

THAT ONE CIGARETTE

A Novel by Stu Krieger
CHAPTERS 1 - 3

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It was his favorite piece of furniture, his prized possession, the very first thing he owned that made him feel like a card-carrying adult. A 1960 Philco Predicta with a blonde wood cabinet and hi-fi speakers flanking the gleaming twenty-one inch picture tube. “The Townhouse model,” the salesman down at the local Beckman Brothers called it. Ed Callahan loved that TV. It was tangible proof that, in the league of life, he might not finish in the cellar after all.

Each morning, Ed’s cue to start his morning ritual was the sound of his wife Bonnie clicking that television awake as she made her way into the kitchen to fix breakfast for their two kids. The calming voice of “Today” show anchorman Hugh Downs told Ed it was time to get his backside in gear.

The Philco was the focal point of the couple’s living room. It faced the sagging plaid couch they’d inherited from Bonnie’s mother, but it was close enough to the kitchen to allow Bonnie to listen to Hugh and newsman Frank Blair as she slapped together peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and poured bowls of sugary cereal.

On this particular morning, already behind schedule because his bum knee had begged him to remain in bed five minutes longer, Ed quickly buttoned his short-sleeve white shirt and grabbed a fresh pack of unfiltered Camels off his dresser. Ripping open the cellophane, he pulled out a cigarette, sparked it with a sizzling match and hustled out of the bedroom, buckling the skinny black belt that held up his neatly pressed khaki slacks.

Sailing into the kitchen, Ed found Bonnie setting a plate of toast, glistening with melting butter, down in front of their children. Seven-year-old Kenny, with his hair slicked back and his orange and white striped shirt tucked into cream-colored pants, was mesmerized by the liquid in his cereal bowl.

“Look, Daddy, my Trix turned the milk all pink. Ain’t that cool?”

“Isn’t, honey,” Bonnie corrected, “the proper word is *isn’t*.”

Ed dipped his chin to acknowledge his son, snatched a wedge of toast from the pile and exhaled a long plume of smoke.

“Oh my stars, Ed, do you have to smoke at the breakfast table? You know it’s not good for you; I been tryin’ to tell you that for ages,” Bonnie declared. “And now it says so right here in *Time* magazine.”

Before Ed could respond, Bonnie plucked the latest issue, folded to a specific page, off the counter and moved toward her husband. The article in question had one paragraph neatly underlined in red ink. Ever the thwarted schoolteacher, if Bonnie had a point to make, she was going to come at you armed with indisputable facts.

“Meeting at the National Library of Medicine on the campus National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, Surgeon General Luther L. Perry and his committee have been compiling evidence since late last year to support recent findings that there is an indisputable link between chronic cigarette smoking and an alarming increase in lung cancer-related deaths,” Bonnie read.

“Are you gonna die, Daddy?” asked ten year old Libby, her voice laced with a tremor of terror.

Bonnie jumped in. “No, sugar cube, Daddy is not going to die because he’s going to stop smoking right this very day. Aren’tcha, Ed?”

“Sure thing. Or at least very, very soon.” Ed grabbed a ceramic mug from the cabinet above the sink, filling it with steaming coffee from the percolator on the stove.

“I’m serious,” Bonnie persisted.

“Me, too. Tell you what,” patting the pack of unfiltered Camels in his shirt pocket, Ed went on, “I’ll finish this here pack and when it’s gone, I’m done. For good.”

Bonnie, her face a sunburst of gratitude, rushed at her husband and threw her arms around his neck, asking if Ed really meant it.

“You betcha. What’s the point of any of it if I won’t be here to see my grandbabies?”

She gave him a passionate kiss that made her daughter blush; Kenny crinkled his nose and snorted, “Parents kissing? Sick’ning!”

Breaking their embrace, Bonnie looked to her son with a giggle. “You should be glad we love each other. It’ll only make life easier for you.”

Ed downed his coffee while Bonnie cleared the breakfast dishes, prodding the children to collect books and jackets.

On the television in the background, Frank Blair was reporting on an erupting dispute between the Congo and the Soviet Union. Hardly paying attention, one thought skipped fleetingly across Ed Callahan’s mind.

What the heck is the Congo?

Bonnie gave her husband a peck on the cheek and handed him the sack lunch she grabbed from the refrigerator before escorting the kids out the front door. They shouted

goodbyes to Ed while Kenny struggled into his cardigan, having trouble finding the second sleeve drooping off his shoulder. A moment before he disappeared, Kenny reminded his dad that Ed had promised they'd work on the boy's Pinewood Derby car that evening.

Reveling in his momentary solitude, Ed took a last luxurious drag on his cigarette, and then stabbed it out in the Alamo-shaped ashtray beside the toaster.

“Morning, Oak!”

Ed glanced up to see his mother-in-law Marsha shuffling into the kitchen in a pink-and-white checked housecoat. The large pink rollers in her salt-and-pepper hair and the puffiness encircling her eyes told Ed she'd just woken up. “Oak” was her personal nickname she'd first bestowed on Ed when he and Bonnie started dating during Ed's last year of high school. Bonnie had once off-handedly told her mother that what she loved most about him was his solid, steady dependability and Marsha had quipped, “Like having your very own oak tree.” She'd held onto that affectionate appellation ever since.

“Can you believe Thanksgiving is a week from today?” Marsha asked. “If time flew any faster, I'd swear the world had sprouted wings. Just you wait and see; we'll blink and it'll be 1964.”

One thing Ed had learned in the five years since the then-newly-widowed Marsha had moved in with them was that, once she was off and running, he didn't really need to respond. Marsha would happily carry the conversation by herself. She grabbed a mug, filled it with coffee and continued:

“Big surprise: Louis and his family are too busy to come down. I talked to him last night. Long distance. He says he’s swamped at the office and Ellen has something going on with that Ladies Auxiliary of hers – although I must admit, what those ladies actually do is beyond me. Plus, apparently, Tommy has a football game day after. Can that be right? Who plays high school football on Thanksgiving weekend?”

Ed remarked that many schools did; Marsha instantly espoused her disapproval.

“If you ask me, it’s a sin, pure and simple. Holidays are for families. But, in any case, I thank the Good Lord I have y’all to be with or I’d be out on the street like a hobo woman. Heaven forbid.”

Nodding, Ed set his coffee mug in the sink and grabbed his car keys off the pegboard beside the back door. He gave Marsha a quick wave, instructing her to have a good day. Lost in thought, Marsha drifted to the Formica table and settled into one of the chrome chairs with its candy apple red plastic seat.

Ed backed his car out of the driveway staring at the flaking paint on their two-bedroom ranch house on Jimmydee Drive. The lawn needed mowing and the flowerbeds needed weeding but there were never enough hours in a day. Rolling down his window as he turned onto South Story Road, the distinct smell in the air carried Ed back to earlier autumn days when he used to walk a similar route to school.

Growing up seven or eight miles away in suburban Dallas, he’d always planned on being a fireman. Until he completely shattered his kneecap getting tackled by a sophomore grizzly bear from Waco in the Homecoming game his senior year. The damn thing never did heal right, despite three surgeries his parents could ill afford. The army

didn't want him and the fire academy couldn't take him because he simply didn't have the stamina the job required. Lugging heavy equipment up steep stairwells during his tryout caused Ed's right knee to buckle repeatedly. During one test, he had to drop fifteen yards of hose to keep from tumbling down a twelve-foot ladder when he lost his balance, right near the top. And that was the end of his dream.

His father didn't make enough money as the manager of their local Piggly Wiggly to send Ed to college and, besides, he had no idea what he would have studied. He and school never had been a great fit. He was bright enough but much more focused on girls and football than on civics and mathematics. The only kind of social studies Ed was interested in was learning how to convince Bonnie Lee Bismark to go out with him.

After high school, Ed worked as a delivery boy for his uncle's pizza parlor and then, after six or seven months, got promoted to manager. He somehow saved enough to buy Bonnie a tiny diamond ring and asked her to marry him on his twenty-first birthday. Five weeks after their small wedding at his father's Elks Lodge, Bonnie told Ed she was pregnant. Libby was born in early '53 and Kenny came along three years later. They knew they couldn't stay in their tiny one bedroom apartment but, even with Bonnie working the evening shift at Skillern's Drug Store four nights a week, they couldn't foresee any way they'd ever be able to afford a house. Ed was working for a company that filled book orders for schools statewide. After eighteen months, he'd worked his way up to Assistant Warehouse Manager but he was still only making \$2.75 an hour.

And then Bonnie's father dropped dead.

Poor bastard was only fifty-four years old. A massive heart attack knocked him to the showroom floor at Patio World – right as he was about to close a sale on a six-piece white wicker ensemble with cobalt blue cushions.

Marsha dove into a spiraling state of panic. She had no marketable skills, had never worked outside the home and Lloyd had somehow forgotten to keep up with his life insurance payments. The only thing the new widow owned was her compact house on Bowman Street but she was terrified of living there alone.

That was how Ed and Bonnie came to buy their house. Marsha sold her place, gave a healthy chunk of the profit to her daughter and son-in-law as their down payment, and took up residence with them. It meant she'd have to share a bedroom with her grandkids but Marsha truly didn't mind. She knew she could handle almost anything as long as she didn't have to navigate life on her own. Despite Marsha's repeated declarations that she was ruining their lives, Ed and Bonnie did all they could to reassure her she was a welcome and helpful presence in their home.

Now they'd been in the house nearly five years, the kids were happy at the local elementary school and life was flowing right along. Kenny was a Cub Scout. Libby took tap dancing lessons at the Community Center. One of their many beloved rituals was to be bathed and in their pajamas by eight o'clock on Thursday nights to watch "The Flintstones" before Marsha hustled them off to bed while Bonnie was at work.

Thinking about Bonnie, Ed felt an electric tingle in his crotch. They'd been together since high school, married for more than eleven years, but he still felt great pride, not to mention a modicum of awe, in the fact that she was his wife. Sometimes

when they were having a quiet night at home, he'd look up to find her mending the kids' socks or cutting coupons from the *Times-Herald*, her dirty-blond ponytail held in place by her favorite plastic Scotty-dog hairclip, and he'd wonder what it was she saw in him.

She's so dang pretty and sweet and well, let's not kid ourselves, I'm downright goofy looking. Tall enough, I suppose...never did let myself get fat – that's a plus – but I got ears like radar dishes and my front teeth are slightly bucked. Even after I shave, I'm still scruffy as sandpaper. She's gotta know she could'a done so much better'n me. Hell, I only hope she never figgers it out.

Many times at work, when the other guys would gripe about their wives' spending habits or whining about how they practically had to beg to get sex, Ed would feel nothing but gratitude. Bonnie truly was his best friend but he didn't dare say that out loud. The last thing he needed was to have his buddies at the book depository calling him a soft-hearted homo.

Back at the house, Bonnie and her mother sat at the kitchen table, each having one last cup of coffee before they had to get a move on. Bonnie had to be at her job by 2:00 that afternoon and would work until eight. Marsha would be there to greet the kids' school bus and make dinner for the family. Bonnie would grab a plate of leftovers when she got home around 8:30, always in time to kiss her children goodnight.

Before getting ready for work, Bonnie had several loads of laundry to do. Marsha was meeting a girlfriend for lunch. She would stop by the market on her way home and

pick up a fresh head of lettuce so she could throw together a salad to go along with the pot roast defrosting in the Pyrex dish on the counter.

“Talked to your brother last night,” Marsha began.

“Let me guess: they’re not coming down for Thanksgiving.”

“Bingo,” said Marsha, touching her index finger to the tip of her nose. “Course I’m disappointed. He makes three bucks more than God, he’s banked more vacation days than Queen Elizabeth, but heaven forbid we should ever be his priority.” Bonnie offered that maybe they’d come down for Christmas. “Nope,” Marsha retorted. “They’re goin’ to *her* family. After they get back from Aruba. Must be nice, I tell ya, must be nice.”

“We’ll have a wonderful Thanksgiving, in any case,” Bonnie declared, “Ed’s folks are coming, plus we invited Nate and Lucy.”

Marsha asked if Nate was still planning on marrying ‘that woman’ and Bonnie told her it was happening on New Year’s Eve; Nate had asked Ed to be his best man.

“Well, if Ed’s truly his best buddy, he’ll warn poor Nate that that girl will bring him nothing but heartache. Don’t he notice the way she’s on him, every single minute of every day?”

“Mother, Nate needs a girl like that.”

“Honey, trust me: *nobody* needs a girl like that. She’s got more opinions than the Oracle of Delphi. And she never knows when to keep them to herself. Sure she’s awful purty, bless her heart, but purty only gets you so far.”

Filling the sink with hot water and a squirt of Joy, Bonnie busied herself doing the breakfast dishes as Marsha glanced at the morning paper. “President’s coming to town

tomorrow,” she announced. “Jackie, too. Talk about purty! That gal has more style than Grace Kelly and Oleg Cassini combined.”

Gliding along the Stemmons Freeway in his '56 Ford Fairlane, Ed fumbled to pull a Camel from his shirt pocket, punched the dashboard lighter and waited for the cylinder to heat up. Sticking the cigarette between his lips, he heard the lighter's familiar pop and plucked it out. With its neat concentric circles glowing a deep orange, Ed pressed the filament to the end of what Bonnie sneeringly referred to as his 'coffin nail;' he reveled in a protracted inhale. The instant he sucked the smoke deep into his lungs, he felt that euphoric rush the nicotine never failed to deliver.

I know it's a filthy habit and it is probably killing me – and, yeah, I promised Bonnie I'd finish this pack and stop – but it sure as hell ain't gonna be easy. Smoking since I was sixteen; in point of fact, I love it: the ritual, the comfort – the fact that it gives me something to do with my hands. Gotta admit, smoking makes me feel like more of a man. Taking that last deep drag, flicking away the butt, grinding it under my boot heel. But heck, a promise is a promise, so I at least have to give it the good old college try – soon as I finish this pack.

Ed recalled the first cigarette he'd ever had, with his best buddy Nate when they were fourteen years old. It was Christmas break, their sophomore year in high school. Nate had stolen a pair of Marlboros from the cigarette box his parents kept on their living room end table. The night was real cold, especially for Dallas. They were out in the woods up on the hill behind Nate's house, wearing the identical denim jackets they'd

bought together at the J.C. Penny's downtown, every button buttoned, collars upturned. Nate was taller than Ed and always ten to fifteen pounds heavier, but most folks took them for brothers.

Ed had swiped two cans of Budweiser from his parents' refrigerator and he and Nate were going to drink the beers, smoke the cigarettes and swear like a couple of bad-ass good ole' boys while they laughed about Francie Hermann's huge tits.

Of course, they choked on the smoke and grimaced when ingesting the beer but when they reminisced about it later, they declared that it was one of the coolest nights of their lives. From then on, they were eternally bonded: two East Dallas rebels in search of a cause.

Jesus. Nate's finally getting' married. Came close that one time; to that girl from Jersey...what was her name? Joy. There's some irony for ya. It was full speed ahead 'til his parents found out she was a Jew. End of story. It was two whole years before he even had the stomach to ask another woman out.

Nate's current fiancé, Lucy Wallace, was a genuine southern belle. Born in Memphis, raised in Louisville, she attended two years of junior college in Atlanta. She moved to Dallas to work as a buyer at Dillard's and met Nate at a "Ladies Drink Free" night at Rusty's Saloon.

What I don't get is how a woman like Lucy will live with a slob like Nate.

Ed and Bonnie agreed Lucy was a bit rigid, often acting more like Nate's mother than his girlfriend, but they also believed that no one except a take-charge woman would ever get Nate Stokesberry to the altar.

The thing that made Ed most uneasy about Nate marrying Lucy was that she had a creepy collection of porcelain dolls. There was something about their painted faces and antique frilly gowns that made Ed start to sweat every time he had to be in Lucy's apartment. He actually had nightmares about those dolls: he'd be left alone in their front room while Nate and Lucy were fixing drinks and the playthings would come to life. Ed would hear their hideous cackles as their eyes flashed with evil intent. He'd wake up with his heart about to explode like an over-cranked Jack-in-the-Box.

What if Lucy moves those damn things into the house they're buyin' together? Maybe I'll wait 'til she's out one night and smash 'em to smithereens with a baseball bat. Don't she know how scary they are? I mean, what's a grown woman need with a pack of creepy dolls?

Ed sucked so intently on his cigarette his head nearly imploded. When he exhaled, it felt like the smoke was rising all the way up from his groin. He swiped uncomfortably at his armpits, feeling the prickly sting of perspiration that erupted whenever he thought about Lucy's malevolent doll mob.

Realizing he was about to miss his off-ramp, Ed swerved across two lanes and exited the freeway. Driving through the streets of downtown Dallas, heading for the book depository parking lot, he heard an unsettling scraping behind him. He tilted down the rearview mirror, trying to catch a glimpse of the noise's source.

Goll darn it! Tailpipe's dragging again? Hope the sparks don't set nothing on fire. That wire I had rigged up must'a busted when I swerved to catch the ramp.

Eying his watch, Ed knew he had no time to deal with it. It was 7:52, it was a five-minute walk from the parking lot to his building and he couldn't afford to be late. His boss Roy Truly was a decent guy, and he genuinely seemed to like Ed, but with nineteen warehouse men to manage, Roy liked to keep everything running shipshape.

When Ed pulled into his regular parking spot, parallel to the chain link fence at the lot's south end, he saw his coworker Junior Jarman arriving in his Chevrolet station wagon. He parked in the spot right next to Ed. Ed snatched his sack lunch off the passenger seat and hopped out. "Morning, Junior. How they hanging?"

"Tight and to the right, just the way I like 'em."

Both men chuckled. Junior was clutching a black metal lunch bucket with a union decal on the butt end. That thing had more miles on it than a '51 Dodge.

Junior had been working at the book depository, on and off, for years. For a while he left and went to work at Parkland Hospital; Ed was never quite sure what it was that sent Junior back to the warehouse. He and Ed never socialized outside of the job, but they were friendly enough at work. Usually, once or twice a week, they ate together in the second floor lunchroom or met in the domino room on the first floor to play a quick game of bones as they gobbled their sandwiches and guzzled Dr. Peppers.

Leaving the parking lot, the two men walked along Munger Street, then gingerly crossed several sets of railroad tracks. Ed made a point of stopping to look around any unmoving boxcars to ensure that an oncoming train wouldn't cream them.

“See the morning paper?” Junior asked. “President’s motorcade is gonna pass right on by tomorrow, just after noon. If we time it right, we’re like to get a look at him on lunch break. ‘Course, I ain’t been too crazy about the man since he nearly got us into World War III over that showdown with the Rooskeys –”

“The Cuban Missile thing? Heck, Junior, he only did what needed to be done. Otherwise, that maniac Khrushchev would’ve bombed us back to Kingdom Come. Wait, you sure the parade’s goin’ by us?”

“Yup, the map was right there in the paper. It’s one helluva procession: Johnson, Governor Connally...Mrs. Kennedy, too, I do believe. Going from Main to Houston, then straight down Elm on the way to some fancy V.I.P. luncheon out at the Trade Mart. Must be nice...flying around on private jets, riding in limousines, having folks turn out to cheer ya jest for showing up.”

“It all looks like a giant pain-in-the-butt, if you want my opinion,” Ed said.
“Can’t fart without it turning into front page news.”

Minutes later, Ed and Junior moved past the loading dock and slipped through the rear door of the Texas School Book Depository, coming in off Houston Street. Heading for the basement stairs, Ed spied Roy Truly hustling across the plywood planks lining the first floor. Ed offered him a ‘good morning’ and a chipper wave. Spying Ed and Junior, Roy replied with a nod and a grin.

Ed stuck his lunch in his basement locker and hung up his corduroy coat. Junior was at his own cupboard a few feet down. Closing his locker door, Ed turned and nearly

collided with a skinny, pale fellow he knew only as Lee. He was seven or eight years younger than Ed, had been working at the depository for a little more than a month. He always seemed to move without making a sound.

“Sorry,” Ed said as he sidestepped the newcomer.

Lee nodded but remained eerily silent. Ed could see the yellow stains in the armpits of Lee’s once-white Fruit-of-the-Loom T-shirt that was now the color of an exhausted Brillo pad. Lee swiftly moved up the steps and disappeared.

Turning toward Junior, Ed shook his head and chuckled. “Jeez, even on our crummy salary, you’d think the kid could spring for a clean T-shirt.”

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Before dressing for his classes at Saint John Fisher College, Brian Scott stepped outside to check the day. Grumbling to himself about the only town he had ever called home, Brian knew he was sounding exactly like his father.

That's Rochester: baking in the morning, freezing by early afternoon.

There had been plenty of Halloweens here in upstate New York when Brian went trick-or-treating in his shirtsleeves one-year but then the next he had to cram a bulky winter parka under his Mighty Mouse costume, fretting about ruining the whole effect.

On this particular late November Thursday, Brian left his parents' house not knowing if the black clouds overhead meant rain or snow. He wore his yellow slicker but threw a heavier coat onto the back seat of his '59 Renault Dauphin.

Typical – after a three hours class, the sun's shining, it's almost sixty degrees.

Brian took off his raincoat, threw it over his shoulder and tucked his books under his arm. Looking to a classmate, he shook his head. "I don't know, pal; I honestly just don't know. This whole college thing? Not convinced it's for me."

"Give it a chance; we've only been here three months."

"Yeah," Brian went on, "but it's...I'm dying here. I hit my classes...go back to my parents' house...bug the crap out of my little brother and that's about it. Pretty sad."

His buddy suggested Brian might enjoy things more if he lived on campus.

"My old man says it's a waste of dough. We only live six miles away. I mean, he's got the money if I really pitched a fit..." As Brian let the thought drift off, his

compatriot hustled away to his next class. With a wandering mind, Brian floated toward the parking lot to retrieve his car.

From the time he was ten years old, Brian wanted to be a doctor. The only problem was it required so much school. He was certainly smart enough – everybody told him that – but he lacked focus and discipline. He'd skated through high school exerting very little effort, still managed to graduate near the top of his class. He had the fortunate ability to retain nearly everything he read but never applied that skill toward any particular passion. The appeal of a career in medicine was the lure of big money and the respect that came with it. His Uncle Nelson was a cardiac surgeon; he had a bigger house and took better vacations than anybody Brian knew.

Halfway to his car, Brian had an epiphany.

Maybe I should join the army.

He remembered seeing a recruitment table near the student union. The square-headed guy with a fire-hydrant neck dressed in camouflage fatigues was talking to an eager senior about this golden opportunity to see the world. Maybe that was exactly what Brian needed.

Some perspective, a little adventure...the chance to get my head on straight.

Pivoting, he headed back up the hill toward the quad.

The guy seated at the long table, decorated with red-white-and-blue bunting, was a different fellow than the one Brian had seen previously. If that first recruiter was a former all-star tackle, this one was a quarterback. Tall, lean, one hundred and eighty

pounds of muscle, he looked like he could snap Brian in half without breaking a sweat. He introduced himself and launched into his sales pitch before Brian finished shaking his thick hand.

“You’ve seen the posters, right? Uncle Sam looking at’cha, pointing his finger. I WANT YOU. It’s true; we do want you. And you know the great thing about signing up with us? You don’t make friends, you meet your brothers.”

This guy’s good.

Sergeant Bowers talked at Brian for nearly a half-hour, answered every question with enthusiasm and vigor and wouldn’t let Brian leave without taking his card. “Just so you know, brother, I don’t go after everybody this way. That’s the truth. But you’re the kind of kid we need. I see it in your eyes. You’re a thinker. A leader. Right now, I got more sheep than I can handle; what I really need is a few more shepherds – like you, Brian Scott. Are you ready for the adventure of a lifetime?”

Brian pulled his red Renault into the family driveway on Westfall Road and parked behind his mother’s Studebaker. Heading into the two-story clapboard house, Sergeant Bowers’ sales pitch was ringing in his head.

Opening the back door to the kitchen, Brian could hear his mother singing in her clear, strong alto. He recognized the song immediately: “Till There Was You” from the Broadway show, “The Music Man” which had been turned into a recent hit movie. It was currently his mother’s second favorite soundtrack, coming in behind “The Sound of Music.” She listened to both original cast recordings on her sky-blue hi-fi day and night, singing along, especially when she was baking.

Brian found his mom at the open cutting board, rolling pin in hand, working the pleats out of a homemade piecrust. A dish of sliced, cinnamon-coated peaches waited on the counter nearby. Nancy looked up at her older son with a blazing smile. “Here’s my favorite guy! Home from the sawmill. How was Biology?”

“Biological,” Brian retorted.

Never give a straight answer when you can be a smart aleck.

“Your brother’s at soccer practice, dinner’s at six. Unless he gets stuck in some awful staff meeting, Dad should be home by 5:45.”

“And that’s the up-to-the-minute news, Nancy Scott reporting,” Brian quipped.

Pulling the pie plate closer to the cutting board, Nancy gingerly lifted her delicate crust and folded it into the tin; she pressed it into place, scoring its edges with a fork. She offered to fix Brian a snack but he told her he was just going to grab an orange so he could get going on some homework.

Nancy poured the peaches into the tin, then began to roll out the second crust that would form the pie’s top, picking up her song where she left off.

“There were bells, all around but I never heard them ringing...til there was you.” Peeling the fruit he’d snatched from the refrigerator, Brian grabbed his book bag and headed down the plywood-paneled hallway toward his bedroom. Both sides of the corridor were lined with framed 8x10 photos of him and his younger brother Johnny from infancy to the previous summer. Brian was convinced that because his father worked for Eastman Kodak, his mother felt it was her personal duty to keep the company afloat.

Turning into his room, Brian locked the door, threw his books on the floor and collapsed onto the bed to devour his orange. As he finished, licking the sticky juice from

his fingers, his mind began to play its most frequent mental slideshow: images of Karen Peterman. She was the girl Brian had been madly in love with since sophomore year of high school but had still never managed to kiss. When she had a boyfriend, he was free; whenever she was single, Brian was taken... so they never had become a couple. Yet even if he hadn't captured her heart, he did possess a pair of her panties.

Pushing himself off the bed, already half-aroused thinking about what was coming, Brian moved into his closet and parted the neat row of shirts hanging along the back bar. He tugged an old Boy Scout backpack off a nearly invisible recessed shelf and dug into it. Pulling out a crinkled manila envelope that once held his Pony League All-Star certificate, he opened its fragile clasp. From inside the envelope, Brian extracted his prize: a lemon-colored pair of silk panties with a border of lace along the waistband.

Falling backwards onto his bed, Brian dropped the inside-out panties onto his face and took a deep inhale. Although he was no longer sure if their scent was real or simply a sense-memory embedded in his brain, he was instantly hard. He unzipped his pants, reached into his underwear and wrapped his hand around his thickening dick.

He had replayed the moment so many times, by now it was like a scene from his favorite movie. It was October, right before Homecoming his junior year. They were working on their class float and Karen was hosting a flower-making party. It was a ritual – folding Kleenexes, stapling them in the center and then fanning them out into tissue-paper flowers to adorn their float – that went on at different houses for weeks before the parade. The girls did most of the work while the guys goaded each other, wrestled and drank smuggled-in beer. Karen was dating a football gorilla who appeared every five minutes to give her a possessive mauling kiss. It was driving Brian crazy.

Her house had a modern-looking open living room-dining room-kitchen that the kids were working in. The class president was at the dining room table with the math genius, creating a blueprint for their float. Brian couldn't believe his eyes.

All that miniscule detail, drawn perfectly to scale? These guys are like flippin' architects. How long did they work on this thing? All for some stupid Homecoming float? How can they possibly give such a shit?

Brian was feeling restless, pent up, wondering why the ape was kissing the girl that should be his. He wandered down the hall and found Karen's bedroom, almost by accident. Acting on impulse, he ducked in, closed the door behind him and stood stock still, feeling guilty and excited to be in her private space. The smell enveloped him: perfume, cherry lip balm and teenage girl. He pushed open the sliding closet door and discovered a laundry basket with the lemon-colored panties on top.

Back in Karen's living room, Brian kept one hand shoved deep into the pocket of his dungarees, convinced that if he didn't, the purloined panties would come rocketing out on their own volition to reveal themselves to his friends and classmates.

When he got home that night, he went straight to his room, turned the underwear inside out and inhaled for hours. It was the first time he'd smelled those intoxicating odors and when he finally came, it was the most convulsive orgasm of his young life.

Thank you, Karen Peterman.

Two years later, the panties still held him in their thrall. They symbolized danger, a touch of forbidden excitement.

Right as he grabbed a wad of Kleenex to catch the explosion of milk-colored lava, Karen's underwear on his face like a cockeyed burglar mask, Brian heard his mother move past his door, singing brightly.

“There was love, all around, but I never heard it singing...till there was you.”

What Brian didn't know was that, a short time later, his mother was locked in her walk-in closet upstairs, working with every fiber in her body to muffle her heaving sobs. It was a secret rite Nancy performed three or four times a week. She would be working in the kitchen or vacuuming one of the boys' rooms when suddenly she'd feel a crushing sadness overtake her. It welled up from the pit of her stomach, rising like a tidal wave. She knew if she didn't give into it she might simply disintegrate.

When the sobbing subsided, Nancy had a second part of the ritual. She'd slink into her bathroom, lock the door, and press a cold, damp washcloth to her eyes to reduce the redness and swelling. She'd reapply eyeliner, pucker up for a fresh coat of lipstick and return to her domestic duties without a hint that she'd been gone.

Five minutes later, she'd be singing again.

As Brian moved to his desk to crack his *American History (1492-1700)* textbook, he became fixated on a sound bleeding into his consciousness. It was a repetitive thump...thump... thump. Like the hyper-magnified drips from the leaky faucet keeping Donald Duck from a peaceful night's sleep in one of Brian's favorite cartoons.

What the hell? How am I supposed to think with that noise?

Even if he couldn't nail down its cause, he was positive of its source.

It has to be something that idiot Johnny's doing.

Springing out of his chair, Brian bolted from his room and charged down the hall. As he sailed into the kitchen, the sound grew louder. Thump. Thump. Thump. It was coming from right outside the kitchen door.

Brian barreled out like an enraged bull and found exactly what he was expecting: his fourteen-year-old brother Johnny. Wearing a Spaulding fielder's glove, Johnny was throwing a tennis ball, over and over, against the closed garage door, calling the play-by-play. "It's a high pop-fly to centerfield but, not to worry: the dependable Johnny Scott is there to get under it. He makes the grab, ending the inning!"

"Hey, moron, did'ja ever think maybe some people are trying to study?"

Johnny heaved the ball, jockeying to grab it out of the air. "Who's stopping ya?"

"You and your noise. It's like a sledgehammer to my brain."

"Maybe you should take a Midol and relax."

Brian went tripping down the three back stairs with such fury that Johnny froze, holding his gloved hand out in front of him in terrorized surrender. "Okay, I'll stop."

Brian hit the brakes, pivoting as he spit out his retort. "You'd better. Or I'll sit on your face and fart until you suffocate."

Pulling into the driveway just after sunset in his prized 1962 Buick Electra coupe, John Scott fought to stifle his disgruntled groan. He was convinced that his across-the-street neighbor Marsh Ditlow stood at his front window each evening waiting for John's approach before he went out to get the day's mail.

Climbing out of the car, John fumbled with his briefcase, doing his best to look preoccupied, knowing his charade was for naught.

“Hey, neighbor! How’s every little thing in your Kodachrome world?”

“Fine, Marsh,” came John’s lifeless monotone.

“Got a second?”

John knew that if he tried to demure, Marsh would only persist; sometimes, it was easier to simply surrender. “What’s up?”

Minutes later, they were standing in Marsh’s spotless garage as he showed off his latest purchase. “It’s a Lawnboy. D’you love it?” Gesturing, he went on. “The snow gets sucked in here, blown out there and – presto – you’ve got a spanking-clean driveway without breaking your back. Shoveling is history. They call it the Snow Thrower. Fantastic, am I right? I can’t wait for the first blizzard just to try it out. You should get one, sport. You can afford it.”

“I’ve already got two Snow Throwers: Brian and Johnny.”

“Hey, if you’re content living in the Stone Age, my friend, suit yourself.”

When John came into the kitchen, Nancy was at the stove basting the night’s roast beef. “I don’t know why I let that guy get under my skin,” John grumbled.

“Marsh again? I’ve told you, you simply need to avoid him.”

“I try!” John protested. “He’s like a fungus. No matter what you do, he just appears. And it’s...it’s that thing he does...I talk to him for two lousy minutes and end up feeling like I’m doing everything wrong with my life.”

Nancy moved to him, took the briefcase and gave him a kiss. “Well, if it’s any consolation, he and Louise never have sex.”

John reacted with a startled guffaw. “How in the world would you know that?”

“She told me. Flat out. We weren’t drinking wine or anything. One minute we’re talking about the artichokes at Wegman’s and suddenly she’s in tears wondering how she got to be so old and undesirable. Apparently, he goes months at a time without touching her. If you ask me, I’ll bet that pompous windbag is keeping a little something on the side.”

Before John could react, Johnny came bounding in, announcing to his parents that he was in danger of imminent starvation. Nancy told him to go and find his brother so they could all sit down.

While John passed the mashed potatoes, Nancy sliced the beef onto a platter. Johnny and Brian helped themselves to creamed corn. Unprompted, Brian announced that he was thinking of joining the army.

Nancy stopped in mid-slice. “What? You just started college. Why in heaven’s name would you be thinking about the military?”

“Why not? I can see the world, do something good for my country, and when I get out, they’ll pay for school, practically a full ride.”

“Where is this coming from all of a sudden?” John asked.

“I don’t know. I’m bored. I’m...I just...”

“You wouldn’t last four days in the army,” Johnny piped up.

Brian whirled in his seat and slammed his balled fist into his brother's arm. Johnny cried out, "What're you doing, jerk-face? Dad, did you see that? He HIT me! For no reason."

"That's enough," Nancy snapped. "Both of you."

Nancy turned her attention to her eldest. "You really need to think about this, Brian. The military's no day at the beach."

"What're you going to do when they send you to Vietnam?" John asked.

"What? Where's that?"

"In Southeast Asia. And in case you're not aware, my friend, there's a damn good chance we're soon gonna be engaged in a full-blown war over there."

"The recruiter guy didn't say anything about a war," Brian protested.

"I'm sure he didn't. Look, it might not be officially declared yet," John conceded, "but that's no consolation to the families of the boys already coming home in body bags."

Later, as they settled onto the family room couch to watch "Perry Mason," Nancy looked to her husband with fear-filled eyes; she asked if John thought Brian was serious about joining the service.

"Hard to tell. You know how he is. He gets an idea in his head and off he goes."

"But what you were saying at dinner – about a possible war – is that for real or were you trying to scare him?"

"It's very real. They're claiming the only folks over there are 'military advisors' but what the heck does that mean? Our presence is supposed to be about trying to stop

the spread of Communism, so what if they don't back down? Kennedy already called Khrushchev's bluff once; maybe the second time won't be the charm."

"Then we just have to tell Brian he can't enlist. I don't want him being sent off to some god-forsaken part of the world to die."

"I'll talk to him. We'll have a serious chat over the weekend, but Nance, the fact of the matter is the boy's eighteen."

At his bedroom desk, Brian rolled his neck and rubbed his eyes. He glanced at his watch: 9:00 P.M.

I've seriously only been reading this Biology crap for forty-five minutes? Geez.

It was a chapter on cell biology comparing prokaryotic and eukaryotic cells –

If I have to read one more word about mitochondrion and lysosome, there's a chance I'll go insane.

Brian slapped the book shut, capped his yellow highlighter and stood up. Yawning and stretching, he dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups like he was back at a Pittsford High baseball workout. Up, down, up, down. He was panting, his arms were burning but he didn't stop. Fifty. Fifty-five. Sixty. He collapsed on his bedroom rug, working to get his heavy breathing back to normal. And then, with the same frenzy, he flipped onto his back, hooked his feet under his bed frame and began an equally vigorous set of sit-ups. When he was done, his abdomen muscles were taut and tender but he felt much calmer. He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

The army might be a good way to finally get with Karen Peterman. Coming back with washboard abs and pumped arms, wearing my crisp battle dress uniform. Doesn't that drive girls insane? Always does in the movies. Heck, I'd be a soldier. A man.

Brian flipped onto his stomach and hopped up. He went to his closet, yanked open the door, gazed into the full-length mirror. He sucked in his gut, threw back his shoulders. He tried to snap off a crisp salute like Kirk Douglas in "Town Without Pity."

Wow, pathetic.

He held his shoulders back tighter, raised his arm with a more fluid motion and saluted once more.

That one didn't look half bad.

Holding his extended fingers against his forehead as he folded his thumb to his palm, Brian held the pose. He liked what he saw.

As soon as I get to campus tomorrow, I'll track down that recruiter and join up. But right now, I need to grab myself a pop.

##

One thing David Salinger hated most was waking up and realizing he had no idea where he was.

Fighting his way back to awareness, battling through the fog enveloping his throbbing head, the first thing he heard was the sounds of a television coming from another room. Hugh Downs. "The Today Show." David cracked one eye, scanned the small, cramped bedroom. Not one damn thing looked familiar.

Are those god-awful gold swirls part of the wallpaper or am I having a stroke?

Pushing himself into a sitting position, he slowly opened his other eye.

Good gravy. Who invited the drum and bugle corps to practice inside my skull?

He looked around desperately searching for his clothes.

Oh, thank God. There they are.

Folded into an unsettlingly neat pile on the seat of a straight-back chair. Glancing at his watch, David's heart started to race. 8:32 a.m.

What day is it? Thursday? Howard Zellman is due at my office at ten. If I had any clue where I was, it would be easier to know how long it'll take me to get to campus.

David realized he needed something to eat to calm his flip-flopping stomach.

A shower is out of the question. I'm not about to do it here...I have no time to get home. Good gravy, what was I thinking last night?

The answer was painfully clear: he wasn't thinking at all.

David pulled up his slacks, tucked in his wrinkled pinstriped white shirt and fastened his belt. He dropped onto the edge of the bed, tugged up his socks and swiftly tied his wing tips, all the while trying to conjure a picture of the person who would greet him when he emerged from the bedroom. Damn it. He was drawing a total blank.

I went to Corky's near the Herald to grab a quick drink after class last night...

David liked that place. It was dark, anonymous, filled with alcoholic newsman and ink-stained editors who didn't care about anything but getting drunk in peace.

I knocked back a couple of Tanguary & tonics...

“Well, good morning.”

David's head snapped up. The guy standing in the bedroom doorway was an inch or two taller than David, stocky, with a thick dark moustache. He had a bit of a belly hanging over the waistband of his navy blue boxer shorts and wore black socks pulled up over his calves. Instantly, David felt his face flush to a deep scarlet. He couldn't make eye contact. Hanging his head, he responded with a curt 'hello.'

“Seems like somebody slept pretty well,” the man chuckled.

David bobbed his head up and down. A suffocating silence filled the space between them.

“Can I, ah...may I fix you something to eat?”

“No. No, thank you. I, um...I...I need to get going. Work.” David snatched his tie and black sport coat off the back of the chair and moved toward the guy with an awkward smile. “So, ah...anyway....” He moved past his host into the hallway, head angled toward the beige carpet. “I'll...I...thanks.” He started off to his left. The man chuckled again, seeming to revel in David's discomfort.

“If you’re looking for the front door, it’s the other way.”

David pivoted, reversed course. He barreled into the living room, elated to find the looming exit in his sights.

“It’s Nolan, David. My name’s Nolan.”

Gripping the doorknob, David pivoted just enough to eye Nolan and then quickly nodded before yanking the door open and sailing out.

Standing on the parkway in front of Nolan’s three-story brick apartment building, David was struggling to get his bearings. He spied the intersecting street signs on the corner: Cochran Avenue and Edgewood Place.

That means nothing to me. Is that Wilshire over there?

David dug in his pocket and found his car keys.

Now all I need is my car.

He walked along Cochran, past several apartment buildings and a few modest homes. Finally, he spotted his blue Plymouth across the street. He glanced at his watch. 8:46. The best thing he could do was get acclimated, head to USC and make a beeline for any spot on campus selling a muffin and the biggest cup of black coffee he could find.

The street he thought was Wilshire turned out to be Olympic but that was good enough. He could head east, take Olympic to Hoover and get down to ‘SC without much hassle. Even if he encountered traffic, he’d be able to park at school, grab a quick bite and then settle into his office before the over zealous graduate student showed up with an endless litany of questions about the proper direction for his thesis project.

My mouth is dryer than Oscar Levant's wit. What else is on the agenda today? Howard, class at noon and then...wait...oh no, dinner at Lisa's tonight. It's fortunate I keep a clean shirt and tie at the office.

If he showed up in the wrinkled, stained shirt he currently had on, his younger sister would be all over him – badgering him about when he was finally going to get married and stop living like a rebellious teenager.

“You’re thirty-three years old, for God’s sake. You need a wife; you need to start a family. You’re a college professor. You should be focused on teaching and writing great books and molding young minds – which you could be doing with much more diligence if you settled down.”

He knew she meant well, but he already had one mother. In New Jersey. And he had moved three thousand miles away to escape her, only to have his little sister follow him to the west coast, carrying the maternal mantle all that way on her delicate shoulders.

You know what? I'm willing to put up with every moment of Lisa's incessant nagging if it means I get to spend time with my beautiful baby niece.

Gina Rose Kaufman was only three months old but she was already the light of David's life. He swore they bonded the first time he held her in Queen of Angels hospital. Her eyes focused on him and stayed fixed on his face for three or four minutes without wavering. Then she fell sound asleep, making the most precious cooing noises. David loved everything about her – the way her smooth, pink skin felt, the way she smelled – she truly was a gift from God.

Good gravy, now I'm crying.

The steady parade of tears fell from his eyes, made tracks down his cheeks and splashed into his lap. Trying to keep his blurred focus on the road, David searched the glove compartment for a tissue. Finding one, he wiped his eyes, blew his nose and tried to pull himself together.

Why am I such a mess?

A vision of Nolan in his underwear and black socks popped into David's head. He remembered the sex, hot and urgent. Finished minutes after it began. A searing wave of guilt and shame washed over David, threatening to drag him down into the dark muck of his mind.

Why can't I control myself? What's wrong with me? Everything.

By the time he strode into the lecture hall, precisely as the two hands met at the twelve on the black-rimmed wall clock, David Salinger was back in control. He had downed several cups of black coffee, changed his shirt, had his meeting with the inquisitive grad student and was now ready to pontificate on the root causes of the First World War. It was part of his current undergraduate class, *World History of the Twentieth Century*.

David was an engaging and popular professor. His classes were peppered with visual aides and entertaining anecdotes; he did his best to try to connect the past with relevant corollaries to his students' contemporary lives.

He was also well regarded among his colleagues, on a firm path to tenure. He was working on a book about the Jewish American immigrant experience in turn-of-the-century New York. The idea for the project grew out of an interview he had done with

his own grandfather a few years earlier, looking to capture that particular bit of family lore before the old man passed away. The vast majority of David's research was done, he had a firm outline and a clear sense of where he wanted the book to go; all he had to do was write the thing. If only he could add twenty extra hours to each week.

When the class ended, the students sailed out, some in pairs or small clusters, all in animated conversation. It was their unrestrained enthusiasm for the most mundane details of their lives, that David found touching. They practically percolated with optimism and hope.

If they only knew fate is lurking around the corner waiting to kick them in teeth.

As he packed up his books and gathered his note cards, David noticed a hesitant-looking student hovering in his peripheral vision. "May I help you?"

She giggled and blushed as she twisted her big toe into the linoleum. David offered a warm smile, allowing her to exhale and calm down. She had a question about their next paper on the rise of Facism, wanting to know if she could write about General Franco even though they hadn't yet covered him in class.

David responded, "Since I'm certain the majority of your classmates will write about Adolph Hitler, it would be quite a welcome relief to have you focus on Franco."

The student thanked him but stayed put. She hesitated and then blurted, "Okay, I know this is probably way out of line, but if I worked up a detailed outline before I start the essay, is there any way you could look it over and give me notes?" David informed her that that was his teaching assistant's job.

“The thing is, I really need to get an A this semester because, ever since I was a little girl, I’ve wanted to do my graduate work at Harvard and that’s never going to happen unless I do amazingly well here.”

She prattled on about a failed test after a horrendous fight with a boyfriend and gave many more breathless details than David needed, peppering her monologue with ardent praise for David’s teaching skills before she finally paused.

“I’d be happy to review your outline. Drop it by my office when it’s finished.”

The girl gushed, groveled and thanked him profusely and then vanished in a rush before he could change his mind. Buckling his briefcase clasp, David heard the voice of his friend and fellow professor, Charlie Yamamoto, in his head.

“The reason you get approached for this kind of malarkey is because you’re too nice. You let them take advantage of you. Doesn’t happen with me because I scare the crap out of them. They enter my office like they’re taking their final steps to the electric chair. And may I tell you something, David? That is exactly the way I prefer it. And you would, too, if you could learn to say no.”

David had heard variations on this rant every time he and Charlie were together. Thinking it through, David shrugged. He *was* a soft touch, so what? He wanted his students to like him; he got into this field to see each and every one of them succeed.

Besides, the busier I am, the less likely it is that I’ll wake up in a stranger’s bed.

While David returned to his office to outline the following week's lecture, his sister Lisa Kaufman was home in Sherman Oaks, darting into her first-floor powder room, happy to have to pee so she could catch her breath.

Is this really what my life has become? Getting to go to the bathroom alone is the highlight of my day?

She told herself that even if she was doing her best to relish every precious moment with her new baby, she couldn't deny that it was hard to recall a time when she wasn't completely exhausted.

As soon as her intense-but-relatively-brief four-hour labor was over, Lisa was convinced Gina was going to be her easy baby – unlike Gina's older sister Debbie who needed nearly twenty-four hours of nonstop, searing contractions to make her debut. Even their first child, Michael, took thirteen hours to emerge. Right from the start, Gina was serene, an observer. As long as she was being held, all was right with the world.

Sitting on the couch, giving Gina a bottle of formula as "The Guiding Light" flickered on the TV across the room, Lisa knew she needed to revel in this rare moment of calm. Soon, four-year-old Debbie would be up from her nap, they'd hurry out to the bus stop to meet Michael returning from his school day, and it would be chaos until the kids were in bed. Her husband Martin was a wonderful man, a great provider, a jovial dad – but he simply wasn't a whole lot of help on the domestic front. He made the money, maintained the yard and, during baseball season, took Michael to a half-dozen Dodger games. What more was a man expected to do?

Braving afternoon traffic, David headed for a tiny gift boutique on Ventura Boulevard. Standing with the perky saleswoman, he held a set of plastic stacking rings in one hand and a jack-in-the-box in the other, weighing his momentous decision. The clerk offered a patient grin and asked to be reminded of the age of David's niece.

“Three months tonight. That's what we're celebrating.”

“How lovely. Frankly, I'd go with the rings. The jack-in-the-box is a classic but it tends to scare the living bejeezus out of children. The parents crank the handle, “Pop Goes the Weasel” is tinkling along, and then that clown SPRINGS up so suddenly the poor little tykes burst into tears. I mean, honestly, I have never been clear on whether it's a toy or a certified instrument of torture.”

David chuckled. “I'll go with the rings.”

As the saleswoman wrapped the gift in bright yellow paper dotted with buoyant red balloons, David raked his fingers through his hair, worked to press his short sideburns into place and smoothed the front of his pale blue shirt. After having survived this day despite very little sleep and a backbreaking load of Jewish guilt, the last thing he needed was an inquisition from his baby sister.

Taking the tidy package, he thanked the woman and hurried out.

Driving to his sister's two-story white-shingled home on Vista del Monte, David's mind wandered to the book he was currently reading, *From Russia With Love* by Ian

Fleming. The main character was a dashing undercover spy, James Bond. David knew that the novel had recently been turned into a film but he had no intention of seeing it.

Movies from books are never as good as the source material so why waste my time and money? Besides, I know I'd much rather hang onto the James Bond who lives in my head.

David had a fascination with spy novels; he had been reading them since he was a teenager. Because he was a college professor – an “alleged intellectual,” as he often called himself – these works of fiction were a cherished respite from the more scholarly tomes he was required to read at the university. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* by John Buchan was another favorite – and hadn't seen that film, either. He didn't care that the supposed master Alfred Hitchcock directed it; he was convinced it would let him down.

Working it over in his head, David admitted to himself that the reason he loved these formidable secret agents, with their cool demeanor and multiple identities, was because each one possessed all of the qualities he would never have: being cock-sure, unflaggingly brave and determined to seduce any woman who crossed his path.

Lisa was in the kitchen adding a splash of olive oil to the kettle of boiling water when the doorbell rang. Instantly, she heard the thundering footsteps of Debbie and Michael overhead as they raced for the staircase.

Moving into the living room, Lisa snatched Gina up out of the playpen where she had been contentedly staring at her butterfly mobile and held the baby against her chest.

Debbie and Michael were right behind her, squealing about who might be at the door. Lisa promised to open it to find out.

“Uncle David!” Debbie and Michael shouted as they wrapped themselves around his legs; Lisa pulled her brother inside and closed the door. Before he acknowledged anyone else, David handed the wrapped package off to Lisa and reached for baby Gina. “Come on, give her up. I need to hug that little bundle right this instant.”

Eying the present, Michael piped up. “Is that for me?”

David cradled Gina in the crook of one arm and reached into his pocket with his free hand. “Afraid not, champ.” He extracted his hand and unfolded it to reveal two quarters. “But I do have...twenty-five whole cents each for you and precious Debbie!”

Michael grabbed the quarters, doling one out to his sister declaring that they were rich. Lisa advised them to run upstairs to put the coins right into their piggy banks before they got lost. The kids eagerly obliged. As soon as they were gone, Lisa waved the gift at David. “You know, you *can* actually show up without a present once in a while.”

David hoisted Gina into the air and slowly lowered her toward his face until their noses touched. The baby emitted a tiny giggle so pure and sweet it broke David’s heart.

Pacing the kitchen floor with Gina against his chest, her downy head tucked against the side of his neck, David watched Lisa slice a foot-long loaf of French bread. She asked how it was possible that Thanksgiving was only a week away. David reminded her she still hadn’t told him what he could bring.

“Swing by Marie Callendar’s and grab a couple of pies. An apple and a pumpkin would be perfect. I’m sure you’ve heard the folks are driving out to Aunt Ruby’s. Mom’s

told me thirty or forty times already – squeezed between boundless whining about how you and I had to move across the country and ruin her life.”

David looked over the top of the baby’s head. “Is she asleep?”

Lisa nodded. Gina looked completely at peace, secure in her uncle’s arms. David asked who else would be joining them for Thanksgiving dinner.

“Ken and Marilyn and their two kids...Martin’s parents, of course – oh, and did I tell you? I invited my friend Joanne.” Seeing David’s blank look, Lisa went on. “You know, Joanne, from my painting class. I’ve told you about her: she’s smart and funny, really pretty – she works at Yamashiro as the evening hostess.” Lisa caught David’s eye and raised her brows in a mischievous declaration. “And she’s single.”

Feeling his face flush, David turned away to hide his chagrin.

“Honestly, David, you need to think about settling down.”

Later, after a delicious dinner with homemade strawberry tarts for dessert, David sat in the den with his brother-in-law, giving Gina a bottle of formula. Lisa was upstairs putting the other two kids to bed. The TV was tuned into “Dr. Kildare” but neither of them was paying much attention. David asked Martin about work.

“We’ve been selling like crazy. All of a sudden everybody’s listening to Dinah Shore, deciding to see the U.S.A. in a Chevrolet. And ya know what? Whatever it takes to bring them in is a-okay by me.”

Martin was partnered in a Chevy dealership in downtown Burbank with Teddy Winslow, his college roommate from UCLA. When they set out to name their business

six years earlier, they'd tried to come up with a catchy hybrid or hyphenate version of their two names but Martin feared that any variation on Kaufman sounded too Jewish.

"It's not as if I'm ashamed," he said at the time, "but we don't need to shove it in people's faces. We're in Burbank. It'd be a different ballgame if we were in Encino."

In the end, they had simply settled on calling their place Winslow Chevrolet.

As Martin prattled on about the latest fancy features on his favorite new models, David's attention drifted to the television.

I certainly wouldn't mind a head-to-toe examination from that Doctor Kildare. Especially not if wanted to get naked with me.

When Lisa rejoined them, it was time to get Gina up to her cradle, still at the foot of her parents' bed. Martin was sure the baby was ready to be moved into the antique oak crib waiting in Gina's own room but Lisa wasn't prepared to let her go.

"She's our last baby, Marty; please let me spoil her a while longer."

As Lisa lifted the sleeping tot from the warmth of her uncle's arms, Gina woke up. Her heavy lids blinked a few times like a sultan's fan and then snapped wide open. Her gaze fixed on her mother's enamored face and the baby broke into an ear-to-ear grin.

David was ecstatic. "Oh my God! Did you see that? No doubt about it, it was a purposeful smile for her momma. Not gas, a real smile. And I was here to witness it!"

Driving home, David was speeding through Beverly Glen Canyon. From the Valley, it was a steep incline that peaked at Mulholland and then took a sharp downward

grade to Sunset Boulevard. It wasn't the quickest route back to his bungalow in Silver Lake but, on this particular night, it was the way David felt he needed to go.

Approaching the top of the mountain, his mind was whirling.

Lectures to prepare, letters of recommendation to write, Thanksgiving with a hostess from Yamashiro who, bless her heart, probably thinks I'm a prospective husband. Nolan and his black socks. That fellow from Detroit with the haunting green eyes I picked up so late on a Saturday night on Santa Monica Boulevard. Oh God – and the Midas Muffler man...a two-for-one brake job and a blowjob. I'm not even sure that kid was eighteen.

Stomping on the gas pedal, David was getting closer to the hairpin turn where he'd have a light-dappled view of the San Fernando Valley in his rearview mirror while the open, empty canyon appeared in front of him. All he'd have to do was drive over that rim and it would be done.

The shame. The guilt. The self-loathing. He'd never have to admit anything to anyone. He'd sail into the air and be free.

With no one in front of him, David gunned the engine and punched the pedal to the floor.

In another minute I'll be soaring.

##