by the fact that Prof. Styles wanted him to be one of his research assistants!

Emboldened by Prof. Styles' offer, Ryan decided he'd do something no other high school teacher in Crane had ever done: go to a Crane liquor store!

Ryan drove to a liquor store he passed every day going to school and then home again. After entering Lefty's Liquor store, he walked to one of the wine racks and selected a \$20.00 bottle of chardonnay; we're celebrating, he said to himself, rationalizing the cost.

He drove home, singing along with the radio in his automobile. Ryan couldn't remember when he had felt this good; he was overwhelmed that Prof. Styles had remembered him from last summer's class, and, furthermore, that Prof. Styles had so much confidence in Ryan's abilities.

For years, ever since he been ill at age 5, Ryan had doubted his abilities and feared the impressions he made on people.

Parking his car in the driveway, Ryan entered their home through the back door, leading directly into the kitchen where Brooke was wrapping potatoes in aluminum foil.

Ryan walked to Brooke, kissed her on the cheek, and said "Greetings. Greetings, Mrs. Graves. Let the wild ruckus begin!"

Then he opened the drawer where they kept a corkscrew.

“What could possibly make you so happy tonight?” Brooke asked. “A back rub from the drop-dead gorgeous girls’ phys ed teacher? Was it a cup of Italian dark roast coffee from that good-looking foreign language teacher with the big boobs? Or, could it be a telephone call from A. Gordon Styles?”

Handing the cork screw the bottle of chardonnay to Brooke for her to open, Ryan laughed at her questions. “Prof. Styles has offered me a research assistantship; he has a grant and wants me to help him with the research. I could also finish my Masters Degree, he told me.”

Brooke held up her left hand as if she were a traffic cop: “Whoa there, big guy.”

“What,” Ryan asked, “why ‘whoa’?”

“I’ll bet you breakfast in bed for seven days that Prof. Styles is NOT talking about a masters Degree; he’s referring to a PhD.”

“You think so?” Ryan questioned her.

“Yes, of course I think so,” Brooke replied, “otherwise, I wouldn’t have suggested what I did. Very few universities support Masters Degree students with assistantships.”

“You mean Prof. Styles is inviting me to be one of his doctoral students?” an astonished Ryan asked.

“Yes, I think so and I’ll wager your father-in-law would agree with me,” Brooke answered. “Furthermore, we’d be crazy not to return to Columbus for this opportunity for you.”

Ryan turned his attention to the bottle of wine and poured two glasses. He and Brooke drank the first glass, and then a second, finishing the bottle. “I hope you liked this chardonnay,” Ryan said, “it cost \$5.00 a glass.”

“What,” Brooke asked, “you paid \$20.00 for the bottle?”

“I did,” Ryan admitted, “but I’m so excited, nervous, and nonplussed, I can barely taste it. Next time I’ll get boxed wine.”

That night Ryan called his parents to share the good news. Ryan’s mother was excited and pleased that he and Brooke would return to Columbus.

Since neither of the Graves had graduated from a university, they didn’t fully comprehend what Prof. Styles’ offer could mean to Ryan and his career, but they intuitively understood that it was a good thing for him.

Brooke called her parents. The Kennedys were very

impressed but not surprised. They had thought all along that Ryan had more promise and potential than Ryan probably did.

Dr. Kennedy also agreed that Prof. Styles was thinking about a Ph.D. and not an M.A. program for Ryan.

“Told you so,” Brooke smirked.

In the next 14 hours Ryan called Prof. Styles to accept the assistantship offer. Both he and Brooke wrote letters of resignation to give to the Superintendent of the Crane Public School System the next day.

Ryan Googled the university’s Graduate College, wrote down the e-mail address, and then completed the on-line application for admission to graduate studies. He also e-mailed the Transcript Office, asking for a copy of his grade transcripts to be sent to the Graduate College.

Brooke had written and mailed a letter to the Columbus Public Schools requesting an application form for an elementary school teaching position for the next school year.

Ryan and Brooke were amazed at how many 90-degree, life-changing turns they had completed in such a short period of time.

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Although no one involved would admit it, Brooke's application for a teaching position in the Columbus schools received special treatment. Nothing was illegal, but Brooke was, after all, the daughter of a leading citizen in Columbus. She had been an outstanding student throughout her years in the Columbus public schools, and she was showered with many awards and recognitions when she graduated from Columbus High School.

It would have been all but impossible for her application to be read dispassionately.

Responding to an invitation from the CPS Assistant Superintendent for Personnel, Brooke and Ryan made a quick trip to Columbus so that a committee of three elementary school principals could interview her.

The senior member of the committee, Dr. Joe Fitzgerald, chaired the meeting and told Brooke as she put on her coat to leave the room, "Brooke, I can't speak for any one but myself, but we'll recommend to the Assistant Superintendent that you be offered a contract for next year. She typically agrees with a committee's

recommendation, especially since your family is so well established and well known here in Columbus and also because you are one of the best students CHS has ever had walk across the stage at commencement.”

There was a two-family reunion dinner that night at Mildred Pierce’s Place, a popular Columbus restaurant: the Kennedys, the Graves, Brooke and Ryan. The parents were delighted that Brooke and Ryan were returning to Columbus next fall.

“We’ll be living on paupers’ wages, you know,” Ryan explained, “so, can we have dinner at your houses once a week?”

Almost in unison as if they had practiced saying it, Mrs. Graves and Mrs. Kennedy said, “Of course!”

Mr. Graves added, “Son, I’ll have some of your favorite beer on hand, too.” When the polite laughter at Mr. Graves’ comment ended, Ryan asked, “Are you sure you remember what my favorite beer is?” Mr. Graves laughed, “If you two are going to be as poor as you say, you’ll most likely like AFB beer, ‘Any Free Beer.’”

“Yes, I’m sure that’ll work for me,” Ryan replied to his dad, “just don’t get any of that CBA beer, please, ‘Cheapest Beer Available.’” Everyone groaned at Ryan’s corny reply.

“But seriously folks,” Ryan said, trying to imitate a vaudeville comic by wagging an imaginary cigar in his left hand, “my first priorities have to be Prof. Styles’ research project and my graduate classes.”

“We understand what you’re saying, Ryan,” Dr. Kennedy said. “During the week we’ll need to respect your study time.” Mrs. Kennedy and Mr. and Mrs. Graves nodded in agreement.

Ryan lifted his water glass to offer a toast: “In honor of our parents, and with thanks to Prof. Styles and the Columbus Public schools for Brooke’s job offer, we hope, here’s to next fall.”

Six smiling and obviously happy people clinked each other’s glasses and echoed, “To next fall.”

Three days after Ryan and Brooke had returned home to Crane, Brooke received a formal letter from the Columbus Public Schools with a contract enclosed. Her school assignment would be determined at a later date.

During the spring break in the Crane schools, Ryan and Brooke went to Columbus for another quick trip with a limited focus: find a place to live.

They were lucky finding a brick, two-story, house with

upstairs and downstairs apartments. They rented the downstairs two-bedroom apartment; the second bedroom would serve as Ryan's study and guest bedroom if needed.

They returned to Crane to finish the school year, excited about finishing as quickly as possible. Their attention was already focused on returning to Columbus and beginning a new journey in their lives.

The remainder of the school year did, indeed, seem to fly by. There were many special activities: individual photographs for the yearbook, photos of the class officers; photographs of the various clubs, athletic teams, and the like.

In the spring there was the senior prom; the May fete; MAT and the exams assessing students' annual yearly progress in meeting state standards proficiencies; the senior play, concerts by all of the groups in the music department, and, finally, commencement.

When all of the academic and extra curricular activities were history, there was the faculty end-of-year picnic at Andy Matson's 5-acre farm just four miles east of town. The potluck picnic was a virtual cornucopia of mixed lettuce, Jell-O, and vegetable salads; vegetable casseroles, relish plates, ham, meat loaf, fried chicken,

spaghetti and meatballs, home baked bread, biscuits and dinner rolls.

At the far end of the table there were enough pies and cakes to cause diabetic comas for the entire faculty and their families.

There were two circular horse-watering tubs. One was filled with ice and soft drinks and plastic bottles of water. The other tub had cans and bottles of a large array of beer iced down; this is where the largest and noisiest crowd gathered.

As the families were finishing up their desserts and were beginning to chat, Andy Matson, the high school principal, blew an athletic official's whistle to get everyone's attention. "Attention folks! Can I have your attention, please? Ryan and Brooke, will you come forward, please?"

Matson began what he promised would be a few words: "Ryan and Brooke, during your too short tenure at Crane you've been excellent teachers, wonderful colleagues, and model citizens. We want to honor you tonight since you're returning to Columbus, to graduate school for Ryan and a new teaching position for Brooke."

"I've enjoyed having Ryan in my school. I want to share something you may not know about Ryan. Let me begin by saying

that a bus station is where a bus stops. A train station is where a train stops. On Ryan's desk, there's a work station, and that's where the work . . . do I need to finish?"

Everybody laughed at Matson's joke, partly because of the irony. Ryan's work ethic was the envy of the school.

Ryan and Brooke were presented with a cashier's check in the amount of \$232.00, the amount the faculties at the high school and at Brooke's elementary school donated as a going away gift for the Graves.

The high school English department gave Ryan a bottle of single malt scotch.

Since the daughter of the owner of Curt's Place was one of Ryan's English students, and since she thought Ryan as the best teacher on the planet, the owners gave Ryan and Brooke a generous gift certificate, "good for dinners for four, carte blanche, at Curt's Place."

"I hope you gave his kid an 'A+'," Brooke whispered to Ryan through her smiling teeth.

Ryan and Brooke moved to Columbus five days later, filled with good memories of their days and their colleagues at Crane. It may have been a small town, but Crane personified the term *community*, a happy and unified group of people with common values and goals.

There was a two-day gap in time between their arrival in Columbus and their furniture. To ensure familial equity, they spent one night with the Graves and one with the Kennedys. Both mothers told Ryan and Brooke dividing sleeping time this way wasn't necessary, they appreciated it nevertheless, as each mother whispered later to her offspring.

On the appointed day for the moving van to arrive, Ryan and Brooke were at their new home by 7:00 a.m. They carried from the trunk of their car the box marked **Necessary First Day Items** to the kitchen where Ryan unpacked their coffee maker, a canister of Tully's full roast blend, two mugs, and two wine glasses.

After the coffee maker started gurgling, Ryan reached back into the box and pulled out a bottle of single malt scotch, the

farewell gift to Ryan from the Crane English department, and a bottle of Swedish vodka, Brooke's gift to herself.

He also removed three bottles of Bloody Mary mix and two bottles of chardonnay. He put the bottles on a kitchen counter.

"This should see us through the day," Ryan laughed to Brooke.

"You can start on the coffee as soon as it's ready," Brooke said, "but hold off on the hard stuff until either all of our stuff is in the house, or until 5:00, whichever comes last."

"Yes, my dear," Ryan said with an exaggerated bow and flourish. "Your command will become my wish, a wish that your command will go away, that is."

Brooke looked at him sternly, "I'm not joking, Ryan. Let's not have your alcohol interfere with our settling in our new home," she snapped.

Ryan started to bristle, but he held himself in check. "Brooke, we have long day ahead of us. Let's no start it with an argument."

Before Brooke could respond, they heard the high-pitched metal on metal sound of the squeaking brakes of a large vehicle, their moving van. The driver stepped out of the van's cab onto the

running board, then hopped down to the street. His helper did the same from the passenger's door.

Ryan walked to the street as the movers were opening the back door and putting the ramps in place. "How can I help?" Ryan asked. The driver replied without looking at Ryan. "Just have someone at the front door to tell us where the boxes go."

Ryan's desk, chair, computer hutch, boxes of books, and book shelves had been loaded onto the truck at the same time, so they were unloaded at the same time. When Ryan's office furniture had been transferred to the second bedroom, he began to set up his study, leaving Brooke to direct the incoming boxes to their appropriate rooms. Both of them were pleased with this division of labor:

Ryan knew he wouldn't be comfortable until he had his books on the proper shelves in his bookcases, his desk and chair in place, and his computer set up in the hutch.

Brooke enjoyed giving directions.

Brooke called to Ryan from the kitchen, where she was putting contact shelf paper in the cupboards. "Ryan, all the boxes are in so I'm going shopping. I need more shelf paper."

Ryan was walking toward the kitchen and replied, “Okay. Are you getting something for us to eat later?”

“I’ve already checked the grill on the patio and it has ample gas. How about steak, salad, and baked potato? I’ll stop by the grocery store.”

“Sounds great,” Ryan said, walking to Brooke and giving her a kiss on the cheek and a pat on her butt.

“Will you please stop that,” Brooke admonished him, removing his hand from her buttocks. “I’m not a plaything, you know! Where does ‘Toy’ appear on my tee-shirt?”

“Come on, Brooke, for Pete’s sake,” Ryan said, “that was only a playful swat.”

He continued, his voice unsteady and obviously sarcastic.

“I hear some adult couples engage in that sort of horse play. I was not suggesting we forget all the work we have to do and go to bed for some afternoon delight. My swat was meant to be loving, teasing, possibly some fun. It was a love pat. ” Ryan was irked.

Ignoring Ryan’s remarks, Brooke grabbed her purse and walked through the kitchen door that led out to the driveway. “I’m going now. I have several stops and will be home, most likely, in an

hour and a half, maybe two hours.”

Don't hurry back, Ryan thought, as she backed the car out of the driveway. He went to the counter where the bottles, mugs, and glasses from the **NECESSARY FIRST DAY ITEMS** box had been placed.

I have a really big decision, he satirically told himself. Will I use a coffee mug or a wine glass? He chose the wine glass, opened Brooke's Swedish vodka, then poured four fingers of vodka into the glass.

Whatever you do, he warned himself, don't over-do it.

Ryan took the glass of vodka to his study, assembled his computer and printer, regretting that he couldn't go online until he made arrangements with a local carrier. He sipped his vodka and played some games he had installed on his hard drive. He was beginning a new game of solitaire when his cell phone rang.

It was Brooke. “Ryan, I'm at mom's, helping her. She's redecorating their bedroom and has oodles of sample paint catalogs and a bunch of bed spread samples.”

“Okay, good,” Ryan said. “Spending this kind of quality

time with your mother was one of the positives we identified when we were considering our move to Columbus.”

“I suppose so. Are you drinking?” Brooke asked.

“Haley, you’re talking to a linguist, remember?” Ryan said. “What you just said to me is dressed up like a question, but we both know it isn’t a question. It sounds like a threat to me. Yes, I’m having a drink; I’ll likely have another. Your point is”

Brooke didn’t answer.

They exchanged “Good byes,” then Ryan tossed down the remaining vodka in his glass. He returned to the kitchen and poured himself a very pale, almost anemic Bloody Mary.

He warned himself again; don’t over-do it.

He took his drink into the living room, hooked up the speakers to the CD player, and selected five CD’s he placed in the player. The familiar sounds of The Modern Jazz Quartet began to fill the room.

Ryan took a sip from his glass. He liked the MJQ and respected its musicality. The sounds Milt Jackson made on the vibes were unmistakable, he thought. With Percy Heath’s bass, John Lewis on piano, and Kenny Clark on the drums, their music and

arrangements were *sui generis*. One of a kind.

With the exception of Heath, members of the MJQ originally played together when they were sidemen with Dizzy Gillespie's band. Kenny Clark was also the house drummer for Atlantic records at one time. Ryan was in awe of their experiences and abilities.

He sat in a wingback chair, and, since Brooke was at her mother's, he knew he could prop up his feet on the coffee table. Ryan leaned back in the chair and swallowed a long pull from his glass. He closed his eyes.

Haley walked into the living room, carrying two glasses. A vodka on the rocks for her and a glass of scotch, neat, for Ryan.

"Sweetheart," she said, "here's a little something you can enjoy while we take a breather. Everything's in place, except in the kitchen, of course. "

"Thanks honey," Ryan said, as he took the glass she offered. "I'll put away the plates, glasses, cups, silverware and other kitchen stuff tomorrow. Please sit."

Haley sat quietly; Ryan heaved a big sigh. Haley stretched her neck and her arms. They enjoyed being where they were having a break, having a drink, and having each other.

“I am thoroughly tired,” Haley said. “We’ve had a busy day, but all of the furniture is in place and there aren’t many boxes left to unpack except for”

“. . . the kitchen, I know,” Ryan interrupted, then smiled and laughed.

Haley smiled back, then noticed Ryan’s glass was empty. She finished her drink, stood up, and walked over to pick up Ryan’s glass.

“How about another drink,” Haley asked? She bent down and kissed him on the lips.

“Sure,” Ryan answered, “but if I have a second drink as strong as the first one you fixed, I won’t be completing many more moving-in jobs.”

“I won’t either,” Haley said, “but I’ll be ready for a shower.”

“Me too,” Ryan agreed.

“One of the nice features of our new bathroom is that the shower is big enough for two,” Haley added, smiling suggestively, her eyebrows arched.

“So I’ve noticed,” Ryan replied. “Can you speed up that

second drink, please? I'm feeling dirtier and dirtier by the minute.

We . . . er . . . I really need a shower."

Haley gave him a coquettish smile. "Give me just one minute, okay?" She started toward the bedroom.

By the time Ryan answered by saying "Okay. One minute, but no more." Haley had disappeared into the bedroom.

Very quickly she reappeared, wearing a bright red muu muu. After going to the kitchen and returning with their replenished glasses, Haley bent over to put Ryan's glass on the coffee table.

He looked down the gaping front of her loose-fitting muu muu and saw Haley's breasts. She wasn't wearing anything underneath the muu muu.

Haley looked up and could tell what Ryan was looking at. "See any thing that interests you," she asked with a flirtatious smile?

"As a matter of fact, yes, I do" Ryan said. "Let's take our drinks to the bathroom while we shower." He stood, cupped Haley's right breast in his left hand, and kissed her. "I'll even help you lather up."

"You already have," she said. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Ryan placed his left thumb and forefinger on his eyes, wondering about Brooke and her increasing edginess. Probably just the stress of moving, he suggested to himself. I hope you're right, Ryan #2 said from deep within his psyche.

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At the end of Ryan's first year of graduate studies, sandwiched between two summer sessions, he satisfied the requirements for an MA Degree. In the next two years he took a course load a full-time student would take. Ryan was more than a full-time student, though. In addition to his studies, he was a research assistant the first two years.

When the funds supporting Prof. Styles' project ran out, Ryan was appointed as an Instructor, teaching freshman level courses. . He was also studying for the French and Spanish reading comprehension tests; both of them research tool requirements for his PhD.

Since he was dividing his studies equally between English and Education, he was also required to satisfy the research requirements for a PhD in Education: two courses in statistics and two research methodology courses.

Considering that he was also taking a full load of graduate-level coursework, Ryan's plate was full.

Brooke enjoyed teaching at the school where she was

assigned. The principal was an excellent organizer and problem-solver. He supported the faculty and encouraged them every day to seek higher goals for themselves as well as their students. Brooke described him as a building administrator who was “almost too good to be real.”

The faculty at Brooke’s school, most of them husbands and wives of graduate students at the university, were supportive of each other. They respected each other professionally and personally. Every three to four weeks, one of the teachers would host a Saturday night potluck supper. When there was no supper planned, the more social among the faculty would meet in smaller groups for table or card games, well seasoned with beer and canapés. Frequently the board and card games lasted for no more than 45-minutes to an hour, leaving more time to snack and drink.

In the month of April in Ryan’s second year as a graduate student, he and Brooke received invitations to their high school ten-year reunion. Two weeks after they received their invitations, Hannah Winston, a member of the reunion planning committee, telephoned Ryan.

“Ryan,” Hannah began, “you were one of the most popular

people in our class and you talk effortlessly and gracefully; will you be the speaker and Emcee at the CHS 10-year reunion?"

"Oh Hannah," Ryan laughed, "stop it. Flattery will get you everywhere!"

"Ryan, I'm not blowing smoke up your ass. I'm simply telling the truth. Your verbal abilities are obvious, and you were, you might remember, our Most Popular senior boy," Hannah said, defending herself.

"Hannah, any connection between your sense of reality and mine is purely by chance," Ryan replied, still laughing. "but I'll do it. It's the least I can do since the planning committee has provided this special time for me to publicly humiliate myself."

"Okay, thanks a lot, Ryan," Hannah said, obviously relieved that she could check-off one of her reunion planning responsibilities. "I'll call again when the date is closer."

"Who was that?" Brooke asked, as she entered the room.

"Hannah Winston," Ryan answered. "The reunion committee wants me to be the Emcee and to give a speech."

"And did I hear you agree?"

"Yes," Ryan replied. "I think it could be fun."

“Well, you know what you can add to your ‘to do’ list better than I do, but, quite frankly, I think you’re already over-extended. Couldn’t they get someone else?”

“Why? I don’t know why you think I should take a pass on Hannah’s request. It won’t take me long to prepare for this, I don’t think,” Ryan said. “and, I think it’ll be fun.

Brooke shrugged her shoulders.

One Saturday morning Ryan Googled some key words, like *humor, wit, one-liners, reunion jokes and ageing jokes* and put together an outline for a 20-minute “ad lib” talk.

As it turned out, Ryan was correct. It was fun.

Ryan was feeling good the night of the reunion. He was, truth to tell, quite proud of the fact that he had been asked to assume a highly visible role in the evening’s activities. There were, however, two people who brought him back to earth.

The first was Vern Jackson.

“Hi Ryan,” Vern said as he and Ryan met during the cocktail hour.

“Hey Vern, it’s good to see you. What are you doing now?”

“I’m teaching history at High Plains Community College,”

Vern answered. “And, I just love it. What are you doing?”

“Oh . . . I’m . . . uh . . . I’m in grad school,” Ryan replied.

“Working on a Masters Degree, I’ll bet.”

“No,” Ryan said. “I already have a Masters.”

“So? What are you working on?”

“I’m in a PhD program,” Ryan said.

“What? You? You working on a PhD?” Vern asked, laughing.

“Yes,” Ryan answered, quietly.

“Oh boy,” Vern said, “not many of us would have predicted that.” Then he laughed again.

“Excuse me,” Ryan said to Vern as he took his leave and walked toward the bar. “I need to circulate.”

What a freakin’ idiot, Ryan told himself. I never did have much use for Vern Jackson. Now I remember why: he has shit between his ears. Ryan was angry with himself for letting Vern get him so exercised. He headed for the bar.

At the bar Ryan ordered a double Stoly with a twist, no

olives, no ice. He scanned the room with a furtive look, checking to see if Brooke could see him with a drink and hoping she couldn't.

He didn't see her, so he put the glass to his lips and took a large swallow. As soon as the first vodka hit the bottom of his stomach, he could feel its warmth radiating throughout his system. He hadn't eaten all day.

While he was enjoying the effect of his first taste of his vodka, he felt someone rubbing his back with an open palm.

This was the second encounter that would bring him back to earth.

Ryan turned to see who was trying to get his attention. He had a reunion smile on his face.

It was Haley! Ryan's expression turned to surprise. She was with a man Ryan didn't know.

"Hello Ryan," Haley said with an intense look into his eyes. "Ryan, this is my husband, David Cooper."

"Hello David," Ryan said, offering an obligatory handshake. David wasn't sure what to do since most people shake hands with their right, not their left hand. Ryan secretly enjoyed David's discomfort. Usually, he would have been embarrassed about the

handshake confusion; not so with Haley's husband.

In a nanosecond Ryan gave David a thoroughly critical head to toe assessment.

David's suit looked like it was an inheritance from his grandfather. He was wearing a button down collar shirt and he hadn't secured the collar buttons. The knot in his tie was loose and was askew to the right. His shoes were an old-fashioned, plain-toed brown, badly in need of polishing. His glasses were wire rimmed, reminiscent of a character from an old black and white movie televised on the American Movie Classics TV network.

He reminds me, Ryan said to himself, of an accountant whose insights into the workings of the social world are defined by stupid witticisms like *It's too cold to snow*, or *It's not the heat it's the humidity*, or *Is it hot enough for you?*

Ryan looked at Haley, who could tell that Ryan was not pleased with his first impression of David. Ryan wanted to say to Haley, *I'm not being rude; it's just that your husband is too small and unimportant to be relevant. And you selected him over me?*

Since their high school days Ryan was convinced that Haley had her sights set on someone else. Otherwise, why was she so curt

when she rejected his requests to see her? All Ryan was left with, unarticulated by him, was a desire that the man who beat him out for Haley's attentions would turn out to be a modern day Adonis, a brilliant and handsome man of incomparable looks and physical build.

Ryan could've better accepted Haley's rejection of him and her preference in favor of another man if that man were someone along the lines of a Greek god, or at least a Brad Pitt, a Denzel Washington, a Johnny Depp, or a George Clooney.

Instead, the other man in Haley's life turned out to be, and this was painful for Ryan to admit, turned out to be someone like David Cooper.

Ryan didn't simply come back to earth; he crashed, feeling a combination of embarrassment and disappointment. How could David Cooper be a better choice?

It's time to let this friggin' Haley obsession go, Ryan thought.

Hannah interrupted Ryan's interior monologue. "Ryan, would you please announce that the bar will close in 15 minutes and dinner will be served at that time?"

The heavy drinkers, or perhaps they were simply slow sippers, made a dash for the bar, many of them buying two drinks to tide them over until the dinner was finished. They must believe they're the Designated Drunks for the evening, Ryan laughed to himself.

Jim Lawrence, the only member of the graduating class who had gone into the ministry, blessed the food. At the appropriate moment at the end of his blessing, the Baptists and fundamentalists joined him in saying, rather too loudly the religious main-liners thought, "Amen."

Ryan's next responsibility of the evening was to ask the attendees to "Please be seated." Brooke hit his knee with hers under the table and whispered to him, "Very nice; well done. How long did it take you to learn those three words?" Then she started laughing.

"I'm ignoring you, Shorty," Ryan whispered back. He laughed, too. "Please understand that I am a representative of the Devil, but my duties are largely ceremonial, as you have just witnessed." Brooke laughed even harder.

Most of the graduates finished their meal in a relative short time. The hotel staff cleared the tables and left small ice cream

dishes of orange sorbet. Other servers roamed the dining room with carafes of coffee, both regular and decaffeinated. Several of the diners were already up and about, either going to the bathroom, the bar, or going outside for a smoke.

When the after-dinner smokes, bar and bathroom trips were taken care of, most everyone was back in their chairs. It was time for Ryan's big moment. Using his knife, he plink, plink, plinked on the side of his water glass.

"Hello . . . hello . . . hello," Ryan spoke into the microphone, trying to create some sense of order.

"Hello everyone, and welcome to this first reunion of our high school class. Ten years ago we graduated from Columbus High School, except for five or six of you, and you know who you are." Several people at the tables, laughing alcohol-induced guffaws, pointed at others in the room, suggesting they were among those who hadn't graduated.

Ryan continued his speech with a few more jokes, made some comments about how important CHS had been in their lives, the positive role models that 3-4 of their favorite teachers had been, and the public successes some of their classmates had already

achieved.

Then, when Hannah bought him the names of the various winners, Ryan announced which alum traveled the farthest distance to attend the reunion, and presented him with a U.S. atlas; who had changed the most, and presented her with a mirror; and, who had the most kids, presenting him with a box of condoms.

“Thanks for your attendance and attention,” Ryan said.

“Someday, we'll look back on tonight, laugh nervously and then we'll quickly change the subject. I have just a couple of comments to add before the bar is reopened. Consider these words our evening's benediction, at least until we meet again in 15 years for our 25th reunion.

“First, as Humphrey Bogart said on his deathbed, ‘I should never have switched from scotch to martinis.’ Or, second, the famous last words of Ludwig van Beethoven, ‘Friends you may applaud now, this comedy is finished.’”

As if Ryan's Beethoven quote was their cue, everyone applauded, some while standing, some while still seated. As the classmates began to circulate, several came to the front table to congratulate Ryan and tell him that he did a great job; some suggested to Brooke that she ought to be proud of Ryan.

Suddenly, there was Haley. She approached him. "Ryan Graves," she said for public consumption, "it's good to see you."

Then she gave him a full-body hug, pressing her breasts against his chest. She spoke in his left ear in a much lower voice, just above a whisper. "Ryan, you're the only one of our classmates that I ever think about, and I think of you every day. Can we go outside and talk?"

She touched his ear lobe with the tip of her tongue.

"Huh . . . Wha . . . what in the hell are you doing?" Ryan asked. Given his lackluster history with Haley, he was dumbstruck at her invitation.

"I'm asking you if we could go outside and talk," Haley replied, almost inaudibly. "I really need to talk to you."

"Go outside? Talk? Haley, for God's sake, we haven't seen

or heard from each other for at least ten years. Can't we just visit here?" Ryan asked.

"What I'd like to tell you and talk with you about is much more serious than a 'visit,'" Haley said. "Furthermore, I'd rather we talk in private."

"Haley, now look, we had a few good times in high school, and, granted, not nearly as many as I had hoped for. You had a magical way with me; you'd express interest in me one day, making me really happy, and then when I'd call you for a social and possibly romantic get together and you'd turn me down faster than a New York minute."

"I know, Ryan, and that's what I'd like to explain," Haley said plaintively. "I've come so close to calling you on the telephone but you have Brooke now and I didn't want to interrupt your home life."

"I'm confused, Haley," Ryan said. "Why now? After you rebuffed me over and over and over years ago, I finally figured it out, stupid me. You liked me, sure, but not as someone who might fit in your romantic ideas. The only possible conclusion I could come to was a simple one: there was another guy in your life, or you were

hoping there would be,” Ryan said.

“And, Haley, that’s okay with me now. It hurt like hell when I was 17 years old, but not today. I’m married; you’re married. We’ve both moved on, haven’t we?”

“No, Ryan, at least I haven’t. I want so much to tell you about . . . there wasn’t . . . there never was . . .,” Haley whispered, fighting back the tears that were welling up in her eyes. “It wasn’t anything you did. I thought you were perfect; I still do, every day. And you weren’t stupid. You’re the only one I’ve ever . . . I . . . we . . . you. . . oh, never mind, I’m sorry,” she said with a sob, as she turned and walked away, her right hand wiping a tear from her cheek.

Haley quickened her steps, hoping to get out of the room before people could see her crying and embarrassing herself. When she reached the exit she stopped and turned around for one last look at Ryan. She attempted a wave of her hand, then made her way through the door.

What the hell is going on, Ryan asked himself? He looked back toward the head table and saw Brooke staring at him. How much of that mini-drama with Haley had Brooke seen, Ryan

wondered?

Ryan's internal question was answered when he and Brooke were driving home from the party. As Ryan steered the car through the streets of Columbus, Brooke began: "I thought one of your jokes tonight was in poor taste and really out of line.

"Oh," Ryan answered, "which one?"

"The one about how some of them hadn't graduated from CHS and they knew who they were."

"I delivered that joke in a way that I think most of our classmates recognized it as a joke. They laughed didn't they," Ryan asked?

"I don't care whether they laughed. It was in bad taste and you ought to be sorry that you embarrassed some of the guests," Brooke shot back. "And furthermore, what did you say to Haley Cooper that made her cry? Weren't the two of you an item in our sophomore and junior years?"

"You've asked two questions, Brooke," Ryan observed.

"Which answer do you want first?"

"Like I give a damn?"

"Get real Brooke," Ryan said, "you must 'give a damn'

because you're the one who asked the question. Okay then, I'll tell you first that we were never 'an item' in high school. I think we went to a movie together twice in our sophomore year. We didn't see each other much more than that in our junior year. Whenever I'd suggest we do something together, her answer was a short and predictable 'No, I can't.' She was a riddle. I finally figured it out – she didn't care about me; she was interested in somebody else. The good news is that after I solved the Haley mystery you and I became an item.”

“And her crying?” Brooke asked.

“She wanted me to go outside with her so that we could talk in private,” Ryan answered.

“She what?” Brooke interjected quickly. “Is there something you need to tell me, Ryan? What do the two of you have to talk about ‘in private’ now?”

“That's what I asked her,” Ryan replied. “I told her we hadn't talked for ten years and I asked why we needed to go outside. She said it was important that we talk, in private I guess, outside. I told her we didn't have so much to talk about that required privacy.”

“That's all?” Brooke questioned.

“That’s all, although this isn’t a verbatim account,” Ryan explained. “What I just told you is, I believe, a description of our conversation faithful to its intent.”

“I still wonder why she acted like the spurned female lead in a B-grade movie, rushing off camera in tears,” Brooke responded.

As Ryan guided their car into their driveway, and then into the garage, he yawned and said to Brooke, “You can wonder about Haley’s behavior all you want. I quit doing that 10 years ago. Right now I’m only wondering how fast I can get out of these clothes and into my pajamas.”

“I trust Haley won’t try to get in touch with you to clarify her emotions or feelings toward you,” Brooke said. “She was very emotional tonight, you know, I mean, crying and all that.”

“Brooke,” Ryan said, exasperated, “if it’s bothering you, why don’t you telephone her and ask her all about it?”

“Like hell I will,” Brooke retorted.

“Then for God’s sake,” Ryan said, “leave it, Brooke, leave it.”

Brooke looked at Ryan as if she’d never seen him before and said, “Ryan, don’t get snippy with me.”

“Good Lord,” Ryan said, exhaling loudly, “give me strength.”

“Oh that’s really cute,” Brooke said. Ryan heard her, he but decided their present conversation had run its course. Consequently, he said nothing to her as he parked the car in the garage, got out and went through the door taking him into the house.

Ryan went to the kitchen and went to the cabinet where the liquor was kept. He grabbed a bottle of scotch, then reached to another cabinet for a glass.

“What, pray tell, are you doing now?” Brooke scolded.

“Brooke, please, we’ve been exchanging harsh words all the way home tonight,” Ryan said, hoping he could negotiate a cease-fire. He poured a healthy measure of scotch into the glass.

“Hasn’t there been enough drinking for one night?” Brooke began a new interrogation.

“No. Brooke, in case you missed it, I was the Emcee and the after-dinner speaker tonight; I had one drink before dinner and nothing afterwards,” Ryan explained.

“From what people said to me, they appreciated what I did. They thought I did a really good job. I wish you did. I’m having a

nightcap while I get dressed for bed. Does that meet with your approval?"

"No, it doesn't, but if that's your decision," Brooke began, "you just go right ahead. However, you'd better plan on getting up and having breakfast with me in the morning, and don't complain about a headache from your drinking. I'm going to bed; try to be quiet so that you don't wake me when you come."

Ryan didn't miss the double-entendre in Brooke's last words. I just hope you fall fast asleep ASAP, he thought, and please don't talk in your sleep or snore. I've had an earful of you in the last 35 minutes. For the first time in their marriage, Ryan thought Brooke was a royal pain in the butt.

Ryan swallowed the remains in his glass, then went to the hallway where he made a small adjustment in the thermostat setting. The evening had been warm, in more ways than one, so he set the thermostat two-degrees lower.

Well, well, he thought to himself. Here I am, just three steps from the kitchen. He entered the kitchen, opened the liquor cabinet and poured himself another glass of scotch, knowing he was too close to reaching his limit.

Cool it, bud, he told himself.

He walked to the living room and put a Gerry Mulligan CD in the player. He sat in his chair, sipping his scotch, admiring the sonority of the quartet.

The music and the scotch ganged up on Ryan, making him more reflective than usual. What's up with Brooke, he asked himself? She's been a real shrew lately. Why is she always so angry all the time when we're together?

What's up with Haley, he wondered? She was someone very different from the Haley of ten years ago. What was on her mind tonight? Why was she so intent on our going outside to talk? Ryan finished off the rest of his drink, but found no answers to any of his questions in the bottom of his glass.

Ryan took his glass to the kitchen, rinsed it out, and then put it in the sink. He walked quietly to their bedroom and changed into his pajamas. Remembering Brooke's parting words 45-minutes ago, he slipped into bed as quietly as he could. The numbness in his cheeks and tongue made him sleepy. Before he could think of one more issue to occupy space in his brain about either Brooke or Haley, he was asleep.

Ryan's third year of graduate school was a delight. His last two courses were enjoyable. He passed his written comprehensive exams with minimal questions from his supervisory committee at his oral exam, and he completed his doctoral research and subsequent dissertation well before the deadlines.

The director of the teacher placement office stopped Ryan in the main corridor one afternoon to report that he had sent Ryan's dossier to four universities that had vacant positions in his specialties. Ryan withdrew from two of them, not liking their geographical locations, and was invited for interviews on the campuses of the two remaining schools.

He accepted the job offer at the university most like the one he was graduating from. The institutional resemblances were an appealing feature that made Ryan and Brooke comfortable. Another attractive feature was the fact that their new home would be only two hours from Columbus.

Brooke had been putting in long after-school days at her school in Columbus, while Ryan filled the time at home alone

packing for their move. Brooke was calculating her students' final grades and completing her room inventories. She checked and rechecked them. Ultimately, she was finished and ready to accompany Ryan to their new jobs, their new city, a new university, and their new lives.

Both of them understood that their move would be transformational.

Brooke's, experiences, resume, and her references made her a high quality hire for the local school district in their new town. In fact, she was named fifth grade team leader in her school before she ever visited the school or met any of the teachers there.

Ryan spent four days transporting boxes of books and other paraphernalia to his campus office and shelving them in an order that made sense to him. He was excited about his first university position, leaving home at 7:00 every morning and coming home at 7:00 at night.

"What do you do all day at your office on campus," Brooke asked? "Classes don't begin for another two weeks and here you are putting in 12-hour days at the university. I never know when to have

dinner ready.”

Ryan started snapping his fingers like he did years ago when he sang with Sine Nomine, then he started to sing the first stanza of a song made famous by Bachman-Turner Overdrive, *Takin’ Care of Business*.

“What kind of ‘business’ do you have to take care of,” Brooke asked peevishly? “As I just said, classes don’t begin until two weeks from yesterday.”

“I’m reading the files of my undergraduate advisees, all 90 of them. I’m writing syllabi for three new classes. There are several faculty meetings between now and the first day of classes. I’m transferring gobs of files from my flash drive to my new computer in my office. Whenever any of the current faculty invites me to coffee, I accept because I need to know my new colleagues. Now, have I answered your question?”

“Okay,” Brooke said. “I’m sorry. I spoke too soon from too little understanding of your new responsibilities.”

“Brooke,” Ryan said in a tempered voice, “during the past 8 to 10 weeks you’ve been in a hyper-agitated snit. What’s wrong with you? Or, is there something wrong with me? Am I doing something

that irritates you? We've had a fantastic relationship, in my judgment, until recently. I can't imagine you're very happy; I know I'm not. We need to talk. What's up?"

Brooks sat heavily on their couch.

"Since you asked," she began, "while you were in grad school we put a lot of things on 'hold.' The closer we were to the completion of your PhD, most of our conversations were about your career. Our personal plans got shoved aside."

"What are you talking about? What plans," Ryan asked?

"Travel for one," Brooke replied. "We talked about a trip to London. We also talked about a summer at Uncle Fred's cabin in Minnesota . . ."

"Oh c'mon Brooke," Ryan interrupted, "those aren't issues big enough to cause you to be as curt and irritable as you've been. On any given day I don't know which of your personalities will greet me: my happy wife or the bitchy person I don't recognize any more."

Brooke looked at Ryan, fumbling into her linguistic repertoire for an appropriate reply. She searched for the right words. She hesitated.

"All right," she said, "since you're so damned inquisitive and

insightful regarding my demeanor: I want to have a baby. Do you hear me? I want to start a family,” Brooke blurted.

She stood there defiantly; her teeth clinched as if she had thrown down a gauntlet, waiting for a reply from Ryan.

“Is that all?” Ryan asked. “You’re getting yourself all worked up wondering when we can have a child? We can have a baby anytime you like. When do you want one?”

“As soon as possible,” Brooke answered, near tears.

“Okay, fine. We’ll have a baby. I need a shower first, though,” Ryan said, “In the meantime you turn down the bed and take off your clothes.”

“Don’t be so irritatingly cute and sarcastic about something I care about deeply, Ryan. And besides, today isn’t a good day,” Brooke said. “I’ve been taking my temperature for the past six days, looking for a day when I’m ovulating. My temperature would be a bit higher if I were. It’s not higher today.”

“Maybe we could do it tonight and call it ‘baby-making rehearsal,’” Ryan suggested, thinking he might bring a smile to Brooke’s face. He didn’t. “Or we might do it tonight because we love each other and don’t need any other reason than that. Could that

be a possibility?”

“I’d rather not do it tonight, if you don’t mind. We’ve talked about sex and love-making more than enough, I think,” Brooke said. “There’s certainly no spontaneity or romance left.”

“Speak for yourself, Brooke,” Ryan said crossly. “I do mind if we don’t make love tonight. If we waited to make love until you were satisfied that there was a sufficient amount of ‘spontaneity and romance’ in our bedroom to suit you, I’d be as celibate as a Trappist monk, damn it.”

Ryan was angry. His frustrations about his physical relationship with Brooke had been suppressed for too long and now his emotions were bursting forth. His dissatisfactions and disappointments about their sex life were out in the open.

“Celibate?” Brooke asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Ryan answered, “celibate. I haven’t been keeping count of our lovemaking, but I’m estimating it happens no more than once or twice a month. Moreover, I miss the loving, passionate Brooke I used to know. Brooke, we had fun! We enjoyed each other.”

“We thought we did,” Brooke said. “That was before we

consummated our love for each other, before I knew how messy lovemaking is.”

Ryan almost burst out laughing. Does this woman have any idea, he thought, how the “messy” part she says she doesn’t like is the crucial ingredient in creating a baby?

Does she have any idea how two people who are united in loving harmony and concord as one person when they are in the act of physical love, enjoy sex even when babies aren’t the intended result?

He decided, however, he would pass on the “messy” comment and try to draw the current conversation to a close. *C’est la guerre*, he thought.

Classes finally began at the University, the public schools opened, and Ryan and Brooke became new faculty members at their respective schools. Brooke found a collegial atmosphere at her elementary school. Ryan’s department at the university welcomed him as a drought-ridden community would welcome a two-day rain.

The difference-makers in the department had read Ryan’s application dossier before his interview. They had read his letters of

recommendation and were impressed, especially the one by Prof. Styles who said many good things about Ryan. The Styles letter had also included two items of particular interest: in Prof. Styles' view, Ryan was one of the top five doctoral students he had ever mentored throughout his career, and Ryan was destined to be a national figure, in Prof. Styles' view in 7-10 years, if not sooner.

The first day of classes two of Ryan's new colleagues invited him and Brooke to dinner parties, one party on Saturday night and the other Sunday night. After checking with Brooke, ostensibly to make sure those dates on their calendar were clear, Ryan accepted the invitations.

Actually, Ryan knew their calendar was open. Their social calendar wasn't the real issue. They were new in town. What social claims on their time could there be?

Truth to tell, Ryan really wanted to see what kind of mood Brooke was in. She had become extremely Puritanical; Ryan imagined she was usually upset because there might be some people someplace who, horrors of all horrors, could actually be having fun.

One of Brooke's colleagues, Alexis, confided in her one afternoon after the children had left the building that she and her

husband, also a new faculty member at the university, were having trouble getting pregnant. “Our problem has a unique twist, I think,” Alexis said.

“Oh, how so,” Brooke asked?

“Brooke, our problem . . . er . . . my problem is I just don’t like sex,” Alexis replied.

“Well Alexis,” Brooke snickered, “I’m told it’s awfully difficult to have a baby without it.”

“I love my husband, Brooke, but he’s one of those men who thinks about sex every six seconds. I think about it once a month.”

“This is too, too ironic,” Brooke said with a smile, “I feel like you’re a mirror, Alexis. Ryan and I, well . . . er . . . well, we’re duplicating your experience. I’m usually ‘not tonight’ and he’s ready to go every night. I think Ryan’s a sex addict. Just last week we had an argument about our infrequency of sex.”

“I hear you,” Alexis said. “My husband and I have had similar discussions I imagine.” Why are men so horny, like a bunch of 17-year olds?”

Brooke took Alexis’ hand, held it, and began to stroke it. “Do you think we’d be better off adopting a child? We are having the

same challenges and feelings. You're a beautiful person, Alexis. I'm sure you'd be an exemplary parent."

"Thank you, Brooke," Alexis said. "You're very generous.

"I'm not trying to be generous or flattering," Brooke responded. "It's just that I'm sympathetic to your situation and would like to help you, in any way I can. I mean it."

Brooke released Alexis' hand, then raised her hand to Alexis' cheek. "Maybe adoption is the best solution."

Alexis pulled Brooke's hand from her cheek. "I'm not ready for that option, at least, not yet." I have to go now. I need to stop by the grocery store on the way home." Alexis left the room.

Brooke was sympathetic with Alexis' feelings. She liked Alexis; she liked her a lot and was eager to help her. She wanted to support her.

Brooke opened the center drawer of her desk, took out some papers that she put in her attaché case, closed the case and started for home.

Brooke's mind was filled with many reflections of her recent history: her new school, her new colleagues, Ryan's new position at the university, his need for sex, her feelings for Alexis, whom she

wanted to help.

Perhaps I've been too hard on Ryan, she thought. Her discussion with Alexis didn't help her resolve her lovemaking issues at home. I need to discuss this with someone, she told herself. Who?

Daddy!

45

Brooke's father counseled people all the time helping them reach solutions to numerous personal problems. She reached for her cell phone in her purse and entered her father's cell number, bypassing the church's secretary-receptionist.

"Hello, sweetheart. How's my favorite daughter this afternoon?"

"She's just so-so," Brooke answered. "Are you busy? I'd like to stop by and talk to you."

"Brooke, that's an impossible question for me. If I say I'm not busy, I'll sound like a slacker who's shirking his responsibilities. If I say yes, I am busy, then you'll excuse yourself and our conversation will come to a premature end."

"I understand," Brooke chuckled. "Good answer, as always. Let me ask a different question: can I come to talk with you? It's serious."

"By all means, Brooke," Dr. Kennedy said, "come straightaway."

Two hours and fifteen minutes later Brooke was entering the church office, making obligatory social noises to the secretaries and

explaining that her father was expecting her.

Brooke walked down the narrow hall to her father's office and knocked lightly on the door. "Come," she heard her father's bass voice respond to her knock.

She opened the door to her father's office, smiled at him with a timid "Hi Daddy," then rushed to him and hugged him.

Brooke turned and sat in one of the two chairs facing her father's desk. As soon as she crossed her ankles and tugged her skirt down, she began to quietly cry.

Dr. Kennedy grabbed several tissues from a box on the bookcase counter behind him, then sat in the vacant chair beside his daughter. He handed her some tissues, which she took and then started drying her eyes.

"Here, here, Brooke," Dr. Kennedy said in a soothing voice. He took her left hand and held it. "What's the matter and how can I help?"

"Thanks daddy, you're such a perfect soul. Well, either Ryan has a problem, or I have a problem. I don't know."

Dr. Kennedy smiled at his daughter. With a shrug of his shoulders, he said to her "I've done my share of marriage

counseling. I'll do whatever I can to help both of you. What seems to be the cause or the root of the problem or problems?"

Brooke looked at her father and pursed her lips. Furrows plowed their way into her brow. She wasn't sure how to start.

"This is a little embarrassing, daddy, but it's . . . uh . . . er . . . uh . . .

"Let me help," Dr. Kennedy interjected. "It's either about values, families, sex or money. Right?"

Brooke laughed. "How'd you know?"

"Many young couples experience conflicts in their marriages in the first two or three years and those conflicts are typically grounded in differences of opinion regarding money, sex, families, or socio-political values."

"This is really embarrassing," Brooke said. "I'm finding it hard to bring up the topic, but I, er . . . we . . . need help . . . now."

And then, Brooke blurted out, "Our conflict is sex."

"As I just told you," Dr. Kennedy said, "it's not an uncommon issue with young couples. What are the main issues?"

"Well, I want to have a baby . . . I want us to start a family. I'm not stupid and I know how babies are made; that's not the

problem. But, Ryan and I can't agree on how often we should have sex."

Brooke continued, "Daddy, I think Ryan is a wonderful man with huge talents and enormous potential. Everybody thinks he's great. I love him. But, and this is a big 'but.' Frankly, I think he's a sex addict."

"Whoa," Dr. Kennedy said, "that's a serious charge. Do you have any evidence? Do you think he's seeing another woman . . . or other women? Is he staying out late at night with questionable reasons? Or is he . . ."

Brooke interrupted her father, "No, it's none of the above, as we say in school. It's just that every time we go to bed Ryan starts pawing me, grabbing my breasts . . ."

"Every night? Really? That often?" Dr. Kennedy asked.

"Well," Brooke answered, trying to frame a more precise answer, "I guess it's not every night. But it's at least two or three times a week. It's so often that I think there's something wrong with him."

"Brooke, when it comes to sex in a marriage, there are no orthodoxies. There is no list of sex activities that are either good or

bad, appropriate or inappropriate. There's no standard calendar governing frequency of sex. Some couples may have sex every night, some once a month; as long as they both consent and are motivated by love and respect for each other, there's nothing wrong with sex every night . . . or every morning or every afternoon, for that matter. Other couples may have sex two or three times a week, maybe no more than once a week. Some couples enjoy sex less than that. It's something they need to discuss and resolve, either by themselves or with the assistance of a counselor."

Brooke sat quietly for a minute. "Are you okay," Dr. Kennedy asked?

"Yes, I think so," Brooke answered. "This helps. I'll try to be more understanding. You're so great at this. I'll try; that's all I can promise."

"You give me more credit than I deserve . . ." Dr. Kennedy was saying when Brooke interrupted him. "No, you've been more helpful than you might suspect."

Brooke rose up from her chair, hugged her father, and said, "I knew you'd help me. Thanks so much Daddy; I needed to hear these things from you."

“Come back anytime, dear,” Dr. Kennedy said. He arose from his chair and hugged his daughter. Brooke returned the hug, and then walked to the door. She turned to look back at her father. “Thanks again, daddy, and . . .uh . . . about mother?”

“Don’t worry, I never share what transpires in my counseling sessions with anyone. This is between you and me.”

Brooke smiled, went out the door, and began to think about dinner. She stopped at the super market and bought a leg of lamb, Waldorf salad makings, a wedge of Stilton cheese for grating in the salad, a pound of Dunkin’ Donuts coffee, and a pound of fresh asparagus. All were Ryan’s favorites.

She remembered the \$20 bottle of chardonnay he bought once for a celebration. They already had two bottles of wine at home in their wine rack. So, she picked up a six-pack of Beck’s Light instead, knowing how much Ryan liked it.

She remembered one of Ryan’s “celibacy” comments and smiled to herself; a Trappist monk knows a lot about beer and surely must like to drink beer, doesn’t he?

When Brooke arrived at their house she put all of the groceries away, went to their bedroom and took off her clothes in

order to take a shower.

After the shower she powdered and perfumed herself and dressed in the expensive pink penoir with the lace bodice Ryan gave her as a Valentine's gift last year.

This was the first time she had put it on. She smiled to herself, thinking Ryan's in for a big surprise tonight.

The dinner was prepared, the hot items were in the oven on hold and the salad was in the refrigerator. All it required was the dressing and the grated Stilton just before serving. A bottle of wine was in the refrigerator beside the beer.

All I need now, Brooke thought, is my husband.

Finally, Brooke heard the garage door open, signaling Ryan's arrival. She scurried into the kitchen to open the bottle of wine. She poured two glasses, picked them up, then stood in the kitchen facing the door Ryan would use to enter the house.

Ryan opened the door and there was Brooke. She was dressed in the fancy penoir he had given her last year on Valentine's Day; the sheer fabric left little to the imagination, the diaphanous lace bodice revealing her breasts.

Brooke was holding two glasses of wine.

He put down his briefcase and then kissed her on the cheek. She handed him a glass of wine. Ryan was speechless with a stunned expression on his face.

Ryan looked at the wine in his hand, and then he looked at Brooke, wearing the sexy nightgown. He finally spoke to her: “Excuse me lady, who are you and why are you in my kitchen? More to the point, where is my wife? If she finds us here alone and you dressed for bed, she’ll kill both of us.”

Ryan laughed, enjoying his stand-up routine.

Brooke was smiling as Ryan entered the house, but when she heard him speak, her smile faded, gradually turning into a stern, tooth-clinched visage. This look evolved into a frown.

Brooke took the wine glass from Ryan’s hand, drank the wine in two gulps, and then hurled the empty glass against the wall behind Ryan.

Then she emptied her glass, guzzling its contents, making a loud swallowing sound. She threw her empty glass against the wall, hitting the same spot as the first glass.

“Thanks for making fun of me, you bastard,” Brooke screamed. “Thanks for appreciating the dinner I prepared for you.

Thanks for complimenting me because I dressed for your amusement. Thanks for treating me like a low-life whore.”

“Screw you, Ryan!” Brooke screamed.

She broke into tears and, sobbing, ran to the bedroom.

Ryan took off his blazer and methodically put it on the back of a kitchen chair. He took a plastic trash bag out of the cabinet and began picking up the shards of glass littering the kitchen floor and then putting them in the bag. He was moving like an automaton, hardly thinking about what he was doing.

What Ryan said to Brooke was meant to be a joke. She took it as an insult, however, and erupted like Old Faithful.

When he finished picking up the mess in the kitchen, he went to the bedroom. Brooke had removed the penoir, replacing it with a flannel shirt and a pair of well-worn jeans. She was slipping her feet into a pair of moccasins. She ignored Ryan.

“Is it safe for me to come in,” Ryan asked? Brooke didn’t say anything, continuing to ignore him.

“Brooke, please,” Ryan pleaded with her. “I was only joking. Please. Can’t we talk? I had no intention of insulting you; I think you looked like a million bucks. I was happy you were finally wearing

the penoir. Please, let's talk.”

Brooke stomped out of the bedroom as if Ryan were on another planet. Ryan removed his necktie and started to unbutton his shirt, and then he heard the garage door opener grind into action.

He stopped undressing and, holding up his pants, ran to the kitchen. He opened the door leading to the garage just in time to see Brooke backing her car out of the garage.

She stopped for a moment to stare at Ryan, she gave him the finger, then continued backing the car to the street. She drove away.

Ryan stood transfixed. “What in the hell is going on?” he asked himself aloud. This can't be happening. This is simply unreal. Things like this just don't happen . . . except on Jerry Springer or the Maury television programs.

He went back to the bedroom, took off his campus clothes and put on a sweatshirt, a pair of worn Levis, and slipped into some old penny loafers.

He went to the kitchen, shaking his head in overwhelming and utter disbelief. I simply can't friggin' believe this is happening to me . . . to us!

He double-checked the floor to make sure he had picked up

all of the pieces of the shattered wine glasses. When he was satisfied the floor was safe to walk on, he went to a cabinet and took a tall cocktail glass from the shelf. In the neighboring cabinet he found the unopened bottle of single malt scotch his friends at Crane had given him as a going away gift.

He opened the bottle and poured a four-finger drink.

He went to the living room, put a Modern Jazz Quartet CD in the player, started it, and then plopped into his chair, spilling a small amount from his glass. He sat there, trying to collect his thoughts.

Trying to establish the chronology of his arrival at home tonight.

Trying to replay his mental recording of what he said to Brooke that ticked her off.

Trying to make sense of it all.

He drew heavy sips from his glass. Soon, it was empty. He refilled it, knowing that his ability to think coherently about Brooke and her emotions and behavior would diminish with each swallow. At the moment he didn't care.

His cheeks already had that cozy, comfortable feeling of numbness. The MJQ music was over. He replaced it with a Brubeck

CD, the one with “At a Perfume Counter” on it, a 35-minute marathon of fantastic Brubeck piano and glorious Desmond alto sax sounds wrapped up under one title.

On his third drink, Ryan’s mind was wandering. He was remembering his high school days. In his mind’s eye he could see Sine Nomine on the stage in the Columbus High School auditorium. Tyler and Jake were performing magic on their guitars. Jim’s hands were moving faster than the eye could see as he gave each drum in his set a separate and distinctive voice.

Ryan was singing, sweat running down his face. He was happy, unconcerned about his physical appearance.

The audience was going wild. The applause was at the dangerous decibel level. After every song, Sine Nomine would begin another selection.

We had times, Ryan thought, really cool and swinging times. Whatever happened to the guys in the band, the guys in Sine Nomine, the band with no name?

I miss them, a lot. I miss Sine Nomine.

What if we’d made it big? What if we’d gone pro? What if we’d won the State Idol contest we didn’t even qualify for? What if?

Ryan laughed. What if my grandfather had been born without balls; would he have been my grandmother? Indeed, what if?

Ryan started humming the Stones' "Start Me Up," then moved on to Marvin's "Sexual Healing." He'd hum two or three bars of a song, then his alcohol damaged long-term memory would fail, forcing him to move on to another song.

"You are the wind beneath my wings," he sang, then started humming in his "Higher Love" Winwood voice.

Without really thinking about his improvised selections, he started humming "What's Love Got To Do With It?" He was sober enough to recognize that the last three tunes in his head were of a theme.

He wondered where Brooke went. He couldn't call the Kennedys; no need to disturb them tonight, he thought. Brooke wouldn't go to his parents' house; no need to call them. Will she come home tonight, or spend the night with a friend?

What if? Who knows? There's a title for a good song, Ryan imagined, drowsily.

I'll make some coffee, Ryan thought, forgetting that the only thing coffee accomplishes for people who've been drinking too

much is to create wide-awake drunks. Ryan closed his eyes, thinking how good the coffee will smell as soon as he makes it. I can just about taste it, he thought.

46

When Ryan first awoke the next morning the only thing he was aware of was his enormous headache. Why, why did I drink that much?

Then, he could sense that he was still in his chair in the living room, his mouth tasting like what the bottom of an aquarium must taste like. He looked at the watch on his left wrist and saw that it read 7:15. Daybreak was coming through the windows. Oh, my god, he thought, it's 7:15 a.m., which means I slept in this chair all night.

He got out of his chair and went to the kitchen. He took three painkillers, then made coffee. While the coffee was percolating, Ryan mixed himself a Bloody Mary. As he sipped the Bloody Mary the pain behind his eyes and between his ears began to subside.

He called the departmental telephone number and left a message, since the office wouldn't open for another half-hour, explaining that his back went out last night and that his classes wouldn't meet today, Friday.

Ryan mixed another Bloody Mary and since he couldn't remember whether it was his second or third, he decided it would

have to be his last.

He knew he was slightly tipsy, but at least his headache had gone away. My wife has gone away, too, Ryan thought. Where did she spend the night, he asked himself?

He was still wearing the clothes he put on last night, prompting a debate with himself: should I stay as I am or should I shower and change clothes? He argued both the affirmative and negative sides. Affirmative won.

Ryan took off his clothes in the bedroom and put them in the dirty clothes hamper. Brooke would have told him he hadn't worn those clothes long enough to warrant a washing, but she was absent.

He went to the bathroom, shaved, and took a shower. He thought to himself as he was drying his body, don't ever underestimate the recuperative powers of a shower.

After drying himself, Ryan returned to the bedroom and put on his underwear, a pink, button down collar shirt, a newer pair of Levis, and a pair of Sperry topsiders with no socks.

He went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. After retrieving the morning paper, he sat at the kitchen table with the morning's news and a cup of coffee.

First, he looked at the front page to scan the headlines, looking for any accidents Brooke may have been involved in. He was relieved that he didn't see anything.

Next, he skimmed through the sports section, looked with little interest at the crossword puzzle, then he reassembled the newspaper and placed it at Brooke's regular place at the table.

His cell phone was on the kitchen table where he had left it last night. Ryan was startled when it rang, He answered the phone and heard a female voice.

"Hello Professor Graves. Your wife wants me to tell you that she's fine."

"Who is this, Ryan asked?

"I'm a friend of Brooke's," the voice answered.

"Is she with you?" Ryan asked.

"All I can tell you is that she's fine and she doesn't want you to worry about her," Alexis answered.

"She doesn't want me to worry about her?" Ryan asked in a loud, quivering, voice.

"She had a major meltdown at home last night, screaming and throwing glassware against the wall, then she leaves home and

spends the night sleeping God knows where. And now I'm receiving an anonymous telephone call telling me that she's okay and I'm not supposed to worry about her? What the fu . . ."

" . . . I understand your frustration, Professor Graves," the voice interrupted, speaking with clinical detachment, "but all I'm authorized to report to you is that your wife is fine and in good spirits." Then, *click*, the call ended.

"How did that sound," Alexis asked Brooke?

"Convincing, I think," Karla answered. "I should call my parents and bring them up to date."

"You need to take a nap first, in my judgment," Alexis said. She walked across her living room and helped Brooke stand up. Brooke wrapped her arms around Alexis' neck.

"You've been so sweet to me," Brooke said, kissing Alexis on the cheek. "I don't know how I could have survived last night by myself. And I know you're right. I need a nap. I didn't have a good sleep last night. It's been weeks since I slept well. "

"I understand, and that doesn't surprise me." Alexis said, removing Brooke's arms from her neck. "I could hear you tossing

and turning all night. Apparently there isn't enough room in that single bed for both you and Ryan.”

“When you've finished your nap,” Alexis said, “we can go to my church for the Saturday afternoon prayer service. I think you'll find the prayer service to be just what you need right now. Many congregants in my church have found relief from all kinds of illnesses when they're the object of community prayers.”

“My father was always disappointed because I wasn't more active in church,” Brooke said, “and I haven't been one to pray very much. But, if the prayer service at your church will help me regain a sense of balance and purpose, I'll be grateful to you.”

“What about Ryan,” Alexis asked?

“What do you mean, ‘What about Ryan?’” Brooke asked.

“Don't you think you should call him sooner or later and give him some kind of report about where you are and what you're doing?” Alexis asked.

“Let him stew in his own juices for awhile,” Brooke replied, “he insulted me beyond belief yesterday afternoon, referring to me either as his mistress or his whore. Let him go do an impossible physical act.”

“Did you understand him correctly?” Alexis asked. “Is there a chance you might have misinterpreted what he said, or what he meant?”

“No, no way. There’s no chance,” Brooke said. “Ryan and I have known each other since high school; we go way back, for God’s sake. We’ve never had communication problems . . . until recently, that is. His was obsessed with his graduate studies. Receiving his PhD became paramount in our relationship; my life was secondary. Starting a family was . . .” Brooke began to cry.

“We can talk about this more after your nap,” Alexis said, taking Brooke by the hand and leading her toward the guest bedroom. Alexis pulled down the bedspread, blanket and sheet; Brooke sat on the side of the bed and took off her shoes. She stood, pulled her skirt down and stepped out of it. Then she pulled her sweater over her head, and dropped it on top of her sweater. She sat there in her bra and panties, smiling at Alexis.

“Do you want to join me?” Brooke asked, as she reached behind her back, unhooked her bra and put it in a chair beside the bed. She held her breasts in her hands and gave them a gentle, rotating message while smiling at Alexis.

Alexis edged back a couple of steps, trying to smile, and said, "No, but thanks. I need to do some housekeeping," she said as she picked up Brooke's skirt and sweater, folded them and put them on the chair with Brooke's bra.

Brooke slid between the sheets and was almost asleep by the time Alexis reached the door. Before leaving the room, Alexis looked back at the sleeping Brooke and shook her head.

"You poor, stressed and mixed-up kid," she muttered quietly to her self.

Ryan hadn't heard from Brooke for three days. His calls to her at her school were unsuccessful. "Yes," was all the secretary would say, answering Ryan's questions, "Mrs. Graves has been here all week. But she's not taking calls because of her heavy agenda."

It's time, Ryan decided. It's time I talked with the Kennedys.

On Thursday he called the Kennedys after his last class. Mrs. Kennedy answered the phone.

"Hello, Ryan," Mrs. Kennedy said. "We thought you and Brooke had dropped off the planet. It's been over a week since we talked. It's a delight to hear your voice."

“Thanks, Mom Kennedy,” Ryan replied. “I know we’ve been remiss in either seeing you or talking to you on the phone. That’s why I’m calling. When can I come to see you and Doc?”

“Dayton will be home fairly soon, Ryan. He’s had a frantic week: committee meetings every night, a child’s funeral ---those are so difficult --- two pre-nuptial conferences, and lunch with the mayor. He’s coming home early this afternoon to rest a bit. It’ll be about an hour and a half to two hours, and then he’ll be home. Come on now, why don’t you?”

Ryan arrived at the Kennedys two hours later, just after Dr. Kennedy had pulled into the garage. As Ryan saw the automatic garage doors begin to close, he began to feel sorry for his father-in-law.

Ryan shook his head and thought about his father-in-law. Doc, you’re coming home early to recover from a really busy week? What until you hear what I have to lay on you and Mrs. K.

Mrs. Kennedy met Ryan at the front door and ushered him to Dr. Kennedy’s study. Dr. Kennedy, who had entered the house through the back door, was seated at his desk. He looked up from his open brief case and saw Ryan.

“Come on in, Professor. It’s good to see you. How was the drive to Columbus? Are you here to ask me to be a guest lecturer in one of your classes?”

“I wish I were,” Ryan answered. “But, I’m here on personal business, not professional.”

“Oh?” Dr. Kennedy said, his eyebrows arched in a question. “Please, Ryan, sit,” Dr. Kennedy said, motioning Ryan to a chair. Dr. Kennedy sat down in his desk chair.

“Well, sir, there’s no easy way to begin this,” Ryan said, with tears in his eyes. “Have you talked to Brooke lately?”

“No,” Dr. Kennedy said, “it’s been six or seven days, I think. Why do you ask; is something happening?”

“Yes,” Ryan answered, “something is happening, but I don’t know what that ‘something’ is. I haven’t seen or talked with Brooke for three days.”

Ryan went on, recounting Brooke’s extremely angry response, her complete collapse of composure and subsequent violent outburst in response to his comments when he entered their house three days ago.

When he finished his description, tears ran down his cheeks.

Dr. Kennedy reached into a drawer in his desk and brought out a box of tissues, which he handed to Ryan. “Thank you,” Ryan said, as he pulled several tissues out of the box. He dabbed at his eyes.

“I’ve had some knowledge --- very limited --- about this situation. Remember Ryan, this isn’t the Brooke we’ve known,” Dr. Kennedy observed. “Is there anything that’s happened recently that would cause her to behave in such an uncharacteristic manner?”

“Not that I know of,” Ryan answered. “She hasn’t been her usual self lately. I know she’s anxious about our having a baby and starting a family.”

“Yes, she shared that with me some time back. Frankly, I took Brooke’s complaints to be fairly typical, if not predictable, from a recently married young woman. I was certainly wrong, wasn’t I?”

“It’s not your fault, Doc,” Ryan replied. “Who knew?”

“Do you know whether she seen an OB/GYN,” Dr. Kennedy asked? “If you know who the doctor is, you could call him or her for some help, possibly get some suggestions. It’s unlikely, given doctor-patient confidentiality, but you never know till you try.”

“I don’t know,” Ryan answered. “I think I’m going to call her

building principal first. Maybe she can help.”

Ryan and Dr. Kennedy ended their conversation, hugging each other like father and son, promising to report to the other when or if Brooke should call, and each declaring his love for Brooke.

Ryan drove home with an overwhelming headache. He didn't turn on the radio or play a CD for company, odd behavior for him, he noted.

Thank God, tomorrow's Friday, Ryan thought. Instead of TGIF, should I say TGTF? Thank God Tomorrow's Friday! .

Why am I thinking stupid stuff like this, Ryan asked himself? You know why, his inner voice told him; it's easier to think about inconsequential things right now rather than about Brooke.

When Ryan arrived home, he parked the car in the garage, entered the house, took a beer out of the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. He took his cell phone out of his pocket and entered the direct number to Brooke's room at school. There was no answer. After seven rings, his call was automatically transferred to the main office.

“Mrs. Graves' room,” a secretary answered.

“Hello, this is Ryan Graves. I'm calling for my wife; is she

still at school do you know?"

"Hello, Professor Graves," the secretary said. "No, she's gone for the day. Left as soon as school was over. Had a doctor's appointment; she told me this morning."

"Can you transfer my call to the principal," Ryan asked?

"Sure," the secretary replied, "no sooner asked than done. Bye-bye for now, and have a good day." Ryan heard a couple of clicks; the transfer was completed.

"Dr. Hood speaking." It was the principal, using a measured, imperious voice just in case the caller was an angry parent.

"Dr. Hood, this is Ryan Graves, Brooke's husband."

"Good afternoon, Professor Graves, how can I help you?" the principal asked, in a markedly friendlier tone.

"My business," Ryan began, "rather, my reason for calling you, is a bit delicate. We're talking in confidence, I assume."

"We are," Dr. Hood assured him.

"I don't want to be an alarmist," Ryan said, "but I care a great deal for Brooke, of course. She's my wife; I love her. BUT, I have some concerns about her." "I can't think of an easier way to ask," Ryan continued, "so I'll be straightforward with you. How

has Brooke's behavior been at school," Ryan asked? "She hasn't been herself at home and I'm just wondering if there's anything going on at school that might be causing her tense and sometimes erratic behavior?"

"She's been fine, Professor Graves," Dr. Hood said. "Her good friend Alexis Claiborne --- Alexis teaches in the room across the hall from Brooke --- and they are very good, very close friends, as I'm sure you already know --- Alexis has commented that Brooke has had some difficult days lately. Nothing serious, though. All teachers have both good and bad days, you know."

"So, well, thank you Dr. Hood," Ryan said. "It sounds as if there's nothing really too serious requiring my immediate attention. Should I simply remain patient and wait for Brooke to have more good days, or at least better days?"

"Yes, I think so, Professor Graves," Dr. Hood said. "And, you don't need to worry; I won't discuss our conversation with Brooke, or anyone else for that matter."

Ryan sat, not moving, puzzling over one of Dr. Hood's comments: she assumed he would know that Brooke and, what was her name . . . Alexis Claiborne? . . . were close friends.

Ryan put his empty beer can in the trash. Sitting down at the kitchen table again, he entered the phone number for Brooke's school in his cell phone and the secretary he talked to an hour ago answered.

“Hello, this is Ryan Graves again. I'm sorry to bother you, but can you give me Alexis Claiborne's home telephone number?”

The secretary was anxious to help and read the number to Ryan while he wrote it down on the back of an envelope on the kitchen table.

Ryan put his cell phone on the table and dialed up his calendar. He saw that there were no university classes tomorrow, Founders' Day, or something like that.

At a special ceremony two or three professors would be named a Curators Professor and each would have a \$10,000 stipend added to their annual salaries on a permanent basis. Or, Ryan thought, until retirement or death do they part. I'll go for the endowment, he thought, the sooner the better, and leave retirement or death for a later season.

I've done enough for today, Ryan thought. He went to the bedroom and changed into some more comfortable clothes: his

oldest, most faded Levis, a t-shirt with *Eschew Obfuscation* on the front, and his boat shoes.

Shall I call the Claiborne woman now, he asked himself? Can she provide some helpful information? Shall I do something else?

The answer was a wine glass filled with chilled chardonnay. Selecting a wine glass was a bad idea. It reminded Ryan of Brooke's outburst. What's wrong with her, Ryan wondered? I love her; I've loved her since high school. I feel lost right now . . . and I feel sorry for her. What can I do to help her?

Ryan poured the wine down the sink and went to the bedroom. He lay down, hoping to find some brief relief from his problems by falling asleep, but he tossed and turned throughout a restless night.

After dozing a bit, Ryan got out of bed at 7:15 Friday morning. He went to the kitchen, put water and coffee in the coffee pot, then went to the front door to look for the morning newspaper. He looked aimlessly through the paper until he heard the coffee pot's beeper signaling that the coffee was ready.

He poured coffee in a mug, added the sweetener and creamer,

then took a more serious and sustained look at the sports section. Afterwards he shaved, showered and dressed, going back to the kitchen around 11:00.

He picked up the envelope from the kitchen table with Alexis Claiborne's telephone number. After entering her number, he waited for only two rings before he heard, "Hello, Alexis Claiborne here."

"Mrs. Claiborne, this is Ryan Graves, Brooke's husband. Have you seen Brooke? How is she? I'm worried about her state of mind. Is she with you?"

"Hello, Ryan. I feel as if I know you; Brooke has said so much about you. And, please call me Alexis."

"Thank you," Ryan said. "Can you tell me, Alexis, how Brooke is and do you know where she is?"

"Yes, I can give you a partial report," Alexis said. "This is a negotiated teachers' planning day at school. She's with her parents in Columbus. She's been very depressed lately. She's spent the past several nights here at my place. I took her to the Kennedys . . . oh, . . . let's see . . . it must've been about two hours ago."

"I won't bother you further, Alexis. I'm going to the Kennedys ASAP," Ryan said hurriedly.

Ryan was both relieved and angered. It was a relief to know Brooke was safe and with her parents; but, why in the hell didn't either Brooke or the Claiborne woman call to let him know Brooke's whereabouts?

Ryan picked up his cell phone and placed a call to the Kennedys. Mrs. Kennedy answered, "Hello?"

"Good morning, Mrs. K, this is Ryan."

"Yes Ryan, I know. Your mother-in-law can recognize your voice."

"How is Brooke," Ryan asked? "I've been worried sick, not knowing where she was. Did Doc tell you about our conversation?"

"Yes he shared the gist of it with me," Mrs. Kennedy answered. "Brooke's in her old bedroom right now, sleeping soundly."

"I'm coming to Columbus," Ryan said. "I'll see you in two hours or so."

"Very well, dear. I'll tell Dayton and Brooke you're coming."

As Ryan was driving the distance to the Kennedy's house, his long-term memory kicked in and he had time to recall happier moments he and Brooke had shared: the party at Christopher's when she sat on his lap and they kissed for the first time; their first teaching jobs in Centerville; moving to the small town of Crane and the fellowship they shared with the faculties; their graduate school days.

Brooke was happy then. In his mind's eye he could still conjure up an image of a younger, smiling, beautiful, and happy Brooke. How soon will we be able to revisit those days, Ryan wondered?

When he arrived at the Kennedys, Mrs. Kennedy met him at the front door with a hug, then escorted him to Dr. Kennedy's study. Dr. Kennedy stood to greet Ryan, giving him a handshake and a hug. The three of them sat, then there was an awkward moment when no one knew who would, should, or could speak first.

Ryan broke the ice. "How's my wife, and what's happening to her . . . to us?"

"We're not sure," Dr. Kennedy answered. "My counseling

experience tells me that Brooke is depressed, whether it's clinical I can't say."

"She had been talking with me," Mrs. Kennedy said, "about how much she wants to start a family and is disappointed because she isn't pregnant. Perhaps 'disappointed' isn't a strong enough word. I agree with Dayton; she's very depressed."

"I know having our first child has been weighing heavy on her shoulders for some time now," Ryan said, "and I guess I'm guilty of not being sensitive enough to see how her not getting pregnant has been such an emotional burden."

Dr. Kennedy cleared his throat, his eyes misty. "We're here because what we have in common is Brooke, and our love for her. Ryan, don't beat up on yourself; you're a good person. Remember how hindsight is always 20-20?"

"Thanks Doc," Ryan said. "What should or can we do to help her?"

Ryan's question hung in the air, waiting for a reply. The three people in Dr. Kennedy's study sat and looked at each other, each one shifting his or her glance from one, then to another, hoping one of them would have some insight into the proper treatment for Brooke.

Dr. Kennedy, to the relief of Ryan and Mrs. K., broke the silence. “Ryan, you and I are both called ‘doctor,’ but we’re not the right kind of doctor as far as Brooke’s condition is concerned.”

Dr. Kennedy smiled, giving himself sometime to organize his thoughts. “I don’t think your PhD in Socio-Linguistics or mine in Theology & Culture are germane here,” he chuckled. “We need a different kind of specialist”

“Do you have any ideas, Dayton?” Mrs. Kennedy asked.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Dr. Kennedy answered. “There’s a man in my congregation, Matthew Durkin. More formally Matt is, ‘Dr. Matthew Durkin.’ He is an MD, with a specialty and license in Psychiatry.”

“What,” Mrs. Kennedy asked? “I certainly didn’t know that.”

“No reason you should have known it,” Dr. Kennedy replied to her. “I’ll call him and see if he can visit with Brooke this afternoon. Maybe he can give us some advice about what Brooke needs. Maybe he won’t be able to. But, it’s worth a try, at least.”

Ryan and Mrs. Kennedy nodded their heads in agreement.

“Well, gentlemen, I need to start my cookies for the coffee

break between services at church tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Kennedy said. “My circle, Martha Circle, is responsible for cookies and we’re each bringing two dozen.”

She left Dr. Kennedy’s study and headed for the kitchen.

Dr. Kennedy telephoned Matt Durkin, who agreed to be at the Kennedy’s house at 5:00 that afternoon. He went to the kitchen to tell Ryan, who was having a cup of coffee while Mrs. K. worked on her cookies.

“Ryan you are more than welcome --- for several reasons --- to sit in on Dr. Durkin’s conference with us after he completes an initial interview with Brooke.

Both Dr. Kennedy and Ryan sat in the kitchen drinking coffee to pass the time.

Ryan and Dr. Kennedy stood, stretched, then went outside to look at a flowerbed at the side of the house. It gave them something to do. Almost immediately, Matt Durkin’s car pulled into the driveway and stopped his car behind Ryan’s.

Dr. Kennedy turned around to greet Matt. “Hello, Dr. Durkin,” Dr. Kennedy said.

“Oh, sure, it’s ‘Dr. Durkin’ now,” Matt laughed, “but when

you receive my bill, you'll want me to revise it and use rates more appropriate from 'a faithful congregant and your best friend, Matt.'”

“That's a good idea. Matt; this is Brooke's husband, Ryan,” Dr. Kennedy said. “As I explained during our telephone conversation earlier today, we're concerned about Brooke's emotional states.”

“I see,” Matt said. “ I met Brooke a few summers ago when my twin daughters attended vacation church school and Brooke was one of the teachers. They loved her! If you'll show me where she is, I'd like to talk to her.”

Dr. Kennedy took Matt inside the house and up the stairs to Brooke's room. He introduced Matt, then left them alone and went downstairs. When Dr. Kennedy returned to Ryan, he suggested they have another cup of coffee in his study.

“Could we have tea?” Ryan asked. “I'm already wired from too much coffee.”

Mrs. Kennedy brought them a pot of tea and two mugs. They sat and talked about a wide range of topics: baseball, music, current events not only on the national scene, but also at the university and at Dr. Kennedy's church. They were anxiously awaiting Matt's return and report.

Ryan looked at his watch: 7:15 p.m. then he heard a voice, “I’ll take a cup of that coffee if there’s any left.” It was Matt.

“Hey, Matt. Sure thing. It’s Irish Breakfast tea, and I’ll get you a cup,” Dr. Kennedy said. He left the room and headed for the kitchen.

“I can understand why you’re concerned about Brooke,” Matt said. “She remembered me, by the way --- or, I should say she remembered the twins --- so she was candid, seeing me as a friend.”

Dr. Kennedy returned with Matt’s tea, overhearing his initial report to Ryan.

“So, Matt,” Dr. Kennedy began, “what did you learn?”

“I was telling Ryan,” Matt began, “as you probably heard when you were bringing the tea, Brooke was frank and open with me.”

“In my judgment, Brooke is seriously depressed. I can’t be sure about the causative factors because they’re usually multiple, but I can assure you she’s treatable. There’s her lack of interest in sex. She told me you and she had at least one large argument about that,” he said, looking at Ryan.

The visible Ryan nodded in agreement; the inner Ryan

thought, one large argument? How about twenty?

“Her constant fatigue; her tendency to sleep all the time; her lack of interest in food, her daily headaches, her upset stomach and her daily use of and reliance on over the counter stomach medications ... all of these suggest serious depression.”

“How do we ... er ... uh ... you deal with this,” Ryan asked?”

“In my opinion Brooke is not a threat or a danger either to herself or to others,” Matt answered, “so, I can treat her on an outpatient basis in my office, using a combination of medications and psychotherapy. I’m optimistic.”

“Whew,” Ryan exhaled. “I’m happy for Brooke and I’m relieved!”

“Yes, aren’t we,” Dr. Kennedy added. “Matt, when can the sessions in your office begin?”

“I’ll have my secretary call you, Ryan, say Monday morning,” Matt answered. “My secretary you can arrange Brooke’s appointment schedule. The first thing we’ll need to do, however, is to have a thorough physical exam. I’ll have my secretary make an appointment for Brooke’s physical exam with a good friend of mine,

Dr. Leonard White, an endocrinologist. He'll get the results, including thorough blood work, to me quickly."

"Brooke's staying here with her parents," Ryan said, somewhat embarrassed. "One of her teaching colleagues brought her here a couple of days ago. You can have your secretary call the Kennedy's number."

"I see," Dr. Durkin said. Then, turning to Mrs. Kennedy, he said, "I'll call you Monday morning. We can schedule the physical exam with Dr. White and my subsequent sessions at that time."

First thing Monday morning, Brooke called her school to report that she was ill and had doctor's orders to stay home all week. Later, Matt Durkn's secretary called. The first session with Dr. Durkin was scheduled for the following Friday. Dr. White, the endocrinologist, would see her Wednesday afternoon for her physical exam and blood work and would fax some of the initial results to Dr. Durkin.

Mrs. Kennedy accompanied Brooke to Dr. White's office not only for moral support but also in order to provide answers to any health history questions Brooke might not either remember or know.

On Friday, Dr. Durkin discussed with them the preliminary results of Brooke's physical exam from Dr. White. After interviewing Brooke, Dr. Durkin was finished. Brooke and Mrs. Kennedy left Matt's office, going for a late lunch at the Columbus Downtown Bistro.

"That's the most time-consuming interview I've ever had," Brooke said, looking over her spinach, pine nut, and beet salad. "but I know it'll be worth it. I haven't been the happiest creature you've been with for the past several weeks, have I Mother?"

"Let's focus on the future, dear," Mrs. Kennedy answered. "Dr. Durkin said he'll have all the lab results from Dr. White in 4-5 days and then he'll have a clearer idea about the direction your treatments will take."

She picked up her water glass and tipped it toward Brooke as an informal toast.

"I want you to know Mother, I'm really anxious to learn the results," Brooke said. "I haven't been very likeable for too many days and weeks. I'm also fully aware of the ways I've abused Ryan; I may be seriously depressed and behave in strange ways, but I'm not crazy and I'm not stupid. I know what's been going on with me."

“All of us are, obviously, hoping for the best,” Mrs. Kennedy said. “I’m sure you know that and don’t need to be told. We want our old Brooke back.”

“Even Ryan?”

“Ryan especially,” Mrs. Kennedy said in a firm voice. “I don’t think you know or appreciate how much Ryan loves you. All wives should be so fortunate!”

“I’ll try to think hard on that one, Mother,” Brooke said as she and her mother stood, signaling the end of lunch and the discussion. It was time to go home.

When Mrs. Kennedy and Brooke approached the Kennedy’s house, they could see Ryan’s car in the driveway

Brooke got out of her mother’s car and faced the house. She took a deep breath and started walking toward the front door. She entered the house and looked through the living room to the kitchen, where she saw Ryan.

“Hello, Ryan,” she said.

“Hello, sweetie,” Ryan said in response. “How did it go at Dr. Durkin’s?”

“Fine,” Brooke said softly to Ryan. “He’ll have full results

from Dr. White's lab tests and x-rays toward the middle of next week."

"Speaking of next week," Ryan said, "remember that I'm scheduled to be at the American Linguistics Society in Philadelphia Thursday through Saturday to give a paper and serve on two panels. Then Sunday through Wednesday I'll be at the University of Pennsylvania as a visiting scholar, giving one paper and sitting in on three doctoral seminars. I can cancel both trips if you need me to stay home with you."

"No, no, I want you to go," Brooke said. "The meetings are important to you and your career. If we should ever have a child, I'd want him or her to have a father like you, grounded in your goals and passions. Your becoming a successful and distinguished professor would provide your children with a great role model."

"Are you sure?" Ryan asked. "I can cancel out of both meetings, telling them we have a family emergency."

Brooke began to cry, "I want you to go. I'll be all right. I really will. I've caused you enough difficulties. You go. I'll stay here with mom and dad. They'd like that I think."

"I know they would," Ryan said. "Okay, I'll go. Your staying

with your parents is a great idea. I won't worry quite so much about you knowing you're with them."

Brooke continued to cry. "Excuse me, Ryan, but I'm exhausted. I'm going upstairs to stretch out on the bed for a short nap."

While she was napping, Ryan drove home two hours to his own bed and his own thoughts.

On the following Tuesday afternoon Ryan drove to Columbus to spend the night. The Kennedys hovered about, telling both Brooke and Ryan that they would take good care of her. She needn't worry about anything; neither should Ryan.

Dinner was quiet Tuesday evening. Brooke was teary, dabbing at her eyes with tissues, and eating very little; she finally left the table and went to her upstairs bedroom.

The next morning, Ryan drove to the Columbus airport and boarded his flight for Philadelphia.

He arrived at PHL, Philadelphia International Airport, 20 minutes late, but he considered the lost 20 minutes insignificant. Any arriving flight has a standard error of 30 minutes, Ryan had decided. Operating within that standard error, almost any flight was actually

“on time,” time being a theoretical construct for most US airlines.

After his arrival Ryan went to the baggage claim area, retrieved his suitcase, then walked the short distance to the surface transportation doors where busses, taxis and limos were available to take travelers to their final destinations.

He took a bus to the Loews Downtown Hotel, checked in, then went to his room to unpack his wrinkled clothes and take a brief rest.

After a 25-minute nap, Ryan opened his eyes to a darkened scene outside his hotel room window. He looked at his watch to see that it was 6:47 p.m. It’s only 5:47 at the Kennedy house, he thought, so he reached for his cell phone and placed the call.

“Hello,” Mrs. Kennedy answered.

“Hi, Mom K., it’s Ryan.”

“Good evening, Ryan; how was your trip to Philadelphia?”

“It’s a long, tiring trip, but there were no problems. How’s Brooke?”

“We had a quiet day,” Mrs. Kennedy answered. “She seemed to be calm. There were a couple of tearful periods this afternoon, but they were relatively short in duration.”

“I’m glad she’s with you and Doc,” Ryan said. “I ‘m going out for a quick supper, then I’m coming back to the room to go over the paper I’m presenting tomorrow. It’ll be an early to bed night for me. I’ll call you in the morning before I leave for the conference activities.”

“That’ll be fine, Ryan,” Mrs. Kennedy said. “I’ll tell Brooke you called, and you try to enjoy at your conference. Please don’t bother yourself, Ryan. Dayton and I will take good care of Brooke.”

“Thanks, Mom K., I know you will. I’ll call again later,” Ryan said, ending the conversation, looking out the window with a frown in his face.

How can I not worry, Ryan thought? My marriage is going to Hell in a huge trash dumpster. If my marriage is going to Hell, then almost certainly it’s already in Purgatory.

After showering the next morning he put on his navy blue suit, oxford blue button-down collar shirt, and a solid burgundy necktie. He would be dressed more formally than the beard and sandals crowd, but the suit was a carry-over from the mentoring from Prof. Styles: “How you dress at conventions will explain the degree to which you honor your profession as well as the institution

you represent.”

Ryan was positive Prof. Styles wore a navy blue suit to bed.

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Ryan picked up his cell phone and entered a call to the Kennedys. It was 8:30 in the morning, and possibly too early for Mrs. Kennedy and Brooke, but he felt as if he was obligated to call.

“Hello?” It was Dr. Kennedy, up for hours, Ryan thought, either reading or working on Sunday’s sermon.

“Good morning, Doc, it’s Ryan.”

“Well, well, well good morning to you Professor. Are you ready to deliver your paper?”

“I’m as ready as I’m going to be,” Ryan answered. “I present my paper in 45 minutes. Is Brooke still asleep?”

“I haven’t heard a peep coming from her room this morning,” Dr. Kennedy said. “She was up several times during the night talking with her mother. I’m sorry to have to report this to you Ryan, and, selfishly, I’m sorry I was awakened every time Brooke came to our room in tears to talk with her mother. I imagine both of them will sleep a bit later this morning.”

“I understand,” Ryan said. “Will you please tell Brooke I called this morning, Doc, and I hope all three of you sleep better

tonight.”

“Me too,” Dr. Kennedy agreed. “Thanks for calling. I know your presentation will be excellent. Good bye.”

Ryan went to the hotel reception area, found a Starbucks Coffee Cart, and bought a large cup of latte. He found a vacant chair removed from the lines of traffic, put his coffee on the lamp table beside the chair, then pulled the strap to his soft-sided brief case from his shoulder. He sat down to enjoy his coffee and to go over his presentation one final time.

After finishing his latte he made a quick pit stop at the public toilet, then he went to the room where his session was scheduled. The other two presenters were already seated at the head table; Ryan counted 79 people in the audience. He went to the head table, introduced himself to the other presenters, then sat down and began to unpack his briefcase.

The local host was the last to arrive. She introduced herself to the presenters and they determined the order in which they would present their papers. By the time Ryan, the third speaker, gave his paper, the audience had grown; there were well over 100 in the audience.

After Ryan's presentation, the local host asked if members of the audience any questions for any of the presenters; there were five questions directed toward Ryan, each question prefaced with a laudatory comment concerning his paper, the clarity and precision of his writing and his insights.

After Ryan had answered the fifth and final question everyone applauded, then started filing out the door.

Ryan was the last to leave the room, walking behind one of those in the audience.

She spoke to him with a British English accent. "I enjoyed your paper, Professor Graves; I enjoyed it very much, indeed."

"Thank you. Thank you," Ryan said.

"I have a couple of ideas I'd like to visit with you about," she said. "Might we go somewhere for a cuppa?"

"I know there's a coffee cart in the reception area," Ryan answered. "I don't think the woman at the cart has tea, but I had coffee there this morning. Would coffee do?"

"Brilliant," she said, "coffee would be fine with me." They took the escalator down to the reception area and the coffee cart was nowhere to be found. Ryan and the woman stood there, looking

right, then left. No coffee cart.

“Well,” Ryan said, “I’ve obviously led you on a non-productive escalator ride.

“No bother, she said. “Let’s pop over to the cocktail lounge, shall we? Or is it too early in the day for you?”

“It’s 5:30, Ryan said. “Anytime after 5:00 p.m. is socially acceptable.”

“If it’s 5:30 in Philadelphia, then it must be either 10:30 or 11:30 p.m. at home,” the woman said.”

“This is awkward,” Ryan said, “ and I should’ve asked before, what’s your name?”

“Yes. Sorry I’ve been a trifle rude. I’m Gillian Davies,” she said, holding out her hand, “I’m currently at Wandsworth University, my second year, you know, in the Department of English.”

“Gillian, it’s nice to know you,” Ryan said, taking her hand and shaking it. “Where is Wandsworth University, and what do you teach?” Ryan asked.

“Wandsworth is in southeast London,” Gillian answered.
“We have a full range curriculum with undergraduate and graduate

degrees, with some professional licensure programs as well. I'm a linguist in the department."

"I see," Ryan said. "I was paying attention Gillian," but tell me your last name again, please."

"It's Davies. In America," Gillian began, "I suspect you'd pronounce my name as if it were D-a-v-i-s."

"Most likely," Ryan agreed. "In your country how would you spell 'thirsty'?"

Gillian laughed. "Right, that's why we're standing here, trying to decide whether it's socially acceptable to go to the hotel bar for a drink. I think it is."

"Well then," Ryan replied, "let's." Ryan cinched the strap of his briefcase over his shoulder, then he took Gillian by her right elbow and steered her toward the bar.

The bar was filled with conference attendees, and they found a table with three chairs against the far wall. Walking carefully through the crowded bar so as not to trip over the feet of the other conference participants, Ryan and Gillian were able to reach the table before it was claimed by someone else. They put their briefcases in the extra chair and then sat down.

Gillian looked over the room, resting her head in her left hand, her left elbow on the table. She laughed. “And we were concerned that we’d be too early at the bar? It appears as if we’re rather late.” She laughed some more.

“Haven’t you heard, Gillian,” Ryan asked, “an alcoholic in civilian life is a mere social drinker at an out-of-town convention or conference?” Gillian laughed some more.

One of the cocktail waitresses stopped at their table. “What’ll it be, folks?”

Ryan nodded to Gillian, suggesting she give her order first. “Sherry,” Gillian said, “dry, please.”

“I’ll have a double Stoly martini,” Ryan told the waitress, “very dry and with a twist, please.” The waitress left to take their orders to the bartender. “I’ll be back with you as soon as I can get your drinks,” she said.

Gillian looked at Ryan, smiled, and then said to him, “What no ‘shaken, not stirred’?”

“Silly moi,” Ryan said, “now the waitress will know that I’m not James Bond but just another boring linguist at a conference in her hotel.”

“I think not,” Gillian said, laughing again, “you’re a well known linguist at a conference in her hotel.”

Ryan chuckled at Gillian’s flattery. How nice it is, Ryan thought, to be with a woman who still knows how to laugh! It’s also pleasant to hear someone compliment him, he told himself, even if it is unearned.

She’s also beautiful, and that does her no harm.

Ryan smiled at Gillian, who was already smiling at him.

Watch your step, the inner Ryan warned himself. Don’t say or do anything you’ll regret. Gillian is easily the most attractive woman in the bar but that’s no license to do something dumb, inner Ryan said.

They finished their drinks, then ordered seconds. Their conversation was light and breezy, responding to their interior radars directing them away from any topic too serious.

“My gosh, it’s 7:00,” Ryan said, looking at his watch, “are you interested in dinner?”

“Yes,” Gillian responded, “but I fancy something rather light, perhaps a salad. Is that possible, do you suppose?”

In addition to an elegant restaurant on the top floor, the hotel

had a fast food operation, the William Penn Delicatessen, in the basement “garden level” featuring short order fare: sandwiches, salads, fresh fruit, yoghurt, beer, sodas and fruit drinks.

Ryan and Gillian went to the delicatessen, put their briefcases on a table, and then went to the head of the line to pick up trays, silverware and napkins.

Shuffling sideways in front of the food choices, Gillian was successful in her salad search; she also selected a plate of cheese and mixed fruit. Ryan chose a pastrami sandwich with brown mustard and a Beck’s Light.

“How’s your salad; is it fresh?” Ryan asked Gillian.

“It’ll do, thanks,” Gillian answered. “Better than what I’m used to getting at the students’ union on the Wandsworth campus. Is that small amount of food going to be enough for you?”

“I’ll get by just fine with this, thanks,” Ryan answered. He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I could, however, enjoy that cup of coffee we didn’t have earlier,” he smiled.

“I have tea in my room,” Gillian suggested. “I have sweetener but no creamer. Does that interest you?”

“It does, thank you,” Ryan answered, “but just one cup. I

need to call my wife before it's too late. She hasn't been well and she goes to bed early."

"Of course. I understand," Gillian said, "just one cup. I hope your wife's illness isn't serious." Ryan chose to let Gillian's sympathy pass without comment.

They took their trays with their plates, silverware, and soiled napkins to the trash receptacle, then walked down the hall to the elevators. Gillian entered the car first, pushing the button for the 7th floor.

They got out of the car when it stopped at the 7th floor. Gillian turned left, and stopped in front of the door to room 707. She unlocked the door, then stepped back to allow Ryan to enter first.

"Have you used or done anything in this room," Ryan asked? "It's spotless and nothing is out of place."

Gillian smiled, went to the closet and took a small electric kettle from the top shelf. She held it aloft for Ryan to see while she walked to the sink in the bathroom. "You know, I'm sure," Gillian said, "we Brits never go anywhere without our tea."

She steeped teabags in two cups, and then presented one cup to Ryan after a 4-minute steeping. Ryan took a sip. "Gillian, you've

done a good job.”

“Thank you Professor Graves,” Gillian said acknowledging Ryan’s compliment.

“Please call me Ryan,” he said.

“Rught,” she said, “and you should continue calling me Gillian.”

Ryan finished his tea, then stood, announcing that it was time for him to leave. “Oh, Ryan, must you leave so soon?” Gillian asked.”

“Yes, I need to go,” he said. And then the inner Ryan said, you *must* leave. You are becoming way too comfortable with this very attractive woman.

Ryan gathered his blazer and briefcase and started toward the door. Gillian stepped in front of him, unlocked the door and opened it for him.

“Thanks for the tea, Gillian,” Ryan said.

“Ta,” Gillian answered, “I imagine we’ll see each other tomorrow.”

Ryan started for his room, reflecting on his time with Gillian. His thoughts paused for a moment. Come to think of it, he

commented to himself, I haven't seen many Blacks today.

Not that it matters, but was Gillian the only African-American in my session, he asked himself?

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“Hello,” Dr. Kennedy said as he answered the telephone.

“Hi, Doc, it’s Ryan. I hope everything’s going well with Brooke.”

“First,” Dr. Kennedy replied, “how was your presentation today?”

“Oh, I guess it was received politely enough,” Ryan answered. “Now, what about Brooke?”

“I can’t be certain,” Dr. Kennedy said. “She hasn’t left her room all day and won’t acknowledge our tapping on her door.”

“That bothers me,” Ryan said. “I know it upsets you and Mrs. K.”

“Absolutely,” Dr. Kennedy said, agreeing with Ryan. “We’ve heard her crying much of the day. Her mother is getting worked up, as you would expect.”

“I’ll feel better, I think, if I come home right away,” Ryan said. “I shouldn’t have come to Philadelphia to begin with.”

“I don’t know that there’s anything you can do here,” Dr. Kennedy said, “however, I understand your wanting to be with

Brooke. Things are not, if I'm to be totally honest, going well with her right now."

Ryan called to cancel his visit with the Linguistics Department at Penn, "a family emergency", he explained, and then he called the airline to reschedule his flight to Columbus. The next flight with available space left PHL at 6:30 the next morning. Ryan booked the reservation, then started right away packing for his early-morning flight home.

Having set his travel alarm the night before, Ryan was up early Friday morning. He showered and dressed, then took his luggage to the lower level entrance used for ground transportation. He waited only 15 minutes for the airport bus.

Checking in at PHL was relatively easy, given his early flight. After take-off, Ryan thought about what he might face at home. My early return has been too easy, he reasoned; is this a good or bad omen?

Ryan claimed his luggage, then wrestled it to his car in the parking lot. He hurried to the Kennedy's house as fast as the speed limit allowed. There he met the Kennedys who were trying to put on happy faces to welcome him home.

“Is she awake,” Ryan asked?”

“I think so,” Dr. Kennedy said. “I went in to see her 45 minutes ago to tell her you were coming home this morning.”

“How’d she take it?” Ryan asked.

“She gave a weak smile and a soft ‘that’s good,’” Dr. Kennedy answered. “Let’s go upstairs and see if she’s still awake.”

When Mrs. Kennedy opened the door to Brooke’s room, the three of them met Brooke, dressed and sitting on the edge of her bed. Her suitcase was on the floor in front of her, a few clothes around it on the floor.

With a pained expression on her face, Brooke said, “If one of you will help me pack my clothes, I’ll be ready to go home.”

Ms. Kennedy knelt in front of Brooke and began to fold her clothes. Her attempt to hide her tears was not successful. When the clothes were in the suitcase, Dr. Kennedy knelt down to close the latches.

“It looks to me like our overnight guest is ready to return home,” he said with a forced chuckle, and then he picked up the suitcase. “Shall we go?” he asked.

The Kennedys escorted Brooke and Ryan to their car parked

in the drive in front of the house. “Brooke,” her mother asked, “can you all us later this afternoon? We want to know when you get home and how you’re doing.”

“I will mother,” Brooke said. “I’ll call too,” Ryan said. Dr. Kennedy put Brooke’s suitcase in the back seat, then the Kennedys took turns hugging the Graves.

The two-hour drive home was eerily quiet, Ryan thought. Brooke asked one question: “How was your presentation?” He answered with a broadly noncommittal, “Fine.”

When they arrived at their house, Ryan started unloading both his and Brooke’s suitcases and his briefcase from the back seat.

Brooke went to the bedroom, undressed, put on a nightgown, and went to bed.

“Would you like a cup of tea, something cold to drink . . . anything?” Ryan asked. Brooke answered with one word: “No.”

Ryan walked out of the room and went to the kitchen. He made himself a cup of tea, then carried it to the living room. Sipping his tea, Ryan wondered to himself, Where do we go from here?

The week-end passed as quietly as midnight snowflakes.

Ryan took tea to Brooke several times, but for the most part she remained in bed sleeping.

There was no sign that her depression was lifting.

The department wasn't expecting to see Ryan Monday morning since he had planned to be at Penn both Monday and Tuesday. Since he had made prior arrangements for someone to cover his Monday afternoon class, he decided he'd stay home and try to take care of Brooke.

He spent the morning checking his e-mail, scanning a couple of journals, and paging through a recipe magazine Brooke had bought at the grocery store.

His day was interrupted by a telephone call from Dr. Durkin. It was 2:30 when he called, a call and a time Ryan would remember for a long time.

"Good afternoon, Ryan; how is Brooke today?" Dr. Durkin asked."

"Much the same, I'm sorry to say," Ryan answered.

"I have some results from the various tests Brooke completed when she was in Dr. White's office," Dr. Durkin said. "I've discussed the data with him, and, to put it bluntly, we're a bit

stymied.”

“What does that mean,” Ryan asked?

Dr. Durkin continued: “Brooke is showing some symptoms associated with Turner’s Syndrome. This is a female disorder caused by difficulties with the x chromosome. Brooke is physically short and she has infrequent periods, two common TS symptoms. She’s also showing, on the other hand, symptoms of PCOS, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome. Women affected by PCOS have infrequent or no periods because their ovulation is either irregular or non-existent.”

“Brooke tells me that for the past few years she has no more than two to three periods annually. A confounding variable is that TS symptoms usually manifest themselves earlier in a woman’s life.”

“This would explain a lot,” Ryan said. “If Brooke can’t ovulate, she can’t get pregnant. If she can’t get pregnant, she can’t have a baby. If she can’t have a baby, she’s going to think she’s a failure and will be depressed.”

“Absolutely. You’re correct,” Dr. Durkin agreed. “It’s that simple. Brooke doesn’t know about the symptoms of either TS or PCOS, but a woman doesn’t have to be a rocket scientist to

understand that before she can get pregnant, she has to ovulate.”

“Is pregnancy out of the question,” Ryan asked/

“PCOS can usually be treated with fertility drugs,” Dr.

Durkin began to explain. “TS can be treated similarly,” Dr. Durkin went on, “but the fact remains that Brooke can still have challenges in getting pregnant. She should not think, however, that the TS or PCOS symptoms mean that she’ll be ‘abnormal’ or ‘odd’ for the rest of her life, although both of these treatable syndromes are life-long.”

“Brooke and I haven’t talked about her menstrual irregularities; this is the first I’ve heard about it,” Ryan said. Given our more recent infrequency of sex, I couldn’t have known when she might have had her period. I’m assuming she’s known about her lack of ovulation for a long time.”

“Of course she has,” Dr. Durkin said, “what woman wouldn’t, and that’s part of our current problem. I suspect a good measure of Brooke’s depression is due to the fact that she has already convinced herself that having a child is out of the question, which simply isn’t the case. In my specialty, we know that the mind can exert an amazing amount of control over one’s physiological make-up. I’ll talk with her this week, as soon as you and she think

she's ready and able and discuss all of this."

Dr. Durkin ended the conversation, leaving Brooke's next office visit up to her.

Ryan decided that all he would tell Brooke was that Dr. Durkin had called and he had said that he wanted to see her in his office when she felt like she was ready for an office visit. He didn't wait long. At 4:15 Ryan's mental processing of Dr. Durkin's information was interrupted when Brooke entered the kitchen, wearing her gown and robe.

"Hi sweetheart," Ryan said. "Did you have a good nap?"

"I slept a lot. I feel better," Brooke said. "Ryan, you know I don't enjoy disrupting everyone's life, don't you?"

"Sure I do," Ryan replied. "We'll deal with this together, the way a couple ought to meet challenges. By the way, Dr. Durkin called almost two hours ago and said he'd like to see you in his office as soon as you're up to it."

"I'll be ready in a day or two; will that be soon enough, do you think?" Brooke asked?

"I'm sure it will be," Ryan answered. "He said anytime this week."

Since Brooke didn't ask further questions about Dr. Durkin's call, Ryan couldn't answer questions she didn't ask. We'll have ample time to discuss Brooke's situation, he told himself.

On Thursday, Brooke called Dr. Durkin's office and made an appointment for 4:00 p.m. Then she called her mother to ask if Mrs. Kennedy would come get her and then take her to Dr. Durkin's office that afternoon.

Ryan felt as if Brooke had erased him from the picture, but he decided this was no time to protest and begin another argument.

Brooke and Mrs. Kennedy drove to Dr. Durkin's office and took chairs in the waiting area after checking in with the receptionist. Mrs. Kennedy asked Brooke, "Do you have any specific questions in mind before we go in to see Dr. Durkin?"

"No, mother, not really," Brooke answered. "I'm assuming he'll go over some test results with me. I'll no doubt have questions then. My primary reason for being here this afternoon is to find out what I need to do to feel better. . . feel better about my self . . . and, you and father . . . about everything, about the world, I guess."

Mrs. Kennedy observed Brooke had omitted an important person.

Both Brooke and her mother were thumbing through six-month-old magazines in the reception area, paying little attention to the contents of the articles.

After a 20-minute wait, a nurse entered the waiting area and said, “Brooke?” Brooke and Mrs. Kennedy stood up, then followed the nurse to the examination room.

In the examination room the nurse asked Brooke what medications she was taking, took Brooke’s temperature, blood pressure, and then weighed her. Five minutes later, Dr. Durkin entered the examination room.

“Good afternoon ladies,” Dr. Durkin greeted them in a jolly manner.

“Hello Dr. Durkin,” Brooke replied.

“Hello Matt,” Mrs. Kennedy responded.

“What kind of news do you have to share with us,” Brooke asked.

“I don’t know what you’ve been anticipating,” Dr. Durkin answered. “Your data have presented me and some of my colleagues an interesting profile.” Dr. Durkin said, then he went into a more detailed description of TS and PCOS than he gave Ryan.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Kennedy was watching Brooke intently during Dr. Durkin's discussion. She was a bit surprised to see Brooke sit there, impassively, listening to the etiologies of the two syndromes. What is she thinking, Mrs. Durkin asked herself? How is she going to respond to this information?

"Do you have any questions so far, Brooke?" Dr. Durkin asked. "Mrs. Kennedy?"

"No." and "I don't think so," they answered serially.

"Well," Dr. Durkin began, folding his hands across his stomach, "I have another question which is more grounded in my specialty. How would you describe your sex life?"

"Do we need to discuss this," Brooke asked? "Isn't that topic rather personal?"

"Of course it is, Brooke," Dr. Durkin answered. "It's one of our most personal topics. Sex is, however, more than tangentially related to your case."

"Okay," Brooke responded, "if you say so. But the idea of talking about my . . . er, our . . . mine and Ryan's sex life is kind of embarrassing, especially in front of my mother, and you, too, Dr. Durkin."

Mrs. Durkin stood up, smiling, and spoke to both Dr. Durkin and Brooke, “I was reading an interesting article when the nurse called us. I’ll go back to the waiting room.”

“Mother,” Brooke said, “you don’t need to go. I’m sorry I said what I did. I’m really screwing up things today.” She began to cry quietly.

“I think I will, dear,” Mrs. Kennedy replied. “I want you to feel as comfortable as you can as you talk about what needs to be dealt with concerning your getting better. I’m not offended by what you said, nor am I unsympathetic about your embarrassment. I want you and Matt to have a frank and candid conversation. So, I’m off to the waiting room, and I do so lovingly.”

Dr. Durkin smiled at Mrs. Kennedy as she left the room, then he turned to Brooke and smiled at her. “Brooke,” Dr. Durkin began, “we can’t choose our parents, but if we did, you couldn’t have made better choices than your mother and father. They’re special.”

“Yes, I know,” Brooke said. “Thank you.”

“Now, let’s revisit my last question to you, Brooke,” Dr. Durkin resumed their conversation. “What can you tell me about your sex life?”

“Where should I begin?” Brooke thought aloud. “Ryan hasn’t been happy, I know that. He told me so.”

“Oh?” Dr. Durkin commented in his best Rogerian style.

“Can you tell me more?”

“We had an argument about sex, or about the lack of sex, I should say, from Ryan’s point of view. We’ve had several arguments, as a matter of fact. He told me he didn’t want to be celibate but that’s the condition he’d be in if we waited for me to think that every detail is conducive to our making love.”

“Is that true?” Dr. Durkin asked.

“I don’t think so,” Brooke answered. “I work all day teaching rambunctious elementary school students. It’s demanding work; it’s tiring. A roll in the hay isn’t the first thing that pops into my mind when I get home.”

Dr. Durkin smiled blandly. “Go on,” he said.

“I’m just not turned on about sex,” Brooke continued. “For one thing, it’s messy and I need to wash myself afterwards. I always have to sleep on the wet spot, too.”

“Do you think your depression contributes to your lack of interest in sex,” Dr. Durkin asked, “or vice versa?”

“I don’t know,” Brooke replied. “You’re the head doctor; what do you think?”

“I’m confident that there isn’t just one variable contributing to your feelings of depression,” Dr. Durkin said. “It will take some time to sort out the right medications to prescribe for you. Our sessions in my office will also help us better define the contexts and conditions that contribute to your emotional malaise. Then we can treat those, too. What I need to say at the outset is that you can best help me to help you if you will be both honest and patient. Okay?”

“I’ll certainly try,” Brooke said. “you have my permission to share any and all of what we’ve been talking about with my parents. They need to be involved.”

“Thank you, Brooke,” Dr. Durkin replied. “your permission is helpful, but I will combine it with my professional judgments about sharing personal informal. What about Ryan?”

“Brooke blinked. “What do you mean? ‘What about Ryan?’”

“ You told me that I could share information with your parents,” Dr. Durkin explained, “ but you didn’t extend that consideration to Ryan. Did you omit him on purpose or was it merely an oversight?”

“I’m not sure,” Brooke said. “Let me think on that.”

“It’ll be your decision, Brooke, and certainly not mine. I believe, however, Ryan can help and support you, too, in ways perhaps your parents can’t, and vice versa, of course.”

“Ryan is not, according to your test data, the reason you’ve not gotten pregnant; your menstrual, in particular, history would confirm my judgment.”

“I understand,” Brooke said, “but I’d still like to think on it.”

“Can we pursue this line of thinking?” Dr. Durkin asked. “It would be helpful to me, and ultimately to you, of course, if you could clarify the relationship between you and Ryan, as you see it.”

“It seems to me,” Brooke began, “that your primary responsibility is to your patient, namely, me. I don’t see how Ryan belongs in this discussion.”

“Oh, come now, Brooke; Ryan is your husband,” Dr. Durkin exclaimed, “a marriage between a husband and a wife is both a legal and an emotional relationship. Ryan belongs in our discussion of your depression because we need his support and help as much as we need your parents’. What’s the emotional relationship between you and Ryan?”

“Oh well, okay,” Brooke said, “if you insist.”

“Don’t put that onus on me, please, Brooke,” Dr. Durkin cautioned. “I can’t insist that you do something you’re opposed to doing. But, let me remind you, as you’ve already mentioned, you are my patient. I’m responsible for providing you with a course of action that will lead to your recovery and better health. I’m suggesting that some knowledge about your relationship with Ryan can help you and me plan and execute that plan of action. But, if you refuse to share that information with me, I certainly can’t force you to.”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Brooke said in resignation. “When we went back to Columbus for Ryan’s doctoral studies, he was the center of attention in both of our families. Plans we had discussed before we were married were pushed aside and ignored. Replacing those plans were Ryan’s courses, Ryan’s exams, Ryan’s research, Ryan’s dissertation. It was all Ryan, Ryan, Ryan. Nobody ever asked about Brooke.”

“What were the plans Ryan’s doctoral program replaced?”
Dr. Durkin asked.

“We were going to take a trip to London, for one,” Brooke answered. “We were going to spend a summer at my uncle’s cabin in

Wisconsin, for number two. And, most of all, I wanted to have a baby. But, oh no, we couldn't do any of those things, especially the baby, because of Ryan and his damned PhD program! And he, the man who is responsible for delaying our dreams, expects me to jump in bed whenever he wants to have sex?"

"I see," Dr. Durkin said. "Have you discussed this with anyone?"

"My father and I talked about it once," Brooke replied.

"Was that discussion helpful," Dr. Durkin asked?

"Oh . . . I guess so . . . at least at the time it helped," Brooke answered. "Mostly he said sex between marriage partners isn't governed by a set of rules. The importance about sex and the frequency of sex needs to be determined by each couple. They need to set their own patterns and methods through mutual love and respect."

"That sounds like good advice," Dr. Durkin said. "Let's stop here, Brooke. I wouldn't want our first session to be so jam-packed with ideas that we lose sight of our primary goal: ameliorating your depression."

"I agree, Dr. Durkin," Brooke said, dabbing the tears in the

corners of her eyes with a tissue taken from her purse.

“I’m ready to go home. I’m not feeling great right now, plus the fact I’m exhausted.”

Dr. Durkin stood and then Brooke stood up and followed his lead to the door. She met her mother in the waiting room and said nothing. Brooke was still trying to control her tears.

Dr. Durkin took Mrs. Kennedy by the elbow as the three of them walked to the office door. “I’ll talk to you and Dayton soon,” he said to Mrs. Kennedy in a low voice. Brooke and her mother left the office, went to the parking lot to get in the Kennedy’s car.

“Mother, I’m exhausted. I think I’ll spend the night in Columbus with you and dad,” Brooke said.

“That’s fine with us, dear,” Mrs. K. said. I’m sure you’re tired. We’ll call Ryan as soon as we get home.”

They drove to the Kennedys in silence.

Brooke was upstairs and slept through dinner Thursday night. Over a tuna and noodle casserole and a bottle of Little Penguin chardonnay, the Kennedys tried to make small talk about the day's activities at the church, the fact that there were no meetings Dr. Kennedy would attend tonight, and an e-mail from Uncle Tyler reporting how much he and Aunt Elizabeth enjoyed their inside passage cruise from Vancouver to Anchorage.

Finally, Dr. Kennedy approached the 'Where's Brooke?' question. "Is Brooke going to join us sometime this evening?"

"I don't know, Dayton," Mrs. Kennedy said. "She's been asleep in her room since we returned this afternoon from her appointment with Matt Durkin."

"That's a consistent symptom of depression," Dr. Kennedy replied. "I guess I'm not surprised she's still sleeping. I'm having lunch with Matt tomorrow to discuss his sessions with Brooke and some of his tentative observations."

"Please call me afterwards, Dayton; I'll be extremely anxious, as you are, to know what Matt thinks," Mrs. Kennedy said,

a sense of urgency in her voice.

Dr. Kennedy took her hand and smiled, “My darling, I know how nervous and worried you are; so am I. I’ll call you just as soon as I can.”

The two Kennedys cleared the table, taking the tableware to the kitchen for a rinse before it went into the dishwasher. Mrs. Kennedy went to the family room to resume the knitting she had put aside before dinner. Dr. Kennedy went to his study to work on next Sunday’s sermon.

After an hour, Dr. Kennedy put his books and sermon notes away, deciding he had accomplished as much as he could; he was distracted from his work because he couldn’t stop thinking about Brooke and Ryan. He walked softly up the stairs and into their bedroom, trying not to waken Mrs. Kennedy who had given up on her knitting an hour ago. After changing into his pajamas, he slid between the sheets of their bed.

“I’m awake,” Mrs. Kennedy said, reaching for her husband’s hand. “Care to guess what’s on my mind,” she asked softly?

“I don’t have to guess. I’m pretty sure it’s Brooke,” Dr. Kennedy whispered back. They embraced. He could feel the wetness

of his wife's tears on the shoulder of his pajama coat. He held her closer and said, "I love you." They slept, fitfully.

Brooke didn't come downstairs Friday morning for breakfast. Later, at mid-day, Mrs. Kennedy had lunch by herself; Brooke was still in bed. When Dr. Kennedy called home at 4:00 that afternoon he learned that Brooke, still in bed. She had been in her room all day.

Saturday morning Dr. Kennedy was the first of his family to dress and come to the kitchen. He started the coffee maker, then went to the front door to get the morning paper. When he returned to the kitchen, there was Brooke, sitting at the table.

"Good morning, Brooke," Dr. Kennedy greeted his daughter, cheerily. "How's my favorite daughter this morning?"

"Do you want me to say I'm great?" Brooke asked, "or would you prefer the truth?"

"You've already given me your answer, I think," Dr. Kennedy said. "Would you like some coffee? I think it's ready."

"Okay," Brooke replied, "I'll try a cup. Black, please."

Dr. Kennedy took a mug from the cabinet, went to the coffee pot to fill the mug, then turned toward Brooke. She was sitting at the table holding her head in both hands, staring into space.

Both Brooke and her father were startled when the telephone rang. Dr. Kennedy answered the telephone, and then said, “Why yes, she’s sitting right here.” He handed the telephone to Brooke.

“Hello,” she said. A brief conversation followed.

“That was my friend Alexis,” Brooke reported to her father. “She’s coming to Columbus later this morning to pick me up around 10:30. I’m going to spend today and tomorrow with her. You’ll be pleased to know we’ll go to the Saturday Prayer Service at her church tonight, then to the 11:00 service tomorrow morning.”

“I’m not going to try to dissuade you from attending church, God knows,” Dr. Kennedy replied. “I wish you’d bring your friend to my church, but you’ll be attending a Sunday service with her and that pleases me. And, you must call Ryan and tell him your plans.”

Brooke ignored her father’s last comment, pretending to read the first page of the newspaper.

Alexis pulled into the Kennedy’s circular drive promptly at 10:30 a.m. Brooke, who had been watching for Alexis’ car, left the house and walked to her ride carrying an overnight bag.

“Don’t forget to call Ryan!” Mrs. Kennedy called out. Brooke looked back at her mother, tried to smile, and waved as she

opened the car door. Brooke sat in the passenger's seat, took a tissue from her purse, and then started to wipe her eyes.

Mrs. Kennedy watched them drive away, despairing that Brooke hadn't taken the time for her good-byes, hoping Brooke had heard her . . . and praying she'd call Ryan.

Ryan called the Kennedys at 3:15 Saturday afternoon. "I thought I'd wait to call until Brooke had got out of bed and have time to collect herself. How's she feeling today?" Ryan asked Mrs. Kennedy, who had answered the telephone.

"Oh, Ryan, I'm sorry," Mrs. Kennedy said. "Brooke left here at 10:30 this morning with her friend Alexis. They were going to Alexis' house. And, Brooke was supposed to call you so that you'd know her plans."

There was a long silence on Ryan's end of the conversation.

"I take it she didn't call you," Mrs. Kennedy observed.

"That's correct, Mrs. K., I haven't heard from her," Ryan replied. "What's going on?"

Mrs. Kennedy wasn't sure how to interpret Ryan's question. What did he mean? What are Brooke's plans? Or, did he mean what's wrong with Brooke? Very likely, he meant both.

“I have Alexis Claiborne’s telephone number,” Ryan said.

“I’ll try to call Brooke there.”

“Ryan, Brooke should have called you by now. Both Dayton and I asked her to,” Mrs. Kennedy said. Ryan could hear that she was crying. “We pray daily that Brooke can get her life reorganized and return to the daughter and wife the three of us used to know.”

“Mrs. K., we’re all hoping for the best. I appreciate you and Doc a great deal,” Ryan said. “I hope the two of you know how much you mean to me.”

“We certainly do, Ryan, and the feelings are mutual,” Mrs. Kennedy was barely able to say.

Ryan ended the call promising to call the Kennedys in the event he learned anything new about Brooke’s plans. Remembering he had written Alexis Claiborne’s telephone number on the back of an envelope in the kitchen, he went to the kitchen to see if he could find it. The envelope was pushed to the back of the kitchen counter, beside the canister set. Ryan picked up the envelope and stored the numbers in his cell, then he placed the call.

“Hello?” a voice answered.

Ryan recognized the voice immediately! It was the mystery

voice that had called him when Brooke went on her earlier walkabout; it was the voice that reported that Brooke was okay and that Ryan shouldn't worry.

“Yes . . . er . . . ah . . . this is Ryan Graves. I understand my wife Brooke is with you. I'd like to speak to her, please.”

“Hello, Ryan, this is Alexis Claiborne,” she said, “I hope you don't mind my using your first name. I'll tell Brooke it's you on the telephone,” Alexis said.

Then her voice went silent. She was most likely going to wherever Brooke was to tell her that her husband was on the telephone, Ryan assumed. Alexis returned in record time.

“I'm so sorry, Ryan,” Alexis said, “but Brooke's soaking in the tub; she has a migraine. She says she'll call you later.”

“Okay,” Ryan said. “I'd like to leave her a message. Wait . . . ah . . . let's make that two messages.”

“Sure, but if I need to write anything I'll need to get paper and pencil,” Alexis replied in a solicitous manner.

“No, you won't need to take notes. Just please tell Brooke I still love her as much as ever and that I'm anxious for her to return my call. I miss her and want to hear her voice.”

“I sure will, Ryan,” Alexis chirped. “Have a nice day.”

Ryan was almost stunned by Alexis’ idiotic closing comment. I should what? Ryan asked himself. I should have a nice day? I should have a nice day?

He laughed to himself. Alexis’ patronizing sign-off to their conversation was simply too formulaic and too casual, Ryan thought, given the present relationship between him and Brooke . . .dammit!

How in hell am I going to have a nice day?

Ryan went to the liquor cabinet and reached for a bottle of scotch, a bottle of sweet vermouth and then mixed a Rob Roy. The first one went down too easy and too fast. I should’ve gone to Penn as I planned instead of returning to Columbus ahead of schedule, he chastised himself. My early return didn’t make an iota of difference with Brooke, not at all. He made another drink and went to his study.

Ryan sat down heavily at his desk, spilling a small amount of his drink. He lapped it up like a cat, not wanting to waste a drop. Alexis’ “have a nice day” wouldn’t go away.

My wife has a serious mental condition, he thought dramatically.

My wife ought to be at home where I can take care of her, but

she's not.

She's at a buddy's house. Brooke's buddy . . . who doesn't understand how serious things are, and tells me, cavalierly, "have a nice day."

Brooke's buddy, who stooped to an anonymous telephone call weeks ago when Brooke went missing.

The alcohol was helping him work up a smoldering head of anger-stoked steam. The more he thought about Brooke's being at Alexis' house instead of her own home, the angrier he became.

Angry with Brooke. Angry with Alexis. Angry with himself.

At 5:00 Ryan was still waiting for Brooke's return call. His patience was threadbare, so he called Alexis Claiborne's telephone number.

"Hello?" It was Alexis.

"Hello Alexis, this is Ryan Graves calling again. Brooke was going to call me when her migraine was better. Is she still not feeling well?"

"Frankly Ryan I'm not sure how she's feeling. She's sitting in my guest room and she is dressed, so that's some progress."

Ryan asked Alexis, "Do you think she'll talk to me?"

“I’ll check. Excuse me while I go ask her,” Alexis said.

After a brief pause Alexis returned. “I misspoke, Ryan. She’s dressed, but she’s resting on the bed covered with an afghan. We’re going to the Saturday night Prayer Service at my church. She says she’ll try to call you after we come home from church.”

“That would be so very nice of her,” Ryan said sarcastically.

“Did you give her my messages?”

“Yes, Ryan, I did,” Alexis said.

“Did she respond?”

“Not much, I’m sorry to say, but remember she had just got out of the tub and was still feeling woozy with her migraine,” Alexis answered.

The telephone conversation with Alexis ended with Ryan feeling vulnerable, frustrated, and still angry.

How can I help her if we don’t talk? But, if we did talk, what would I say? I don’t know what to do, he thought. How can I help us? Is our marriage in jeopardy? He had tears in his eyes.

Brooke didn’t call after the church service. Ryan sat up waiting for her call until 11:45 p.m. He knew further waiting would be useless. He went to bed and watched the small TV set in their

bedroom until sometime between 2:30 and 3:00 a.m.; he wasn't sure what the exact time was when he dropped off to sleep.

Ryan was in the kitchen making coffee at 9:00 Sunday morning. While he was measuring the coffee into the brewing basket, his cell phone rang. It was Brooke, calling him from her cell.

"Hello, Brooke, I'm really glad you called. How are you feeling this morning?" Ryan asked.

"I'm feeling better," she answered. "In fact, I'm going with Alexis to the 11:00 service at her church this morning."

"It's good that you're feeling better," Ryan replied.

"Ryan, I'm thinking this morning that I'm going on a retreat sponsored by Alexis' church," Brooke remarked in a chatty voice Ryan hadn't heard before. "They talked about it last night at the prayer service. Alexis thinks I would benefit a great deal from the retreat and has encouraged me to attend. "

"I see," Ryan said. "Is it sometime this summer?"

"No," Brooke replied, "it begins next Wednesday."

"What? Next Wednesday?" Ryan asked. "What about your job? What about the kids you're supposed to be teaching?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Brooke began to explain. "While

you were in Philadelphia my principal, Dr. Hood, and I completed all of the paperwork putting me on disability for the remainder of the school year.”

There was silence on Ryan’s end of the call.

“Ryan? Hello? Hello, Ryan?” Brooke asked.

“Yes, I’m still here,” Ryan said.

“What’s wrong? I thought your call had been dropped,”

Brooke said.

“No, not the call. But maybe I was dropped,” Ryan said, cool and detached. “Brooke I was in Philly for just one day. On the one day I was absent from your life you and your principal make arrangements for you to go on disability status. And this morning is the first I hear about it? What in God’s name is going on, Brooke?”

“Ryan, please don’t yell at me,” Brooke warned.

“I’m not yelling,” Ryan replied. “You want yelling? I can give you yelling. I think I’ve earned it and you deserve it.”

“Ryan, I don’t have to listen to your ranting you know,”

Brooke said.

“Okay,” Ryan said. “If it pleases you, I’m calming down.”

“Thank you,” Brooke said in a small child’s voice.

“Let’s get back to the retreat,” Ryan said. “You said ‘they’ talked about the retreat at last night’s church service. Who’s ‘they’ and which church does Alexis’ attend?”

“She goes to the Yahweh is Lord Mission Church and it’s the Prayer Soldiers who are planning the retreat,” Brooke answered.

“And the purpose of the retreat?” Ryan asked.

“The participants will develop their prayer repertoires so that they will be able to pray more forcefully and efficiently in different contexts, you know, like healing, forgiveness, national issues, and that kind of stuff.”

“I see,” Ryan said, trying not to communicate his astonishment with Brooke’s plans. “Will we see each other before you leave for the Prayer Soldiers’ retreat?”

“I’m sorry, Ryan,” Brooke replied, “but I have to put in 40 volunteer hours at the church before Wednesday as a prerequisite to joining the Prayer Soldiers. This is really important to me . . . to us, actually. I’m hoping when the retreat is over things between you and me will be just like they were on the day we got married. Doesn’t that sound just really awesome?”

“Oh, yeah, really awesome. Downright cool,” Ryan said, his

monotone exposing his true feelings about Brooke's immature English, but Brooke wasn't paying attention.

“Oh, Ryan, thanks so much for understanding,” Brooke gushed. “You're just great! You're awesome! Alexis and I need to leave for church now. I'll call you as soon as I can. Bye-bye, and have a nice day.”

Brooke disconnected the telephone conversation before Ryan could reply. Bye-bye and have a nice day? Ryan choked. A nice day?

She's talking like Alexis, for God's sake, Ryan thought. I could puke! What the hell is wrong with her? With me and everyone else, she's depressed; with Alexis Claiborne she's irritatingly cheerful!

Ryan went to the bedroom and took off his pajamas, put them in his closet, and then he went to the bathroom for a shower. During the shower and his toweling off, he shook his head in disbelief. I can't friggin' believe what my life with Brooke has become! It's a damn soap opera! What's the next story line she'll concoct for us?

Or, he thought, recognizing that this was the first time his thoughts had taken this new path, what's the next story line she'll

concoct for just herself, perhaps, without me?

Ryan went to the bedroom. I don't want to do this, he told himself, but I've got to talk to the Kennedys. He called his in-laws and asked if they had heard from Brooke; no, Mrs. Kennedy told him. Can I come see you? Sure, we have a rare, quiet Sunday afternoon at home, Mrs. Kennedy said. Good, Ryan said, I'll be there in a couple of hours.

He put on a navy blue polo, a pair of khakis, and his Sperry Topsiders, then started for the door to the garage.

Walking toward the kitchen door to the garage, he paused in front of a mirror in the living room. He hadn't noticed before, but his right shoulder was considerably smaller than the left one. His body had become asymmetrical over the years and he hadn't noticed until now.

Why is my whole life so goddamned screwed up, he asked himself bitterly?

Ryan backed his car out of the garage and began his trip to Columbus to see the Kennedys. The Kennedys had always treated him royally. He loved them as if they were his own parents. I'm lucky, he thought; my relationship with the Kennedys will make our discussions about Brooke much easier.

The drive to Columbus was uneventful. Ryan yawned a couple of times, causing him to increase the volume on the CD player and to lower the driver's window. Watch the road, Bucko, he said to himself. This isn't a good time for a wreck. He laughed at himself; is there ever a good time for a wreck?

He steered his car into the Kennedy's drive exactly two hours after he left home. Both Kennedys came out their front door to greet him in a three-way hug. Mrs. Kennedy's eyes were red from crying.

"Let's go to the family room." Dr. Kennedy suggested.

"Fine," Mrs. Kennedy agreed, "I'll get the coffee."

"Are you ready for a cup, Ryan," Dr. Kennedy asked?

"Doc, what I would like most is a very brown scotch and water," Ryan replied, "but since I'll be back on the highway after our conversation, I'll settle for coffee."

“Good decision,” Mrs. Kennedy said, and then she disappeared. In a matter of seconds she reappeared with a tray and the coffee service. While the men were sitting and talking she poured the coffee.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” Ryan said, “but I had a telephone conversation with Brooke and it bothered me quite a bit.”

“Why? What was the conversation about?” Dr. Kennedy asked.

“First, I need to give you some background,” Ryan said. “Brooke and her friend, Alexis Claiborne, went to church last night. I waited until 11:45 for her to call me after the service, which she said she’d do, but she didn’t call.”

“When we talked this morning,” Ryan continued, “she told me that she’s going on a prayer retreat sponsored by her friend’s church, leaving next Wednesday.”

“What about her teaching responsibilities?” Mrs. Kennedy asked.

“That’s another thing,” Ryan answered. “While I was in Philadelphia she and her principal, Dr. Hood, completed the paperwork required to place Brooke on disability leave. I knew

nothing about that development.”

The Kennedys sat quietly, shaking their heads in disbelief.

“I asked Brooke this morning if we’d see each other before she left town for the retreat and she said No. There won’t be sufficient time between now and next Wednesday.”

“Unbelievable,” Mrs. Kennedy said.

“Isn’t it?” Ryan said. “She’s behaving toward me as if I’m either a brother or a friend but not her husband. I’m worried about her, I’m angry with her, and not knowing what to do makes me feel useless and hopeless. I’m really frustrated.”

“I’m guessing you also feel lonely,” Dr. Kennedy said.

“I am lonely, you’re right,” Ryan said. “Nothing personal, Doc, about you and Mrs. K., I always look forward to seeing the two of you, of course, but I’m missing my wife. I’m missing her a lot.”

“We understand, Ryan,” Mrs. Kennedy said. “Dayton and I miss Brooke, too. The daughter we knew has changed, but not permanently, we hope.”

The three of them reviewed what they already knew. Brooke had some symptoms of both Turner’s Syndrome and PCOS Syndrome, but she didn’t totally fit the profile of either disorder.

Brooke's primary issues, as best they could identify them, were her small stature, her irregular periods and her inability to get pregnant.

Ryan talked with the Kennedys until 6:00 p.m., turning down their invitation to stay for dinner. He begged off, thanking them for their gracious invitation, explaining he had to go home because there were still student papers he hadn't yet read.

A dark rain was falling when Ryan drove into his garage at 8:15. He was glad he hadn't stayed at the Kennedys for dinner because he had several hours to himself before bedtime.

Telling himself to practice moderation, he went to the liquor cabinet and reached for the bottle of Stoly. If a night was ever just right for a Stoly on the rocks, tonight was the night.

He fixed his drink, dropped several small pickled onions in the glass, and went to his study.

He went to the bookcase where he kept the St. Louis Cardinals scorecards he had saved from earlier days, a collection of his and Brooke's Columbus Public Schools grade reports, and their high school year books.

He thumbed through the scorecards, the yearbooks and grade

reports without pause, and with the many happy memories they brought him.

His page scanning slowed considerably when he looked at the yearbook from their senior year. He was looking at a montage of photos from the all-school Amateur Night, a competition Sine Nomine won.

Whatever happened to Jim, Tyler, and Jacob, Ryan asked himself? We were so close, Ryan thought, sipping his drink. How and why did we drift apart?

My Sine Nomine days were my happiest, Ryan thought. Why? he wondered. Why do I keep returning to my Sine Nomine memories?

He ruffled the pages and found photographs of many friends; he found a large photo of him --- the most popular senior boy. He turned to several pictures of Brooke and tears came to his eyes. We were so happy and carefree, very much in the early stages of love, he remembered, and we were incredibly naïve.

He finished his drink, went to the kitchen for a refill and then went back to his study.

He picked up the senior yearbook and thumbed through it

again. A photograph of Haley caught his attention. I haven't thought of her for years, he laughed gently to himself.

I wonder, what ever became of Haley? Haley the Enigma? The Mysterious Haley. I hope she's happy. I really do. She always appeared to be so sad, so melancholy. Who was it she selected instead of me? Why?

She and I might've been a durable couple.

Several thoughts about Haley raced through Ryan's mind. I wonder if she's still as pretty as she was at 17? Does she still have beautiful skin the color of buttermilk? Is she still married to David Cooper? How could I get her telephone number or an e-mail address?

Whoa! Slow down, Ryan, he warned himself. Don't let the vodka think for you.

Ryan began to feel weary, a normal condition for someone who's had a trying and tiring emotional day, and especially when their stamina is sapped by alcohol. He decided going to bed was his best option for the remainder of the day.

When his alarm woke him the next morning, Ryan wanted to throw the clock through the window. Better judgment prevailed,

however, so he sat up and turned off the clock's buzzer. He went to the kitchen, put on the coffee, and then took two aspirin for his headache.

Too much Stoly last night, he recognized. Again. A bad sign.

He shaved and showered, toweled himself, then put on his clothes for the day. As he was sliding his feet into his loafers, he realized he was not moving in any kind of rhythm or cadence. He was a robot, looking but not really seeing any thing, sensing but not really feeling anything.

He went to the front porch for the morning paper and then took it to the kitchen where the coffee pot was. He drank his first cup with his obligatory reading of the sports section.

Doc Kennedy once told him his life would be happier if he skipped the op ed section and the letters to the editor until he'd had at least one cup of coffee and the sports section behind him.

Ryan drove to campus and parked his car behind the building where his classrooms and office were situated. How he got through the day he couldn't explain. His class on Monday was basic enough that he could lead the session blindfolded.

There were two classes Tuesday and one Wednesday.

Without his customary enthusiasm, Ryan completed a yeoman's teaching performance in the classes. Wednesday night he called his colleague at Penn to see if there was any interest in rescheduling his Visiting Scholar trip to Philadelphia.

Yes, came the response, there's much interest in having Ryan visit the Penn campus. Would next Thursday and Friday suit Ryan's schedule? Having no classes to teach on Thursday or Friday, Ryan confirmed the visit. Thursday morning he made his travel reservations, feeling odd that he didn't and couldn't check with Brooke to see if the travel dates were okay with her and their social calendar

Ryan made the trip, reaching down deep in an academic reservoir he didn't know he had. He gave two presentations that the departmental faculty and advanced graduate students thought were first-rate scholarship.

It was refreshing, he realized, to get out of town and talk shop with the Penn group. It got his mind off his problems with Brooke.

Ryan completed the return flight to Columbus Saturday morning, retrieved his luggage from the carousel, took the shuttle to

the parking lot where he'd left his car, then began the two-hour drive home.

He wasn't sure what to expect when he guided his car into the garage. Would Brooke be home to welcome him? He didn't know when Brooke's retreat was finished and it was possible she wouldn't be home but would still be off in the woods someplace trying to pray herself pregnant. Ryan chuckled at his witticism.

He got out of his car, opened the trunk lid, then pulled the strap of his soft-sided briefcase over his shoulder. He grabbed his suitcase, closed the trunk lid, and then went to the door that opened to the kitchen.

Something was wrong, very wrong.

Ryan knew the minute he stepped into the kitchen that something was amiss. He dropped his luggage and briefcase.

The kitchen table and the four chairs were gone. The cabinet doors were open and all of the plates, glasses and other tableware were missing, except for the liquor cabinet. The liquor bottles and two glasses were still there.

Stunned, Ryan walked to the living room. All the furniture was gone, except for the stereo, the CD tower, and one straight back

chair. The bedroom closets were empty. All of Brooke's clothes were gone.

It looked as if a burglar had looted their house.

Why did the culprit take Brooke's clothes and not mine, Ryan wondered?

Feeling disoriented and violated, Ryan sat uncomfortably in the straight back chair in the living room trying to make sense of what had happened to their house while he was out of town. He reached for his cell phone in his pocket. I'm calling the cops, he thought.

No. Not yet. Don't call the police. First, call Alexis, then the Kennedys. Then the cops. Brooke's safety and whereabouts had to be confirmed first. Ryan entered Alexis' number he had earlier stored in his cell phone file of Contacts. It's Saturday afternoon, Ryan thought. I hope Alexis isn't out running week-end errands.

"Hello," Alexis said, answering her telephone rings in an annoyingly cheery tone.

"Hello, Alexis. Ryan Graves here."

"Oh, . . . er, . . . uh . . . Ryan, it's you," Alexis said, her voice changing to sound like that of a 9-year old caught in the midst of

some family taboo.

“Yes, that’s what I said,” Ryan replied. “Something’s really screwed up at my house. Do you know where Brooke is?”

There was a long pause.

“Alexis, are you still there,” Ryan asked?

“Well, . . . er, . . . yeah. I’m still here,” Alexis answered.

“Alexis, what’s up,” Ryan asked? “I can hear in your voice that you’re a little discombobulated by my call. Do you know anything about Brooke?”

“Ryan, I feel extremely awkward at the moment,” Alexis answered. “I expected your call. I just didn’t know when it might come. To answer your question, yes, I know where Brooke is.”

“Where is she then? What’s happened to our house? Most of our furniture and all of Brooke’s clothes are gone. What’s happening?” Ryan asked.

“Ryan, I can’t tell you where Brooke is,” Alexis said, “or what happened with your furniture. Brooke swore me to secrecy.”

“What the fuckin’ hell is going on?” Ryan shouted! “Tell me, for God’s sake! What’s so goddammed secret?”

“Easy Ryan,” Alexis tried to calm him. “I can give you a

telephone number where she can be reached.”

“Well, then, dammit, let’s have it,” Ryan barked.

“Okay,” Alexis replied; then she read the numbers to Ryan very deliberately. “The number is 886-555-5917.”

Before Alexis could say another word, Ryan gave her an abrupt, “Thank you,” and then he closed the lid on his cell phone. He remained seated in the only chair in the house. It wasn’t a comfortable chair, either. How appropriate, he thought.

Brooke has really flipped, he told himself. What happened at the retreat, he wondered? As he stood from the chair, he wondered if the Kennedys had any inkling that their daughter has gone loony? He walked to the kitchen and opened the liquor cabinet.

“Thanks, Brooke,” Ryan said aloud to himself, “At least you left me two glasses. I won’t have to drink vodka out of the bottle like a homeless vagrant or a trail waif.”

He poured several hefty glugs of Stoly into one of the glasses and then went to the refrigerator to get some ice cubes.

I’ve got to call the Kennedys, he told himself. No, before that I have to call Brooke and see what kind of condition she’s in. I need to be able to tell the Kennedys something more than some weird

clues to this mystery. I need to know if Brooke's become a certifiable lunatic or is just temporarily confused. The inner Ryan spoke: You're not a shrink. How the hell would you know the difference?

Ryan took a big swig from his glass and felt the warmth of the vodka as it flowed into his stomach. He picked up his cell phone and entered the 10 digit number Alexis had given him. At the first ring, Ryan took another drink from his glass and inhaled deeply. He heard the second ring and began to get nervous; he had to pee.

How do I prepare myself for this conversation? Ryan asked himself. He heard the third ring. What's her disposition going to be? Angry? Depressed?

"Hello," Brooke answered the telephone after the fourth ring.

"Brooke, it's Ryan. Are you okay?"

"Hello, Ryan," Brooke said in a strange monotone. "What's going on? How can I help you?"

"Brooke, you're my wife," Ryan said loudly. "You sound like the receptionist at the damned Columbus Public library! What's with this 'What's going on? How can I help you?' How about a little

bit of ‘Ryan, it’s great to hear your voice?’ Or maybe a ‘Ryan, I love you. Please come get me.’?”

“I’ve changed, Ryan,” Brooke said in a determined voice.

“I’m no longer depressed. I’m happy. Thanks to the Yahweh is Lord Mission Church and the Prayer Soldiers, I know who I am, really, finally.”

“I’m happy; at long last, I’m actually happy,” She said. “I’m hoping you can share my happiness.”

“Brooke, Matt Durkin is your therapist,” Ryan reminded her, “not the Prayer Soldiers at whatever the hell the name of that church is.”

“Ryan,” Brooke said, with a distant tone, “the name of the church is Yahweh is Lord Mission Church. Please have some respect. Don’t diss me or my church.”

“Your church?” Ryan asked loudly. “Your church? All of a sudden it’s your church? What kind of church is it? What denomination?”

“It’s a mission church, Ryan,” Brooke answered, “freed from the chains of denominational politics. We are God’s people. We’re neither Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, nor any other

denominational captives. We are children of God and He is the only superior we recognize. We have no elders, no superintendents or Bishops; they aren't needed."

"Brooke, what are you telling me?" Ryan asked. "During one retreat you turn your back on your family's values and your father's career? Your father is one of the most distinguished citizens in Columbus. His reputation in the community hasn't been the result of a series of accidents. People from all over the place seek his advice and guidance. Clearly, he's helping people gain insights into their lives and, consequently, their lives are becoming more meaningful. He's the people's counselor. How can you deny his faith, his professional training and his commitment?"

"Ryan, I understand now," Brooke began to respond, "that clerics like my father mean well. That's not the real issue. We believe that mainstream denominations and their ordained leaders have mistranslated God's holy word, and what they practice --- ostensibly in the names of theology, discipleship, worship and discipline --- have become nothing more than glorified social clubs. Their main focus is fund-raising. Money, money, money. That's all they care about."

How rapidly she's identifying with "We," Ryan noticed. The professor in him wondered if the organizers of that retreat had brain-washed her.

Brooke has succumbed to some of their beliefs almost overnight. Either they're fantastically good teachers or they're dangerous snake oil salespeople.

"Brooke, please, can we talk about you and me?" Ryan asked sadly. "When are you coming home?"

"Ryan, I'm already at home . . . my new home, that is," Brooke said.

If a 300-pound boxer had punched Ryan in his stomach he would not have lost his breath any faster. He was speechless. He stared at space with Little Orphan Annie eyes: big, round, and white, with no pupils.

“What did you just say?” Ryan asked, finally catching his breath.

“I said I’m already at home --- at my new home,” Brooke answered cryptically.

“And, what do you call this place where I am at the moment? We, and I emphasize *we*, used to call this house our home,” Ryan said firmly.

“That’s correct Ryan. *We used* to call it home. You may still think of the house that way; but Ryan, I don’t,” Brooke said, in a detached, matter of fact tone.

Once again the 300-pound boxer laid Ryan low. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do: either start crying or start yelling at Brooke.

He was as unraveled as he had ever been.

“ Brooke,” Ryan said hoarsely, “I can’t believe that after one

retreat with some people from that church that you've apparently decided to leave your home and your husband. Have you discussed any of this separation with your parents?"

"No, not yet," Brooke said nonchalantly. "I'll take care of that. You needn't get involved. I'll probably call them this week end."

"Brooke, what are you talking about 'I needn't get involved'? You'll 'probably' call your folks? What about us? Don't you remember me, your husband?" Ryan asked urgently.

"I can't believe you're breaking up our marriage, our plans, and our future without out at least talking about it with me."

"Wait a minute now, Mr. Big Shot," Brooke replied, ready for a fight. "We have talked about it. You told me that I was forcing you to be celibate! Don't say we haven't discussed our relationship. We have!"

"Brooke, I can't believe what you're saying! You're referring to one conversation we had," Ryan rebutted. "I hope we can still talk about our marriage. Marriages at risk usually provide a context for several conversations, not just one, for God's sake!"

"Ryan, don't take the Lord's name in vain. I don't believe

more talking will save our marriage,” Brooke said. “We have basic differences that simply aren’t repairable.”

“ Like what?” Ryan asked. “Brooke, we’ve been together since high school. Until recently, I thought we were a pretty good fit for each other. I don’t think that any marriage is perfect, but I think ours came as close as any I’ve known about. What’s a basic difference between you and me?”

“Sex is a big one. Maybe the biggest difference,” Brooke answered. “I think you may be a sex addict, Ryan. Sex is all you think about. You’re like all men, Ryan.”

“I’ve heard that you men think about sex every 50 seconds while women think about it, at most, once a day. They say we women may even think about sex only every other day. I’ll tell you, Ryan, I don’t know how you men get anything accomplished, thinking about sex more often than once a minute.”

“Brooke, where in the world did you hear this crap? It’s simply not true,” Ryan said. “You’re quoting some pretty goofy research.”

“They told me you’d say something like what you just said to me,” Brooke said. “You men are so full of testosterone it’s a wonder

you don't have constant erections, walking around like cave men dragging your knuckles and your erection on the ground."

"They? They? Who the hell is the 'they' you're talking about?" Ryan roared! "You're blathering some crazy stereotypical notions."

"Oh, so now I'm crazy?" Brooke asked. "That's an easy and simple defense, don't you believe? I'd think a linguist could do better, much better."

"Okay, let's calm down," Ryan said. "Do we need to see a marriage counselor? Maybe some professional counseling would enable us to sort out some of these issues."

"What about religion?" Brooke asked.

"Well, that's certainly a question from left field," Ryan said. "Why did you dodge my question about the counselor?"

"You asked me to cite examples of basic differences between you and me," Brooke said firmly. "I was, indeed, answering your question. I answered your question with another question: what about religion?"

"Okay. Fine," Ryan said, "I give up: what about religion?"

"First, *The Holy Bible*," Brooke said. "We believe *The Holy*

Bible is true, faithfully and actually true. Noah's ark, Methuselah's age, Job's boils, Jonah's being swallowed by a great fish . . . it's all real, just as it reads in *The Bible*. *The Bible* is infallible and beyond question. I know you don't believe these things, based on conversations I've heard between you and dad. We believe that the Virgin Mary was truly a virgin and that her having a virgin birth is an historical fact and not a metaphor, as you describe it."

"Brooke, stop this nonsense, please," Ryan plead with her. "You've been brainwashed and you're spouting unexamined dogma. You don't want a discussion with me or anyone else. You don't want a discussion, you're only interested in confirmation of what you believe."

"Now you're catching on. Why should I bother discussing any of this with you, Ryan?" Brooke asked. "I know that you're not living a holy lifestyle and I don't think you'll ever change. You enjoy drinking alcohol; you think Glenfiddich was a Scottish therapist. You enjoy movies and the theater. You listen to jazz. These practices are totally unacceptable to us. Do I need to describe other differences for you? I could recite a lengthy list."

"Brooke, Brooke, what's come over you?" Ryan asked, sadly

and softy. “I miss you so much. I want to help you. I want us to be together.”

“You? Help me?” Brooke asked rhetorically. “Now you’re a comedian. It’s obvious, isn’t it, that you can’t help me. I know now that you’re the reason I couldn’t get pregnant. It’s your fault we never had a baby. Because of you and your sinful behavior God’s, punishing us.”

“You aren’t making any sense at all, Brooke,” Ryan said, his voice full of pain. “Can’t you please come home so that we can talk? If you don’t want to come home to be with me, would you consider going to stay with your parents so that you could continue your sessions with Dr. Durkin? Please, Brooke; I’m begging.”

“No and no,” Brooke said sharply. “I’m staying here where I can be happy and where I can dedicate my life to God’s plan for me and to our evangelism programs. Please, Ryan, don’t call me at this number again.”

“Okay then. Just one more question, please?” Ryan asked in concession. “What happened to your clothes and our furniture?”

“I have everything I need with me,” Brooke said. “We need the furniture I brought with me and I’ve donated it to our safe

house.”

“Where, exactly, are you Brooke?” Ryan asked.

“I’m in a plain house, our safe house, surrounded by true Christian friends who love me and support me,” Brooke answered, “and that’s all you need to know or will ever know.” Ryan heard a click. Brooke ended the conversation.

All Ryan could hear was a dial tone and the sound of a man crying softly.

Ryan finished the semester using all of the grit available in his personality. He was proud of his previous end-of-course evaluations and was fearful that this semester his students would notice that he struggled at times to remain focused on the topic at hand. His student evaluations were, in fact, lower than usual, but not appreciably so.

Ryan had told his department chair about Brooke’s decision to separate from him. When the chair was able to find another faculty member to teach the two courses he had agreed earlier to teach in the summer term, Ryan was relieved and happy. The extra money from teaching summer school would’ve been nice, but Ryan

knew having some decompression time would be more valuable to him in the long run.

Since Brooke's decision, Ryan had spent every Wednesday night in Columbus having dinner with the Kennedys, who were distraught to the core. Mrs. Kennedy had red eyes most of the time since she cried several times every day.

Dr. Kennedy tried to maintain his professional composure, but often in vain. Ryan's regular visits were a blessing to them both.

Brooke's continuing refusals to meet with her parents, with Ryan, or with Dr. Durkin were devastating disappointments for the three of them. Her abdications from her roles of daughter and wife were constant sources of frustration, pain and agony.

One of Ryan's greatest fears became fact the first day of June when he received from Brooke's attorney a letter explaining that she was filing for divorce. While the letter didn't surprise him, he wasn't as prepared for its inevitability as he thought he would be.

He lost three subsequent days wandering around their near-empty house in a dudgeon, punctuated by cup after cup of black coffee, peanut butter and strawberry preserves sandwiches, and failed attempts to sleep through the night.

After getting out of bed the fourth day he went to the kitchen to make coffee. While the coffee maker was doing its job, Ryan shaved, took a shower, and dressed. After finishing a cup of coffee, he called the Kennedys in Columbus.

“Hello,” Dr. Kennedy said after the second ring.

“Hey, Doc, it’s Ryan here.”

“My favorite son-in-law,” Dr. Kennedy acknowledged.

“What’s going on with you, and before you answer, I hope you say ‘Nothing.’ Recently we’ve had just about all of the family events we can handle.”

“I hear you, Doc,” Ryan agreed. “Since it’s Monday and you’ll spend some time at home today, I thought I’d come to Columbus and visit with you and Mr. K., if that suits both of you.”

“We’d be delighted, as usual,” Dr. Kennedy said. “I need to make a visit at Buck’s funeral home sometime between 1:00 and 3:00 this afternoon, but otherwise your plans are our plans.”

“Great,” Ryan said. “I’ll see you and Mrs. K. in two hours.”

At 10:15 a.m. Ryan pulled into the Kennedy’s driveway, greeted by both of them. They’ve been watching for me, Ryan told himself.

“Hi folks,” Ryan said as he stepped out of his car.

“Oh, Ryan, it’s so good to see you,” Mrs. K. said as she gave him a hug suitable for the returning prodigal. “We’re so happy you’re here.”

“Indeed we are,” said Dr. Kennedy, shaking Ryan’s hand. “Let’s go inside for coffee and fresh cinnamon rolls, if you’re interested.”

“The only reason I’m here is to sample Mrs. K.’s cooking, Doc,” Ryan joked. “I can talk to you on the telephone when or if you and I need to talk. Anytime. Actually, it’s her cooking that draws me back here.

Dr. Kennedy laughed and held open the door while the other two entered the house.

The men sat at the kitchen table while Mrs. K. busied herself plating the cinnamon rolls and pouring coffee. She brought the tray with the rolls and coffee cups to the table.

“Well, son,” Dr. Kennedy said, spooning a small amount of sugar substitute into his coffee, “is there a particular reason we’re enjoying your company today?” Ryan smiled. Dr. Kennedy always sensed what was appropriate, needed, necessary, and suitable

for almost all occasions. He knows, somehow he knows, Ryan thought, he knows that I have news about Brooke.

“Yes, two reasons,” Ryan said. “First, I didn’t want to spend today alone at home. I needed to be with both of you and I needed your support. Second: Brooke wants a divorce.”

“Oh no, what next?” Mrs. Kennedy asked of no one in particular. She lowered her cup to the table and began to cry.

“I’m so sorry, Ryan . . . for both of you,” Dr. Kennedy said solemnly. “I was afraid something like this would happen.”

“Dayton,” Mrs. K. scolded, “if you knew Brooke would initiate divorce proceedings, why didn’t you warn us?” She continued to cry.

“I said I feared *something* like this would happen,” Dr. Kennedy replied. “I didn’t predict a divorce. I’ve had a hunch all along that the retreat would be an experience that would greatly affect Brooke, given her state of emotional dysfunction.”

“How so?” Ryan asked. “What’s so threatening about a church-sponsored camping trip where people talk about prayer?”

“You’re being too generous and charitable, Ryan,” Dr. Kennedy answered. “We weren’t there, so we can’t be sure what

actually happened. However, based on Brooke's behavior after she attended the retreat, I think it was much, much more than a simple 'camping trip where people talk about prayer,' as I think you described it."

"What are you trying to say, Doc," Ryan asked? "Was this some kind of Jonestown experience, without the poisoned kool-aid, of course?"

"No, I don't believe it was that extreme. However, groups can set up a series of intense experiences for the novice, experiences that will make profound impressions on those who are in an especially impressionable state, as Brooke was," Dr. Kennedy explained.

"A retreat can be an extremely orchestrated and controlled environment in which the planners keep the vulnerable novice in an atmosphere in which the group emerges as friends to the friendless, like liberators," Dr. Kennedy added. "The novice, then, is freed from his or her fears and becomes an obedient --- and I stress *obedient* --- member of the group."

"That's enough, Dayton," Mrs. Kennedy said. And then, turning to Ryan, she added, "Ryan, see what happens to intelligent,

well-read people? Their answers to simple questions become lectures.”

“It makes sense, though,” Ryan said. “Brooke was certainly vulnerable, and susceptible.”

“I’ve had too much experience with these sorts,” Dr. Kennedy observed. “Tomorrow’s Tuesday, and I assume Matt Durkin will be in his office. Why don’t I call him and bring him up to date. I’ll tell him about the retreat and let him know about Brooke’s petitioning for a divorce. Maybe he’ll have some suggestions for us. Are we agreed?”

“We are as far as I’m concerned,” Mrs. Kennedy said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue she had tucked under her watchband.

“Count me in,” Ryan agreed, “I think Dr. Durkin is our best adviser at the moment.”

“Okay then, I’ll put a telephone call to Matt at the top of my Tuesday to-do list,” Dr. Kennedy said. “Now, who’s for some lunch? My treat.”

“If you two will excuse me,” Ryan said, “I think I’ll pass on lunch. I need to go home and try to sort out things . . . and I don’t mean dirty socks,” he laughed.

“We understand, don’t we Dayton,” Mrs. Kennedy said.

”We certainly do,” Dr. Kennedy agreed.

They both stood and gave Ryan parental hugs and good-byes.

“I’ll call you when I get home,” Ryan said. “I won’t want you to worry unnecessarily about me and my driving. Brooke gives the three of us more than enough to worry about.”

Ryan completed the trip home without incident and called the Kennedys when he entered his empty kitchen, reporting to them he had arrived safely.

He tried to ignore the emptiness of his and Brooke's house. Should I call it *my* house from now on, he asked himself? He had difficulty imagining how he might have difficulty shifting his thinking from *our* to *mine*, or from *we* and *us* to *me*.

He went to the liquor cabinet and poured four generous fingers of Glenlivet, the gift from the Crane faculty, into one of his two glasses. He went into the living room put a CD, a new remix of an old Weavers album with Pete Seeger, into the player. Then he sat in *the* chair to sip his scotch.

What has happened? Ryan asked himself. How's this disaster going to end? What hubris am I guilty of that could have brought on this tragedy?

Is she in denial, Ryan asked himself? Given the medical data we have, doesn't she understand her ovulation irregularities contribute to her difficulties getting pregnant?

By definition, *denial* isn't rational; unfortunately though,

Ryan thought, it's obviously effective and very useful to some people.

Enough tragedy talk, he declared. I'm not Othello and she's not Desdemona.

Seeger was still playing and sang through "Little Boxes" and "If I Had a Hammer." It wasn't until he started "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" that Ryan was reminded of Sine Nomine.

Maybe his memory of the band was tweaked by a combination of Seeger and scotch; he couldn't be sure. Scotch and soda, or scotch and Seeger? Either suits me fine right now, he concluded.

His thoughts about Sine Nomine always made him wonder why the band occupied such a significant place in his memory.

Once again he wondered whatever happened to Tyler, Jim, and Jacob? He booted his mental computer and went, for the umpteenth time, to a game he had conceived over the years, "Sine Nomine: The Game."

The game was always fueled by alcohol, was usually played as an escape from a current dilemma, and always began with the same prompt: "What might have happened if . . . ?"

Ryan played the game until it was time to freshen his drink. He rationalized another drink by telling himself that he was between a rock and a hard place in his personal life and needed to get his mind anesthetized a bit.

Ryan returned to the chair in the living room and noticed that Pete Seeger and the Weavers had finished their concert. What would sound good right now, he wondered? Just as a sommelier selects the wines most appropriate for the salad, soup, entree and dessert courses, Ryan's expertise was in selecting music most appropriate for his moods.

His scanning the CD tower was interrupted by his cell phone: ring ring. Then another ring ring. He had purchased a European ring tone for his cell phone; it went ring ring, ring ring.

"Hello," Ryan answered. His tongue had thickened some. You'd better focus hard on your speech the inner Ryan warned him.

"Hello Professor Graves . . . ah . . . hello, Ryan, that is. This is Gillian, Gillian Davies in the UK."

"Who," Ryan asked?

"Gillian Davies, perhaps you remember. I'm from Wandsworth University in the UK, in southeast London, south of the

Thames. We met at the recent meeting of the American Linguistics Society.”

“Oh, . . . yes . . . of course, *the* Gillian Davies,” Ryan said, warming up to the conversation. “The Brit who travels with a teapot.” Ryan thought his last line was rather funny. He was disappointed that Gillian didn’t laugh, but he remembered that people who’ve been drinking believe that everything they say is funny.

“How’ve you been, Professor Graves?” Gillian asked.

“Do you know anything about the works of Theodore Dreiser?” Ryan asked.

“That’s rather an odd answer, Professor,” Gillian said with a chuckle, “and I’m afraid all I know is that Dreiser’s a Yank author from the first half of the 20th Century.”

“Not bad, Professor Davies. I’ve had some students who wouldn’t have known that much,” Ryan laughed. “If Dreiser were to write my biography this year he’d call it *An American Tragedy*. The only problem with that idea is that Dreiser’s deceased and that he’d already used that title.”

“It can’t be that dreadful or harrowing for you, surely not,”

Gillian said, then she paused. “May I call you ‘Ryan,’ Professor?”

“Of course Gillian,” Ryan said, “I thought we decided on first names the last time we talked. Which was also the first time we talked.”

Gillian paused again. Another of my clever comments eliciting no laughter, Ryan observed. Then she spoke.

“Right! Ryan, we’ve a proposal for you, my departmental colleagues and I,” Gillian said.

“That sounds intriguing,” Ryan said. “What’s the proposal?”

“Well, are you busy next August?” Gillian asked.

“Our fall semester begins the third week in August,” Ryan answered, “but between now and then my calendar is open; I’m not teaching this summer. Why? Why do you ask?”

“Right. Well, you see our fall term begins the last week in August,” Gillian answered. “We’re planning a series of 4-5 day faculty meetings during the first three weeks in August to serve as research symposia. We’d like you to be one of our three Visiting Scholars.”

“Me? Gillian, you’re pulling my leg, aren’t you?” Ryan asked. “Me? I’m not old enough, distinguished enough, or important

enough to be a Visiting Scholar. Might I qualify as visitor from the States, a tourist? Yes. A visiting scholar? No.”

“Oh but you are, Ryan,” Gillian protested, “especially in areas where we need to make genuinely significant improvements.”

“And what, please tell me, what area might that be,” Ryan asked.

“Actually, more than one area,” Gillian answered.

“According to national rankings in the UK, perhaps you’ve heard of the Research Assessment Exercise, our faculty research in English Language Studies and in the area of North American Studies enjoy status approaching international and world-leading.

“Research Assessment Exercise?” Ryan asked.

“Locally we refer to it as RAE,” Gillian explained. “The rankings determine the amount of research funding universities receive from the Ministry of Education.”

“I’m flattered that you and your colleagues believe I have anything of value to share,” Ryan said. “But I’m still not persuaded I’m your guy.”

“Ryan, in your most recent book, *Current Language Studies in the USA*, your chapters on Culture and Language, Politics and

Language, and Social Stratification of Language in the Midwest, are especially insightful. Several of our faculty have read and liked your book so much, that they'd like to have uninterrupted time to pick your brain."

"What is it exactly you'd expect from me?" Ryan asked.

"Devote one morning to each of those three chapters I mentioned," Gillian answered. "Give a brief review for each one, then we open the agenda for discussion."

"And the afternoon?" Ryan asked.

"Individual faculty will have one hour appointments with you," Gillian explained. "They'll discuss their research program as it relates to your ideas in the book, and you can suggest refinements."

"That sounds easy enough," Ryan replied.

"It's more valuable to us than you might understand," Gillian added. "The faculty in the English Studies program and the North American Studies program are young and bright. Soon they'll be the best in the world. We intend to be a world-class leader in those two areas of scholarship. Already you are a world leader. Help us get to the top, both with our international standing and our research funding level."

Ryan's head was spinning. A bunch of living footnotes at Gillian's university want him to share ideas with them so that they can sustain their international reputation as well as their funding for research?

He was speechless.

Finally Gillian had to ask, "Ryan, are you still on the line?"

"Yes," Ryan said, breaking his silence, "I'm still here. I'm thinking about what you just outlined."

"There's still more," Gillian said. "We'll pay you in British Pounds; £1500 for the four days, plus all travel expenses. We'll provide housing and meals and accommodations on campus, avoiding a hotel charge."

"That's very generous," Ryan observed. "Do I have to give an answer right away? Could I have some time to think about it?"

"Of course, Ryan. I'll ring you up Wednesday at 5:00 p.m. Central time in the US. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes," Ryan replied. "That would be perfect. I'll have made up my mind by that time."

"Excellent," Gillian said enthusiastically. "I'll talk to you Wednesday afternoon at 5:00. Good-bye."

“Thanks, Gillian,” Ryan said. “Good-bye to you, too.”

Tuesday night Dr. Kennedy called Ryan to give a report on his conversation with Matt Durkin. Unfortunately, there was not much to share. Dr. Durkin said that he simply lacked too much information about Brooke's condition to offer any valid suggestions. "It would've been helpful if Matt had the benefit of a couple of sessions with Brooke," Dr. Kennedy said. "But, as you would surmise, Ryan, it looks as if that's not likely to happen."

"For the time being," Dr. Kennedy explained, "Matt suggests that we should be supportive when Brooke calls, don't make her out to be a victim or a bad person, and don't pressure her to come home but let her know she's welcome anytime."

"Nothing very revealing, huh?" Ryan said. The conversation came to a disappointing end.

Wednesday morning Ryan was out of bed at 6:45, shaved, showered, and dressed by 7:15. He went to the front door to get the morning newspaper, and took it with him when he went to the garage to get his car. He was going to Denny's for breakfast, hungry for their Grand Slam special.

He finished his Denny's breakfast, then had another cup of coffee while he glanced through his morning paper. He stopped at the sports section to see whether the Cardinals won or lost.

Then he turned to the business section to find out the exchange rate of American dollars for British pounds. He laughed at this. I guess I've made up my mind about whether to go to the UK in August, he observed to himself. Why else would I check the exchange rate?

Ryan left the newspaper on his table and went home. He sat down in the chair in the living room to sort through three days' worth of mail. Most of it he put in a pile for the wastebasket he no longer had.

I've got to get rid of this house and move into a smaller place he told himself. Get some decent furniture.

Don't you want to wait to see how Brooke's plans mesh with your plans the inner Ryan asked?

No. I know Brooke. If she's after a divorce, she won't rest until she gets one.

Ryan picked up the unwanted mail and took it to the garage where he and Brooke had kept their trash dumpster.

After putting the mail in the dumpster, he drove to the local

hardware store to buy a new grill and a bag of charcoal. His next stop was the grocery store where he bought a salmon filet, a baking potato, and a bag of salad greens, and a bunch of green onions. He left the food area and as he left the building he stopped at the liquor area for six bottles of Amstel light.

After putting away his groceries, it took him 30 minutes and two Amstels to assemble the grill on the patio behind the house. There are still two hours before Gillian's call at 5:00, he noticed. He went to the living room, started the Weavers CD which was still in the CD player, then he stretched out on the living room carpet for a rest.

There was a ring ring.

Another ring ring.

It's my cell, Ryan tried to tell himself. He was napping, awakened by the ring ring. It's only 4:00. Can't be Gillian.

"Hello," Ryan said, clearing his throat.

"Good afternoon, Ryan. It's Dayton."

"Hi, Doc," Ryan said, with a somewhat muffled voice. "I fell asleep on the living room floor. That's why it took me several rings to answer. What's up?"

“I have some news from Brooke I think you need to know about,” Dr. Kennedy said. “She called 15 minutes ago to tell us that she was moving to her church’s retreat center. She, her clothes, and the furniture. All moving from the safe house to the retreat center.”

“You’re kidding,” Ryan said. “No, I mean she’s kidding. Isn’t she? This is insane! Did she say whether she intended to call me to discuss her plans?” Ryan asked.

“As a matter of fact, Ryan, she asked me if I would call you and give you the news,” Dr. Kennedy explained. “It pains me to relay her message. Her news is that she doesn’t want us --- you, or the two of us --- to try to reach her until she’s ready; and, she says she’ll let us know when she’s ready. I guess this is the old ‘don’t call me, I’ll call you’ routine.”

“This is too crazy,” Ryan complained.

“Son, we’re as upset and disappointed with Brooke’s behavior as you are,” Dr. Kennedy commiserated. This is the second time he’s called me *son*, Ryan noticed.

“Doc,” Ryan said, trying to remain stable, “thanks for the call. If you learn anything else, please let me know.”

“You know we will, Ryan,” Dr. Kennedy said sadly. “We

both send our love to you.” Ryan heard the familiar click that ends telephone conversations.

Did I understand all of that, Ryan wondered? It’s a hell of a way to wake up from a nap! Yes, it was a real call, not a dream. He remembered hearing his ring tone: ring ring.

He sat in the chair and looked at his watch: 4:46 p.m. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a Stoly; he took five ice cubes from the freezer section of the refrigerator and dropped them in his glass. It was always five ice cubes, never four and never six.

Back in the living room, he removed the Weavers CD and placed a new one in the CD player, “The Best of Basie.” The first track was Joe Williams singing “Roll ‘em Pete,” A Count Basie standard Ryan turned into Sine Nomine’s theme song, that is, assuming Sine Nomine had a theme song. Before he could begin playing the “Whatever happened to . . .? game, his phone rang: ring ring.

He looked at his watch, 5:00 p.m. Gillian’s right on time.

“Hello, Gillian” Ryan answered the phone.

First, he heard laughter. Then he heard Gillian say, “Ryan, what if I had placed my call later than 5:00 p.m. your time, and this

call was from your wife, you silly pong? Wouldn't you have been thoroughly embarrassed?" She was still laughing.

"It's not very likely she'll call," Ryan replied, explaining nothing. Gillian ignored his reply.

"So, Professor Graves," Gillian said, changing to a register of playful academic formality, "what is your decision? Are you accepting our invitation, and we certainly hope that you are, to serve as a Visiting Scholar in our department?"

Ryan hadn't really concentrated on thinking about Gillian's invitation, but given Dr. Kennedy's recent call about Brooke's moving to the retreat center, he realized his plans no longer depended on anyone else's.

"Yes, Gillian, yes. I'm coming. I'll be glad to visit with you and your colleagues."

"Oh, Ryan, that's wonderful," Gillian squealed. "I'm ever so happy."

Ryan thought she was laying it on a bit thick, but she's at least ten years younger and isn't yet jaded to the ways of life in general and higher education in particular. She's still impressionable and idealistic.

“Is there anything I need to do?” Ryan said.

“Is your passport current?” Gillian asked.

“It is,” Ryan replied.

“Brilliant, then you needn’t do anything else,” Gillian said.

“We can negotiate dates later; and, I’ll book rooms for you in Henry Sweet Hall, where campus visitors often stay. We’ll pay the airlines for your e-ticket, then report the itinerary to you.”

“I need to get the dates settled soon,” Ryan said. “I have a number of personal items I need to attend to this summer.”

“Right. I understand,” Gillian replied. “I’ll ring you again in seven days. I need to consult with our other speakers and coordinate the dates for all three of you. A week hence, then; same time?” Gillian asked.

“Yes, that’ll be fine. I’ll look forward to talking with you again,” Ryan said pleasantly enough.

“It’s been grand, hearing your voice,” Gillian responded. “I’ll anticipate our call next Wednesday very much, Ryan.”

Although I don’t particularly favor the word, Ryan told himself, Gillian sounded awfully *perky*. Was her part of our conversation as cheerful and energetic as I’m imagining? Was it

intended to be something more than *perky*?

Here I go again, Ryan laughed. I'm letting a small amount of alcohol think for me! Our visit was strictly a business conversation . . . wasn't it?

He went to the kitchen to prepare his grilled salmon dinner, thinking about Gillian.

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Ryan filled the next six days with two visits with the Kennedys in Columbus; No, they told him, they hadn't heard from Brooke. Ryan reported the same to his in-laws. Consequently, with no news to the contrary, Brooke's request for a divorce was still a live issue. Ryan resolved to hire a lawyer.

He read and made notes after reading four books he had ordered from an internet source. Ryan went to two movies that had received rave reviews.

He was sorry he had no one with whom he could discuss the movies; he didn't like being alone.

He was looking forward to Gillian's Wednesday night telephone call. First, he wanted to set for sure the dates of his travel to the UK and, second, he enjoyed having someone to talk to.

As he had done last week, he went to the kitchen a few minutes before 5:00 p.m. and made a scary and very dry vodka martini. He added his five ice cubes and five olives. He took a test sip and congratulated himself on his performance as a mixologist. Then he took another, bigger taste.

As he was warning himself to use caution and to go slow, he heard ring ring. It was his cell phone ring tone, most likely the result of Gillian calling him.

“Hello Gillian,” Ryan said.

“Hello as well to you, too, Ryan,” Gillian laughed. “Don’t you remember last time I rang you?” she said. “What if another caller rings you up at 5:00 p.m. your time in the US? Will you be embarrassed using my name in your greeting?”

“Not likely,” Ryan said. “But I’m repeating my self from last Wednesday, aren’t I?”

“I suppose, but that’s all right, Professor Graves, our distinguished visiting professor. I’ve talked to the other two visitors and they’ve expressed no preference for the dates of their visits. They left the decisions to me.”

“So, why don’t you plan to be here the first week in August?” Gillian asked. “My husband is in Australia from June through December visiting his clients who are station managers . . . oops, *ranch foremen* to you . . . they use his company’s animal pharmaceuticals. So, having no family schedule to plan around, I’ll be devoting all my time to our first visiting scholar, which is you.

“The first week in August is a good week for me, too,” Ryan said.

“Right,” Gillian said. “I’ll book your flights and your rooms here on campus. Any other loose ends we need to tie up?”

“I can’t think of any at the moment,” Ryan replied.

“Ryan, I’m getting all energized about your visit,” Gillian said. “The other two visitors are excellent scholars, as are you, but I’ve never met them.

“I feel as if have a personal attachment with you,” she added, “since we met in Philadelphia. You’re the first VIP I’ve ever met.”

While Gillian was speaking Ryan had taken a large sip from his martini. “Thank you, Gillian,” Ryan replied. “I’ll call you if I have any questions between now and the time I see you in the UK.”

“Oh please do,” a pleased Gillian said.

They signed off by exchanging “Good bye” and “Talk to you soon.” Ryan reviewed their conversation and, once again, he thought her “Oh please do [call me]” was offered with more than professional anticipation. But, who knows?

Ryan lifted his glass to his mouth and took a sip. The liquid was cold on his lips, which he pursed when he swallowed. His

pursed lips reminded him that it had been a long time since he had kissed Brooke, or kissed anybody for that matter.

He hadn't talked to Brooke for weeks, months. When was the last time we even touched each other, he wondered? This question with no answer made him extremely sad.

Since he wasn't teaching during the summer session, Ryan's June and July daily agendas were filled with personal priorities: reading, working on three journal articles to submit for publication, completing the prospectus for another book, going fishing Friday afternoons, and watching baseball games on TV after dinner.

Gillian sent him the information regarding his e-ticket: fly out of Kansas City International to Minneapolis where he connected with Delta for his flight to London Heathrow. There was actually little preparation for Ryan to complete before his trip since his most recent book would be the jumping off point for the daily discussions.

Ryan was glad the sessions with the Wandsworth faculty would be informal; that fact made packing much easier. Khakis, polo shirts, a brown suede blazer, and his navy blue suit, just in case there might be a more formal event.

His flights to Minneapolis and then to London Heathrow were uneventful. Since it's a good walk from where international passengers deplane at Heathrow and then wend their way to customs, Ryan knew there was little use in hurrying; customs lines at

Heathrow are usually long for either arriving or departing passengers.

After clearing customs he reclaimed his baggage from the appropriate carousel, then struggled with his luggage to the pick-up area just outside the terminal.

Ryan had no sooner parked his bigger suitcase on the curb --- spelled *kerb* in British English, as the sign where he was standing illustrated --- when he heard a miniature *beep beep*.

It was Gillian pulling up to the “Kerbside pick-up” sign in her Cooper Mini.

Gillian stopped her car in front of Ryan, then hopped out from the driver’s rightmost seat. She stepped up to Ryan and gave him a twisting and turning hug.

“Oh Ryan,” she said. “It’s so good to see you and for you to be on my side of the pond!” She kissed him on the cheek.

Ryan was still a bit logy from his lengthy flight and mumbled something about being happy to have his plane ride over. They wrestled his luggage into the Mini’s back seat, a space appropriate for passengers no more than three feet tall.

He silently admitted to himself that Gillian’s hugging him,

kissing him on the cheek and his feeling her body pressing against his felt good, very good.

He was tired, but not so tired that he couldn't feel a growing tenseness in his groin.

"Where are we headed?" Ryan asked.

"My place . . . just for tonight, though," Gillian answered.

"Some of the university accommodations are being renovated this summer and your rooms in Sweet Hall won't be ready until tomorrow afternoon. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"No bother," Ryan said. "After today's travel I'll be able to sleep anyplace you put me."

"That's good," Gillian said. "We still have a fair drive to Putney, which will further test your endurance."

"I don't mean to be the stereotypical ugly and uninformed American tourist, but where's Putney?" Ryan asked.

"Right. Putney is the part of London where I live," Gillian answered, "and don't feel guilty about not being familiar with London's boroughs. The borough of Putney is south of the Thames. From here it's a short or a longer ride, depending on traffic and time of day, of course, whether on the bus or the tube to London city

center. Putney is 20 minutes west of the university.”

Ryan had his London street finder packed away in his briefcase. While he was killing time during his flight, he located Gillian’s university and thought he’d track his way from Heathrow to wherever he went after landing. But, he decided he’d just leave the street finder packed. He was too tired to do much of anything except ride along with Gillian in her Mini.

He wasn’t, however, too tired not to know when they crossed a river.

“Is this the Thames?” Ryan asked.

“Yes, this is the Thames and we’re crossing it on Putney Bridge,” Gillian answered, “which means we’re five minutes from my house. Your travels will be finished very soon.”

Ryan nodded in the affirmative, forgetting that her attention to the formidable traffic kept Gillian’s eyes on the road ahead of her rather than the seat beside her. “That really is good news, Gillian,” Ryan responded verbally. “Thanks.”

At the southern end of the bridge Gillian turned right into Upper Richmond Road then turned left into Gwendolyn Avenue. She steered the Mini into a crushed stone driveway. She started singing

Steely Dan's "Home at Last."

"Gillian," Ryan warned, "try to avoid being so corny with your musical selections. Take pity on me; my travels have left me in a diminished state this afternoon."

"Sorry," Gillian said, laughing, "you'd prefer something by Ralph Vaughn Williams?"

"I would. But remember," Ryan said, "although it's 4:45 in the afternoon for you, it's 11:45 at night for me. And, I'm a weary, very weary old, old man." Gillian laughed some more.

"You're a delight, Ryan," she said in her feigned proper British English. "It's going to be wonderful --- both personally as well as professionally ---to have you as a guest."

It took both of them, one pushing and one pulling, to wrest his luggage from the diminutive back seat of Gillian's Mini. Ryan slipped the briefcase strap over his left shoulder, then grabbed the big suitcase and started rolling it toward the front door of Gillian's house.

After putting his luggage in what he took to be the guest bedroom, Ryan removed his blazer and hung it on the back of a chair. He went to the kitchen and found Gillian rinsing some dishes

used at an earlier meal.

“Ryan, would you like something to drink?” Gillian asked.

“Sure; what are my options?” he answered.

“ ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ I suppose,” Gillian replied, laughing merrily at her own joke.

“I mean, Miss Smarty . . . “, Ryan began to explain.

“ . . . Oh, Ryan, I know what you meant,” Gillian said.

“What’ll it be: coffee, tea, or me? as a flight attendant once said. Or, would you prefer something more spirituous?”

“Those are all tempting choices,” Ryan observed, “I think I’ll go with a beer, if you have it.”

“Bloody hell,” Gillian said, obviously flirting. “I was hoping you’d select me as your option, but, yes, I have beer in the fridge, getting it cold like you Yanks prefer it.”

She went to the refrigerator and pulled out a tall can, a pint of Newcastle Brown Ale. She popped the top, and handed the can to Ryan. Then she poured herself a scotch.

“Do you prefer a glass for your Newcastle?” Gillian asked.

“No,” Ryan replied, “the can will be fine.”

“Let’s go to the sitting room, shall we?” Gillian asked. Ryan

followed her without voicing an answer.

Ryan sat in a wingback chair with a table beside it, giving him a place to put his beer. He noticed a framed photograph on the table. It was a photo of a couple with different ethnic identities: the black Gillian holding hands with a man Ryan assumed to be an Anglo-European.

“Your husband?” Ryan asked, holding up the photo.

“Yes, in happier days.” Gillian responded. “That was us a year ago. We haven’t been together for 10 months. We’ve separated. I don’t know why the photo is still there.”

Instead of commenting on Gillian’s response, Ryan put the photo back on the table, then he picked up his beer, put it to his lips and took a long draw.

They discussed the weather, Gillian’s first visit to the states for the linguistics convention, the comparative costs of petrol, groceries, and other necessities.

“I’m sorry, Gillian, but I need to go to bed,” Ryan said. “It’s been a long day for me.”

“Silly moi; I’m sorry for being so greedy about having you as a house guest that I’ve kept you up later than I should’ve,” Gillian

apologized.

“It’s not a problem, really,” Ryan said. Gillian stood and walked Ryan to the guest room.

“Sleep well,” Gillian said.

“Thank you, I’m sure I will,” Ryan said.

Gillian closed the door behind her as she left the room. Ryan hoisted the big suitcase on the bed. On top were his pajamas and a bag for his dirty clothes. He undressed, hanging his khakis in the closet and putting his polo shirt, socks, and underwear in his dirty clothes bag.

Just as the nude Ryan was taking his pajamas out of his suitcase, there was a knock on his bedroom door. Without waiting for an answer, Gillian walked in. Seeing the naked Ryan, she blurted “Ooops, sorry. Oh, my god! I was only going to inquire whether you needed anything.”

The surprised Ryan was shocked and immobile. Gillian was wearing a short, lavender penoir which emphasized her curvaceous body. She is one gorgeous woman, Ryan told the obvious to himself. I wonder, Ryan thought, if her sleeping clothes were randomly selected or . . . ?

Forget that, he said, and get some damn clothes on! He pulled on the bottoms of his pajamas first, and then started to put on the jacket.

“Oh, Ryan, please forgive me,” Gillian said loudly, turning her back to Ryan. “I am so sorry for barging in like that. I’m an embarrassment to the both of us.”

“Let’s forget it,” Ryan replied, “okay?” He lifted his suitcase from the bed and put in the floor of the closet.

Without turning to face Ryan, Gillian muttered, “Sleep well” and fled the guest room.

Ryan finished the last button on his pajama jacket, pulled down the bedspread, the sheet and the blankets, then he crept into the bed between the sheets. He thought briefly about how beautiful Gillian looked in her penoir. Ryan felt himself growing hard.

He wished he had more physical strength and fewer principles tonight . . . but, sleep interfered before his thought could be completed.

When Ryan woke the next morning he had a small headache in the back of his head and neck. Yesterday was a grueling day, he thought. I need a shower. He went to the closet and reached down to

his suitcase to get his toiletries kit. Then he went to the bathroom and, voila, no shower!

He ran the water into the tub while he shaved, then stepped into the water. The water was not quite hot enough, but it was invigorating. After a lathering from head to toe, Ryan used the French shower head to rinse the soap from his body and stepped out of the tub to towel himself dry.

He walked quickly to his room with his towel wrapped around his middle, not wanting to shock Gillian any more than he did last night. He dressed in clean clothes, always a treat after a lengthy airplane trip. Khakis, blue knit belt, burgundy penny loafers, navy blue polo, brown suede blazer.

“Ryan, are you out of bed?” Gillian called from the kitchen.

“Yes, and here he is,” Ryan answered as he walked through the kitchen door.

“I have both coffee and tea,” Gillian explained, “not knowing which you’d prefer.”

“I’ll have coffee, then,” Ryan said, “with a small splash of creamer.”

“You Yanks,” Gillian said with mock scolding. “You’re in

the UK now; we use actual cream from real cows. The creamer you Yanks use has never been near the genus *bovine*.”

They both laughed, but Ryan noticed that since he had entered the kitchen Gillian had averted her eyes from any contact with his.

After Gillian poured his coffee and added some cream, she brought it to him, shuffling along in her robe and fluffy slippers. He took the mug and put it on the counter, then reached for her shoulder, turning her so that she had to look at him.

“The sooner you look at me,” Ryan began, “the sooner we can deal with any residual embarrassment from last night.”

Gillian had tears in her eyes. “Ryan, I don’t want you to think I’m a flirt, or a street walker,” she explained. “I respect you very much. I simply forgot my manners last night and barged into your room, overly anxious that you’d be comfortable your first night in the UK and in my house.”

“Gillian, it’s over, it’s behind us,” Ryan said. “Think of it as a funny episode from what we in the US we would call a B-level, low budget movie.”

“On the other hand, however, please don’t introduce me this

morning by telling your colleagues how ugly my body is in the raw or what color my pajamas are.”

He kissed her on the forehead. She hugged him. He liked it.

Ryan finished his coffee and poured a second cup.

“There’ll be coffee, tea, and pastries at the meeting this morning,” Gillian said, drying her eyes, “but I can prepare a proper breakfast here if you’d fancy one.”

“No, please don’t,” Ryan said, “I’m afraid I’m already more of a bother than you anticipated.”

“No, please try not to think of yourself as a bother,” Gillian pled. “You’ve been here less than 24 hours. Breakfast was easy; I made coffee. The only bothersome error thus far has been my doing, not yours.”

“Gillian, when we meet at a convention 25 years from now, we’ll look back on last night’s mini-adventure and laugh,” Ryan said, trying to reassure her.

“Thank you Ryan,” Gillian replied, “that’s how I’ll try to remember our, what shall I call it, our *unplanned* and how shall I say it, *unadorned* meeting last night.”

“I must say though,” Ryan commented with a smile, “I could

be flattered that a younger woman would be that interested in me. And, if I'm ever surprised again in my bedroom by a drop-in female visitor, I hope it'll either be you, or your clone."

Gillian gave him a playful poke on the shoulder. "Come on, Ryan. Let's go to work. You need to earn that huge honorarium we're paying you."

The "twenty-minute drive" to the Wandsworth University campus Gillian had described was off the mark by 20 minutes because of the horrendous rush hour traffic. Why traffic nearing gridlock proportions was ever called *rush hour* is just another example of the fact that the English language isn't at all logical, Ryan mused to himself. Living in a smaller city in the States with fewer cars has its advantages!

Gillian drove to the faculty and staff car park, then escorted Ryan to the building where his seminar room was located. Several people were already there, having coffee, tea and assorted pastries with their small talk.

Gillian ushered Ryan around the room introducing Ryan to each of the faculty members who were, thankfully Ryan said to himself, wearing nametags.

“Good morning everyone,” Gillian said, at an emcee’s volume. “If you’ll freshen your coffee or tea, we can get started.” These were the last words Ryan heard Gillian utter until lunch.

The morning session flew past Ryan. He was impressed that the group had a firm grasp of his most recent book, as Gillian had assured him during one of their earlier telephone conversations.

“Thank you everyone,” the emcee Gillian said. “It’s time for lunch.” Ryan looked at his watch and couldn’t believe it was 12:45 in the afternoon already! The morning conversations had been lively, with widespread participation. He chuckled to himself when he realized he really had to pee; he hadn’t had a bathroom break all morning!

“I’m taking Professor Graves across the street to the Angel and Crown for lunch,” Gillian announced. “Those of you who have an afternoon appointment with him are certainly welcome to join us.”

“Er . . . Let’s change that . . .” Gillian corrected herself, “all and any of you can join us. I hope you will. Yanks haven’t yet learned that having a pint at lunch is not a bad thing! We have some educating to do.”

Gillian’s last remark elicited a round of applause accompanied with a chorus of “Here, here.”

Fifteen went to lunch.

Never having tasted pub fare anywhere, including, of course at the Angel and Crown, Ryan asked Gillian to order for him, “Just make it something authentic,” he said, “not something a tourist might look for, like a hamburger.”

She ordered scotch eggs with chips and pints of Guinness for both of them. Ryan ate with gusto, enjoying his pub lunch very much. After finishing his Guinness he asked for a cup of coffee, thinking the caffeine would help him maintain whatever edge he’d

enjoyed in the morning session.

That afternoon he had individual conferences with three faculty members from Wandsworth and discussed their research agendas. At 5:30 Gillian appeared out of nowhere and approached Ryan and the afternoon's final conversational partner.

"Nigel," Gillian said, "If you don't mind terribly I'm going to take Ryan now. He's had a full day of talking."

"So he has," Nigel replied, and then he stood. "Ryan, thanks so much; it's been a pleasure. I'll look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning."

"Likewise. The pleasure is all mine," Ryan replied. He and Nigel shook hands.

As soon as Nigel left the room Gillian gave Ryan a hug, then took him by the left arm and started walking him toward the door.

"From everything I've heard you've been enormously successful today," she said.

"I hope it was a useful day for your colleagues," Ryan said. "and I want to thank you for not describing my pajamas."

"Oh, stop it, Ryan!" Gillian exclaimed. "You promised that the peek-a-boo chapter was behind us."

She giggled and pretended to poke Ryan in the ribs.

Gillian's feistiness and laughter were tonics for Ryan. I'm having a wonderful time, he told himself.

"Did you enjoy lunch?" Gillian asked as they joined the endless line of cars headed east toward Putney.

"Yes, I did," Ryan answered. "I enjoyed it a lot. I've never had a hard boiled egg in the center of a ball of sausage."

"Scotch egg is a popular luncheon offering in the schools as well as pubs," Gillian said. "We won't be having a scotch egg for dinner tonight, but how does fish sound?"

They arrived at Gillian's car, got in, and drove out of the faculty and staff car park.

"Fish sounds wonderful," Ryan said. "I'm a flatlander back in the States and it's a rarity for us to get fresh fish; I like fish and hope we can have every day I'm here."

"Right. I have some nice plaice filets in the fridge I think you'll like," Gillian said.

"I'm not familiar with plaice," Ryan told her. "What is it?"

"It's a sea fish," Gillian explained, "similar to sole. It swims

on its side with both eyes on the topside of its flat body. Plaice is the commoner's Dover sole."

"Sounds great to me," Ryan said. "I'm a pretty common guy, you know."

"No," Ryan, "I don't know that," Gillian said very softly, her eyes fixed on the road ahead.

Ryan pretended he hadn't heard her last remark.

"Here's Gwendolyn Avenue, we're almost arrived at home sweet home," Gillian announced after successfully driving the Mini through the traffic.

Ryan shook his head, realizing he had dozed off.

"I'm afraid I wasn't much company on the way home," Ryan apologized. "I think I napped some."

"That you did," Gillian agreed. "No wonder; you were totally engaged all bloody day." She steered her car unto the driveway at her house. "Here we are," she said, "it's 6:15; not so terribly late, eh?"

"Just fine," Ryan said. "I marvel at the way you Brits navigate automobiles through traffic that I think looks hopeless. How do you do it?" Ryan asked as he got out of the car and started

walking toward the front door.

“In Great Britain and in many other cities in western Europe,” Gillian began her answer as she walked beside Ryan to the house, “driving an automobile in city traffic is not a task for the faint of heart. Shall we have drinks before dinner?”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Ryan answered. Then he went to his room and hung his blazer in the closet.

Gillian wasn't in the living room or the kitchen, as best Ryan could tell. He noticed her bedroom door was closed so he assumed she was changing into more comfortable clothes. His assumption was correct. Gillian joined him in the kitchen, now wearing black sweatpants and a heather gray sweatshirt.

“You look like the poster child for after school comfort,” Ryan said. “Very dashing.”

“What'll be for you, Ryan?” Gillian asked. “I'm having a martini, possibly two.”

“I second the motion,” Ryan said. “Let me fix them, please.”

Gillian reached into a cabinet and picked out a bottle of dry vermouth and a bottle of Booth's gin. “Did you want gin or vodka?” she asked Ryan.

“Vodka, please,” he answered. Gillian reached for a bottle of Stolichnaya and a silver martini shaker.

“Here’s everything you’ll need, I think,” Gillian said.

Ryan shook a dry gin martini for Gillian and a dryer vodka martini, shaken not stirred, he reminded Gillian, for himself. “Here’s to Wandsworth’s Visiting Scholar for the week,” Gillian said as she clinked her glass against Ryan’s.

“Superb,” she complimented Ryan after her first sip.

“I don’t mean to boast, but my drink is very good, too,” Ryan said. “After being on alert all day, I’d be happy with almost anything in a glass tonight.”

They sat at the kitchen table and talked about the questions the Wandsworth faculty asked during the day, Ryan’s replies, and some research ideas the faculty had shared with Ryan. In 30 minutes both martinis were gone.

Gillian reached across the table and picked up Ryan’s glass. “I’ll make the second drinks, if that’s agreeable to you,” Gillian said.” Ryan smiled and assured her it would be okay with him.

“Here you are, Professor Graves,” Gillian said as she handed Ryan his replenished glass. She sat down opposite Ryan after she

fixed her drink. “Ta,” Ryan said, using his best informal British English as they clinked their glasses together. Gillian smiled, looking into Ryan’s eyes.

“Ryan, if you’d like to call your wife that would be fine with me; my long-distance telephone bill can handle it,” Gillian offered.

“It’s thoughtful of you to make the offer,” Ryan said, “but since she isn’t living at home, I’ll pass on the call.” Gillian arched her eyebrows questioningly “Whatever,” Gillian pushed the topic, “but your wife doesn’t even know whether your flight landed safely.”

“I doubt she even knows I’ve left the country,” Ryan explained, “or cares.” The second martini was making him more talkative.

“Have I introduced a topic you’d rather not talk about?” Gillian asked.

“No, no, not at all,” Ryan answered, “to the contrary, Gillian, I suppose I need to talk about it. She and I are at different stages in our relationship and I can’t discuss it with her because she won’t talk about it. We’re separated, too.”

Ryan explained Brooke’s aberrant behavior caused in part by

her inability to conceive.

“Can non-functioning ovaries create a mental dysfunction?”

Gillian asked.

“The counselor she’s seen only twice tells me anything is possible,” Ryan answered.

“Are the physicians agreeing that she actually has Turner’s Syndrome or that PCOS thing?” Gillian asked.

“The neurologist’s most specific comments about TS went something like ‘I can’t say it is, and I can’t say it isn’t.’ Ryan answered. “He said essentially the same thing about PCOS.”

“What I know for certain is: (a) my wife left me and is presently living at a church retreat facility and (b) she’s filed for divorce,” Ryan continued.

“Oh Ryan, I’m so sorry for you,” Gillian sympathized.

“Don’t be, please,” Ryan said. “With the exception of my personal life, everything’s great with me. Your invitation for this trip was a godsend. Thank you for inviting me. It has helped me focus on more constructive ideas.”

“Are you going to contest the divorce?” Gillian asked.

“No, I think not,” Ryan answered. “Our differences have

been growing ever since my graduate school days. My record with love hasn't been very good."

"What do you mean?" Gillian asked.

"I mean that I'm changing the subject," Ryan laughed. "I shouldn't do this, but I'm interested in another drink. Are you?"

Ring ring.

It was Gillian's telephone.

Ring ring.

Gillian answered the call. "Oh no," she said. "I'm so sorry to hear this? Had she been ill? Okay, we'll talk later tomorrow afternoon."

"Bad news," Gillian said turning to Ryan. "You remember Nigel, the man who discussed research with you this afternoon? He was your last appointment."

"Why, yes, of course I do," Ryan replied, "why do you ask?"

"The caller was my head of department," Gillian began to explain. "Nigel's wife died this afternoon shortly after he arrived at his home. Heart attack."

"How terrible," Ryan stated, "to be engaged in adventurous intellectual conversation, and then 30 minutes later your spouse dies.

The world is too much with us at times.”

“Absolutely!” Gillian agreed. “Tomorrow’s seminar with the faculty is postponed, by the way. Most of the faculty will want to be with Nigel; it’s a strongly bonded group.”

“I don’t mean to sound oblivious of Nigel’s loss, too self-absorbed or hard-hearted,” Ryan sad, “but since we aren’t meeting tomorrow, will it be possible for us to have that next drink?”

“I suppose so,” Gillian giggled, “but I won’t be responsible for your headache tomorrow morning or my behavior 45 minutes from now.”

“Fair enough,” Ryan laughed. “I know where the ingredients are, so let me prepare what you might call a *proper* martini.” He picked up both of their glasses and took them to the kitchen. In five minutes he carried Gillian’s glass to her, then returned to the kitchen for his.

Ryan returned, sat in his chair and placed his glass on the table beside him. He saw a framed photograph of a black man and a woman of Anglo-European descent, as best Ryan could determine. “Relatives?” he asked.

“Yes, my parents, ”Gillian answered. “My mother was a Brit,

originally from London. My father was from Nigeria. He was a geologist with Afren plc and was in London on company business --- oil. He and my mother met at the concessions bar at St. Martin's Theater; that's where *The Mousetrap* has been staged . . . forever it seems. So, making a longer tale a shorter one, they married so my ethnicity resembles your President's," she laughed.

"Biologically that's true," Ryan smiled, "but, and I mean no disrespect to my President, you're much more attractive than he is. And that's not liquor talk; furthermore, I hope you don't think I'm hitting on you."

"Too bad," Gillian said. "My loss, and that's not my liquor talking, either."

Ryan wasn't sure where the conversation should go from here.

Was Gillian joking or was she giving him an invitation? Is my thinking clear enough to recognize the difference, he asked?

"You can do better than Ryan Graves," he said. "My record with female relationships has been distinguished, but only by failures."

"Now Ryan, that has to be an exaggeration," Gillian argued.

“Oh, is it? I’ve already told you about my wife, Brooke,” Ryan rebutted. “I’d say my marriage has failed; no doubt about it. The only other love in my life was in high school, what you’d call a *comprehensive* school in the UK.”

“Her name was Haley. I thought we were destined to realize the great love of a lifetime. Isn’t that how adolescents think?”

“Yes, they do; I remember I did,” Gillian agreed. “What happened?”

“I misinterpreted her behavior and her smiles; you know how it goes with adolescents. I pestered her many times for us to get together at the mall, the movies, for a coke, and the like. A few times we’d get together, but mostly she’d turn down my invitations.”

“Did you give up too easily?” Gillian asked.

“I’d say I gave up too late. I finally realized, I should say I finally *admitted*, that she liked me well enough as a friend, but her deeper emotions were saved for someone else. I never knew who he was. After high school graduation I met her husband who was from a different city. ”

“So,” Gillian began to summarize, “Your school sweetheart, all of 17 exceedingly mature years of age, prefers someone else, and

more years later, your wife, who sounds as if she's several pence short of a shilling, goes missing from the home hearth. And you call these events proof of your failures?"

"What would you call them, if not failures?" Ryan asked.

"I'd simply call them part of your life story," Gillian answered. "That's all. They're major events in your life story, perhaps, but I would not call them the end of your life with females or possibly another marriage. Marriage has no guarantees. If you're after a guarantee, go marry some home appliance; they have guarantees!" "That is funny," Ryan admitted to Gillian, "but, seriously, I suspect my future doesn't include another love interest, and certainly not another marriage."

"Stop it Ryan," Gillian spoke harshly. "Why are you beating up on yourself? You're much too young to say pessimistic things like that. You're a handsome man, you're successful in your field, and you're also a nice guy. I 'd say you'll be a real catch for someone."

"Gillian, I don't want to embarrass you," Ryan began, slowly and controlled, "but you've seen my body, totally undressed, and

you know my physical appearance is flawed; I don't look like other men."

Gillian broke out laughing, laughing hard. "Yes that was quite the picture I saw last night!" She was still laughing. "I wish you could've seen the expression on your face."

"What I saw," Gillian continued, "was neither ludicrous nor grotesque. I simply saw this poor man surprised out of his wits, so scared he couldn't move; he was frozen."

"I can't believe you didn't see my arm," Ryan said.

"What, the one you were trying to use like a fig leaf to cover your manhood?" Gillian said, still laughing.

"Of course not," he replied. "The other arm, the arm that was just hanging there, useless, as it has for 35 years."

"Ryan, since our first meeting I've paid no notice to that, please believe me" Gillian said, now turned serious. "I can't imagine many people notice."

"I think maybe we're getting too serious," Ryan said as he emptied his glass. "I'm changing the topic again. I don't want the conversation to be all about me.

So, are we going to eat anything tonight or what?"

“Of course,” Gillian replied. “I’ll broil the plaice filets while you prepare a green salad, okay?” In a short time dinner was on the table, and in what seemed even a shorter time the dinner plates were empty.

“There were two hungry people at the table tonight,” Ryan observed.

“I think you’re correct,” Gillian agreed, “furthermore, hungry people who’ve ingested no small amount of alcohol usually eat with a heartier appetite.”

They cleaned up the dishes, utensils and pans from dinner and put them in the small, apartment-sized dishwasher.

“It’s 10:00 p.m., GMT,” Ryan said, “I’m bushed and I’m ready for bed. Are you?”

Gillian heard fire brigade sirens after Ryan’s two final words. How symbolic is that, she wondered?

Gillian walked toward her bedroom door, talking as she walked. “Yes, I’m ready, too. Sleep well and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks, you too,” Ryan answered. “First one up tomorrow morning makes the coffee, right?”

“Agreed,” Gillian said as she closed her bedroom door behind her. Once the door was shut, she leaned against it. What if I had invited him to my bed tonight, she asked herself? What would he have thought? What would he have done?

Gillian walked to her bed, remembering how she barged into Ryan’s room last night only to see him naked, and she smiled.

Down the hall, behind another closed bedroom door, Ryan was asking himself what if I had invited my self to her bed? What would she have thought? What would she have done?

He walked to his bed, remembering how she barged into his room last night only to see him naked, and he smiled.

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Ryan woke up at 4:00 a.m., feeling the unmistakable need to visit the bathroom. He sat on the side of the bed and slipped his feet into his well-worn boat shoes. As he was walking past Gillian's closed door, he accidentally stepped out of the shoe on his right foot; he tried to get his foot back into the shoe and caught his little toe on the shoe's side.

He bent down to hold the shoe open wider for his foot.

Gillian stirred, thinking she had heard an unfamiliar sound in her house. There it is again, she told herself. She sat in the side of her bed and put her feet into her house slippers. She waked to her closed door and then opened it. There was Ryan, bent over in front of her door.

"Ryan?" Gillian asked.

"Gillian?" Ryan asked.

They both started to laugh.

"Are you trying to peek at me through the keyhole?" Gillian asked.

". . .uh . . . er . . . It's my slipper . . . going to the bathroom .

. . . lost my slipper,” Ryan mumbled, still half asleep.

“Do you need some help finding the WC?” Gillian asked with a giggle. She imagined the sirens she had heard earlier in the evening sounded again.

“ Thanks but I’m okay,” Ryan said as he completed his interrupted walk to the bathroom. He closed the bathroom door, took care of his business, then opened the door and returned to his bedroom.

As he walked past Gillian’s bedroom he noticed her door was still open. Should I say something to her, he asked himself? No, skip it and go back to bed, he decided.

Ryan crawled back into his bed, stretched, and his foot felt another foot. He knew the extra foot wasn’t his. “What’s this?” Ryan said.

“It’s just me,” Gillian said. “I thought you could help me keep my feet warm. You’re the reason they’re cold.” She snuggled her body against Ryan’s. “My feet got chilled when I thought there was an intruder in the house and I got out of bed. They’re already warming up,” she said as she kissed Ryan on the cheek. She ran her hand under Ryan’s pajama coat and across his chest.

“Gillian,” Ryan said, “are you sure we should be doing this?
Are we going to ruin a good friendship?”

“Ask me in the morning,” she answered as she pulled her
penoir over her head, dropped it beside the bed, then rolled on top of
him and began kissing his lips.

When Ryan awoke the next morning he smelled layers of aromas coming from the kitchen: coffee, bacon, and sausages. He slipped his feet into his boat shoes and smiled when both feet went in easily.

“Good morning,” he said to Gillian as he walked into the kitchen.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” Gillian replied with a merry voice. “I hope you slept as soundly as I did.”

Uncertain whether he should say anything about their making love, he decided to say only, “Yes, I did. Like a bug in a rug.”

“Coffee’s ready, if you’d like a cup. I have real cream in the fridge,” Gillian offered.

“What?” Ryan asked. “No synthetic creamer that we Yanks seem to enjoy?”

“You remember my teasing you about that?” Gillian asked. “I’ll wager you remember the nub of every conversation you’ve had this year.”

“Not really,” Ryan replied, “but thanks for the flattery.”

“How do you prefer you eggs?” Gillian asked him.

“Sunny side up, please,” Ryan answered as he poured his coffee into his cup. He sat at the table, noticing that four pieces of toast were already there in a toast rack. Odd ducks, the Brits; they want their breakfast toast to cool before eating it.

Gillian served his plate at the stove, carefully lifting the eggs so that the yolks wouldn't break. Then she took four steps to Ryan and put his plate in front of him.

“I'm getting the bacon and sausage,” she said as she stepped back toward the stove. She loaded another plate with the breakfast meats and carried it to the table.

Ryan took a second drink from his coffee cup. “Excellent coffee,” he said.

They began to eat what Gillian had referred to yesterday as a “proper” breakfast.

“Let me put marmalade on a slice of toast for you,” Gillian suggested.

“Thank you.” Ryan answered. He was impressed all the more with Gillian; putting butter, jam, or marmalade on a piece of toast is a two-handed job. She anticipated his need for help and satisfied it

quickly.

“This is wonderful,” Ryan said, as he paused from eating in order to take a drink of coffee. “What kind of bacon is this; it’s the best bacon I’ve ever tasted.”

“It’s what we call bacon,” Gillian answered. “It’s cut from higher on the back of the swine than US bacon is. What you Yanks call “bacon,” we call “streaky.”

“Because of the large streaks of fat?” Ryan asked.

“Exactly,” Gillian replied.

They finished breakfast and carried the used dishes and utensils to the counter by the sink.

“Gillian,” Ryan began, “thanks for a fantastic breakfast. And, about last night, I want to tell you . . .”

Gillian held up her hand like a cop stopping traffic. “You don’t need to say anything this morning,” she smiled. “Last night was something special for me.”

“Oh, hell, Gillian, for me too; you’ll never know . . .” Ryan tried to complete his thought but Gillian stopped him again.

“Let’s save this topic for later, okay?” Gillian asked, still smiling. “Let’s leave it for the moment as the special something it

was. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ryan said, returning her smile.

Ryan moved to the guest room in Sweet Hall and met with the faculty for the next three mornings and afternoons that were on the original schedule. The group took lunch together every day across the street at the Angel and Crown, enjoying a pint with their choices of pub fare. Ryan ordered fish and chips every day, bemoaning the fact that when he returned to the States he'd suffer with poor imitations.

Gillian escorted Ryan and two or three of the faculty to dinner each night, eating at popular restaurants in the neighborhood. The conversations were spirited and there was a lot of laughter.

Ryan was having a wonderful time, temporarily forgetting the problems with Brooke that were waiting for him at home.

The inevitable day when he was to return to the US come too soon for Ryan, but he reminded himself about the beginning-of-semester chores he needed to attend to.

There was also the matter of a divorce facing him.

For better or worse, and Ryan knew very well it was the latter, it was time for his homeward bound flight.

Gillian picked him up at Henry Sweet Hall in her Mini. They crammed his luggage in the rear passenger seat and set off for Heathrow, a 45-minute drive at this time of day. Neither one of them was especially talkative during the first half of the drive.

“Gillian,” Ryan said, breaking the silence, “this has been a great time and an enjoyable visit for me; quite therapeutic I must say. I hope you and your colleagues will say it was beneficial.”

“Oh, yes, Ryan,” Gillian responded. “To a person, excepting Nigel, of course, who won’t return to campus for another week, everyone has told me how much they enjoyed you and your ideas. If our RAE rankings don’t improve, I’ll be very surprised, not to say disappointed.”

“There’s one more thing,” Ryan said, noticing that as they neared Heathrow the traffic became heavier,” that night . . .” He couldn’t finish because of Gillian’s speaking.

“Ryan, pardon my interrupting you, but I don’t want you to say anything that you think you either ought to say or should say,” Gillian said. “From the moment I met you in Philadelphia I knew you were one of those rare people in our profession.”

“Come now . . .” Ryan tried to say

“Let me finish, please,” Gillian said, smiling at him quickly with tears in her eyes. “You are a national figure in the US with enormous potential for international leadership. Your visit with the Wandsworth University faculty has only reinforced my initial impressions.”

“Gillian,” Ryan said, trying to regain a position in the conversation, “I think you . . .”

“The other night,” Gillian said, “we had something special. “Well beyond your professional attributes, I ‘m quite fond of you personally, too. You are a prismatically handsome man --- that means any way I look at you, you’re handsome: professionally, personally, academically, you name it. And, you don’t owe me anything. I didn’t ask you for any promises and don’t expect them now. If we never meet again, I’ll want you to remember that I loved you that night. When you do remember, I’ll still be loving you. You’re much more loveable than you know.”

Before Ryan could reply he saw that they were at the international terminal. Gillian was pulling up to the curb to let him out.

“Just one more thing,” Gillian said. “My husband and I

haven't been intimate for three years. I hope you don't think I jump from one bed to another."

"I thought nothing like that. To the contrary, I see you as a warm, loving person. Thank you for the airport ride, Gillian," Ryan said, a tear in his eye and catch in his voice. "Thank you for everything."

Gillian reached over to the passenger's seat, an easy task in a Mini, and kissed Ryan on the lips. "Safe journey," she said with a smile.

Ryan got out of the car and pulled the passenger seat forward so that he could get his suitcase from the back seat. "Gillian, if I look at you one more time," Ryan warned, looking at his suitcase, "I'll be reduced to a blubbering mass. As weak and puny as it sounds, thanks Gillian. You're special to me, you know."

Ryan rolled his luggage toward the terminal without daring to look back.

He couldn't see the small streams of tears running down Gillian's cheeks.

Ryan's return flights were easy. He drove his car into his garage and switched off the engine. He sat there and then breathed a

heavy sigh; this has been one hell of a long day, he told himself. I'm frazzled.

Eighteen hours ago he was saying good-bye to Gillian at Heathrow's international terminal. Now I'm home; London and Gillian seem much farther away than 18 hours, he thought. Too far.

Ryan decided he'd leave his suitcase in the trunk for later, so he pulled the strap of his briefcase over his shoulder and entered the house. The kitchen was as he left it: empty. Most of the rooms are empty or almost so, he reminded himself, thanks to Brooke.

Welcome home, Ryan, he thought . . . welcome home.

Ryan put his briefcase on the floor beside the refrigerator and hung his blazer on the kitchen doorknob. He went to the liquor cabinet and reached for a glass and then the bottle of Stolty, pouring three fingers worth. He went to the refrigerator for 5 ice cubes to chill his drink.

Ryan took his drink to the living room and the chair where he could sit. Before sitting, he put a Modern Jazz Quartet CD in the player. It was one of his favorites: MJQ 's tribute to Django Reinhardt, the great Belgian jazz guitarist.

Ryan sat in the chair collecting his thoughts, relishing Milt

Jackson's artistry on the vibes while sipping his Stoly. He was thinking about where he had been, in London with Gillian, and where he was headed, back home without Brooke.

He finished his drink and the CD at the same time. He called the Kennedys to report that he was home and would talk in more detail after he had recovered from today's long journey and the resulting jet lag. Then he went to the kitchen to refill his glass.

His drink replenished, he started the CD player again. Then he sat in the chair and entered Gillian's number.

"Hello," Gillian answered.

"Hello Gillian, it's Ryan," he said, unnecessarily.

"Ryan! Ryan! You cabbage," Gillian squealed happily, "do you really think you need to identify yourself? You think I don't know the sound of your voice?"

"Just habit I suppose," Ryan said, defending himself. "I wanted to call you to report my safe arrival. I'm home. More importantly, though, I'm thinking of you."

"You're all I've thought about since I dropped you off at the airport this morning," Gillian admitted. "That was more than 18 hours ago. It's 6:22 a.m. in London at the moment. That's 6:22 a.m.

tomorrow, from your perspective. ”

“I hope my call gets you off to a good beginning today,”

Ryan said. “I’m getting ready for bed.”

“Thanks for calling, Ryan,” Gillian said. “I’m happy, knowing that you’re home and safely so, thank God. I’m also happy that you called me. When will you call next?”

“I’ll need to recover from jet lag first. I’ll call in a couple of days,” Ryan said. “Not knowing Brooke’s status, I don’t know about mine, either.”

Ryan slept later than usual the next morning. He was living on Central Time but still sleeping on Greenwich Mean Time, a six-hour difference, so he was still a bit groggy. He shaved, showered, and dressed. Then he called the Kennedys to invite himself to lunch, something that pleased them very much.

Ryan arrived at the Kennedy's house at 11:30. Both of his in-laws were watching for him and came out the front door to greet him as soon as he turned off his car's ignition.

"Hello Professor! Welcome home," Dr. Kennedy boomed.

"Hello Ryan, it's so good to see you back in Columbus,"

Mrs. Kennedy said at the same time.

Ryan hugged them both, and then Mrs. Kennedy led everyone into the house.

"I don't mean to be rude," Dr. Kennedy said, "but let me answer what I'm sure will be among your first questions: No, we haven't heard from Brooke during your trip, I'm sorry to say."

"We've tried to telephone her friend Alexis but either she's rarely at home or she has caller I.D. and won't talk to us," Mrs.

Kennedy added.

“I’m afraid we’ll not hear from Brooke for quite awhile,” Ryan said. “If you could see how barren our house is . . . not much furniture remaining and all of her clothes gone . . . I can only conclude that the divorce petition represents all I’ll hear from her for quite awhile. I don’t know about you folks.”

The three of them went to the Victorian Tea Room for lunch, one of Mrs. Kennedys favorite restaurants in Columbus. She ordered a Canadian bacon and watercress sandwich and a cup of shrimp bisque; Dr. Kennedy had the Victorian Club Sandwich with coffee; Ryan ordered the crab quiche and a glass of iced tea. Everyone passed on dessert, but ordered coffee afterwards.

Lunch was uncomfortable for Ryan; obviously, he thought, I can’t share my relationship with Gillian with the Kennedys. Their daughter is still my wife, at least legally and if only for the time being. Consequently, he steered their questions about his trip toward the academic issues, knowing his answers would be of minimal interest to them and, therefore, brief.

They left the tea room promising to call the other when or if they heard from Brooke. They hugged again; the Kennedys went

home and Ryan began the drive to his empty house two-hours away.

On his way out of Columbus he stopped at a convenience store to buy gas and a pack of chewing gum. He hadn't smoked since his undergraduate days and knew buying gum was a wiser decision. He thought about buying a pack of cigarettes by telling himself he was under a great deal of stress which would only get worse before it got better. It's the *truth*, he said, intensifying his rationalization. Nevertheless, chewing gum was an acceptable substitute

He filled his car with gasoline then went to the convenience store to pay for the gas and get the gum. He was walking back to his car when he heard a voice call to him.

“Ryan! Ryan Graves!”

He turned to look behind him to see if the voice was at the convenience store door.

“Ryan, over here.”

He looked to his left. Three pumps behind his car there was a woman waving at him . . . it was . . . Good Lord! . . . Haley, Haley Foster!

They started walking toward each other and embraced fondly as soon as they were within their arms' reach. Haley kissed Ryan on

the cheek, then stepped back to look at him, holding his left hand, smiling broadly.

“You look great!” Haley exclaimed.

“So do you, and look at you . . . all tanned and beautiful,” Ryan replied.

“Well, we just returned from a cruise . . .” Haley was beginning to explain when a driver wanting access to her gasoline pump honked his automobile horn.

“Park your car over there,” Ryan motioned to empty space in the parking lot. “Do you have time for coffee or a coke?”

“Sure,” she said, “I’ll move my car over there and then I’ll meet you inside the store.

They parked their cars then went inside. Ryan went to the self-service coffee bar and poured himself a cup of coffee while Haley used the soda fountain to pour herself a diet soda. She arrived at an empty booth before Ryan.

“So, tell me about your life since our tenth reunion,” Haley said as Ryan sat down on his side of the booth. Ryan didn’t want to go there; his life story wasn’t something he wanted to share with anyone, especially Haley.

“Wait just a minute,” Ryan said, “you first. You told me outside ‘we just returned from a cruise.’ Are you still married to, . . .er . . . uh, . . . Dennis, was it?”

“No, not Dennis, it was *David*, David Cooper. What a loser! We’re divorced.” Haley said, with gusto and with a smile. “I could tell when you met him at our tenth reunion you didn’t like David.”

“You’re right. I didn’t think he was good enough for you. Frankly, I couldn’t understand why you picked him and not me. You don’t seem to be very broken up about your divorce from him,”

Ryan laughed.

“That’s because I’m not,” Haley said. “I’m married again, however, and I’m very, very happy. You’ll never guess who.”

“Is this a knock knock joke in reverse, like *Jeopardy* maybe?” Ryan asked. “I give an answer then you say ‘knock knock?’”

“Still a joker, aren’t you?” Haley said, laughing. “No, it’s not a set up. I’m married to the drummer from your old high school band, Jim Crane.”

“What the hell! Mrs. Jim Crane! Haley Crane!” Ryan talked so loud that the people at the other booths halted their conversations

to turn and look in Ryan's direction. "Jim Crane! Good for both of you."

"Jim's still in music. He's head of the jazz studies program at State, and he took a summer job with Festival Cruise Line as drummer for their jazz trio in the Spirit Lounge," Haley explained. "That explains my tan. We returned to the States a week ago and are in Columbus visiting family."

"What a nice surprise to bump into you this way," Ryan said.

"Can I ask one more question?"

"Of course," Haley said, "ask away."

"This is going to sound really egotistical," Ryan began hesitantly, "but . . . well . . . why didn't it work between you and me? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything, Ryan," Haley said. "I did it myself."

"Huh . . . why?" Ryan asked.

"The economy was rough, you might remember. Many businesses were having financial difficulties. My father represented Treleon Jewelry, the outfit that sells class rings, necklaces and stuff like that to high school graduates."

“So?” Ryan said. “What’s that have to do with you and me?”

“Jewelry for high school seniors is an option,” Haley said, “not a requirement for graduation. In tight financial times families have fewer discretionary dollars.”

“Which means,” Ryan began to add, “they can’t afford . . .”

“Treleon jewelry for high school graduates.” Haley said, finishing Ryan’s sentence. “Teleon was hit severely, financially. One way to save money, of course, is to cut the payroll. They let Daddy go.”

“Oh, damn,” Ryan said, “I feel so sorry for him, and for you, and for your whole family.”

“Mother took a night job at Lyreck Laboratories,” Haley explained, “just outside Columbus. Daddy took a job as a night watchman at the university; he was too old for too many jobs he applied for.”

“And,” Ryan added, “their night jobs made you stay at home and at no cost, I might add, provide child care while your parents were working night jobs.”

“Yep, you get it,” Haley said.

“Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you explain to

me?” Ryan asked.

“Oh sure, Ryan,” Haley replied. “You were in the process of becoming a star in our class. You were on your way up. You were hanging out with the popular crowd. And I was going to tell you that I couldn’t see you because my Mom was a night-time janitor, that my Dad was a night watchmen at the university and they needed me to baby-sit?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Ryan said.

“It sure as hell mattered to me,” Haley laughed. “It would have been the most embarrassing moment in my life to explain it to you.”

“I had no idea,” Ryan said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I thought there was something about me you didn’t like. I thought there was another guy.”

“Heavens no,” Haley said. “I wanted to tell you at our tenth reunion but you were so damned huffy you wouldn’t let me,” she laughed. “I was in love with you in high school, I mean I was as much in love as a 17-year old understands love.”

“I was too embarrassed,” Haley emphasized, “to tell you about my family’s financial problems. I just moped around. When

you'd ask if we could do something together, I'd say 'No' because I knew asking my parents would be useless because I was needed at home to take care of my sisters. I was desperately ashamed and didn't want to explain."

"I'll be damned," Ryan said. "I've thought all these years there was something about me --- most likely my physical appearance because of my arm --- that drove you away from me."

"Nope," Haley said. "It wasn't anything negative about you." Then she changed the subject, "What about you and Brooke? Do you have a family?"

"It's a long story," Ryan said as he started to tell Haley the low points, there being no high points, of the Brooke-Ryan saga.

"I'm so sorry for you," Haley said. "I never liked her. You deserved better. I still think you're one of the neatest guys I've ever known; Jim wouldn't mind my saying so because I know he'd agree with me."

Ryan started making end-of-visit noises so they stood. He gave Haley a friendly hug; they vowed the three of them would get together for dinner before she and Jim left Columbus.

"Call Brooke's parents. They're in the Columbus book and

they'll know how to get in touch with me," Ryan told her.

He already knew, however, he'd have a conflict with any date and any time Haley or Jim might suggest.

While he would like to see Jim, he'd already cashed his conversation coupons with Haley.

Driving home Ryan revisited the daydreams he had created over the years connecting him and Haley in marvelous imaginary trysts that would make soap opera directors shocked!

And during all those sexy daydreams she was happily married to Jim Crane! "I'll be damned!" he said aloud, laughing.

Ryan stopped at a liquor store on the outskirts of Columbus and bought a bottle of Jim Beam Black Label. This will taste good tonight, he thought.

By the time Ryan reached his garage any pleasure he had felt because of his chance meeting with Haley was gone. He was glad for her and Jim, but the contrast between her happiness with Jim and his depression with Brooke was almost more than he could handle. I hope they don't call me to schedule a dinner meeting before they leave.

Don't get so depressed now, he cautioned himself. It's going to get worse before it gets better, or have I already said that, he wondered?

Yes, you have, said the inner Ryan. I guess I'd better save my deeper depression for later, he said, responding to his inner voice.

Ryan closed the garage door and entered the bare kitchen. He went to the sink and rinsed out his glass, poured some Beam Black Label into it, then added his five ice cubes.

He didn't sleep well that night.

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Ryan thought he heard a ring ring. Yes, he was certain he did hear it. Then he heard another ring ring.

“Hello,” he said in that stifled, muffled sound people make when they are awakened from a sound sleep.

“Hello, I’m calling for Dr. Ryan Graves,” the caller said.

Ryan looked at the clock on his bedside table: 7:50 a.m.

“This is me . . . uh . . . Ryan Graves speaking.”

“Dr Graves, my name is Fowler Cathey, and I’m the executive secretary of the American Assembly of Scholarly Societies.”

“Yes, I recognize your name, Dr. Cathey,” Ryan said, “how can I help you?”

“I’m sorry to call you so early,” Dr. Cathey began, “but I wanted to speak with you before you became too engaged in the day’s activities. I have news for you, Dr. Graves, good news.”

Ryan thought, there is a God in heaven after all. Given all the bad crap I’ve been dealt recently, some good news surely would be nice.

That's what Ryan thought, but it isn't what he said to Fowler Cathey, the executive secretary of the American Assembly of Scholarly Societies.

"Oh? Good news, you say?" Ryan replied.

"We have received word from a recipient of one of our fully-funded one-year's leave of absences with pay that she cannot accept the leave after all, for personal reasons . . . she didn't explain the reasons and I didn't ask."

"I understand," Ryan said, keeping the conversational wheels turning.

"Although the beginning of the academic year is upon us," Dr. Cathey explained unnecessarily, "the selection committee has directed me to award to you the newly vacated leave of absence."

"Who is this?" Ryan asked. "Doc, is this you?"

"Dr. Graves, I can understand and appreciate your suspicion that this call is a practical joke," Cathey laughed. "This is news, nevertheless, that's very true. Let me assure you, this is not a prank telephone call. If you will call the Dean of your college and your department Chair, you'll learn that I have already notified them of this award by AASS. I called them because I know that any leave of

absence from almost any university requires approval at several administrative levels. I was giving them a ‘heads up.’”

“That’s thoughtful of you, but why me?” Ryan asked.

“The proposal you submitted last year for a leave of absence funded by AASS was nearly approved. The selection committee was split; had there been sufficient funds for 11 instead of the normal 10 leaves, your proposal would have been funded. Now that one of the awardees cannot utilize her leave for the coming academic year, the selection committee was pleased that it was in a position to offer it to you.”

“Holy sh .. ,!” Ryan caught his language. “Fantastic! I can’t believe this! This is wonderful, Dr. Cathey, thank you so much,” Ryan said, now fully awake and totally enthused.

“Both your Dean and department Chair have assured me that there are administrative procedures available on your campus for emergency personnel actions like the rapid approval of your leave. Consequently, Dr. Graves, if you are still interested in a leave with pay for the coming academic year, AASS is prepared to fund your proposal.”

“Well . . . uh . . . yes . . . I mean, I do. Yes, I’m still

interested. And thank you, and please thank the selection committee for me,” Ryan stammered.

“If you’ll notify your department Chair that you’re accepting the AASS leave of absence,” Dr. Cathey explained, “he’ll take care of the ensuing administrative steps required for approval. Congratulations, Dr. Graves, and best wishes during your year of research.”

Ryan changed his plans for going to his campus office for the day. He called his department Chair and told him that he was accepting the AASS leave of absence.

“Ryan, your acceptance doesn’t surprise me,” the department chair said. “Your turning it down, on the other hand, would have both surprised as well as disappointed me, though.”

‘I was afraid you wouldn’t have enough time to find anyone to cover my classes,” Ryan said.

“Ryan, department Chairs do a lot of things . . . solving personnel issues is only one. This award is great for you and your research agenda; it’s also a feather in the cap for the department. As usual, you’ve added luster to our department and university at a national level. AASS leaves are damned difficult to obtain. We’re

proud of you, as I hope you know. Congratulations.”

Ryan went to the bathroom to shave and shower, then put on his predictable khakis, navy blue polo, and penny loafers. He drove to Shorty’s Grill for coffee and the morning newspaper.

“Hey Doc Graves. Good morning,” the greeter at the cash register said, “getting a late start today?”

“Hey Shorty,” Ryan replied. “The governor called this morning and told me to slow down because I’m shaming all of the other faculty on campus.”

“That’s a good one, Doc,” Shorty laughed, “good to see you this morning. Here’s the paper,” he said, handing Ryan one of the morning papers delivered hours earlier.

Ryan took the paper and went to his favorite booth in the corner, the booth with windows on two sides. The server brought him a pot of coffee and a pitcher of real cream, something he had insisted on when he returned from his London trip. No more creamer; real cream tastes better.

Real cream also reminded him of Gillian.

Ryan scanned the front page, then went straight to the Sports section. The Cardinals split a double header with the Cubs yesterday,

dammit. Well, he thought, all of the news can't be as great as what I've already had this morning. He sipped his coffee; when the server returned he asked if Ryan was ready to order.

"Two poached eggs, soft, on a toasted whole wheat English muffin with a banana on the side, and a small OJ," Ryan said.

"Thanks Doc, you never change, huh?" the server said.

"My breakfast ain't broke, Wayne," Ryan said smiling, "Why fix it?"

Wayne laughed as if he'd never heard Ryan's well-used breakfast joke before and then took the order to the grill cook.

Wayne brought Ryan's breakfast to the corner booth, humming "Satin Doll." Ryan smiled, "Wayne I'll bet you're the only server in town who hums "Satin Doll" while you work."

"Doc," Wayne replied, "I'll bet I'm the oldest server in town . . . old enough to know Duke Ellington's music."

Ryan finished his breakfast and poured another cup of coffee. He reached in his front left pocket and pulled out his cell phone, then entered Gillian's number.

"Hello?" Ryan heard Gillian's familiar voice answer her phone.

“Is this Buckingham Palace?” Ryan asked.

“No, this is the gents’ toilet at the Savoy Hotel,” Gillian answered. “Are you looking for someone in particular?”

“Not especially,” Ryan said, “any old chamber maid will do just fine.”

“Good afternoon Ryan,” Gillian laughed, “what brings your call his way?”

Ryan explained about the AASS funding for an academic year leave of absence. Gillian shrieked in joy.

“This is wonderful,” she was finally able to say. “Wait until I tell my colleagues at dear old Wandsworth U. They’ll be impressed, and rightfully so, I might add. I am so happy for you; if you were here I’d give you a big hug.”

“Can you put that hug in the fridge and keep it fresh for a later date?” Ryan asked.

“That’s not necessary,” Gillian answered. “I have many more hugs for you where that one came from, and they’ll all be fresh and covered with morning dew when they’re needed.”

“I’ll remember that and I warn you, Gillian, I plan to collect,” Ryan laughed.

They ended their conversation, too soon Gillian said; Ryan promised to call her as she had insisted, “within the fortnight.”

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Ryan spent the next several days organizing the notes and reprints he had collected for the research he would complete with his AASS leave of absence. I've taken on an ambitious agenda for nine months' effort, he was telling himself as he heard his telephone: ring ring, ring ring. He flipped open his phone. "Hello?" he said.

"Hello Ryan, it's Brooke."

"Yes Brooke," Ryan said. "What's up?"

"Ryan," Brooke replied in a cool, business-like voice. "I've sent you a pack of materials, registered mail, and I'm calling to alert you about it."

"Oh? What is it that's so important you'd send it to me by registered mail?" Ryan asked.

Brooke's reply was very calm and business-like: "Papers that will make you happy, I'll bet. They're divorce papers."

"Brooke, a divorce won't necessarily make me happy. We haven't had a chance to talk about you and me, or our relationship, or our marriage. How can you decide all by yourself that a divorce is the best thing for us?" Ryan asked.

“I’m not by myself. I’m not alone,” Brooke said. “I’ve explained everything about you and me to the Family Council; they agree divorce is best.”

“Who --- or what --- in God’s name is the Family Council?” Ryan asked.

“Ryan, I’ll not tell you again: don’t use blasphemous language with me,” Brooke warned.

“Okay. I’ll try again. Brooke, can you tell me who --- or what --- is the Family Council?”

“That’s much better,” Brooke said calmly. “The Family Council is an elected group of 12 family members who advise The Prophet.”

Ryan hesitated. Who in hell is The Prophet? What has she gotten herself into? Brooke’s language was hinting at a religious context and he surmised --- given her recent personality changes --- she would not be dissuaded about any decision made by The Family Council.

“I’ll be looking for the mail, Brooke,” Ryan said. “Thanks for making me aware of it.”

She has flipped, he thought as he shook his head in disbelief.

What in the world happened? I had no idea she was headed in this direction; what caused this to happen to us?

“Are you looking for this section of the newspaper?” Brooke asked as she held up the business section?”

“No, thanks,” Ryan answered. “Actually, I’m looking for the arts section, the section with the book reviews.”

“Ryan, you promised you wouldn’t buy any more books until you got rid of some. Your study has books piled on top of books piled on top of even more books,” Brooke said laughing. “Can’t you donate some books to the library at dad’s former church?”

“Dear, we’ve discussed this before,” Ryan began. “No church library wants a copy of ‘Metaphors and Upper Midwest Social Discourse’ or any other books like it.”

“I give up, then,” Brooke said. “There’s no changing you.” She chuckled gently.

“Would you really want to change me after all these years?” Ryan asked, smiling. “You should’ve thought ahead when you asked me for that New Year’s Eve date.”

“For the umpteenth time, Ryan, I didn’t ask you, you asked

me. And of course I don't want you to change, silly," Brooke answered. "Celebrating 50 years of marriage ought to be proof to anyone who might care that we've made our separate peace with each other's uniqueness."

"I might add, 50 of the best vintage years," Ryan said.

"Yes, my sweet, 50 of the best vintage years," Brooke said as she reached her right hand across the lamp table separating their chairs. She held his wrinkled, liver-spotted left hand in hers.

The doorbell interrupted Ryan's reading an article he had downloaded a month ago and finally had the time to study. He put a check mark beside a paragraph to mark his place. He opened the door and there was his mail carrier with a registered package requiring signature confirmation. Ryan signed the delivery receipt and took the package back to his new recliner to sit.

The return address showed the mail was from Brooke, very likely the mail she had called to alert him was on the way. He opened the large envelope. He thumbed through the papers: Uncontested Divorce Petition, Property Division, Division of Bills, Handling Debts, Alimony, Name Change . . . Ryan stopped. There

were more papers but he had seen enough for the time being.

Brooke had downloaded the forms that needed to be filled out in order to file for a divorce. Divorcing one's partner has become so routine that now it's available on-line. And some wonder why the divorce rate increases annually; look how easy it is, Ryan observed. One quarrel and the more hotheaded spouse can file for divorce without even considering other solutions.

Brooke had obviously made her decision and wasn't interested in counseling or reconciliation. Ryan went to the kitchen, reached for the liquor cabinet, but then changed his mind and made a cup of tea, steeping the bag in his new cup for 6 minutes to make sure it would be good and strong.

Ryan finished his tea while he paged through the divorce papers. Brooke wanted no alimony, she wanted the restoration of her family's name, and wanted only the property that she had in her current possession. Ryan stopped reading the forms.

All I have to do is sign my name on the lines where Brooke, or someone, had

stuck “Sign here” post-it notes. And then in 20 days our divorce is final? This is too easy, Ryan thought.

This is too much, Ryan thought. It’s all happened so fast. Friday night used to be a special night for us, Ryan reminded himself; we’d celebrate the end of the week by getting a pizza. Tonight it’s an early-to-bed Friday night.

He slept restlessly that night.

Shortly after brewing the morning coffee, Ryan poured his first cup. Before Ryan took a sip of coffee Dr. Kennedy made what had become his routine Saturday morning telephone call to Ryan. “Good morning, son,” Dr. Kennedy said. “Did you have a good week?”

“Hello Doc,” Ryan answered. “Yes, I’ve had a productive week I guess.”

“Have you heard from . . .” Dr. Kennedy started to ask?

“ . . . Yes I heard from Brooke yesterday,” Ryan answered. “She mailed divorce papers to me for my signature.”

“I thought she would’ve had her attorney get in touch with you,” Dr. Kennedy said.

“When she first mentioned the word ‘divorce,’ that’s what I would have anticipated, too,” Ryan explained, “but all of the necessary papers are available on the internet these days. Apparently, all that’s required of me are my signatures and my check for \$150. After signing the uncontested divorce papers, I deliver them to the County Clerk and then in 20 days our divorce is finalized.”

“Has she discussed any of these arrangements with you?” Dr. Kennedy asked. “But then, to ask that question is to answer it I suppose.”

“Correct,” Ryan answered. “As best I can figure, the advice and counsel she’s received is from the people she’s living with now at that church’s retreat center. I don’t know that she’s had any legal assistance.”

“This divorce business is so far removed from what we imagined for you and Brooke,” Dr. Kennedy said in a sympathetic tone. “I thought you two were destined for one of the classic ‘. . . and they lived happily ever after.’ stories”

“Instead, we wound up with the Fickle Finger of Fate Award,” Ryan said trying to be humorous. “I would never have

predicted our divorce and I don't pretend to understand what happened. Brooke is different, of that I'm sure."

"We thought Brooke was the perfect daughter," Dr. Kennedy added, "she always had a pleasant disposition, did well in school at all levels, was a wonderful teacher, and we thought she was a terrific partner for you."

"I agree with everything you've said," Ryan replied, "what's more, she was instrumental in helping me find my identity in high school. She helped me to reach higher, to imagine, to aspire."

"Are you going to contest the divorce?" Dr. Kennedy asked.

"I've thought about that question from the moment Brooke told me about her plan for our divorce until you called this morning," Ryan answered, "as you might suspect, I slept very little last night, thinking"

"And you've decided . . . ?" Dr. Kennedy asked.

"I'm going to cooperate and sign everything," Ryan answered. "Brooke wants a divorce or is being advised to get a divorce, and I have no desire to put up another barrier for her to surmount. My agreeing to an uncontested divorce is something I can do that I think will be helpful to her in the long run. She has more

than enough emotional baggage in her life right now; even more important than our marital status, I hope she'll get the professional help I think she needs."

"I respect that, and we share the sentiment," Dr. Kennedy said. "Furthermore, please remember, son, as you've already suggested, the Brooke we're seeing today is not the Brooke we've known."

"Doc, do you think the Brooke we used to know will ever return?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know; I hope so. The safe return of the former Brooke is one of my daily prayers," Dr. Kennedy answered.

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Ryan signed all of the required forms and attached a check for \$150; he hand-delivered the packet of materials to the County Clerk August 12. In 20 days, he told himself, our divorce will be finalized. I'll be a single person again. So will Brooke.

September 9 Ryan received a telephone call from Brooke's friend, Alexis Claiborne, reporting that the dissolution of his marriage to Brooke had been approved and the divorce is final.

"Thanks for sharing the news," Ryan said, "I assume the County Clerk called Brooke since she was the petitioner."

"Yes, the County Clerk's office called Brooke yesterday afternoon" Alexis agreed.

"Alexis, I don't mean to be rude to you, but why are you calling me?" Ryan asked. "Why isn't Brooke calling me?"

"Ryan, Brooke asked me to call you, as a special favor to her. She said she was too emotionally distraught to talk with you," Alexis replied.

". . . hmmm," Ryan paused. "Distraught? I hope Brooke will feel better soon," Ryan said, "good-bye."

“I’LL BE DAMNED!” Ryan yelled after he ended the telephone call. “She’s emotionally distraught? Like I’m not?”

Ryan stomped to the front door and left the house; maybe a walk around the block will help me calm down, he thought.

He was right. After his walk he came back to his house and went to the kitchen to brew a cup of tea. He carried the full mug to the living room and put it on the table beside his new recliner.

Before sitting down he went to the CD player and looked for one of his Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers CDs, the one with Bobby Watson and David Schnitter on alto and tenor sax, respectively.

He sat, sipped his tea, and buried his unhappiness in the music. He hummed along with the music; Coltrane’s influences were clear, he thought.

Calmer now, Ryan called the Kennedys to give them a report concerning Alexis’ news. Although they knew news about the finalization of the divorce was due at any time now, confirmation of the finalization deepened their sadness.

The next day Ryan returned to his research and during the next month he made substantial progress on the manuscript he was revising, which was the primary goal of his AASS proposal.

His only interruption had been the telephone call from Alexis on September 9.

As the calendar approached Halloween, Ryan was satisfied that his progress was, in fact, almost remarkable since the telephone call from Alexis cost him at least a week of imperfect focus and concentration.

Ryan invited April Noyes, a new faculty member in the Anthropology department to join him Halloween night to dole out the goodies to the trick or treat kids in his neighborhood. He prepared some cheese and crackers and had some wine, a California chardonnay, they would sample in between the rings of the doorbell.

They had a pleasant time. April was a world-class conversationalist, being one of the most widely read people Ryan had met in years. He thought he might try to see her again, but he wasn't sure.

Throughout the first half of November he continued to bury himself in his research. He paused to eat an infrequent meal now and

then and to sleep. He drank a lot of coffee and was only slightly aware that his eating habits weren't healthy ones; his mind was elsewhere.

Dr. Kennedy made his routine Saturday morning call.

"Happy week-end, professor," Dr. Kennedy said, "do you ever take a day off?"

"Not often," Ryan replied, "I'm a dull grunge, but I'm getting the most out of my leave of absence. 'Every day I don't work is a lost day I'll never regain.'"

"Son, you're a workaholic. We worry about you," Dr. Kennedy confessed. "You know what they say about all work and no play . . ."

"Yes sir, I've heard that one. It's probably true," Ryan said. He wanted to add that Brooke had obviously decided much earlier just how dull he could be, but he thought it might be a bit too soon after the divorce for Brooke jokes.

"This is the year all of the Kennedys go to my mother's for Thanksgiving," Dr. Kennedy said. "Could you tear yourself away from your new desk long enough to go with us?" Dr. Kennedy asked.

“I ‘d love to go with you,” Ryan replied, “ and I would appreciate having time with you and Mrs. K., but I’ve already accepted an invitation for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Darn! That’s our loss!” Dr Kennedy said. “I was too late in asking you, wasn’t I? I respect your honoring your first invitation, though. We’ll call you when we’re back in town. I hope the three of us can get together sometime before Christmas.”

“That would be great,” Ryan said with almost too much enthusiasm to be honest. “I’ll talk to you when you return.” They exchanged good-byes.

Actually, Ryan did not have an invitation to anyone’s house Thanksgiving Day. He disliked himself for not telling Dr. Kennedy the truth, but he didn’t want to go to Grandma Kennedy’s for Thanksgiving dinner, or go anywhere else, for that matter. He simply was not in a celebratory mood, for Thanksgiving or for anything else.

As Thanksgiving Day approached, he remembered the first Thanksgiving he and Brooke celebrated as a married couple. They shared a four-dollar bottle of wine, cut a Cornish hen in half, used a boxed dressing mix, opened a can of jellied cranberry sauce, and

heated a jar of chicken gravy. It was a joyful day with absolutely scrumptious food, they thought.

This year, however, Thanksgiving would be different.

Ryan took his time getting around and organized Thanksgiving morning. He shaved, showered, and dressed casually for the holiday he would scarcely observe.

At 12:45 p.m. he fixed himself a Bloody Mary and watched a parade on his new flat screen TV. He had seen in the morning newspaper that the Thrift-Way Foods supermarket at the mall was serving a Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings, eat-in or take-out, for only \$6.75.

A second Bloody Mary cheered him up enough that he called the supermarket to order a take-out Thanksgiving dinner. The clerk who answered the telephone was very apologetic and explained to him that, unfortunately, the Thanksgiving dinner special was no longer available; prior orders had used up all of the entrees and side dishes.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the clerk told Ryan, “but our Thanksgiving dinner cupboard is bare. We had no idea our

Thanksgiving special would be so popular. Thanks, however, for calling Thrift-Way Foods.”

Ryan flipped his cell phone shut and stuck it in his pocket. I’m not hungry anyway, he told himself as he went to the kitchen to make another Bloody Mary. He carried his drink to the living room and restarted the CD player; the Art Blakey CD was still in play.

Ryan was concentrating on the saxophones. Schnitter and Watson are two of the coolest horn players I’ve ever heard, he thought; They blow me away. He sipped his Bloody Mary, smiling during his entertainment.

Ring ring. Ring ring.

He reached in his khakis and pulled his cell phone out of the pocket.

Who would call me on Thanksgiving Day he questioned himself? Someone else who’s celebrating a solo?

“Hello,” Ryan answered.

“Hello there, distinguished scholar of linguistics Professor Ryan Graves; Gillian Davies here.”

Ryan sat in his chair, holding his cell phone against his ear. It was either the alcohol or the quality of the connection, he couldn’t

decide which, but he thought he heard the caller say “. . .Gillian Davies . . .”

“Who . . . ah . . . who is this?” he asked.

“Hi Ryan, it’s me, Gillian, calling from Putney.”

“Oh, . . . Gillian! . . . Gillian! How great to hear your voice!”

Ryan exclaimed. “I’m delighted that you’ve called.”

“I thought you hadn’t heard me identify myself and you were about to end the call too early to suit me,” Gillian said. “How are you getting along?” she asked. “Are you enjoying your sabbatical?”

“You just asked me two questions,” Ryan replied. “The answers are: to the first question I ‘d say I’m barely getting by; to the second question, I’m enjoying my leave of absence enormously.”

“Oh, why the split decision?” Gillian asked.

“Well, I don’t want to waste too much of our conversation on this,” Ryan said, “but I’m divorced now.”

“Oh, that’s too bad, I guess, ” Gillian responded. “What happened?”

“It’s a long, dreary story. She initiated our divorce,” Ryan explained, “and I didn’t contest it. My ex-wife has some serious emotional issues to deal with, and I hope she will.”

“So then, she was the one who stepped around the wedding vows,” Gillian observed.

“I suppose you could say that,” Ryan agreed. “But remember, I promised to love her through good times and bad, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, but I draw the line at wacko and bizarre.”

“I’m sorry for you, Ryan,” Gillian said, “you deserve better. You will remember, won’t you, that I love you. Remember what I said at Heathrow?”

“I remember,” Ryan said.

“I called this evening because I know you Yanks are celebrating your Thanksgiving holiday today,” Gillian said. “I thought I’d call you and wish you a happy Thanksgiving. Is that the custom observed in the States? I mean, doesn’t one wish a happy Thanksgiving to friends and family in the U.S.?”

“Yes, we often do that,” Ryan replied, “however, you’re the first to say it to me so far. I haven’t left my house all day.”

“You’re not part of a larger group enjoying dinner at a bountiful table?” Gillian asked.

“Hardly,” Ryan answered. “So far today I’ve eaten three stalks of celery . . . and they were garnishes in my Bloody Marys.”

“Ryan, I certainly wouldn’t call three celery stalks marinated in vodka and tomato juice a meal . . . or even a snack,” Gillian scolded. “Now I understand better what you meant when you said you were ‘just getting by.’ All you’ve ingested today has been three Bloody Marys. You ought to take better care of yourself, you know.”

“I know, I know,” Ryan replied. “I probably need someone to watch over me until I get back on my feet emotionally.”

“Would I do?” Gillian asked.

“Would you do what?” Ryan asked in return.

“I mean, would you consider me a qualified candidate for the position of someone to watch over you?” Gillian asked.

“Gillian, you’re awfully nice, but . . .”

“ . . . don’t call me ‘nice,’ please, Ryan,” Gillian interrupted and spoke tersely, “in our last conversation I told you what I feel for you. I meant it then, Ryan, and I still mean it this evening.”

“I know. I’ve been replaying our last conversation in my mental CD player for many weeks,” Ryan admitted.

“Then why don’t you come see me?” Gillian asked. “A live performance is always more satisfying than a recording.”

“What?” Ryan asked.

“You heard me, clearly I suspect,” Gillian said teasingly.

“Ryan, one can’t work every day, hour, or minute during a sabbatical, not even you. Come to London, please. Let’s eat at some fine restaurants, see some shows in London’s west end, and take some walks. Let’s hug and kiss like teen-agers. You need some personal time.”

“I can’t,” Ryan said, “I still have a lot of work to complete.”

“Ryan, that answer simply won’t stand,” Gillian rebutted.

“The Ryan Graves I know will always have work to finish up.”

“A trip sounds tempting, quite tempting,” Ryan said. “Let me sleep on it, okay?”

“Yes, you sleep on it, then ring me about this time tomorrow and tell me you’ve made the arrangements for your flight to Heathrow,” Gillian said.

“Okay, I’ll call tomorrow,” Ryan said.

“One more thing before we ring off,” Gillian said.

“Remember how much I want you to say ‘Okay, Gillian, I’m coming.’ Please make me happy, Ryan. I’m already looking forward to tomorrow’s call from you. Ta-ta,” she said, ending the call.

I didn't even thank her for calling, Ryan said to himself in dismay; what kind of jerk am I becoming? Thinking he owed himself some kind of answer, he said I'm a hungry jerk. Gillian was right, of course; three celery stalks hardly qualify as food.

Ryan looked in the yellow pages of his telephone directory to see if any pizza restaurants provided home delivery. Mama Rosa's Authentic Italian Pizza advertised home delivery, so Ryan called Mama Rosa's. In 45 minutes he had a medium-sized vegetarian pizza with extra artichokes and extra garlic sauce for Thanksgiving dinner; he ate three pieces, and then he took a nap.

Ryan lay on his new couch, waking slowly from his nap, wondering why he asked for extra garlic sauce. His mouth tasted like how he imagined the bottom of a bird cage might taste. Why did I ask for the extra garlic? Because I like it, he told himself.

He looked at his watch and saw that he'd slept through the night on his couch; it was 7:45 a.m.

Because of the three Bloody Marys, his memory of yesterday's conversation with Gillian was, at best, sketchy. He remembered they had discussed the possibility of his spending some time in London.

He couldn't remember, though, whether he said Yes or No.

He stood up, shaking his head at his poor memory and wrinkled clothes. He went into the kitchen to make coffee and was surprised that he didn't have a headache from yesterday's Bloody Marys. While the coffee was percolating he went to the front door to get the morning newspaper.

Ryan sat in one of the chairs he bought for his new kitchen table and started to glance his way through the first three sections of

the newspaper. When he heard the tiny beep beep beep of the coffee maker, he got up and poured a cup, adding a small amount of cream.

He was having trouble concentrating on the fourth section, Sports. His mind wandered to Haley and Jim Crane, wondering where they spent Thanksgiving Day. I hope they had a good time, he said to himself. And, what about the Kennedys? If anyone deserved a pleasant Thanksgiving, the Kennedys did.

What about Brooke? Indeed, what about Brooke was a huge question. Her new family no doubt surrounded her with some kind of support, and she and they were not wondering about Ryan.

And where was I, Ryan asked? Home. Alone. Lonely. Feeling sorry for myself.

He finished reading the morning newspaper and then after shaving and showering he put on clean clothes. It was an important shower because it was in the shower that he made an important decision.

Ryan drove to the grocery store to pickup a few meal items. When he arrived home he put away the groceries, then he went to his study and picked up the book he had started to read the day before

yesterday. Gillian's call yesterday afternoon kept him from making much sense of what he was reading.

At 5:00 p.m. he went to the kitchen and brewed a cup of tea. Waiting for the tea to steep in the cup, he sat in a kitchen chair. He thought about the decision he'd made in the shower earlier in the day. It's 11:00 p.m. in London; I hope she's awake.

Ryan took his telephone out of his left pants pocket and placed a call to Gillian's home number.

"Hello, Ryan," Gillian answered.

"How did you know who was calling?" Ryan asked.

"Yesterday you told me you'd ring me at this time. I take you at your word. " "Of course, as you should." Ryan lied. "See how punctual I am?" Ryan lied again. He was playing fast and loose with his memory and was moderately successful, so far.

"Well?" Gillian asked.

"Well what?" Ryan asked in return.

"Ryan," Gillian said impatiently, "don't be so damn coy, please. Are you or are you not coming to London?"

Ryan faked it: first, pretending he remembered he was to call Gillian today at this time and, second, with a decision about his traveling to London.

What am I going to do, he asked himself? I have the money and the time. In nanoseconds Ryan reviewed the wisdom of going to London to be with Gillian.

Do I want or need to begin another relationship? Is Gillian someone with whom I want to share a part of my life . . . or all of it?

“I’m calling my travel agent first thing tomorrow morning to book my flights to London, if, that is, you could find me a room at an inn or a bed and breakfast in Putney, Wandsworth, or Richmond. Southfields could work, too. Southfields is just a short train ride to Putney, if that’ll help.”

“Thank you, Ryan, but I think I know my way around south London,” Gillian said lightheartedly. “My finding a B & B is nothing for you to worry about. I’ll take care of everything.”

Given the lateness of the hour in London, Gillian’s voice sounded surprisingly alert and almost playful, Ryan thought.

The next morning Ryan left the house early for some personal business. He went to the drive-up window at Starbucks for a large, or in Starbuckese, *venti*, *caffè latte*. He put the cup in the recessed drink holder in the car's console and drove to Tour de Franz, his travel agency, owned by some guy named Franz Hart. He arrived at 8:45, leaving fifteen minutes to wait until the agency's door was open for business.

He sat in the parking lot drinking his latte and thinking about Gillian and how she introduced herself in Philadelphia because she wanted to discuss some ideas with him. She was instrumental in his earlier trip to London so that her colleagues might benefit from talking with him. She had recognized him as a prominent linguist, one who could assist her department in raising its RAE ranking.

Throughout their association she had been focused on him. She had been concerned about his poor self-image; she had been solicitous of his views, feelings, and attitudes, both professional and personal.

Why did she call me Thanksgiving Day, he wondered?

Ryan took the final drink from his cup of latte. I forgot, he laughed to himself, she's also seen me naked . . . and she still wants me to come for a visit? He laughed out loud.

The agency's front door opened. One of the agents was coming outside to get the morning newspaper. It was his agent; she waved for him to follow her inside to her office.

The quickest connections to the UK were from Kansas City to Chicago to Gatwick Airport, about 30 miles south of London. He'd arrive at Gatwick Friday morning at 10:09. He laughed again at the precision of the flight's scheduled arrival time. When he returned home he called Gillian's number and left his itinerary on her answering machine.

"If need be, I can ride the bus from Gatwick to south London," he said to her recorder. "You shouldn't feel as if you must be at the airport to greet me. I can manage on the bus, or the tube, or taxis."

After waiting through four agonizingly long days, Ryan completed his flights to the UK without a hitch. He deplaned at Gatwick and rode the elevated bus to the terminal, where he went to

the carousel for incoming baggage. He stood beside the conveyor belt looking for his luggage.

“Hello, sailor, are you new in town?” a familiar voice said from behind him. He turned, and there she was, Gillian! “Give us a hug,” she said. She reached up and hugged him, hugged him seriously. He hugged her as well.

They kissed passionately.

“Despite what I may have said in my message on your answering machine, I’m glad you could meet me here,” Ryan said.

“Ryan, there was no way in hell I was going to leave you to your own devices to get from Gatwick to London, and then on to my house,” Gillian said.

Ryan had never seen a smile as wide as Gillian’s. One possible exception might be a painted, exaggerated smile on a clown’s face at the circus. Gillian’s smile wasn’t painted; it was real. She’s truly glad to see me, Ryan said to himself.

“Do you fancy driving the car to London?” Gillian asked.

“No, but thanks for the offer,” Ryan replied. “If I should nod off, I’d rather be in the passenger’s seat, not the driver’s.”

“Of course. I know how tiring the flight from the US to the UK can be,” Gillian said. “I’ll have you at your bed and breakfast within the hour.”

The next 45 minutes they drove north to London, chatting about the weather, Ryan’s sabbatical, and Gillian’s happiness to have him beside her in her car. They took the exit Gillian was looking for and quickly Ryan saw familiar landmarks in Putney. Gillian drove her car into the graveled driveway in front of her house.

“Here we are,” she said, her smile not showing any signs of diminishing.

“This is your house,” Ryan remarked. “I thought you said you’d find me a bed and breakfast not too far from you.”

“Yes, I did say that, and here it is. You’ll not be too far from me. You’ll be in the bedroom next to mine, as a matter of fact,” Gillian beamed, “for how many nights remains to be seen.”

“Gillian, what will people say?” Gay asked.

“What other people might say bothers me? Not in the least, I’m sure! My colleagues in the department will only wonder how long it might take one of us to cross the other’s threshold,” Gillian laughed.

She looked at Ryan's face carefully to see if she could interpret his feelings about what she had just said. He was smiling.

Together they managed to get Ryan's luggage inside her house and then to the guest room. After hanging a few items in the closet, Ryan sat on the side of the bed and looked at Gillian.

"What I'm going to suggest is how I think people avoid jet lag, or at least a couple of degrees of jet lag" Ryan said.

"And that is?" Gillian replied, still showing her Cheshire grin.

"I cannot and must not take a nap, although I feel the need for one," Ryan answered. "Instead, let's take the tube to Knightsbridge and go to Harrods tea room for high tea . . . or for lunch if you'd prefer."

"Tea will be fine," Gillian answered. "I don't want us to have lunch because I've planned a special dinner; it's one of your favorites, I believe."

They made their way on the underground to Knightsbridge and then took the short walk on Brompton Road to Harrods. Ryan steered them through the food halls, a sight that never stopped impressing him. They rode the elevator, the *lift* Gillian insisted good

naturedly, up to the tearoom and then had tea with marvelous cookies and strawberries with cream.

The train ride back to the East Putney underground station, bouncing the riders back and forth, almost put Ryan to sleep. The walk to Gillian's house, only seven blocks, revived him.

"Another cup?" Gillian asked as they entered her house.

"Yes, that would be nice," Ryan answered.

They each had two cups of tea, talking about Harrods department store, the advantages or disadvantages of Gatwick airport vs. Heathrow International, the research productivity of Gillian's department, and Ryan's sabbatical.

"Oh, my gosh," Gillian said, looking at her watch. "Look at the time. What does your watch say?" she asked Ryan.

"Tick tock tick tock," Ryan replied with a deadpan expression on his face.

Gillian groaned, "Oh, Ryan. That's an awful joke. My watch is quartz-run and it only hums."

"Of course it hums; it doesn't know the words" Ryan answered.

Gillian stood up, “Okay, I’ve had enough! You sound like a character in a Christmas pantomime. Come on, let’s go. My watch has 5:45 and I really don’t care what the time is according to your watch. We’re going to dinner.” She laughed and was obviously enjoying herself.

“We’re walking, right after I make a comfort stop,” Gillian said. Ryan made a pit stop, also, and then they hiked off to Putney Center. The Olde Spotted Horse on Putney High Street was a pub Ryan remembered from his previous trip because it had great fish and chips, he thought. He ordered a pint of Yorkshire Bitters to accompany his fish. Gillian asked for a Newcastle Brown Ale.

As they walked leisurely back to her house, Gillian put her right arm through Ryan’s left.

“Did you enjoy your fish and chips?” she asked.

“Enormously,” Ryan responded. “As usual, you had a great idea. That was a good place for my first dinner on this trip.” Gillian squeezed his arm and nestled her head against his shoulder.

“I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am tonight,” Gillian said. As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Ryan realized that

he hadn't had an unhappy thought about the status of his life since his trip began back in Kansas City.

"I understand," Ryan said as he lifted his arm away from Gillian's grasp and put his arm around her shoulder. "I'm happy, too."

When they arrived at Gillian's house she reached in her purse for the key to the front door. She opened the door and Ryan followed her inside, showing his gaping mouth with a world-class yawn.

"I'm not bored with the company," Ryan apologized. "It's just that it's been a long day for me and I'm hoping I can get to bed before falling asleep."

"I know, you poor thing," Gillian replied. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Ryan answered with a kiss on her lips. Gillian's enormous smile returned.

Ryan excused himself and went to his room. He groggily slipped out of his shoes and clothes, throwing his clothes in the chair beside his bed. He climbed into bed still wearing his undershirt and his Calvin Klein briefs.

The next morning Ryan awoke to the sounds of the traffic on Upper Richmond Road. As he regained his senses from his deep sleep, he realized there was another person in bed with him.

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Ryan looked to his right and saw a head with coal black hair.

He reached across his body and gave the head a gentle shake.

“Pardon me lady, but haven’t we met before?” he asked.

‘Yes, I’m happy to say, we have,’ the groggy head said as it turned toward him

“Why bless my sainted mother’s *Bible*,” Ryan said, “if it isn’t Gillian Davies. Good morning,” Ryan muttered as he reached over and kissed her. Gillian put her arms around him and kissed him back.

“Tea?” Gillian asked.

“Tea? Now? Are you bloody serious?” Ryan asked.

“Absolutely,” Gillian answered as she got out of bed and put on her robe. “I want us to be wide-awake when, you know, when we . . . er . . . more intimately and officially celebrate your return to London,” she said.

“Here’s something I bought for you when I knew you were coming,” she said, reaching under the bed for a green shopping bag. She pulled from the bag a white terry cloth robe with the Harrods logo on the left breast pocket and handed it to him.

They went downstairs to the kitchen and Gillian made tea. Ryan went to the living room and turned on the television looking for Saturday morning news.

“Tea’s ready, Ryan,” she called to him as she poured his cup full.

Gillian was filling her cup as Ryan entered the room and sat at the kitchen table.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Gillian asked.

“Actually, pretty good,” Ryan replied. “I’ve learned on my travels to adopt the local time as my own as soon as possible. So, instead of napping after a long flight, I try to stay awake until the locals go to bed.”

He walked to the kitchen and sat at the dining table.

“I’m glad you feel good,” Gillian said, sitting down. “It’s so wonderful for me to look across my kitchen table and see you looking back.”

“I think it’s especially nice to look at the person beside me in bed and see that it’s you,” Ryan said with a smile.

“Ryan, I do wish you’d stop connecting me with the word ‘nice,’” Gillian said. “My feelings for you are much more than a tad stronger than ‘nice.’”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said. “I don’t know if my use of that word is a Freudian quirk or not.”

“Why Freudian?” she asked.

“Maybe I’m holding you at a ‘nice’ arm’s length because I’m reluctant to enter into another relationship, or anything more than that . . . with you or with anybody. As we’ve discussed before, my track record with women hasn’t been conspicuously successful and certainly not encouraging.”

“Hold on there,” Gillian said. “What about me? And, as I’ve said before,” Gillian argued, “I don’t care about that part of your history. I want to risk a relationship with you, or something more, as you put it. I fancy being more than ‘nice’ to you.”

“I’ve had these long-standing doubts about myself . . .” Ryan started to say.

“ . . .yes, how well I know,” Gillian interrupted, rolling her eyes.

“No, please let me finish,” Ryan jumped in. “I’ve believed all of my life that people stare at me because of my physical appearance. I think about it every day. My ‘physical difference’, as my mother described it, haunts me constantly, except when I’m listening to music. . . or singing . . . or lecturing or teaching.”

He explained about his ostrich strategy. He told her about the importance of long sleeves. He explained how he loathed being physically different from the crowd and, therefore, in a diminished condition.

“Okay. That will be enough. Are you quite finished? Have you mentioned everything you don’t like about yourself?” Gillian asked.

Ryan nodded that he had. “I guess so.”

“What would you prefer, then, for people to judge you on the basis of your physical appearance or on the quality of your ideas as a professor?” Gillian asked.

“Well,” Ryan answered, “that’s a no-brainer; the quality of my teaching and my writing, of course.”

“Then why do you care what other people might think about how you look?”

“You’re right,” Ryan admitted. “I know you’re right, and I’ve been trying throughout my adult life not to let a fixed stare from someone here or someone there bother me. It’s easier for me to agree with you, however, than to behave as if the staring doesn’t matter. All I can say is, I’m still trying.”

“Good. Keep at it. Back in a moment,” she said. In a flash she was back with two snifters and a bottle of Highland Park, a 25 year-old scotch. She gave Ryan one of the snifters and she poured him two fingers.

“This scotch was a gift when I received my PhD. It’s certainly not in my price range to purchase anything this expensive. I vowed I’d not open until I had something major to celebrate. I think today qualifies as a major event in my life, and I hope yours too.”

“This is really a ni . . . er, I mean, generous.” Ryan smiled, catching his sentence in midstream and avoiding the ‘nice’ word. Gillian looked at him and laughed at his attempt to edit his language as it came out of his mouth.

“I have a pleasant, not a nice, but a pleasant surprise for you,” Gillian said as she walked to her CD player. “I know a bit of your music preferences and I have two CDs that I think you’ll enjoy,

but I'm not 100 % sure. Do you know Stan Keaton or Woody Herman?" she asked.

Ryan shook his head negatively and feigned an exaggerated scowl. "It's not Keaton, it's Kenton. I know the name Buster Keaton, an American movie comedian the 20's and 30's, but he's not to be confused with Stan Kenton; please, please."

"Fine, fine. Excuse me. I'll never make such an egregious error again," Gillian said, salaaming Ryan. "What about the other chap. Do you know this Woodrow Herman chap?"

Ryan threw up his left hand as if in surrender. "There she goes again," Ryan said, speaking to no one in particular. "It's Woody. As in W-o-o-d-y," Ryan spelled. "Woody Herman. His mother was probably the only person who ever called him Woodrow; Woodrow Charles Herman, better known to jazz enthusiasts as Woody Herman. And, to answer your question, Yes, I'm very familiar with his music."

"Are Kenton and Herman still popular?" Gillian asked.

"Only among dedicated jazz aficionados, especially those who enjoy big band music. Both Kenton and Herman had people in their bands who would go on to fantastic careers on their own:

players like Maynard Ferguson, Zoot Simms, Shorty Rogers, Stan Getz, the Candoli brothers . . .” Ryan was explaining.

“ . . . hold it, hold it,” Gillian interrupted, “I’ve had high hopes for today ever since you told me that you were making a return visit, but I didn’t expect a lecture on the history of American jazz. Will any of this be on the final exam?” she asked, mimicking the ageless and ubiquitous student question.

Ryan laughed at himself. “Sorry,” he said, “I hope I’m not wearing out my welcome already with my rants about jazz. I don’t pretend to know very much about music other than what I enjoy . . . and what I enjoy I enjoy with a passion. I hope I’m not too boring, leaving you to wonder why in the devil did you invite me,” Ryan laughed again.”

“Ryan, you’re not boring! I’ve admired you from the moment I met you when you were at the dais in Philadelphia. My admiration for your academic work has continued to increase. . . . “

“Thanks, but I . . .” Ryan tried to say.

“It’s my turn,” Gillian said. “Let me finish. While my admiration for the professional side of you has increased, my personal feelings for you as a person have increased also.

“One more thing,” Gillian went on. “I don’t believe you’re color blind. You must have noticed that my skin is much darker than yours. People stare at me, too, sometimes. I cannot, however, adopt an ostrich strategy. Longer sleeves won’t change my ethnic identity, nor do I want them to.”

“C’mon Gillian, your ethnicity is not the first thing that comes to my mind when I think of you,” Ryan said. “I think about you, Gillian Davies, as a beautiful person, a person I love.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you, Ryan, I have the same attitude toward you,” she explained. “Most people admire you for the person you are, not the person you’re not. Me? I’m certainly not interested in you because some features you *don’t* have; I’m interested in you, indeed, interested very much, because of the characteristics you *do* have.

“You’ve shared with me some of the one-armed challenges you’ve faced and how you’ve met them successfully,” Gillian continued. “If anyone pays any attention to your physique, I suspect they marvel at what you *can* do . . . not at what you can’t do.”

“Ryan,” Gillian continued, “it’s my observation that losers gravitate toward other losers so that they can enjoy pity-parties,

complaining how unjustly life has treated them. Winners, on the other hand are attracted to other winners; they solve problems and resolve issues.”

“As for me,” she said, releasing her pent up notions,” I think you are a remarkable man, a winner, a man I want to spend more time with. How much more time that might be is something I hope we can discuss during this visit to the UK. Frankly, Ryan, I’m thinking in terms of years, not months, weeks, or days; but I suppose time will tell, correct?”

Ryan sat in his chair, speechless. He was stunned at Gillian’s homily, especially her last remark. Was it a proposal? He sat there, staring at the woman across the room from him as if she had just been introduced.

He finished his drink and went to the kitchen to put his empty glass in the sink. He returned to the living room with a smile, his eyes glistening with a tear.

“Am I being too forward?” Gillian asked. “I don’t mean to sound like some kept woman who’s just been exposed in a tabloid exclusive.”

“No, you aren’t being *too* anything,” Gary replied. “You’re making sense. You’re helping me come to terms with myself.”

“Actually?” Gillian asked.

“Absolutely,” Ryan answered. “In fact, my focus is changing.”

“How so?” she asked, again.

“You haven’t said so, directly at least, but I’ve been too self-absorbed when I consider my relationships with friends, colleagues, and especially people in my life like you. Tonight, it’s not *me* I’m thinking about; I’m thinking about *you*, mostly, and *me*, too, a little bit. And now, with that said. I’m ready to go to bed,” he said to Gillian, who was looking at him with arched, impish eyebrows, expressing but not voicing a question.

“There was a woman in my bed earlier this morning,” Ryan said. “She offered me a cup of tea at the worst, the most absolutely inappropriate time. I wonder whether she’s still there.”

Gillian stood up, smiled sweetly, and then took Ryan’s hand. “On excellent authority I know she’ll be there, absobloodylutely; yes, she’ll be there and, moreover, I can assure you she’ll not mention tea, that is until after . . .”

“I think I get it,” Ryan interrupted with a smile.

He reached down to kiss Gillian on the tip of her nose. Then on her lips.

She and Ryan looked into each other’s eyes and they smiled lovingly at each other. As they started walking toward the guest room he put his left arm around her shoulder and she put her right arm around his waist.

“Have I ever told you about Sine Nomine?” Ryan asked, as he closed the door behind them.

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