

Where There Is Love

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Preface

Is it possible for there to be something so unique in this world as two souls who are meant to be together forever? Over the span of my short lifetime I have become very cynical and tend to believe this idea only exists in our imaginations. Then again, perhaps we are able to imagine it only because it is real but so extremely rare that most of us only dream of it and never experience it.

If we only believed in what we ourselves experienced our universe would be quite empty, would it not? Where would we be without our dreams and hopes of something greater than ourselves? What is it that binds us all together in this life? Do we not spend our entire lives searching for that thing— that one thing—that makes life worth living? And could that thing simply be...love? With that kind of power, could love transcend time and space, life and death? Was John Lennon right when he said, “All You Need Is Love?” Could love be all there is?

I do not have the answers to all of those questions. However, I’m convinced that love is a very powerful energy. Just how far its strength reaches, I’m not sure. I do know that it forced me to write this story.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” Corinthians 13:1-3

1

If ever two souls were meant to be together it was those of Helen and David. It is very rare for those souls to find each other at such a young age and recognize it so easily, but it was true of them. From the very moment that Helen met David, they were virtually inseparable—both physically and emotionally. There was something between them that could not be explained. Not that either of them ever needed an explanation. Because they had been together since they were babies, neither of them knew what life was like without the other.

Helen and David might never have met if it hadn't been for one fateful afternoon at the local coffee shop. Helen's mother, Cathy, was pregnant with Helen and was just leaving the shop after visiting with her circle of friends. Joan—who was pregnant with David and who belonged to no such similar circle—was having coffee alone. As Cathy began to pass by Joan's table, the glint of a silver heart pendant around her neck caught Cathy's eye. Cathy thought about dismissing her observation and continuing on, but something told her to turn around and speak to Joan.

“Excuse me, but I couldn't help notice the pendant you were wearing. I have the exact same one. See?” Cathy pulled her necklace out from under the neckline of her sweater.

Joan, being caught completely off-guard, looked immediately at the pendant Cathy was holding between her fingers. “Oh my! It most certainly is the same!” she said. Joan’s fingers went up to grasp her own silver heart-shaped pendant. It was solid silver with a raised filigree pattern and tiny pearl in the center—somewhat unusual—and now strangely common in this little coffee shop. Joan invited Cathy to sit down, and they shared how each had come by their jewelries. Joan’s father had given it to her on her sixteenth birthday. It had been his mother’s, and when she had no daughters to pass it onto, it became his. Cathy’s mother had given the necklace to her for a graduation gift. Her mother never told her where it came from, but just that it was very special and she should save it for her own daughter.

The two women both noted how strange it was that they came from different areas of the country and would end up with identical necklaces. Cathy had been born and raised in Mississippi, but Joan came from Virginia. As they chatted they realized that they had more in common than a piece of jewelry. For one thing, they were both expecting their first child in the same month. It also turned out that they lived only a few blocks from each other. In fact, by the time they finished their conversation, they were surprised that they hadn’t met much sooner. It was the beginning of a friendship that would last many years and create the opportunity for Helen and David to find each other.

After their children were born, Cathy and Joan continued to see each other regularly and so their babies grew up together. Helen was a striking red-headed, green-eyed girl. There was no hiding her Irish ancestry in her looks or her behavior. She was energetic, loving, and stubborn to the core. David was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and fair-skinned little boy. He was quiet, and there was a calmness about him that seemed unusual for a boy his age, but it didn’t stop him from laughing with delight as he and Helen played. They complemented each other well. They looked like a couple of cherubs from a Renaissance painting, frolicking together in the park while their mothers looked on.

As they grew older and were able to get around without their mothers, Helen and David still went everywhere together. They were classmates at school, and their summers were filled with adventures as far as their little imaginations would take them. The two would run through the grassy fields behind their houses, laughing, pretending to

be wild horses or two hunters lost in the jungles of Africa. On rainy days they got into their “boat” and sailed to a beautiful place known as “David’s Island.” David was the king of the island and Helen was his fair maiden. David would fight off imaginary dragons with his cardboard sword, and then rescue Lady Helen from the shackles of the Evil Queen. These were Helen’s favorite days. She loved when it was just the two of them in their own world and nothing else existed except them.

The games they played as children were replaced with more grown up activities as they entered their teenage years. They swam, rode bicycles, and went hiking through the woodlands of central Mississippi. Although the games had changed, their love for each other did not. In fact, their imaginary world called “David’s Island” only became more real to them. It was not a place they would go, but a virtual world—cut off from everyone else’s idea of reality—that very much existed in their minds. He would always be her king, and she would always be his lady.

In the summer of their eleventh year, Helen and David had just finished a long hike to the river. They pulled off their sneakers to dip their sweaty bare feet into the cool flowing water. With feet in the water, both leaned back on their elbows to look up at the soft blue sky. Helen pulled the rubber band out of her long, curly, red hair and shook her head to let it fall loosely around her shoulders and then lay back down on the cool grass. David lay back next to her and took her hand in his.

“David, will we always be together?” asked Helen. She’d asked him that question a million times, but she kept asking him. It made her feel so good to hear his answer. It had almost become another game for them, and it gave Helen the opportunity to imagine their life together in the future, which always made her smile.

“Yes, Helen. We will always be together,” David would say patiently.

“But what if my parents move us away? How will you find me?”

“I will look everywhere for you, Helen. I won’t rest until I find you,” said David.

Helen wiped the sweat from her forehead. She paused for a moment trying to think of another situation that she could spring on him. She wrinkled up her freckled nose as she pondered her next question, and then she asked, “What if I was captured by pirates, and

they took me on their ship, and sailed to the other side of the world, and hid me away in the deepest, darkest caves? How would you find me? How can you be so sure that we would be together?"

David took a deep breath and turned his face away from the warm sun to look at Helen. He raised himself up on one hand. Helen turned to face him. His deep blue eyes looked into hers and said, "Helen, you would just have to sit still, close your eyes, and think of me, and I would turn the universe inside out to find you. I would go anywhere and fight anything to get to you—witches, dragons, and even pirates. If I have to pass through a hundred lifetimes, I will do it to find you. I may be an old man and you may be an old woman. You may not even recognize me by the time it happens, but you will know and I will know, because nothing can separate us. We will always be together. I promise you. Now stop worrying." He rolled onto his back. His eyes squinted in the bright sunlight as he put his hands behind his head to cushion the hard earth beneath it.

His serious stare slightly frightened Helen. She'd never heard him answer her with such complete reassurance. In fact, she wasn't completely sure she understood all of it, but he'd convinced her that she had nothing to fear. She liked the way he looked just then—so strong. She turned her head back again to face the sky. She closed her eyes and smiled as she kicked up the river water with her right foot. "Thank you, God, for David," she whispered very quietly to herself.

While their souls were fully compatible, Helen—as an individual—was really nothing like David, and David was nothing like Helen. They came from different backgrounds and did not share the same kind of home life. Helen's father was a doctor. Her mother had been a schoolteacher until she met Helen's father. The family of three lived in a very well-kept brick two-story house in an upper middle-class neighborhood in Jackson, Mississippi. David's father was a banker. He and his parents lived just a few blocks away in a more modest house but still in a respectable part of town. David's mother had never held a job. She had met her husband when she was seventeen and he was nineteen. Despite his young age, David's father was ambitious. He had started as a teller at the bank but had risen quickly into management.

While Helen's parents were deeply devoted to each other and their lives revolved around making the best life for Helen that they could, David's parents were very different. David's mother, Joan, was

a very loving mother. But his father, Henry, was quite the opposite. When David was very young, Henry was drafted into the army. He had served overseas during the war in Europe. When he returned, there was a noticeable change in him. He was quiet, moody and—at times—became violent. Joan was devastated by his new behavior. She remembered the sweet kind young boy she married, but David was too young to remember him that way. It broke her heart to know that David would never see his father as anyone other than this dark individual who was in a constant struggle with his demons.

To the outside world David's father was a respectable, responsible, model citizen. But inside David's home, Henry's dark side often showed itself to Joan and David. These outbursts usually resulted in bruises on Joan's arms or David's back. None of this was ever talked about outside of their household, but Helen knew. She had seen David's bruises in the summer when they would go swimming. She knew, but she never said a word. She knew one day they would run away together where his father couldn't find David, but until that time, she prayed that God would find a way to keep David safe so he couldn't be hurt anymore.

Very little changes came as David and Helen grew older. At the age of fourteen, the two were even closer than ever. Helen was becoming a young woman and experiencing all the changes—physically and emotionally—that come with womanhood. David was lagging behind her a little in the physical development. He was no longer taller than Helen. Not that it mattered to either one of them.

Helen's mother wished her daughter would dress more like a lady and act less like a boy. As a compromise, Helen would wear dresses with sneakers, so she could keep up with David while still looking like a girl. Their cherubic days of childhood were behind them. Now they looked more like a couple from the comics with their obvious differences in height and development.

As David grew older he was facing other challenges that most young men never have to encounter. It was getting more and more difficult to deal with his father's physical abuse of his mother. He could stand a beating or two from the man, but he couldn't bear to watch his mother be hurt by someone much larger and stronger than she was. The tension was building inside their home. It wouldn't be long before a full-fledged conflict would break out amongst them. David knew this. He was afraid—afraid to rise up and defy the

commandment to honor his father. But he was also angry and tired of seeing his mother living in a frightened world. He was tired of watching her be humiliated and hurt while he stood by and did nothing.

The long sunny days of summer ended too quickly, and autumn was demanding to take over. Before they knew it, October was upon them. Gone were the innocent days of freedom. Even though October came every year to extinguish what was left of summer, the fall of 1954 seemed different. This year everything seemed to take on more meaning. The death of summer felt deeper this time—as if it threatened to never return as it always had after the spring. David and Helen both felt this new gravity taking over their childhood days, but neither could quite understand it as anything more than a puzzling, dark sensation.

Halloween had been a very warm day, but now the wind was growing stronger as the night fell. Helen was dressed as Tom Sawyer—her favorite Mark Twain character. Her freckled face peered out from under a straw hat as she stood on David's front porch waiting for him to answer the door. He wore an old top hat and black cape. His mother had drawn a curly mustache on his face and he was suddenly a magician! The two were not looking to play tricks on their neighbors that night. Sensing that they were growing out of the dress up phase, they were contented to walk the dark streets and watch the children play in their costumes.

The usual bonfire had been canceled given the high winds and they ended up down at the corner soda shop to indulge in some chocolate milkshakes. Helen noisily drained the shake from her glass and giggled at how unladylike she was behaving. As much as she hated to leave her reckless childhood days behind her, she was optimistic about becoming an adult. She dreamt of the day when she and David would be married. They would have a beautiful house far away from David's father. The house would be filled with games, music and laughter from their two boys, two girls and the two of them. It was going to be a wonderful life. She smiled gleefully at David as he slowly savored his last few sips.

It was a school night, which meant an early bedtime. David walked Helen home. Reluctantly she said goodnight. She hated for it all to end. The air was filled with electricity, and she felt like it was a night when just about anything could happen. Just before he turned to

leave, he took Helen's hand in his, pressed it to his lips and kissed it gently. He looked up at her and said, "Goodnight, Lady Helen, until we meet again."

She smiled at his theatrical farewell and replied very dramatically, "Goodnight my king." David turned away and cut a path through her backyard for a shortcut home. As he disappeared into the darkness, she felt the magic go with him. She stood there watching him go as she held the back of her hand to her lips, where he had placed his just moments before. When he was no longer in sight, she sighed and trudged up her front steps, sad to see the last of the warm evenings end and dreading the impending doom of winter.

A storm blew up just at bedtime. Helen was shivering under her covers as the wind howled outside. With each gust, the shingles flapped, the walls moaned slightly, and the tips of the tree branches rapped on the glass of her bedroom window. The dry leaves scuttled across the pavement, formed a gang that hit the side of the house, and then tried their best to fly as high as possible against the brick wall before surrendering to the ground. Occasionally one or two made it all the way up to become stuck in the gutter. The soft flashes of light in the distance had now increased to loud strikes that lit up her room even when her eyes were closed. Helen tried her best to cover her eyes and ears with her pillow. She had always been terribly afraid of storms ever since she could remember. She hated the sound of thunder, and it was horrific that evening. It was as if the demons from all their Halloween adventures had been unleashed at once on them. She thought about how happy she had been earlier that night—how carefree and easy. Now everything seemed dark and scary. Her imagination was taking over and making her more frightened as she envisioned the trees becoming monsters, attempting to break through the glass and enter her room.

A knock on her window pane startled her. She lifted her head out from under the covers to see what it was, but all she could see from her bed was the rain running down the glass. She climbed out of bed to get a closer look and prayed that she wouldn't see a monster at the window. She was relieved when she saw that it was David. He'd scaled the tree and was hanging on for dear life while he tapped at her window. She went over and lifted the pane for him to come inside. She was so thankful to see him. Always her hero, he had heard the storm come up just as he was going to bed and rushed to be with her.

When they were younger and had been out playing near the river a storm had blown up and caught them both out in the open with raging winds, strong downpours, and terrible lightning. Helen became hysterical while hiding under a tree. David held onto her tightly and promised her everything would be alright. But it was no use. Her fear was so great. She continued to sob wildly, so he just held her tightly until the storm passed. She never forgot that afternoon or how patient and calm he had been as he sheltered her from the danger. David never forgot the frightened look on her face and promised he would never leave her to be alone and afraid again.

After David entered the room he ordered Helen to get back in bed and under the covers. He lay down next to her on the bed as close as he could get.

“David, you’re shivering. Get under the covers with me,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m okay. Besides it wouldn’t be right, Helen. I’ll warm up soon. I’ll stay here until you fall asleep.”

Lightning struck and the thunder clapped loudly, shaking the house. “David, I’m scared,” she whispered in the dark. She reached her hand over to find his and clasped it tightly.

“It’s okay, Helen. I’ll protect you,” he whispered back. His hand squeezed her hand back.

“David, promise you’ll always be here when I’m afraid.”

“I promise, Helen. I’ll always be here,” he said.

“And we’ll always be together?”

“I promise, Lady Helen. We will be together forever. Close your eyes now and stop worrying. You don’t ever have to be afraid.” He stroked her hair lightly with his fingers. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to relax. It felt warm with him lying so close to her. She felt safe and she could finally rest. *What would I do without you, David?* She quickly drifted off to sleep. When Helen awoke in the morning, David was gone. She ate breakfast, brushed her teeth, combed her hair and left for school. Usually David would meet her along the way to school, but not today. She was surprised when he wasn’t in class either. School was wasted on her that day, for she could think of nothing else but David. She sat there staring out the window wondering what would keep him away. She thought about the night before and how comforting it was to lie next to him while

the storm raged outside. It was so hard to stay focused on anything her teacher was saying and she was never so thankful for the last bell of the day to ring.

She arrived home quickly and out of breath. The air had that first chill to it that nobody is really ready for, and she had run to avoid being out in it any longer than she needed. The house was dark when she walked inside. The fall season meant shorter days and it was already apparent that the change was occurring. She looked around for her mother and found her sitting quietly in the living room, staring out the window.

“Mother, I’m going over to David’s house. He wasn’t in school today and I want to see if he’s okay.”

“Helen,” her mother turned to look at her. “Wait. I have to tell you something. Come in and sit down.”

Cathy’s eyes were bloodshot and her cheeks tear-stained. Helen became a little nervous as worrisome thoughts clouded her mind. She slowly walked into the room and hesitantly sat down on the sofa. All the windows in the house were open. Fresh autumn air drifted through the room and past Helen’s nose. She thought she detected a slight wintery smell, and it made her shiver. It had been an incredibly beautiful day with clear skies and sunshine, but now clouds were gathering. Helen could feel a change all around her. She could tell something terrible had happened. Her thoughts quickly turned to her father, and tears began to well in her eyes as she imagined losing him. She carefully swallowed and tried to prepare herself for the worst as her mother began to speak.

“Helen, I’ve had some rather bad news.” Cathy began with what she thought was a strong approach, but her voice soon began quivering as she continued. The tears began to flow down her already tear-stained face, and she nearly choked trying to relate the horrible story to her daughter. Helen watched as Cathy struggled to explain how David had gone home last night to find his drunken father out of control and strangling his mother on the kitchen floor. David rushed to help his mother by pulling his father off of her. In the end, David saved his mother’s life, but lost his own. Now Joan was in the hospital and Henry was in the city jail for murder.

Helen couldn’t recall much more than that as she slowly walked up the stairs to her room. She forced her feet to rise up and meet each new step as her mind reeled from the information her mother had just

given to her. The shock had erased the memory of her eyes rolling back in her head, her hysterical outbreak, the screams of disbelief, and uncontrollable sobbing. Only her mother would remember how Helen ran to her and started flailing her arms, and crying out, “No! That’s not true! You’re lying! It’s not true!” Helen continued to scream at her mother as if she could change the outcome of the news by her rampage. Cathy held her tightly in her arms and didn’t say a word while Helen wore herself out. When she could no longer fight the reality she was facing, she pulled free from her mother’s arms and left the room.

She lay on her bed until it was dark, past her father’s return from work, through supper and bath time. She lay there in the darkness staring out the window at the moon, wondering how she could ever care about anything ever again. Her thoughts raced through her mind at lightning speed. The tears poured from her eyes and down her face onto her very wet pillowcase. “David, you promised that you’d never leave me. You said we would be together forever. Where are you? I need you. I need you, David.”

Helen quieted herself as she waited for an answer to come. In the silence memories of David’s words came back to her and forced her to think more clearly. *I’ll just be still and wait here*, she thought to herself. *He told me to be still and wait and he would come for me.* “I’ll be still, David,” she whispered in a trembling voice. “Come back for me. I’ll wait for you. Just, please, please come back for me.” She closed her eyes and begged God that this day never happened, and she would wake in the morning to find it had been a bad dream.

2

Armed with only the clothes she was wearing and her life savings that amounted to eighty dollars, Julie hitchhiked her way from Tennessee to just outside Jacksonville, Florida. She tried to keep her nose pointed out the window as much as she could that afternoon to avoid the terrible stench coming from her driver who was in desperate need of a bath. When he finally pulled in to a small truck stop off of the interstate, she was grateful to climb out of his cab. She offered to pay him for the ride, but he told her to keep it. She looked around the dusty little town and she sighed. She was eighteen, on her own, no job, and her money was dwindling rapidly. She would have to find some work for a little while before she could move on, but first she had to eat. She made her way across the parking lot to the little truck stop diner.

Julie was a beautiful blonde-haired, brown-eyed girl born into a quiet Southern household. There was no affection shown between her mother and father or any shown toward her that she could recall in the eighteen years she'd lived with them. She rarely remembered seeing her father as she was growing up. He was either at work or at the neighborhood tavern getting drunk. When he came home it was late and he usually went straight to bed without dinner. Her mother didn't

seem to mind. She kept busy with the typical chores of cleaning, cooking, sewing, and shopping. There was barely a word spoken between them.

Much of Julie's social time as a small child was spent with her imaginary friends—a well-loved stuffed bunny, a doll whose hair was missing in a few places due to a bad haircut experience, and a sock monkey made by her grandmother. Although her world had many voids, it was the only world Julie had ever known, so she had no comparisons and no conscious longing for anything more.

As Julie began to develop into a young woman and mix with others at school, something awakened in her that she never knew existed. She noticed that boys liked the way she looked and the more attention she showed them, the more she received in return. She enjoyed the admiration and soon realized that it was very crucial to keep it coming. She began to dress in ways that flattered her figure, so that she would be noticed. But flirting and come hither glances weren't all that the boys wanted from her. In order to maintain the level of affection and attention she desired, she would have to give a little more in return. She started "dating" boys after school. Sometimes they would go to the park and find a grove of trees to hide in while they made out. Sometimes she would invite a boy to her basement where she would let him feel her naked breasts and kiss her with an open mouth. She found it necessary to give away more and more of her body in order to maintain their level of interest and her level of need. Whatever it took, it was worth it to her.

She lost her virginity at fifteen to a boy of eighteen with white-blond hair and devilish blue eyes whom she met after school in the soda shop. He looked at her as if he could see right through her. He told her how beautiful she was and how much he'd like to take her out on a date if only she was a little older. He told her she looked like she was seventeen, which was exactly what she wanted to hear. They never even got out of the parking lot. She laid herself down in the back seat of his car and let him pull off her panties. From there it went pretty fast and, in the end, left her feeling a little disappointed. But it opened up for her a new fascination with sex and how to find love and acceptance.

With very little parental guidance or supervision, it was easy for her to get out of the house and stay out on almost any given night. The girls in her class had very little respect for her and the boys the

same age bored her, so she hung out with an older crowd. Being exceptionally bright, she was able to skim through high school without paying much attention or studying. She partied with all the right people who could get her pot, beer and sex.

Just days before her eighteenth birthday, Julie's father died of pancreatic cancer. It had been a horrific eight months since his diagnosis, watching him deteriorate and suffer. Despite the fact that he had not been much of a father, she loved him and it was hard to let him go. She didn't blame him for staying away from home and drinking as much as he did. She didn't see any reason for him to come home to such emptiness. Why would he? She resented her mother for being so emotionally vacant to them both, and she blamed her for forcing them to endure a lonely existence. Hours after her father's body was buried in the ground, Julie left home to find a place where she could belong.

The truck stop was a typical greasy spoon operation. It smelled of smoke, old grease, and pancake syrup. Julie sat down in a booth and looked over the menu. As she mulled over her choices, she noticed a man watching her from across the room. He tried to hide the fact that he was watching her, but to Julie it was very obvious. She knew when a man was scoping her out. She'd had advanced training in it. While she was eating her burger and fries, she watched him sipping his coffee and moving his eyes over the room to get another glance at her. She was used to men watching her all the time, but this guy was different. Something about him made her want to watch him too. He was very cute. She wanted to get a better look at him, but she didn't want him to see her eyeing him back. She placed her menu out in front of her face, so she could stare at him while it looked like she was just reading. It worked until the waitress came over to take her order.

While Julie was just finishing her hamburger and fries, she saw him pay his bill. He stood up and looked as if he was going to walk over to her table. Julie licked her lips and brushed her fingers through her straight wind-blown hair in a half attempt to comb it. She lowered her head to try and sniff for odors. The last thing she wanted was to smell like that last truck driver she'd been with, but when she raised her eyes expecting to see him standing in front of her, he was gone. The front door slammed shut. She looked out the window to see him walking away. Julie watched him walk through the parking lot to the

sidewalk. His long, brown, wavy hair was blowing in the breeze along with the fringe on his suede jacket. She liked the way his butt looked in his faded bell bottom jeans, and she thought he was the coolest guy she'd ever seen. She assumed that she hadn't impressed him given his quick exit. She decided to turn her focus on her short-term future. It would be dark soon and she had no place to stay and very little cash.

The waitress came over and stood in front of her as she totaled up Julie's dinner ticket. Her dyed black hair was pulled up tightly into a bun so severely that it only accentuated her pale and deeply lined face. The name tag on her tan polyester tweed uniform read, "Beverly." Julie watched Beverly's thin painted red lips move in a circle as she chewed her gum. They stopped revolving only for a moment to say, "Will that be all, hon?" Then they continued to rotate.

"Yeah," Julie said and reached up to take the check from her. Then she added, "Hey, Beverly, you don't know anyone that's hiring, do you?"

The waitress looked down her nose at Julie, chewed on her gum, and said, "We had a waitress quit last week. You can check with Frank in the kitchen and see if he wants to hire you. You're awful young, honey. You sure you can handle these truckers? They can get pretty hardcore sometimes."

Julie smiled. "Trust me. I know how to handle any kind of guy."

"Yeah, I imagine you've had to deal with a few from the looks of you," said Beverly without the slightest bit of a smile. "Let's go back and talk to Frank."

An hour later Julie was walking out the door with a tan polyester tweed waitress uniform and apron. Beverly told her about a motel down the road that would rent to her by the week, if she mentioned her name to the owner. That would give her a little time to find a more permanent place to live. All Julie cared about right now though was knocking off two days' worth of road dust and sleeping in a real bed. Feeling completely drained, she slept soundly that night despite the noise from the highway. She didn't wake up until noon.

She was to start work on the dinner shift, which was usually a bit slower than breakfast and lunch. It would be easier for her to train during the evenings. She brushed her hair back into a ponytail and stood back to admire herself in her new uniform. She thought she looked ghastly, but it was a job, and that's all that mattered at the

moment. She was on her way to making a life for herself and she was excited.

Her first night on the job was hectic. For a slow shift, it was quite busy and confusing for Julie. She tried her best to keep up with everything Beverly was telling her and tried not to cry when Frank barked at her. “Don’t pay no attention to him, hon. He just don’t know any other way to be. He’s a sexually frustrated old man with nothing better to do than agitate everyone around him.” Beverly smiled a big red-lipped smile and then went back to chewing her gum.

As things slowed down, Beverly told Julie to handle a table on her own. There was a single man sitting in the corner booth, so Julie walked up to him and asked if she could get him something to drink. The man looked up at her. Julie recognized him right away. It was the same man from the day before...Mr. Cool. She immediately looked back at her note pad, hoping he couldn’t see her blushing, and waited for his response. The man ordered a cup of coffee, and Julie quickly whirled away to get it. She didn’t know why she felt so embarrassed. It wasn’t like he could read her mind and know all the indecent thoughts she’d been thinking about him the day before. Or could he?

She returned with the coffee and set it on the table. She held up her pad and pencil and asked, “Can I take your order?”

The man looked up from the menu and this time looked her right in the eyes. “Hey, didn’t I see you in here yesterday?” he asked.

Julie laughed nervously. Maybe it was his pale green eyes that turned down ever so slightly in the corners. Maybe it was his long, brown, wavy hair that fell across his shoulders. Maybe it was the light brown hairs of his mustache that brushed his upper lip as he spoke and made her think about kissing him. She studied each part of him, trying to discern just what about this man made her heart pound so loudly that she was sure he could hear it. She thought it was best just to ignore her feelings and escape as quickly as possible. “Yep, that was me,” she said to do her best impression of a disinterested waitress. “I just got into town. Now I’m working here. Are you ready to order?”

He gave her his order, and she walked away. The night went on in an ordinary fashion. One by one the customers left, but he stayed, continuing to sip his coffee as he had done the night before. It was just a few minutes before closing time, and he was still there. At the coaxing of Beverly, she grabbed a broom and began sweeping around

his table as a way of letting him know it was time to leave. She glanced over at him while she swept. He seemed to be completely unaware of his surroundings while he carefully studied the pages in a book entitled, *The Complete Works of Monet*.

Without taking his eyes off of the book he asked, "So, where are you from?"

Quite surprised that he was even aware she was there, Julie turned around quickly to look at him. "Me?" she asked. "Tennessee," she replied.

"Hmmm...never been up there," he said. He closed the book and set it down. "Is it nice?"

"Yeah," she said. "I guess it's pretty nice."

"Then why'd you leave?" he asked. His lips turned up in a slight smirk and his eyes twinkled at her.

Julie smiled. She was finding it very difficult to resist him. "Long story," she said.

He invited her to sit down at the booth with him and she did, glancing back toward the kitchen to see if Beverly was watching. Before she knew it she was telling him her life story, and he was telling her his. Beverly yelled out from the kitchen that Julie could leave for the night, so they both got up and headed for the door. As they stepped outside, he asked her if she wanted to get a beer and talk some more. Julie agreed. They bought a six-pack at the gas station and walked to the park. Sitting on the swings of the playground, they both shared their stories of what led them to where they were now.

His name was Danny. He was an artist, but he'd had no formal training. He and his parents could not afford college, so he'd been drafted into the army and ended up doing a tour in Vietnam. He was wounded by shrapnel in his left shoulder and sent home. When he arrived back in Houston he married his high school sweetheart. Times were tough. He still held hope that someday he could sell his artwork in a gallery, but until that lucky break happened, he had to support a family. He had two children to feed, and he'd been laid off from his factory job for six months. When a friend told him he could hitch a ride to Florida and make some quick cash, he jumped at the chance. It was just a temporary job. He'd be gone in a week.

After a few hours and a few drinks, Julie knew more about Danny than she'd known about her own father. They sat on the top of a picnic table finishing the last of the beer. Danny was telling her a

joke that made her laugh, and she realized that she couldn't remember the last time she had laughed at anything so hard. She'd also never spent this much time in conversation with anyone. It was so easy to be with him.

She was still giggling when she noticed Danny looking seriously at her. "You're gonna think I'm coming on to you or something, but I just gotta say you are absolutely beautiful." He stared at her as the moonlight cascaded down her long golden hair. She smiled. "I really mean it," he continued. "You're stunning. That's why I couldn't take my eyes off of you yesterday in the diner. I'd really like to sketch you...that is...if you would let me." He laughed. "That probably sounds like a line, huh? I'm really serious though. What do you think?"

"Sure. I guess," she said and took another swig of beer from her bottle. She didn't know how to handle his attention to her. Normally she could play off a guy's cheap come-ons easily, but she sensed he was seriously interested in her. It was unique and a little frightening. She hadn't realized how close they were sitting to each other until now. Her thigh was gently pressing against his, and she could feel the heat coming from him. His face was very close to hers as he continued to study her features. Julie began to study his face also. Danny had a gentle look about him and she could just sense his tenderness. That's what made him most attractive to her. She wanted so badly to say, "I think you're beautiful too." But she kept silent and watched him watching her. His lips were so close and she imagined how soft they would feel when he kissed her. Her heart was pounding, and her body was on fire with anticipation. Just then, Danny pulled away abruptly. "It's getting late. I'll walk you home." Disappointed, she threw her empty beer bottle at the trash can and stepped down from the picnic table. They walked down the street to her motel engaging in idle chit-chat to fill up the silence between them. When they finally arrived at her motel room door, she unlocked it and stepped inside the threshold.

She leaned against the corner of the doorway and said, "Thanks for the beer. I had a really good time."

Danny rested on the door frame with his left hand. "Yeah?" he asked as he bent his arm so that his face was closer to hers. "Me too," he said, smiling. He was studying her face until his eyes landed on her mouth. She could smell the beer on his breath and she wondered if he

was pondering kissing her as much as she was. Without moving away he closed his eyes and said, "Do you have any idea how hard it is to leave you right now?" His mouth was so close to hers that she could almost feel his mustache tickling her lips as he spoke.

Do you know how much I want you to stay? Julie felt the heat run through her body as they both stood there waiting. She knew he wanted her and she wanted him. She couldn't let him walk away any more than he wanted to. Finally she found the courage to say quietly, "Who said you had to leave?" He opened his eyes and stared directly into hers. He leaned his face in closer and pressed his lips on her mouth very gently. For a few moments they just teased each other by barely making contact, savoring the softness of their lips' slightest touch and taking in each other's breath. The teasing turned to full-fledged passion as his tongue found her open and willing mouth.

They backed into the room and shut the door. Julie continued to lead him toward her bed as she unzipped her uniform and kicked off her shoes. Together they unbuttoned Danny's shirt. She sat down on the bed while he unfastened his belt and dropped his jeans to the floor revealing a fully erect penis in front of her face. Julie took it in both her hands and wrapped her lips around the tip. She slid her hands around his hips to his butt and pushed him deeper inside her mouth. He very willingly moved in rhythm to let it slide in and out of her warm wet mouth. His hands reached around her back and unhooked her bra. She lay back on the bed and pulled herself further on to it, so he could climb on top of her. He pulled her panties off her long silky legs and spread them apart so he could enter her. It was everything she imagined sex should be. This wasn't like the teenage sex she'd had before. He made love like a man. She could tell that he wanted to make sure that she enjoyed it as much as he did. And enjoy it, she did. They made love until neither could stay awake. Then they fell asleep in each other's arms. Just as the sun was coming up, Danny carefully kissed her so not to wake her and then tiptoed out the door.

For the next few nights, Danny would show up at the diner to eat his dinner and wait for Julie to get off work. It was like having a steady boyfriend, which was something Julie had never had. The ugly truth was that he was married and it wouldn't last. He would be gone soon and that made her heart sick. Danny had indicated that the relationship with his wife had soured many years ago. They had dated all through high school and then Danny was drafted. He promised he

would marry her when he got back from Vietnam, so when he returned he felt compelled to honor his commitment. They were both very young and caught up in their parents' excitement over the wedding that they forgot to make sure they still wanted to spend forever together. The ceremony went on as planned. She was pregnant before they knew it, and there was just no going back. Another kid later and a few years down the road, she confessed to Danny that there had been someone else she was seeing while he was in Vietnam. She was confused about her feelings for Danny and the other guy. Then he lost his job, and it was everything they could do just to keep their household together. There just wasn't time to think about feelings or emotions. They were in survival mode.

Julie listened to Danny tell his story and it frustrated her. On one hand she felt sorry for his marriage to be in such turmoil. On the other hand, she wished he would give up on his wife and stay with her. But Danny wasn't the kind of guy to walk away. She could tell. He would go back if only for the sake of his two daughters. His determination to stand by his responsibilities only made her love him more. She felt a strong aching in the pit of her stomach every morning when she realized they were one day closer to him leaving. She knew she had to be strong and face the facts, but it was eating her up inside.

Danny had been pestering her to pose for him all week. Julie made a deal with him that if he would take her to the ocean, she would pose for him as long as he wanted. She'd always wanted to see the ocean and walk along a sandy beach. When Sunday came they rode the bus down to the beach. Danny brought his charcoal and sketch pad. It was a beautiful sunny day. The sky was clear and the sun was hot, but the ocean breeze kept them cool. The water was too cold for swimming, so they settled for walking barefoot in the wet sand until they found a secluded area that was hidden by some large boulders. There Julie took off her clothes and draped a towel around her body. She posed herself at Danny's direction next to a large rock. He sketched her half-naked body as she stared off at the sea.

When he'd made all the drawings he wanted, he pulled her down off the rocks and lay her down in the sand with him. He couldn't take his eyes—or his hands—off of her. Julie thought she could tell he really cared about her. She wondered if he was dreading going home as much as she was. She knew this was going to just be a temporary relationship, but she had fallen for him pretty hard. She stared back

into his eyes thinking how much she would be missing them soon. They were the color of the water beside them, and now she knew she would always see his face when she looked out over the ocean. Before they left, they made love in the sand with the waves crashing just beyond the rocks. Knowing it would be their last time, they clung to each other tightly as their bodies moved together.

He didn't show up at the diner on Monday night, so she went by his motel room after work. The manager told her he had left before dawn that morning. Julie went back to her place and cried all night long. She knew he was going to leave, but it had still happened way too soon for her. It had obviously been too hard for him also, or he wouldn't have left without saying goodbye. Maybe he had loved her too? She was mad at herself for letting her feelings get that carried away. It really didn't matter how she felt about him at this point. There were no choices to be made. There was no room for her in his life. They knew they would never see each other again. All they would have is the memories.

Three weeks later Julie found out she was pregnant. Being a parent was not what she really wanted to be just yet. She had a crappy job. She lived in motel room, and she had no husband. She knew she couldn't tell Danny even if she knew how to find him. She was on her own with this one, and she had to think fast before things got more complicated. She was angry with herself for being so stupid. She was angry with Danny for being married. And she was angry for this thing inside her that could mess up her dreams of ever having a good life. She could not take care of a baby. It would only dig her deeper into the hole she was living. Sensing that she had no other options, Julie decided to have an abortion.

She told herself it was for the best. It was a safe procedure that would be over quickly, and she could move on with her life. She told herself everything would be fine, if she could just make it past this little mistake. Petrified with the consequences of her actions but still more afraid of being a mother, Julie found herself in the waiting room of a clinic one September afternoon.

She nervously filled out the paperwork while she waited for her name to be called. Her hands were trembling. She hated what she was doing, but she was even more afraid of doing nothing. A woman holding a clipboard came out to the waiting area and escorted her back to the examination room. Sensing Julie's anxiety, the woman

kept reassuring her that everything would be alright. She told her that the doctor was very gentle and had performed hundreds of these procedures on other girls just like her every day.

Julie did her best to relax and let the doctor do what he needed to do. She laid back and put her feet in the stirrups as he directed. She laid there and looked up at the ceiling and tried to think of better days. She thought about her sixth birthday party, when she was still young enough to think that life was something good. Her friends from school and her parents were gathered around the table with her as she made a wish on six glowing candles on her cake. She could almost taste that birthday cake again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had one. Her thoughts of fluffy white icing were abruptly interrupted by the doctor saying he was finished. It was over much quicker than she expected, and before she knew it she was back out in the cold walking home.

That evening she tried her best to eat some soup she'd brought home from the deli. She was starting to cramp, and it made her feel like she was going to vomit. They told her that would be normal to experience some cramping and bleeding, so she tried to distract herself from the pain with watching television. She kept telling herself that she had done the right thing, all the while struggling with the guilt she was feeling. She could not bring a baby into her world. She could barely take care of herself, let alone another person. She didn't know how to be a mother, and she didn't want to be one.

The pain increased to the point where she could no longer concentrate on the TV anymore. She took some aspirin and started changing her clothes for bed. It felt good to get out of her jeans and slip a soft nightgown on over her head. She went to the bathroom to put a fresh maxi pad into her underwear, but when she pulled her panties down, she found she had soaked through the pad. Feeling more anxious now, she quickly changed pads and pulled her panties up so she didn't have to look at the blood. They told her there would be spotting, but this seemed too heavy for spotting. The cramping started again, and Julie began to cry out of fear and pain. Writhing around on the bathroom floor in agony, she wondered when she would ever stop making bad choices in her life and start being smart. She felt now that she had reached rock bottom. She had let herself get so low that she had talked herself into taking a human life. *Oh, Danny, why couldn't you have stayed?* Through her tears of heartache

and physical torture, she begged God to forgive her for what she had done and asked Him to help her turn her life around.