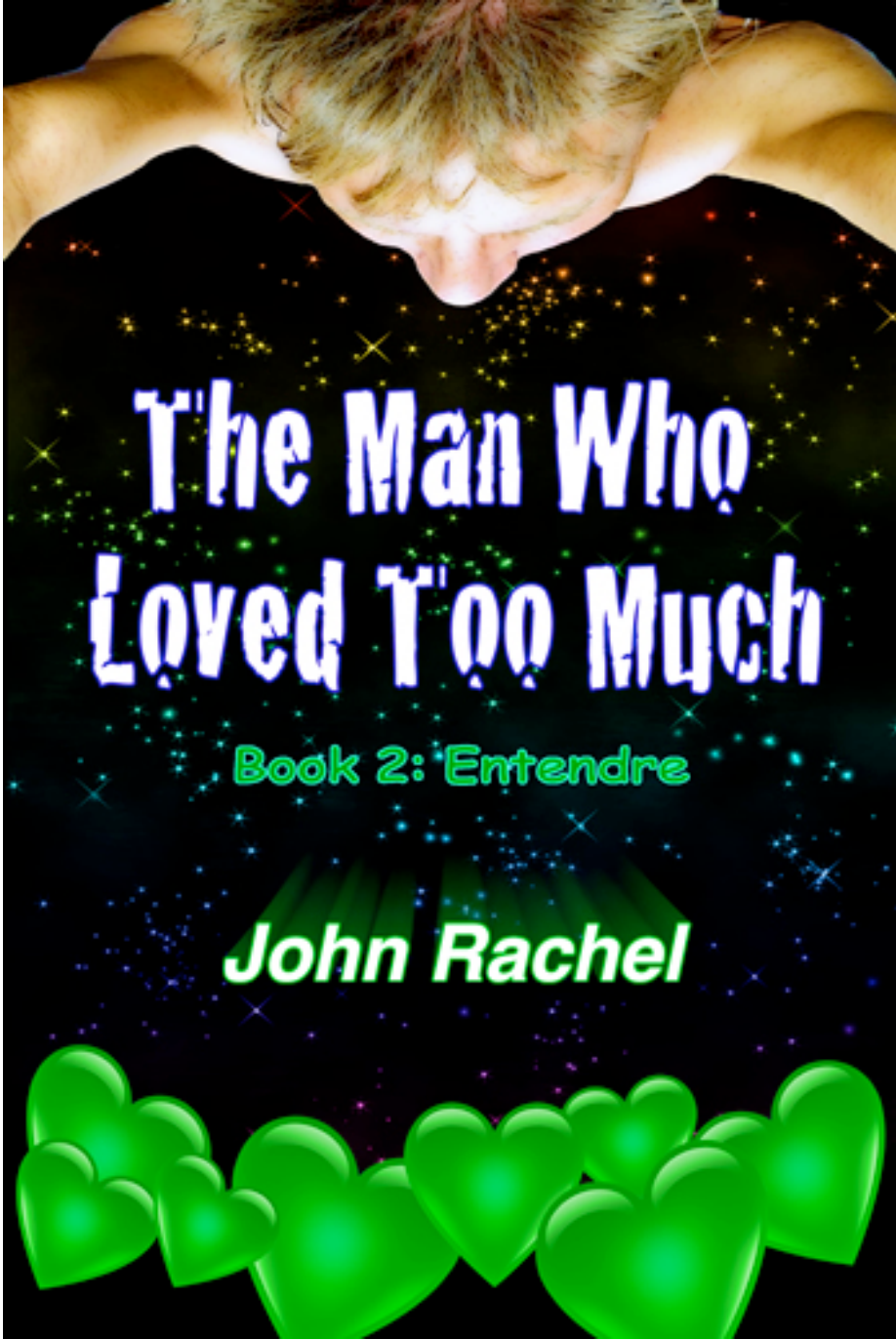




The Man Who Loved Too Much

Book 2: Entendre

John Rachel



THE MAN WHO LOVED TOO MUCH

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by John Rachel

Chapter One

[Sample Excerpt]

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Book 2: Entendre
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by John Rachel

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Chapter One

THE HABITS OF CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

2003 – 2004

Dear Ann Landers

Billy had a quirky professor Spring Term for his PSYCH 2800 - Introduction to Social Psychology class. Her name was Dr. Phyllis Hargus and in spite of the fact that her physical appearance placed her somewhere around 110 years old, she had the enthusiasm and energy of high school cheerleader.

Billy found her classes, if not informative, at least entertaining. For her often risqué lectures, Professor Hargus had a good sense of humor, a sharp tongue — which she routinely turned on herself in hilarious bouts of self-mockery referencing her dwindling sex appeal and 100% failure rate with the opposite sex — plus a seemingly infinite number of personal anecdotes to draw from. It was clear that Professor Hargus thought that the psychology of social interactions 99.9% of the time revolved around sex, but never bothered to identify what that other .1% might be. No one seemed to care.

She also had a nearly pathological obsession with the personal advice columns that typically appeared in daily newspapers and had over the years increasingly become a staple in popular magazines as well, especially men's and women's monthlies — such as Playboy and Cosmopolitan — or targeted niche publications — like Seventeen and Ebony.

She had apparently grown up reading the advice columns of Ann Landers and Dear Abby. They were twin sisters who competed fiercely for popularity and syndication in newspapers all across America during the last half of the 20th Century, and made no secret how much they hated one another.

These two legends had spawned a whole industry, so that now there was a vast number of personal help pundits, each with a following and distinctive style. Dr. Hargus had enormous respect for the whole range — Dr. Ruth, Miss Manners, Dr. Tracy, Dr. Joyce Brothers, Carolyn Hax.

But Professor Hargus also enthusiastically embraced the new breed of irreverent, caustic, outrageous columnists who delivered advice and abuse in equal proportions. Whereas Abby and Ann were gentle and genteel, Dan Savage, The Love Doctor, Dog, and a host of new print and web-based counselors were more pop pugilists than pop psychologists.

Of course, Billy thought all advice columns were crap. What little exposure he had to them, browsing through the occasional pop zines and now going online as part of his class assignments for Hargus, only made him wonder what was so special about these editorial psychologists that they were now in a position to be telling others what to do. Plus he had the suspicion that they themselves were probably pretty screwed up, prompting him to conclude that they should deal

with their own issues before tackling those of everyone else.

But Dr. Hargus was convinced that advice columns were insightful portholes into the psyches of the public, and if that's what the professor had decided, Billy would suspend judgment and go through the required motions, buoyed by a blind faith that something valuable might come out of it.

One thing Billy couldn't deny. Hargus's classes were a lot of fun and never predictable. The most comical, sometimes heated discussions would arise out of some silly, seemingly innocuous question, and the advice offered by the columnist.

"Okay, class. We have an interesting one today. I'll hand these out. Please pass them along. We can read this together." Dr. Hargus took a couple big handfuls of the printed questions and responses and gave them to students in the front row to distribute. "Now do not, I repeat, *do not* turn these over to look at the columnist's advice until we come to that. Okay. Everybody's got it? Let's go over the question and see what we think."

Professor Hargus read aloud.

Dear _____ :

My girlfriend acts like a dude. It didn't bother me when we first started dating but it's getting to me, more and more, lately.

How can I get my girlfriend to act more feminine?

- Guy Who Wants A Real Lady

"Alright. I see a number of hands already in the air." Pointing at a hard-looking blond with tattoos and a leather jacket. "Yes? You there. Courtney Love."

"This guy's the problem. Who is he to tell her how to act?"

Groans from some of the guys.

"Yes. The guy with the Hard Rock Café shirt."

"If the guy wanted to date Tom Cruise, he'd be a homo, right? So he wants a girl who acts like a girl. But Lizzy Borden over there might be right. He's probably a wussie boy who would be better off with some cuddly kewpie doll instead of the dyke he's with right now."

That brought a lot of laughs.

"Okay, class. What's the advice we give him?"

Courtney Love again.

"The guy needs to get a clue. He should cancel his subscription to the Disney Channel and start going to strip clubs."

"Hard Rock Café?"

"He should sign up to become a pen pal with a bunch of Japanese high school girls."

A girl a few seats over shouted. "Is that how you got started?"

"Anyone else want to venture advice to our poor femininity-starved boy?"

Billy stood up.

“Masculine and feminine are artificial categories, solely made up by human beings with a lot of time on their hands and too many products to sell. Either the guy finds his current girlfriend attractive or he doesn’t. If he doesn’t, it’s time to move on. Unless she looks like Marlon Brando, some other guy will think she’s a dish and she won’t have to waste the time and energy trying to match up to this guy’s comic book idea of femininity. The guy should have no problem finding someone. He should just start hanging out in the cosmetics and perfume department at Macy’s or Walmart.”

There seem to be unanimous approval from the girls in the class. The guys offered polite nods of assent. There were a lot of why-didn’t-I-think-of-that expressions, probably at having lost a great opportunity to impress the girls, who now thought Billy had it pretty much together.

Dr. Hargus loved it when the boys got slapped in the face by one their own. She always stressed in her lectures that male competitiveness was one of the primal forces driving civilization building, matched only by female competitiveness, both of them trumped by the ongoing age-old battle between the sexes.

“Nice work, young man. That pretty much agrees with the columnist’s reply. Flip over your sheets and check out the response given by the advice professional.”

GWWARL:

*How does she act like a dude? Spitting, cursing,
scratching her balls in public? And she pees standing
up? What? Don't tell me she's finally beating you in
Guitar Hero and your ego is being bruised?*

*She is who she is and your asking her to act more
feminine around you will result in you playing Guitar
Hero on your own.*

*If the attraction isn't there anymore ... well, then it just
isn't there ... She prancing around, following a script (if
she went there), would only work for so long.*

“Let me ask you this. With a show of hands, please. Is this columnist male or female?”

The class decided almost unanimously it was a male. Only two dissenting votes.

To the raucous laughter of the rest of the class, she pulled two dunce hats out of a large bag she always brought to class with her, then had them passed up to the two students — one male and one female — who had guessed wrong. They had to wear the hats for the rest of the class period.

“Yes, class. He’s pretty gnarly. But he knows the subject matter. It was probably himself he was describing there. Spitting. Scratching his crotch. But I love the guy. He really nails it. Besides, I don’t know any girls who play Guitar Hero. Okay. Hopefully you didn’t peek at the reply to the next one. Let’s go back

to the front of the page. This is a broken-heart letter. This young man got dumped. I can't imagine that happening to any of the handsome, well-mannered, highly intelligent lads in this room."

The girls got a big hurrah out of that one. Choruses of '*Oh no, never*' and '*Not them*' went up all around. The guys were good sports and took it in stride, having often been the butt of Professor Hargus' taunting.

"Here we go." She read aloud.

Dear ————— :

In October, my college girlfriend ended our relationship by email within a week of our year anniversary, my longest relationship to date. She said a lot of stuff about us living too far away (30-minute drive) and that she needed time to be alone.

Not three weeks later, I found out she was dating some other guy.

I never contacted her after the first month of being broken up. When I got the email, I called her and told her how much she meant to me, but she insisted that the distance wasn't working, and that she needed to be alone. A week or two later, I called to just say hello because I was feeling pretty low (I didn't tell her that) and she got off the phone pretty quick. I never contacted her since, because I knew that would only be bad for me.

I've been doing everything to get over it; taking her number out of my phone, getting rid of anything she gave me, all mementos of the relationship.

But yet I'm having a hard time forgetting her. I've gotten to a point where I know that if she wanted me back, I'd even say no to her, because I see now that it wasn't like the relationship was working so great by the time we broke up. So it's not like I feel like she was the only one for me. But I can't forget the good times, and I can't forget the way she just left me like that. I've been on a few dates since the breakup, but I didn't enjoy it.

I've done everything to start living my own life and forget about her (I've been good enough to not even try to get in contact with her since the break-up), so why am I still dwelling on it? It's been almost eight months!

I feel like I need some sort of closure; I want so badly to tell her how she hurt me by dumping me so coldly and lying to me. But I feel like it would be a bad idea to call her up just to say that.

- How Can I Get Some Closure?

“Alright. Once you’ve all pulled yourself together and stopped crying, I’d like your thoughts on both the letter and whether any of you have ever had this much trouble getting over a relationship.”

There wasn’t much crying going on but there sure were a lot of strong opinions. The class took on aspects of a bedlam-based TV talk show.

“Why is it some girls get in your head and lodge there like an intestinal parasite?”

“That should only be a problem for guys with their intestines in their heads.”

“Or their heads up their butts.”

“This guy’s a drama queen. He’s wallowing in his self-pity. He’s like twenty years old and he thinks his life is over. Why doesn’t he just go out and get laid?”

“God, I hope I never go out with someone like you.”

“You won’t have to worry about that.”

“What is it with you guys? Is it that you don’t have feelings? Or is it that you’re just way too cool to admit you have feelings? Here’s a guy who actually loved a girl and misses her. Tell me. What’s wrong with that? You have to make fun of him for caring.”

“He thinks she was so special because she got out first. If he had been smart enough to dump the bitch first, she’d be writing this pathetic letter.”

“It’s a question of sensitivity. Or I should say, insensitivity. There are too many people in the world. An individual has no worth. So he or she gets no respect. This girl took the coward’s way out. The guy got majorly dumped on. It’s that simple.”

“The guy’s a pussy-whipped idiot. He should have seen it coming.”

“It’s not that simple. You don’t know anything about him.”

“And you don’t know anything about her either. Maybe she’s a slut.”

“Regardless. The truth is that nowadays, for both sexes, it’s all just fast food. There’s no loyalty anymore. No one is in it for the long haul. We change partners like we change our underwear.”

“Maybe that’s why she left. Because he never changed his underwear.”

“The issue is not that she broke up with him. It’s the callous way she handled it. You don’t have to mess the other person up. There’s a right way and a wrong way.”

“Well, as a really sensitive guy, I agree with you there. By the way, what are you doing Saturday night?”

“I’m weightlifting with my three lesbian girlfriends.”

“Anyway. Like I was saying. The email thing was not happening. Very bad form. When I broke up with my last girlfriend, I used a much more delicate touch.”

“And that was?”

“She had this cat that used to attack me every time we were in bed together. I still have the scars on my back if you want to see them. Anyway, I attached a note to the cat after I strangled it with a guitar string from my ex’s Martin D-40. Her guitar playing sucked anyway. Not the cat’s. My ex’s. The girl played guitar like Stephen Hawking plays rugby. Maybe not even that good.”

Professor Hargus couldn’t let this one go by.

“Excuse me. If you’re not making this up, what did the note say?”

“I’m not making it up. The note was direct and to the point. It said, ‘Hey, you know the Paul Simon song, 50 Ways To Leave Your Lover? Well ... here’s number 51 ... I ain’t gettin’ hitched, bitch.’ She definitely got the message.”

“Your mom must be proud of you.”

“My mom’s dead.”

“Strangled with a guitar string?”

*"Fuck you! I didn't really kill the cat.
It died of natural causes."*

"Like rat poison?"

Before all hell broke loose, Professor Hargus jumped in.

"Okay. Let's cool it down here a bit. I like a spirited discussion, students. But let's stay away from personal attacks. Alright. Let's look at what the professional has to say to this jilted guy, who does not want the girl back, mind you, but says he wants 'closure'. Does anyone want to tell me what closure is in this context?"

Most students seemed to be slipping lower in their seats. A few looked thoughtful, while two others popped open laptops, presumably to look for the dictionary program. So far there was a conspicuous lack of hands.

"Anyone? Not all at once now. Okay... you young lady. The only one with her hand up."

"He wants to clear the air of any bad feelings. Just feel like they understand one another and are able to end their relationship with no resentment or bitterness. Maybe come clean as to what exactly happened and be completely honest about it."

"Excellent. Excellent answer. Okay, let's see what advice-giver says."

HCIGSC:

*Let me count the ways in which you are better off
without this girl ...*

- 1. Timing the break-up to an anniversary is just
incredible weak. She had ample time to end the
relationship. (She is inconsiderate and selfish).*
- 2. A 30-minute drive is not a long-distance relationship.
That is almost like being neighbors, in any
metropolitan area. (She is lazy and dumb).*
- 3. She told you that she needs "time to be alone" ...
This in reality, translates to "please don't bug me; I'm
already working on this other guy". (She is a cheat
and a slut).*
- 4. Email break-ups are laughable. (She is cowardly
and pathetic).*

*The fact is: She was already working on that other dude
before even breaking up with you ... Sooner or later, the
other dude will also get to experience her weak-arse
excuses and blame games.*

*You'll get closure when you have a new and much
hotter girlfriend's legs wrapped around your head and
she can't get through a single day without fucking your
brains out.*

Give it time. Go out with your friends and meet some new people. You will be hard-pressed to find someone "weaker" than this ex-girlfriend. When you stop moping around the house and start meeting people, you will also start remembering the times when she bugged the hell of you ...

Really ... your old girlfriend laying naked, sweaty and panting in your bed, was not your whole relationship. It wasn't ... really.

Good luck!

"I feel like I should fire a starting gun. In any case, it's off to the races."

*"This columnist is the same as for the last letter, right?
Only a male would trash a girl like that. What a pig!
He called her a slut."*

"You're right about that. If the tables were turned and it was the guy who started banging another girl and left his ex stranded, this writer would be whapping the guy on the back, telling him how incredibly cool he was."

*"That's not fair. You can't second guess what
he'd say."*

"How can he go second guessing the girl? When he says that her saying she needs time alone has to mean that she is already with another guy. How can he claim to know that? Maybe the girl was thinking about it but hadn't done anything yet. Maybe she wanted a clean break before she got into the new relationship. Meaning time alone."

"Maybe Mary Magdalene was a virgin."

"Is that the best you can do? Maybe she was a virgin. That was 2000 years ago. Maybe Monica Lewinski was a virgin. Who cares?"

"Maybe Bill Clinton is a virgin!"

"I love the ending where he says, ' your girlfriend laying naked, sweaty and panting in your bed, was not your whole relationship.' I don't know. I could go for some of the naked, sweaty and panting."

“Join a nudist colony and take up jogging.”

“This writer makes some sense. And gives some good advice. The girl was lying. She said the same stupid things everyone says when they want to break it off but don’t have the guts to just say it. And Mr. Feel Sorry does need to just get out there and stop moping.”

“But the way he goes out of his way to demean her. Look at this. She’s inconsiderate and selfish. Lazy and dumb. A cheat and a slut. Cowardly and pathetic.”

“He’s got a problem with women. He is definitely a misogynist.”

“How do you even like know he’s married?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Duh! Misogynist? Someone with like more than one wife.”

“That’s bigamist. B-I-G-A-M-I-S-T.”

“No matter how you dice it, for someone who is in the public eye telling others how to behave and conduct their lives, he may be funny, but he has no sensitivity.”

“Fuck sensitivity. I eat sensitivity for breakfast and spit it out on the way to class. It’s Darwin, baby. SOTF. That’s what it’s all about.”

“SOTF? What’s SOTF?”

“Survival of the fittest. If you can’t compete, it’s in the street. Next to the garbage.”

“I envy the lucky girl who marries you.”

“I ain’t ever getting married. But thanks for asking.”

“I’d rather have my tongue pulled out through my ass by a monster truck.”

“What about the whole legal aspect? He should be able to sue the bitch for damages. For all the mental grief. And for lying. That’s fraud. She should have to pay!”

“Then she should be able to sue him for being such a boring wimp-ass and a crybaby. Think of all her mental grief listening to his girly-boy eunuch whining.”

“If the guy’s a eunuch, it’s because she’s a castrating bitch. Look what she did to him. And how he ended up.”

“I love the way everyone can read so much into this. The letter is from the guy. What if she had written the letter? You’d get a whole other story.”

“Men are such pigs. Take away their beer and call them on how inconsiderate they are, and suddenly we’re all running around with axes and machetes. Think about how stupid that is.”

“Besides. Guys don’t need us to castrate them. They do it to themselves. It’s happening all of the time.”

“I don’t think so!”

“No way!”

“Just look at the way you act. Jealousy. Possessiveness. You think if you sleep with a girl, you own it. The thought of another guy putting his willy in there drives you nuts. The big strong stud bull becomes a whiny little mouse. This guy that wrote the letter so much as admits it.”

“That right. It’s been eight months and the guy says he still can’t enjoy going out. What else can you take from that? Snip snip. He’s his own worst enemy.”

A boy speaks out in a very high-pitched voice.

“Alright. Who put the helium in my asthma inhaler?”

And so it went. In every class Dr. Hargus continued acting like a supercharged hybrid of Jerry Springer and Oprah Winfrey. Billy cruised along, never even once tempted to change the channel. It was a hoot!

Spring Term galloped into April. Billy and the rest of the class continued unsuccessfully trying to second guess what the core substance of PSYCH 2800 was — in other words, what the material was they were expected to master and would ultimately be tested on. There seemed to be no formal lesson plan. It was impossible to figure out in terms of coherent subject matter, where they had been, much less divine where the course was ultimately heading.

The question of tests and grading was solved the third Tuesday of the month. Professor Hargus marched into class precisely at 10:00 am and launched into her carefully prepared speech.

“Okay, class. We’ve only got three weeks of regular class to go, and I have a very important announcement. First, the good news. I will not be giving you a final exam in this class.”

Whoops and cheers filled the room. It felt momentarily more like a pep rally than a bonafide psychology class.

As the ovation subsided, one male student yelled out from the back of the room.

“What’s the bad news? Am I going to have to have sex with you?”

Dr. Hargus laughed along with the class.

“You could wish. I’ll say this. If you did, I guarantee you’d never look at your grandmother the same way. No. The bad news is ... I’m pregnant and I don’t know which one of you is the father.”

A chorus of groans from the boys competed with tittering and laughter from the girls. One girl then yelled out.

“It would be bad news if any of these guys were the father, that’s for sure.”

Boos and catcalls from the males collided head-on with hisses and catcalls from the girls.

Professor Hargus decided to get down to the business at hand.

“Okay. Okay. Enough fun. Let me explain how you will earn your grade. As I said, no formal exam. So don’t even show up exam week at the designated time. I won’t be here. Neither should you. Now let me explain. This is the first time I’ve tried this. But I think it’s going to really pull everything together. Let’s see.” She picked up the enrollment form listing the members of class. “We started out with forty-two. Six drops. And from what I can tell, three of you have never been to class ever. That leaves thirty-three. What I want each of you to do is write a short letter, just like the ones we have been looking at all term. Address it to Dear Hargee — that’s me. In this letter, you will describe some real or invented problem. ‘Dear Hargee. I caught my new boyfriend trying on my panties the other day. He claims it was an honest mistake. But he was also wearing lipstick at the time. What should I do?’ Okay? That’s just an example. But that’s the idea. Whatever problem you want answered. But listen, class. Part of your grade will be based on the originality of your letter. So don’t just regurgitate the same old predictable stuff. Really think about some problem we haven’t discussed here in class. Or maybe you have some really unique situation in your life. Your originality, that’s part of your grade. The other part comes from advice you give to others. This is how it works. Each letter turned in — there should be thirty-three total — will be given to the other members of this class. They will

each write their own advice. You should get thirty-two replies. Since every reply will be signed, I will know what each and every one of you have said and will grade you accordingly. Let me summarize this and make it completely clear how this will work. Your overall grade for this entire class will be based first, on what question you come up with, and second what advice you give to the thirty-two questions you receive from other members of this class.”

The groans were back. And they weren’t fun groans.

“Now now. I know this sounds like a lot of work. But it’s not. Not really. The problems and the replies should be short and sweet. Direct and to the point. Just like what we’ve been reading all along. The key is common sense. You can be weird and wacky and try too hard or think you want to be clever. But that’s not going to cut it. Because being weird does not reflect the majority of the people out there. People have real problems and the want sensible answers. This is not a class in science fiction or creative writing. This is about the dynamic psychological elements — the unwritten rules of behavior, if you will — which are the sum and substance of our social interactions. Human interactions. So let’s keep it real. Have fun with it but *please*, keep it on planet Earth, year 2003 C.E. Any questions?”

One mock-whiny voice from off to the side filled the silence.

“Is it too late to drop this class?”

Dr. Hargus looked at him over the top of her glasses.

“Will an F hurt your grade point average?”

Another student replied.

“An F would raise his grade point average.”

Professor Hargus laid out the timetable. Letters were due at the beginning of the next class. She would have them copied for distribution by the end of the 90-minute lecture period. That would give everyone just under three weeks to come up with their replies. All replies were due in her office no later than Monday of Study Period week.

“Go to it, lads and lasses. See you day after tomorrow. Same time. Same station.”

It was a very somber group of students that lumbered out of the lecture hall.

Billy walked out of class and sat down under a tree. He finished his letter less than twenty minutes.

Dear Hargee,

I am deeply in love with a girl I've been dating for about a year.

She has a lousy family. She can't stand them, and has minimum contact with them.

There are only two people in her life, people she is truly close to.

I, of course, am one of them. Her best friend, a girl who she has known from all the way back in elementary school, is the other.

This friend occasionally comes to visit my girlfriend here at Cornell, and I have slowly grown to like her. They are obviously very good for one another and I can see their friendship is a very positive thing.

This friend visited very recently and we all went out to dinner.

We had a great time but then at the end of the evening a very strange thing happened.

My girl's best friend first told us that she thinks we are a really great couple and believes we should get married. That was cool. Then she said she knew I couldn't afford to buy an engagement ring right now. So she had gone ahead and bought one for us.

Yes. It's true. She pulled out a 1½ carat diamond engagement ring, gave it to my girlfriend and said it was hers to keep, so that if we wanted to get engaged, we could make it official.

I have been thinking a lot over the last few months about someday asking my girlfriend to get married. But obviously I assumed it was something I would do sometime well off in the future. The ring really caught me off guard.

I don't know what to think. Or how I should feel.

On one hand, it was such a kind and generous gesture.

On the other, it seems kind of weird having someone else just take the ball on this and run, without even checking with either of us.

Maybe whatever hangups I have about not buying the ring myself are silly and it's a gift I should accept. But I am really having trouble convincing myself. Something just doesn't seem right.

Am I off base here? Is this too weird? What should I do?

*Broke and in love,
Billy Green*

Billy's was one of three letters Professor Hargus singled out for uniqueness, relevance and creativity. Having identified it as such, she added as an aside, that we could safely assume this was not a problem actually confronting Mr. Green at this time, making it an even more noteworthy triumph of his imagination.

There was greater agreement in the responses given to Billy than for any of the other letters.

- (29) recommended that if he and his girlfriend finalized their engagement, they accept the ring, and moreover make special mention of the friend's generosity at their wedding. The 29 judged it as an act of extreme unselfishness, demonstrating the value of true friendship. 23 went on to say that for Billy to be threatened by the gift of the ring was just his male ego clinging on to outdated ideas about the rigid roles of men and women. 17 used the phrase "that's what friends are for", and 9 said "don't look a gift horse in the mouth", or words to that effect.
- (1) said in no uncertain terms that the best friend was way out of line and being pushy. She obviously was threatened by Billy and was trying to regain top billing for herself in his girlfriend's eyes, even if it meant giving her friend up to marriage. This person surmised she would always hold it over them that she was the one who pushed them into it, exerting some sort of weird control over them. They should give the ring back and tell her to mind her own business.
- (1) suggested Billy grab the ring for himself, dump his girlfriend, and either pawn the ring or ask the best friend to marry him. The best friend was obviously loaded with bucks and loose with her wallet, two qualities which a discerning man should always look for in a prospective wife.
- (1) told Billy to bail immediately, because there was something funny going on. The girls had probably planned the whole thing together. In all likelihood, they are man-haters or lesbians playing a sick joke on a poor unsuspecting male.

Billy got the only A for the class.

Everyone else got B or below.

Two schmucks got an F.

Make Love Not War

Back in March while Billy and Natalie were holed up in the Motel California huddled in each other's embrace, there were thousands of people in another part of the world holed up and huddled as well.

Shock and awe.

That was what they called the raining down on Baghdad of tens of thousands of pounds of explosives as punishment for Saddam Hussein's refusal to cede his iron-fist rule over Iraq, as demanded by President and Commander-In-Chief, George W. Bush, and the cobbled-together Coalition of the Willing.

The message was unequivocal.

Do as we say or we kill you.

So the innocent citizens of Iraq — young and old, men, women, children — already struggling to survive the aftermath of the Iraq-Iran war, the punishing defeat of Operation Desert Storm, and cruel sanctions imposed on their country because of the tyrannical rule of a ruthless and sinister Saddam Hussein, were now holed up below the ground, huddled against one another, trembling and afraid as explosion after explosion wreaked unfathomable terror and destruction on their cities, homes, temples, schools, hospitals, museums, and mosques.

People were holed up and huddled.

Billy and Natalie.

The citizens of Iraq.

The same three days.

Let's do some war math.

In the first 72 hours of the air assault on the relatively defenseless country, over 1000 cruise and other sophisticated missiles leveled building after building, vaporized or dismembered thousands of civilians, and sent tens of thousands of screaming citizens scrambling from one burning building to another. Smart and dumb bombs alike, launched by technological miracles like the F-117A Stealth Fighter, and dropped in random carpet bombing by behemoth cargo airships of death like the stalwart B-52, also ran into the thousands. Some of these bombs were so massive they had destructive capabilities which rivaled nuclear devices.

The air assault impersonally and efficiently almost completely destroyed the infrastructure required to support the millions of people crammed into Baghdad and other urban centers, dotting the vast uninhabitable sea of hot sand which comprises 98% of the country of Iraq. The people who survived the initial shock and awe faced a long difficult battle. They would be holed up and huddled for some time to come.

Now let's do some love math.

In that same 72 hours, Billy and Natalie made love 11 times. Billy's orgasm count was 14. Natalie's was 27.

Let's take this a step further.

There are over 7 billion people in the world.

For arguments sake, let's safely assume that about half of them are coital capable-and-ready.

That's 3½ billion.

Let's say that half of those are in some sort of relationship or have within their immediate range of options someone to make love to.

Now we're at $1\frac{3}{4}$ billion.

Let's conservatively say that each of the $1\frac{3}{4}$ billion has sex once a week, resulting in a happy ending, meaning an orgasm.

That would suggest that during the three day shock and awe bombardment of Baghdad, 3 out of 7 of the $1\frac{3}{4}$ billion coital capable-ready-and-accessible had happy-ending sex.

Click click click equal sign.

So while thousands of bombs were being dropped on thousands of people in Baghdad, there were over 750,000,000 people having orgasms.

Let's see.

Drop bombs kill people.

Or.

Make love happy ending.

Hmmm.

Tough call.

While Billy and Natalie followed a make-love-happy-ending scenario along with 750 million others, no one died, no one had their arms or legs shot off, no one was blinded or crippled for life. Both Billy and Natalie emerged from their experience with blissful smiles and hopeful dreams for the future.

Probably a good number of the other 750 million did as well.

They at least were in a decent mood.

President Ronald Reagan, one of the most popular presidents in recent history, probably because he articulated an easily-grasped vision of the world, unencumbered by logic and uncomplicated by fact or historical perspective, had a favorite phrase he used to completely baffle and disarm his critics. It was one of those perfect combinations of words, for which American English seems particularly adapted, which said absolutely nothing but managed to bring to a complete halt any further equivocation, or for that matter any further intelligent communication. The phrase was ...

"There you go again."

Yup.

There we go again.

It does kind of sum it all up.

The repetition. The familiar patterns. The cyclical nature of things.

Birth. Life. Death. Birth. Life. Death.

The good and the bad. All the glory and tedium that defines us.

The dreams. The despair. The optimism and pessimism. Triumphs and tragedies. Boldness and cowardice. Daring and fear. Celebrity and anonymity. Order and chaos.

There we go again.

Yup.

2003 was the Chinese Year of the Sheep.

People in the U. S. generally lived up to the characterization. They flocked to the malls, flocked to the stadiums, flocked to the movie theater, flocked wherever

the powerless and unthinking flock to when they can't look at the mess the world is in, or own up to the tiny bit of responsibility and blame which falls on them for the catastrophic shape of things.

Beyond the initiation of war in Iraq, many notable things happened in 2003.

In January: The last signal is received from NASA's Pioneer 10 spacecraft, some 7.5 billion miles from Earth. The 108th United States Congress is sworn in. In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the Thai Embassy is burned and commercial properties of Thai businesses are vandalized. Super Bowl XXXVII, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers defeat the Oakland Raiders 48-21. The Space Shuttle Columbia is launched on what turns out to be its last flight because ...

On February 1st, at the conclusion of its mission, the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrates during reentry over Texas, killing all seven astronauts onboard.

That same day, in Northern Ireland, Protestant Ulster Defence Association Belfast leader John Gregg is killed by a loyalist faction.

Also in February: An arsonist destroys a train in Daegu, South Korea, killing more than 190. The Station nightclub fire in West Warwick, Rhode Island claims the lives of 100 people, when the stage incendiaries of the feature band, Great White, turn the facility into an inferno. The kids-show TV star Mr. Rogers and country-western singer Johnny Paycheck die.

In March: In two separate opinions, the Supreme Court of the United States, by 5-4 margins, upholds California's 'three strikes and you're out' law. Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić is assassinated in Belgrade. The UN's World Health Organization issues a global alert on SARS. The scientific journal Nature reports that 350,000-year-old upright-walking human footprints had been found in Italy. FBI agents raid the corporate headquarters of HealthSouth Corporation in Birmingham, Alabama, on suspicion of massive corporate fraud led by the company's top executives. The 75th Academy Awards ceremony, hosted by Steve Martin, is held at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood. *Chicago* wins Best Picture. WHO doctor Carlo Urbani, who first identified SARS, dies of the disease.

In April: A passenger bus is destroyed by a remote-controlled land mine in the Chechen capital, killing at least eight innocent people. Syracuse wins the college basketball National Championship. The Human Genome Project is completed, with 99% of the human genome sequenced to 99.99% accuracy. Nina Simone dies.

In May: A major severe weather outbreak spawns more tornadoes than any week in U. S. history, as 393 tornadoes are reported in 19 states. A female suicide bomber blows up explosives strapped to her waist in a crowd of thousands of Muslim pilgrims, killing at least eighteen people in Chechnya. May 15th is the date predicted by Pana-Wave Laboratory, a Japanese cult, for a close encounter with an unknown planet which would result in the extinction of most of humankind. Dewey, the first deer cloned by scientists at Texas A&M University, is born. Top Thrill Dragster opens in Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio as the world's tallest, fastest roller coaster. Prometea, the first horse ever cloned, is born.

In June: The 29th G8 summit opens in Évian-les-Bains, France, to tight security and tens of thousands of protesters. Martha Stewart and her broker are

indicted for using privileged investment information and then obstructing a federal investigation. A female suicide bomber detonates a bomb near a bus carrying soldiers and civilians to a military airfield in Mozdok, a major staging point for Russian troops in Chechnya, killing at least sixteen. Sodomy laws are declared unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas* by the U. S. Supreme Court. The largest hailstone ever recorded, the size of a volleyball, falls in Aurora, Nebraska. Gregory Peck and Katherine Hepburn die, as do author Leon Uris and television journalist David Brinkley.

In July: SARS is declared to be contained by the WHO. The 70-meter Eupatoria Planetary Radar sends the METI message, Cosmic Call 2, to five stars: Hip 4872, HD 245409, 55 Cancri, HD 10307 and 47 Ursae Majoris, that will arrive at these stars in 2036, 2040, 2044, 2044 and 2049 respectively. Canon Jeffrey John, the first would-be gay bishop in the Church of England, withdraws his acceptance of the post of The Bishop of Reading after discussions with church leaders. The last Volkswagen Type 1 rolls off its production line in Puebla, Mexico. A Russian security agent dies in Moscow, while trying to defuse a bomb a woman had tried to carry into a café on central Moscow's main street. Bob Hope dies.

In August: A suicide bomber rams a truck filled with explosives into a military hospital near Chechnya, killing 50 people, including Russian troops wounded in Chechnya itself. The highest temperature ever is recorded in the UK at Brogdale near Faversham in Kent, a scorching — scorching by British standards — 38.5°C (101.3°F). Two bomb blasts in Mumbai, India kill 52 people. A rocket explosion kills 21 at the Brazilian rocket complex in Alcântara, Brazil, due to the premature ignition of a solid rocket booster. A heat wave in Paris results in temperatures of 44°C (112°F). A widespread power outage affects the northeastern United States and south-central Canada.

In September: Europe's busiest shopping centre, the Bullring in Birmingham, Great Britain, is officially opened by Sir Albert Bore. Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh is stabbed in a Stockholm department store and dies the next day. Two suicide bombers drive an explosive-filled truck into a government security services building near Chechnya, killing three and injuring 25. A power failure affects all of Italy except Sardinia, cutting service to more than 56 million people. Johnny Cash dies.

In October: California voters recall Governor Gray Davis from office and elect actor Arnold Schwarzenegger to succeed him. The Peoples Republic of China launches Shenzhou 5, their first manned space mission. The Concorde makes its last commercial flight, bringing the era of supersonic airliner travel to a close, at least for the time being. The Florida Marlins defeat the New York Yankees to win their second World Series title. Mahathir Mohamad resigns as Prime Minister of Malaysia after 22 years in power. Neil Postman, American educator, media theorist, and cultural critic dies.

In November: Gary Ridgway, The 'Green River Killer', confesses to murdering 48 women. Two car bombs explode simultaneously in Istanbul, Turkey, targeting two synagogues, killing at least 25 people and wounding more than three hundred. Anti-same-sex marriage laws are ruled unconstitutional by

the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*. Several more bombs explode in Istanbul, Turkey, destroying the Turkish head office of HSBC and the British consulate.

In December: A suicide bombing on a commuter train in southern Russia kills 44 people, an attack which President Vladimir Putin condemns as a bid to destabilize the country two days before parliamentary elections. Saddam Hussein, former President of Iraq, is captured in Tikrit by the U.S. 4th Infantry Division. A female suicide bomber blows herself up outside Moscow's National Hotel, across from the Kremlin and Red Square, killing five innocent bystanders. A mad cow disease outbreak in Washington State is announced, prompting several countries including Brazil, Australia and Taiwan to ban the import of beef from the United States. An earthquake in California kills two. Libya admits to building a nuclear bomb. Beagle 2 is scheduled to land on Mars, but nothing is heard from the lander. Keiko the whale dies.

It all had a familiar ring. History was going into reruns before it happened.

There seemed to be one incremental change. As each year passed, mankind seemed to grow increasingly impatient with the slow pace of natural disasters. So from all appearances, it was taking up the slack with disasters of its own making.

There we go again.

Who could make sense of any of this? Chaos and violence, destruction and disorder, mixed in with some isolated, random happy thoughts and amusing curios, commanded the airwaves and dominated the hearts and minds of most Americans. Many people would be hard pressed to find China on the map, and most could care less if it was the Year of the Sheep or the Year of the Pitbull.

For Billy and Natalie, the year plodded along at a breakneck crawl. At least until the end of August. Then big changes got underway.

Natalie had graduated right on schedule and in the blink of an eye had moved off campus, still in upstate New York but almost 200 miles away, where she started a new job.

They kept in regular touch by telephone but Billy saw her only three times during the new academic term which started only eighteen days after she left. The third time he saw her, she had a new more "professional" hairdo, and he noticed that she was wearing the engagement ring Pam had bought for them. He also noticed that she had gotten a tattoo. It was a tiny symbol centered high on her back at the base of her neck.

"Nice tattoo, Natalie. Is it the Chinese character for the Year of the Sheep?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a lucky guess."

Darkness Before Dawn

10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - HAPPY NEW YEAR!!

The party was being held at Natalie's apartment in Newburgh, NY to ring in the new year. Of course, Billy and Pam were there. Plus an odd and mismatched assortment of people unfamiliar to either of them. A few were neighbors, people who also lived in the building — that they had nothing else going on for one of

the most important celebrations of the year, spoke volumes as to the extent of their social networks. Others scattered here and there at the tables full of snack food and the kitchen counter where the hard liquor and drink mixes were lined up, were Natalie's colleagues from her new workplace. They were professionals in the Newburgh sense of the word. As could be immediately ascertained from the casual to ragged state of their attire, all of them were pretty laid-back upcountry types, whose fashion sense wouldn't cut it in a soup line in the Big Apple.

Natalie had graduated on schedule in August. It took her three days to find her new job. Actually, it found her. The Clinton administration — in particular Al Gore — had conferred anything to do with ecology and the environment, a high degree of prestige and popularity. Moreover, the best efforts of the Bush administration had not entirely eradicated that meritorious gesture or trashed all of the programs which grew out of their initiatives.

Toward the end of both Spring Term and Summer Session, numerous eco-companies from various parts of the country visited Cornell with the intention of recruiting the best newly available talent. Natalie's B. S. degree was in Human Ecology and Sustainable Development. She graduated Summa Cum Laude, third in her class, so was at the top of the list for several of the personnel reps interviewing the new grads.

Seminole Environmental Consultants had everything she was looking for. In terms of money it was not the best offer, but with a total of fifteen employees, including the management, they were a small firm, as much an extended family as a business enterprise. Six of their current employees were women, including the number one and two executives in charge of the operation. They were set up as an employee-owned corporation, meaning that after a year of employment, Natalie would be eligible to participate in the success of the firm with gifted shares of stock ownership, which presumably would increase in both quantity and value over time. From what Natalie had gathered, the work at Seminole was interesting and made important contributions to society at large, most profoundly in terms of the ecological integrity of the surrounding region.

Nearly as important for Natalie as any of the purely professional aspects of the company, was the fact that they were located Upstate New York, in the Hudson River Valley. Of itself this was a pleasant and bucolic place to live, but even more to her liking, it was less than two hours by train from New York City.

Billy had never been to the Big Apple. He naively assumed that all big cities were created equal and Detroit had from his earliest memories seeded in him a deep distaste for urban life. On the other hand, it was apparent that Natalie loved New York. She and Pam had on several occasions used it as an escape hatch from the mundane and predictable. Billy never knew what they did there. But he figured it was just a matter of time before he and Natalie together would make a visit, and he might then begin his education as to what was so special about this renowned city, such that people all over the world regarded it as the center of the *homo sapiens* universe.

Newburgh worked for Natalie from the get-go. Only days after her last final exam at Cornell, she made an exploratory trip to the town, visited the offices of Seminole, met the entire staff, and definitely liked what she saw. With the help of

one of her future co-workers, she then found a decent two-bedroom flat right near the center of town. This put it a stone's throw from the Hudson River and the bridge to the train station. Perfect. Within a week, she moved her meager possessions from Ithaca and was ready to report for her new job, which officially started the day after Labor Day.

Billy helped her move her stuff in a small rental truck, and spent a few days with her, before his return to Ithaca for the beginning of Fall Term. It was for both of them, of course, sad and traumatic to confront their coming separation. But their time together during the short transition was full of both the pleasant domesticities of setting up her new apartment, and the hot carnalities of test driving her new bed. It proved quite worthy as a recreational vehicle for their erotic exploration.

Despite the 190 miles separating them, things remained excellent between Billy and Natalie.

Really good.

"Happy New Year, my big hunk of guy!"

Natalie was all over him. She was obviously a little tipsy. He could smell the champagne on her breath as she covered his face with kisses and licked his lips with her tongue.

"I'll give you two hours to stop this or else."

He never got tired of her attention, the feel of her body against his, the taste of her lips, the warmth of her skin, her smell, the delicate touch of her hands.

"I'm going to play hostess and make the rounds. I'll be right back for the other hour and fifty nine minutes."

He stepped into the tiny kitchen, freshened his gin and tonic, then stepped into the foyer and looked out the front door at the fresh snow, still coming down in slow-motion flurries, as the whoops and hollers, hugs and kisses, and general revelry of the party went on behind him.

Billy stood there thinking about the year that had just passed. After all, it was New Years Eve and if you weren't too drunk, it's often-as-not what you did. That and make foolish resolutions for the coming year which, after coming to your senses the following few days, you accepted you had no intention of keeping.

This past year: What a journey!

First of all. He really had to hand it to Natalie. She was only a year older than him and here she was, already graduated from college, with highest honors no less, now with a nice paying, challenging, professional job. He could easily see, even through the bubbly mirthful glaze of New Years Eve, that she was well-regarded and enthusiastically accepted by the people she worked with. There was a definite hint of awe in the eyes of those with whom she exchanged small talk and shop talk, as she made the rounds this evening.

They should be awed: Just the last stretch of her final academic year was monumental and would have broken most mere mortals.

After completing a single three-week class during Winter Session, she took on five classes. Five real *monsters*, including PAM 4060, Politics and Policy: Theory, Research, and Practice, taught by Dr. E. M. Castle, reputed to be the most ornery, most formidable, most punishing professor on campus.

For Summer Session, she took three classes, one more than necessary to graduate, but she judged that ECON 7640, International Trade and Foreign Investment, would be an enormous asset to her in whatever job she accepted.

Through it all, she was a rock.

It was Billy who sometimes succumbed to nerves. Apprehensions about Natalie's graduating and moving on. Anxieties about doing his best in school. Worries about money.

Billy had decided to stay in Ithaca for that last summer. He would just have to find a job locally and make do. While he could make more money working in a factory in Detroit, as far as he was concerned that was not an option this year. Frankly, he wasn't even sure his dad would try to arrange it for him, considering their never-abating hostilities.

But more importantly, he wanted to be with Natalie. He wanted to be right there with her every available opportunity until she packed up and left.

Beyond that?

That was another source of anxiety.

They never really talked about what was going to happen next.

Was there any way to know? To plan? There were too many variables.

Standing here now on New Years looking out from the foyer of Natalie's new apartment at the hypnotic cascade of weightless snowflakes, it suddenly struck Billy how grateful he should be. Maybe he and Natalie weren't together every day. But they were still together!

Like Sister Mary Felicia had said way back when, always count your blessings.

He knocked back another mouthful of gin and tonic. His thoughts drifted.

It suddenly occurred to him what a lousy son he had become lately. Over the past year, he had not been home once. Last time Billy had been with his mom was Christmas vacation over a year ago, while his father played in Las Vegas. They celebrated a quiet New Years Eve together. Two days later he was back to campus. That was the last time he had actually seen her.

Of course, they had talked. She got off of the chemo and radiative treatments in February. The good news — the really *great* news — was that her cancer was in complete remission. She had gained weight and her hair grew back. Much to Billy's relief, the last few times she had called him, she sounded like she was pretty much back to normal, and life was back on track again. She was going to live, anyway. As long as people typically live.

That's what the doctors assured her.

But through it all, through her whole painful ordeal of recovery, he had not been there for her. Not in body or even in spirit. So concerned about school, Natalie, the future, what to do, how to do it, how to pay for it. Time slipped away. He had become too busy for his mom.

He felt guilty.

She didn't deserve that.

Maybe that should be his New Year's resolution. One that he would actually keep. To not let the drama of his own life come between them. Make time for her. *Be a good boy.*

Billy felt someone walk up behind him and slowly turned around from the quiet winter scene he had been viewing, an agreeable backdrop for his thoughts about the past year. Holding a tumbler of Zinfandel in her long fingers was Pam. Her eyes were as dreamy as Billy's private ruminations had been. A pleasant if somewhat vacant smile was plastered on her face. She came so close, the glass bumped against Billy's chest.

"Well, Pam. It's just you and me."

"Not quite."

Billy nodded toward the Zinfandel as Pam took another sip.

"How many of those have you had?"

"Just enough."

Billy felt trapped in the foyer with her alone.

"Let's go back in. I hear there's a party going on."

Offering no resistance, Pam turned and they stepped through the kitchen into the living area. They both were watching Natalie talk to one of her new colleagues and his wife. Billy leaned toward Pam so that she could hear him over the din.

"Whaddya think?"

"She seems pretty happy here, eh? Is that what you're getting?"

"Same thing I'm sure she tells you. Loves the job. The community is what it is. Growing up in Indianapolis turned out to be good training for Rubeville here. The place is not in any hurry to enter the 21st Century. In some ways, it's still adjusting to the 20th Century."

"Growing up in Indianapolis doesn't prepare you for anything but death. Believe me. I speak from experience. She needs you here, Billy. Well... maybe *needs* is the wrong word. But that would fill in the blanks. Lacking that..."

Pam paused to look at Billy. She seemed to be studying him. Or playing his anticipation.

"Yes. You were saying. Lacking that?"

"Lacking that... there's me."

"You?"

"This just happened. I haven't told her yet."

"What? What's the big secret?"

"No secret. I'm just a little amazed. Actually, a lot amazed. The way things just happen sometimes. It looks like I have a job waiting here for me, if I want it. See that man over there with the red and brown plaid shirt. Jesus fuck! Who dresses these people?"

"Yeh. I see him. He probably calls the local square dances."

"Close. He manages the biggest radio station here in the Hudson Valley. Soft Rock 104 FM. They dish up high-energy elevator music plus a lot of community jabber. Anyway, his name is Bollis Shattuck and he owns the station. He just offered me a job."

"You're kidding?"

"What? Don't you think I'm qualified?"

"I... I didn't... that's not quite—"

"Well, I'm not. But based on my good looks, charm, slightly visible nipples,

blond hair ...”

“I get the picture. What will you be doing? Beside looking good?”

“Not what he thinks I will be doing.” Pam laughed loudly at her own joke. “Promotions and sales. You know. The annual 4H tractor pull. The apple butter festival. Then selling ad time whenever they’re overstocked on harvesters and chain saws over in Red Hook.”

“Wow.”

“I can see why Natalie raves about your vocabulary.”

“I ... I just ... it’s kind of sudden.”

“I haven’t decided yet. Wait. I just decided. I’m going to take it. So if the next word out of your mouth isn’t ‘congratulations’, you might want to sleep with a shotgun under your pillow tonight.”

“Congratulations, Pam. This is *great* news!”

“I hope Natalie feels that way.”

“I can’t imagine otherwise. You’re her best friend. Her best *female* friend anyway.”

Pam gave him an enigmatic smile. Bordering on snide.

“I’m her best friend.”

Whether it was the alcohol, the sheer force of the surprise, or the pure stuff of true friendship, Natalie’s reaction was, to put it mildly, over the top.

“I can’t believe it! Ohmigod! This is fantastic! What a great way to ring in the new! When, Pam? How soon? Can you believe this, Billy?”

Actually, he couldn’t. He was wondering if by some miracle of academics he could finish his degree in the next thirty seconds and make a similar surprise announcement about himself, if Natalie would be anywhere as consumed by heart-pounding elation and hysteria.

Just when he thought it was safe ...

She’s back!

Billy went to the kitchen and threw a few more ice cubes in his glass. He made a death row mix of gin and tonic, five parts gin to one part tonic. After pouring that into his gullet and swallowing it in one gulp, he mixed another equally as potent anesthetic gut bomb.

The almost instantaneous numbing of his brain mitigated some of the anxiety that had just been smothering him. Billy by nature was a mellow drunk, rather than an aggressive drunk. Therefore, he started thinking nice thoughts and making a lot of room for gratuitous optimism and arbitrary cheer.

He started to reevaluate — and rationalize — the unexpected turn of events.

Maybe this *is* a really good thing.

Natalie may not “need” someone right now — she was as self-contained and autonomous as practically anyone he had ever met, male or female — but that didn’t mean she would not benefit from and appreciate the companionship and support of someone who really cared about her. If it couldn’t be him — the ideal situation, if it were possible — then it *should be* Pam.

Thus his alcohol-lubricated brain now reasoned.

Billy realized, to be entirely fair, he needed to square himself away about Pam. Granted, things had started out pretty rocky. He had misjudged her right off.

But the truth was, at that particular time, he had no truly clear, adequately formed impression of Natalie herself. How could he have gotten any perspective on her best friend?

The surprise birthday party Pam threw for Natalie was when he really started to get a more rounded picture of Pam as a person, and the quality of the friendship she had with Natalie. Truly how much they meant to one another.

To be fair, from that time on he and Pam had gotten on pretty well.

Realistically, right until the very moment she just announced moving here to Newburgh, all of his anxieties about her had pretty much subsided. Even the engagement ring — whether it was appropriate or not — did not detract from what Billy perceived overall as her good intentions. Why should he be threatened by her? Pam meant well. He had no reason to think otherwise.

And no matter how you cut it, they had one hugely important thing in common. They both cared deeply about Natalie and wanted the best for her.

Maybe he should grow up a little. Stop perceiving every little unexpected twist in the road as a threat. Stop being so paranoid. From this point forward, Natalie wouldn't only have Pam in her life. She was going to be developing a whole new set of friends and professional relationships. It was inevitable.

Did that mean that what he had with her was any less?

Less important?

Less powerful?

Less . . . period?

"Natalie, I think this is fantastic news. I know you'll be in good hands."

"You're right about that."

He gave Pam a big brother hug.

Natalie gave Pam a big sister hug.

There were smiles all around as he and Natalie wrapped their arms around one another in a lover's embrace.

Did she notice his fierce erection begging for her tender mercies?

Seeds of Deception

Pam moved in with Natalie on January 31st.

Billy had been back in Ithaca for almost a whole month, straight off in the throes of another cram Winter Session. Now a week of classes had already passed for the new Spring Term, as he made his regular weekly call to Natalie. He always called her on Saturday evening.

Pam picked up the phone.

"Hello."

"Pam?"

"Wow! You recognized my voice? I guess we have become buds, eh?"

"How long have you been there?"

"Just arrived today. Gave four weeks notice on my old job and here I am."

So the time had come, Pam's moving in with Natalie. It made sense. Save money on rent. Make the transition into the new community easy for Pam. Give

Natalie someone she knew well and cared deeply about to spend time with. Keep them both out of trouble.

Absolutely. It made total sense.

The only awkwardness might be when he came for his weekend visits. But they could work with that. They were adults. Pam had her own room. He would stay with Natalie in hers.

The logistics of that were still a few weeks off. For now he had to deal with the day-to-day challenges of keeping up with an intense five-class load, and the other sundry details of campus life.

Billy had yet another new roommate.

Maybe he was a jinx. He remained in the same townhouse he had been living in since his sophomore year. But for everyone else, it had been a revolving door.

He had certainly seen an interesting cross-section of humanity.

There was Skid aka Beavis, the highly forgettable, easily dismissed, whack loser from Florida. That was the first semester living in the North Campus suite.

He got to live alone Spring Term. But at the beginning of Summer Session — when Natalie was completing her studies — a mutant ninja turtle from Japan showed up. He spoke no English, giving rise to the mystery as to how he could possibly finish a single class, much less get all the way through a degree program. He was always asking Billy how to spell words. Such daunting formulations as ‘equals’ and ‘sorry’ and ‘milk’. The spelling bee apprenticeship ended abruptly after three weeks. One afternoon, Yuji — that was his real name — went into convulsions and was carted off to the campus hospital. They suspected a viral meningitis but Billy never found out the final diagnosis. Nor did he ever see him again.

The following Fall Term he shared his apartment with a bull ox from Nebraska, who was there on a football scholarship. Obviously, he couldn’t be that great of a player or he would have gone to one of the Big Ten or PAC 10 teams. Billy couldn’t remember ever seeing him with anything but food in his hands, certainly not anything as intimidating or foreign to his early-hominid skull as a book. He called Billy ‘brain boy’ and was always asking him to start buying his share of the beer. Of course, Billy didn’t ever drink beer, so he had by default already bought his share of the beer. This reasoning was lost on Bluto or whatever his name was — Billy never found out — and the benign but annoying harassment continued. One day Bluto, about the middle of the term, packed up and left. The empty beer cases proved handy.

Four hours later, the person bull ox had conned into trading residential space with, showed up. This was a very effeminate, light-skinned AfricAm, who had an obsession with the singer Prince. While he somewhat toned down his look-alike dress and make-up for class, it was obvious that this guy had probably seen *Purple Rain* at least a thousand times. On the week ends, it was full out masquerade. Billy discovered he was making ends meet as a Prince impersonator in various venues off-campus, at frat and sorority parties and the like. For Prince Wannabe, like Bluto, studying was a distant option. Most of the time in the apartment itself, he spent either in front of the mirror making fine adjustments to his hair or make-up, or perfecting Prince dance moves in their common living

area. Because Billy loved Prince's music, it would have been impossible for him to study with it blasting all of the time. Mercifully, the qua Prince man wore headphones so that he could totally immerse himself in the music while gyrating, playing air-guitar and feigning erotic sex with imaginary stage dance partners.

Like the others, he also evaporated into air without so much as a good-bye. So concluded the end of Fall Term.

After the holiday break, when Billy returned from Newburgh and opened his apartment door, he stumbled on the latest in the lineup of unusual suspects. This guy had taken over most of the living area. There were four desktop computers arrayed in front of him. Two were in some auto-function mode and their monitors were scrolling, re-drawing, bouncing between different screens and programs as they performed some calculation or analysis. A third monitor displayed a screen saver of piranha fish eating each other.

The person Billy presumed was his new roommate — if he wasn't a cyber cult leader, or a in-transit operative for a terrorist cell which had appropriated the work space for the day — was typing away. He was wearing headphones with an attached microphone, although it wasn't apparent why. A cigarette dangled from his chapped lips and the entire room reeked of tobacco smoke. He took a long drag, then put the cigarette out in an already overflowing ashtray.

Finally, he noticed Billy and gave him a broad, stained-tooth smile.

"Hi! I'm Garth. Garth Francot. From Wright Patterson Air Force Base. You're Billy Green. They gave me that name at housing. Billy Green."

"I am. Yes. That's me. What's up?"

"Just crunching some numbers. Writing a compiler. I'm only here for Winter Session. Just blasting my way through two courses — Comp Sci 6322 and 6830. Hope you don't mind if I smoke a little. I try to be considerate of others."

"Not at all. I encourage people to smoke. Helps thin out the population. But I don't approve of smoking inside the apartment. I only have one lung and I have a severe allergy to nicotine and tar. Even light contact causes my brain to swell, then I go into cardiac arrest."

"Right. No problem."

Garth lit up another cigarette and looked back at the computer monitors.

It was obvious that he was now again totally oblivious to Billy's presence in the room. He typed away, inputting code and running consistency tests on whatever it was he was creating.

Billy only had to put up with Garth for nine days. On Tuesday of the second week of Winter Session, Billy came in huffing from the cold and stamping the snow off his feet from a heavy winter storm. All evidence of the computer whiz's existence had vanished. Except for two items: There was a cheap electrically-activated air freshener plugged into the wall next to the kitchen sink, emitting a lemon-pine odor, which apparently was supposed to mask the malodor of several days of chain smoking. And there was a five-dollar bill and a note in the center of the coffee table with a large heavy rock holding them down. Better safe than sorry. You never know when hurricane conditions are going to suddenly develop inside a townhouse apartment.

The computer-printed note simply said . . .

THIS IS FOR THE COOKIES.
GARTH FRANCOIS,
CERTIFIED MICROSOFT PROFESSIONAL

What cookies?

Browser cookies?

Now it was Spring Term and it certainly appeared that Billy's luck with roommates was about to change.

This time it was someone familiar — in one sense as familiar as a person could be — and it had come about in a very unexpected way.

His roommate for the current Spring Term was none other than Julianne. Yes. *That* Julianne. The Julianne of the Fast and Foxy Five. Julianne, the surprise birthday gift Billy's freshman year.

He had run into her at the beginning of Winter Session, only a few days after the New Years Eve bash in Newburgh. It was late afternoon and he was walking at a fast clip back to his room after a grueling day. He was trying to decide whether to grab a bite on the way or fix something himself back at the apartment.

"Billy Green! I am so glad to see you. How is Natalie?"

"Great! Fantastic! Just got back from Newburgh, NY where she now has a new job and apartment, new friends. It's all good."

"Listen. This is way off the wall. But maybe you could help me out. Maybe not. I'm in a bit of a bind."

"This has a very familiar ring to it."

Julianne laughed and then almost looked embarrassed.

"No. Not that. I've grown up. Can't you tell?"

She looked the same to him. Beautiful. Delicious. Intense. Enigmatic.

"I'll take your word for it."

"Have you got a roommate? I know you're living in the townhouses."

"They never tell me. I think they just open the doors of a mental institution and whoever makes it to my place first, voilà! There's my new roommate. But to answer your question. As far as I know, my current roommate is going back to his planetary system in the Pleiades when winter cram session is over. Then, it's anyone's guess. Are you homeless?"

"Homeless would be an improvement. I'm in a rut. Still at Mary Conlon. I just can't do that anymore. It's like pre-school. I've got four more semesters and I've got to stay focused. The party bunnies have dropped out or moved on, which sure is a relief. But I'm still getting paired up with either the congenitally compromised or the intellectually impaired. You'd think that Cornell would attract a higher percentage of students whose lives weren't lived within the confines of a 29" television screen. I can't even understand what they're saying much less reply. I feel like I've been exiled to 6th Century Constantinople."

"You're rambling a bit. But I gather you're looking for a quiet, studious atmosphere. Okay. Let's see. You're still a girl, right?"

"Yes, I was a few minutes ago when I looked."

"I mean, despite my worldly playboy image and reputation, I've never roomed with a girl."

“Billy. We pretty much do the same things. Breathe, eat, sleep, bathe, other body functions. We do sit down when we pee.”

“So do I.”

“Congratulations! Good for you. Anyway. Give it some thought.”

He recalled his conversation with Pam at the New Years Eve party.

“Yes. I really need to think about this. There. I’ve thought about it. The answer is yes.”

Julianne went to Student Housing early the next morning. No assignment had yet been made for Billy’s living unit. She only needed Billy to sign a simple request form and it was done.

Since by the time the approval came through, computer whiz had already left, Julianne was able to bring a few things over right away. When Spring Term started, she was fully moved in and ready to hit the ground running. Like Billy, she had a very demanding schedule. They discovered they even had one class together — HD 3470 Human Growth and Development: Biological and Behavioral Interactions — which might prove to be valuable in terms of studying. They could share notes, as well as discuss anything which was problematic or difficult.

Both were soon into the rhythm of the academic machine. They didn’t really see much of one another — Julianne was doing some volunteer work related to her specific degree program and Billy was back to working part-time to try to keep his financial house in order — plus they were both very private people, and correspondingly respectful of one another’s privacy.

She was the ideal roommate.

Of course, so far — more than two weeks into the new term — he hadn’t mentioned any of this to Natalie. He wasn’t sure if it would be an issue, and frankly didn’t know how to broach the topic. It was awkward, so he avoided it. But this hedging naturally made him feel guilty. Like he was hiding something. He *was* hiding something. Without knowing why or whether he should.

But how could he casually bring up the fact that his new roommate is a devastatingly beautiful girl, who by the way is someone Natalie not only knew, but caught Billy in bed with the first time he had sex? And oh yes. There’s nothing going on now. Really. We just sleep with a thin wall between us and it has never occurred to either of us to do what comes naturally between a man and a woman. Even though we already did that. But that was a long time ago.

Either saying or not saying what needed to be said seemed fraught with peril and suspicion. What a totally lose-lose situation he found himself in.

The lesser of two evils seemed to be to take the cowardly approach and just not mention it. Then blindly hope for the best.

That’s just what Billy did. And then did his best to stop thinking about it.

Billy belatedly did make good on his New Year’s resolution. It was the 3rd of February, a Tuesday night, and the moment felt right. He called his mom.

“Surprise. Happy New Year!”

“I was just thinking about you, Billy. We have a psychic connection.”

“Then I won’t have to pay for this phone call?”

"I think the phone company charges double. How are you, my favorite son? How's the new girl?"

"Not so very new, mom. We've been going out for a while now."

"Natalie? Is that the one? When do I get to meet this girlfriend? At least send me a photo."

"Now that's a great idea. She's in a town in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City. Next time I visit, we'll take some pics and I'll send them along. How are you feeling?"

"Like a songbird on the 5th of May. Everything's fine, Billy. Clean bill of health. Have I got some news for you, though! You won't believe this."

"Okay. I'm sitting. My seat belt is fastened."

"Your dad bought a motorcycle. A Harley Davidson."

"What! Has he flipped? This isn't exactly great weather for motorcycling. Or has global warming turned Detroit into a desert town?"

"Nope. Still snow on the ground. But he rides it anyway. I keep expecting him to come back with frostbite. But he's got the leathers, the whole shebang. He looks like a Hell's Angel."

Now that Billy had no problem picturing. He had seen photos of Hell's Angels. They didn't exactly age well. They were fat and grizzly. His father could fit in well with that scene, that was for certain.

"So what brought this about?"

"He says it's a wonderful way to see the world. He claims we're going to ride to Mount Rushmore this summer. There's a place near there called Sturgis. Every year, thousands of bikers from all over get together. A lot of beer drinking."

"What's new? He drinks beer at home. Let's see. Last year it was Vegas. Now he wants to ride a Harley across the country. What's happening with the old guy?"

"I think it's a mid-life crisis. From what I read in the magazines."

"And what about you? Any signs of a mid-life crisis? Thinking about joining a roller derby team? Or living on a commune in Sedona, Arizona?"

"I re-scheduled mine. I moved it to my 65th birthday."

Birthday. Billy suddenly had a very rude awakening. Like a knee to the groin. He suddenly realized he didn't have a clue when his mom's birthday was. He was sure they had never celebrated it. Home life had always been about hiding and dodging bullets from his father, so it had never come up. The old man certainly had never brought a gift or anything home. Never acknowledged or mentioned it once. What a screwed-up family!

"Moving your mid-life crisis to 65. That is brilliant! That means you'll live to be 130."

"You didn't know how clever I was, is that it? Listen, I just heard the rumble. He's here. Wanna talk to your father?"

"I think I better go. But thanks. Just tell him I said 'hi'. And to never downshift in sand."

"I will. Whatever that means. What was that again?"

"Never downshift in sand. Or on ice for that matter. He'll get it."

“Be a good boy, Billy. I’m expecting some pictures of you and the lucky lady.”

Damn it. He should have asked her. But it was embarrassing. To not know your own mother’s birthday. Of course, he didn’t know his father’s birthday either. But he probably wasn’t even born. He probably grew from a pile of old rags, rat shit and tossed garbage. What did they call that? Spontaneous generation. That’s it! A Harley Davidson? Wonders never cease. Maybe he could find out his mother’s birthday from public records. They must have files for all of that. Did he know where she was born? Was it beautiful sunny Detroit? Her maiden name was Jovovich. That’s was a start.

It was only a little after 10 pm but Billy’s head was still spinning from the phone call and the lingering guilt, his feeling of neglect for his mom. He lay down on his bed, rolled on his side, as his thoughts continued scattershot — ricocheting from place to place, from the distant past, to the recent past, to the present, and around again.

Billy’s back was turned but as soon as Julianne’s knee touched his bed, he rolled toward her. In the same instant, her lips were against his ear.

“Let make love. I’m horny.”

“I—”

Whatever objection he might have made was smothered as her lips covered his in a dreamy, passionate kiss, immediately leaving romantic foreplay in the wake of urgent tongues and hot heavy breathing.

His mind said no. But his body said yes. His body shouted it loudly and insistently, as Julianne caressed his member to rigid rocky heights of astonishing pleasure. Between lips and tongues, the tangle of their limbs pulled desperately at one another’s clothes and within the minute they were both naked.

Julianne liked to be on top. Billy liked it any way he could get it. She just kept saying over and over, “Oh Billy. This feels so good.” He had to concur.

They climaxed almost simultaneously and kept going. After a few minutes, she came again and relaxed the grip of her legs enough to permit a long slow penetration. As she moved up and down, in and out, Billy’s pleasure built and built. He thought if he came again the Earth would rip apart. The planet somehow survived his time-and-space-shattering climax.

When the hot clouds of euphoria cleared from his mind and reconnected him with the starkness of the moment, he felt his body floating in the mundane reality of his campus room. Julianne gracefully dismounted and now lay next to him, curled up in his arms with her head tucked against his neck. It was like paragliding from one dream into another.

She kissed her way up his neck to his ear. After playing his earlobe with her tongue, she softly and breathily whispered.

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“I think we already have.”

“In the future. It could happen again. It should happen again, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You have a boyfriend.”

“Yes. Aaron. And you have Natalie. But for the past few days, late at night I’ve thought about this. I was laying there in bed picturing you over here by yourself. There I was by myself. Wanting to be with you. And I thought, what a waste. There’s no excuse for wanting something and not taking it. If no one gets hurt, why not?”

She took his hand and pulled it across her stomach, then looked up and gave him a soft gentle peck on his cheek. She nestled her head on his shoulder and whispered.

“This will make life just a little better. Don’t you think?”

He ran his fingertips across her nipples, up the center of her chest, her throat, then opened his hand and placed it against the side of her face. He tipped her head toward his and kissed her. It was short and sweet, all of his erotic energy for the time spent and diffused.

“I’d say life is definitely better right now. Right this minute. I just hope I can ... I don’t know whether I can handle this. I mean can ... you know, with Natalie. We’ll see.”

“Sleep tight. Thanks for the love.”

She went to her room and he could hear the sheets rustle as she got in bed. Seconds later her light went out.

And that was that.

One week later to the day, as Billy lay on his bed plodding through Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* for his Religion and Politics in American History class, Julianne appeared at his door. She was wrapped in a blanket, looking like either the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene, smiling calmly and invitingly. She said nothing. She didn’t have to. Her beautiful smile and presumed nakedness wordlessly and seductively spoke with blunt and evocative clarity.

Billy put down the book.

“I think I’ve had enough religion and politics.”

There was a little less urgency this time. But no less passion. They made love efficiently. Yet an objective observer would assume they were both in love and deeply committed to one another. They were certainly deeply committed to giving one another as much pleasure as possible within the 45 minutes or so that they shared Billy’s bed. Neither one a stranger to oral sex, they took turns sending one another into singular rapture, then consummated the entire process with missionary zeal, shaking the entire north campus with the perfection of simultaneous orgasms in the classic man-on-top coital position.

If no one gets hurt, why not?

And so it went. Like clockwork. Or more accurately, like calendarwork. Once a week on Tuesday night.

Life was definitely better.

They never spent the entire night in bed, which was difficult, to say the least. After the final rush and collapse, it was all Julianne could do to make herself get up and return to her room. But that seemed to be the understood terms of the bargain. Along the same vein, they never shared anything resembling romantic exchanges — not even glances or nods or knowing looks — between their buddy

fucking sessions. While they certainly cared for one another, at the very least as good friends, this arrangement was not about romance. It was purely about sex. They were not having an affair, not even considering becoming boyfriend-girlfriend, not tempting fate or threatening the status quo of their respective relationships, Julianne's with Aaron and Billy's with Natalie.

If no one gets hurt, why not?

Billy was still having trouble with it. Maybe it was the inertial guilt which traditionally plagued Catholics. Maybe it was his relative youth and naiveté. Maybe it was his lack of sophistication and appreciation of the countless number of possible acceptable arrangements which could be fashioned between a male and a female.

So while it felt good, it still didn't feel right.

Not that this contradictory mix stopped him.

One thing that puzzled him was how quickly his resistance went down that first night, and how completely it disappeared afterwards. He spent way too much time pondering what the significance of that was. Did it mean he really didn't love Natalie as much as he thought? Did it mean that he was incapable of attaching himself to one woman at a time? Did it mean that he had been deluding himself in thinking he was somehow superior to, or at least more in control of himself than the typical fuck-anything-with-panties guys his age?

One salient point played an important role in his rationalizations. That was that he had had a relationship — if you could call it that — with Julianne in the past. He had a history with her anyway. In fact, she had played a singularly unique and vital role in the stage play of his short life. It was a small part, but as any male or female will probable agree, one which is never forgotten. She was the first girl he had ever had sex with. Didn't this confer on her some special status, some special privilege, some unique ranking?

This practically made her family.

Right.

After wasting much too much time wrestling with the ethics, psychology and sociology of his hot little arrangement, Billy did the only thing which a rational person with proper survivalist instincts could do. He put the whole thing — meaning all of the issues surrounding the erotic covenant with Julianne — in a little grey-matter box, and tucked the thing deep inside his brain behind the wall of conscience and consciousness, somewhere between his cerebellum and his brain stem, and went on with life. Life, of course, now included approximately one hour of the most mind-boggling, beautiful, briefly-satisfying but breathtaking sex imaginable, every Tuesday night, with certainly one of the most intelligent and stunning girls ever to ever attend Cornell.

Sex was sex. Good sex was good sex.

If no one gets hurt, why not?

As a bonus, Billy was spared the pointless, time-consuming, hormone-driven wandering about, checking out girls, fantasizing about the improbable but still entertaining it as possible, that many guys seem possessed by — at all ages, but particularly in their late teens and twenties. He had the perfect release.

A truly great thing about the arrangement was that it did nothing to interfere with school. Perhaps the temporary relief from sexual hunger in certain respects actually optimized the performance of his academic work. Billy continued to plug away and in spite of his working 25 to 30 hours a week at his part-time job, never fell behind on his studies, and in fact had time to supplement his class work with additional relevant reading and research.

As February was coming to a close, Billy knew it was high time to visit Natalie.

He was very excited. With Natalie in Newburgh, he felt her absence as tangibly as he felt her presence when they were together. His arms could feel, like a dark sticky lump of unfulfilled expectation, the void which held in reserve the Natalie-shaped space where she should have been.

Julianne — for all of her overwhelming beauty, for her staggering intelligence, for all her virtuosity in bed — wasn't Natalie. And an hour once a week was not forever.

It just wasn't at all the same. The Tuesday night sessions were no temporary or permanent substitute for building a life together. In every respect, that was what Natalie was all about. Consequently, Billy's not being with her every minute, not taking each step, not being there putting each little building block in place, left a gigantic gaping hole in his life, no matter what was going on at Cornell. He knew he had to finish school, but being away from her now, especially after all the time they had had together last year, was truly driving him crazy. He had to see her. It had been almost two months.

At the same time, he was very nervous.

As the weekend approached, the quandary about this new thing with Julianne — harmless and unthreatening as he had finally convinced himself it was — came back to haunt him.

He and Natalie talked fairly regularly but he still had not even mentioned Julianne was his new roommate. Now that he had the sex arrangement, there was a lot more not to mention. Unfortunately, he was lousy at lying. He suspected his face was its own lie detector read-out. He could imagine a record of his recent infidelity would be written in huge block letters across his forehead, even if not specifically queried. Plus he had always suspected that women were gifted with mysterious mind-reading powers — especially when it came to men.

Yeah. He was nervous. The bird cage empty and feathers sticking out of the cat's mouth.

"Julianne. What should I say? What should I do?"

"Go and love her like there is no other. Because, you know in your heart, there is no one else like her, Billy. She's one of a kind. I love our Tuesday nights. But put it in perspective. We're just having fun. Natalie loves you. She's not against you having a little fun. Trust me."

Billy arrived late Friday afternoon. This was his first trip since the Christmas holiday break. He had had the luxury of chauffeur service back then. Natalie had come to pick him up in her new used car and even brought him back to campus on New Years Day. This time he took a bus directly from North Campus to the Short Line bus terminal in Newburgh.

Natalie was waiting there as the bus pulled up, big smile on her face. Unfortunately Pam was at her side.

"Look, Pam. Our son is home from college. How wonderful!"

"Isn't he cute!"

"Hi, mom and dad. It's so good to be home! Where's the dog?"

They exchanged hugs all around and made the short ride through the snowy streets. To Pam's credit, after they arrived at the apartment, she made herself extremely scarce for the entire rest of the weekend. Billy and Natalie spent a lot of time in bed, both doing the obvious and just being together. It was relaxed and fun and even productive. Billy brought a couple of textbooks with him as well as class notes, and Natalie had piles of work to do for a rush proposal assignment she had just been handed at work.

It was very remindful of their time together on campus, when he would spend an evening and the night in Natalie's room at Mary Conlon. Particularly when they were both under the gun with heavy study loads, or needed to prepare for an upcoming examination.

On Saturday, they got up late, then right after having a delicious lunch at a local Mediterranean deli, took a nice if very cold walk along the river and through the rustic town.

"So, Billy. Whaddya think? Could you live here?"

"This is great. From what I can tell. You're happy! That says a lot."

"It's kind of sleepy. Compared to the City. But it's a great place to raise a family."

"Are you hinting at something here?"

"No. Yes. No. I mean, family-oriented communities have a whole different atmosphere. That's all. People are going about doing different things than in bigger communities. This is almost suburban without being a suburb. But it's not soulless like a suburb. There's so much history here. It's almost like living in a museum."

"You should be chairman of the welcoming committee."

"I am. The Welcome-To-Newburgh-Billy-Green-Welcoming-Committee."

"Okay. I'm sold! And do I get the keys to the city?"

She stopped walking, and as they turned to face one another, pressed herself against him. Discreetly she slid her hand down and lightly touched the front of his pants.

"It's right here. Just make sure you put it in the right lock and all the doors will open."

She was smiling at her own modest cleverness. Billy felt a rush of guilt, suspecting for no particular reason other than his paranoia, that this was a veiled reference to his "key's" recent wandering. It must have registered on his face, because then Natalie's expression changed. She gave him a 'what's-going-on? I-was-only-kidding' look. She pinched his cheeks like you would a pouting child.

"Come on. Smile! We've got some celebrating to do. My Billy's come to visit. I tried to hire a brass band but I guess my Walkman will just have to do."

They returned to her apartment. Pam was there but her door was closed. Natalie got a bottle of champagne out of the refrigerator, grabbed two tall-stem glasses and Billy followed her back into her bedroom.

“Hey. Where’s your computer?”

“I have it in Pam’s room. That’s kind of the office.”

“Seems inconvenient to have it in there.”

“Very convenient. Broad-band internet connection paid for by my company. In fact, they bought the whole thing. Computer, printer, scanner. The works. They treat me very well.”

They made love, fell asleep in one another’s arms, woke up in time for dinner, but were both too lazy to make anything. They had pizza delivered from Stella’s Pizzeria, reputed to be the best between Lake Erie and the Italian Alps. Then they went back to bed and spent the entire evening pretending to get something done. Actually, after they made love again, they both did get a lot done, laying side by side, then across from one another, then her head on his lap, then his head on her thighs, then laying opposite one another legs tangled like pretzels. Neither seemed much in the mood to sleep until almost five in the morning, when they finally collapsed.

They staggered out of bed just after 10 am and reached a groggy agreement that they should go to Sunday brunch and stuff their faces like it was their last meal. The Yellow Pages gave a wide selection of options but they settled on Anna’s, a fancy but family-friendly restaurant downtown.

Pam’s door opened and she made her way to the bathroom.

“Hi guys. Top of the morning to you.”

While she was in the bathroom, Billy and Natalie got ready to leave.

“Hey, Nat. Should we invite her?”

“It’s up to you. She told me she wanted to make sure she stayed out of our way. She knows how important this time is to you.”

That caught Billy off guard. It had always seemed previously that Pam was bent on staking her territorial claim of friendship whenever he was around.

“It’s fine with me.”

Pam started to head back into her room and Billy spoke up.

“Pam. We’re going to Sunday brunch at Anna’s. Interested in joining us?”

“That’s so sweet, Billy. But I look a fright and I’ve got some things to do. But thanks.”

In addition to getting dressed for the restaurant, Billy packed and had everything ready to go for his return to Ithaca. His bus wasn’t leaving until 6:35 pm but he didn’t want to have to scramble when they got back to the apartment.

After brunch they stopped at a coffee house for Billy’s first experience with designer drinks for the caffeine addicted. He had a caramel latte with whip cream heaped on top, and as they walked out he was still licking his lips like a cat after a can of albacore tuna. Then they went to Natalie’s office. He had never been there, as Natalie wasn’t comfortable during Billy’s initial holiday visit with bringing an “outsider” into her place of work. She was too new at the time. In two short months, her comfort level had substantially increased. She had quickly established herself as a solid member of the Seminole family-workforce.

Billy was surprised at the lengths the owners of the company had gone to create a pleasant, as well as functional, work environment. None of the typical boilerplate office furniture. Instead there was a mixture of antique and modern, all wood, classical motif desks and tables. Large extremely comfortable chairs, even a couple couches and luxurious coffee tables, strewn with a wide selection of currently popular fashion and trade magazines. Beautiful healthy plants grew everywhere, in pots on the elegantly carpeted floor, hanging from the ceiling, and in the spacious windows. The best, most modern computing equipment and accessories were situated throughout the expansive working area.

What was ultimately most striking was the graceful use of floor space. The room could have easily accommodated over 25 employees, had they been crammed together the way most businesses configure an office. But Seminole only had 15 people working there, including management. Moreover, the three individuals who ran the operation were not sequestered in private offices but had their executive desks right in the general work area shared by everyone. Apparently, privacy during phone calls and meetings was not an issue. There were no secrets. This was an employee-owned company, so everyone was privy the workings of the company, the deals made, and those in progress.

"This is incredible, Nat. You have done very well for yourself."

"I guess I got lucky. I couldn't ask for a better situation. They're already giving me some serious assignments. I don't at all feel like an apprentice here."

As they walked casually through, they stopped at the desk of one of Natalie's co-workers, who was spending her Sunday off at the office. She looked up from her work, an open welcoming smile greeting the two of them.

"Cassie, this is my boyfriend Billy."

"Hello, boyfriend Billy. Is this your first visit?"

"I was here during Christmas but spent the whole time in a bathtub full of champagne."

"I can still smell it. It was pink champagne, if my nose serves me correctly."

Billy spotted a digital camera on her desk. Suddenly, he remembered.

"Ohmigod! I promised my mom."

Cassie could see through her wire-rim glasses the object which prompted Billy's epiphany.

"It belongs to the office. Ah! You want me to photograph the two of you?"

"Are you the office mind reader? *That's* what you call a marketable skill. I promised my mom a picture of us and almost forgot. This is perfect."

Natalie picked up the camera and the three moved to the other end of the room where a large stuffed couch was backed up against a window arrayed with various flowering plants on the sill. Through the window was an excellent view of the Hudson River.

"How's this?"

Cassie snapped a number of photos. They downloaded them to her computer, chose two — they were both great, Billy preferred one and Natalie the other — then printed them out, photo quality on the high-end networked Epson printer Seminole used for their best graphics.

"That's \$1000 per photo. Do you want to put that on your Visa card?"

"Can you bill it against my student loan? Thanks so much for your help, Cassie. Mind reader. Photographer. You're the whole package."

Natalie gave her a co-worker hug.

"See you tomorrow, Cass. Don't work too hard."

A brutal wind had come up in the last hour and surly grey clouds threatened a punishing winter storm. Billy and Natalie opted for the comfort and shelter of her apartment, until she had to take him to the bus station. They sprinted and made it to Natalie's car without freezer burn.

"I can't believe it, Nat."

"You can't believe what."

"Everything. Your job. This apartment. Everything just falls into place. Then I get this photo thing taken care of. I would have really hated myself if I'd forgotten. But that's what I mean. It just took care of itself. If life at Cornell could be so ... so smooth."

They arrived at home and dashed from the car through the buffeting gale. Their noses were red and eyes watery as they dropped their coats and gloves on the chair next to the fireplace, and luxuriated in the 70° coziness of the apartment.

It was closing in on 5 pm. Pam finally came out of her room.

"Looks like trouble brewing out there, eh? What time's your bus?"

"6:35 and counting."

"Take survival gear. Ice picks. Snow shoes. Flares."

Natalie warmed up some cider and set out some crackers, onion dip, celery sticks and sliced carrots, for them to munch on.

"Billy. Do you really have a student loan?"

"Yes. I'm desperate. I can't keep up. And I don't want to lean on my parents any more than I have to."

"I hear that."

"So right after you left last August, I took the plunge. It was either that or cut back on class load and work full-time."

"You do what you have to do."

"I do."

There was an awkward silence. Billy knew that Natalie had every right to know what was going on with his finances. After all, they shared a common stake. But to Billy, it felt a little weird discussing matters which would affect only him and Natalie and their future in front of Pam, even if it wasn't something particularly intimate, but just financial odds and ends. For several moments, all three stared at the same invisible object somewhere in the center of the room. Billy finally broke the conversational logjam.

"How do you like your new job, Pam?"

"It's great. The first thing I did right after starting was to insist on meeting my boss's wife and kids. I'm good buddies with the wifey now. I bring her cakes, fresh flowers, recipes I cut out of women's magazines. Even hang out with his two teenage daughters. That puts a real damper on his roaming hands. Anyway, the work is easy and I get to rub shoulders with everyone in town. From the town board, police chief and mayor, to the owner of the feed store. I'm hoping to be

the Grand Mistress in the annual Memorial Day parade. Or at least captain of the baton twirling team.”

“You know how to twirl a baton?”

“As well as you know gandy dancing.”

“Natalie! You told him about my job at the Ride My Rail Club? That was our secret.”

And so the cleverness went for the next hour. Nothing personal. Not very funny. Pleasant. No one wanted to mention the obvious. The obvious announced itself in the form of an alarm clock in Natalie’s room.

“I wanted to make sure we didn’t lose track of the time. Time to go.”

Billy grabbed his duffel bag, he and Natalie bundled up for the short drive, Pam shifted in her seat, then finally stood up for the final farewell.

“See you soon, Billy. Don’t work too hard. Guess we’ll see you in what, three weeks? Spring break?”

“Am I invited?”

“You’re always welcome here, Billy. Like a bull in Barcelona.”

Isn’t that where they have the bullfights? Billy struggled to get the joke.

Pam followed them to the door. She watched them as they went down the steps. It was already starting to snow heavily. But the real avalanche came from Pam. Just as he was getting into the car, she delivered a parting shot.

“Hey, Billy. Say ‘hi’ to Julianne for me.”

Billy tried to contain his reaction. He glanced over. Natalie was pre-occupied with cleaning off the windshield, then getting into the driver’s side, and wasn’t looking his way.

Pam knew about Julianne? *They* knew about Julianne? Julianne knew Pam? Whatever. They must have been talking about it in any case. Natalie knew about Julianne. Holy shit. What did she know? She couldn’t know ... maybe ... what? Women! What now?

His mind was definitely not performing at its best. He was in panic mode.

As they rode to the bus station, the radio playing some generic pop love song with Natalie, to Billy’s surprise, humming along, Billy started to calm down a bit. His brain functions started to assume acceptable parameters — more like a programmable VCR than a nuclear power plant that had just been hit by lightning.

“This has been great. I’m going to miss you. I guess that’s obvious.”

“Hmmm ... mmmm ... mmmm.”

“I see you like this song.”

“Hmmm ... mmmm ... mmmm.”

“It’s nice.”

“It’s stupid. But catchy. Ultimately forgettable. Like most guys.”

Since he wasn’t driving, he had the luxury of being able to study her face. Was that remark directed at him? She seemed intent, but was still humming along, smiling faintly.

They stopped at a traffic light.

She looked over. There was that ‘what’s-going-on? I-was-only-kidding’ look again.

“Hey you! Thank god you’re not like that. You’re pretty catchy. But definitely not stupid. Or forgettable.” She leaned over and kissed him. “Billy Boy. I love you!”

The five-hour bus ride back to Cornell was tedious. But the bus wasn’t full and Billy had two seats to stretch out. He spent the entire time studying the text books for his art history class, taking detailed notes and listing the questions he knew were key to making sense of the subject matter they were covering at the time. He had missed the lecture this past Friday afternoon — something he rarely allowed himself to do — to catch the last bus to Newburgh.

When he got back to the townhouse, it was approaching midnight. Julianne appeared to already be asleep. Billy had some cereal and an apple, then hit the sack himself. Monday was a very busy day. Three classes, then shifts at both of his part-time jobs. There were gaps between them. But he didn’t even return to the apartment, choosing just to find a place to study, sometimes a empty classroom or the corner of a café along the way, rather than waste time making trips back home. When he finally did return to the townhouse, it was after ten and he found Julianne sitting in the dinette reading a textbook over a cup of herb tea.

“Hey guy. How was the break? How is Natalie doing?”

“Great on both counts. And you?”

“Eh ... so so. My family — what’s left of it — is moribund. I can’t say I enjoyed myself.”

“Sorry about that. But now you have the bright optimistic environment of Cornell and your always-laughing-never-dull roommate.”

“I think I can go along with that general assessment. Tea?”

“Naw. Time to take the laughing show to bed.”

Billy didn’t see Julianne the entire next day. Tuesday mornings and afternoons were hectic.

Then Tuesday night came. Billy would have assumed, considering how much lovemaking he and Natalie had done over the brief but sexually intensive weekend, he might be a little more lukewarm to the prospect of some quick-release fucking. But as soon as she walked into his bedroom and sat on the bed, it was all over except for the heavy breathing. They both sighed deeply and collapsed into one another’s arms after their second set of orgasms.

So that was the plot line now.

Billy often pondered over the next several weeks why he found it so effortless to go against his own firm belief that what he was doing was terribly wrong. The easy answer was that he was just a typical guy under extraordinary circumstances.

But that wasn’t entirely the reality of the situation. He didn’t believe nor was he in fact a typical guy by any stretch. Nor were the circumstances extraordinary. Probably on any given night, thousands if not millions of men and women — and Julianne had to be included here because she was after all doing the same thing behind the back of her boyfriend — were cheating on their significant others. The ones to whom they had some paramount commitment.

An atypical guy in a far-too-ordinary circumstance? That was both frivolous and a dead end.

He continued to think about it. In fact he was haunted by it and for some time continued to be plagued by guilt. Still he came up with no answers. He made absolutely no sense to himself.

Eventually, he decided that he was asking the wrong questions to the wrong person. He stopped asking and just went with it.

Just because.

There!

That would have to do.

Normally he and Natalie talked a couple times a week. They had recently agreed — at her insistence — that to save him money, she would call him. She had become more protective of Billy's money than he was. He was slipping so far behind financially, he had pretty much given up budgeting. He figured he would just make up his shortfalls by arranging a student loan to cover the deficit at the end of each semester. But Natalie decided that since she had a full-time job, she should carry a little bit extra of the burden, at least for now. She had pretty much paid for all of the food and entertainment both during Billy's Christmas holiday break and for the recent weekend visit. She even offered to pay for his bus ticket.

Her calling him had its downside, however. He never quite knew when she was going to call. Though she officially had regular hours at her job, the 9 to 5 regimen was more the exception than the rule. While she pretty much knew Billy's schedule, she often could not call him at an opportune time or even when they had agreed.

Billy missed both of her calls the week after his visit. She left short and very sweet messages on voice mail but that just heightened his frustration. He broke the rule and tried to call her on Saturday, but there was no answer.

Then on Tuesday night, fairly late, right after he and Julianne had just finished making love, the phone rang. He and Julianne looked at each other, probably thinking the same guilty thoughts referencing the same people — her Aaron and his Natalie. He got up and answered.

"I finally caught you."

Not the best choice of words.

"You did. How are you, Nat?"

"Did I wake you?"

"No. No. I... I was just lying down. Some quiet time."

Technically true. He was lying down, and he and Julianne had finished and were listening to one another's quiet breathing.

"I'm so glad you called. I was beginning to think I was jinxed."

"Jinxed?"

This was not going well. They sounded like strangers to him.

"You know. I keep missing your calls. So. Everything okay?"

"Great. Really good. Say. I've been thinking. Next week is your break, right? And I'm really wondering if you should be coming here. I mean, of course I want you here. But maybe you should be earning money. Is it too late to get a job?"

Billy felt like she had just handed him a live hand grenade.

"Well... I could. The grounds department—"

"Billy. The thing is, I'm going to be working all day, sometimes into the evening. What are you going to do? We just got this big project. Four of us are going to be working day and night. The deadline is the end of the month."

"Maybe I could get something there."

"You'd spend the whole week looking, then have to leave. Listen, I can't make your decisions for you. But ... why don't you just come the last weekend? If you're not working, that is. Maybe I'll have some time that Saturday or Sunday. Think about it. Okay?"

"You're way too sensible. You're probably right. But I was so looking forward to spending some time with you."

"I guess that's the point. If you're just sitting in this apartment alone, it kind of defeats the purpose of coming. Hey, Billy. Not to change the subject, but is Julianne there? I need to talk to her. Just a quick one."

How long before a hand grenade explodes? It should be getting close.

"I'll see if she's around."

White lie #1.

Like he didn't know.

Billy waited a few seconds, then went to his room and got her. She was wide awake and calmly staring at him as he approached, then got up and picked up the receiver in the living room.

"Natalie! How are you? Things are going well. Can't complain Sure. I understand Okay. I promise. Right. So. When are you thinking? Perfect. Did you want to talk to Billy? Can't wait. See ya."

She handed the phone back to Billy.

"She sounds in good spirits. What are you doing there? Giving her foot massages?"

Natalie had a teasing chuckle in her voice.

"Nothing really. I hardly ever see her. Maybe that's it."

White lie #2.

He saw her enough. Enough to be her lover.

"I'm sure you have studying to do. I've still got a project action item breakdown to do tonight. Then some cost spreadsheets. It never ends."

"What were you two talking about?"

"Just your basic girl talk. Are you worried?"

Again the taunting laugh.

"No. Of course not."

White lie #3.

He was as white as the bed sheet Julianne was still laying on. His stomach was in a knot. Acid was dissolving the back of his throat.

"Do you like Stephen Stills? Pamela turned me on to him the other night."

"Never heard of him. Is he a movie star? Football player? What?"

"As in Crosby, Stills and Nash?"

"Who?"

"Billy. We've got to educate you. Anyway, check out his solo album."

"Oh. He's a musician."

"You got it. 70s and 80s guy. Big time. The album is just called Stephen Stills. Just listen to the first track. Great philosophy of life there. I think you'll appreciate it. Good night, love. Sleep tight. I'm thinking about you."

"Good night, Nat. I miss you."

What was with the games? Billy was sure that this rated as the strangest conversation he had ever had with her. They went from being strangers, through Natalie's basically putting the brakes on for spring break, to him listening to one half of a puzzling conversation with his once-a-week-lover who he had just had sex with, to Natalie embedding some bit of philosophical wisdom inside of an upgrade of his musical tastes.

Maybe the grenade hadn't gone off but Billy was left with the uncomfortable job of pulling pieces of shrapnel out of himself anyway. He definitely felt wounded.

Julianne had gone into her room. Billy knew it would be bad form to bother her. Her door was closed. But he was going crazy. What had they talked about? She and Natalie.

He knocked so softly he was afraid Julianne didn't hear it. But after a few seconds, just as he reached his hand up to knock again, she opened the door the width of her head and peered out quizzically at Billy, who looked like the next door neighbor wanting to borrow an egg at three in the morning.

"Have you ever heard of Stephen Stills?"

"Yes. Anyone who has owned a stereo system in the last thirty years knows who Crosby, Stills and Nash are. Do I win something?"

"I... I... this can wait. Sorry to bother you. Good night."

"Good night, sweetheart. I shall be counting the minutes until I know you are squatting in the bathroom like a girl. It just tickles me pink to think about it."

Paradoxically, her little bit of midnight mockery put him completely at ease. Suddenly, he felt that whatever it was that was bothering him was ridiculous. Julianne was a good friend to have, at whatever hour. He laughed like she had just given him a shot of nitrous oxide.

"That's beautiful. Because I know it comes from here."

He was tap tap tapping his heart as she closed the door.

And that's what friends are for.

Billy never bothered to track down the first track of the eponymous Stephen Stills album, as Natalie had suggested. That was too bad. It might have put some things in perspective. Then again, it might have confused the shit out of him.

The song she referred to was Mr. Stills' biggest hit, called "Love The One You're With."

It was famous and popular for giving license to a whole new level of promiscuity. The final words to the chorus became a mantra for the generation which kept true to its message until running smack up against the AIDS epidemic...

*If you can't be with the one you love
Then love the one you're with*

Billy really needed to start paying attention.

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

At some point the latter part of Spring Term, Billy fell in love with Julianne.

A couple weeks into April they had already upped the ante. It was Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Then she was gone. Summer came and she moved out. It was time.

That short, turbulent period of several weeks was — at least so far in his twenty years — easily the most confusing time of his entire life.

Of course, in years to come, life would be so messy that it would make this little dramatic episode seem like a cellophane-wrapped store-bought shirt from Van Heusen.

But a person has to start somewhere. Confusion is not something anyone masters overnight. It requires years of practice and rigorous application of one's worst judgment. Start small and build the dead-ends, detours, burnt bridges, cul-de-sacs, sink holes and road closures slowly and methodically over time. That is, if you want to really get confused, and make life a string of maybes, what-ifs, whatever's, could-have-beens, should-have-beens, what-was-I-thinkings, what-to-dos, and what-nows.

And who doesn't? At least that's how it seems.

Judging from the way most people muck up their lives.

As is most common, Billy just stumbled into his confusion. Blindly, cluelessly, unwittingly — with the naive and furtive optimism of relative youth and the addled brains of wide-ranging inexperience.

He had never been in love even once. Now he was in love twice. At the same time. Was he twice lucky or twice cursed?

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder.

How true. It sure did in Billy's case. Natalie was absent. So he grew fonder of Julianne. Ultimately, it was Julianne's absence which made him fonder of Natalie.

And for a good stretch he loved them both equally.

One did not subtract from the other. If anything, they seemed to build off of one another. His feelings for Natalie colluded with and augmented his love for Julianne. And as the intensity built for Julianne, it synergized and magnified his love for Natalie.

This in turn synergized and magnified the pain and the guilt he felt for what he was doing. Though that ironically seemed only to inspire him to further seek solace in the hot inferno of his affections for Julianne. He genuinely feared that this superheated infatuation was plunging him headlong toward a total meltdown.

He had no idea how to begin sorting it out.

He wasn't even sure he wanted to.

Maybe he was just in love with love. Maybe he was just out of his mind.

Against his better judgment and with reluctance on her part, he occasionally got Julianne to talk about it. Usually, it was as his semen was slowly oozing out of her vagina. Her impatience with him could be cut like a chunk of warm taffy.

"You can't be serious, Billy."

"Of course, I'm serious."

"I love you, Billy. But it's not the same. It's a biological love."

"Like between two frogs? Or lily pads? Or a frog and a lily pad?"

"You weren't a complete idiot three minutes ago."

"I just know how I feel."

"Good for you. I think I better go."

"You're saying you don't feel the same way about me as I feel about you."

"I'm saying you don't feel the same way about me as you think you do. I know what you and Natalie have. Consider yourself lucky and leave it at that."

"I am lucky to have both of you."

"You have me on Tuesday and Thursday nights. For a while. You'll have Natalie for the rest of your life. If you don't blow it."

"It feels exactly the same."

"But it's world's apart. It's a distinction it seems most guys don't make, much less understand. Figure it out. Good night."

He tried. He really tried.

Sometimes he tried to drop all pretense and delusion and just view the whole thing entirely superficially.

Hedonistically might be the better word.

He hardly had to remind himself, that within each world, the Julianne world and the Natalie world — completely separate and isolated from one another in space and time — he was definitely having a phenomenal shot of good fortune.

At the same time, Billy was no stranger to his fatalistic side — perhaps some semi-latent self-sabotaging component of his personality — which pointed its reprimanding finger and reminded him not to expect the current course to have anything but a tragic ending. Think of his father. Was Billy a chip off the old block? Think of Detroit. You can take the boy out of Detroit but can you take the Detroit out of the boy?

He felt cheap. White trash cheap. Typical guy cheap. Mutant strain cheap. Garbage-in garbage-out cheap. No-escaping-what-you-are cheap.

Of course, this was pure, self-deprecating hyperbole. The tricks and torture the mind resorts to in order to goad itself into risk-averse retreat.

The inescapable truth was that Billy had no real perspective on himself or the situation. He was flying blind and for now had no idea where he would land.

Despite his best efforts and his spectacular failure at understanding, explaining, or at least coming up with a plausible rationalization for his duplicitous, if sexually entertaining behavior, Billy did accomplish one notable thing. It would not find him a place in the intellectual history of the West, or even garner him a footnote in a grad student's unpublished philosophy paper. But it would put his own mind to rest and give him a certain amount of satisfaction.

Out of all of the analysis, merciless self-examination, cold chills, cold sweats, teeth-grinding, guilt, frenzy, frustration, empty epiphanies, and rare moments of calm contemplation, Billy came to know one thing for sure ...

Love is real.

He could now with the absolute cocksure confidence of pure enlightenment, scoff at the naysayers and spit in the face of the purveyors of romantic nihilism, the cynics who say that love is an illusion.

Billy knew the real score.
Love is the light that never dims.
Love is a wine that flows in our hearts.
Love is a wonder that has no beginning or end.
Love is a master key that opens the gates of perfection.
Love is the language our souls use to speak to one another.
Love is the trafficking of fantasies and transcending of mortality.
Love is an energy that can neither be created or destroyed.
Love is God Allah Yahweh Shiva Qat Aphrodite.
Love is touch smell feel taste listen pray.
Love is the poetry of the senses.
Love is metaphysical gravity.
Love is the gift of oneself.
Love is sweet tyranny.
All you need is love.
Descartes. You almost got it right.
Je aime, donc je suis.
Yes. That's how it should go.
I love, therefore I am.
Valentines Day solipsism.

It should have come as no surprise that Billy fell so deeply — or at least was convinced he was so deeply — in love with Julianne. Regardless of how matter-of-fact and calculating their arrangement was, at least on paper. Regardless of what prior commitments were on the table when Billy and Julianne struck their self-serving, mutually convenient arrangement. Regardless. The music at the closing curtain played the same recognizable universal melody.

By the end of Spring Term, Billy was deeply, madly, passionately crazy about her.

And realistically ... how could it be otherwise? Given the circumstances? They had been living and regularly sleeping together for five months. Tuesday followed Tuesday followed Tuesday. Then they threw in Thursdays for dessert. How could he not fall in love with her? After he felt the urgent needy rhythms of her body and the tight cool convulsions of her climax. After he tasted the sweet salty suppleness of her breasts and the milky lubrication between her legs. How could he not fall in love with her? Every girl has a unique taste. Julianne was uniquely delicious. Honey-lemon mixed with the spicy sweet of nutmeg. Toward the end of their lovemaking sessions as he entered her, he would wet his lips and the luscious smell of her sex would enter his nostrils. They had gotten so familiar with one another, they could sustain their coital ballet for the longest time, savoring the promise and all of their pre-orgasmic sensations with miserly joy, until the volcanic roar of their climaxes — after their months together more often than not simultaneous — collapsed them in a perfect erotic embracing fusion. They never rushed anything anymore. Until she got up and went to her room, she would wrap her long lithe arms around him and the barriers between their bodies and souls dissolved. Their shared warmth would permeate everything they could feel, touch, smell, hear. His fingertips would light on her face and hair, as he

brushed her lips with his. Her hands would delicately caress his back and buttocks. Finally their breathing would slow and synchronize, as they became one.

How could he not fall in love with her?

Unfortunately, this raised another profoundly troubling question. One which would never be answered and continued to add to his torment and bewilderment for years to come.

The great mystery, the thing that left him stumbling punch-drunk, wobbling and reeling in a black hole of confusion when Spring Term came to a close and they had parted ways, was how Julianne had seemed so completely unaffected by their love trysts. Sure. She had always been affectionate, kind and considerate, and generous as a lover. But love? She had kept that locked away in some private chamber which Billy had never seen, much less approached or broached.

For better or worse — probably worse — he would never forget her parting words the final day of exams. Her bags were packed and stuffed in the trunk of a waiting taxi. They shook hands like they had just settled a bet. Julianne spoke with the cold authority of Galileo addressing the Pope.

“Thanks for the great sex, Billy. You’ve got a beautiful body and you know how to use it.”

Billy Green.

Gigolo. Stud boy. Fuck buddy.

He boarded the very next bus to Newburgh and spent the weekend alternating between sulking and sobbing.

He never gave Natalie a straight answer why. He couldn’t.

“What’s wrong, Billy. Talk to me.”

“Life. Pollution. TV. Twinkies. Iraq. Mad cow disease. Nuclear weapons. Paris Hilton.”

“You’re in love with Paris Hilton?”

“I love you, Natalie. You. Don’t you forget it.”

Who was he reminding? She certainly already knew.

His dramatic declaration of the obvious seemed to calm him down some, leaving him for the remainder of his visit, closer to catatonic than agitated.

Natalie drove him late Sunday afternoon to catch the last bus to Ithaca. She waited with him in the departure lobby. The bus was delayed due to some unspecified mechanical problems. They sat in the midst of a small but increasingly impatient crowd, saying nothing, both bored and jumpy. Almost an hour passed. Finally the announcement came.

The Short Line bus bound for points west including Middleton, Monticello, Binghamton, Ithaca, Geneva, and Rochester is now ready for departure. Passengers should immediately proceed to Boarding Area 5.

They stepped out of the terminal to the boarding area. It was the most unromantic of all possible settings for any exchange of sweet nothings, big or small. The gunning of the diesel engine pumped brown-black smoke into the

hangar-size bay. The croaking rumble almost made any exchange of words inaudible. Just before stepping up into the behemoth steel box which would ferry him back to campus, Billy turned to Natalie and made a huge push from the back of his throat, which was partially paralyzed from speaking so little over the past few days, partially in the grip of a trepidation he had never felt before. In his effort to speak, he almost seemed to be choking.

Four halting words with a grimace.

“Will you marry me?”

Her response was calm and without hesitation.

Two lilting words with a smile.

“Of course!”

“The Man Who Loved Too Much”

Trilogy



Billy Green is bright, enigmatic, and lost. He spent his first 28 years trying to figure out who he is and where he fits in. His life has been a wild, unpredictable quest to attach himself to some reality he can grasp and live with. He grew up in an abysmal suburb of Detroit, escaped to university life at Cornell, got married and divorced before being thrown headlong and entirely unprepared into the insanity and social chaos of New York City.

Book 1: Archipelago

Amazon (Kindle): [amzn.to/1tyIRiw](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B001TYIRIW)

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Lenny Petrocelli had it made until his gangland bosses decided to set him up as the fall guy for a child prostitution ring. This crime thriller confronts the horrifying and taboo topic of sex slavery and human bondage. There are over 35 million slaves in the world today. It's a multi-billion dollar business, subjecting females, many of them barely in their teens, to the worst kind of savage exploitation. If this gritty novel rings true, it's for good reason. Petrocelli is based on actual stories from the violent and gruesome world of human trafficking.

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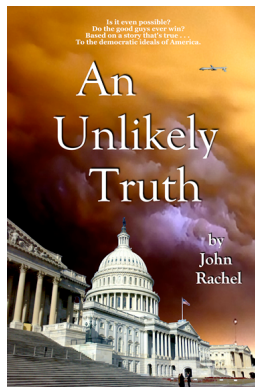
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In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

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“Blinders Keepers”



In this dark comedy, a young man who escapes his hopelessly hayseed home town in Missouri is mistakenly labeled a terrorist and must survive a manhunt by government security agencies, as the President of an America in chaos and collapse perpetrates an end-of-the-world hoax, in a desperate attempt to regain control and get himself re-elected.

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“11 - 11 - 11”



Noah was turning 23 and desperate to get out of town. Pulnick, Missouri had always been bland and soporific, but now it was now being invaded by white supremacist meth heads, plagued by an unprecedented crime wave, exploited by spiritualists and local politicians, and driven to hysteria by paranoid rumors that the world would end on November 11th.

Amazon (Kindle): [amzn.to/1RQzupo](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000APR000)

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Barnes & Noble: [bit.ly/1nlgS2Z](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/?i=11-11-11&cid=11-11-11)

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Kobo: [bit.ly/1JIdpRQ](https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/11-11-11)

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“12 - 12 - 12”



Welcome to the parallel universe of "12-12-12". This not what actually happens during 2012. But what unfolds is not more implausible. Nor is it less implausible. It is dark satire, a portrayal of reality with healthy doses of surreality and comedy, spawned by the tragic absurdity of our times. One reviewer calls it "laugh-out-loud brain food for hungry minds."

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About The Author

John Rachel has a B.A. in Philosophy, has traveled extensively, been a songwriter and music producer, and is a bipolar humanist. He has spent his life trying to resolve the intrinsic clash between the metaphysical purity of Buddhism and the overwhelming appeal of narcissism.

In October of 2008, while living in Japan, he completed his first novel, which he prefers to no longer discuss. It fell into a legal black hole, the result of the naïve and trusting Rachel being conned by an unscrupulous publisher.

In November of 2009, he completed his second novel, *The Man Who Loved Too Much*, written over ten months, as he lived in and traveled through Japan, China, Nepal, India Thailand, and Malaysia. It follows the convoluted life of a young man from age 4 to 28, as he tries to find his place in the world. The story is set in Detroit, upstate New York, and New York City. At 800+ pages, it is an epic. This encyclopedia of white trash pulp fiction plotlines has been split into three volumes, the novel you have just read being the second book of the series.

While writing his third and fourth novels in 2010 and 2011 — *11-11-11* and *12-12-12* — which track two years in the life of a young man, a hapless victim born in a hopelessly hayseed town in Bible-belt Missouri, the author hopped around between Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea and the Philippines. Those two efforts evolved into the short and snappy adventure, *Blinders Keepers*, both as a novel and a screenplay. Combining plot elements from *11-11-11* and *12-12-12*, *Blinders Keepers* is social-political satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift, Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, but revved up and spit-shined to take on the historical new levels of absurdity and dysfunction of the 21st Century. It was published in 2013, after which the author bounced between Japan, South Korea, America, and nine countries in Europe.

He then became somewhat rooted in a small traditional farming village in Japan near Osaka. It was there, immediately after poking himself in the forehead with chopsticks, that he was inspired to plant soybeans and sweet potatoes in his small but promising vegetable garden, and to write *An Unlikely Truth*, published March of 2014. In this political drama, a bright, young, idealistic, Green Party candidate, in his bid for the congressional seat of a very conservative district in Ohio, teams with a beautiful, fiery African-American intern to combat the slick deceptions and ruthless tactics of a sweet-talking right wing incumbent.

After the publication of the entire *The Man Who Loved Too Much* trilogy, he has two more novels in the pipeline: *Love Connection*, a drug-trafficking thriller set in Japan, and *The Last Giraffe*, an anthropological drama involving both the worship and devouring of giraffes. It unfolds in sub-Saharan Africa.

Also in the works is a political manifesto, and a creative non-fiction work, *The Naked American*. It is allegedly an account of his travels since leaving the U.S. August of 2006, but more likely the product of the voices in his head which have plagued him since puberty. Several publishers have declared that they will do everything in their power to make sure this book never sees the light of day.

The author's last permanent residence in America was Portland, Oregon where he had a state-of-the-art ProTools recording studio, music production house, a radio promotion and music publishing company. He recorded and produced several artists in the Pacific Northwest, releasing and promoting their music on radio across the U.S.

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The author quoted song lyrics as part of the story: "Love The One You're With" Copyright 1970 by Gold Hill Music Inc, written and performed by Stephen Stills.

Seven adapted excerpts from *The Man Who Loved Too Much, Book 2: Entendre* have appeared as short stories in online and print publications: "Dear Ann Landers" was published in the Michigan State University annual anthology, *The Offbeat*, Autumn 2011; "Make Love Not War" appeared in the American magazine, *The Fear of Monkeys*, the March 2010 issue; "Baby Fever" was published in the American print magazine, *Down In The Dirt*, July 2010; "Renoir Albertine Toulouse, Thumb Painter" appeared in *The Dirty Napkin*, September 2010; "Machines of Melanoma" was published in *Paradigm Shift: The New Paradigm*, in August 2010; and "Tunnel of Love" and "The Crush" appeared in the Detroit-based online magazine *Troubadour* 21, in May 2010 and December 2010 respectively.