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# Down at the Bowl: A Novel

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DOWN AT THE BOWL: A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

By

THERESA MARIE EVANS  
B.S.J., Ohio University, 1984

2007  
Wright State University

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2007

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED  
UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Theresa Marie Evans  
ENTITLED Down at the Bowl: A Novel BE ACCEPTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

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Novel set in late-1970s Cincinnati, on its traditionally conservative, Catholic west side. Karen is a sheltered seventeen-year-old girl, who gets a job bussing tables at a bowling alley restaurant. Unlike the friends she has struggled to fit in with throughout high school, Karen finds she is immediately welcomed into the group of teenagers who work there. Karen tries to become more street smart like her new friends, but she finds herself jolted at times by their casual attitudes towards drinking, drugs, and sex. She also finds herself conflicted by her willingness to follow the crowd. She falls in love with a co-worker, who becomes one of her best friends, but whose popularity among other teenage girls seems to thwart her desire for a more romantic relationship. Along with the coming-of-age theme of trying to establish an identity and a set of values, the story addresses issues of homosexuality in a time when gays were just beginning to come out publicly. Karen struggles with her search for truth and love against the seventies' backdrop of social upheaval and economic insecurity. While the subjects are serious, the first-person narrator has a sense of humor and enduring hope that reflects the bittersweet and fleeting nature of teenage melodrama.

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Bradley, and my children, Kara and Daniel.

## INTRODUCTION

Down at the Bowl is told from the perspective of Karen, a sheltered, insecure teenage girl, who is trying to make sense of a world that is at odds with the religious and cultural ideals she's been raised on. With dry, self-effacing humor, the narrator reveals the confusion and anguish of trying to fit in, dealing with unrequited love, and trying to determine the truth behind the games people play to avoid completely revealing themselves.

The story is set in 1970s Cincinnati, in a working-class area known for its German Catholic roots and generations of families who would never dream of leaving. Both the tumultuous times and her part-time job at a bowling alley bring the protagonist in contact with the types of situations and people that challenge her black-and-white view of the world. Issues addressed include drinking, drug abuse, premarital sex, and homosexuality.

This story is very loosely based on what happened to me, but most of it is too fabricated to qualify as a memoir. I did not want to be tied down to strict reporting of facts, partly because that would be impossible, but mostly because it would bore me as much as any reader. In the process of writing this fictional work, I have merged, split, deleted, and transformed actual people to create the novel's characters. Sometimes I created completely new characters. Passages in the story based on real events are not necessarily in the order that they actually happened—and most events are simply the product of my imagination. The few sections based on actual events have been stretched beyond recognition to anyone who was actually there. The important thing is that they could have happened.

I wrote the basis of Chapter 1 when I was a freshman at Ohio University, but dropped the project because I didn't feel I had enough distance from my experiences to write about them. My junior year I took a creative writing class, for which I wrote a short story on which Chapters 32 and 33 are based. My professor said that nobody would believe a girl could be as stupid as my main character, and he suggested setting the story up so the reader would understand her lack of perceptiveness. He was the first person to point out to me that just because something happened in real life doesn't automatically make the event interesting or even believable in a story.

I revised my story and got an A on the paper and in the class, but I was so embarrassed about my apparent spectacular naïveté that I dropped the project once again. I began to feel that everything I wrote was going to be derided for being clueless.

Over the years I would occasionally look back on what I had written and consider writing more, but by then I was juggling work and family obligations. Finally, a few years ago, I decided I was going to write this damn book if it killed me. Unfortunately, I didn't know anyone who could give me any worthwhile advice, and that's how I eventually ended up at Wright State University. It was probably one of the best decisions of my life; the feedback and encouragement I have received from professors and classmates have been invaluable.

One of the things people always ask when they find out I have written a book is "What's it about?" It may be a cliché to say that my book is about a search for identity, but I think that is what most coming-of-age tales are about. This theme is never clichéd for the person experiencing everything for the first time; it seems so only after years of experiencing and witnessing an endless cycle of identity crises. That endless search for

identity correlates with the search for truth: What is right and what is wrong? The answers we think we find determine how we act, which further shapes our identities.

The theme of my story fits in perfectly with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of identity as social construction: We can find out who we are only by what others tell us about ourselves; it's impossible to come up with an identity for ourselves except in relation to other people. This is Karen's struggle. Her old group of friends reacted to her in ways that created a negative image in her head about who she was. In fact, this is why her seemingly quick change from a nerd to a more "cool" kid is possible once she stops hanging around with them. If society is a mirror, then the society she is keeping once she starts working at the Bowl reflects an image she likes better.

Of course, the negative self-images haven't completely disappeared, which is why her friend Kurt gets away with treating her the way he does and why she mistrusts her own perceptions, which are often accurate. I purposefully used a first-person narrator, which I think works well for this kind of story—if the reader can see everyone else's perspective, they are left out of the narrator's angst of not knowing for sure what is going on with people. This inability to ever really get at the complete truth of any human being or any human relationship is what turns much of life into a kind of poker game: the kind of game Karen despises, but is forced to play.

I have always read stories hoping to learn something as much as to be entertained, and my hope has been to return the favor somehow and pass along something other people could learn from. Again, that sounds very corny and naïve, but I don't think I'm ever going to be hip. That being said, this is not a story that tries to whitewash reality or preach a particular brand of morality. It also does not sum things up tidily at the end,

since arriving at the brink of adulthood raises more questions than it answers. On the other hand, I do not intend for my story to be ranked among the titillating versions of teen melodrama. I hope my work is more aesthetically pleasing and enduring than that. While the subjects are serious, the narrator has a sense of humor, which makes this a story that is funny and bittersweet rather than just sad. Along with humor and hope is the newly acquired knowledge that pain, confusion, and ambiguity are life.

As suggested earlier, in my own teenage search for identity, I often turned to books. Some that most influenced me as a teenager in the 1970s include A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith, A Separate Peace by John Knowles, A Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger, Ordinary People by Judith Guest, The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton, and Go Ask Alice of uncertain authorship. Except for Smith's novel, most of the other stories feature male protagonists, while Go Ask Alice is a depressing tale of a very weak female. It always bothered me that female characters in teen novels were often secondary or clichéd; my goal has been to write a story of substance with a strong female character.

I started out with the intention of writing a book for the young adult audience, but my resistance to straying from my intended story may have thwarted those efforts. Karen's experience of watching her black-and-white world turn into shades of gray is a theme that resists villains and heroes, and it does not lend itself to revelations of ultimate truth. For example, I did not create homosexual characters that were either heroic or tragic; I did not free my protagonist from all her biases; I did not neatly resolve the issues of substance abuse raised throughout the story.

My preliminary research on the young adult category of books focused on stories with similarities to my own, starting with those narrated by a teenage girl or about a

teenage girl. I also looked for similar issues: relationship issues with both female and male friends, first love, drinking, depression, and homosexuality. The books and memoirs I read included Catalyst and Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson; Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen; A Girl Named Zippy by Haven Kimmel; The Late Great Me by Sandra Scoppetone; The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold; Name All the Animals by Alison Smith; and Bringing Up the Bones by Lara M. Zeises. To help me better understand Kurt's character, I also read One Teenager in 10, a collection of writings by gay and lesbian youth that was published in 1983. Since it came out so close to the time period I was writing about, it accurately reflected the common attitudes towards homosexuality at that time.

What has become most odd to me is that because I have spent more time thinking about and working on this book than actually being a teenager, the characters and events described in it feel more real to me now than what I actually experienced. Although fiction, this novel is created from memories and impressions of the late seventies, which seemed mundane to me while I was living through them, but appear extraordinary three decades later. Time has created distance that allows me to see distinctive features of the fleeting era it was, as are all eras.

The social upheavals of the sixties, and fallout from the Vietnam War and Watergate, led to cynicism, energy crises, and runaway inflation in the late seventies. It was a time of disco versus rock 'n roll, four-cylinders versus muscle cars, polyester versus blue jeans, albums versus eight-track tapes versus cassettes. Drugs were bad, but alcohol and cigarettes were still socially acceptable. Movie rentals were unheard of, cell phones were only a dream, and the Internet was beyond the imagination of most people.

Women's liberation, gay pride, and the sexual revolution were changing societal attitudes, but it was a messy business, rife with fear and rebellion, tolerance and disapproval, truths and consequences. It was the era of my youth.

Youth flees all too soon for everyone, but is never fully appreciated until we can look backwards upon it with the wisdom of 20/20 hindsight, distorted through the rose-colored lens of age. The passage of time allows us to wistfully remember when the future was unwritten, possibilities were endless, and youthful energy was inexhaustible. Times are always changing, but the qualities of an era become distinctive only when they fade into legend.

## 1.

It's amazing how one small incident can mark the end of an era in a person's life—and the beginning of something new. When it happened to me, the incident seemed so ordinary that I hardly noticed it. I didn't realize my life was about to change until it already had.

A new era began for me at four o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon in May of 1978.

I was in bed when my mom called me to the phone, having been sent home from school with cramps. With a groan, I slipped from underneath the blankets and, eyes half-closed, felt my way downstairs to the phone.

“Hello...” I muttered.

“Karen? This is Ginnie from West Side Bowl. You still need a job?”

Instantly, I was awake. I had seen the “restaurant help wanted” sign down at the Bowl one Saturday afternoon two weeks before, and the fact that I didn't have to ask if they were hiring gave me the courage to go in and fill out an application. My only means of earning spending money for the past five years had been babysitting, and I was ready to give it up for a job with a real paycheck.

Ginnie, it turned out, was the night shift head waitress, and she started telling me all about the restaurant. It was part of West Side Bowl, so obviously there'd be a lot of bowlers eating there. She said there was this tournament that ran all summer and people

came from all over the country to play, and so it would be really busy. But there were lots of other kids my age working there and I might enjoy it.

“Would you mind being a bus girl?” she asked.

“Mind? You mean I have the job?” I was incredulous.

“Sure, if you want it. We can work you from five to ten a few nights a week.”

“When do I start?”

“Well...” Ginnie paused. “We could start you tonight if you want. Wear blue or black pants and a white shirt. We’ll give you a uniform vest.”

Tonight! My excitement about a job offer turned to dread as I remembered my current state of cramps and bloating and my constant state of social paralysis. More than anything, I wanted to go back to bed and hide under the covers. My black polyester pants would feel too tight, and I had medicine-head from the pain-killers my doctor prescribed for my always-excruciating periods. But a job was a job and so I said I’d be there.

\*

I knew that if I wanted anything out of teenage life beyond food and shelter (the latest fashions were not in my parents’ budget—only school uniforms and my cousin’s hand-me-downs), I had to earn the money. If I was sick of babysitting, I had to find a part-time job, and a foodservice establishment seemed the most likely place to find one.

My job search had been pathetic. I was so shy to begin with that having to ask for work put me in full panic-attack mode. One particular Saturday I actually begged my mom to go job-hunting with me. I think I was afraid someone was going to yell at me if I asked for a job application. Now that’s the kind of “can-do” attitude that impresses potential employers.

Normally, my mom irritates me because, while she yells a lot at home, in public she is one of those happy social people who gets chatty with total strangers and tells them way more than they need to know—about me, for instance. But that day, I needed someone with the gift of gab to help me get past my brick wall of reserve. Mom and I hit all the restaurants along the main strip in and around the mall and the shopping plazas. Since I was tongue-tied, Mom was the one who usually asked for the application, and she was so upbeat and friendly that I think she would have been hired on the spot.

At one place, after giving the manager my completed application, I turned to walk away and saw, reflected in the glass on the door in front of me, the image of him shaking his head as he crumpled the paper in his hand. There was laughter. I could feel the blood rushing to my face, the tears stinging my eyes. If he was going to laugh at me, he could have waited until I was out of earshot. My only consolation came a few months later when that particular establishment went belly-up. Apparently *he* wasn't a master of the restaurant business either.

But the laughter hit home. After all, how did I think I was going to be able to deal with the public if I was too scared to ask for a lousy job application? Then I felt a familiar paranoia: It's because I look like a dork. Maybe if I didn't wear glasses with Coke-bottle lenses or slouch or talk in that mousy, timid voice. Maybe if I didn't have that zit on my chin. Maybe if I wasn't fifteen pounds overweight. Maybe if my hair were long instead of short. Maybe if I smiled more—but no, that would reveal my crooked teeth that my parents couldn't afford to fix.

The trouble was, I had also caught a glimpse of my own reflection in the restaurant's glass door and I didn't like what I saw: Short curly brown hair with a mind of

its own and brown plastic glasses with the round frames that were too big for my face. Less than perfect nose. Pointy chin. Too-small mouth. Pale skin—should have worn blush. I looked like an owl. Moving down to the thin red and white stripes on the short-sleeved T-shirt and on to the baggy blue jeans. Pretty nondescript. Not at all how I had imagined I would look at sixteen.

Unfortunately, I had gotten my ideas about teenage life from watching Patty Duke reruns. I thought my high school years would be just like that. I'd be cute, of course—and popular. And I'd have a cute boyfriend. I would be a cheerleader and he would be a football player. We'd go to the soda shop and use two straws to share a milkshake, and then we'd dance to the jukebox and hang out with the other kids. I'd be really involved at the high school and have all these crazy hair-brained schemes that wouldn't always come out right but everyone would think I was funny and adorable. Just like Patty.

I was in awe of teenagers when I was a kid. Once, when one of my aunts was getting rid of some of her old junk, she gave me some 45s in a little record case with sleeves. On the front of the pink vinyl cover there was an image of a '50s-era teenager in a poodle skirt and ponytail dancing with her boyfriend. I loved that little pink case. I did a lot of dreaming while I danced to those 45s.

But this was the 1970s and teenage girls didn't wear poodle skirts anymore. The soda shops were gone. I went to a Catholic all-girls school, so there were no cheerleaders—or football players. And despite having been an attractive child who oozed self-confidence, I had not emerged from puberty that way. My fantasy of perky and cute and happy had given way to the reality of shy and awkward and depressed. Sweet sixteen and never been kissed.

Of course, there were some things that happened to help reinforce my negative self-image. Take, for instance, the Sophomore Dance fiasco. At my school, every dance was a Sadie Hawkins dance. Having a boyfriend wasn't important, but getting a date to the school dance was everything.

My girlfriends suggested Tim, a guy from grade school we still hung around with. My girlfriends just loved Tim—not as a boyfriend, of course. Mary Lee, Debbie and Janeen were dating Tim's best friends. They just loved him like you'd love a cuddly teddy bear. He liked them, too, but I think he was hoping for a dating opportunity with one of them at some point.

I didn't have a boyfriend and Tim didn't have a girlfriend and we hung around the same crowd, so the suggestion made perfect sense on the surface. Except that Tim didn't like me. I don't mean as in boyfriend/girlfriend "like," I mean he just plain didn't like me. In fact, the only thing he did like was to give me a hard time, and I wasn't quick enough with comebacks to earn his "respect." He constantly taunted me and I took it to heart, mostly keeping quiet when he was around. Of course, any time I did try to join the conversation, he'd say, "Hey, everybody, it talks!" and there I would be, an escaped prisoner from my own cage of shyness, caught in the glare of the spotlight.

It also happened that Tim was the first in our crowd to get his driver's license. What fun! Except that sometimes he'd conveniently "forget" to pick me up along with the rest of the gang or he'd grudgingly pick me up after being badgered by my girlfriends. Being left behind was almost better than being included. After an evening spent absorbing insults or being ignored, I'd just make it inside the front door of my house before bursting into tears. My parents didn't understand. My dad would say

something stupid about boys not liking me because I wore jeans, and I wouldn't have these problems if I wore a skirt like girls did in his day. Real helpful advice.

“Why do you keep hanging around these kids?” my mom would say, directing most of her anger at me. “Why don't you go find some new friends?”

She didn't understand. She always told me high school was the best time of her life. She was some kind of rose queen at her high school dance. She was a majorette. She had always had a boyfriend. The underlying theme was always that there must be something wrong with me.

I wished getting into a new group of friends was as simple as just asking. I tried to imagine going up to another lunch table at school and saying, “Hey, can I eat here at your table? My friends make fun of me because they think I'm a loser. Can I join your clique? Will you be my new friends?” Right.

Actually, my girlfriends weren't really that bad. They just couldn't understand why I didn't fight back. Neither could I, and that's why it troubled me. Especially since Tim's antagonism towards me grew as my ability to defend myself withered. I mean, it's like those crimes where killers aren't satisfied that they killed on the first strike; they keep hitting or shooting or stabbing their victim over and over in a pointless kind of rage. My girlfriends got along famously with Tim. I got along famously with my girlfriends—except for when Tim was around. It infuriated me that they didn't stand up for me and it annoyed them that I was such a drip. Tim had assigned a personality to me and for some reason I assumed the role whenever he was around. What was so galling about it was that I couldn't stop playing the part and I didn't like the character I was playing any more than he did.

Mary Lee is the one who talked me into asking Tim to the dance. She convinced me that it would be a nice gesture to include him in the event with the rest of the group. I figured it couldn't hurt to ask and it might even improve his attitude toward me.

I figured wrong.

We were all at Janeen's house, and the plan was for me to take him aside privately and ask him. Everyone else in the group knew about it and encouraged me—even the guys. It was going to be great fun! The whole gang would be together!

Not only did he turn me down flat; he didn't even have the decency to give me a lame excuse. It was almost as if he thought the whole thing was set up as some kind of sick joke—as in “Gross! I'm not going to be seen with *her!*” Now, that's when you know you aren't imagining someone's distaste for your company. It would have been bad enough to be rejected over the phone, but to be rejected so publicly and with such poor taste in front of all my so-called “friends,” was unbearable. But bear it I did until I could get home and privately sob out my despair and humiliation.

You'd think that since I didn't have a crush on him it wouldn't have bothered me as much, but it did. There was no way that I was going to risk rejection from someone I was actually attracted to. I spent the evening of the dance sobbing in my room and listening to Elton John.

\*

By the time my dad dropped me off at the door of the restaurant, I was feeling anxious. Meeting new people is always kind of terrifying for me because I always figure I'm making a bad first impression. Plus I was still feeling dizzy from the medication I was taking for the cramps.

I had been instructed to arrive by the back entrance, which led directly into the coffee shop. Walking through the door from the sunny parking lot, I was blinded by the relative darkness inside the building. Adding to the confusion was the continuous sound of bowling pins being knocked over interrupted by occasional shouts of glee or despair and a cackling voice over a public announcement system. The atmosphere was heavy with a mixture of cigarette smoke, burning coffee and grease.

I had to pause for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dimly lit restaurant. Slowly, I began to make out a red and black color scheme of tables, booths, and a long counter with swivel stools. Two waitresses stood behind the counter, smoking and looking towards me.

The older one approached me. Her voice was loud and somewhat gruff. “Can I help you?” She was an older woman, who either looked more than her years or couldn’t afford to retire. She was heavysset and her hair was a faded yellow color, short and teased up. She struck me immediately as one of those “old gals” who seem to have become one of the boys.

“Yes. I’m Karen. I’m supposed to ask for Rita.”

“That’s me. You the new girl?”

I nodded.

“Okay, follow me,” she gestured toward a girl who was wiping down a counter.

“Dina, this is the new girl—what did you say your name was?”

“Karen.”

“Cameron?”

I shook my head. “Karen.”

Got a last name?"

"Oliger. Karen Oliger."

Rita chuckled good-naturedly. "Okay, Karen Oliger. You'll need to fill out some paperwork before you leave. But that can wait." She turned to Dina. "Dina, this is Karen. You can start breaking her in tonight. You two will be working together, so why don't you show her around?" She winked at me as she lit another cigarette. "Get to work!"

"This way," Dina said shyly as she moved toward the door to the kitchen. She seemed nice enough, but she also struck me as a lost member of the hippie generation with her long shapeless hair and beaded jewelry. Probably did drugs. She scared me a little.

## 2.

Despite my first impression, Dina did have one quality I admire since I don't have much of it myself: patience. It's embarrassing to admit this, but sometimes my lack of self-confidence is equally matched by my lack of common sense. And that's got to be a frustrating combination to contend with. Weeks later, Dina told me she had wondered if I was really "all there." By that time I knew it was kind of a scary comment for someone like Dina to make.

The kitchen was a brightly lit area with aqua-painted walls, and it was crowded with sinks and cutting tables, ovens and grills, storage shelves and ice-makers, dishes and pots, mops and brooms, food and waste, freezers and microwaves, and a lot of people rushing around and yelling at each other.

It was an atmosphere of grease and grime and steam mixed with the smell of bread baking and onion rings frying. It was the sound of hamburgers sizzling, freezer doors slamming, microwaves buzzing, people shouting orders, dishes clinking, water running, dishes breaking, someone swearing—pandemonium. I guess I had expected something a little less grimy, a bit more organized and a lot less hectic.

Dina gave me a red uniform vest. It was a longish open polyester thing with pockets on each side that the waitresses used for holding their order forms and tips. I think the open look was supposed to look "cowgirlish" or something because the West Side Bowl had this Wild, Wild West theme going.

Next I learned how to clock in, and then Dina grabbed a handful of clean silverware and said, “Follow me.” I followed obediently.

“We never have enough silverware,” Dina muttered half to herself as she filled the silverware tray. She began pointing out items: “Here are the menus—they’re also the placemats. There are the water glasses; we have to keep them filled with ice. Each place-setting gets a knife, fork and spoon. Here’s a rag to wipe down the tables—when it gets gross there are clean ones back by the dishwashers.” She looked at me sympathetically. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long before you’re an old pro.”

I smiled. “Hope not.”

Dina smiled back. “Follow me.”

She then showed me how to bus tables: first grab all the silverware, then the glasses, then the plates. Dump the paper products in the wastebasket. Wipe the table down. Put down new placemats and silverware. Check the napkin holder. Check the ketchup, salt and pepper. When customers come, bring water. And remember to get on the dishwashers about the silverware. There’s never enough.

It was easier than I had expected—of course, it was also a slow night. When we ran out of tables to bus, we took the filled bus pans back to the dishwashers, brought out clean silverware and water glasses, filled the ice bin and then filled the glasses. Duties accomplished, we were allowed to sit at the counter and talk and drink coffee or pop.

Dina lit up a cigarette.

“So you like going to a girls’ school?” she asked, tapping the ash from her cigarette.

“It’s okay, I guess. How do you like a regular high school?”

“It’s okay, I guess.” Dina smiled as she took a long drag. As she exhaled the smoke, she began to laugh. “Course, I’ve haven’t been there much. I’ve had forty sick days this year.”

“Forty!” I couldn’t believe it. Dina must be one sickly girl. “Are you okay now?”

She laughed harder this time. “I wasn’t *sick*. Just skippin’.”

“But won’t you get held back?”

“Nahh! I’m set to graduate next month.”

I pondered that for a moment. At my school, being absent five times could put your passing grade in jeopardy. Plus there was just no way to skip school unless you had the unlikely cooperation of your parents. They had all kinds of systems in place to make sure you didn’t. But even if I went to public school, my parents would see to it I didn’t skip, and if I managed to, anyway, there would be hell to pay. It made me wonder what Dina’s parents were like.

Suddenly, a cute blond-haired guy was standing on the other side of the counter.

“Hi, darlin’, can I help you?” he said. “I recommend the special.”

Dina laughed and shoved her empty glass at him. “Yeah, get me another Coke. There’s tip in it for you.”

Kurt returned with the Coke and set it down on the counter.

“So you gonna introduce me to your friend?”

I blushed.

“This is Karen. She’s the new busgirl.”

“Pleased to meet you, Karen,” Kurt reached across the counter to shake my hand with a comic air of self-importance. “Let me be the first to welcome you to this fine establishment.”

“Thanks. You, too.” I said, smiling. He seemed nice, but I couldn’t help wondering if he was making fun of me.

He held onto my hand, his brown eyes searching mine, it seemed, but I knew he couldn’t possibly see my eyes behind my glasses. He let go of my hand.

“Well, I’ve got to get back to my station. I just wanted to say hi.”

“Okay, see you around.”

“I’m sure I will.” And he was gone.

“Cute, ain’t he?” Dina said. “You got a boyfriend? He’s available.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t be interested in me.”

“You never know. I’ve got a boyfriend or I might be interested.”

“So won’t missing all that school kind of hurt your chances for college?” I asked, changing the subject. I didn’t want to talk about boys.

“College?” Dina looked at me wide-eyed. “Are you kidding? I can’t stand school, and I can’t wait until I never have to go again.”

I laughed this time. I really liked Dina, in spite of myself. Her priorities were a little different from mine, but she was okay.

### **3.**

I lived on the west side of Cincinnati, which is defined by its hilly terrain and separated from the rest of the city by the Mill Creek Industrial Valley. The west side is

predominately Catholic, so much so that even people who aren't Catholic identify their neighborhood by the name of the nearest parish.

It's a family-oriented place, and people tend to stay put. Pizzerias and chili parlors are plastered with the photos of local sports heroes, and social events revolve around churches and Friday night football at the local public and Catholic high schools.

Since I went to an all-girls Catholic high school, I had no particular allegiance to any high school football team; for obvious reasons, my school didn't have one. I usually went to games at the all-boys Catholic school where most of my male grade school classmates had gone on to high school. I didn't care enough about football to care who won. Besides, hardly any teenage girls went to the football stadium on Friday night to watch the game. Most went to see who else was there, meaning boys, and to scout out any parties going on after the game. My girlfriends and I went to improve our chances of chance encounters with guys we had crushes on. We would walk circles around the stadium field, each revolution requiring us to run the gauntlet of groping hands and catcalls of the official boys-only cheering section.

That's about as much attention as I got from boys. By my junior year of high school, my social situation was still pretty hopeless. Mary Lee always had a boyfriend. A different boy every year, a different high school ring wrapped with colorful yarn to adjust the fit. Debbie didn't have a boyfriend as often, but she never missed a school dance. Janeen never had a boyfriend either, but that's because she was in love with a guy who was already taken. Still, she always managed to get asked to dances and to find dates to our school dances. Then there was me.

When the boys' high school had their homecoming dance and prom each year, we pined for an invitation. For me the hope was always in vain.

"God, I hope Todd asks me to prom," Janeen had said one day this past April. "This wondering is driving me crazy."

We were sitting at our usual table in the cafeteria having the usual conversation about boys that, as usual, didn't include me.

"Mary Lee, you're so lucky to have a sure date, even if Jim hasn't officially asked yet," Debbie said.

"But don't you think Brian Schafer might ask you?" Mary Lee said.

"Pretty sure, but I don't want to jinx myself."

"Jinx yourself? You've already got your dress picked out!" I said, laughing.

"God! I hate this!" Janeen said. "You're so lucky, Karen. At least you *know* you're not going."

I was silent, but my face grew hot as I looked around the table at each of them. From their expressions, I could tell Janeen was just saying out loud what they had all been thinking. I fought the too-familiar urge to burst into tears, swallowing the knot that had formed in my throat.

Debbie broke the awkward silence.

"So, Janeen, how do feet taste?"

"What do you mean?"

"Open mouth; insert foot."

After that exchange, I couldn't get up the nerve to ask anyone to my own prom. Besides, who would I ask?

\*

My situation was apparently hopeless, but maybe my new job would give me a new start. There were other teenagers working at the Bowl, and most of them went to different schools than I did. They all seemed nice. Even that cute Kurt guy was nice to me. Maybe I could change my image; nobody at the Bowl knew I was a certified dork.

The day after I started my job, I went to school feeling that my life was looking up. In the cafeteria at lunch time I could even contribute to the conversation about cute guys.

What was nice about the Bowl was that we didn't have to work both nights of the weekend. I was scheduled for Saturdays, so when Mary Lee called me to see if I could go to the CYO dance at St. Teresa's on Friday, I said okay. I usually hated those things, but I was feeling pretty confident. Maybe I'd meet the man of my dreams.

CYO stands for Catholic Youth Organization and every parish had one. I belonged to the one at my parish for about five minutes because it seemed so nerdy, somehow, to belong to a teen religious group. I was a nerd already and didn't need to enhance that aspect of my reputation. Still, these were the groups that organized dance events with live bands—cool events that lots of kids went to, although they became less cool after sophomore year of high school, when kids had to depend less on their parents for transportation.

At first I looked forward to Friday, but my confidence faded quickly. Why was I here, at the end of my junior year, at another one of these stupid CYO dances? And why was I here with Mary Lee, Miss Congeniality herself? That's what I was thinking as her brother dropped us off in St. Teresa's parking lot. She always ditched me at some point

during these dances. Everybody loved Mary Lee, especially the boys. Maybe it was because she had older brothers and knew how to talk to guys. Maybe it was because she had a popular boyfriend. Maybe it was because she was cute. Probably all of the above.

“Calvary Bash is playing tonight,” Mary Lee said. “This should be great.”

“Yeah, it should be,” I said with false enthusiasm. “Until the dancing starts.”

“Just don’t think about it and you’ll be fine.”

“I mean the slow dance. I’m okay with the faster songs.”

“Oh, you’ll get asked to dance.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said, feeling my spirit sag downward as we approached the door of the gymnasium. This happened every time I came to one of these things. As usual, I knew I wouldn’t be able to snap out of my funk. I felt ugly. I went mute. My whole body felt awkward and rigid. I felt as if everyone were staring at me and laughing. Hot waves of anxiety flashed over me. I wanted to go home and hide.

I knew that the first squealing female acquaintance or the first flirtatious male who greeted Mary Lee would be the reason I would sink further. It was hard to watch people like her so much, when just about everyone ignored me. I didn’t have to wait long.

“Mary Lee!” A pretty girl with shiny brown hair and animated expression rushed towards us.

“Jessica!” Mary Lee and Jessica embraced in one of those enthusiastic hugs teenage girls use to announce how popular they are, rather than to demonstrate any actual affection.

“Hi, Jessica,” I said. Jessica nodded briefly, but pointedly made no move to include me in the enthusiasm.

“Mary Lee, I have someone who absolutely wants to meet you!” Jessica said, tugging on Mary Lee’s arm.

“I’ll be right back,” Mary Lee said as Jessica led her away.

“Right,” I said, the familiar panic setting in.

As I mentioned before, my social life wasn’t the best. I hated CYO dances, and this one didn’t look as if it were going to go any better. I vowed never to come to another CYO dance.

That was probably a good thing as far as my sister, Darla, was concerned. She was a freshman at St. Mary’s and a member of the kind of popular crowd that had always eluded me. It was bad enough for her to have to occasionally be seen at school with her nerdy older sister. She did her best to pretend she didn’t know me when we passed each other in the hallways, so I was pleasantly surprised when she came up to me at that moment.

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you just standing there like an idiot?” Darla said. I noted her long, straight honey-blond hair, brown eyes, clear skin, and straight teeth, and wondered for the millionth time why I got stuck with frizzy hair, glasses, zits and fangs.

“What do you care?”

“Because my friends noticed you standing there like a dork.”

“So?” Good comeback, I thought.

“So stop acting like a dork.”

“I’m not *acting* like anything. I’m just standing here.”

“By *yourself*.”

“There’s no law against it.” Hey, another good comeback. But I was too depressed to think of anything clever. My own kid sister was bullying me. It was too much.

“You are such a dork.” Darla ran off to join her friends.

“Good comeback!” I shouted after her.

The CYO dance was my very own personal hell—or at least purgatory. Dancing to rock music was okay, because, let’s face it, there are no rules to dancing to “Slow Ride” or “Takin’ Care of Business,” staples of the CYO band. But when the pace slowed, I was in real trouble. The slow dance was a very big deal, because every girl wanted to be asked to dance. Preferably by some guy she thought was cute, but definitely by any guy rather than have to sulk to the sidelines, one of the unwanted.

My friends always got asked to dance. I usually did not. I was convinced the glasses were a turn-off or, in my better moments, I imagined I looked stuck up, making guys afraid of rejection. In either case, my own confidence was destroyed on a regular basis, and that just sent me into a spiral of depression, shyness and further rejection. I just couldn’t put a happy face on it and keep going, especially as I watched my girlfriends happily flirting and dancing.

This was going to be another one of those nights. I managed to locate a group of girls I knew from school and we danced in a group together. When the band started to play a slow tune, I glanced around briefly, but, as usual, no boy was approaching me. I slipped out of the gymnasium and headed to the women’s restroom to wait it out.

4.

The following Tuesday was a slow night, and Dina and I were able to take our break together.

“You never did tell me much about your school,” she said, lighting a cigarette.

“So what’s it like going to a girls’ school?”

“It has its good and bad points,” I said. “We’re not allowed out of the building, for one.”

“Really?”

“Well, you know. School full of girls. Magnet for creeps and perverts.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.”

“Sometimes weirdos expose themselves.”

“No shit!”

“Well I’ve never seen anything, but it does happen. And sometimes guys come by with megaphones and yell out that they want to have sex with us. That always happens in the spring when the windows are open.”

“Yeah, and what do your teachers do?”

“We all start laughing and they shut the windows. That stinks, because we don’t have air conditioning.”

“Bummer.”

“But it’s not just perverts we have to worry about. One time I was waiting to cross the street with my sister when some kids from West High drove by and threw eggs at us.”

Dina laughed. “That mighta been me!”

“What!”

“Yeah, me and my friends used to do that. Hey, I’m sorry, if it was me. I didn’t know you then. We were just looking for the uniforms.”

“Whatever.”

“How can you stand not having guys at your school?”

“I don’t know any different. You should have been there for Student Exchange Day. When the boys came in the cafeteria, you’d have thought the Beatles had gotten back together. Girls were all screaming like we were the first stop on the tour. It was pathetic.”

“You’re a bunch of goofy girls.”

“It’s not just the girls. The boys’ schools are just as bad.”

“They can’t be as bad as girls.”

“I’m serious. Last year my art class got together with a St. Joe’s art class to decorate a nursing home for Christmas. We went in the school van to pick them up at their school. Guys were going nuts! They had their faces pressed against the windows trying to get a look at us. It was too bizarre.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m totally serious.” I paused a moment as I recalled that scene. I mean, guys who would look right through me at a Friday night football game were checking me out and whooping it up as if they actually liked what they saw. Amazing. I had thought only girls could be that giddy.

Dina interrupted my thoughts. “How about the cliques?”

“Oh, yeah, we have cliques.”

That’s one thing you can always count on when girls run things. There were a number of girls who never spoke to me once all through high school. In fact, I was convinced that I could stand in front of them and wave my hands around in their faces and they would still refuse to see me. There was no telling why some people acknowledged you and some people didn’t.

“So what clique are you in?”

The question stumped me. “I’m not sure I’m in one,” I said finally. “But I guess it doesn’t matter. Some girls are snobby, but at least I don’t have to worry about getting beat up.”

“That’s nice.”

I didn’t mention that being snubbed left bruises of another sort.

“It’s not like I have to eat lunch by myself every day. I don’t know. I guess I don’t feel like I fit in. But I’m not a total outcast either.”

“You’re just independent.”

I liked the sound of that. “Okay,” I agreed. Of course, I didn’t believe it.

“So what’s the typical St. Mary’s girl?”

I had the answer for that one: “Perky and bubbly.”

“What are they on?”

“On?”

“Yeah, what drugs are they doin’?”

“School spirit.”

“Oh, yuck!”

The ideal St. Mary's girl would appear at pep rallies and volleyball games with her hair pulled up in high ponytails with blue & white ribbons—the school colors—and cat whiskers painted on her face. She clapped and cheered for the Blue Panthers like she really meant it. School spirit was a real headache for me. Part of me thought it was stupid, but the other part of me wished I could be stupid enough to feel it or at least go along with it. I couldn't bring myself to do perky, and I couldn't do pigtails because my hair was too short. All that happy, happy stuff just made me depressed.

“So if you got so much spirit, how come you don't have school jackets?”

“I have one. But I only wear it to school.”

“How come?”

“Oh, right, Dina. Like a girls' school jacket would get any respect.”

“You got a point there.”

“I wore it to a football game once and got totally harassed.”

“That sucks. Guys always expect girls to wear their jackets.”

“It's a double standard.”

“Hell, I'd never wear a high school jacket,” Dina said.

“Yeah, but if you did, at least nobody would laugh at you.”

“My friends would laugh their asses off,” she said, snuffing out her second cigarette. “I'm not the school-spirit type.”

“Well, there are good points about a girls' school.”

“Such as?”

“You don't have to get all dolled up to go to school.”

“Yeah, that would be nice. We always have to worry about what guys will say.”

“Some girls look so skuzzy all week, and then I hardly recognize them on weekends. They look so cute and guys are flirting with them. I want to yell, ‘but she’s a hag in study hall!’”

Dina laughed.

“How can you be a hag one day and gorgeous the next? How do they do it?”

“Don’t ask me,” Dina said. “All I care about on the weekend is getting high. Shit. That’s all I care about every day. Hey, don’t look, but cutie pie is heading our way.”

Kurt slid into the booth next to me. “Can I join you ladies?”

“You already have,” Dina said. “What’s up?”

I was speechless. He sat next to me! My heart was doing weird somersaults. It hit me that I had a crush on this guy.

“I’m hiding from Reynata. I haven’t clocked back in yet, and she wants me to bus her table.”

“You devil you. Speaking of clocking in, my break is up. You comin’, Karen?”

“Yeah, I’m right behind you.”

“Wait, Karen, can I talk to you?” Kurt said.

“Take your time,” Dina winked at me, and slid out of the booth. “But don’t take too much time. People will talk.”

“So what’s up?” I said.

“Reynata’s my mom. She always expects me to do more because I’m her son. I just want to hide out a few minutes until she finds someone else to help her.”

“Reynata’s your mom? She seems kind of young.”

“She got married young.”

“Oh.”

“Shit, here she comes.”

Reynata strode up to the booth in mock exasperation.

“Well, here you are. Oh, a girl. I should have figured.”

“Aw, come on, Mom.”

Reynata smiled. “You are such a scoundrel. Come on back and help me.”

“Mom, I want you to meet Karen. She’s my new friend.”

“I’ll bet she is. Nice to meet ya, honey. Don’t take him too seriously, you hear?”

“I won’t.” I was mesmerized by Reynata. She was blond and pretty; of course, she was Kurt’s mom. I could see the resemblance immediately.

“So do you approve of her, Mom?” he turned to me grinning. “She never approves of my friends.”

“Well this one seems all right,” said Reynata. “Now come along with me or I’m gonna have to tell your father.” She grabbed his ear and tugged.

“Ouch, Mom!” Kurt said laughing. “All right, all right, I’m coming!”

“Come along, son,” said Reynata. “Nice to meet you, Karen. I’m glad my boy’s finally raised his standards.”

Kurt smiled at me. “See, you’re part of the family now.”

## 5.

My first payday came just a little over a week after that first day on the job. For twenty-four hours of work, I made a little over forty dollars, almost twice as much as babysitting. It probably should have been more, but kids under eighteen didn't get paid minimum wage at West Side Bowl. Still, I was happy. In my mind, I was halfway to my goal of getting contact lenses, and that's all I cared about at the moment.

I loved my job. Not that bussing tables was such a thrill. I loved going to work because I could count on seeing Kurt.

Kurt Waller worked the prime "rib cage," a carving station set up at the point where the Pony Express coffee shop joined the "nicer" Rodeo Room restaurant of the bowling alley. Of course, it was the same food from the same kitchen, but most people didn't seem to notice. The station was set up so customers could see whether the prime rib was good that day—and also to entice people as they walked by, I guess. Kurt's job was to carve the meat as orders came in.

Kurt was tall, blond and handsome. Well, maybe not tall, but taller than I was. But he was blond and handsome. He had short hair, big brown eyes, a strong nose—okay, kind of a big nose—and the most genuinely friendly personality I had ever seen in a high school kid. Something I wouldn't necessarily expect from such an attractive guy because usually they're trying too hard to be cool to bother about being genuine.

But the biggest surprise and thrill for me is that he actually sought out my friendship. He had to because I wouldn't have had the nerve to talk to him otherwise.

Normally, I would never know what to say around a guy like him, but something about Kurt immediately put me at ease. Even so, I still found it hard to believe that a guy that good looking would actually want to talk to me.

I put my paycheck in my purse, and then walked nervously over to the rib cage. I tapped lightly on the glass surrounding the cutting block. “Hi, Kurt. How’s your mom?”

Kurt looked up, surprised. I was about ready to feel total rejection and humiliation when he suddenly grinned. “She’s fine.” Just then, Reynata brought some orders for Kurt to fill.

“Here ya go, darlin’”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Reynata smiled at me, then. “You know, he’s such a *good* son!” She hurried off.

Kurt had told me he was joking about Reynata being his mom. I know I’m gullible, but she did have blond hair and she was pretty, so why wouldn’t I believe him? But it was all a practical joke. Reynata was in on the joke, but they didn’t leave me hanging very long.

He did it to get my attention, so I was flattered instead of miffed.

Since Dina and I weren’t usually able to take our breaks at the same time, it wasn’t long before Kurt was my companion during breaks. It was almost like having a date, actually. We’d take our food and drinks to one of the empty booths and spend our allotted half-hour talking and laughing. The first time I was a little nervous about it because I had noticed a busgirl from the Rodeo Room flirting with Kurt, and as we sat down to eat, she walked by and shot me a dirty look. It was already too good to be true that he was talking to me and that he seemed to actually like being with me; how could it

be possible that he was available? So I asked if she was his girlfriend, and he looked at me as if I were crazy.

“Who? Sharon? Definitely not my type,” he said.

Suddenly, he looked worried. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

He smiled. “Okay, so we’re even.”

The waitresses noticed how much time we were spending together and would smile knowingly at us. Even Donna, a divorced-and-bitter-about-men waitress would look us over with her huge haunted eyes and nod approvingly. Little Jo, the kitchen manager, pulled me aside one day and said, “You picked a good one, honey. I’m pullin’ for ya.”

We got even more nods and winks when Kurt started giving me a ride on the days we both worked—even though it was really out of his way to do that. When Kurt wasn’t working, I took the bus to work and called my Dad for a ride home. Little Jo noticed, and soon she got the schedule arranged so that Kurt and I always worked the same days.

It’s hard for me to explain how overwhelmed I was by the attention, but I loved every minute of it. Maybe it was only a matter of time before Kurt would officially ask me out and that we’d officially be a couple. Of course, I didn’t really believe this. But I could hope.

By the time a few weeks had passed, it felt as if we had known each other for years. I felt so at ease with him that it seemed we could always find something to talk about or joke about.

Kurt was going to be a senior at St. Joe's, a Catholic high school for boys. Kurt told me he was the oldest of five and that his parents had married young and had three boys by the time they were twenty-one. I looked forward to hearing more about his family. It made me feel as if Kurt was working up to asking me out, but then I'd always have to remind myself how impossible that was.

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We'd known each other about a month, when, one night on break, Kurt told me the story about his family.

"My mom says they were always having to borrow from her parents. For awhile, we actually had to move in with my grandma and grandpa," said Kurt. "But then my dad got into the police academy and we got our house."

"Your dad's a cop?"

"Yeah. Now he's a rent-a-cop, too."

"He has two jobs?"

"Well the other one is just part-time. Ever since my sisters were born three years ago. They're twins, you know. Lindsey and Lauren."

"Pretty names."

"Cute kids, too, but kind of a surprise. I'll never forget that summer. We were at Kings Island standing in line for the Racer, when my dad says to my mom, 'Do you realize, Judy, by the time we're forty our kids will be grown up and we'll get our freedom back.' Then my mom gave us all this weird look and ran off to puke."

"Oh. You mean she had morning sickness?"

“Well, we didn’t know it at the time. We all thought it was motion sickness from the rides. But when it didn’t go away, she went to the doctor. My dad was so pissed.”

“Oh.”

“He wasn’t planning on having any more kids. Then it turned out they were having twins. They had to buy a lot of baby stuff. My mom was working a part-time job, but she had to quit. Money got tight. My mom wanted to ask my grandparents for help, but my dad said no. That’s when they started fighting…” he trailed off.

“You all right?”

“Oh. Sure. Anyhow, my dad got the second job so they wouldn’t have to ask anyone for money. So he’s hardly ever home and that makes my mom mad. I can see her point, but then again I can see his, too. I thought it would get better by now, but it’s still bad.”

“Maybe they’ll come around as the twins get older.”

“It just pisses me off!” Kurt clenched his fists like he was getting ready to hit something then suddenly relaxed his hands again, looking despondent.

I was startled. Where did that come from? Kurt must have noticed my expression.

“Sorry about that. Don’t get the wrong idea. I think my sisters are great,” he said.

“I just wish my parents would get along.”

I could empathize with Kurt somewhat. My own parents practiced natural family planning, the only Catholic-approved form of birth control besides abstinence. What this meant is that I got an unexpected new sibling every two to three years instead of every twelve months. The difference was that although my parents were less thrilled with each

new pregnancy, they didn't blame each other—although sometimes I think they were secretly pissed off at God.

“Do you think things will get better?”

“I don't know. One thing I do know is I'm never getting married. I couldn't stand the fighting all the time.”

“It doesn't have to be that way for you.”

Kurt smiled. “I know. I'm just venting.”

“Well, go ahead and vent, then. I don't mind.” And I didn't. Are you kidding? I looked forward to these talking sessions. I was flattered that he confided in me. He was definitely someone I wanted to get to know better, and he made *me* feel like someone worth knowing.

**6.**

Harvey Clyde, the restaurant manager, treated me a like an invisible nobody.

Harvey was short with a jack-o-lantern face and fading, receding red hair. He had a bushy red mustache that looked as if it were glued on as a disguise. He never looked directly at anyone with his slanted, bloodshot eyes, and he always walked around as if his head were too big and heavy for his shoulders to carry. I think that's because he was drunk a lot.

One evening after the dinner rush, Kurt and I were standing near the entrance of the Rodeo Room talking when Harvey shuffled by and barked, "Get to work!" I smiled and offered a shy, "Hello!" but he ignored me as usual. He didn't like me much. "Another one of those damn kids!" he had grumbled after being introduced to me. "At least we don't have to pay her minimum wage."

He was on his way to the bar in the Rodeo Room. That's what he did every night. Occasionally he would wander around in the kitchen and yell at people, I guess to let us know who was in charge. Then he'd go back to the bar.

Everybody knew Harvey only liked the waitresses—that is, the ones he considered good-looking. In fact, the three young waitresses who worked the weekend dayshift were known as Harvey's Angels.

"Hey, Karen!" Kurt called to me as I began to walk back to my bus station. "A bunch of us are going to the Ferguson Drive-in tomorrow. Want to come along?"

“Sure.” I tried to look nonchalant. Good thing I didn’t have to work on Friday night. “Who’s all going?”

“Some of the gang from here.”

“Okay.” I hardly dared to believe it. I knew some of the kids who worked at the Bowl hung out together, and it was a big deal to be invited out with them.

It took me forever to get ready, and I only had two pairs of jeans and two shirts to choose from. There were the straight-leg jeans and the flared ones. There was a pink short-sleeved shirt that tied into a little bow in the front, and a more peasant-style white one that also tied in the front, but was more scoop-necked. I had one pair of gym shoes, so there was no choice there. Everything else I owned for summer was shorts and t-shirts, except for church clothes.

I settled on the flared jeans and the pink shirt. There was no controlling my hair, so I spent extra time on my makeup. Then I reconsidered my outfit. I put on the white shirt. I took it off and put the pink one back on. Then I paced. Took another glance in the mirror and tried to adjust my hair. Failing that, I put on a little cologne. Tried on a necklace and took it off again. Peeked out the window to see if anyone had arrived yet. Brushed my teeth again. Redid my lip-gloss. Began to panic.

Waiting for my ride to come that Friday night put me back into turmoil of self-doubt and self-loathing. Kurt was late. I wondered if he had reconsidered including me. Maybe my reputation as a dork preceded me.

Eventually, an older blue car I didn’t recognize pulled up to the house. I peeked out the front door. It wasn’t Kurt driving; it was David, who also worked down at the Bowl. He was a dishwasher. Kurt and David went to the same high school; David was

actually the person who helped Kurt get his job there, not Reynata. David was a tall, lanky guy, and he had this perpetual expression on his face as if he'd just pulled off a hilarious harmless prank—or was about to. There was another guy in the car who looked familiar, but I was a little confused because I didn't see Kurt. My confusion changed to gratitude when I saw David had the good sense to actually come to the door to meet my parents. Lots of kids will just honk their horn and wait for you to run out, which is okay with my parents only when they already know who is out there honking.

I waited until my mom called me before I went downstairs. I didn't want to appear too eager for friends, even though I was.

“Karen! Your friend is here!” she yelled up the stairs.

She waited at the bottom of the steps. “He seems like a nice boy.”

“It's not a date, Mom.”

“Well, you never know. I think your father likes him.”

I cringed inside. Why was she so desperate to pair me off with someone?

“Whatever.”

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“Hey, Karen! Glad to have you join us tonight!” David said once I was seated in the backseat of the car. “Kurt's driving, too, so we'll be meeting up with him and the rest of the gang at the drive-in. You know Frank?” He gestured to the figure in the front seat.

I recognized him from the Bowl. He was a dishwasher, a somber-looking dark-haired guy who never said much except to grumble at another load of dishes. I sometimes saw him back by the dumpster on his break, smoking cigarettes. He seemed kind of scary to me. At that moment, Frank was smoking a brown cigarette that looked like a twig. He

reached over the front seat to shake my hand and grunted, "Pleased to meet ya."

Suddenly, he didn't seem so scary.

What struck me immediately was how friendly they were. I wasn't being judged or tested: I was accepted. Any friend of Kurt was a friend of theirs, I guess. It was a new experience for me.

"Help yourself to refreshments!" David gestured to a small cooler right at my feet. "The opener's in there somewhere."

I lifted the lid: Little Kings. I hesitated. I pulled out one of the tiny green bottles, and rolled the icy glass in my hands, staring at the label. I opened it and hesitated once more. Then I lifted the bottle to my lips and drank.

Before this night I had drunk beer only once before at a party, and on that occasion I didn't even get drunk. Still, my sobriety was more due to lack of opportunity than righteousness. *Here I am, I thought, three years of high school behind me and still a boring goody two-shoes. If I don't start having some fun soon, I won't have any stories to tell about my reckless youth.*

That was my rationale as I sucked down four Little Kings one after the other. But the truth was that I was nervous, and I noticed the beer helped. We met up with the other kids at the Ferguson Drive-in as David promised. Kurt had driven his mom's AMC Hornet, which was loaded with teenagers and beer. He seemed happy to see me, and introduced me to Claire Ann, Sharon and Rick. Sharon was the busgirl I had seen flirting with Kurt, and Claire Ann was her friend. She worked the weekend day shift in the kitchen, so I had never met her before. Rick, I was happy to note, was obviously Sharon's boyfriend.

I was thrilled to see Kurt, but the others were just shadowy figures reflected in the dim light from the movie screen. My face was tingling in a way I had never experienced before. I pinched my cheek and it felt like it had been shot with Novocain. I had the sensation of moving in slow motion. But I was feeling really good.

“Hey, Karen, come up here and sit with me!” David called to me from the rooftop of his car. “The view is great!” I looked at Kurt, and he nodded approval.

With Kurt’s help, I somehow managed to crawl up to join David. “This is fun!” I laughed. On some level I noticed the two girls named Claire Ann and Sharon were laughing, too, but everything seemed funny.

Kurt and Rick sat on the hood of the car, while Sharon and Claire Ann leaned up against the back of the car, smoking cigarettes. Frank was sitting on the bumper of Kurt’s car, nursing a Little Kings and smoking another twig. I was relaxed and having a good time. I don’t even remember what movie we were watching. It didn’t seem to matter. School was out for the summer, it was a balmy June evening and the only thing that mattered was having fun and feeling good.

David put his arm around me. What was he doing? Was that some kind of friendly gesture to keep me from falling off the car? Not one to make waves, I let it go for the moment. I heard muffled giggling behind me.

Suddenly David’s hand slid up the back of my shirt and began working on the clasp of my bra. That was quite enough. “What are you doing?” I yelled as I shoved him off the roof of the car. David lay on the gravel, stunned and dazed. The giggling behind me exploded into uncontrolled bursts of laughter. Claire Ann and Sharon had fallen on their knees in a fit of hyena-like hysteria.

I was furious. Who were these girls laughing at me? I slid off the rooftop of the car and stood there, somewhat unsteadily, glaring at them. In between bursts of renewed glee, the two girls slowly got back to their feet, trying not to spill any more of their beer in the process.

Kurt and Rick hadn't seen what led up to David's current predicament. Frank was helping him up. "Hey, sorry, Karen," David was calling over to me. "My bad."

Kurt was immediately at my side. "What did he do?"

I whispered to Kurt who at first glanced angrily at David, but then started to laugh at the sight of him unsuccessfully trying to climb back on to the roof of the car.

"Good job!" Kurt said to me. "David's really harmless, though. Tell you what. How about you riding in my car on the way home?"

"That was great! That was great!" Claire Ann, still chuckling, grabbed me by the arm and began to lead me away. "Come on, let's go to the little girl's room. It's okay—he's just drunk."

I allowed myself to be led away. I guess it wasn't me they were laughing at after all.

"I didn't hurt him, did I?"

Claire Ann made a face. "So what if you did? He deserved it."

It was a good thing we went to the restroom. I had to go really bad and I don't know if I could have found it without Claire Ann and Sharon's help.

In spite of the comedy of the situation, the girls seemed genuinely concerned that I was okay. I admitted I was a little frightened about what I had just done to David.

“I’ve never pushed anyone like that before. But nobody ever made me mad like that before.” And then I confessed, “And I’ve never been drunk before.”

Sharon and Claire Ann exchanged glances and then stared at me in disbelief. “But you’re going to be a senior!” Claire Ann said. “What have you been doing for fun?”

“I’ve been getting drunk since sixth grade,” Sharon said. “Me and Claire Ann used to get into my dad’s liquor cabinet.”

“No way!” At this point I was too drunk to be embarrassed by my lack of worldliness. “My Dad hardly ever drinks. We only have one bottle of whiskey in our house and that was a gift from somebody. He’s so paranoid he draws a line on the bottle to make sure nobody sneaks any.”

Sharon and Claire Ann burst out laughing again. “No way!”

“Yeah!” I might have added that in sixth grade the last thing on my mind was getting a buzz.

“Well you’re partying now,” Claire Ann said. “Are you feelin’ good?”

“I can’t feel my face.”

Claire Ann and Sharon started laughing again. “No, I mean it!” I insisted. “I can’t feel my face! It’s all numb!” I started pinching my cheeks. “See? I can’t feel that!”

We all laughed then.

From that night on, I never again questioned whether my presence was wanted or not. It’s hard to explain what kind of an effect that total acceptance had on me, but suffice it to say I immediately dropped my old “gang,” or rather, happily gave up trying to fit in. I still saw my old friends at school, but my weekends were reserved for my new friends.

With the “Bowl” crowd, I didn’t have to try to fit in; I just did. It was a new experience for me.

I wondered why Kurt had thought of including me in the group. He was protective of me in so many ways, always making sure I had a ride to wherever we were going, always making sure I got introduced to people. It was almost as if I had gotten the “Kurt Stamp of Approval” the way everyone treated me. But our friendship stopped short of being romantic. On the one hand, I was confused because I didn’t understand why he went so much out of his way to be nice to me if he wasn’t interested. On the other hand, his kindness sort of confirmed my impression of myself as someone who was seen as a nice person, but not particularly attractive. Maybe I was doomed to hearing guys say, “I like you a lot, but not *that* way.”

Claire Ann and I soon became friends. It turned out that we had met before because she played in the same recreational soccer league that I did. It also turned out that we went to the same high school; she was a year behind me. I already admired her from the times I played her team during the soccer season. Usually, the opposing team isn’t very friendly when you win, which is why I remembered her. We had just beaten her team, and she made a point of complimenting me on my playing when we all shook hands afterwards. She had seemed really friendly, and I had noticed she seemed popular with her teammates.

Claire Ann was one of those girls who weren’t particularly pretty but had such a great personality that nobody seemed to notice. She wasn’t into fussy hairdos or trendy clothes, and she never wore makeup, but she had a ready smile and friendly open attitude towards everyone, or so it seemed to me. I found out she had a quirky, cynical sense of

humor, which somehow helped draw me out of my natural state of reserve. I wished I could have been more like her. She was funny. She was outgoing. She was nice to everybody.

Sharon I wasn't so sure about. She and Claire Ann had grown up on the same street, so they had known each other for years. Sharon was my age, but she went to public school. She seemed a little rough to me, although maybe I got that impression because of Rick. They both dressed in a way that made me think there must be a Harley hidden nearby, and they were constantly smoking and swearing. Claire Ann wasn't like that at all, so it was hard to figure how she and Sharon were friends. At any rate, Sharon was okay but we didn't click like Claire Ann and I did, and that seemed odd to me because she and Claire Ann got along so well. Then again, like I said before, Claire Ann got along with everybody.

7.

I wondered why Dina did not fit in with the rest of the Bowl crowd, nor did she ever seem concerned about it. I guess it was just as well because I was starting to think she was a bit odd.

One night she found a blue pill on one of the tables we were bussing. “Look at this!” she exclaimed.

“It’s a pill.”

“But what *kind* of pill?” Dina held it up between her thumb and forefinger, smiling at it with a certain amount of gleeful anticipation.

“I don’t know.” Now I was curious. I waited for her to tell me.

Dina lowered her voice. “I don’t know, either. Wanna split it with me?”

I burst out laughing, then abruptly stopped when I saw the look on her face. She was serious. “Are you out of your mind?” I said. “You don’t know what it could do to you!”

Dina smiled and nodded. “That’s what’s fun about it!”

That just blew my mind. I wasn’t completely naïve. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know what the dishwashers were doing back by the dumpster on their breaks. But I was still trying to adjust my thinking about people smoking dope or taking pills when they had a pretty good idea what the effects were. To ingest something on purpose knowing that the effect could be a nasty surprise just seemed too much like a druggie form of Russian roulette.

“No thanks. You found it; you can have it all to yourself.”

“You sure?” Dina completely missed my sarcasm. “Thanks!”

I told Kurt about it when we went on break. He wasn't sufficiently shocked to suit me.

“I wouldn't worry about Dina. She's probably done a lot worse.”

“I thought you were anti-smoking and anti-drugs.”

“I am. But we're talking Dina here. She's not going to change.”

“Well, still. Who knows what that pill could do?”

“Yeah, what if it's a pill for constipation? She could be getting high on the shits,”

Kurt started making disgusting potty noises followed by groaning. “Oh, man! What a trip, man!”

I rolled my eyes. “Very funny.”

“You're too nice, Karen. Dina's a weirdo. Forget about it.” He slid out of the booth.

“You're off at nine tonight, right?”

“Yeah. Either me or David will come by when you get off work. We're just going to find someplace to hang out.”

“Okay.”

I never did find out what Dina's experience was with the pill. It didn't kill her though.

Around midnight that same night, when it was the end of my shift, David burst into the coffee shop wearing a big cowboy hat and yee-hawing loudly. He swept me off

my feet and slung me upside down over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Come on, girlie, it’s time for the hoe-down!”

I was getting used to David’s outrageous sense of humor by now. He was always coming up with new ways to startle people. “Okay, you’re funny. Put me down, now.”

Ginnie, who was standing behind the lunch counter with a pot of coffee, was looking at us with a grim frown of disapproval. Her face relaxed when she recognized the cowboy. “Oh, for God sakes, David, I was ready to call the police!”

“It’s okay, Ginnie. He’s just here to pick me up from work.”

My dad hated the idea of going out at midnight on weekends to bring me home from work. The weekday shift ending at ten bothered him enough. So I was able to negotiate a later curfew with the understanding that my friends would bring me home instead. Usually David or Kurt would pick me up—and whoever else in the group was working that night—and we’d go somewhere and hang out. My new curfew was one-thirty a.m., so there wasn’t a whole lot of time, but I took whatever I could get. Mostly we just hung out wherever we could find a place to hang out. Since we usually hung out in parking lots, we had to move the party as rent-a-cops chased us from one location to the next. It’s weird, but I understood why they didn’t like us hanging out, because I wouldn’t have liked the looks of us, either.

The most harmless among us was also the scariest looking: Frank Blessing, the dishwasher I’d met that first night out with the Bowl Gang, as we called ourselves. Frank was a big, heavy-set guy who favored black rock-n-roll t-shirts and giant belt-buckles on his faded blue jeans. His dark hair was too long and he didn’t shave regularly, so he always looked scruffy and slightly menacing, like someone you’d expect to see in a bar

brawl. He almost never smiled and almost always had a cigarette in his mouth. If you didn't know him, he was a scary guy to come across.

I did know Frank so I was glad to see him leaning up against David's car when we came out of the restaurant. He flicked his cigarette away as we approached. "Hey."

"Hey, to you, too," I said. "Where's everybody else?" I meant Kurt.

Frank knew what I meant. He nodded his head to the left. "Around the corner of the building. Let me see what's going on."

"Whaddya mean 'what's going on'?" David said. We followed Frank.

Frank looked back at me with some hesitation, then resignation. I caught his meaning: There was something he didn't want me to see.

I rounded the corner of the building just behind Frank. Just in time to see Kurt and Claire Ann making out in Kurt's car.

"Hey, hey, enough of that, kids!" David said with a grin.

I felt as if I had been sucker punched. While I had never actually admitted to anyone that I had a crush on Kurt, and Kurt had never technically even asked me out on a date, I felt betrayed. There was Kurt, who acted as if he liked me, making out with Claire Ann, who had gone out of her way to make me feel accepted in the group. I had no idea. It was maddening because I was so insanely jealous yet I knew I had no right to be angry with either of them.

I took a deep breath and fought back the sudden tears that had sprung to my eyes. It was so unfair. Why couldn't Kurt like me instead? But I refused to fall apart.

"Hey, Karen! Ready to party?" Kurt was leaning out the car window grinning.

"Sure." I wanted to slap his face.

Claire Ann disentangled herself from Kurt and got out of the car. “Karen! I’ve got to talk to you!” It was clear she had been drinking. She pulled me aside and began gushing to me drunkenly about Kurt.

“Karen, I am so glad to see you. Karen, he’s a god! I’m in lust!”

I cringed inwardly. “I didn’t know you were going out with Kurt.”

“Me neither, but I’m not complaining.” She actually gave me a high five before she ran back over to Kurt.

Suddenly I realized that Claire Anne had no idea how I felt about Kurt. I had never told her. I hadn’t told anyone. I had just completely misunderstood Kurt’s intentions towards me. I stood there alone, my mind in a whirl of confusion. What in the world had made me think there was even the smallest chance that a guy like Kurt would be interested in me?

Frank tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a beer. “Don’t worry. It don’t mean nothing. They’re both drunk.”

“Well, that’s obvious.” Somehow that made me feel better. I popped the tab off the can and chugged the beer.

**8.**

I wondered why Kurt went out of his way to become friends with me. Some people seem as convinced as I was that we had something going, even though I'd deny it when they asked. Little Jo thought so. Frank seemed to think so. This thing with Claire Ann just seemed to come out of nowhere.

How was I supposed to tell if a guy liked me if he didn't come right out and say so? How could I let a guy know that I was interested without coming right out and saying so? Why don't people come right out and say how they feel?

Even I know the answer to the last question: Rejection. Humiliation. Cold, dark, stomach-twisting, sweaty-palmed, tongue-tied fear.

Besides, how did I think I was suddenly going to get the guy? Just because Kurt was nice to me didn't mean he wanted to go out with me. I was embarrassed just thinking about it. How could I have been so stupid?

I called Debbie the next day to talk about the Claire Anne incident. Debbie and I had drifted somewhat since I started my new job, but we had been friends since fourth grade, and, besides, she didn't know my Bowl friends. Maybe she could be more objective.

"If I knew ahead of time that somebody liked me that I didn't like, I would know to avoid them. You know, give them nothing to feed their hopes," Debbie said. "It was pretty crappy of him to lead you on that way."

"Maybe he doesn't know I have a crush on him."

“Oh, bullshit. He knows if this Frank guy knows. Frank’s his friend, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think Kurt actually said anything to him. Frank just notices things.”

“Still he knows Kurt better than you do. He’d know if Kurt was flirting with you.”

“Kurt flirts with all the girls. I just read too much into it. Besides, what guy wants to go out with a girl with glasses?”

“You’re getting contact lenses, aren’t you?”

“I’m saving up for them.”

“Well, that’ll help. And you’ve gotta learn how to flirt, too,” Debbie said. “You flirt like a dork.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, you do. Sometimes you don’t try hard enough, and sometimes you look like you’re trying too hard.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sure it does. You have to know when to play hard to get and when to catch flies with honey.”

“Flies with honey? What the heck are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you ever hear that expression? My grandma says it all the time: You catch more flies with honey than vinegar. You’ve gotta learn to be sweet.”

“But I’m never mean to anybody.”

“Oh, never mind.”

Talking to Debbie about it helped a little, but not much. There was history there, too. After all, sometimes she had crushes on the same people I did. It was the same with

Mary Lee and Janeen. There was too much competition among us, and I didn't compete very well.

For the longest time I had a crush on one of Mary Lee's boyfriends, but I didn't dare say so to anyone, because, after all, she was my friend. But she didn't have a problem competing with me for his attention in the first place, did she? And I backed off, didn't I? Because I figured she was prettier, right? I figured I'd lose the competition, so I dropped out.

Then there was the time I told Janeen about a particular guy I liked because I thought she might be able to help me find out if he liked me. She never got back to me about it. Pretty soon I wondered if she was becoming an obstacle to the object of my affection because she had a crush on him, too. Or did I just create dynamics like these in my mind because they played better than believing she found out for me, the news wasn't positive, and she was trying to spare my feelings?

And so I thought about all this as I agonized and daydreamed and lost my appetite. I felt the intoxicating rush of infatuation followed by the sickening thud of jealousy and the despair of rejection. Sometimes I longed to feel nothing at all. I knew it would take another object of affection to make these feelings go away; the only cure was to find someone else to have a crush on, preferably someone who felt the same way about me. In the meantime, I was stuck.

**9.**

By July I had enough money saved to get contact lenses. They were hard lenses and much harder to get used to than I expected, but I knew the effort would be worth it. No longer peering at the world through my own personal windshield, I would now experience peripheral vision and the benefits of one less social handicap. In addition, my angst over Kurt had left me with less of an appetite; that meant I dropped the ten pounds I had been trying to lose all through high school. Food didn't comfort me anymore, and my figure looked better as a result.

The first day I showed up at work with my new lenses, I had also just gotten a haircut. It was a little shorter than I expected and I was self-conscious—no surprise there—about so many changes in my appearance at once.

David was working that day also and was already running the dishwasher when I came back to the kitchen to clock in. He broke out into one of his mischievous grins when he saw me.

“Karen’s got a buzz!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I rolled my eyes as I brushed past him, but I was smiling.

For the next few hours, David would occasionally peer around the kitchen doorway to the bussing station, pointing at me and grinning, while mouthing the word “Bzzzzz.....” as if he were some kind of overgrown fly. After awhile, I started to think, gee, is my haircut really that bad? Sure, it was shorter, but it wasn't as if I'd been to the barber for a crew cut. He was starting to annoy me. Finally, during one of my many trips

hauling a loaded bus pan to the dishwashing station, David cornered me.

“I can’t *believe* you got a buzz!”

I handed the bus pan over to him with a sardonic smile. “So what?”

David was positively gleeful. “So you admit it!”

“Well it’s pretty obvious. You could use one, too.”

David laughed. “Oh, yeah? So you think I could use a buzz.”

“Yes I do. You’re starting to look like Shaggy from Scooby Doo.”

David looked confused, then even more amused than before. “I wasn’t talking about your haircut, you ding dong! Your eyes!”

“What about my eyes?”

“They’re all red! And you’ve been squinting and blinking. You know what *that* means!”

I did. He meant *that other* kind of buzz. So while glasses made me look like a geek, contacts were making me look like a freak—well, at least until I got used to them. David and I had a good laugh about the misunderstanding after I finally convinced him the red eyes were from contact lenses and that I hadn’t been smoking any funny stuff. He said, “I noticed you weren’t wearing your glasses, but what I really noticed was that I had never gotten a good look at your eyes before—and boy, do you look stoned!”

“Thanks a lot, David.”

“Hey, the truth hurts!” He folded his arms and eyed me with mock indignation.

“So, ya think I look like Shaggy, do ya?”

“Truth hurts!” I laughed.

Fortunately, my eyes adjusted to my new lenses for the most part, although late

nights and the West Side Bowl's permanent cigarette haze were constant irritants. If anyone else noticed anything funny about my eyes, it probably raised their estimation of me more than anything else. It meant I was "cool," as in now they didn't have to hide their use from me. "Don't worry, she's cool," is what I heard Frank say when I came across kitchen staff sneaking a toke out in the parking lot during their break.

\*

Part of the catch of working the night shift was that you had to work at least one night of the weekend. Dina and I usually had the Friday evening shift, which lasted until midnight for us because we were under eighteen and couldn't legally work past that time. But, of course, to everyone who had to stay until closing, which ended up being around 4:30 a.m., you'd think we were cutting out early.

Fridays were busy. There wasn't much time for anyone to sip a Coke or smoke a cigarette, and getting in a dinner break was impossible until after the dinner rush settled down about nine o'clock. Dina and I were running constantly. The ice machine couldn't keep up with the demand for beverages and there was never enough silverware. The customers were always yelling at the waitresses and the waitresses were always yelling at the cooks. Harvey would shuffle in, half-listen to a few complaints from the battling wait staff and kitchen crew, smile his cynical Pumpkin-face smile, and shuffle off to the bar in the Rodeo Room. Once the activity settled down, he would emerge from the Rodeo Room and shuffle slowly and unsteadily back into the kitchen to give a show of being in charge of things. Of course by this time, he'd be plastered, so his tour of duty lasted about two minutes before he'd stumble back into the bar, where he'd remain, from what I'd been told, until they stopped serving liquor at two.

One Friday evening, I encountered Harvey on his shuffling route.

“Hi, Harvey, “I said cheerfully.

He grunted something incomprehensible, as usual, and peered at me briefly through his red watery eyes as he took a drag from his cigarette and continued on his path to the Rodeo Room Bar. Suddenly, he stopped and slowly turned. I thought he was going to give me hell about something or other and braced for the onslaught.

Harvey shuffled back, looking at me as if he’d never quite noticed me before.

“You lost the glasses,” he said and I realized to my dismay that he was leering at me drunkenly. “My God, you’re actually *cute*.” He took another drag on his cigarette and winked at me.

“Uh, thanks,” I replied smiling nervously. He nodded and shuffled off again.

From that point, I became one of Harvey’s Angels. It was a good thing in that he didn’t grouch and grumble at me anymore about how I was doing my job, but then his new appreciation for me wasn’t tied up in my job skills.

\*

Frank had been right. Kurt and Claire Ann’s relationship hadn’t lasted very long. In fact, that one drunken encounter was the extent of their romance. Kurt hinted that Claire Ann was too aggressive for his taste and left it at that.

“You like him, don’t you?” Claire Ann asked me one evening.

I was sitting with her and Sharon on the sidewalk in front of Frank’s house. Kurt, David and I had just gotten off work, and Kurt dropped David and me off at Frank’s, while he went home to change. We were all supposed to go out somewhere, but nobody

had any ideas. It was taking Kurt forever to get changed, and Frank and David had gone in the house to call him on the phone to see what the holdup was.

“Who?” I asked.

“You know who.”

“I guess.”

“Don’t worry, Karen. I’m over him,” Claire Ann said. “He’s cute, but not my type. You two go good together, though.”

“Really? What makes you say that?” Sharon sounded surprised.

“They’re both goody-two-shoes!” Claire Ann laughed. “Don’t get offended. I mean that in a nice way.”

I shrugged.

Sharon took a long drag on her cigarette and slowly exhaled. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t think Kurt’s a goody-two-shoes. I think it’s an act.”

“A pretty good one if you ask me,” Claire Ann laughed.

“Maybe I’ll have to investigate,” Sharon said. She looked at me as if she were sizing up the competition and finding no threat.

“Rick’ll love that,” Claire Ann said. Sharon’s boyfriend was a known tough guy. I was learning that Sharon was the kind of girl who enjoyed being fought over.

“Yeah, Rick would beat his ass,” she said proudly, putting her cigarette out on the sidewalk, twirling it back and forth, then smashing it down hard into the cement. She looked up and smiled sweetly at me. “I wouldn’t do that to Kurt. You go for it, Karen.”

Kurt pulled in the driveway just then. Frank and David came out of the house yelling at him.

“You said you were going to change. Where the hell have you been?” said David.

“I took a shower.”

“A shower? A shower?” David was incensed. “The rest of us are sitting here in our restaurant stink waiting for you and you’re off getting a shower?”

“Well I couldn’t stand myself.”

“I can’t stand you either,” Frank said. “Whew! What is that you’re wearing? Perfume?”

I was a little annoyed, too. After all, he wasted time when he could have been with me. But then again, maybe he wanted to get cleaned up to impress me. Yeah, right, I thought. He’s probably real attracted to me now as I sit here smelling of cigarette smoke and French fries.

“Well, where are we going?” Kurt asked impatiently. “You’ve had time to think about it.”

“Nowhere, now,” said Frank. “Karen has to be home in twenty minutes.”

I was the only one with an actual curfew, it seemed. It was embarrassing, since I was older than the other two girls.

“I’ll take her home, while the rest of you figure it out.”

Sharon had a triumphant smile on her face. She hadn’t worked that evening. Claire Ann didn’t work until morning. I was the only smelly one besides David.

“I love that aftershave you’re wearing, Kurt,” she said as I got into Frank’s car.

## 10.

Bob “The Bread Man” Smith had a lot to do with Claire Ann’s change of heart towards Kurt. Bob baked all the homemade pies, breads and rolls the Bowl restaurants were famous for, thus his moniker. The skin on his pale boyish face contrasted with his straight black hair and reminded me somewhat of the pastry dough he worked with all day. He spoke in a slow, lisping way, but was quick witted and had a great sense of humor. Bob was nineteen and supposedly “engaged to be engaged” to some other girl, but that didn’t stop Claire Ann from developing a major crush on him. It didn’t stop Bob from encouraging her, either.

Bob was a recent addition to our circle of friends. The night he officially joined our little group, we were actually playing a prank on him to be mean. Bob was a full-time employee unlike the rest of us and he drove his own brand-new car unlike the rest of us, and so I guess we considered him one of the “establishment.” Actually, I think Kurt and David just had it in for Bob. So one night they let the air out of one of his tires.

I discovered this when Kurt came to pick me up from work one evening. He let me in on the prank in progress as we were leaving the restaurant, and he led me to the scene of the crime. I was terrified we were all going to get caught and my conscience was bothering me even though I hadn’t done anything myself.

As we approached, I heard David yell, “Omigod! Here he comes! Blow it back up, Claire Ann! Blow it up!”

I saw Claire Ann frantically racing back and forth as David doubled over with

laughter. Frank just stood with his arms crossed, cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth, shaking his head.

“That’s not funny!” Claire Ann screamed at David, but she was laughing, too.

Then things got not so funny. We heard Bob shouting as he ran toward us. There was nowhere to hide so we had to listen to him curse and fume at us.

“What the hell did I ever do to you? Goddamn it. You’re going to fix this.”

I think everybody felt pretty rotten about it. After all, what *did* Bob ever do to any of us?

Frank was the first to speak up. “Give us the jack and the spare.”

David and Kurt changed the tire while Frank supervised and watched them bicker.

“You know you could help, Frank,” Kurt complained.

“Hey, it wasn’t my idea to let the air out of his tire. You need the practice. I already know how to change a tire.”

“Quit your whining, Kurt,” David said. “You just don’t want to get your hands dirty.”

“Fuck you!” Kurt said good-naturedly.

“Hey, Bob, want a beer?” Claire Ann held out a can of Hudepohl.

“Thanks,” Bob said. “Hey, you guys are all right. I’m sorry I got so mad.”

“No, we’re sorry,” said Claire Ann. “We didn’t realize you were so cool.”

Frank and I exchanged glances. It was obvious Bob and Claire Ann were hitting it off. Just then, I spotted the Bowl’s security guy coming to kick us out.

“Rent-a-cop!”

We hid the beer, but had a ready-made excuse to loiter, thanks to Bob.

“Hey, these guys are just helping me out. Somebody let the air out of my tire and they’re helping me put on the spare.”

“Well, all right,” the guy said. “But don’t be all night about it.”

As soon as he walked away, we toasted our new friendship with Bob.

## 11.

It was Kurt's idea for all of us to get together and go to Kings Island. None of us worked on Mondays, so we picked a Monday and went.

I brought a purse that day. I hate purses, especially at places like amusement parks. Usually I just stuff my money in my front jeans pocket and a comb in my back pocket. But since I was still getting used to my new contacts, I had to be prepared for vision emergencies. So I bought a nice canvas foldover clutch purse and stocked it with tissues, eye drops, wetting solution, my lens case and the backup glasses I hoped I wouldn't need. Oh, well. At least Kurt could see me without the distraction of my ocular windshield. Dragging a purse around was minor in comparison.

Especially since Kurt really did notice the difference.

"I never noticed how green your eyes are," he said, while we waited in line at the park entrance. Frank overheard and mocked him.

"Oh, darling," he said. "And I never noticed how brown your eyes are...kind of like...pools of...bullshit!"

"Shut up, Frank," Kurt tried to laugh it off, but he was blushing.

"You're a funny guy, Frank," I said, but I was blushing, too.

I didn't think it was my imagination that Sharon seemed to be determined to pair herself off with Kurt. I wondered what happened to Rick. Likewise, David was hanging all over me. I tried to be pleasant about it, mainly by ignoring it and walking away as soon as the opportunity arose, but I didn't get where he got the idea he could just put his

arm around me like he was trying to claim me. Kurt would never do that. Then again, I probably wouldn't have minded if he did.

Claire Ann and Bob were inseparable and pretty happy about it. Frank, the seventh wheel, seemed alternately happy-go-lucky and morose, but then he was always that way. He kept disappearing periodically to play skeeball in the arcade, usually when we were in line for rides that went around in circles. He didn't like rides that went around in circles. I didn't do too well on them either, but stupid pride wouldn't allow me to sit them out. We did the Rotor, which was basically a big spinning can. You stood with your back against the wall while the can spun really fast—and then the floor dropped out. Centrifugal force kept you stuck to the wall.

That didn't help my stomach, but it turned out that slower circular rides affected me much worse than fast ones like the Rotor. We rode the Ferris Wheel, followed by the Spinning Teacups and the Scrambler. I'd finally had it after going around and around on the Wooden Shoes.

That's when everyone decided to ride the Racer. I actually liked the Racer, but by then I needed to rest or I was going to puke. Of course, that was taken as a sign that I was afraid of roller coasters.

"You get to be the mom then," Frank said. "Mom, hold my stuff for me." I held open my purse and he dumped in his keys, sunglasses, two ashtrays he'd won at the arcade, cigarettes, lighter, and wallet.

"Well, at least I have money now," I said.

"Hey, can you hold my sunglasses, too?" Claire Ann asked.

Pretty soon my little fold-over purse was unfolded and bulging with an

assortment of sunglasses, wallets and cigarette brands.

I sat on a bench trying to regain my sense of equilibrium while the rest of the group went on the roller coaster several times. It was Monday, so the lines weren't too long. It occurred to me that I might be "Mom" for the day. I wanted to ride rollercoasters too, but right then I was hot, thirsty and sick to my stomach. I was starting to feel sorry for myself, when Kurt showed up suddenly with a pop.

"Here, this will make you feel better," he said.

"Thanks." I took a long drink. It did feel good.

"After the next ride, let's make Frank hold your purse and we'll ride."

"Yeah, I guess we should all take turns being the mom."

"That, and I need to get away from Sharon. She's getting too friendly."

"What? She's coming on to you?" I joked.

Kurt was serious, though. "Something like that. Let's just say I'd rather be with you."

I was overjoyed, but of course, I tried not to make it too obvious. "Well, I need to get away from David," I said. "He's been friendly, too. Maybe we can get him and Sharon together."

"David is at it again?" Kurt was incredulous. "Okay, it's you and me together from here on out. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Hey, don't laugh like you did before, but you really do look nice with your contacts—not that I didn't like you before...I mean..." Kurt looked embarrassed.

"It's okay. I know what I looked like."

“You looked fine. It’s just that I never really saw your eyes before. Very pretty.”

“Thanks.” It was my turn to be embarrassed. I wasn’t used to compliments from guys.

A few minutes later, the rest of the group returned. David came up behind me and began to give me a shoulder massage. Startled, I jumped up from the bench, but Kurt was way ahead of me.

“Hey, get your hands off my girl,” he said good-naturedly as he pulled me away from the group. “It’s our turn to ride.”

I threw my overstuffed bag at Frank.

“Hold my stuff, Mom,” I said.

## 12.

My status as one of Harvey's Angels was cemented at the company picnic in August. Harvey kept referring to me as his newest "Angel," and was so friendly I even started to like the guy. Ever since I'd gotten contact lenses he'd stopped yelling at me at work. Maybe he wasn't so bad, after all. I have to admit it was flattering to be placed in the "angel" category, which sure beat the "dog" category I'd spent time in previously. However, nothing I felt about my ratings upgrade compared to how I felt when Kurt asked me to go to the picnic with him.

A shelter and softball field had been reserved for that Monday afternoon at McFarland Woods. The Bowl was closed on Mondays during the summer, so nobody was left out. The Bowl provided all the food and beverages, which also included a keg of beer, supposedly for adults only. I don't remember what I ate but I do know that I had a few beers. Maybe more than a few.

Kurt and I arrived together in his Mom's red Hornet. David and Frank were already at the shelter drinking beer. It was an absolutely gorgeous July afternoon, although there had been some rain recently and the softball field had a large puddle right where pitcher's mound was supposed to be.

Claire Ann showed up with Bob. I wondered what was going on with Bob's girlfriend, but Claire Ann looked so happy I figured the girlfriend was already out of the picture.

"So, are you two going out now?" I asked her.

“Not exactly,” Claire Ann said. “But it’s a start.”

“So is the party still on at your house tonight?”

“Yeah. Hey, Karen, I wanted to talk to you about that. Frank’s bringing some weed tonight. You okay with that?”

“It’s your house.”

“I swore I would never smoke pot because my brothers are such burnouts. But I’d like to try it. If Frank offers, do you want to try it?”

“I don’t know. Kurt is so against smoking of any kind.”

“So, are *you two* going out now?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “We’re still just friends. But it’s a start.” We high-fived each other.

“Kurt doesn’t have to know. Besides, it’s not like you’re going to go crazy like they tell you in school. That stuff is bogus.”

“Well, I am kind of curious.” And I was, come to think of it. I knew some of the other kids smoked pot, but nobody had ever offered it to me.

“Then it’s a deal. If he offers, we’ll try it.”

The grill was fired up for bratts and hot dogs. We ate and we drank, and then we played softball. Well, we tried to play softball, but the game didn’t last too long with that giant puddle in the middle of the diamond.

It all started when Kurt backed up into the puddle as he tried to field a grounder, slid and fell right down on his behind. When I laughed, he came after me and pulled me into the shallow muddy water. David yelled, “Mud fight!” and everyone joined in. I never laughed so hard or got quite so muddy.

“Here, madam, let me offer you a mud mask,” Claire said as she smashed a handful of mud in my face.

“Let us offer you the full mud bath,” said Bob. We both pulled her into the puddle, which by now had churned to the consistency of a milk shake.

By the time we left, the mud had dried somewhat, but the get-together that evening at Claire Ann’s had to wait until we all went home and got hosed down.

I can’t imagine what my parents thought when I came strolling in. My guess is they were too stunned by my swamp-monster appearance to notice I was drunk, which was a good thing since I wasn’t supposed to be drinking.

Most of my siblings had walked down to the community pool for the day, and they hadn’t come home yet. But my parents were in the kitchen, and when I walked in barefooted, carrying my soggy shoes, my dad was reading the newspaper and my mom was starting dinner. My baby brother Patrick was sitting in his high chair chewing on a graham cracker. I thought I could slip by unnoticed, but he squealed with delight when he saw me and pounded on his tray. My parents just stared at me, speechless.

“Mud fight,” I said and headed upstairs.

I had to fill the bathtub three times to get all the mud off my body and out of my hair, and I’m fortunate I didn’t drown myself in the process, being in the state I was in. I could barely stand up, so a shower was out of the question, although it probably would have been more efficient. Yes, I know I could have sat under the shower, but that would have been asking me to think logically.

Amazingly, I pulled myself together and was both clean and relatively sober when Kurt came a couple hours later to pick me up. It was a good thing because I was about to

get a shock. Kurt had brought along his new girlfriend.

### 13.

After the initial shock of being introduced to Kurt's girlfriend, Beth, I remember just sliding into the backseat of the car and numbly staring out the window as we drove to Claire Ann's house. Beth was pleasant, but in the way you'd be nice to your boyfriend's kid sister. She was from another part of town, and nobody else in our group had met her yet, Kurt informed me.

She was pretty, with big gray eyes and shoulder-length straight dark brown hair. I was startled when she pulled out a cigarette and lit up with the ease of someone with a habit. It completely destroyed my initial impression of the perfect nice girl, which was okay with me, but also a little disturbing since Kurt was supposedly so anti-smoking. Both his parents smoked and he was always complaining about it.

Yes, I was jealous of her, and I immediately disliked her, but I knew better than to blame her for that. The surprise for me was not so much that Kurt would find another girlfriend who wasn't me, but that he was carrying on as if nothing in the world had changed between us since that afternoon at the picnic. It meant that, for him, nothing had. What I had interpreted as his growing romantic interest was still nothing more than platonic friendship.

\*

Claire Ann had the coolest basement for our gatherings. First of all, she had tolerant parents, who let us have the run of the place as long as we came in through the exterior basement entrance and stayed down in the basement. That wasn't a problem

since it had a bathroom and since we provided our own refreshments (which they simply didn't want to know about).

Claire Ann's family lived off a main road, but their house was at the end of a long driveway and the neighboring homes were spaced far enough apart that there was no real danger of us bothering anyone with our occasional late-night pickup volleyball games—or the occasional noisy car.

The basement itself was finished enough that it wasn't a dungeon, but not so nice that we couldn't be kids. The recreation room had a serviceable stereo and some big old couches and chairs. In the center of the room was one of those pool tables that could be converted to a ping-pong table. It was a great place to hang out.

The only catch was that Claire Ann had older brothers who didn't want us hanging around when they had *their* friends over, so the basement wasn't always available. On those evenings, we spent most of our time driving around, looking for someplace to go, and getting chased out of various parking lots, sometimes by rent-a-cops, just as often by regular cops. Yes, we'd go to our favorite fast-food haunts also, but you can only eat so much. The drive-in theatres in our neighborhood got most of their business from kids like us willing to pay a few bucks for the privilege of loitering for a few hours.

Once I made the mistake of lamenting to my mom how few places there were for kids to gather. She said we could hang out in our basement. Yeah, right. We had an exterior basement door, too, but my parents were the type who expected everyone to come in through the front door so they could inspect them. To make matters worse, there was no bathroom in our basement, so everyone would have to go up and down the stairs.

My paranoid parents would be eavesdropping or dropping in on us, which was very uncool. I didn't even want to think about the disciplinary consequences if someone happened to bring beer over—or the social consequences if I happened to suggest that no one bring it.

\*

When we got to Claire Ann's, Frank was sitting on the steps leading down to the basement, smoking a cigarette. He looked at me and then at Beth and then back at me again, this time with a questioning look.

“Who's the girl?” he asked in his characteristically undiplomatic way.

Kurt was unfazed. “This is my date, Beth. She's from North College Hill.” He said it as if that should satisfy Frank's curiosity.

“Who's *that* girl?” Frank asked again, pointing at me. The meaning of the comment wasn't lost on me and I thought I saw a little glimmer of anger in Kurt, but he quickly recovered.

“Shut up, Frank.”

Kurt and Beth went inside, but, now slightly embarrassed, I sat down on the steps with Frank and stared down between my feet.

“What the hell is that all about?” he asked, gesturing in their direction.

“I'm sure I don't know,” I replied with a shrug, not bothering to look up.

“I thought you two were an item.”

“Me, too.” I smiled dejectedly. “Guess not.”

Claire Ann came out just then. Music was playing loudly inside and there was laughter and shouting.

“What are you doing just sitting out here? There’s a party going on!”

I raised my head and I guess Claire Ann immediately saw the tears welling up in my eyes.

“Oh, no. What’s going on?” She pulled the door shut and came up the steps to join us.

Frank wasn’t comfortable with tears, and actually, I was embarrassed to cry, so I wiped my eyes with the back of my arm.

“It’s that girl, isn’t it?”

I nodded and sighed. “I’ll get over it.”

“Yeah, right,” Claire Ann knew better. “Well don’t let *him* know it bothers you. Come on. Let’s have some fun.”

I followed Claire Ann inside. A couple beers helped and so did a few hilarious rounds of ping-pong with Bob. I am very good at ping-pong.

I didn’t exactly avoid Kurt; in fact, I did my best to not let on that my feelings were hurt, and even forced myself to talk briefly with Beth, who kept lighting up like she was trying to break the record for most cigarettes smoked at one party.

If Kurt just thought of me as a pal, well I guess I was guilty of misinterpretation. The fact that other people thought we were a couple meant something, but I wasn’t sure what, exactly.

Of course, all my rationalizing didn’t make me feel *that* much better, but it was a start.

Frank tapped me on the shoulder. “I got something’ll make you feel better.” He briefly pulled a small pipe out of his pocket and then quickly dropped it back in.

“Hey, Claire Ann, Sharon, Bob!” He waved them over. “Ready?”

“I don’t know, Frank,” I said.

“Your goody-two shoes are showing,” Sharon said, seeing my hesitation.

“Don’t tell me you’re worried what Kurt will think,” Claire Ann said.

“The hell with him,” I said.

So I went along with the crowd.

We went outside and headed over to a corner of the yard shielded from view of the house by some blue spruces. Frank pulled out a zip-lock bag and began filling up the bowl of the pipe. Claire Ann and I looked on nervously.

“Don’t worry, you won’t hallucinate or nothing,” Bob assured us as he took the lit pipe from Frank. “First you inhale, then you hold it for awhile. Like this.” He demonstrated and then handed the pipe to Claire Ann.

Claire Ann giggled. She took a hit. Then it was my turn. I breathed in the strange-smelling smoke and immediately launched into a coughing fit. My lungs itched. Everyone else laughed, but not in a mean way. The pipe went around again, and the second time I did fine.

“What am I supposed to feel, anyway?” I asked. “So far I don’t feel a thing.”

“That’s the idea,” Frank replied.

“No, I mean, I don’t feel any different,” I insisted.

“Why are you smiling then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” I began laughing. I tried to stop smiling, but I just couldn’t.

Suddenly Kurt burst through the wall of greenery.

“What are you guys doing out here?” Beth was behind him, looking concerned.

No one made any effort to hide the pipe. Kurt looked relieved, but then turned to me and said sharply, “Karen, what are you doing?”

“Partying.”

He got this weird disapproving look on his face and suddenly I noticed Beth looking at me with a similar expression. It irritated me. First of all, who the hell was she, chain-smoker that she was, to disapprove of me? Second of all, who the hell was Kurt now that he had clearly demonstrated he was not taking on the role of my boyfriend? Frank was the next target.

“Frank, I can’t believe you. Don’t do this!”

Frank raised his eyebrow. “Like you never do this?”

“I don’t anymore! And you shouldn’t either.”

“Yes, Father Kurt.”

With that comment, Kurt wheeled around and stalked off with Beth, who cast one last look of disgust upon us.

Bob gestured toward Claire Ann, and they both stood up. “We’re going back inside,” Claire Ann said, as she and Bob strolled away holding hands.

David showed up next.

“What’s going on? Oh…” He grinned at the sight of the pipe Frank was still holding. “Father Kurt read you the riot act.” He plopped down on the ground next to me.

“What’s with the Father Kurt bit?” I asked.

David and Frank exchanged glances.

“Oh, this you gotta hear,” David said. “Kurt has announced that he’s going to be a priest.”

“A priest! What brought that on?” This was actually good news to me where Beth was concerned.

“Who knows?” Frank laughed. “Don’t you believe it.”

I actually argued in Kurt’s defense as David and Frank alternately rolled their eyes and repeated, “Bullshit!”

“Well, Karen, maybe you can be the one to change his mind,” Sharon said. She was being a smart ass.

“I think Beth is already working that angle,” said Frank.

I have to admit that Kurt’s sudden calling sounded good to me because it explained a lot: for instance, why he didn’t ever try to “make out” with me like he did with Claire Ann. My self-esteem had been suffering over that one. Maybe he just respected me. Maybe he had become the perfect Catholic boy. Of course, there was still the chance he could be persuaded away from the priesthood by the right Catholic girl. A Catholic girl just like me.

No, I wasn’t saying any of this out loud, but you can bet I was thinking it. Still, I was a little unnerved by how adamant David and Frank were about Kurt not being “priest material.”

“We’ve known Kurt since we were kids,” David insisted. “We’ve gone to school with him since kindergarten. I’m telling you he’s not that religious.”

David and Frank kind of ticked me off. If they were right, it meant that Kurt wasn't attracted to me, plain and simple. The idea that Kurt operated from of a higher set of values was very attractive to me. It gave me hope.

Besides, didn't I notice an expression on Kurt's face before he realized what we were doing was smoking pot? Could that have been—jealousy? But when I saw him and Beth leaving together a few minutes later, they were holding hands, and neither jealousy nor the priesthood seemed to explain his behavior towards me.

Just then someone turned up the stereo in the basement. At the sound of the Bee Gees, Frank and David protested.

“Disco sucks!” David yelled.

“Claire Ann's fuckin' with us,” said Frank.

The song was abruptly interrupted, and a few minutes later, Lynyrd Skynyrd was blasting out the basement windows.

“Oooo...that smell!” Claire Ann yelled out from one of the windows. We all laughed. Everything seemed so funny.

I wasn't sure if Beth was really any threat to me, but the buzz I had temporarily relieved me from caring.

**14.**

Claire Ann's party was the first and last time I ever saw chain-smoking Beth. For about a week or so, Kurt had been overly polite to me at work, taking his breaks alone or with one of the guys, but then one day he called me up.

"Hey, Karen, need a ride to work?" He was back to his old self.

We were back to flirting and spending our breaks together just like nothing happened.

We were sitting in one of the back booths on a slow Thursday evening during our break when I got the story out of him. He had broken off with Beth.

"I realized how hard it is to date someone from another part of town. It was just too complicated trying to get together on weekends with our work schedule conflicts. Besides, once school starts, we'd hardly ever see each other."

Personally, I thought that was a weak excuse for dumping someone, but the result worked in my favor so I didn't argue the point. Especially when he got to the part about how much more he liked spending time with me.

"You know, Karen, we just have something between us," he said. "I don't know what it is, but we just connect."

"Maybe we just think a lot alike," I offered. "You know, we tend to have the same sense of humor."

"That's true," Kurt agreed. "But being friends with you means a lot to me. And I don't want to mess it up. I'm glad we're just friends. It's much easier that way."

The other shoe is falling, I thought.

“It is?” I did my best to force my expression to be quizzical rather than crushed.

Kurt nodded. “Definitely. We both work together, so we see each other all the time. We hang around the same crowd.”

“So you shouldn’t date people you hang around with?” I didn’t like this train of thought.

“Exactly. That way we can stay friends,” he looked at me earnestly. “Say we started dating and then broke up? It would make things really awkward. As long as we’re hanging around the Bowl crowd it’s just better if none of us are dating each other.”

So what was he saying? Later, we could date? It made sense on the surface, but it sounded too much like something your parents would advise. I liked Kurt *now*. I didn’t want to wait around to go out with him at some later point in time.

“So you’re telling me I should date people outside our group?” I asked.

“If that’s what you really want.” He sounded perturbed. So what did *that* mean? Was I supposed to just sit back and watch him go after every girl in the neighborhood until he was ready for me?

Just then, David slid into the seat next to Kurt, and Bob plopped down next to me. The serious part of the discussion was over, and the three of them turned to more important topics, such as determining how many toothpicks they could shoot through a straw into the ceiling tile. I looked up, and saw the evidence of previous toothpick shooting sprees sticking out of the ceiling above us.

David began entertaining himself by blowing through a straw to move a drop of water across the length of the table, while Bob was using a spoon to fling ice chips from

my glass into Kurt's glass.

"He shoots; he scores!" Bob exclaimed with each success.

Bored with the toothpicks, Kurt used his straw to release drops of water on the scrunched-up paper in which the straw had been packaged. As the paper got wet and expanded, it stretched out like a worm.

I sat watching them for a long time, fascinated by how fascinated they were with their individual activities. They were oblivious to each other after a time.

"The things you guys do to amuse yourselves," I finally commented. It suddenly struck me as hilarious and I started laughing. How could I take any of these guys seriously?

I slid out from my seat. "Sorry, guys, but I have to clock back in."

"Hey, don't forget about the fireworks tomorrow," Kurt said. "We'll pick you up at six."

\*

The big end-of-summer celebration in Cincinnati was the WEBN Fireworks on the riverfront over Labor Day Weekend. A bunch of us piled in David's car to make the trip down to Public Landing, where we planned to stake a spot near the Suspension Bridge.

It was a warm clear evening. Bob had to take his official girlfriend to the fireworks, so he didn't come with us. Claire Ann didn't let on if she was bothered by it, though. Sharon was going with Rick, and he was too cool to hang out with us. So it was just David, Frank, Kurt, Claire Ann and me riding along River Road in David's Cutlas, listening to Jackson Browne with the windows down. I never was a huge fan of Jackson

Browne, but that evening as we all sang, “*Won’t you play just a little bit longer? Please, please play...just a little bit more...*” I thought it was the best music in the world. I wanted the moment itself to last just a little bit longer.

We found a spot right on the landing and laid out a blanket on the sloping cement to claim our territory. We had beer in the cooler and a radio to hear the tunes that would be played during the fireworks display. I had such a feeling of contentment, a feeling of being absolutely myself and at peace with myself, a feeling of being accepted and loved by my newly found close friends. Then again, maybe it was just the beer buzz. I liked getting a buzz. It made me feel confident instead of self-conscious, so I could actually be in the center of the fun instead of the fringes. We weren’t supposed to be drinking and that made it all the more exciting and fun. So far, I hadn’t experienced any bad hangovers, mostly just headaches the next day, but they didn’t last. I had a lot of catching up to do in the fun department, so I never felt guilty; I just made sure I didn’t overdo it and didn’t get caught. What’s weird is that I don’t remember ever paying for beer; I certainly never bought it. The guys usually took care of that. There was no way I was going to pass for eighteen—at seventeen I was usually mistaken for a twelve-year-old. I comforted myself with the hope that my youthful appearance would serve me better when I was thirty. Even if I had looked older, it wouldn’t have done me any good because I was a hopelessly bad liar. Guilt would radiate from my eyes over the tiniest white lie, which is also why I was so susceptible to practical jokes: I could just never understand the capacity some people have to stretch the truth beyond reason and still keep a straight face.

I remember watching two guys jump into the Ohio River from the bridge support

and cheering with everyone else in the crowd as they tried to out-swim the coast guard. Even after the two were pulled out of the river onto the boat and arrested, the crowd cheered and laughed and whooped it up. I remember lying on the blanket next to Kurt and watching the spectacular display of light bursts timed perfectly to the music and smelling the river and the spent fireworks and occasional wafts of marijuana and frequent wafts of Kurt's aftershave, and after the final hoorah that lit up the entire river valley as bright as day, watching the little ash flakes drift down upon us like snowflakes as the bridge and boats beneath disappeared into a manmade fog of smoke. We moved with the swarm of the crowd, making our way back to the car, Kurt holding on to my hand as we trudged slowly up from the river. I remember sitting in the car drinking beer, waiting for the traffic to clear out, finally pulling out into the mass of cars when it became apparent there was no point in waiting; nobody was going to get anywhere quickly tonight. David had the radio on and the people around us were still festive, and so were we. We started getting silly and stole some cigarettes from Frank so we could practice blowing smoke rings. We drank all the beer and Claire Ann and I were desperate to pee, so as soon as we could get off the highway, we did and found our way to a gas station with a restroom. I couldn't feel my face again. Claire Ann and I giggled uncontrollably as we helped each other balance so we could pee without actually sitting on the toilet. We laughed a lot that night. Kurt pulled me aside, grasping both my hands and said he'd had the best time ever with me and please don't ever change. Then he lost his balance and we both fell over into a bush that was part of a landscape island on one side of the parking lot, and we struggled back to our feet laughing hysterically. At Frisch's, we ate Big Boy sandwiches and drank lots of coffee, so by the time I got home at midnight, the buzz was wearing off. The next

morning I had my first hangover.

**15.**

I had always done well in school. Until I started working at the Bowl, that is. Being a nerd with no social life was a lot better for my grades and more conducive to my participation in all those extra curricular activities that look good on your college applications. My senior year, I dropped out of Spanish Club and Art Club and did the least amount possible for the Drama club. I played the worst soccer season of my life, thanks to missed practices and late nights before the games. It was a recreational league, so they didn't kick me off the team, but they probably should have. Normally a fitness fanatic, I just didn't have time for it anymore and I got out of shape, even though I was skinnier. Senioritis had overcome me. I felt alternatively guilty and apathetic about it. Go to hell, world: I'm a senior!

Socially, the year seemed full of promise. While I was frustrated with my role as Kurt's platonic friend, I felt confident enough to ask him to go my school's fall dance—as a friend, of course. Claire Ann had asked Bob, and he said okay even though he was officially “pre-engaged.” David had been asked to go by a girl I vaguely knew from my social studies class. We could all go together.

Kurt agreed to go and I was ecstatic.

Bob and Claire Ann drove separately, but Kurt and I went with David and his date, Joyce. In the car, David passed around a small jug. Joyce took a swig and handed it to Kurt. Kurt took several swigs and then handed it to me.

I looked at him questioningly. “Whiskey,” he said. “Go ahead. It's okay.”

In the spirit of the party, I imbibed, but I probably should have stopped at one swig. Jack Daniels turned out to be a bit stronger than 3.2 beer or even Little Kings.

The jug had been passed around several times before we arrived at the school, where the dance was being held. We were having a jolly good time. Getting out of the car, however, I felt extraordinarily unsteady for how little I thought I had been drinking. My puzzlement turned to dismay when I saw Kurt's disapproving expression. Pretty hypocritical, I thought, since he was right there with everyone else drinking and encouraging me to drink.

But I had bigger problems. If I didn't pass inspection at the school gymnasium, I could be in some big trouble. Like expulsion, for instance. I don't know why, but it hadn't even occurred to me to worry about our drinking until I saw the line of teachers taking tickets and checking purses for contraband. Then I was absolutely terrified.

"Oh, my God. What do I do? They're going to bust me!"

"Be cool. Just be cool," David encouraged me. "Kurt, hold her arm."

"But I never get in trouble," I said.

"That's good," Kurt said. "They won't be looking to bust you."

"I don't know," said Joyce. "Here, I've got breath mints."

Mints might hide the whiskey smell, but they couldn't help me walk straight. I took one anyway. Might as well.

Kurt and I walked arm in arm up to the inspection point at the building's entrance. All I could think of was how furious my dad was going to be when he came to pick me up. He'd start yelling and screaming before we even got to the car. I'd probably be grounded for the rest of the year. Maybe even sent off to Oldenberg. Oldenberg! That's a

girls' boarding school in Indiana, mostly known in our neighborhood as the ultimate parental threat. It's where girls got sent when they got caught smoking pot in the restroom or getting too friendly with boys.

"Oldenberg!" I hissed to no one in particular.

"What?" Kurt just looked at me as if I were crazy.

Mrs. Rudemiller, a younger teacher, saw me coming, gave me a look and immediately pulled me away from Kurt and over to where she was checking purses and taking tickets.

She put both her hands on my shoulders, bent over and whispered in my ear, "You smell like a brewery. Because it's *you*, I'm just going to tell you to be careful. Don't let it happen again." She straightened up and smiled, then pushed me along.

I passed inspection!

But I knew exactly what she meant by "because it's *you*." Since this was my senior year, since I had no reputation as a troublemaker, and since I didn't have so much as a detention on my record, she was cutting me a break—this time.

Chiding myself, I was determined to not let it ruin the rest of the evening. But it already had.

I had never felt so unsteady in my life. The room was spinning. I had to sit down.

What I had thought was that Kurt might sit with me. But instead, as a slow song began, he asked if I minded if he asked Jenny Collins to dance since I wasn't feeling well.

"I'm feeling fine," I insisted. "I'll be fine." I started to rise, but Kurt was already making his way across the dance floor.

Meanwhile, Debbie and Mary Lee came over to meet the mysterious Kurt I had been telling them all about at lunch every day. I had hoped to introduce him personally, but I was now reduced to pointing him out on the dance floor.

“I’m taking a rest right now,” I said.

“Hey, have you been drinking?” Debbie said. “You have!”

“Yeah, well...

“Ha! It’s about time, Oliger!” said Mary Lee. “Tell Kurt we said hi. We’ve gotta run.”

They rejoined their dates at a table across the room. Janeen couldn’t get a date this time. That gave me some satisfaction, but not much.

After a couple Cokes and some pretzels, I finally felt well enough to dance, but by then the deejay was playing rock tunes. Kurt didn’t bother to come back, and I spent the next hour or so dancing in a group with Claire Ann, Bob, David and Joyce.

“Where’s Kurt?” Bob yelled over the music.

I shrugged and pointed. “Over there, somewhere.”

“Isn’t he your date?”

“That’s what I thought.” Claire Ann and I exchanged looks. She glanced across the room and her eyes narrowed.

“You okay?” she asked.

I nodded, smiling wanly.

“We can talk later,” she said. “Let’s have fun now.”

Kurt finally returned, but he wanted to leave. “Let’s get out of here and go back to David’s,” he said.

Not even one slow dance. Rejected once again. Even with a so-called date, I was relegated to the sidelines.

In the car, Kurt was blunt. "I wish you'd told me you couldn't handle whiskey."

"Oh-oh, I-I didn't know," I stammered, in shock. He gave me the whiskey. He said it was okay, didn't he? Finally, in a small plaintive voice, I said, "I'm sorry."

"Well, I wanted to dance and you weren't feeling good. So there I was having to look for other girls to dance with."

"I'm not that bad off. I said I was sorry."

"Just forget about it."

That hurt. When we got back to David's, his dad directed us to the basement rec room, where he had left a full spread of pop, chips and hoagies. I nibbled on a sandwich, but my appetite was gone and I was suddenly very sleepy. Kurt was having a good old time, but completely ignoring me. I wanted to find some place to hide before I started to cry right there in front of everyone.

The old couch in the corner looked like an appealing place to escape to. And I was so very sleepy. I couldn't keep my eyes open much longer. While everyone else continued to party, I went over and curled up on the couch using my shawl as a blanket.

A couple hours later, I awoke to Bob nudging my shoulder.

"Hey, kid. You passed out," he said. "Come on now, wake up. We're taking you home."

"Passed out? I didn't pass out," I mumbled groggily. "I was just resting."

"Kid, you passed out," Bob laughed gently. "It's after two. We have to get you home."

“I thought Kurt was taking me home.”

“Kurt left already. I think he’s a little upset with you,” Bob said. “You probably shouldn’t have had the whiskey.”

“But he gave it to me!” I said sitting up. My head hurt. “I didn’t know how strong it was!”

“Yeah, I know,” Bob replied. “Why did you drink it, though?”

“She didn’t know,” Claire Ann was suddenly standing there. “It’s not her fault. Kurt should have known better.”

Bob shook his head. “It’s not my place, I know, because I like to party, too. But, you know, maybe you ought to think about why you’re drinking. I mean...you don’t want to get where you depend on it.”

I couldn’t believe that he was talking to me that way, but I felt I had it coming, even though everyone else had been drinking, too. I started to panic, thinking maybe I did have a drinking problem. Bob was looking at me not in a disapproving way, but with real concern. I wondered if he was talking from experience.

**16.**

Kurt called me the next day.

“I’m sorry I was such an ass last night,” he said. “I shouldn’t have hassled you about the whiskey.”

“That’s okay.”

“I couldn’t handle it either. My head is killing me.”

“Mine, too. I think I’ll stick to beer from now on. Did you leave me there because you were mad?”

“No! I was just mad at the world, plus I was feeling sick. Bob said he’d get you home. You were asleep and I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“I was passed out.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Kurt changed the subject. “You work tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

\*

We got to work ahead of time so we could socialize with some of the regulars before clocking in. Little Jo saw us as soon as we came in and waved us over to a back booth.

“How’d the dance go, kids?”

Kurt and I looked at each other.

“That bad, huh? You two have a spat?”

“No, it was fine,” said Kurt, laughing.

“That’s what I like to hear,” said Little Jo. She started waving her arms again.

“Here comes the rest of the gang.”

“I’m getting a pop, Kurt. Want one?”

“Sure, Karen. Thanks.”

By the time I got back, both booths in the back were packed and I had to pull a chair over between them. This was how we started work every night: A group of night-shift workers, with Little Jo as ringleader, would snag an empty booth about a half hour before their shift started to get in a cigarette or two and a few cups of coffee. This was generally a half-hour bitch session with either Harvey or the day-shift staff as the topics of discussion.

“Goddamn day shift snuck out again yesterday without restocking the cooking bins.”

“There was a pile of dirty dishes back there, too.”

“Hell, I don’t know how that could be. Lord knows nobody cleaned off the tables before we got here.”

“Nobody’s cleaning them now.”

“That’s ‘cause they’re all too busy taking their umpteenth break.”

“Sure, why not leave it for the night shift?”

“Bullshit on that. Somebody should say something to Harvey.”

“He don’t give a rat’s ass. I already said something to him.”

“We got time for another cigarette?”

“About five minutes.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not getting up from here until I have to.”

Soon enough it was time to clock in and get to work. Dina and I had a good system going, so bussing tables was no big deal after awhile except when the restaurant was busy. Then it could be chaotic; trying to clean tables around people who hadn’t even ordered yet, which gives you some idea of how unorganized our system was. Seating was a free-for-all. With two entrances at opposite ends of the coffee shop, there was no one place to organize and direct customers. The other thing I hated was when customers mistook me for their waitress and then got all worked up when I said I couldn’t take their order. This usually happened because part of my job was to bring water to the table, and, since I wore the same outfit as the waitresses, they would just assume I was one.

There were four waitress stations. The first station overlooked the last three lanes where this ongoing bowling contest was running. If you bowled three strikes in a row you’d win the jackpot. People liked to watch, so this meant a lot of them would grab those tables and just sit and sit and sit, which really ticked off the waitresses. First of all, customers like these generally didn’t tip well because usually they just ordered the minimum amount of food to justify sitting there—sometimes all they’d order was pop. Second, the tables weren’t available for other customers, who would then start complaining to the waitress, who was then forced to try to kick the freeloaders out. Sometimes it got unpleasant. Without exception, the waitresses hated this station, which is why there was a rotation system in effect.

The next unpopular station was the counter. If you worked the counter, you could

count on getting pockets full of change throughout the course of a shift and a lot of aggravation. The counter waitress had to take carryout orders for the lanes, and none of those people ever tipped. There were a lot of lane orders, and that made it difficult to wait on the tipping customers, usually people eating alone who rarely tipped generously to begin with.

The other two stations had booths and one station even had a larger table, so those were good potentials for good tips. On the other hand, they were near the back entrance of the restaurant, which meant the waitresses had to keep an eye on things to thwart the “dine-and-dash” crowd.

Friday and Saturday nights were the worst. I hated when it got really busy because then I got pulled off bussing tables to take lane orders so the waitress could focus on customers sitting at the counter. Dina would be pissed because she couldn't keep up with the tables, but she still preferred bussing to waiting on customers. I felt the same way. Being shy, it was terrifying for me to deal with the public, even though I knew it was something I had to learn to deal with in life. Most people were nice and understanding, but every now and then I would have to face off with someone who acted as if the world owed them something and that I was a stooge for some unnamed evil force that wanted to rip them off.

The first time I had to take lane orders was a nightmare of an experience. It was a Friday night and we were in the worst part of the dinner rush. Donna, who was working the counter that night, thrust a check pad and a pen at me, and just yelled, “Do the best you can!” It was total chaos, one of those baptism-by-fire situations. I finally figured out what I was doing, though, and was feeling pretty confident. Then that woman came up to

order a country steak sandwich.

“Mmm. I can just taste that steak now!” she said to the woman with her. “A big juicy steak is just what I need!”

The country steak sandwich was ground sirloin on a bun. She should have noticed the price was unrealistic for a big juicy steak, but since she didn't, I tried to be helpful.

“Ma'am, did you want a real steak sandwich?” I asked. The last thing I needed was this woman throwing a fit when I presented her with a hamburger.

“Honey, it says right here it's a sirloin steak sandwich!” Her attitude was already testy and I hadn't even taken the order yet.

“Yes, but the country steak is *ground* sirloin, so it's really more of a hamburger. If you want an actual steak, we do offer a grilled steak sandwich called the Sizzler.” I pointed to the item on the menu.

“That's two dollars more than the country steak! You tryin' to rip me off!”

“No, I just want to make sure you get what you really want.”

“The hell you are. Get me the country steak!”

She threw a fit when I presented her with ground sirloin on a bun. Oh, brother, was she loud. People were staring and I just wanted to disappear.

“This ain't no steak sandwich! This is a hamburger!”

“Yes, ma'am. The country steak sandwich is a hamburger.”

“I don't want no hamburger! It says steak on the menu and I want a steak!” She started to take a step towards me, but Donna moved between us.

Donna was a young, single mother in her twenties with a three-year-old son and an abusive ex-husband. On breaks, sometimes we'd sit together and she'd tell me about

her life between long, nervous drags on her cigarette. Normally she seemed kind of vulnerable, but now it seemed as if she were channeling her anger about the way she had been mistreated into protecting other weak people from being mistreated. Like me, for instance.

“Ma’am, the menu says the country steak is ground sirloin. This is ground sirloin.”

“This ain’t no sirloin! It’s a hamburger!” The woman shoved the burger under Donna’s nose. Donna wasn’t about to back down.

“Yes, ma’am. Ground sirloin is hamburger.”

“Well, I ain’t payin’ for no damn hamburger. Get me a steak.”

“So you want to order the Sizzler?”

“Yes I do. But I ain’t paying that price. I’m paying for a country steak sandwich, and I want a sandwich with a damn steak on it.”

“I can’t do that, ma’am.”

“Well, you can just keep your damn sandwich.” She went off in a huff, still fuming to her friend. “I can read. It said steak. Ain’t nobody gonna tell me a damn hamburger is a steak!”

I was nearly in tears, mainly because I wasn’t used to grownups who didn’t even know me yelling at me like that. What did she think—that I was getting a kickback for switching people to the Sizzler sandwich?

I stood there flustered. “Did I do something wrong here?”

Donna put her arm around me. “It’s okay, honey. You did fine. You just gotta learn to deal with the bastards and not take it to heart.”

If I was taking carryout orders and bussing the counter, it meant that only one bus girl was available to bus the tables. So, in their frustration, those waitresses would bitch at me. Then when midnight rolled around and both bus girls had to clock out, they would go nuts. I wouldn't have minded earning the extra money by staying until closing, but kids under eighteen weren't legally supposed to be on the clock after midnight.

Then again, it probably wasn't a good idea to be hanging out down at the Bowl that late with the kind of people who hang out that late at a bowling alley. The Rodeo Room became a disco with a live band after ten p.m., and I don't know how many more hours I could have endured listening to "Imaginary Lover" and "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" played over and over and over. Either the band had a limited repertoire or those were the most-requested songs.

I think it was the same crowd hanging out in the Rodeo Room each weekend. It wasn't a young, hip crowd. It seemed to me they were a bunch of middle-aged, divorced alcoholics who had no better place to go. The drunker they got, the sloppier they got, and the less likely they were to leave at a reasonable hour.

Apparently, when the Rodeo Room stopped serving alcohol at two in the morning, these patrons would all pile into the coffee shop and order breakfast. The restaurant was supposed to close at three, but that's not when the customers left. The waitresses and kitchen staff, who were still exhausted from the heavy dinner rush, would have to wait around while these lost drunken souls sat drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes until four in the morning.

By the end of the summer, Dina turned eighteen, so that helped a little, but only on the nights she was scheduled to work. Then her boyfriend got out of prison, and she

had to quit.

“He thinks I been seein’ some guy who works the bar down on the lanes,” she told me.

“Why would he think that?” I said.

“Oh, some dumb ass was just trying to get him pissed off. But now he says he’s going to kill the guy if I don’t quit. He will, too.”

“Nice.”

“Oh, it’s all right. We’re getting married!”

**17.**

After Dina quit the Bowl, nobody was hired right away to take her place. In the meantime, Kurt volunteered to work with me on the weekends after he closed the Rib Cage at nine. That meant I was bussing tables by myself for four hours during the dinner rush, but working directly with Kurt was a dream come true, so I wouldn't think of complaining. We even stayed until closing, which my parents said was okay as long as Ginnie brought me home. Finally, Harvey got tired of Little Jo nagging him about child labor laws. While the kids kept their weeknight bussing jobs, the Friday and Saturday night shifts were designated for workers eighteen and over. The kids were moved to the weekend day shift, which actually gave us more hours because we could work the whole ten-hour shift. Getting to work by six-thirty in the morning proved a challenge, but at least my weekend evenings were free. And it coincided with my decision to ease up on the drinking. Besides, I didn't need it anymore. I wasn't nervous around the Bowl gang.

I'd still see everyone at work. David and Frank would be dishwashers on dayshift, and Claire Ann had already been working as a cook on day shift. Kurt was going to be a bus boy in the Rodeo Room for the Sunday brunch, but he'd still be coming in at lunchtime to work the Prime Rib Cage on Saturdays.

Moving to day shift changed my perspective. I had been used to the night-shift routine and just accepted at face value the stories about the evils of the day-shift staff. I was so completely taken in by the night-shift complaints that I dreaded working with the weekend day shift.

I quickly learned the routine: The day-shift staff arrived about a half hour before their shift started so they could set up and still have time to smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, have some toast and bitch about the mess the night shift left for them to clean up.

“You’d think they’d at least finish the damn dishes.”

“Why bother? They know we’re gonna have to do them one way or another. We need the forks and knives.”

“Harvey needs to get off his ass and order some more silverware.”

“I bet those idiots on night shift are throwing it in the trash.”

“Did you see the pie case? I wouldn’t serve a dog what’s left in those pans.”

“Oh, yeah? You should see the walk-in. Looks like the damn dog got in and helped himself.”

“Bunch of lazy-asses, that’s what they are.”

It was the same complaining I’d heard on the night shift, only I was listening to it over coffee instead of pop. I started to feel like a double agent. When I worked night shift during the week, I’d get all kinds of questions about how the day shift operated. The day-shift people were always quizzing me about the night-shift people. There was probably some guilt on both sides, but neither side was as evil as they portrayed each other during those bitch sessions.

Once the shift started, day or night, the battle began between the front of the house and the back of the house. The wait staff fought with the cooks. The bus staff fought with the dishwashers. Harvey pretended to listen to the complaints and then, to everyone’s exasperation, did nothing but laugh and head back to the bar.

The first thing I discovered when I started working the weekend day shift was

how eerily quiet the Bowl was in the morning before the lanes opened. I was used to the constant background music of rolling sounds followed by a crash and falling pins. The second thing I discovered was why people who needed to make a living didn't want to work the weekend day shift. The tips weren't nearly as good because breakfast and lunch were cheaper meals and the bar didn't open until one in the afternoon on Saturday. On Sunday, it didn't open at all. That's why I soon found myself waiting tables instead of bussing them, even though I wasn't legally old enough. Waitresses were supposed to be twenty-one so they could serve alcohol, but since this wasn't usually necessary on weekend day shift, my age was overlooked.

Sometimes I would get big drinkers, but that was rare. When that happened, Abby, the bartender, would sometimes serve drinks for me. Abby was a real live biker chick. She was a big, strong-looking girl. Her frizzy light brown hair and big silver hoop earrings framed a face that reminded me of an Egyptian hieroglyphic, with her flawless olive skin, big brown eyes and hooked nose. She wore leather bracelets with metal studs, giant silver-and-turquoise rings, and she had a butterfly tattoo on her upper arm. She didn't wear the wait staff uniform: just jeans with studded leather belts, and sleeveless shirts that showed off her muscular arms and the tattoo. She was a nice person, but you didn't want to mess with her, which made her adept at handling some of the bar customers.

If Abby was too busy to help me, she'd tell me, "If anyone questions you, just set the drinks down where you are and walk away. Drop them on the floor if you have to."

I thought that was a bit dramatic. Most people didn't ask because all they cared about was getting their drinks. To the ones who did ask how old I was, I simply replied,

“Old enough” with a smile or an air of indignation, depending on how the question was posed. When they told me I looked young, I said what any woman would say: “Thank you!”

Waiting versus bussing tables was pretty much a wash financially. I may have earned a few more dollars a day, but the hourly salary for waitresses was less than half of that for busgirls. The idea was that you were supposed to more than make up for it in tips, which I guess worked out for the people on night shift.

The Bowl had this ongoing tournament that ran every weekend. I had never heard of it until I worked there, but people came from all over the country to compete in it. There was some huge cash prize for the winner, but the tournament went on from spring until fall and there was only one grand prize, so I don’t know when or how they determined the winner. I’m not a bowler.

Every weekend we’d have a new group of out-of-town customers. Sometimes they were quiet and polite. Usually, they were loud, ready to party, and sometimes rude. They always poured out of their chartered buses and streamed into the restaurant promptly at 7:30 a.m. when our doors opened. Since many of them had been partying the night before, they could be real grouches that early. They all needed lots of coffee. Everyone was in a hurry; they all had to bowl at 8:30, or so they said.

We’d get the coffee brewing and prepare ourselves for the onslaught.

## 18.

I paced around my station, making sure the napkin holders and creamer jugs were filled, dreading that moment when the doors opened. Within minutes, the tables would be filled with hungry customers demanding to be served immediately. I would have to fight off my stage fright and force a smile as I made my way to the first order of the day. Coffee? They always wanted coffee. Would they like a carafe? (Please say yes, so I don't have to run myself ragged!) How would they like their eggs? (Please keep it simple, like over-easy or scrambled!)

Waiting on the customer was the first hurdle. Getting the order past the kitchen staff was the next. The cooks didn't like special orders. You'd think I was the one making up the orders instead of the customers, the way they carried on sometimes. I began to understand that old saying about shooting the messenger.

Taking the order to the customer was the third hurdle. I'd practically hold my breath as I set the plate down. (Please be happy with your order!) If the order was wrong or not to their liking, I ended up back with the kitchen staff trying to get it fixed, while trying to appease their indignation at having to do it over. It wasn't that they were jerks; they were just so overwhelmed with all the order tickets pouring in, they had a hard enough time trying to fill them once.

Of course, in between, I was refilling drink glasses, bringing more coffee, trying to accommodate special requests, apologizing for the delay, waiting on the next table, tallying checks, presenting checks, keeping an eye on my tips, directing the bussing staff,

and trying to appear unflappable as I absorbed lewd comments, dumb jokes, frustrated outbursts, and just plain rudeness.

Some customers were extraordinarily kind about slip-ups in service, while others complained no matter how well I served them. Some left generous tips even though they were a delight to serve; others ordered me around like their personal slave, argued about the bill, made a huge mess at the table, and then stiffed me.

I probably wasn't the most personable waitress in the world, mainly because I was terrified out of my mind half the time. I wanted so badly to do well, and when I goofed up or people started complaining, it just killed me. Dealing with the public was a good experience, but it was also traumatic.

The breakfast rush rolled into the lunch rush, and it was after two before I got a break. Claire Ann joined me in the back booth.

"Sorry, I yelled at you, Karen," she said. "I could have sworn you said over easy on that order."

"That's all right. The guy was being a jerk about it anyway."

"Let me know next time, and I'll add my special sauce."

"I didn't know spit was on the menu."

"It's our secret recipe for assholes."

I bit into my grilled ham and cheese sandwich. I was starved. "You didn't put any of that on my sandwich, did you?"

"I'll never tell."

We were silent as we ate.

"I wish I could be more like Harvey's Angels." I said suddenly.

“Why? They get better tips?” Claire Ann leaned out of the booth to get a look at the three waitresses who worked the weekend day shift with me in the coffee shop: Peggy the blond, Kelly the redhead and Sherry the brunette. Harvey’s Angels were glamorous in a barfly fashion with their teased and processed hair, fake nails, and flawless makeup. In their mid-twenties, the women were high school friends who were apparently working at the restaurant as a lark.

“I don’t know. They must do all right because Sherry got a full-time job as a secretary, but she still works here on weekends.”

“Probably the secretarial pay sucks,” said Claire Ann.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Hey, girls, can I join you?” Sherry slid in the booth next to me. “God, I’m tired. Walter wants me to stay tonight for the band. I just want to go home and take a bath.”

“What about your kids?” Claire Ann asked.

“What? I don’t have kids. Kelly and Peggy have kids, not me.”

“Oh, I thought you all did.”

“I’m not even married!”

“Oops.”

“I’m probably not going to have kids.”

“You’re not? How come?” I said.

“I wanted to be a kid with my kids,” she said. “If I’d gotten married right out of high school, I could have had my kids before I was twenty. Now it’s too late.”

That surprised me. “Too late? How old are you? Oh...sorry.”

“That’s all right. I’m twenty-four.”

“That’s not old,” said Claire Ann.

“It is to me.”

It didn’t help matters that she was dating some old guy in his forties, who came in every Saturday as soon as the bar opened and was drunk by the time she got off work. I’m sure there was a story there. I know they both drank a lot. One morning she came into work with a beer can in her hand. She took a swig from the can, crunched it and threw it in the trash, proclaiming, “Here’s to last night! Let’s get the coffee started!” She still looked good, even though she’d apparently been up all night partying.

“Marriage and kids isn’t all it’s cracked up to me,” said Sherry. “Look at Kelly. She works to get a break from the kids and the house. That’s the only time she gets to see me and Peggy. Mostly she works to get away from her husband.”

“Can’t she see her friends when she’s not working?” said Claire Ann.

“Her husband hates us. He’s a jerk. She knows it, too.”

Kelly was the least processed-looking of the three with natural freckled good looks and a naturally bubbly personality. Kelly came to work occasionally with black eyes, which she expertly covered with makeup, so that most people, including me until I learned otherwise, thought she just had circles under her eyes from lack of sleep. She was the most practical of the glamour girls, very funny and nice to everyone.

Sherry wasn’t finished. “And look at Peggy. She doesn’t even need to work and here she is. She does it for the mad money. And the men.”

Peggy also had marital problems, but not the abusive kind. She was the most glamorous of the three, and she knew it. I think she married too young and still wanted to be a party girl—an obvious source of her marital woes. She had perfect features, a perfect

body, and that blond, blond shoulder-length big hair, kind of flipped up at the ends. Guys went nuts for her.

“How did you all get to be friends?” I asked.

“We were cheerleaders together.”

Somehow that figured. They were the kind of women I would never admit I wanted to be like, but in some ways I did wish for some of their glamour. Even when I’d tell myself it was more important to be intelligent and “deep,” I envied the effect they had on men who fawned over them because they were pretty. And even though I thought Harvey was creepy, you can imagine the ego boost I received when he classified me among them.

Pretty and confident as they were, Harvey’s Angels were not immune to customer wrath or indifference. As a side note, I might add that guys loved Harvey’s Angels but their wives hated them. The Angels hated to see a bunch of women in their station. “They’ll all order a salad and leave me a dime for a tip,” Peggy would fume.

Just then Kelly joined us with a stack of unused check pads. She lit a cigarette, took a drag, and began signing, “Thank You! Kelly” on the back of all the checks.

“Table six has been running my ass,” she said. “I need to just sit for a few minutes.”

Sherry looked over at table six. “They don’t look in any hurry to leave.”

“No, but you just wait. As soon as they see me sit down...” her wry expression smoothed into a polite smile. “Ready?”

I turned and looked. The man at table six was gesturing impatiently. Kelly reached into her vest pocket for his check and took it over, smiling. The smile faded

quickly into a look of disgust as she rejoined us.

“What an asshole.”

“Difficult?” I said.

“I don’t mind difficult if there’s a tip in it. But I know he’s going to stiff me. I’ve run my ass off for those people, and I know he’s going to stiff me.”

We watched as the man and his family headed down to the lanes. As soon as they were out of sight, Kelly jumped up and walked back over to the table. She came back fuming.

“Just what I thought. Not a fucking cent.” She angrily resumed signing her checks.

“What was he bitching about?” said Sherry.

“Nothing. They just had me running for this, running for that. So I bust my ass and I get nothing.” She started to giggle and showed us the check she had just signed. It read: “Fuck You! Kelly.”

We all burst out laughing. “If only you could!” I said.

“Oh, well. Guess I gotta void this one, huh?”

**19.**

After the fall dance fiasco, you'd think I would have given up on Kurt, but think again. I was suffering from infatuation, a condition that rendered me with an altered sense of reality. Symptoms: fluttering or pounding heart when Kurt was near; intense joy when Kurt paid attention to me; loss of appetite when Kurt ignored me; blindness to the clues that our relationship was going nowhere; intense rationalization of my continued allegiance.

My logical side told me to move along. My logical side couldn't convince my emotional side to stop caring about Kurt, but it did help me make the decision to start dating other people. Ha! I tricked that logical side of me. While I pretended to take the advice to check out other fish in the sea, my ulterior motive for dating was to make Kurt jealous. I did believe dating other guys might be good for me, but it was like swallowing a terrible-tasting medicine in the hopes it would actually make me feel better.

I still looked forward to seeing Kurt at work. We were friends again, even though he had another girlfriend. Turns out he and Jenny Collins were an item. It was a good and bad thing. It made me aware that maybe I had overestimated his feelings for me and that a good friend was better than nothing. He was still a lot of fun to be around, and he rarely brought Jenny to our Bowl group get-togethers, so I could almost put her existence out of my mind.

Except that she went to my school and I had to see her in the hallways and smile and say hello like it wasn't killing me inside that she was the girlfriend and I was the

platonic friend. Okay, I hated her. It wasn't fair because I didn't really know her all that well, but who said I was rational? It was enough work trying to appear rational.

Besides, in a way, I understood. I enjoyed hanging around Frank and David, but that didn't mean I wanted to be either one's girlfriend. Maybe Kurt would come around, but if we didn't stay friendly I might never get the chance to find out.

I hate infatuation. You can't really stop it; it's like a flu bug that you just have to wait out. You can mask the symptoms, but you have no control over it. Who really understands it?

I hated dating, mainly because most of my dates involved going out with guys I wasn't really all that interested in. And I didn't have very many dates, which is why I felt obligated to say yes no matter who asked me out.

"You'll never know if you like someone unless you go out with them," my mom would say. "You have to give the boy a chance."

So if I didn't like someone, she would have a fit if I was lukewarm about them asking me out.

"You're too picky," she'd say. "No wonder you don't have a boyfriend."

Here's what I don't like about dating: It starts out with the expectation that you're supposed to act like a couple even if you don't know each other yet. The word "date" shouldn't even be used until you've had a chance to get to know each other well enough to decide you want to date. In my mind, "date" means you might have to kiss someone you don't like at the end of the evening—or even fight him off if he thinks he's entitled to something more. But the worst is when you end up being out with a nice guy you're just not attracted to, which means you have to find a nice way to say no to another date or

keep coming up with excuses until he stops asking. I guess the other worst is when you're the nice girl the guy isn't attracted to and he never calls you again.

But now I had a mission. Dating wasn't so much about finding a boyfriend as it was getting my mind off Kurt. That was the mentally healthy thing to do, right? So that's what I did.

\*

Ted was a burnout kind of guy who hung around the Bowl on weekends with his burnout friends. I never really noticed him, but I guess he had been gazing at me from afar for some time. One night, he and his buddies came in for something to eat. When I went up to their table to bring water glasses, he handed me Boston's latest album. "I want you to have this," he said. "It reminds me of you."

Well, gosh darn, how could I *not* be flattered? He then practically got down on his hands and knees to ask me out. Of course, I said yes. That was the highlight of our dating relationship.

I enjoyed the album, but it didn't spark a great romance. Ted went to Grand Oaks Vocational School, better known among teenagers as "Big Tokes." He was nice, but he was a burnout. He lived to smoke dope and listen to Boston. That was all there was to him as far as I could tell.

Greg was a blind date. One of my acquaintances at school was going steady with his fraternal twin, and she was desperate to set up a double date for homecoming because Greg was very shy and didn't have the nerve to ask anyone. Of course, my reputation as equally shy and desperate led her to recruit me as a suitable date. I didn't know anyone at the high school these guys went to, but at least a shy date would never ditch me. He was

so shy, I had trouble getting a conversation going. Imagine my surprise when I found out he was nominated for homecoming king—and he won! That didn't make me queen. They had a separate vote for that.

He and the queen were paraded around together and they had a great time. My friend and her steady had a great time. But there I was at this stupid homecoming dance where I didn't know anyone—least of all my date, who was now the reigning king of his class. It turns out that shy guys can still be popular football stars. Shy girls who don't know anyone sit quietly in a corner and wait for the evening to end. I didn't care enough to be devastated; I was just bored out of my mind.

There wasn't a second date, but that was okay because soon afterwards the new busboy in the Rodeo Room asked me out. He seemed like a nice guy and he was nice looking, too. It was about this time that Frank started calling me a flake. My dating spree had been going on for two months when he started needling me.

“How long is this one gonna last?” he asked me when he heard about Kevin.

I had just come back from the front of the house with a loaded bus pan.

“What's that supposed to mean?” I set the pan down next to the dishwasher.

“I mean, how long is it gonna last?” Frank repeated.

“What?”

“This Kevin guy.”

“I won't know until I get to know him better.”

“How long will that take?”

“Where's the silverware? We're running low on forks again.”

“You're avoiding the question.”

“It depends on how long it takes me to figure out if I like him.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“After our first date I wasn’t sure that I liked him, but that’s not really fair, you know, to judge after just one date.”

“Why not?” Frank was blunt.

“Because sometimes you just don’t see the best side of people on the first date. My new rule is three dates to decide if I should keep going out with a guy.”

“That’s nice of you,” Frank said sarcastically. “After three dates the guy’s gonna think you *do* like him.”

“Yeah, that’s the downside.”

“Where’d you come up with that dumb rule, anyway?”

“My mom. She didn’t like my dad after the first date.”

“So she says it’s gotta be three dates.”

“Well, no. I came up with that myself.”

“Whatever. I think you’re a flake.”

“I am not.”

“Flake.”

“Shut up. Anyway, I hate dating.”

“So why do it?”

“Teenagers are supposed to date.”

“Says who?”

“Says my parents. Says my girlfriends. Says....society!”

“I don’t date.” This was true. With Frank, I wasn’t sure if it was because he was more interested in cars or because he looked so scary he couldn’t get a date.

“Well, I have to.”

“This is about Kurt, isn’t it?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“So dating other guys is gonna help you get over him?”

“Maybe.”

Frank laughed. “It ain’t gonna work. I know you.”

“Well, what if it does?”

“That might be good. But you’re still a flake.”

“Shut up.”

“Flake!”

Frank was right. Not about being a flake, but about getting over Kurt. Kevin was a nice guy, but I didn’t want to be his girlfriend. In fact, before long, everything he said or did just irritated me. I didn’t like myself very much when I was with him. I snapped at him and then felt guilty about it, but I couldn’t stop myself—and that was a real shame, because his only crime was not being Kurt.

A few weeks later, Kurt pulled me aside at work, “Kevin’s not right for you.”

I laughed and said, “Who *is* right for me?”

He gave me one of his serious, concerned looks. “You deserve better. I just don’t like that guy.”

I wanted to jump for joy. He was jealous! I pretended to be slightly offended.

“What don’t you like?”

“Everything.”

I shrugged and went back to the dishwashing station, where I reported Kurt’s comment to David. He laughed.

“Can you spell jealousy?” he said.

“But he’s got a girlfriend!”

“So?”

“So what does he care who I go out with?”

“It’s that you go out with anyone. You were available before but you’re not anymore,” David paused a moment. “Hey, that rhymes! I could be a songwriter!” He played air guitar with the sprayer and sang out, “Dontcha know you were available before...it’s killing him now-wow....da, da, da, ‘cause you’re not anymore.”

I couldn’t help laughing, but I was still annoyed. “That’s his own fault!” I said. “Why does he play these games!”

“Karen, I don’t know, but I’m telling you he’s always been this way. Listen, kid, don’t let him get to you.”

Kurt burst into the kitchen just then. “Hey, you guys, you gotta see this. A bunch of ladies at table seven are using a dildo as a centerpiece!”

“Yes, this I’ve got to see,” David was grinning.

I was confused. “What’s a dildo?”

David and Kurt looked at each other in amazement and then burst out laughing.

“Come on, you guys. What is it, some kind of pickle?”

Both boys practically fell on the floor laughing.

“Wh-what is it? Some kind of pickle!” Kurt practically snorted.

“Yeah, you *could* say it’s some kind of pickle!” David said.

They eventually filled me in, but I knew this latest lapse of street smarts would soon make the rounds. Just like the day David told me he had an uncle named Jack who was in the roofing business and would be doing some work at the Bowl.

“Just in case you’re here when he’s up there,” David said. “I want you to know that my Uncle Jack has some trouble with his knees. So, if he gets stuck on the roof...could you help my Uncle Jack off?”

“What am *I* going to be able to do? Shouldn’t you ask one of the guys?” I asked puzzled.

“But if they can’t, would you?” David insisted.

Suddenly, I knew I was being set up but I didn’t get how. “I don’t know.”

“Come on. Yes or no?”

“Yes,” I said, waiting for the laughter and subsequent explanation.

I didn’t have to wait long for the laughter. But it was awhile before David could speak.

“Get it? Jack off? You’re helping my uncle jack off! Hey, everybody, Karen says she’ll help my uncle jack off!”

I was so glad to be the source of so much entertainment. The guys weren’t mean about it, and they did explain the jokes I didn’t get once they stopped laughing. And I did learn new expressions. Once, Frank asked me if I liked S&M, and I said yes, very much—in fact, I had their latest album. Okay, so I thought he said CS&N. Anyone could make that mistake, right? I pretended to know what sadomasochism meant, but was smart enough to say that it wasn’t my thing.

\*

It wasn't long before I set myself up again.

The Bowl was closed for a week during Christmas, which coincided with our school break. This was the time of year the whole staff came in to do a deep cleaning of the place, especially the kitchen. The running joke was that the crud that got cleaned out of the equipment each December was the secret ingredient of the Bowl's shredded-pork barbecue.

One evening after a day of scrubbing, a bunch of us were getting together for a party. On the way there, Frank drove David and me over to a used car lot to show us a pickup truck he was thinking about buying.

"It doesn't have a bed," Frank said. "But I bet I could build one out of wood real easy."

"Yeah, but how long will a wooden bed hold up," David countered. "It has to be able to take a lot of bouncing. Can't you just buy a steel bed?"

"Too expensive," Frank replied. "I think I could build a really nice wood bed, though. It wouldn't be perfect, but it would do the job."

"Hey, a bed's a bed."

I was a little bit horrified and a lot embarrassed to be witnessing this conversation.

"You're actually thinking of building a *bed* on the back of this truck?"

Frank was defensive. "Yeah! So what? You think I can't?"

I blushed then. I guess it was none of my business, but I thought it was weird.

"No...I mean, well...won't the pillows and stuff get wet?"

David and Frank laughed until they practically passed out. I knew I had gotten it wrong again. I silently cursed my sheltered upbringing.

“A *truck* bed, you idiot! To haul things!” Frank gasped, still laughing.

“You actually thought Frank wanted to build some kind of open-air love machine?” David asked. “That’s hilarious!”

I guess it was hilarious. What a ding-dong I was.

“Well, I didn’t know what it was called. I’ve just always called it a truck thingy.”

“Truck thingy!” That started a new round of laughter.

“Watch out, Frank,” David yelled, holding his sides. “Karen says you need to build a truck thingy!”

“Shut up,” I said. “Aren’t we supposed to meet everybody at the Kidds’ house? You don’t want Eve to get mad at you.” Eve Kidd was the new busgirl in the Rodeo Room. David hadn’t wasted any time getting to know her.

“She won’t be mad. Especially when she hears about your thingy.”

“Great.”

**20.**

Frank never did buy the pickup truck without a bed. I found out later that he wanted the truck *and* a motorcycle, but couldn't afford both, so he decided what he really needed was a muscle car. That meant an older car with a lot of horsepower. In the meantime, he continued to drive his shabby Vega.

By the time we got to the Kidds' house, the party was already started. Sharon and Claire Ann had come with Bob.

"Where's Kurt?" David said. "Oh, wait, let me guess. Taking a shower."

"How did you know?" said Eve.

"Just psychic, I guess."

Eve and David had become inseparable, which meant David was always at her house. Since David was the ringleader of our group, it made sense that we all gravitated to Eve's house as a place to gather, even if we were planning on heading out somewhere else.

Mr. and Mrs. Kidd were happy to have all of us over any time we wanted to come over. It seemed to me that they just liked having a lot of people around. We didn't even have to hide in the basement or stay outside in the backyard. We didn't have to smuggle in beer. In fact, Mr. Kidd sometimes bought us a quarter keg and usually joined us for a beer or two. How cool was that?

Mrs. Kidd was always welcoming and always interested in what was going on with our lives. I mean, she really listened without any show of disapproval and seemed to

have all the right words of encouragement. She always had snacks on hand and a funny story to tell. She didn't dress like most parents. I thought it was kind of cool how she wore jeans and often borrowed Eve's concert T-shirts. She had her hair frosted and wore it feathered back, and she wore lots of silver and turquoise jewelry. She even let Frank bum cigarettes off her.

Mr. Kidd was more reserved, but no less friendly. He was a slender, balding man with wire-framed glasses, who dressed more like a parent, which meant no jeans or T-shirts. He liked to play golf and usually wore golf shirts from the various courses he had played over his polyester pants and beat-up black loafers. He always wore white socks with his loafers. You'd think Mrs. Kidd would have been able to influence him more on his wardrobe. Mostly when we were over, he just hung out in the living room and watched television. The rest of us would gather in the dining room and Mrs. Kidd would bring out bowls of popcorn and pretzels to go with our beer.

Eve was kind of a mystery to me. She seemed distant and quiet, not in a shy or snobbish way, but in an empty, apathetic way that made me wonder if she was all there. Her blond hair was limp and straight, and her droopy gray eyes always seemed to be staring blankly instead of actually focusing on anything. She was tall and thin, but she slouched, which made her look constantly tired. When she opened her mouth to speak, her monotone voice completed the picture of a girl who looked as if she could fall asleep at any moment.

Frank was less kind, calling her "a dead fish." Dead Fish eventually became her nickname among most of us, but, of course, we never used it in front of her, David, or her parents.

In some ways, Eve's laid-back personality complemented David's boisterous one. He had enough energy for several people. Eve's parents were also a lot more outgoing than she was: I found it easier to talk to them than to her, which made me wonder if part of their hospitality was geared toward helping their only child make friends.

\*

After I lived down the teasing about the truck bed, the boys got down to a serious discussion of cars.

"You know, looks aren't everything," said David.

"As long as she's a car," said Frank.

"I like a car that looks good," said Kurt, who had finally arrived, freshly showered and smelling of aftershave.

"You would," said David.

"Now, now, boys," said Mrs. Kidd. "Kurt has a point. Girls like to see a nice-looking car. I don't know why you two like those big old gas hogs."

"Mrs. K! You can't be serious!" David said.

Frank and David were disdainful of most of the newer cars coming out with their catalytic converters and four-cylinder engines. They preferred the pre-oil crisis, gas-guzzling, eight-cylinder behemoths, but neither could agree on which ones were the best. Frank preferred Oldsmobiles, while David was a Pontiac kind of guy, even though he drove a Cutlas. I didn't get it, because both were made by General Motors—okay, I admit I didn't know that until they clued me in—but they understood the difference. Neither could tolerate Ford, which David claimed stood for, "Fix or repair daily" and they were especially incensed that Ford had stopped producing its one cool car, the Mustang, and

then had added insult to injury by bringing out the Mustang II. I thought the new Mustang was supposed to be better, but David told me it was “a really lame car.”

At that moment they were having a field day with the economy cars.

“What’s wrong with the Pinto?” said Eve. “I think it’s cute.”

“The Pinto? It’s a coffee grinder,” said Frank.

“What about the Chevette?” I said.

“Disgraceful.” That was an odd expression for Frank, which only emphasized his distaste for the car.

David had nothing good to say about the Pacer: “Two balls chasing a penis!”

“How about the Vega, Frank?” said Sharon. “Come on, you know you love it.”

“Well I’m still stuck driving it, but I don’t think much of that one, either.”

Bob and Kurt, being more practical-minded, were more into how cars looked and how gas-efficient they were. Bob drove a shiny black Mustang II.

“Bob’s car is nice,” said Claire Ann. “It’s a good-looking car from the outside, and on the inside it smells new.”

“It is new,” said Bob.

“I know,” said Claire Ann. “I think it’s cool because it’s new.”

“Well, the engine is weak and the factory stereo is appalling.” This came from Frank.

Bob was on the defensive now: “Chicks dig a good-looking car; they don’t care how big the engine is.”

“You got that right,” said Mrs. Kidd.

Kurt didn’t have his own car yet, but he avoided the passionate discussions Frank

and David were always having about their dream autos.

“What good does it do me to have a muscle car if I can’t afford the gas?” he said.

“I just want a nice looking car that gets me where I want to go.”

That made perfect sense to me, but I also understood the other side. To Frank and David, cars were more than transportation: Cars were very large, very cool toys that weren’t complete without very large, very cool engines. And no cool car was complete without a high-wattage stereo system, which transformed it into the ultimate party on wheels.

Not being a car buff myself, I had mostly judged a car by its looks. My dad wasn’t a car buff, my little brothers were still playing with Hot Wheels, and I couldn’t recognize one model from another. But I learned. I wouldn’t say I became passionate about cars, but I did learn how to tell a LeMans from a Cutlas, and I did learn that good looks weren’t everything.

At least when it came to cars. Later, I kept thinking about what Kurt had said about nice looking cars. I thought about his pretty girlfriend, Jenny. And I wondered if I inserted the word “girl” for car if I’d had hit on his philosophy of relationships: “I just want a nice-looking girl who gets me where I want to go.”

Where did he want to go?

## 21.

Frank drove Kurt, Claire Ann and me to Bob's New Year's Eve party.

Bob lived by himself in an old house in Price Hill overlooking the city. It had been his parents' home, but just before retiring to Florida, they had sold it to a developer who planned to tear it down to build condominiums. Somehow a deal was worked out to allow Bob to continue living there until the developers were ready to start developing. I don't know what they were waiting for, because Bob had been living there almost a year already.

It wasn't the kind of old house worth saving. It was a frame house that must have been added on to over the years, because a lot of it was clumsy looking and the floor plan didn't always seem to make sense. Bob lived upstairs in a strange assortment of rooms without a true kitchen: just a corner of one room with a sink, fridge, toaster oven and hot plate. The downstairs had been made into a separate apartment, also being rented on a temporary basis to some old guy we never saw.

To get to Bob's apartment, we entered the original main entrance, which was walled off from the rest of the first floor. The steps were creaky, sagging, and covered with ancient red carpeting. It didn't get much better upstairs. The whole place smelled of musty dust that had been probably been lying around for a hundred years, and it creaked with what I imagined to be echoes of past inhabitants. I guess Bob's parents weren't much into redecorating.

The sagging, mismatched furniture wasn't as old as the house, but it certainly

seemed right at home. Then I looked toward the living room windows.

The view was outstanding.

The four of us immediately were drawn to the windows. From the house's hilltop vantage point, we could look down on the city's crisscrossing highway system that glowed greenish from streetlights below. Bright dots of light moved along the multi-layered ribbons of asphalt. A kaleidoscope of hues from the lights of the downtown skyline and bridges were reflected in the blackness of the Ohio River, the colors moving and glistening in the current.

"Whoa," said Claire Ann. "I am always impressed with this place." She turned from the window and looked around the apartment, smiling and frowning all at once. "Well, maybe not impressed! But the *view* is great!"

"Yeah, it's a shame it's getting torn down," Bob said, ignoring the slam. "But hey, life goes on."

Bob's place had become another place to hang out, especially when we couldn't get reservations for Claire Ann's basement. I never got tired of the view, but I did get tired of Bob's wishy-washy attitude toward Claire Ann. Somehow I didn't think he was going to break up with his longtime girlfriend for Claire Ann. Of course, he and Claire Ann were "just friends," like Kurt and I were. Bob never brought his girlfriend, Sally, along on Bowl group get-togethers except for when they were being held at his house. Guess it wouldn't do for her to call or drop by only to discover a party to which she wasn't invited.

What was remarkable—and yet so like Claire Ann—was that she really liked Sally and they began to develop a friendship. I think Bob was alternately relieved and

worried about it, but Claire Ann wasn't up to anything. "It drives me crazy," she would often tell me. "I am so in love with Bob, and so bad I want either one of them to dump the other. But I just couldn't be the one to instigate anything. Bob's an ass, but she's so nice I can't help liking her."

\*

I was through with dating. That was my New Year's resolution. I didn't like Frank's new nickname for me, especially since I wasn't a flake at all. My inability to settle on a particular guy wasn't that I kept changing my affections. My affections were already settled on Kurt, and dating other guys didn't do anything to change it. I was better off by myself than linked to some guy I didn't care about.

I was relieved that Kurt hadn't brought Jenny, but I noticed that he seemed troubled that evening. It was New Year's Eve, after all. Maybe they broke up.

The apartment grew hot and stuffy as the party guests multiplied. Claire Ann, Sally, Sharon, and I cheered Frank, Bob, and Rick on in a competitive-but-slaphappy game of darts, while Kurt sat across the room by himself, aimlessly fiddling with his empty beer can. I glanced over at him at one point and caught him staring at me with a look that seemed part affection and part cry for help. As our eyes met, he stood up and motioned me over. When I reached his side, he took hold of my elbow and directed me out of the room.

"Can we go outside and talk?" he asked.

We pulled on our coats and made our way down the creaky, creepy staircase and out the door. The night air was still and bitter cold, and the city sounds below all seemed to rise up and come together in a sort of distant gigantic hum. We stood in the small yard

facing the view. I was freezing.

“You’re shivering,” Kurt said gently. “Here. Stand in front of me and I’ll wrap my coat around both of us.”

I couldn’t believe it. Here we were standing in front of this gorgeous scene, while Kurt simultaneously wrapped his arms and his coat around me. I could feel his breath on my neck and the warmth of his body. He smelled of aftershave as he always did. What kind, I hadn’t a clue, but it was nice.

“You wanted to talk?” I asked.

“Yeah. In a minute. Let’s just take in the view for now.”

We stood there silently awhile. I wondered what was going on with Jenny. That’s probably what this was about.

Kurt broke the silence.

“You know...I appreciate our friendship.”

“Oh...Thank you.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Jenny and I aren’t getting along so well. It’s what I kept telling you about not getting so serious.”

“How serious?”

“Well...” he started to say something, then seemed to reconsider. “She seems to think...I mean....that if I really loved her, I would....uh...you know...”

I didn’t know why he was telling me this.

“She wants to do...it,” I said flatly. Kurt seemed to flinch when I said it.

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that what all guys want?” I tried to lighten up the mood. “Come on, Kurt!”

Kurt laughed. “Yeah, yeah, I know. I’ve already talked to David about it and he thinks I’m crazy. But I don’t want to risk it right now. I mean...what if...you know...”

“She gets pregnant.”

“Yes! I don’t want to get married! My parents got together way too young and now look at them. They can hardly stand each other.”

“What about precautions?” I couldn’t believe we were having this discussion.

“I don’t trust her. What’s worse is my parents are pressuring me, too.”

“What?!”

“No, you idiot, not that!” Kurt began laughing again, and I could sense the comic relief my outburst gave him. He couldn’t seem to stop laughing and held me even tighter as he tried to regain control. “My, God, Karen, you crack me up.”

“Well, what did you think I was going to think?”

“I know, I know. No, what my parents are on me about is getting engaged.”

“Engaged! Don’t you think it’s a little soon?”

“Yeah, but they don’t see it that way. They married right out of high school.”

“So what’s that got to do with you?”

“That’s what I’m saying! See that’s why I like you, Karen. And that’s why I want us to stay friends. Jenny and I could never be friends now that we’ve been dating. It just wouldn’t work.”

“So you’re saying you can go from friends to more than friends...”

“But once you do, you can’t go back to just being friends,” Kurt said. “So why risk it until you’re ready to do something about it?”

“Whoa, ho, ho! What’s going on over there!” David’s voice rang out behind us.

Kurt stepped away from me suddenly and zipped his jacket back up.

“We’re just trying to keep warm,” he said.

“Nothing wrong with that!” David laughed. “Nothing wrong with that at all!”

Eve was with him, hanging on to his arm, as usual. She waved at us shyly.

David opened the door to the house and turned back to us. “So are you two lovebirds going to stay out in the cold or are you going to join the party?”

“We’re coming,” I said. Kurt and I exchanged glances and smiled.

“Thanks for listening,” Kurt said. “You’re a good friend.”

Friend. That word again.

\*

The night was full of friends. After the party, Frank said he had to visit a friend.

“You want me to drop you off first?” he said to me.

“I don’t have to be home until two,” I said. “It’s only one now.”

“It’s up to you.”

“Go with us, Karen,” said Kurt.

“How about you, Claire Ann? When do you gotta get home?”

“Shut up, Frank.” Everyone knew Claire Ann didn’t have a curfew.

We got on the highway and ended up somewhere on the east side of town.

“Where does this friend live?” said Kurt.

“You’ll see.”

Eventually he pulled into the strangest subdivision I’d ever seen. The houses were tiny and boxy and nobody had any landscaping. There weren’t any trees either. The cars were old and beat up. Everything seemed stark and bare; I felt as if we were on the moon.

“What is this place?” I said.

“Housing project.” Frank pulled over to the side of the road in front of one of the little boxes.

“Who do you know that lives in a housing project?” said Kurt.

“Just a friend. There he is.”

We saw a guy come out of the house and out to the driveway. I thought it was odd that he didn’t turn on the porch light and that he didn’t come up to where we were parked. Frank got out of the car.

“Hang on a sec. I’ll be right back.”

“Aren’t we going to meet your friend?” I said.

Frank ignored me.

The visit to the friend seemed to be a nonevent, and I was sorry I’d decided to go along for the ride. I had no idea how far we’d be going or how long it would take, and by the time we got back to the west side of town, I was a half hour past my curfew.

To top it off, Frank hit a particularly nasty bump in the road, which made his car start to rattle. The rattling kept getting louder, and a few blocks later we heard the clatter of metal on pavement. Frank pulled over and he and Kurt collected what was left of the muffler and put it in the trunk.

“Guess it’s time for a new car,” Frank said.

I begged him to coast down my street so we wouldn’t wake up the whole neighborhood. I slipped in the front door quickly before he stepped on the gas to pull away. Sure enough, he roared away as porch lights flicked on and neighbors peeked through window blinds up and down the street. And I got busted for missing my

curfew. I was grounded for two weeks.

## 22.

After I got off being grounded, I decided to make more of an effort to hang out with the girls of our group. Claire Ann and I were pretty tight, but Sharon and I didn't click. So I tried to expand my circle of female acquaintances by befriending Eve. Besides, I felt guilty about us all hanging out with her parents. David was a good friend and I owed it to him to try to make her feel part of the group, just like he had done for me.

Frank was convinced that David liked Eve for one reason, and I have to admit I did wonder about that when they would disappear into her bedroom and her parents never seemed to notice. But I thought it was more than that.

David's mom had died when he was little and he and his older siblings were practically raised by a stern housekeeper named Phoebe, an older widow who kept precise hours and was efficient but emotionally distant. "Very professional, you know," David told me once. "But we could have used a damn human being in the house." He said he had grown to accept that was just her way until one day he saw her out with her grandchildren. "It really put a zap on me when I saw how she was with the people she *really* gave a damn about," he had confided. "We were just her job."

That was about the closest look I had at what made David tick. He was always friendly and funny, but you couldn't really get too close. His humor seemed designed to keep people at arm's length. Still, I think the way that Mrs. Kidd mothered him and fawned over him was irresistible. Maybe even more irresistible than Eve.

The day Eve and I got together to go shopping at the mall was one of the most boring experiences of my life. I could have had more fun with a cardboard cutout. That's saying a lot, because I'm not a high-maintenance companion. She didn't have a sense of humor. She wasn't bitter; she just didn't "get" humor at all. It only confused her.

"You got a crush on anybody?" Eve said as we wandered through yet another clothing store. I wondered what planet she was living on. By now, everybody knew who I had a crush on.

"Yeah. Kurt."

"Kurt has a girlfriend," she said, as if I didn't know.

"I know."

"You have to pick somebody else to have a crush on."

"Why?"

"You can't like Kurt if he has a girlfriend."

"Yes, I can."

"No, you can't."

"Well if I can't have Kurt, I'm going to be a nun and forsake all men."

"Why would you want to be a nun?"

"It was a joke."

"Oh."

I picked up an ugly fringed purse on a clearance table.

"Oh, Eve, isn't this gorgeous?" I was being sarcastic.

"Yeah, it's cool." She was serious. "How much is it? Three bucks? I'm getting it."

I thought it was hideous, but I didn't say anything.

After she paid for the purse, we went to get ice cream and sat on a bench hardly talking at all. I wanted to find out what she thought about David or what she thought about anything—except for that awful fringed purse she thought was really cool. She gushed over that thing.

I finally resigned myself to being nice to her without going out of my way to befriend her. Fortunately, she was with David so much, my friendship wasn't required. The one time I glimpsed a spark of personality was one night at church.

Occasionally, some of us would go to Saturday evening Mass together to get it out of the way—especially those of us who worked Sunday mornings. While we would arrive promptly at the church parking lot, we wouldn't always make it into the church. Sometimes we'd just sit and drink a few beers until Mass was over and then just pretend we were leaving with all the other worshippers. Since it was winter, we could hide in the darkness.

One cold, rainy evening in February, Eve had joined Frank, David and me for the trip to church. When we got there, Frank pulled out a six-pack and passed around pretzel sticks.

“It's nasty out there. I say we stay in the car.”

“We should go in,” Eve said.

“What for?” that was Frank.

“We told our parents we were going to church,” she said in her monotone voice.

“That's where we should go.”

Frank grunted. “We *are* at church.” He turned to Eve in the back seat and raised his beer and pretzel. “We even have bread and wine.”

“You’re not funny.”

“Aw, come on, Eve,” David whined. “We do this all the time.”

Eve glared at him. “You do? Well, I don’t.”

She abruptly got out of the car and began walking towards the church.

It didn’t take much to make me feel guilty, especially where the Catholic Church was concerned. Besides, my parents would kill me if they caught me skipping Mass. Speaking of mortal sins, skipping Mass was one of them. Kill somebody; skip Mass. It was all the same to God.

“Come on, guys,” I said. “We might as well go in.”

It did seem as if we were going out of way to avoid going to church. But something about Eve’s attitude turned me off. She was either a hypocrite or an idiot. Her parents were contributing to the delinquency of minors on a regular basis, and suddenly she was worried about what they would think if we skipped Mass. Wonder what my parents would have thought if they knew her parents were buying the beer? Or that she and David had closed-door meetings in her bedroom?

In fact, as time went on, I began to wonder just how cool the Kidds actually were. Was Mrs. Kidd hip or just pathetic? Was Mr. Kidd reserved or just henpecked into submission? Did I wish my parents were like them? I didn’t think so. Sometimes you just want parents to be parents. They should be seen occasionally but rarely heard from when your friends are around.

**23.**

I was having a really hard time with school lately. Although I would never admit it, working three nights during the week until 10 p.m. and two full shifts on the weekend, and then staying up late on Friday and Saturday nights didn't leave me a lot of sleep time much less homework time. And it showed. I dropped a class and just barely made a B average in the rest. I could have done much better if I had the time and energy. Coulda, shoulda, woulda doesn't mean a whole lot when you just don't care anymore about school. I had a bad case of senioritis.

Part of the reason I worked so much was to get out of the house. If I didn't have a job, I'd be stuck at home watching my younger siblings; more free time wouldn't mean more time to hang out with my friends. In fact, I wouldn't have my friends if it weren't for my job down at the Bowl.

Besides, what good was school, anyway? My parents couldn't afford to send me to college and my dad always said I'd better get a full scholarship or I wasn't going. Maybe he was trying to encourage me to work harder but it had the opposite effect. I figured if I worked really hard but still didn't measure up to a scholarship, then all the hard work would be for nothing. I'm still not clear on whether I didn't work hard enough or if I'm just not as smart as I thought I was. Maybe a little of both. Either way, I had a B+ average. Good enough to get into college, but not enough to be a sought-after student. I had saved most of my earnings from the Bowl, but that wasn't going to go very far.

My parents didn't actively encourage me to go to school. "Most girls just drop out after the first year to get married," my dad said. Marriage. I never even got as far as going steady with anyone. How did he figure I was suddenly going to get married? Money was really tight though, and I think he was trying to rationalize my not going to school.

Since college was out, there were only two options: One minute, he'd be marrying me off and the next minute he'd be trying to get me to enlist in the army—you'll learn a trade and they have great educational benefits, he'd say.

So I went to the recruiting office one afternoon and this guy stuck me in a room by myself to watch a video about women in the Army. I think it was supposed to get me really excited about all the opportunities. But all it did was scare the shit out of me. Those were hard-core women. Those girls would kick my ass the minute I walked into their barracks. I tried to imagine myself among them and all I heard were taunts. Here she comes, the little skinny, weak-ass, goody-two shoes girl! I practically ran out of the recruiting office, imagining a bunch of he-women in pursuit.

The idea of staying at the Bowl and working as a waitress was starting to appeal to me. Once school was out of the way, that's all I'd have to worry about. It was hard work, but not too mentally challenging. Maybe I just wasn't meant to go to college. Things certainly didn't seem to be very favorable for it. After all, not everybody has to go to college. Lots of my relatives didn't. Lots of my neighbors didn't.

Yeah, but my dad did. Yeah, but I wanted to go, too.

Yeah, but you've got time, I'd tell myself. In the meantime, there's the Bowl.

That's a dead end, I'd remind myself.

So what? You don't know what you want to do with your life, I'd fire back.

Lame excuse, I'd reply bluntly.

I debated myself a lot those days.

\*

“Hey, Karen, we're going down to the Serpentine Wall tonight,” Kurt told me over the phone one Friday night in March.

“What for? It's cold out,” I said.

“I know, but we're going to dress warm and go have ourselves a little party,” he said. “I'll pick you up at seven. We're all going to meet at the Kidds' house. By the way,” he added. “Frank has a surprise for us.”

The surprise was a new car. A gold '69 Cutlass Supreme with hardly any miles on it, previously owned by a little old lady. It was a beautiful car. Frank said it had a beautiful engine.

Mrs. Kidd came out of the house wrapping her arms around herself. I mentally rolled my eyes as I took in her usual teenager wannabe outfit. Tight jeans, black rock-n-roll shirt (Journey, this time), platform clogs. Too-long dyed blond hair with feathered bangs, too much jewelry and overdone makeup on one of those wrinkled brown faces people end up with when they worship the sun too much—and aggravate by smoking too much. I mean the woman had to be at least forty-five. She was in pretty good shape for her age, but age didn't match her outfit. She dressed like the stereotype of a burnout teenager, which would have been great if she were headed out to a costume party.

“Oh, my, Frank, what great wheels!” she gushed. “I'm jealous I'm not going out with you tonight!”

Frank grunted in reply.

“Oh, Frank you’re such a grouch!” Mrs. Kidd said squeezing his arm playfully. “Now you kids be careful down there! Ugh! It’s cold! I think staying warm at home is what I’m going to do!” She shuffled back into the house.

Everyone admired the car.

“Who gets to ride with Frank?” Kurt said. “I can’t because I’m driving, too.”

“I’m with Frank,” said David.

“Me, too. Definitely,” said Bob.

The trouble started when we all began piling into cars. Frank wouldn’t let David and Bob put any beer in his car. The guys would have none of it. “You’ve got to be kidding!” David complained. “You of all people, Frank!”

“It’s my new rule,” Frank said stonily.

“Well, shit, then,” said Bob. “We’ll go with Kurt.”

So that’s how Claire Ann, Eve and I ended up in Frank’s car. I was surprised Eve came with us, because there was room for her with David. “I don’t want to drink,” she explained in her monotone voice.

The Serpentine Wall was just as uneventful as I’d expected. We sat on the wall and stared across the Ohio River at Kentucky. There was nothing going on over there, either. Nobody else was around except us, and it was cold sitting by the river.

“This sucks,” said Frank. “Let’s get out of here.”

We had parked on Fourth Street, where we had a powwow to determine Plan B.

“Why don’t we just go for a drive?” said David.

“Where to?” said Frank.

“Let’s just head out 74 towards Miamitown,” said Kurt.

“That’s as good a plan as any,” Frank replied. “Let’s go. I want to break her in.”

We piled into Frank’s car and he started the engine.

“This baby is a beauty,” he said. “Listen to this!” He began revving the engine.

“Frank, I wouldn’t do that down here,” I said. “It’s echoing off all the buildings.”

“So? There’s no law against it.” He seemed a little miffed. He put the car in neutral and started revving the engine up more, just to be annoying. Then he put it in drive and peeled out. The sound of the squealing tires ricocheted off the buildings. Within seconds, we were pulled over.

I watched as Kurt drove slowly by us and off into the night. They were smart to keep moving since they had all the beer. We were fortunate to have not so much as an empty beer can with us.

Claire Ann, Eve and I waited nervously while Frank was being interrogated in the police cruiser. We heard a car door slam and the officer appeared at the driver’s side of Frank’s car. He opened the door, peering in at us curiously.

“How is everybody doing tonight?”

“Fine, sir.” I took on the role as spokesman.

“So are you girls in any kind of hurry to get home?”

We looked at each other confused.

“I don’t think so,” I answered.

“Okay. Just wanted to check.” He closed the door and walked back to the cruiser.

“Jeez,” Claire Ann wailed. “How long is he gonna keep us?”

Five minutes later, Frank was back with a ticket.

“Damn it, anyway,” he fumed. “I told him I had to get you guys home right away,

but he didn't believe me."

"Well, duh! If you're gonna lie, you need to clue the rest of us in!" snapped Claire Ann.

Frank glared at her. "So you ratted me out."

"No," Eve said. "He asked us if we needed to get home right away. We just thought it was because we were going to be sitting here awhile."

"You dumbasses."

"It's your own fault," I said. "I told you goofing around like that was going to attract attention."

Frank didn't say anything. He drove slowly to the western edge of downtown and onto the entrance ramp of 75. Then he popped in a George Thorogood tape and turned up the volume. He seemed to be stewing as "One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer" blasted at us. I normally like George Thorogood, but Frank seemed to be living it at this moment and he was starting to scare me. I sensed he was up to something.

Sure enough, a few miles after he headed west on 74, Frank floored it. I instinctively tightened my seat belt and glanced back at Claire Ann and Eve, who were scrambling to get their seat belts on. Frank glanced over at me and grinned a smirking grin I'd never seen before.

"Frank, what are you doing?" I asked.

The grin widened. "What? You scared?"

"A little."

He eased off the accelerator.

"Feel better now?" His tone was sarcastic.

“Well...yeah.” Wrong answer.

Frank floored it again.

“Frank! Don’t!” Claire Ann yelled.

I kept quiet this time as I watched the speedometer rise. Eight-five, ninety-five, one-hundred-and-five. I closed my eyes and prayed, imagining the headlines tomorrow morning: Four local teens killed in high-speed crash on I74. Claire Ann was screaming. Eve was silent. I hated Frank at this moment the way I always hate people who use power when they have it to terrorize others. I hated him all the more because I had believed he was better than that. What was this about, anyway? He couldn’t possibly be that angry with us about the ticket. Frank got tickets all the time, with no help from any of us. And it was usually because he did stupid things that he knew better than to do. Maybe this was just another one of those times. Tell Frank he can’t do something and that’s what he’ll do next. It was as if he couldn’t help himself.

The car started shaking and Frank let off the accelerator. I looked back to check on the others. Claire Ann was crying. Eve was staring stonily ahead. Frank pulled off the Miamitown exit and headed to the nearest gas station, which was the designated meeting point. Kurt, Bob and David were already there waiting. Claire Ann, Eve and I were out of the car and running over to Kurt’s car as soon as Frank turned off the engine. But the guys weren’t very sympathetic. David, especially, was just disappointed that he wasn’t along for the ride.

“Fine, David,” Eve said. “You and Bob go with Frank now. We refuse to ride with him.”

“Ah, poor babies. Did Fwankie scare de wittle bitty girlies?” David thought it was

a big joke. He and Kurt got out of the car and went over to talk to Frank. Eve followed them glumly, with arms crossed.

Claire Ann and I jumped in the back seat of Kurt's car, retrieved a couple cans of beer and started chugging. We were both shaking. I could hardly hold the beer can.

"Hey, don't be drinking here!" Bob hissed at us from the front seat. "You want to get us all in trouble? I'm not a minor, you know."

"Frank just tried to kill us. You think we're afraid of getting arrested right now?" I said between slurps.

Bob got out of the car and went over to join David, Frank and Kurt.

"Whassa matter, widdle Bobbie?" Claire Ann called after him. "You afwaid of da big bad policeman?"

24.

My language skills were really improving since I'd worked at the Bowl. That is, I had learned how to "cuss like a truck driver," as Little Jo would say. I no longer flinched at the casual use of the "f" word and found many vulgar expressions to be quite colorful and appropriate to various situations. Bitch and damn and hell and shit and jackass and asshole and prick. All used in the most creative ways imaginable, but always in the "back of the house," never in front of customers.

Kurt and I spent one dinner break trying to come up with all of Little Jo's lines.

"She acts like her shit don't stink" I said. "She said that about one of the waitresses."

"He don't know shit from shinola" said Kurt. "She said that about Harvey."

"What *is* shinola, anyway?"

"I think it's a shoe polish."

"Are you sure? I thought it was a floor wax," I said. "Here's one: He don't know his ass from a hole in the ground."

"Honey, you can stick it where the sun don't shine."

"You can put it right up your ass."

"Fuck you very much!"

"Little Jo wouldn't use the 'f' word!"

"It ain't my ass you gotta kiss."

"Okay, *that* she'd say."

“If you want a good tip you gotta blow sugar up his ass.”

“What if his ass stinks?” I said. “I just made that one up.”

“Yeah, it sounds like it.”

“You gonna sit on your fat ass all day?”

“Oh, is it time to clock my ass back in?”

“You bet your sweet ass it is.”

Little Jo could come up with original expressions with or without the bad words that always amazed me in their clever twists of humor and sarcasm. Maybe they weren't original, but they sure sounded like it to me. One of her favorites was, “He's worthless as tits on a boar hog,” which took me awhile to figure out. Why wouldn't a boar hog need tits? Little Jo had a good laugh on that one. But how was I supposed to know a boar hog was a male pig? I was a city kid.

Waitresses came and went at the Bowl. There were the older ones, the regulars who would probably never quit until they keeled over. Then there were the younger ones, in between jobs, in between boyfriends or husbands, in between college semesters, in between personal crises. Most were there for such a short time you forgot their names almost as soon as they left.

Like the waitress who worked a 24-shift nobody asked her to work. That was weird. One of the waitresses for the night shift didn't show, and she took it upon herself to be some kind of martyr to the cause of feeding hungry bowlers. You would have thought she was an intern working a sleepless shift in the emergency room on a busy night. She drank pots of coffee and took frantic drags on the cigarettes she kept burning at the bussing station as she held the place together, in her mind. She had this incredibly

dramatic desire to serve and make a difference. The trouble is, nobody cared really. It was just a bowling alley coffee shop, and she was a waitress, not a rocket scientist, as Harvey so plainly explained to her right before she flounced out of there after just a week on the job.

Then there was waitress who got caught stealing. I did remember Mandy's name because she was one of the nicer waitresses who never gave the busgirls a hard time and was fun to talk to. She didn't seem at all like somebody who would steal. Personally, I think she had financial problems and the temptation was just too much. I wanted to believe she was framed, but she admitted to it when confronted.

The most ridiculous was the waitress who was looking for a reason to quit as soon as she started. I think she only took the job because she got pressure from her husband. She was one of those women with high-maintenance grooming habits. She had big processed blonde hair, fake nails, and a lot of tacky jewelry. I'd bet she spent a lot on clothes, probably equally as tacky. She was pregnant, too, and that turned out to be her way out. She had me to thank for it. I was just minding my own business, but it was a busy night and I was getting flustered. Suddenly Little Jo, stopped me on my way to the kitchen.

“What's that rash on your neck?”

“What rash? I have a rash?”

“Honey, go in the restroom and get a look at yourself.”

Sure enough, I had blotchy patches all over my neck. But that happened sometimes when I got nervous or flustered. And we were frantically busy that night. It was no big deal. I found Little Jo back at the waitress station and explained.

She wasn't buying it. "I know measles when I see it. And measles ain't nothing to fool around with."

"No, really, Little Jo, I'm fine."

"Listen, honey, you need to see a doctor. You can't be around food if you got measles."

Just then, David came out of the kitchen to get a pop. He'd back me up.

"David, look at my neck. Tell Little Jo I don't have the measles."

He gave me a serious look. "Karen, you need to see a doctor."

"David!"

David stood behind Little Jo so she couldn't see him making goofy faces at me. He towered over her short frame, which came to only five feet, even with her steel-gray beehive hairdo. Little Jo was dead serious, but David's comic antics were disrupting the mood for me. It took a huge effort to stifle my laughter.

"David's right, honey."

"I'm not sick."

"Like hell you ain't. I raised four kids. I know measles when I see 'em."

That's when the pregnant waitress made her grand dramatic exit. She screamed and looked like she was going to faint.

"Measles! You have measles? Oh, my baby, my baby!" She backed away in terror pointing at me as if I were some kind of baby killer. "I can't work here with no measles!"

David made a quick exit to the kitchen, but I could still hear him back there laughing.

The pregnant waitress left. I clocked out for the night, too, just to make Little Jo happy and to appease Harvey, who was ticked off about losing another waitress.

David and Frank were having a good time back by the dishwasher.

“My baby! My baby!” David said when he saw me heading for the time clock.

Frank held up the sprayer. “Don’t come near me, you baby killer!”

“Ha, the joke’s on you,” I said. “You’re stuck here working, but I get to leave.”

“Hope you feel better,” Frank said, squirting me with the sprayer.

The whole thing was ridiculous, but I realized it was pointless to argue with Little Jo when she had her mind made up about something. I didn’t have the measles, of course. The next time I came into work, I had to make up an elaborate story for her about going to the doctor and getting a clean bill of health. She wouldn’t listen to the truth, but she bought my tall tale.

It made her feel vindicated, though, so I guess that was a good thing. She was just like that waitress who wanted to make a difference. Who was I to take that from her?

25.

Claire Ann and I shared the same set of priorities. That is, we had an unspoken agreement that a chance for contact with the objects of our infatuations took priority over any previously planned girl get-togethers. We were both hopelessly in love with guys who were hopelessly out of reach, and part of our friendship was based on supporting the other through the inevitable highs and lows of hope and heartbreak.

Looking back, I realize the strength of our friendship was based on perpetual heartbreak and our humor in dealing with it. It wasn't a friendship that could withstand either one of us actually getting what we wanted.

Sharon and I never became very close, although I saw her at work all the time and she did hang around the kids from the Bowl when she wasn't out with Rick. Rick didn't think the Bowl kids were cool enough for him. Although she was a year younger than I was, Sharon was of a rougher cut and more streetwise. She seemed to have a bit of contempt for me that she unsuccessfully tried to hide. Or maybe it was jealousy. I wasn't sure. My guess was that she thought I was making up my innocence to get attention. It was true that the guys in our group were protective of me even when they were laughing at me. But I wasn't faking my innocence, or stupidity, depending on your point of view. I was as naïve as I appeared and desperately trying not to be with limited success.

Sharon and Claire Ann were good friends. They had lived on the same street since they were little kids. Claire Ann never mentioned anything about Sharon not liking me and I made a point not to mention it either, hoping, I guess, that things would resolve

themselves over time. I did my best to be nice to Sharon, but it seemed to be a waste of time. She was never really more than polite, but at least she was that. I hung out with Sharon only when we were both out with everyone from the Bowl.

I didn't blame Sharon so much as I did myself. In my twisted view of friendship, if people liked me then they were nice; if they didn't, it was my fault somehow. I take credit only when things go wrong. I wanted to be like Claire Ann. She had so much self-confidence and was so outgoing and funny all the time that people couldn't seem to help liking her. I was self-conscious and reserved, never quite knowing what to say to people I didn't know very well. Claire Ann had what I would call a more generous personality than I did. Whether or not she cared, she appeared to care about people, and that's what mattered. I was not gifted as a flatterer and had a difficult time pretending to care about people I didn't know very well. I was more worried about what people were thinking about me, which, in retrospect, seems selfish, although it was based on an unshakable belief in my inferiority.

Claire Ann seemed to hold me in high esteem. If I said something she thought was funny, she'd bring it to everyone's attention. She gave me credit for being a lot more interesting than I was, and I sometimes even believed it, although it was easier to believe when she was around. I actually was funnier and more interesting when she was around, but maybe it's because I was leaning on her confidence in me rather than my own.

As I mentioned before, Claire Ann's house was a cool place to hang out, mostly because her parents weren't hovering like mine would be. We spent a lot of time at her house. I started to feel like a member of the family after a while, especially when I stayed overnight after evenings of partying because Claire Ann didn't really have a curfew. I

spent the night at her house, not only so I could stay out later, but also so we could stay up later watching TV and rehashing the evening's events. She was the youngest, unlike me, so we weren't keeping little ones up, and her parents' bedroom was on the opposite side of the house away from the family room.

Sometimes the party at her house was as fun as the night out had been. Her three brothers would often arrive with their friends—burnouts every one of them—and they would join us in munchie-calming food fests and late night television. Lots of times we got to mooch off the pizza they'd bring.

On Friday nights, if the Bowl gang wasn't doing anything, we'd hang out at her house, and sometimes when I got there, she would be a bit stoned from sharing a joint with one of her brothers. On those nights we'd watch The Rockford Files and laugh. Not that Rockford was anyone to laugh at. He had great comebacks, which gave him high standing in Claire Ann's book.

It started one night that Claire Ann got particularly high. "Rockford. He's the coolest," she'd say after almost every line he delivered. She was so stoned she didn't realize she was doing it.

"Man, that Rockford. He's the coolest," I joined in. A few lines later. "My God, he's cool! That Rockford!"

Claire Ann slowly got the joke and started laughing hysterically, rolling off the couch and onto the floor. I calmly took a drink from my can of pop and tried to keep a straight face, but pretty soon I was snorting Pepsi out my nose and laughing, choking and coughing at the same time. After that, it got to be sort of a running joke and ongoing contest, trying out new ways of saying the same thing about how cool Rockford was.

Other nights we'd hang out in Claire Ann's room airing our anguish and trying to figure out why I still loved Kurt and why she still loved Bob. We spent even more time trying to figure out how to get them to love us back. We wrote the "Rules for Handling Guys," which made us feel better, but we didn't always follow them.

#### Rules for Handling Guys

1. Flirt. Amaze them with your wit and humor. Frighten them with your intelligence. Fool them when necessary by acting like an airhead.
2. Be Cynical. Don't believe a word they say. Don't fall for compliments, pressure tactics or their wild claims, even though you might have to pretend you believe them.
3. Play Hard to Get. If they're really interested, they'll persist anyway. Ignore them: They crave attention. Don't ever call them on the phone. Don't give them presents. Don't compliment them on anything. Don't let them know you think they're cute, especially if everyone else does. Be independent and confident: Don't act as though you need a guy. Make guys prove they're not jerks. Don't let yourself get attached to a guy. Don't be a bitch: Be cool, be pleasant. Tempt guys but stay out of reach.
4. Don't Lend Guys Money. You'll never see it again. Lie if you have to, but always say you don't have any money.
5. Demand Respect. Act like a lady. Look them right in the eye when you talk. Smoke and drink in moderation or not at all. Don't cuss, but also don't act shocked if they do. Don't act naïve unless it's to your benefit.

6. Holding Hands, Hugging, Kissing is the Limit. If they try for more you have to get home, back to your friends, whatever. Act insulted and be insulted—the guy isn't worth it. He won't respect you. Even if he really is a decent guy getting carried away, he'll think you're a slut and make the most of it. A better word is immature. The best word is Jerk.
7. Lotsa Luck, Chick. You'll need it.

We used to listen to music a lot, too. Claire Ann had turned me on to The Who. We liked to pick out the lines from Quadrophenia that related to what we were feeling. This would eventually be a source of amusement for us and annoyance for our guy friends when we'd use the shorthand of song lyrics to talk to each other in our own private language. We didn't limit ourselves to The Who. Claire Ann was heavily influenced by the music her big brothers loved, and she introduced me to a whole world of rock that included more than the hits that got played on the radio, which had pretty much been the extent of my exposure. Led Zeppelin, Elvis Costello, Eric Clapton, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Jimi Hendrix, Neil Young figured heavily into our lyrical language.

Sometimes we got raunchy. We'd make up fake phone numbers like they did on TV commercials to help people remember the numbers. But our phone numbers had an x-rated twist: WE8-CMEN, I12-FUCK, 246-COME. Then we'd laugh. It was fun pretending to be bad girls, but it was a side of us we never shared with the guys in our group. It was partly a feeling of helpless frustration, I think, that made us do it, but it felt good to laugh and let some of our anger dissipate. I don't know if we were angry with Kurt and Bob or angry with ourselves for not having more control over our feelings. That

loss of control over our emotions was frustrating, like being held hostage. Held hostage to some dumb guy who could care less.

**26.**

I was starting to learn that being innocent and naïve was not the same as being good. The real test of goodness is not only having knowledge about what's bad, but having the opportunity to *choose* to do bad things. I had little opportunity to choose to do bad, so how could I could learn firsthand that good was better? In other words, if I never had the chance to do anything bad, how could I know if my innocence was based on goodness of spirit? Maybe it was based on lack of opportunity or fear of getting caught.

This became a convenient rationale for experimenting with things I had been told were bad, mostly drinking. Sex was not something I was willing to risk, but even that had less to do with goodness and everything to do with not wanting to get pregnant. And again, the opportunity had never seriously presented itself.

My perceptions of the world were changing. No longer could I conveniently label things wrong or right, black and white. Did that mean I was getting sucked into the evil of the world and losing my backbone? Or did seeing right and wrong as more complicated than black and white mean that I was growing up? Was feeling unsure a sign of weakness or a sign of tolerance for what I didn't necessarily approve of or understand? I did know that I couldn't do some of the things I saw other people doing. I didn't want to. I tried smoking, and one night at a party I smoked an entire pack of Benson & Hedges. The way I felt the next day cured me forever of the urge to develop a cigarette habit. Pot was just as bad. I just wasn't into it enough to bother with the risks of actually buying any. Sure, if someone passed around a joint at a party, I might occasionally take a hit. But

Frank actually bought it by the bag, and I noticed he was smoking it a lot, too. That's where my tolerance for other people's stupidity must have kicked in, because I sure didn't understand why he kept doing it.

My whole effort to become more "street smart," resulted in sacrificing some of the "book smart" I had been known for. I was starting to wonder how "book smart" I had actually been, after all. When I wore glasses, my clueless and klutzy personality was attributed to a certain bookish nerdiness. Without glasses, those same personality traits were giving me a reputation as a complete airhead. Neither label was acceptable to me, and I began to realize that I'd been right after all: Despite the insistence of many grownups that it's what's inside that counts, all most people really care about is what seems apparent on the outside.

I included myself in that grim assessment. After all, was I attracted to boys with Coke-bottle lenses like the ones I had worn? No way. I was just as shallow as the next person, which made my shortcomings in appearance and charm all the more frustrating.

I thought contact lenses would change my life, and they did, but in ways I didn't expect. Also they weren't the answer to all of my problems.

I thought drinking would help me relax and become more sociable, but it also changed the way some people thought about me. This became apparent to me after a party at Vince Mack's house in April.

We had met at the Kidd's house first, as usual. It was nice out that evening so we sat out in the backyard drinking beer and trying to decide what we were going to do that evening.

"Vince Mack's having a party," said Frank.

“Who’s that?” I said.

“You’ve never been to one of Vince’s parties?” said David. “That settles it. You haven’t been to a party until you’ve been to one of Vince Mack’s parties.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Kurt. “Let’s go.”

“It’s not dark enough yet,” said Frank.

“Dark enough for what?” I said.

Frank just grinned and took a drag on his cigarette.

As soon as it was dark, we all piled into Frank’s mom’s station wagon. Everyone could fit: Frank, David, Kurt, Bob, Eve, Sharon, Claire Ann, and me. Of course Eve had to sit on David’s lap and I had to sit on Kurt’s lap, but nobody was complaining.

“How’d you get the mom-mobile?” David said.

“Mom wanted to show off my car to her sister, so I let her borrow it.”

“You’re such a good boy,” said Bob.

“Yeah.”

Frank maneuvered the wagon into a subdivision. The car came to a sudden stop. David and Kurt pushed Eve and me off their laps and got out of the car.

“Where are they going?” Eve said.

Suddenly the back of the station wagon popped open and I heard a clanking sound as something was shoved in. Kurt and David hopped back into the car, jostling all of us in the process and Frank took off.

“Nice work!” said Frank.

“What’s going on?” I wanted to know.

“We’re shopping for houses,” said Frank.

“What?”

“Oh, my God,” said Claire Ann. “They’re stealing for-sale signs. This is great!”

Frank stopped the car again. “Here’s another one.”

“You can’t steal those signs,” I said.

“Oh, get over yourself, Karen,” said Sharon. “Loosen up.”

I tried. I really tried. But I was so anxious that we were going to get caught. The guys were having a blast. The signs piled up in the back of the station wagon.

“What are you guys planning to do with all these signs?” I said.

“You’ll see,” said Frank. “How many we got back there?”

“We’ve got plenty,” Kurt said. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” I said. “I thought we were going to a party.”

“We are,” Kurt said. “But first we have some business to take care of.”

Minutes later, Frank pulled into the Bowl’s lot and parked under the marquee that read: “Sunday Buffet: Eat more for less”

“Okay, let’s do it. Be quick about it.” said Frank.

The guys quickly pulled the signs out of the car and started putting them in the grassy area surrounding the marquee. There were at least a dozen signs.

“Hurry!” I heard Kurt hiss.

“What are you doing, Bob?” Kurt said. “Oh, God, you’re really into this aren’t you?”

Bob was climbing up the base of the marquee. He pulled a couple letters off the sign. It now read: “Sunday Buffet: Eat me for less.”

I was sure the rent-a-cop would spot us. I was not a good prankster. The guys

piled back into the car and Frank took off. Everyone was laughing but me.

“I’m sorry, but *I* don’t think we should’ve done that,” I said.

“Oh, yeah?” said David grinning. “Who are *you*?”

Frank turned on the radio full blast in time to catch the last half of The Who song of the same name. I couldn’t stay serious with a carload of kids singing “*Who are you, who, who, who, who?*”

Finally, I joined in.

“*Who the fuck are you!*” We sang, even though the obscenity had been bleeped out on the radio.

\*

Vince’s party was packed. Kids spilled out of the basement and into the yard and out into the street. A stereo was blasting Van Halen. We got really silly. Somebody had the idea to play swinging statues, and the next thing I knew David had grabbed my wrists and my feet left the ground.

“Hey, I want a turn,” said Bob. It turned into a game of swinging the girls around. It was the oddest sensation to be spun around by my wrists in the dark, landing on the damp grass. Laughing uncontrollably, Claire Ann, Sharon, and I would help each other up. We could hardly walk we were so dizzy and disoriented. Lots of people thought we were drunk. At one point I noticed a girl from my class staring at me, but I didn’t think much about it. I was having too much fun, right up to when the police showed up and told everyone to disperse.

\*

The following Monday at school, my old friend, Debbie, from the old gang, had a

heart-to-heart with me over lunch in the school cafeteria. Actually, there was no old gang anymore since everyone had pretty much drifted apart. I was still friendly with Debbie, Mary Lee and Janeen, but they didn't get along all that well with each other anymore. They had all meshed themselves into other cliques; I had not. Here it was, the end of my senior year, and I still didn't fit it, still didn't feel a part of things, and I was feeling sad that I didn't care enough to feel wistful about graduating.

"Amy Schubert saw you at a party this weekend."

"Oh, yeah. I think I saw her too."

"She said you were getting pretty crazy."

"Yeah, we had a good time."

"You know, some people are kind of shocked at how much you've changed,"

Debbie said.

"In what way?"

"Well, you know..." She gave me a "knowing" look.

No, I don't know," I replied. "I don't wear glasses anymore and I'm not as shy as I used to be. That I know."

"Well, it's more than that..."

Suddenly I knew where this conversation was headed. "Such as?"

"Well....people are a little worried....that maybe....maybe you've changed *too* much."

"So you're saying that because I've changed, I must be a sleazebag now."

"I didn't say that," Debbie said quickly. "But you know, the change is so drastic."

"Listening to Led Zeppelin doesn't make me a burnout."

“I didn’t say that, either.”

“You didn’t have to. Listen, here’s what changed: I’m not as ugly as I used to be and I have more fun than I used to have. But I’m not a druggie and I’m still a virgin. Is your people’s curiosity satisfied now?”

Debbie seemed a little startled. She was used to being the giver of advice to the clueless waif. “Okay, well, just checking. Just want to make sure everything’s okay.”

“Everything’s just fine.”

This was yet another lesson in appearances. I began to understand how change can be interpreted as something bad. People get used to the category they’ve put someone in, and when that person changes it screws up their neat little organization system.

In my heart though, I knew that I had changed in a way that bothered my conscience. I had lost my ambition for anything beyond the next party or the group of friends I had come to consider as better than family. Even worse, I was still lovesick over Kurt.

This infatuation with Kurt had become a prison I didn’t want to escape, and when he and Jenny broke up, I got my hopes up again. I stopped thinking about my future. Kurt, on the other hand, acted as if he had all kinds of plans for his future. One weekend he got off work and went with his parents on a family vacation to Chicago, where they checked out a few colleges. He said he wanted to be in a big city, close to all the action. I hoped he would hate it there. At any rate, it was too late to apply to colleges. I think his parents were trying to get him motivated to do something with himself since he still hadn’t made any decisions. He talked as if he had big plans, but I could never figure out what they were supposed to be. I suspected he didn’t know either.

When Kurt got back from his trip, he gave me a call to see if I wanted to go driving around the following Friday evening. He'd gotten a couple new tapes he wanted me to hear and wanted to tell me about Chicago.

27.

Kurt was thrilled to finally have a car of his own, even if it was a used Mustang II. Frank loved to give him crap about that. Frank didn't consider the Mustang II a proper car. According to him, it was a shame on the name Mustang. Kurt saved all year from his job at the Bowl and his parents had lent him the rest of the money he needed to buy it. The first thing he bought for it was a stereo—although minus the power booster that Frank would have considered a necessity. Frank loved to give him crap about that, too.

It was fun driving around on a beautiful spring evening listening to Abba tapes. Kurt told me Abba was his new favorite group, but I knew he'd never tell that to Frank or David. Too fluff for their tastes.

We eventually ended up at Mt. Airy and just sat parked under the trees talking.

Kurt was excited about the possibilities he saw in Chicago.

“There is so much I could do there. All I have to do is reach out and grab it.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I'm not sure. I want to be around people. I want to be in a big city.”

He didn't mention anything about going to school. In fact, he didn't mention any specific plans to move there or get a job there. It was all talk.

“By the way, I bought you something,” he said, reaching into the back seat.

“You're kidding!” I was thrilled, but tried to be as nonchalant as possible.

He handed me a medium-size box. That meant it wasn't jewelry, but what could it be?

I pulled the top of the box off and stifled a gasp—of disappointment. I stared down at a papier mache figure of a clown in an orange-striped costume holding a bunch of orange balloons.

“Wow...that’s so...neat!” I exclaimed with effort, smiling with even greater effort.

“It reminded me of you,” Kurt replied.

What the hell did that mean? Aloud, I said, “It did?”

“Well, you know, we’ve had a kind of funny relationship—get it?” I nodded, and he continued. “We’ve had our ups and downs—like the balloons. Know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I said. “Well, thanks!”

But I didn’t get it at all. Was the clown supposed to be me? Was I a clown desperately clinging to hopes that would fly away or burst at any moment? The clown’s painted-on expression of glee seemed more frightening than funny.

Kurt seemed proud of his gift and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, so I thanked him again and put the clown back in the box.

We got back to talking about our future plans. This required a bit of lying on my part, because, as I mentioned before, I had put my ambitions on hold. Talking was great though. Kurt was thinking about going to school for commercial art. He thought he might like to work in advertising, and Chicago would be a great place to be for that. I loved listening to Kurt pour out his dreams because I believed that if he was telling me his dreams, it meant he felt I needed to know, which also meant they might include me at some point. Besides, Kurt wasn’t doing much more than talking. He didn’t seem to be making any concrete plans to apply to school either in town or out of town, so that meant

he'd be sticking around town for awhile. That was okay with me.

There was a sudden tap on the window. A cop was shining a flashlight into the car. "The park closed two hours ago, kids," he said. "Let's move along."

\*

Saturday morning at work, David wanted to know where Kurt and I had been the evening before. We were supposed to have met up with everyone else at some point, but we'd gotten too involved in our conversation at the park.

"You guys were supposed to meet us at Skyline and you never showed," David complained, good-naturedly. "Where did you end up?"

"Mt. Airy," I said.

David raised his eyebrows and a slow grin spread across his face. "What happened *there*?"

Kurt smiled mysteriously. "We *talked*."

The grin on David's face widened.

"Sure you did."

For the rest of the day, he kept winking at me as if he knew some little secret of mine. I kept blushing, which only made him think his assessment was correct.

Sharon was just as annoying. "I hear Miss Goody Two-Shoes has gone bad. Congratulations."

Word spread around, and, of course, no one wanted to hear my protests. I didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted. I was already having trouble convincing my old girlfriends that I wasn't a sleaze, but if I was going to get the reputation, at least I could have enjoyed earning it.

But here was the flattering part: Kurt wasn't embarrassed to have the world think he was attracted to me. Even though he hadn't really done anything. That part bothered me.

I saw him go back to the kitchen, so I followed him right into the walk-in refrigerator.

"Why did you let David think we were making out last night?"

"Oh, come, on Karen. He knows I was just kidding." He scooped up a piece of cheese cake from a large metal tray and broke a piece off. "Want some? It's good stuff."

I took it from him. "No, he doesn't know you're kidding. He's been bugging me all day."

"Okay, well, so what?" Kurt looked hurt. "So what if he does think we were making out? Are you embarrassed that he thinks we're more than friends?"

What a loaded question. Fortunately, I had a mouthful of cheese cake and couldn't answer.

Kurt gripped my arms lightly and looked directly into my eyes. I was immediately hypnotized by his sincere, brown-eyed gaze.

"Are you?"

I swallowed. I could feel my face getting hot. "Are we more than friends?"

"How can you even ask that?"

It was the perfect non-answer, but I was too happy with the answer I thought he gave me to challenge him at that moment.

That afternoon when I got home from work, the clown was still sitting on my dresser, where I'd left it the night before. It was grinning at me with its stupid, painted-on

clown face. It gave me the creeps.

**28.**

My eighteenth birthday fell on a Saturday. I had to work that day and was not planning on any kind of celebration that evening because my parents and I were going to a National Honor Society banquet. As I was clocking out at five o'clock, Kurt came into the kitchen through the back screen door. I was surprised to see him.

“Working tonight?” I asked.

“No, just had to come to talk with Little Jo about something before my date tonight. What are you up to?”

I winced at the word “date.” Why did he have to be so blunt about it? It was apparent he didn't know it was my birthday, not that I'd made any effort to let him know.

“Oh, not much. Just some dumb National Honor Society banquet.” I was actually quite proud of the dumb banquet and amazed that I still got into the National Honor Society despite “burning the candle at both ends” the past year as my parents complained.

“Congratulations. Well, hey, see you around.” And he was gone.

Claire Ann showed up in her mom's car to give me a ride home, but first, we stopped at the nearest pony keg so I could buy my first six-pack of beer. The scowling clerk, an older guy, grinned when he looked at my license.

“Happy birthday!” he said, obviously relieved that he didn't have to perform the unpleasant task of turning me out. “I was kind of wondering when I saw you coming up to the counter with that.” Meaning, of course, that I still didn't look old enough to buy beer.

The beer was actually for Claire Ann, who was going to a party that night.

“Sure, you’ll come and give me a ride home if I buy you beer,” I joked.

“Hell, yeah, that’s what old friends are for,” Claire Ann said. “And I do mean old! But here, let’s do a trade.” She handed me a gift-wrapped box. It was a pretty cool pearl choker necklace.

“I love it!” I said. “Does this mean we’re going steady?”

“Shut up, you lesbo freak. And happy birthday.”

After the banquet, my parents and I went home and did the usual family birthday cake and ice cream celebration. I had wanted to change out of my dressy clothes first, but for some reason my Mom was in a big hurry to sing the birthday song. We were just cleaning up when the doorbell rang.

“Answer it, Karen,” Mom said.

I opened the door, and there stood Kurt, David and Eve, all dressed up as if they were going someplace special. I was confused.

“*You’re* my date tonight, Karen,” Kurt said smiling. “Got you good, didn’t I?”

I couldn’t believe it.

“Don’t just stand there; let’s go!” David said. “Keep your dressy duds on ‘cause we’re going to The Lighthouse!”

My first nightclub! I was now old enough to get in!

This had to be the best birthday surprise of my life. I was almost out the door when the phone rang.

“Karen! It’s for you!”

“Take a message, Mom,” I yelled over my shoulder. I didn’t want anything to

mess up this night.

“It’s Sharon! She says it’s important!”

Kurt whirled around. “Better talk to her then,” he said. “Hope nothing’s wrong.”

My heart sank.

“Happy birthday, Karen!” Sharon said. “What are you doing to celebrate tonight?” I knew right away she already knew even as I explained. Sharon never called me on the phone. Sharon didn’t even like me.

“That sounds like fun! Can you guys pick me up, too?” No, damn it, Sharon, I’m on a date.

“Well, I’ll ask.”

Kurt was enthusiastic. “The more the merrier!”

One little problem. Sharon wasn’t eighteen yet. While she looked old enough to bluff her way into some of the neighborhood bars, I knew that at The Lighthouse, she’d need to show an ID. Or a really good fake ID.

My night was already spoiled, but no one else seemed to think there was a problem. When Sharon got into the car, I could have strangled her. She had her sister’s ID, and she didn’t look anything like her sister.

“Do you think this’ll work?” she said. We all looked at each other and shook our heads.

“Maybe we should do this another time,” Eve said.

“Oh, no!” Sharon exclaimed. “I can just stay home. It’s Karen’s birthday!”

Everyone was very quiet for what seemed like an eternity. I wanted to shout, yes, yes, go back into the house!

Finally Kurt spoke. “No, no, you might as well come along. We’ll give it a try.”

Of course the ID didn’t work. I never even got to present my own ID because Sharon was immediately rejected at the door.

“Now what?” I said. I felt pretty glum.

We went out for pizza instead. I just couldn’t believe Sharon could be this mean. I didn’t know if she still had a crush on Kurt, but she was obviously determined to keep me from him. Or was she just jealous that Kurt and David planned this celebration for me? David, Kurt and Eve all seemed completely oblivious to the little game that had played out.

The worst part was that I couldn’t express my outrage to Claire Ann, because I was caught in this weird friendship triangle.

I didn’t have to work the next day. Kurt called that afternoon and apologized for the goof-up the night before.

“I guess we should have explained to Sharon why we didn’t invite her in the first place,” he said. “I felt kind of bad for her, thinking we just didn’t want her along.” Oh, so *that* was the line she gave them!

“It’s a nice day so a bunch of us are getting together at Mt. Airy,” he said. “I can pick you up in an hour.”

I cheered up immediately and was even more cheered when Kurt presented me with a gift. It was an eight-track tape of Steely Dan. I wasn’t wild about Steely Dan, but it was a gift from Kurt.

“It’s a gift from Sharon and me,” said Kurt. “She couldn’t figure out what to get you, so we went in on something together.”

I forced a smile. “Really? That’s so nice!”

“Want to hear it?”

“Okay.” I took the wrapper off and handed the tape to Kurt. He put the tape in. It started to play but then there was a squealing noise and the tape stopped. Kurt pulled out the eight-track, but the tape was caught and it pulled out of the cartridge and broke. So much for Steely Dan.

“Oh. That’s not good. Sorry, Karen.”

“That’s all right.” It was a gift tainted by Sharon’s mean-spiritedness, so I didn’t really care. I wondered if Kurt were really so clueless that he didn’t see what she was doing.

Just then, a Wings song started playing on the radio. It seemed to be a good sign: *With a little luck, we can help it out. We can make this whole damn thing work out.* I began to feel optimistic and hopeful. The picnic was a great time. Claire Ann was there along with David, Eve, Frank, and Bob. Sharon was there, too, but now that I knew the score, I could deal with her.

“Thanks for the gift!” I gushed.

“Kurt and I picked it out especially for you,” Sharon gushed back.

We sat under the trees, drinking beer, eating Kentucky Fried Chicken, basking in the lusciously warm early spring sunshine not yet blocked by the budding branches, joking around with each other. How cool was that? Looking around at everyone, I felt like the most popular girl in the world. Then my eyes met Sharon’s. Well, almost.

**29.**

Kurt and I were getting along great. He was calling me on the phone all the time just to talk and was regularly the one driving me to get-togethers and picking me up from work. In fact, he was so friendly, I was sure he was working up to asking me to go to his Senior Prom at the end of April. It was just two weeks away, and I knew he hadn't asked anyone yet.

Then one Friday night we were all supposed to meet up at the Kidds' house, as usual. Kurt had promised to pick me up, but Frank showed up at my house instead.

"Where's Kurt?" I asked as I pulled the passenger door shut. I wasn't surprised or upset that he didn't show; he obviously made sure someone else picked me up, which meant he must have been delayed for some reason.

"Kurt had a date," Frank said in his matter-of-fact tone. "That Jenny girl."

I inhaled sharply as my insides knotted up.

"You okay?" Frank looked concerned.

"No."

"I know. It sucks, don't it?"

I didn't see Kurt until a week later when we worked the same shift. I was hurt and furious, and I made a point of not speaking to him. Very mature, I know. Even though we were all supposed to meet up again at the Kidds' house after work, I had called Frank to pick me up instead of having to ride over with Kurt.

"Need a ride?" Kurt asked as we were clocking out.

“No, thanks. Frank’s coming.”

“Why? We’re going to the same place. You could’ve just gone with me.”

“That’s okay. I have a ride.”

“What’s with you, anyway? You haven’t talked to me all day.”

I just glared at him and flounced out of the kitchen entrance, letting the screen door slam with a loud crack behind me.

“It’s Jenny, isn’t it?” Kurt yelled as he followed me out to where Frank was idling in his Cutlas.

“What do *you* think?” I yelled back, getting in the car.

Kurt ran up to the open passenger side window and gave me a severe look.

“This is why it would never work out with us. You’re too clingy and possessive.”

“What are you talking about? We’re just *friends*, remember?”

Kurt seemed to wince at the sarcasm in my voice.

“Fine.”

Frank had sat like a stone until now. Abruptly he said, “You two finished?”

I nodded and Kurt stomped off. Frank grinned and shook his head.

“You don’t help matters none.”

“Well, what do *you* suggest?”

“Act like you don’t care.”

“I hate playing games.”

Frank lit up a cigarette.

“Life’s a game, ain’t it?”

\*

Several days later, I was taking my dinner break alone at the counter when Little Jo sat down next to me with a cup of coffee. She lit up a cigarette and took a long drag. Little Jo always had these long ashes on the end of her cigarette. I think it was a little contest she had going with herself to see how long she could keep the ash growing without it falling off.

“Honey, you done messed up.”

I knew she'd been talking to Kurt. Little Jo always knew when we weren't getting along. We were her pet project, I think. Two of her restaurant kids that she could help by playing matchmaker.

I looked at her cautiously but said nothing.

“You know what I'm talking about.”

I nodded.

“Honey, he's just a young kid, but he cares a lot for you,” She paused to take another drag. “Remember Jenny?”

I nodded again.

“She's the one who talked him into going out again. After that last date he was sure he didn't want to see her again. Do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because he likes being with you.”

I sat up straight.

“He does?”

“He was going to ask you to his prom.”

“He was?”

“Yeah, but then you got yer knickers all up in a bunch and now he’s changed his mind. He’s taking Beth.”

“My God, I’m such an idiot,” I said, covering my face with my hands. Beth was in the picture again, and it was all my fault.

“Now, now,” Little Jo patted my shoulder. “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over. Learn your lesson.”

I looked back up and she was smiling, but I could tell she was ticked off. At me, for screwing up her matchmaking project.

“I’ll do what I can for you,” she said. “But you gotta quit following him around like a lil ol’ puppy dog.”

I blushed. “Is that what I do?”

“Hell, yeah, honey. Everybody knows you’re sweet on him, and he knows it, too.”

The ash, about an inch-and-a-half long now, started to droop from Little Jo’s cigarette. She carefully took a draw from it as she leaned over an ashtray, making the ash grow until it met up with the filter and then fell off. She snuffed out the red embers and turned back to me, squinting as smoke curled out of her nose, rose up to her eyes, floated past her tall steel-gray beehive, and created a swirling column in the dim ray of light shining from the fixture above, giving her the appearance of a dwarfish wizard.

She swung herself off the counter stool and took one last swig from her cup of coffee as she headed back for the kitchen.

“Get in the game, girl,” were her final words of advice.

**30.**

When Kurt casually mentioned that Beth would be his prom date, I was prepared to not react, thanks to Little Jo's warning.

"Wow, it's been ages since you asked her out," I said with what I hoped was a pleasant smile.

I could tell it was not the reaction he hoped for. He looked surprised, and then his eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, she's a great girl. She's got a lot of confidence in herself, too. Most girls I know are so clingy and dependent."

Ouch. "Then I guess you'll have a good time."

I wanted to know how it went, but I refused to ask. Not long after the prom, Frank told me Beth was out of the picture again. Kurt tried to act like nothing had happened, but I was still pretty hurt over the whole thing. My own prom was coming up, and I wanted to go with Kurt, but pride just wouldn't let me even consider asking him. I was trying really hard to follow Little Jo's advice and not be waiting in the wings this time around. But it was killing me. Why couldn't he admit he liked me so we could stop playing these stupid games?

If Joey Bisaro hadn't asked me out, I probably would have caved and asked Kurt to the prom.

Joey was perfect—in that I knew my dating him would drive Kurt absolutely nuts. Prior to Joey, Kurt had a way of finding something wrong with every guy I dated. They

were dorks or burnouts, they drove ugly cars—you name it. Joey, on the other hand, was handsome, dressed impeccably and was five years older than I was. He drove a red Corvette and spent lots of money taking me out to movies and restaurants.

I couldn't have picked a better revenge boyfriend. My little sister thought he was a dream. My parents thought he was a gentleman. Most of my girlfriends at school thought he was hot. Claire Ann thought he was a jerk. So did I, but I kept giving him chances to prove me wrong.

Joey was twenty-three and had just started a job as a technician at the bowling alley. It was a big bowling alley, I told myself, with a lot of technical stuff to deal with. Joey maintained the mechanisms that swept up the bowling pins and set them down again in a neat triangle. I'm sure it required a certain amount of expertise, but I had a hard time picturing it paying much more than what he needed to support his car and his dating habits. He hadn't gone to college and he lived at home with his parents.

Joey came in to the coffee shop on his break on Saturdays, and he always sat at the counter alone. He asked me out one day when I was waiting on him. Actually, he wrote the question on a napkin, which I thought was really cute. He even drew a heart with an arrow through it.

But it turned out Joey already had one true love: Joey Bisaro. His life seemed to revolve around his car, his clothes, and being seen with pretty girls. Okay, so that was an ego boost for me, but I already had him pegged as being so obnoxious that most pretty girls couldn't stand to be around him. He probably had to keep lowering his standards, which is where I figured I came in. Then there was the nagging suspicion that he thought I was easy.

The first time we went out, he was a perfect gentleman. He took me out to Max and Erma's (which he kept calling Maxie Derma's) and then to a movie. I was starting to think maybe he was okay, when he kissed me goodnight. I had this weird sensation of a goldfish swimming in my mouth. I pulled away giggling, thinking he was kidding around. But he was dead serious.

"My kisses are legendary," he said. "You'll get used to it."

I wanted to burst out laughing, but instead I just backed away with a smile stretched tightly to hold the giggles at bay.

On our second date to see a movie, Joey stopped first at the liquor store and asked me what I liked to drink. Not having had much experience with hard liquor, except for the whiskey at the fall dance, I just told him to get whatever he thought I might like. He came back with a bottle of Tequila Sunrise, which I thought we were going to share, but he had bought himself a bottle of Chivas.

He pulled the bottles out of the bag once we got to the parking lot of the Showcase Cinemas.

"You don't expect me to drink this whole thing," I protested.

"Why not?" he held the bottle up to my lips and tilted it. "Drink up."

I started to drink and it did taste good in a sticky sweet way. But he didn't pull the bottle away. He started to practically force-feed me. I pushed the bottle away, coughing.

"God, Joey, can I breathe sometime?"

He was actually a little ticked off. "Suit yourself."

"I mean, I like it, Joey, and I appreciate you getting it for me, but it's way more than I can handle."

“I wish you’d told me before I bought it,” he pouted.

Get real, I thought.

“I just can’t drink that fast.”

“Oh. Well, take your time.”

I didn’t drink a whole lot more because it was so sweet my stomach was starting to feel a little queasy. Then, once we were in the theatre, another funny thing happened. I got really, really sleepy. It was the whiskey effect all over again. The movie started and I had trouble keeping my eyes open and even worse trouble trying to follow the story line. The next thing I knew, someone was shaking me awake.

Joey was miffed.

“I spend all that money on you and you fall asleep.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, disoriented. But whose fault was that, anyway? After all, he was the one who forced the alcohol on me. He was pouting again. Then it dawned on me. I was supposed to get a little tipsy, not pass out! He had been planning on putting the moves on me in the movie theatre. What a jerk.

I never would have given him a second thought, but then he called later to apologize, and he seemed so sincere I decided to give him another chance. Maybe his shallow personality was just a cover for a nervous guy trying to act cool.

For our next date, he took me to see another movie, but the name of it was a surprise. When I saw the marquee that read, It’s Not the Size That Counts, I was mortified.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not what you think it is. It’s just a funny movie.”

I reluctantly followed him into the theatre.

It was exactly what the title proclaimed. Had I been with a bunch of girlfriends, I might have thought it was funny. But it was not a date movie. Sitting there with Joey, I thought the movie seemed icky. What a jerk.

Joey was not the guy for me, but my options for a prom date were pretty limited at this point. No way was I going to ask Kurt. So, even after those lousy dates, I asked Joey to the prom, figuring I could hang out with my friends once we got there if he got too weird. After prom, I didn't want to see him again.

Joey was pleased with the invitation.

"I have to warn you that I'll be wearing a tux," he said.

I was puzzled.

"And that means...what?"

"When women see me in a tux, they usually pass out because I look so good."

Again, he was serious. This guy was absolutely convinced of his effect on women.

"I'm sure you'll look good, but don't worry about me. I won't pass out."

When I relayed the story to Claire Ann, she almost peed herself laughing.

"He's not Joey Bisaro; he's just your average Joe Bizarre!"

Claire Ann wanted to double-date, but Joey insisted on making our night extra special, so he made reservations at an expensive restaurant downtown that he knew her date wouldn't be able to afford. She was taking Frank, since Bob was now engaged and officially unavailable.

It was a nice restaurant, but I would rather have gone someplace cheaper so Claire

Ann and Frank could have joined us. The prom was okay, too, but I could hardly wait to get the evening over with. I complimented Joey on his tux, but he seemed actually insulted that I didn't swoon over him. He never once said anything to me about how I looked. Didn't he realize he was the guy? I began to realize that the expensive dates had nothing to do with me and had everything to do with some image he was trying to maintain. If he had just been a real person for once, I would have been happy with a date at a pizza parlor. How could anyone be so conceited?

I was home by one a.m., probably a record for a prom night. It was a relief to get away from Joey.

Claire Ann called me the next day.

"How'd it go last night with you and Joey?" she asked. "We didn't see much of you guys."

"He's still Joe Bizarre," I said. "I don't care how hot everybody says he is; I can't stand him."

"Well then maybe you won't be upset when you hear this: Sharon called me today, and she says he stopped by her house about one-thirty this morning."

"No way!" I didn't know Joey had any interest in Sharon.

"Yeah! I thought she was lying. I said, Joey was at prom with Karen. And she said, yeah, but he got rid of her early."

"Boohoo, I'm crying."

"She thinks you're going to be pissed off."

"She's welcome to him."

We both laughed.

“Okay, well, I’ll tell her it’s cool,” said Claire Ann.

Sharon was at it again. Only this time I beat her at her own game without even trying. Stealing Joey was such a gift.

I don’t think Sharon saw it that way at all. I think she thought I was stewing about it and just pretending to be okay with it. She gushed constantly about Joey this and Joey that. Joey took me here; Joey bought me this; Joey is so hot, don’t you think so, Karen?

I was in for a surprise a couple months later. One day at work, I was back in the kitchen chopping lettuce for the salad bar when Sharon sauntered in smiling and holding out her left hand.

“We’re engaged!” she squealed. “Look what Joey gave me!” She had this look on her face that said, victory is mine, Karen-girl.

I looked down at the modest diamond ring. “You’re going to marry him? Nice ring.” I actually felt kind of bad for her. I mean, for a guy who is so conceited, you’d think he’d shell out a little more on an engagement ring.

I think it was at that moment that Sharon realized I wasn’t stewing over Joey. She pulled her hand back. “Yeah, we’re getting married in August.”

“Wow!” I said. “You guys don’t waste any time. Congratulations!”

She backed away from me, still smiling, but her eyes were hard.

Later, Claire Ann told me what the rush was to get married. Sharon was pregnant. So she was going to jump from high school right into marriage and motherhood. Sharon seemed to think it was pretty cool.

That by itself wasn’t a shock to me. What *was* a shock was wondering if she really cared about Joey that much. If she did care, then I was happy for them. If not, it

made me kind of sick to think that she might have carried her vendetta against me to the extreme. I wondered if conception occurred on that prom night.

Icky.

**31.**

For me, graduation from high school was a bit of a letdown. I didn't really have any plans. Although I was accepted into the college I wanted, I turned it down. Four years seemed like an eternity to me, and I wasn't feeling very ambitious. Still, at my graduation, part of me winced seeing my name listed in the program under "working girls" instead of "college bound."

Down at the Bowl, the dynamics of our group were changing. Except for Claire Ann, we'd all graduated and were now staring at an uncertain future. It was hard for me to believe that we had been friends for little more than a year. A year seemed a lifetime ago to me.

I was still working at the Bowl and not really looking too much beyond that. I still worked the night shift during the week, but I wasn't bussing tables anymore. For the past few months I had been doing food prep, which basically amounted to coring and shredding lettuce and cabbage, slicing onions and cheese, preparing hardboiled eggs for the salad bar, and making the famous homemade onion rings. It wasn't bad except I learned that onion juice is hard on a manicure.

If I had to mark the last time the Bowl group got together, I would have to say it was the end of June in '79, when a bunch of us went canoeing at Morgan's Canoe Livery in Loveland.

It was a typical hot, muggy summer day, and after a few miles of paddling, we decided to take a break on a small beach that Eve pointed out. We disembarked, pulled

the canoes up on the beach and pulled off our shoes. Frank, Kurt, Claire Ann, David and I went knee-deep in the river to splash around, while Eve sat nearby on a large rock and drizzled suntan oil over her legs.

I think even David was getting tired of Eve, but they were still a couple. The rest of us were tired of the way she acted like a nagging wife, lecturing us through her whiny complaints to him. Eve had a way of sucking the life out of any fun we tried to generate.

“Remember, David, we stopped here the last time we went canoeing,” she said, stretching out her arm to apply more oil. “We ate a picnic lunch, and then I laid out on the rocks.”

“Like a dead fish,” Frank interjected, as he began skipping stones.

Only Kurt, Claire Ann and I understood the double meaning, and we doubled over with laughter. Eve rolled her eyes. She probably thought we were all stoned or suffering from heat exhaustion.

It had been about six months since the Kidds’ house had become our meeting center. I was starting to get uncomfortable with the constant presence of Eve’s parents.

I went over to where Frank was standing at the edge of the river.

“She’s a dead fish but her parents are too lively,” I said. “Know what I mean?”

“Yep.”

“I mean, at first I thought they were pretty cool. Like they cared. But now it seems more like nosiness. Not to mention a sick case of wanting to be forty-something teenagers.”

“Always wantin’ to know what we’re up to,” Frank said. “I don’t like it.”

“First in line for any late-breaking developments,” I said. “Whether it’s what’s up

with me and Kurt or how you got your latest speeding ticket.”

“It ain’t normal, that’s for sure. Ever notice they don’t have any grown-up friends?”

“Yeah, that’s weird, too.”

“It makes me fuckin’ paranoid. We’ve been giving them too much information. That could backfire, you know.”

I wondered what information Frank was talking about, but I didn’t ask. I was just worried my parents would find out we’d been drinking beer. “Yeah, we’ve got to watch ourselves around them,” I said.

“You got it. Parents aren’t supposed to be cool.”

I got to thinking about that later and realized I had nothing to worry about. The Kidds would have to be complete idiots to tattle on us since they were the ones who allowed beer-drinking at their house. And now, most of us were old enough to drink 3.2 beer, anyway. I just thought they were annoying, but Frank’s paranoia made me wonder if I was missing something.

Soon after the canoe trip, the situation was resolved without any action on our part. Apparently Eve and her parents were irate that David had decided to go away to school. As easygoing as David appeared, he could be absolutely unmovable once he had made up his mind about something, and going off to college was one of those items. Eve argued for staying in town and going to school, but David had made his decision way before Eve came along. The break-up was inevitable. Eve didn’t hang out with us anymore.

Kurt left the Bowl by mid-July, and it suddenly became clear I was working a

dead-end job. Part of my job satisfaction was tied into looking forward to seeing him. He had started a salesclerk job in a menswear store, which he swore was only temporary until he could figure out what college he wanted to attend.

Frank, who was brutally frank about his own lack of academic success, hinted on more than one occasion that Kurt was no rocket scientist, but then you didn't need to be a rocket scientist to have goals—or to get into a state college. But it wasn't long before Kurt's job seemed to go to his head. In fact, he developed a superior attitude that became so annoying to his long-time pals Frank and David that they got into a huge argument about it. At the time, I thought it was just a temporary spat.

"I don't know what's gotten into him," David said. "I'm the one going to college, but do I lord it over everybody? You'd think he owns the place he works at."

Kurt let me know that he was no longer going to associate with "kids" now that he was in the adult working world. I wasn't sure if that included me or if he was just relaying his distaste for Frank and David. I think it depended on his mood, which seemed to be a toss between Jekyll and Hyde ever since he started wearing a suit to work. He didn't call me as often, and when he did, I sensed new and strange distance between us. He had a new group of friends from work, an older crowd, and he made it clear that none of his old friends would fit in with this new group.

It made me sad. I kept trying to find the nice guy I had met the year before. Did that niceness fade so gradually I hadn't been able to see it or did I just know him better? But how could I know someone who seemed like such a stranger these days?

Something was troubling him; that was for sure. He would call and say he needed to talk; he had something important to tell me, something awful. I'd wait expectantly,

fearing the worst, not able to imagine what the worst could be. But he could never bring himself to tell me. Then he would brush it off as nothing important.

Frank was working at a mechanics shop, which seemed perfectly suited for him. He had no aspirations for college and he loved to work on cars. I didn't know he was restless for a change.

Then one day he called me up to tell me his car got stolen. I went over to pick him up from his parents' house the day he found out and reported his car missing.

"Thanks for getting me the hell away from Mom and Dad," he said, climbing into the Pinto I'd recently bought with my Bowl earnings. "Nice coffee grinder you got here."

I ignored the insult.

"Any leads?"

"I know exactly who took my car," Frank said as he nervously lit up a cigarette.

"Who?"

"My cousin."

"But why?"

Frank shook his head.

"The kid's always been in trouble. Crime of opportunity. He was over at the house. The keys were out. There he went."

"Well, at least you know who has the car."

"That's good, but then again that's bad," he said. "There were some illegal substances in the glove box. I'm fucked."

I had suspected Frank was dealing marijuana. Not long after Bob's New Year's Eve party, I got to wondering where Frank got those plastic bags filled with weed, and

then I wondered who that guy was at the housing project. Suddenly the two thoughts collided and I realized he wasn't just buying; he was selling. This was the closest he had ever come to admitting it.

“You've been dealing?”

“Not any more.”

I had another thought.

“But, remember, your car was stolen. You don't know anything about what's in the glove compartment.”

Frank nodded.

“Yeah, but somehow that don't feel right.”

“Does it feel right that he took your car?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Frank took a long drag from his cigarette. “I think I need to get away from this town. Too many bad connections.”

“Oh?”

“Not you,” he added hastily. “But I've got to start clean.”

The car turned up in Florida. Frank's cousin had been pulled over for speeding, which led to the discovery that he was driving a stolen car, which led to the discovery in the glove compartment. He tried to pin the drugs on Frank, but he wasn't in a very strong position to convince anyone.

Frank got his car back with another thousand miles on the odometer and a second chance. Somehow, I didn't think he'd take it.

Frank just seemed too pessimistic about his chances in life. As if someone had convinced him that he was destined to always be on the short end of the stick and the

wrong side of the tracks. He didn't even entertain the thought of a trade school, much less college.

He didn't talk much about his family, but the few times he did I got the impression of a silent, sulking father with eyes glued to the television and a beer glued to his right hand. His mother apparently lived for the soaps and would do housework only during the commercials.

Frank told me his younger sister was a teenybopper sleaze, but his mom couldn't see it.

"She comes home from Gold Circle, and she says, 'Hey, Tracy, look what I found on the clearance table! Four tube tops and I only paid a quarter each!'" Frank shook his head. "I said, 'Jesus, Ma, she don't need no help from you with her reputation.'"

"What happened then?"

"She said, 'Don't you say Jesus like that no more, do you hear? It ain't the Catholic way.'"

I couldn't help laughing.

"Wasn't nobody gonna tell her she didn't get a good deal. Besides, Tracy's a good girl. I'm the bad seed."

"Oh, come on."

"Look, I'd try to set her straight, but it ain't worth it," Frank said. "Besides, Tracy's got too much on me."

What's weird is that other moms always liked Frank. Despite his menacing appearance and ubiquitous cigarette, somehow moms knew he was harmless. He *was* harmless, too, although those same moms would have second thoughts if they knew

about the drug dealing.

One day, Frank stopped by my house to tell me he was leaving town.

“Yeah, me and Randy Kern are going to head to Texas,” he said. “We’ll find a job or something, I guess. Anything’s better than just hanging around here.”

“I’d ask you to write, but I know better,” I said. “Good luck. I’ll miss having you around.”

I did miss him, but I hoped he would get his act together. There was a nice guy under that gruff exterior.

\*

My Bowl days ended abruptly and unexpectedly. Harvey came in one evening, already drunk and desperate for a babysitter, and asked if I would clock out and go watch his kids. His babysitter cancelled, and he’d promised his wife a night out. He’d pay me what I lost in wages, he said. Well, he paid me, but not quite what I would have made if I stayed on the clock.

The next time he asked, he didn’t ask.

“Clock out, Karen,” he bellowed. “I need you to watch the kids.” That time, he claimed he didn’t have any extra cash and would pay me back. He never did.

I watched my paycheck shrink over the next several weeks as he continually pulled me off the clock to watch his kids so he and his wife could go right back to the Bowl and get plastered. I think his wife was jealous of Harvey’s Angels, and he was trying to prove to her there was nothing going on. She didn’t have anything to worry about, believe me. No Angel would have anything to do with him that way.

I didn’t want to watch kids, and I especially didn’t want to watch kids for free. I

tried joking my way out of it, and he laughed and then threatened my job. Finally, I tried taking the bus to work instead of driving, so I'd have to depend on one of my friends for a ride home. That didn't work, either: Harvey was willing to give me a ride.

As usual, he and his wife were plastered when they came home.

"Come on, I'll take you home," Harvey said. I was glad that I lived close by.

When I got in the car, I saw he had a glass in the cup holder filled with ice and what looked like whiskey. He noticed me staring at it.

"It's Chivas," he said.

"Oh."

"Wanna try it?" His voice was slurred.

"No, thanks."

"C'mon, try it. Try it!" He picked up the glass and handed it to me. I took a tiny sip, and he grinned sloppily. "Like it?"

"It's okay."

"It's better than okay." He was leering at me. "You're all right, you know that?"

"Thanks."

"Good-lookin' girl."

We rode in silence for awhile. He kept looking at me with his stupid grin.

"We should get to know each other better."

"Okay, well this is my house. Thanks for the ride."

"Awright. See ya next time."

\*

Little Jo saw what was going on, and she didn't like it.

“Who took you home last night? His wife?”

“No. Harvey did.”

“After he’d been in here drinkin’ all night?”

“I don’t think she was much better.”

“I’m worried about you, honey. Don’t let him try nothing funny on you.”

I stared at her in horror. “You think he might?”

“He’d better not or he’s got me to answer to.” But Harvey was Little Jo’s boss, and she had to make a living. I was on my own.

The next night, when he came in with his usual summons, I simply clocked out and went home. The last thing I saw of him was that big pumpkin face turning red with rage and the last thing he yelled at me was a lame insult. “You’re just another one of them stupid kids!”

Okay, so I showed him. Now I was out of work.

**32.**

My parents came to the rescue, or rather, a friend of theirs did. Seems a local bank was looking for clerical workers. My dad was thrilled with the idea of my having a full benefits package, which I didn't fully appreciate. My mom was thrilled that I would wear "dressy" clothes and work in a "nice" office instead of a greasy, smoky restaurant. I was thrilled that working nine to five meant that I'd have all my evenings and weekends free. Also, maybe Kurt would be impressed enough to see I wasn't one of the kids anymore.

\*

It was a hot Sunday afternoon in August, and Kurt and I spent it at his house washing our cars. I can still see Kurt with his Mustang II and me with my Pinto, shining our respective hubcaps and congratulating each other on our good taste.

Kurt seemed more like his old self that afternoon, someone I rarely got to see anymore. Someone I missed. He was usually busy hanging out with his new friends from work, so I was pleasantly surprised when he called and asked me to come over. I was touched by his efforts to scrub my whitewalls to perfection—didn't that show how much he cared? We were enjoying this car-washing ritual—didn't that prove how compatible we were? That was my mind at work again, twisting every little thing Kurt said or did to fit my little fantasy world. Even when I tried to view things in the worst light in an attempt to force myself to accept reality, it never worked. Truth was what I wanted truth to be.

So I was ecstatic instead of insulted—and only mildly suspicious—when Kurt

casually asked me if I could go with him to a coworker's wedding reception. In three hours. And could we use my car since he was low on gas? After all, it was only an hour's drive to the little town in Kentucky where the event was being held.

If I had any sense, even a tiny sense of pride, I would have made some excuse to refuse the offer. No chance of that. Kurt was finally asking me out on a real date, not some group outing where I tagged along as a platonic friend. Maybe he was ready to admit his feelings for me. After all, we weren't in high school anymore and we didn't work down at the Bowl anymore.

I was the desperate smiling clown again. Kurt's mother stuck the first pin in my gaggle of dream balloons.

As we walked into the kitchen to get something to drink, she looked up from the letter she was writing.

"So who are these mystery friends of yours, Kurt?" The tone of her voice seemed a little sarcastic.

"Just friends from work, Mom." He sounded defensive.

"What's wrong with your old friends? Why do you have to hang around people ten years older than you are?"

"Who cares how old they are?"

"I care. Something's not right about it. Why haven't your father and I met any of them?" Mrs. Waller looked at me in a searching, almost pleading way that made me feel uncomfortable. "What do you think, Karen?"

I shrugged. "I haven't met them, either." That was a tiny white lie. I had met a few of his friends a couple weeks earlier, when Claire Ann and I had come across Kurt

and his new friends at a church festival. They seemed normal enough to me, but I didn't feel I knew them well enough to have an opinion. Besides, I didn't want to get in the middle of a family argument.

Kurt looked too grateful at my reply, which bothered me. In fact, his mom's questions bothered me because it meant I wasn't the only one noticing his strange behavior of late.

"Karen, we have to hurry. Can you pick me up around seven?"

Kurt walked me out to my car, but he didn't offer any explanation about the scene I had just witnessed. I wanted him to say something to dispel the nagging feeling I had that something wasn't right.

\*

I arrived at Kurt's house at seven and let him drive the car. He handed me a set of scribbled directions, which were nearly impossible for me to decipher especially since he couldn't remember his own cryptic code. Every wrong turn was my fault and he grew increasingly irritable. In an attempt to end an argument he was losing, he abruptly changed the subject.

"Have you heard the dead speak?"

"No, no recently." I rolled my eyes.

"I'm serious, Karen."

I looked at him closely. He wasn't smiling.

"Right after dusk is when the dead are the most restless," he continued. "Human ears can't detect their voices, but if you leave a tape-recorder running, you'll come up with some strange sounds."

“Crickets, I suppose.”

Kurt glared at me. “My friends and I have heard the voices.” His voice was low and haunting; his eyes had taken on an eerie expression. “It’s as though they were trying to get out of their graves.”

I felt chilled in spite of myself. “So that’s where you guys hang out—the cemetery.” I tried to laugh but it sounded hollow. “I didn’t know it was such a lively place—get it?”

“Okay, if you don’t believe me—come with us sometime.”

I was silent then. Another balloon had popped. I was slowly, but surely, being brought down to earth.

What in the world was wrong with Kurt? I’d always gotten the impression that there was some kind of conflict going on inside his head. He had often hinted at how bad his childhood had been and how his parents’ marriage had been rocky. But I always suspected his sob stories were enhanced for dramatic effect or to gain sympathy. After all, it was obvious to me that his parents cared for him and had provided well for him. His dad worked two jobs so Kurt and his siblings could go to Catholic schools. His mom stayed home and took care of them, and from what I saw, she cooked decent meals and kept a clean house. Kurt always had nice clothes and a decent car to drive. What evil was lurking behind this façade of respectability?

Then I remembered the pleading look his mother had given me earlier that day. She was worried, too.

Maybe Kurt wanted more drama in his life so he was going out of his way to create it. That was what he liked about working down at the Bowl: the constant

melodrama, the gossip and speculation. It was a play with a huge cast of characters and the coffee shop was the stage.

Since that stage was gone, maybe he had to create a new one. Maybe that explained why he was always telling me about the girls he dated, the nightclubs he frequented and the new drugs he was exposed to. He never gave me any specifics about anything, and while I felt jealous about the girls, it was the talk of drugs that bothered me the most. This was the same Kurt who had lectured me about taking one toke off a joint just a year ago.

Kurt was not the same old Kurt anymore. He avoided all his old friends—“kids” as he called them. What made him think *he'd* grown up so much?

\*

I was curious about the new friends he had been associating with since starting his department store job. Nobody else from the old crowd had met them except Claire Ann and me; for some reason he was highly secretive about this new circle of friends. Were they so sophisticated that Kurt was embarrassed to have them know who his high school friends had been? But I had met them, and he was taking me to this wedding reception, so maybe I was sophisticated enough. That was the answer I preferred.

We parked in a school lot up the street from Sheila's parents' home. The newlyweds pulled up right next to us as we were getting out of the car. Barry was blond and boyish with an athletic build and his smile radiated warmth and friendliness. This put me at ease—he seemed normal enough. He was one of the people I'd met before at the church festival, and yes, he was okay.

But when Sheila emerged from the car, my mouth dropped open in what could

only be called shock. I hadn't met Sheila before that day. Sheila looked like a man in drag. She had tried to cover her blunt, pimply features with some kind of liquid makeup that was sloppily and unevenly applied and made her uncolored lips look even paler than they were. She seemed to have forgotten to do anything with her small, expressionless eyes. Little flakes of the dried makeup clung to her lashes. It was as if she had never used makeup before and yet she must have because Kurt had said that she was twenty-four.

Even if I overlooked the makeup, I couldn't ignore the dress. It was black. And ugly. Black? For a wedding? How strange. The way Sheila talked and carried herself vaguely reminded me of football. She was definitely female, but not very feminine. So this was the kind of girl Barry went for.

Kurt introduced me to Sheila and I tried to overcome my initial shock through small talk, the usual polite things you say to a girl on her wedding day. Sheila wasn't interested.

"Man, I can't wait to check out the punch," she said, ignoring my attempts at conversation. "Hope it's potent enough."

"How does it feel to be a married woman?" I asked.

Instantly I knew I had said the wrong thing. Sheila glared at me, and Kurt was watching me anxiously, as though he were afraid of what I might say next. Barry smiled at me with an amused expression. But what was wrong with what I said?

I decided to keep my mouth shut from then on out.

The reception was being held in the backyard of Sheila's parents' home. Something about this supposed festive occasion struck me as ominous. Maybe it was because these people didn't look very festive. They were all sitting prim and proper in

lawn chairs, politely drinking bottles of sodapop. Old people, young people, little kids. Everyone just sitting there and staring at us. I half expected some guy with a chain saw to jump out and start shaving everybody up, like some cheesy horror flick you'd see at the drive in.

Kurt seemed to sense my confusion.

"Sheila's parents are strict non-drinking Baptists," he whispered to me.

I wasn't confused by the lack of alcohol, but by the grim faces that looked towards us as we walked through the gate into the yard. Upon our arrival, all conversation had ceased. There was a strained moment when no one seemed to know what to say. I glanced at Sheila in her black dress and suddenly wondered if we were attending a funeral. But who died?

Then Sheila's parents stepped forward to greet the newlyweds. Suddenly the rest of the group came to life with animated greetings of congratulations and best wishes. I thought maybe I had imagined that odd moment, but then a lot of things had seemed odd to me that evening.

Sheila brought out the spiked punch she had been so eager about. Kurt offered me a glass.

"You know, Sheila's wedding is a real shock to her family," he said. "She always said she would never get married."

"So what changed her mind?"

"Love, I guess. You, know, she and Barry have only known each other a month."

"That's probably what shocked them." It shocked me, too. I mean Sheila didn't seem like the type of woman to have a whirlwind romance.

I drank too much punch. I felt I had to. This was all just too weird.

My head was starting to spin but I didn't care. Kurt was introducing me to a couple of guys. Both were blond and mid-twentyish. One had a sturdy athletic build, while the other was slighter and shorter. They were both grinning at me curiously.

"Nice to meet you," I gazed back at them, perplexed. What was so funny? Why were they looking at me that way?

Kurt asked me if I wanted some wedding cake. Without waiting for an answer, he firmly led me away as I continued to stare.

"Why were they...uh...who..who are they...I mean..." I stuttered. What did I mean?

"I think you need to sit down for awhile."

"Yes...you go ahead and talk to your friends."

I made my way carefully to an empty lawn chair and lowered myself into it. The world was spinning violently around me. I was now sorry about having the punch. Now Kurt would have to drive me home and tomorrow my parents would notice my car was missing and my dad would give me hell about drinking. Plus I was going to feel lousy at work in the morning.

That was another weird thing: What kind of people have a wedding reception on a Sunday night?

The scene was getting more distorted. I watched as Barry and Sheila danced together in slow motion to the muffled cheers of the wedding guests. I looked over at the two guys Kurt had introduced me to. One of them waved and smiled. They were sitting next to each other.

That's what was weird. They were sitting *right* next to each other. Why didn't the one guy move over a little? There was plenty of room on the bench. Okay, whoa. I didn't like what I was thinking. Time to leave.

Kurt was quiet most of the way home. Abruptly, he broke the silence.

"I think I'll head on over to Barry and Sheila's apartment after I drop you off," he said. "They're going to do some more partying after the reception."

"That's fine. We need to get together tomorrow so I can get my car back."

"No problem."

"That's nice that Sheila and Barry trust all of you to be in their apartment when they're not home."

"They're coming, too."

"On their *wedding* night?"

"Well, they're both off work tomorrow." Kurt looked at me as if I were crazy.

I just groaned and closed my eyes.

**33.**

The next morning I felt sick, and not just from the wedding punch.

I sat up in bed and stretched, trying to delay the dreaded moment of beginning another workday. My tongue was swollen and my head was heavy, but I had a bus to catch and a hangover was not generally an acceptable excuse for absence from work.

I wondered if it were true. I formed the words silently: Kurt is gay. Maybe that's what he had been trying to tell me all the while he had been trying to hide it from me and everyone else. That would explain why he never minded that other people thought we were a couple when we weren't. Damn him. I was too blind and too lovesick to see it.

I didn't want to believe any of what I was thinking. Besides, how could I confront Kurt about it? No one else would believe it, either. Not of Kurt, the guy who had girls falling all over him. What's more, if I said anything about my suspicions to any of the other kids, word would get back to Kurt.

Kurt would deny it. He would tell everyone that I was jealous of all the new girls he was seeing. I would come off as a clingy, pathetic bitch. The "rumor" I would be accused of trying to spread would be unforgivable. Everybody knew that gay people were supposed to stay on the fringes of normal society: homosexuality was deviant behavior; it was a sin. If anyone in our neighborhood was gay, nobody was going to admit it and nobody wanted to know about it.

Maybe it wasn't true. There was something strange going on, for sure, but maybe it had more to do with drugs or some kind of cult. As if that would be better.

Kurt called that evening. He sounded so friendly, so normal and so oblivious to any suspicions of mine that I breathed a sigh of relief. I *was* pathetic. Here I was having all these dark suspicions when probably the whole problem was that I didn't know when to stop drinking.

“Hey, Karen, want your car back?” he joked.

“That would be nice. My parents weren't too happy when they noticed it missing.”

“No kidding!” Kurt laughed. “You were a mess last night.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Listen, that was my fault. I should have warned you about how strong that stuff was.”

“Well, I managed to get through the day.”

I felt ashamed suddenly. Maybe I needed professional help. Why did I have all these conflicting emotions? Why was I so jealous, when I knew that jealousy would drive Kurt away? Why was I so paranoid that Kurt would never love me to the point that I imagined he was gay? What kind of person was I, anyway, that I had all these suspicions? Time and again, jealousy had been my undoing. Why couldn't I control these emotions?

“Kurt, I'm sorry,” I blurted out. “I...I hope I didn't embarrass you last night.”

“Don't worry about it,” Kurt said. “Hey, what do you say we go out again tonight, just the two of us? I'll even pick you up in your own car.”

“On a Monday night?” I laughed. “My parents will love that after last night. But as long as we aren't out late, it should be okay.”

Everything was just fine. Everything was great, in fact. Last night seemed as

distant and unreal as a bad dream.

Kurt picked me up an hour later and we headed downtown. For the first time ever, he held my hand as we strolled along Fifth Street towards Fountain Square. We sat next to the fountain and talked for awhile before deciding where to go for a beer. I didn't think it was possible to feel any happier, but I was wrong.

"Karen, I know it's been rough on you this past year with me not being able to figure out what I want," Kurt said. "That's why I didn't want us to get too close, if you know what I mean."

I nodded silently.

He took my hands and looked earnestly at me. "But of all the girls I know, you're the only one who's really been there for me. I wanted to tell you that."

Could this really be happening? Had my patience won out after all?

For the next few months, I was happier than I could ever remember. Kurt and I spent more time together than ever before and we were constantly scheming how we were going to get out of our parents' houses and out on our own.

We actually began checking out rental rates for apartments and planning decorating schemes. I wasn't exactly sure what the point of it was. Was he trying to say we might be getting an apartment together? But it was so much fun that I ignored the familiar pangs of paranoia that I was reading way too much into all this.

It bothered me that Kurt's physical passion towards me was still nonexistent. Not that I wanted to risk getting myself in any trouble, but a kiss now and then would be nice. Still, he was sentimental and caring. Besides, I had always dreamed of finding the perfect Catholic boy who would respect me. But even Catholic boys have hormones.

One Saturday afternoon, Kurt took me to visit Barry. I hadn't seen Barry since the wedding and was hoping to dispel my uneasiness once and for all.

The idea was that we were going to get some decorating hints from the newlyweds. I was glad Sheila was out of town. I didn't know if I was up to attempting another dead-end conversation.

Barry was friendly as before. I thought he had a great sense of humor and could understand what Sheila saw in him. What he saw in Sheila, I couldn't say, but if anyone could find the beauty in another person, it was Barry.

We sat in the living room sipping ice tea. Barry showed off some of the wedding gifts, and we looked at the photos from the reception.

Suddenly, Barry jumped up. "Want to see the bedrooms?" He asked.

"Sure, why not?" I replied.

There were two bedrooms. One was decorated in orange and black, and on the walls were safari scenes from Africa. The other room was white, feminine and frilly with a lacey bedspread, flowered curtains and prints of Impressionist paintings.

"I take it this is the Master Bedroom," I said.

"No, actually, this is Sheila's room," Barry said. "My room is the other room."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not," Barry insisted. "This way we each have our privacy when we need it. It's no big deal."

Well, okay, maybe that was logical. An interesting idea, anyway.

Kurt changed the subject.

"Hey, Barry are you guys still going up to that cemetery tonight?"

Not that again.

“Yeah! You and Karen want to come along?”

“No,” I was adamant.

“Karen doesn’t believe we can hear the dead speak,” Kurt said.

“I don’t understand why you *want* to.”

Barry and Kurt tried to convince me it was true. Then they started telling me about other psychic phenomena they had supposedly experienced. It was getting too weird for me. I felt as if they were trying to hypnotize me. Or that they were making fun of me. I didn’t like it.

The next day, Kurt invited me over to his house. He didn’t mention anything about his visit to the cemetery the night before or my refusal to go. We were sitting on the front porch drinking Cokes and talking about nothing in particular, but I noticed Kurt had something on his mind.

“You know we’re too young to even think about getting serious,” he blurted out.

My heart stopped. “Of course we are. There’s plenty of time.”

“Exactly. It seems silly to limit ourselves to just seeing each other.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think we should cool it for awhile.”

Cool what? I was crushed, but not surprised.

“You’re interested in someone else?” I asked, not really wanting to know.

Kurt looked apologetic. “Well...yes.”

“Who is she?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

I was suddenly overcome with anger. “Yes, I think it does.”

Kurt glared at me then.

“Okay, I didn’t want to hurt you but if you have to know I’ll tell you. Her name is Tina. She’s sophisticated. She’s gorgeous. I’ve never met anyone like her.”

I felt a stab of pain. Of course. How could I have been so naïve to think that nice and loyal would win out over sophisticated and gorgeous? He wasn’t attracted to me; it should have been obvious. What we had was never going to go beyond a platonic friendship.

“I’m sorry,” Kurt said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you really shouldn’t have.”

So I went home and cried. What else was there to do?

The next day, I had run out of tears and felt emotionally worn out. I called Claire Ann for advice.

“Wow, long time no talk to,” she said. “How’s work?”

“*Out of my brain on the five-fifteen.*” I had shifted to our code of quoting lyrics from Quadrophenia. “The bus was crowded tonight, and I had to stand almost all the way home. In high heels. What’s up with you?”

“*They finally kicked me out. My mom got drunk on stout.*”

“Shut up. Seriously, what’s up?”

“*I just can’t explain why that uncertain feeling is still here in my brain.*”

“Bob called you?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought he was engaged.”

“He is. I wish he’d make up his mind,” said Claire Ann. “You and Kurt must be getting along pretty good. I never hear from you.”

“Not exactly.” I told her what had been going on, except for my crazy paranoia about Kurt being gay.

“*Don’t cry because they hurt you. Hurt them first, they’ll love you.*” Claire Ann was quoting The Who again.

“That would apply to you, too. Well, am I crazy to still like him or what?”

“You’re definitely crazy,” Claire Ann replied. “But I understand completely. I’m in love with a guy who’s engaged to somebody else. Now *that’s* crazy.”

“I wish I could just turn off my emotions,” I said.

“You and me both,” Claire Ann agreed. “But seriously, Karen, he’s jerking you around. As long as he thinks you’re always going to be there, he’s going to keep this up. It’s just common sense. Use it.”

In the end, I disregarded Claire Ann’s advice. I’m sure Claire Ann wasn’t surprised. Claire Ann didn’t get along with Kurt anymore, and I know she would have liked nothing more than to see *him* get rejected for a change. I could tell she was getting tired of listening to me whine about him when we could be out having a good time instead. I called her only when Kurt didn’t call me, and she resented it. I wasn’t being much of a friend.

When Kurt called two weeks later, the relationship with Tina was already over.

“What a stuck-up bitch she turned out to be!” he exclaimed. “I really missed you.”

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Hey, we’re too young to get serious, but we’re not too young to date.”

“That’s true.” Maybe there was still hope.

The yo-yo had swung back again.

**34.**

It was a Friday evening in September, and Kurt had asked me out for a beer. He liked to go downtown lately, so we decided to check out some of the bars down there.

We had already walked down to Second Street and back, and now we were strolling north up Plum Street.

Kurt stopped suddenly. “Hey, want to see what a gay bar looks like?”

My insides twisted. Did he find out what I suspected after Barry and Sheila’s wedding? I hadn’t said anything to anyone about it, had I? I mentally reviewed recent conversations with Claire Ann and David, but came up with nothing.

“Well?”

I tried to sound calm.

“Don’t be silly. There aren’t any gay bars around here.”

Kurt pointed across the street.

“There’s one.”

It looked like a regular bar to me, but then I wasn’t an expert on gay bars.

“How do you know it’s a gay bar?”

“I’ve been there.” He was looking at me in an almost jeering way it seemed. I felt as if I were being set up for some kind of joke.

“You’ve been *in* there?”

“Well, my friends and I heard the rumor, so we went in to check it out.” Kurt seemed pleased with himself. “You should have seen all the homos. Guys dancing

together. Some even kissing. And you should have seen some of the fruity outfits. It was a riot!”

It wasn't like Kurt to talk this way, and it scared me. I sensed anger behind it. This was the first time we'd been out together since he broke up with the most recent love of his life. Maybe he hadn't broken up with her after all. I have to admit I was uneasy about his interest in me this time around. Maybe I let something slip without realizing it, and he found out. Maybe this was his way of sticking it to me.

“Kurt, please...” I started to plead, but then something else caught my attention.

A couple of heavysset women had just emerged from the bar and were walking towards us, arm in arm. They turned to kiss. I just stared. I had never seen anything like it in my sheltered world.

One of the women caught me staring.

“Take another good look, honey!” she bellowed. “Take another good look!”

Kurt howled with laughter.

“You're a couple of lesbos!” he yelled.

I was mortified. He seemed determined to make an ass of himself.

“Shut up, Kurt. Let's get out of here.”

“No, wait! Let's go in and check the place out.”

“Are you serious? We can't pass as a gay couple!”

“So what? Come on!” He tugged at my arm.

“We don't belong.” I pulled away from him. I thought he must know what I had suspected. Now he wanted to take it out on gay people, and he was going to make me watch. Wait. Maybe he *was* gay, and he had a bet with all his gay friends that he could

get his clueless straight friend to go in the bar. They would all be laughing. The joke would be on me.

“Let’s just go in for a few minutes! I want to get a look at the fags!”

“No. Leave them alone. It’s their bar.”

Kurt was angry now. “You really are a stick in the mud.”

Something just snapped in me then. All my suppressed paranoia shot out in a venomous rant. “What is your problem? Why do you need to go in there? Are *you* gay?”

Kurt looked stunned. Suddenly, I realized he had no idea what I had suspected. His face got red and, for a brief moment, I thought he was going to hit me. “Is that what you think? You stupid bitch. I’m taking you home.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. But it was too late.

We were silent in the car on the way home. I tried not to cry as I berated myself silently for the words I couldn’t take back, words he could never forgive.

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I didn’t tell anyone about how Kurt and I parted ways. David and Claire Ann heard we had, and that was enough. Besides, Kurt never talked to them anymore so there was no risk of the details getting out.

It was only five months since high school graduation, and I was already sick of my life as a full-time working girl. I was unhappily aware that I had planned my future around hope for a relationship with Kurt and the idea that I would stay for the rest of my life in the neighborhood where I had grown up. Just a year before I would never have imagined that I would be working a clerical job this fall instead of experiencing my freshman year of college.

Working a nine-to-five office job was not the exciting life I thought it would be, and I had become only too aware of how small my paycheck was. Thinking I had joined the grownup world of work, I had been considering moving to my own place, only to receive a rude awakening from my Mary Tyler Moore-inspired dream of living the single-working-girl life in my own chic apartment.

I took the bus to work because I couldn't afford parking fees. I had headaches almost every day from being confined to a stuffy office where several of my coworkers smoked constantly. My feet and my back hurt from wearing office shoes that didn't lend themselves to actually walking on city concrete or standing on the bus after standing and stooping in front of file cabinets and copying machines all day.

When I got home from work, I was usually too tired to even think about going out. My social life fizzled.

The day my supervisor handed me a folder with information on my benefits package was a real wake-up call. Right under my name, there was a line that read: "Estimated retirement date: 2026." I just stared at the number. 2026. Forty-seven more years of this. That was more than twice as long as I had already been alive. Suddenly four years of college seemed like a mere speck of time.

Why in the world was I spending all day at work with adults instead of at school, where I could be getting an education and meeting other kids my own age? Already, the friends I thought I was going to count on were drifting away from me. David was in school. Frank was in Texas. Bob was getting married. Kurt had cut me off. So had Sharon, not that I cared. Claire Ann was a senior in high school, but who knew what she'd do after that?

I had been so happy with my little group of friends that I was determined to never leave them. But I couldn't stop my friends from leaving *me* behind as they went on with their lives.

Then, unexpectedly, my social life turned around one weekend in October when David came home from college for a visit. He invited Claire Ann and me to go up to Fat Cats Pub on Short Vine and meet up with a few of his high school acquaintances.

Claire Ann was bursting with news.

"David, Karen, you'll never guess. Pam Overberg got four tickets to The Who concert and she's letting me buy one!"

I feigned hurt surprise.

"I would love to go that concert! Why didn't you get me a ticket?"

"Sorry, Karen, but I was lucky to get the one I got. But if you can get a ticket, you can come with us. It's festival seating."

"Vince Mack has tickets," David said. "I'll bet he'll sell you one. At a profit, of course." He laughed.

"He *would*," Claire Ann said. "But I hear the show's sold out, so that might be your best bet."

"Do you have his phone number?" I asked David.

"Sure, but why don't you just ask him tonight?"

Claire Ann groaned. "You mean we're going to see Neanderthal Man?"

I laughed this time.

Vince Mack had been Mr. Party of St. Joseph High School. I had been to a few more of his parties since that first time in April, and his parties inevitably involved the

township police dropping by. His parents were always home and the gatherings started out innocently enough in the basement rec room, but the crowd always seemed to spill out into the yard and the street. A lot of kids showed up to Vince's parties. To be honest, I don't think Vince would have considered a party of his a success unless the blue lights made their appearance.

While Kurt was a ladies' man, Vince was a guys' guy. He was cool. He had a contingent of loyal buddies and his girlfriend, Linda, was always close by. She was pretty, but quiet. Claire Ann used to joke that Vince had his club hidden somewhere and that he dragged Linda around by her hair. Not that he was abusive; it's just that she seemed to be more of an accessory than a separate person.

Vince was always bragging about his "dealings," mostly in reference to winning poker games, scalping concert tickets, and talking his way out of speeding tickets. He drove muscle cars that he kept wrecking—and he was proud of the fact. I'd always thought he was a bit of a jerk, but his parties were usually a good time.

He wasn't handsome, but he was kind of good-looking in a rugged, blue-collar way with his trademark jeans, black t-shirts and cowboy boots. I have to say he seemed to me like a cross between Bruce Springsteen and the Fonz. The cool and the comical.

Vince and a couple of his cronies were waiting for us at a table at Fat Cats.

"Where's Linda?" David asked immediately.

"Broke up," Vince replied, leaning back in his chair, grinning. "I'm a free agent."

We ordered beers and Claire Ann and I quietly listened to the guys exchange pleasantries and gossip. The Who concert eventually came up.

"It's sold out," Vince said. "but I've got extra tickets if anyone's interested."

I spoke up. "How much?"

My question seemed to startle him, as if he hadn't noticed I was there until that point. He looked at me. "You like The Who?"

"Yes. How much?"

"Eighteen."

"I'll take it. When can I get it from you?"

Vince hadn't taken his eyes off me. I was getting a strange, rather disturbing sensation. Attraction. For Neanderthal Man! I looked away, blinking. No way.

"When can I get the ticket?" I asked again.

Vince was still staring. "Tell you what. Go with me and there's no charge."

I heard myself saying okay. And just like that, I became Vince Mack's new girlfriend.

35.

“What in the world were you thinking?” Claire Ann berated me on the way home.

“We’re talking Neanderthal Man, here. Come on!”

“Aw, he’s not that bad,” David chimed in.

Claire Ann ignored him. “Karen, he is so against everything we believe about guys.”

“What?” David raised his eyebrows and waved in the rearview mirror at Claire Ann, who was sitting in the back. “Hello! Male present!”

“Oh, we don’t mean guys like you,” I said.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“David, you know Vince,” Claire Ann said. “He’s such a chauvinist.”

“But he’s a nice chauvinist,” David responded. “Besides, a lot of that is just his persona.”

“Persona bologna! He practically dragged Linda around by her hair.”

“Maybe she liked it.”

“Okay, enough!” I said. “It’s just a concert.”

“I think he likes you,” Claire Ann persisted.

“Well, maybe I like him, too. I don’t know—yet.”

Claire Ann groaned. “You mean you might go out with him again? After the concert?”

“Well, maybe...”

“Oh, Karen! What about the Rules! What about the Rules for Guys!”

“Yes,” David chimed in. “What about the Rules? Fill me in!”

“Oh, never mind...”

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Claire Ann was right about Vince not fitting in with my self-prescribed Mr. Right. I had always wanted a guy who was my soul mate, my best friend. But there was always that other requirement I’d left unspoken: a mutual physical attraction. After the highs and lows I experienced with Kurt, Vince’s he-man attitude turned out to be a relief. Him boy. Me girl. It was primal. Vince and I didn’t have heart-to-heart talks. We just made out a lot. I was his girlfriend, not some platonic female pal, and there was no wondering or agonizing about it.

I was curiously content to be an accessory. It didn’t require much on my part; maybe that was part of the attraction. I was there to hold Vince’s hand or sit on his lap while he played poker with the boys. I’d spend Sunday afternoons at his house, where we’d watch football and make out during the commercials. He was a great kisser.

Interesting enough, while Vince was a bit rough on the edges when it came to social graces—being the man’s man that he was—he was surprisingly gentle and respectful in the way he treated me. No club appeared and he didn’t try to drag me off to some cave by my hair. I liked his family, too, and began to wonder if it wouldn’t be so bad after all to get married young and start a family. No, Vince wasn’t a soul mate, but maybe soul mates were overrated.

Frank came home in November to collect the rest of his belongings and to attend a Jethro Tull concert. Of course, he called his contact, Vince, about scoring some tickets,

and that's how he learned who Vince's new girlfriend was. So Frank bought two tickets, and he and Claire Ann double-dated with Vince and me.

Frank couldn't resist teasing me. "Karen and Vince. It just don't go together. Still a flake."

"Shut up, Frank."

Vince drove the night of the concert. We drank beer on the way downtown, and by the time we got down near the Coliseum, Claire Ann and I had to pee in a bad way.

"Come on, Vince, pick a parking lot," Claire Ann whined.

"I'm not paying to park," Vince said.

"Vince, please. We're desperate here," I pleaded.

He pulled into a parking lot of a warehouse, and Claire Ann and I immediately jumped from the car and headed for some bushes near the railroad tracks. It's amazing how you just don't care about facilities or proprieties when your bladder is overflowing.

"Claire Ann, I'm already wasted," I said as we squatted, positioning ourselves so that the stream of urine missed our blue jeans, which were scrunched around our ankles.

"Me, too," Claire Ann said. "Oh, my God, this feels great!"

"You're not kidding. We drove all the way down here to pee on the railroad tracks. Moving up in the world!"

We joined Frank and Vince back at the car. Vince tossed a beer can at me. "Here, hide this in your coat."

"Oh, no, thanks, Vince. I'm finished drinking."

"Not for you, dingy! For me!"

I put the beer in an inside coat pocket. Looking up, I noticed a sign just above

Vince's car.

"Vince, the sign says this is a tow-away zone."

"Nobody's gonna tow us. That's just for weekdays."

"It don't say nothing' about weekdays," said Frank. "It just says they tow if you park here."

"Don't worry about it," said Vince. "Let's go."

For me, the concert was a blur. I remember fish netting around the stage and some guy climbing on it. Maybe it was Ian Anderson. I was ticked off at myself for drinking because I spent most of the concert waiting in line to go to the bathroom again and again. I had company, though, because Claire Ann had the same problem.

We had recovered sufficiently by the time we headed back out into the chill November night air to retrieve the car that was no longer there. Vince went nuts. Frank just stood with his arms crossed, shaking his head. "Now what?"

"I'm getting my car back, that's what," Vince said.

"Are you nuts? That's at least twelve blocks north of here and not a place I want to be anytime, not to mention this time of night."

"I don't care. I'm getting my car back."

"Vince, we're talking Over-the-Rhine," Claire Ann said. "We could get ourselves killed!"

"Vince, we got two girls with us," Frank said. "What about the girls?"

"You can all do what you want. I'm getting my car back."

"My God, Vince! You mean you'll just leave us here?" I was ticked off.

"Like I said, you can all do what you want. I'm getting my car back."

So that's how we ended up following Vince up Vine Street, through the downtown section that we were familiar with and into the section we'd only heard about on the news when bad things happened. People were hanging on the street corners and at the entrances to bars and apartment buildings, checking us out in obvious surprise as we walked by. Fortunately for us, they were mostly curious at the sight of four white teenagers walking through their neighborhood. Also they were mostly in a good mood that night, calling out relatively friendly greetings to Claire Ann and me, such as, "Hey, babies, you're some *fine* women." Vince headed up our entourage, and he probably looked a little frightening in the state he was in, while the three of us behind him tried to carry on as if it were no big deal to be walking along this portion of Vine at this late hour on a Saturday night.

"Be cool. Just be cool," Frank kept saying, I think as much to himself as to Claire Ann and me.

Claire Ann and I exchanged glances. Her expression seemed accusatory: *I told you Vince was a Neanderthal.*

I was angry with Vince just as I had been angry with Frank that night he took us on a high-speed joyride. What was it with guys, anyway? They were supposed to protect us, but when they got pissed off, they did stupid, reckless things that put us in danger. And men were supposedly more in control of their emotions than women. What a joke.

We made it to the tow lot without incident, and I thought our troubles were behind us. I was making furious mental notes about what I was going to say to Vince when we were safely in our own neck of the woods. But the ordeal wasn't over yet.

"That's my car and I want it back," Vince said, pointing at the Charger. I didn't

think his tone of voice was going to bode well for us.

“For a price,” said the operator of the tow lot, calmly looking us over. He was as dirty and greasy as I would have expected a tow lot operator to be. “I’ll need twenty-seven bucks.”

“I don’t have twenty-seven bucks,” Vince said.

“No car then,” Tow Man said.

“Oh, my God, how are we going to get home?” Claire Ann wailed.

Frank started digging in his wallet. “I’ve got a ten.”

Claire Ann reached in her jeans pocket and pulled out a few rumpled bills. “All I’ve got is two dollars and some change.”

I pulled a five-dollar bill from my back pocket. “Here’s five.”

We all looked at Vince. He shook his head. “I said I don’t have any money.”

We stared at him in disbelief. “I said I got *nothing*,” he repeated.

“You got nothing’?” Frank asked, clearly irritated. “What the hell is your problem? How can you drive around without any money?”

“I spent it all tonight already,” he insisted.

“Shit,” said Claire Ann. “That’s only seventeen dollars. What’re we going to do?”

Her voice was trembling. That may have struck a nerve with Tow Man, because he suddenly relented.

“Listen, kids. You give me the seventeen dollars and we’ll call it a night.”

We handed over the money, profusely thanking him for his kindness.

Back in the car, we were breathing sighs of relief. Except Vince. He started laughing. At first I thought it was some kind of post-traumatic-induced laughter.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He just kept laughing. At the next stoplight, he pulled out his wallet and flashed a ten and a twenty. “Ha! I had money the whole time!” he announced proudly.

“You bastard!” yelled Claire Ann. “I want my two dollars back!”

“Hey, can I help it if you don’t know how to negotiate?”

“That was really uncool, Vince,” said Frank.

“Whaddya mean? You all performed beautifully. Saved yourselves ten bucks, too.”

“*We* weren’t performing,” said Clare Ann.

“You *are* going to pay us back, right?” I asked.

Vince just laughed some more.

He never did pay us back. Claire Ann never got over it, while I suspect Frank wasn’t surprised by it. I kept trying to understand it from Vince’s point of view, but what kind of view was that to have, anyway? That was the thing: While I was attracted to Vince, I didn’t really approve of him. He wasn’t sorry or bothered in the least about what he had done, and this was just one of many of his lapses of conscience that I had witnessed, but tried to overlook.

I wondered if gangster girlfriends felt the way I did: that to maintain this relationship I had to shut out the things that bothered me and focus on the affection and attention I was getting. I couldn’t think too closely about the way he moved through the world.

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December third was the night of the Who concert, and Vince was vague about

when he was coming to pick me up. He was going to a party first with some buddies and said he'd swing by to get me. I didn't think much of it and resigned myself to the wait. Vince was like that. I never could pin him down on an exact time for anything, but it didn't bother me. I was used to it. He checked in with me periodically to let me know he wasn't on his way over yet. Then he called to break the bad news: he wasn't going to take me to the concert after all. Seems as if an old buddy didn't have a ticket, and, besides, I'd be the only girl and would probably feel out of place. He hoped I would understand. I said I did because there was no point in arguing about it.

Probably what happened, I figured, is somebody offered Vince a sum of money for the ticket that he couldn't refuse. Damn him, anyway. If he'd just sold me the ticket in the first place, I could have gone to the concert with Claire Ann. Now I was going to miss The Who.

I relayed the change of plans to my parents and went upstairs to my room to listen to some Who albums and fume. Awhile later, I heard my mom yelling up the steps to come down. Something about trouble at the concert. I ran down into the living room in time to hear a news report about nine people dead outside the Coliseum where The Who was playing. Speculation was that drugs were involved. Over the course of the evening, the story changed. Eleven dead, suffocated to death in the crush of a crowd trying to squeeze through two doors. My mom kept going on about how grateful she was that Vince had the sense to leave me home. Yeah, that's why he did it. In the meantime, I wondered if Claire Ann was okay.

Vince called from a payphone after the concert to let me know he lost his shoes and got pushed through a broken window, but was otherwise okay. He was actually

bragging about his experience, like it was some kind of ultimate party episode, until I informed him that people died. He didn't know. He'd just gone on in and seen the concert.

Claire Ann had a much different experience. She and her friends had entered the Coliseum on the opposite side of where the trouble was. They saw a great concert and had no idea there were any problems until they got home to their frantic parents.

"You missed a great concert," she told me.

As it turned out, my relationship with Vince began and ended with that Who concert. Sure, we spent Christmas together. He even took me to midnight Mass. But on New Year's Eve, he never showed up to take me to the party we were supposed to go to. He called a couple times to say he was running late. Then I never heard from him again.

Claire Ann delivered the bad news a few days later. She'd heard that Vince and Linda were back together.

"You're better off," she said.

I didn't feel better off. Yes, he was a jerk, but I missed him. Vince had made me feel happy again and kept me from dwelling on Kurt. Now all I had were two back-to-back rejections to cry about.

**36.**

It was a crisp morning in February, and I was waiting in line at the bakery next door to the bank to buy coffee and a doughnut before work. Not the best breakfast, but it was a step up from the Dr. Pepper and barbecue potato chips I'd eat on hangover mornings. I was finally coming to grips with the fact that I couldn't go out on weeknights and still function at work the next day.

Someone tapped me lightly on the shoulder, and when I turned to look, I didn't recognize him at first. Then it all came back to me. It was Barry.

"Hi, Karen! How've you been?" He was as friendly as ever.

"Okay and you?"

"Great."

"How's Sheila?"

He grinned sheepishly. "We're not married anymore. Not surprised are you?"

"Well," I hesitated. "Not exactly. You didn't seem to be a match."

"You're right about that," Barry laughed. "You were right about a lot of things."

"Such as?"

Barry lowered his voice. "Yes, he is gay." He paused to see how I would take this statement.

"So I'm not crazy."

"No, you're definitely not," He looked as though he were trying to decide if he should continue. "Look, would you consider meeting me for lunch? I can tell you about it

then.”

We met at McDonald’s on Sixth Street. Carrying our trays carefully down the stairs to the eating area below street level, we located a table near the back of the crowded room. Our conversation was mostly drowned out by the surrounding conversations, for which I was grateful.

Barry told me about his own homosexuality and how he had been in the hospital several times as a result of venereal disease. He was unapologetic about being gay, but seemed embarrassed and angry about the health consequences. He went on to describe how he met Kurt through work and how they had been lovers for a brief time and then parted as friends. I didn’t ask about the timeframe; I didn’t want to know.

I listened in stunned fascination as he went on to describe how Kurt used his charm and good looks to his advantage, dating attractive girls for short periods of time, hoping to deflect suspicion by appearing to be a bit of a playboy. Unfortunately, when girls actually did try to get physical, he didn’t handle it very well, which was the real reason his relationships didn’t last.

“But you were so...naïve,” Barry said. “It was easy to string you along, plus it kept his parents from asking too many questions.”

I felt my face getting red. No wonder Kurt always came back to me. I was safe. He knew I would never make the first move. He knew I was grateful for whatever attention he showed me. I thought of my shattered ego, the wondering and worrying about why I was so physically unattractive to him.

“You mean he was gay the whole time I knew him?”

“Well, not quite. He didn’t know what he was. He just knew he wasn’t like his friends. He wasn’t attracted to girls like they were.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“To be honest, the whole thing made me feel like shit.”

“What thing? There was some elaborate plot?”

“No, but the game playing really got to me. That’s what my marriage was about, too. Sheila and I figured we could be roommates and everybody would be happy. We thought we were so clever fooling our families.”

“I don’t think anybody was really fooled.”

“You’re right about that. Besides, once we both realized this was going to be an ongoing cover-up, we knew we couldn’t keep it up. It’s too much work.”

“What about the cemetery stuff?”

“More games. It gets addicting after awhile. You see how you can make people believe just about anything, and you start to get a rush from it.”

I was silent. It was weird realizing that sheltered, scatterbrained, naïve me had pretty good instincts after all, and I had chosen to ignore them. Instead, I had allowed myself to become the butt of the joke.

“Hey, Barry, how’s it going?” A guy in a hardhat waved from a few tables over.

“Pretty good, Jim. Yourself?”

“All right.”

Before I had a chance to ask, Barry said, “He’s gay.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“Wow, you’re perceptive.”

“I’m not trying to be sarcastic. I mean I really would not have guessed.”

“There are more of us out there than you think. People you probably know.”

“Well, I know of at least one now. No, make that three.”

“Look, I’m not telling you this so you’ll hate him. Just so you’ll understand him a little better. I think he cares about you at some level, but he’s really mixed up.”

“No kidding.”

“Well, think about it. He knew he was different, and he didn’t know or didn’t want to admit why. When he started to figure it out, it wasn’t exactly something he could tell his friends and family about.”

“That’s true.” I tried to think what his parents’ reaction would be. Would they be morally offended? Would they think he was mentally ill and force him to get psychological help? Would they disown him? And what about his friends? What would Frank and David say? What about me? Had I ever said anything against gay people?

“So don’t hate him,” Barry was saying.

“I never said I did. I’m just trying to take this all in.”

“It is a lot to take in.”

“What should I do now? Should I tell him I know?”

“Oh, God, please don’t. He doesn’t want you to know. Besides, he’ll know I was the one who spilled the beans.”

I nodded. Besides, what would be the point? Even if Barry were making all of this up, it was obvious Kurt didn’t want me around anymore. If this was yet another gag, let them have their last laugh and be done with it.

Sitting there in that dim, crowded room, I started to imagine that the seemingly mundane lunchtime crowd was made up of people who were not as they appeared. Those two women gossiping at the next table might be lesbian lovers. The well-dressed business men a few tables away might be leaders of an organized crime ring, laughing and joking about the guy they offed the night before. The blue-haired ladies sipping coffee might have more than store merchandise in those bulky shopping bags.

Everything that looked normal at first glance now seemed somewhat sinister and surreal. Shades of gray were oozing all over my black-and-white picture of the world, creating a disturbing landscape where the paths of right and wrong were almost impossible to distinguish. Now the whites were not so pure and the blacks not nearly as sinister as I had assumed.

“Are you okay?” Barry looked concerned. “I’m not doing this to upset you. I just think you deserve to know the truth.”

I wasn’t upset in the hysterical sense. In fact, I had the most wonderful sensation of relief as that cage of infatuation miraculously lifted. Kurt’s lack of attraction for me had never been about me at all. I never had any control over it and there was nothing I could have done about it.

I was okay for about two seconds before I felt embarrassed about my cluelessness and a little hurt about Kurt’s lack of trust in me. I wasn’t sure what I thought about people being gay, but I was sure I wouldn’t have turned on him for that. I was betrayed as a friend, and I had failed as a friend. Then again, I was disgusted with the casual sex Barry had been telling me about. It had nothing to do with being gay. I mean a slut is a slut. It grossed me out. I was trying to reconcile that awful new image of Kurt with the

one I had built up in my mind of the perfect Catholic boy, whose arms-length approach to our physical relationship was based on his faith and his respect for me. I thought he was avoiding temptation. Talk about wishful thinking. I felt like a complete idiot.

“Karen, are you there?” Barry looked as if he thought maybe his confession wasn’t such a good idea.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Just fine.”

So, the girl who walked back into the office that afternoon was not the same girl who left to meet a friend for lunch. I wanted to believe I was enlightened, but mostly I just had a lot more questions. I was feeling pretty cynical, but frustrated, too, because being cynical didn’t automatically make me any more savvy about reading people. I didn’t want to get hurt again, but I also didn’t want to be paranoid about every person I met. That’s when it hit me. Life and relationships are all about risk. If you don’t risk, you don’t get hurt, but then again, you do. If you don’t ever get hurt it’s because you aren’t really living.

That got me thinking about my life goals. What was I waiting for? I certainly wasn’t waiting around for Kurt anymore. Four years of college was not a long time in the scheme of things, and I’d be around other kids instead of all these grownups with car payments and mortgages and boring routines. My dead-end job had to go. But first, I had to get started applying to colleges—preferably someplace out of town.

When I got home that night, I took that clown statue from my dresser and put it in the Goodwill box my mom kept in the basement.

## **Chapter Thirty-seven**

I have to say I was pleasantly surprised when Kurt called just a day after I got home from my first semester at college. From the way he talked, I could tell he didn't know I knew.

The day Barry told me about Kurt, I had called Frank long-distance, pulling the phone cord as far as it would stretch so I could sit in the hall closet and not have my parents hear my side of our conversation. He had known Kurt longer than I had. Maybe he already suspected something like this. I debated telling anyone, but then my anger and hurt got the best of me, and I was feeling a little crazy, as if I had imagined that whole lunch scene with Barry. At first, Frank thought I was making it all up as some kind of sick joke, but then I pointed out how bad I am at practical jokes, which he already knew. Then he thought Barry must have been lying, and finally, he said, "Well, it does explain some things. But I ain't saying I believe it for sure."

Frank told David, who was surprised, but then like Frank, not surprised. "It's not like I wondered that about him," he told me. "It's just that knowing what I know now makes a whole lot of other things make sense. One thing I do know is that he'll never admit to it."

David was right. When Kurt called me he didn't say anything about needing to talk to me about anything. He had run into Claire Ann at the mall one day, and she told him I was home from college for Christmas break. Claire Ann knew, but she obviously hadn't said anything to Kurt.

I think Kurt was operating the same way as always. He apologized for our last fight, telling me how much he had missed me in the past year and that he hoped we could patch things up. He wanted to go out and talk about things over pizza and a few beers.

This was my chance to finally set our friendship right, to let him know that he didn't have to fear rejection. I didn't really care about him being gay. If we could just be honest with each other about the whole thing, we could still be friends. The stress of pretending and game-playing would be gone. We could relax. He was going to be so relieved and happy when I told him I knew everything.

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We ordered a large pepperoni pizza and a pitcher of beer.

“So what's up with David and Frank?” Kurt said. “I hear they're in Texas.”

“Yeah, well, Frank's been out there for awhile. David dropped out of school and headed out there too. He said he needed a change of scenery.”

“I knew he'd never make it in college.”

I felt defensive on David's behalf. “He didn't flunk out. He could still go back.”

“I could still go back, too,” Kurt sounded sarcastic.

“Well, you could.”

“I don't even know what I want to be when I grow up.”

“Well, Frank and David probably don't, either. Frank wanted to make a new start in Texas, and, I say, good for him. Good for both of them.”

“Claire Ann says the real reason Frank left Ohio is because there's a warrant out for him.”

“Oh. I didn't know that part.” I felt a little hurt by the information.

So Frank hadn't told me, but Claire Ann knew. Something was different between Claire Ann and me; I sensed it the day after I got home for break. She had taken one look at my semester-long efforts to reinvent my look and said, "You went preppie on me. I don't like you anymore." I was stung, but then figured she had to be joking.

"I'm wearing the pearl choker you gave me," I said. "You must be a prep, too."

She wasn't joking. "Why did you have to go and change? I liked you better before."

Who would have thought a yellow wool crewneck sweater and pair of topsiders could be a deal-breaker for a friendship?

"What's wrong?" Kurt brought me back to the moment.

"Oh, nothing."

"You're not worried about Frank, are you? It's not the first time he's been in trouble."

Kurt seemed to be in good spirits, but I felt a strange, sad compassion toward him as he talked about how maybe he was finally ready for a serious relationship. He asked if I was seeing anyone. No, I said, as I tried to muster courage to tell him what I knew. Kurt was making it difficult. I had to wait for the beer buzz to come on before I could get up the nerve to say what I had to say.

"Kurt. I know. I've known for awhile." I tried to give him a meaningful look.

Kurt just looked at me blankly. "You know what?"

"You're gay." It was out. Before he could answer I went on quickly. "I know about it and it's okay. I'm okay with it."

Kurt looked stunned. "No, that's not true."

“Yes, it is. But don’t worry. It’s okay.”

I could almost see the wheels turning as he tried to come up with his next move.

With a sinking heart, I could see he was still in game mode.

“I don’t know where you got such a crazy idea,” he said finally, trying to laugh it off.

“Kurt, don’t. No more games. Please. I still want us to be friends.”

“Who told you I was gay? Whoever it was is lying.”

It was useless. He would not budge. I just sat there, absentmindedly twisting a napkin until it came apart in two pieces. Staring into his eyes. Trying to read him. He was doing his best to look hurt, but there was anger behind his expression. Not hurt anger, but a kind of pissed-off, “you-caught-me-at-my-game” anger. Gay or not gay was no longer even the point.

“Who told you?” He looked angry and insistent.

“It’s just something I heard.”

“From who?”

Fortunately the waitress brought our check before I had to answer. We paid the bill and went to the car, where Kurt continued his barrage of protests.

“I can’t believe you’d fall for a rumor like that. I thought I knew you better.” This I recognized. Mind games.

I sighed. There was no point in arguing with him. When he stopped in front of my house, he turned and looked me straight in the eye. His expression had softened and his tone of voice had changed. He had that look he had used on me a thousand times before. It was the look that used to melt me. It had never before looked so insincere.

“Whatever you’ve heard, it’s not true. You’ve got to believe me, Karen.”

“You’re sure? Because I’m okay either way.”

“Karen!”

“Okay, I believe you,” I lied.

Kurt smiled then and patted my hand. “We’ll have to get together again sometime soon.”

“Sure.” I smiled back. But I knew he would never call.

As Kurt drove away, I stood on the sidewalk with my arms folded across my chest, staring blankly at the receding image of his car until it turned at the top of the street and was gone.

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