

A Poet In Pittsburgh

Chapter One: What Happened

My name is Donna, and my life was pretty ordinary until I made the mistake of getting into a car with John Smith. I feel embarrassed to say that this experience has defined my life, to a pretty big extent. But truthfully, it has. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about it. I don't really think about John that much, and I really don't know what his life is like now, in jail. But the way I think about him is the way he was in high school, a bullying, swaggering football god who nobody dared to challenge.

And in my mind, I challenge him every day. Either I'm in some imaginary court room, sentencing him, not for the actual murders he did commit, but for the small murders of other students' self-esteem and aspirations, back in the fifties when we were all in school together. Or I imagine kicking him in the fork, jumping out of that car, and picking up some heavy object and smashing that precious car's lights out, before running off into the night like a victorious Valkyrie. I imagine numerous outcomes that are the exact opposite of what actually did happen, because what happened resulted in the crashing demise of my future as a loving relationship partner and a happy, productive member of society.

Although I actually am productive, I continually have to remind myself of it. I wasn't crushed completely. I do make a contribution, and there are those who think I make a big contribution, but I am not among them. I do not tend to see my accomplishments in the same light as others do, and in fact, I am not sure I see them at all, much of the time. But the defeats

weigh large in my mind. Still, I keep going. It never occurred to me not to. I am continually fascinated by life, and what fascinates me most is when people climb out of the gutter to remake themselves. I can't go back and change what happened that night, but I can help other people to avoid making similar mistakes, or to rise above their mistakes and claim the gifts their lives can potentially offer. As in the old saying, those who can't do, teach. And I am constantly amazed by the resilience of people. Working with homeless, addicted, sometimes mentally ill people gives me constant examples of that.

Back to what happened that night. It was sometime in the fall of our junior year of high school. My friend Denise got a car for her sixteenth birthday, and she got me and our friend Miranda to go with her to some drive-in hamburger place where kids from our school went to hang out and drink beer. It was after a big football game, and Denise had her eye on John Smith. God knows why, but she has always been one of those girls who likes mean guys. Meanwhile, he really liked Miranda, and she couldn't stand him. So, going to this place was never a great idea, but Denise and Miranda were crazy to go and get their hands on some beer. Both of them had recently discovered they really liked drinking. It didn't appeal to me that much, but they were my best friends, going back to grade school, so I went.

It was exciting, I have to admit, sitting at a picnic table surrounded by kids from our school, most of them older. John Smith was bragging about scoring a touchdown during the game that afternoon. He started to talk to Miranda, but she ignored him and walked away to talk to some other boy. He watched her go, expressionless, which I guess is how he looked when he didn't feel so good. Then he sat down across from me and Denise. "What am I doing wrong, that Miranda doesn't like me?" he asked us, "I keep trying, but nothing works."

“You aren’t always Mr. Nice Guy, John,” said Denise, “but that doesn’t bother me. It was amazing when you tackled that guy and got the ball for the touchdown. So what if the guy got hurt, it wasn’t your fault.”

“I just hope I didn’t put him in the hospital for too long,” said John, with a sappy expression of fake humility on his face.

He always said that after football games, and I always hated it. I tried to think of something to say that hid how much I disliked the guy. I finally said, “Maybe she would talk to you if you tried being a little nicer to people when she was around.”

Denise retorted, “Nah, forget it, it’s a lost cause. If she won’t go out with you, I will. Wait till I get my sweater,” and she walked to her car to get it, swinging her hips.

I watched her go, feeling in my stomach that something wasn’t right about this. I asked John Smith how he was doing, and he just grunted. Then he said, “You know, Donna, I really need to talk with you about Miranda. Could we go and talk in my car for a minute?”

This is where I should have got up and left. Instead, I said, “Shouldn’t you wait for Denise? She likes you, you know.”

“She’s not really my type,” he said, which was probably something he got from a movie, since who at age sixteen, or he might have been seventeen, has a “type,” anyway.

Getting in the car was where I really went wrong. He didn’t really want to talk about Miranda. He said he wanted to go somewhere more private, which I took to mean his house, but we wound up at the parking lot at the Lake, of all places, which was totally deserted. Suddenly he was on top of me and I couldn’t breathe. I passed out for a while. After I came to, all I really remember is telling him over and over to get off me and take me home, and he kept ignoring me

and doing more and more stuff I didn't want him to do. By the time he dropped me off it was the early hours of the morning, and I felt like some torture victim who suddenly got released.

All I wanted to do was get myself to my room, maybe get some coffee to try to calm down and stop shaking. But my older sister was up, watching some late-night movie, and when she saw me, she knew something was wrong. "What happened?" she asked, with a look in her eyes I didn't like.

"Nothing," I said, "I'm just going to get some coffee and go to bed. I don't want to talk about it."

I went to the kitchen and put some water on to boil. I stood by the kitchen counter, shaking and wondering if I was going to throw up. I wasn't even aware that my sister was in the room until she was standing right in front of me. When I looked up and saw her, I jumped a little and held on to the kitchen counter so I wouldn't lose my balance. "What do you want?" I asked her, with a tone like, *go away*.

Her eyes narrowed. "Where did you go? I thought you were just going out with your friends, but you look like something happened. Did you meet a boy, or something?"

"Like I said, I don't want to talk about it," and as I was talking, my voice began to quaver.

I sounded hysterical. I tried to control it, but I couldn't. She continued, "What happened? I'm guessing you went somewhere with some boy. I thought you were smarter than that."

I took a breath, and answered, "What happened is none of your business. Now I'm going to take this coffee to my room. I don't want to talk with you."

"Are you still a virgin?" she asked. I looked down, then tried to get calm so I could put some sugar in the coffee and leave.

“Oh, boy,” she said, “you’re not, are you? Something really happened, all right.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I managed to get out in a strangled tone, “now leave me alone.”

“Wow,” she said, “I didn’t think you were stupid enough to let something like that happen. You better make sure Mom and Dad don’t find out.”

I had picked the coffee up, but now I thrust it down with a slam. “You leave me alone,” I said.

“Dad might have another stroke,” she jeered.

“That’s it,” I yelled, and picked up a small, sharp knife that was sitting on the counter. Probably my Mom had been using it to peel fruit, as she used to do. I held it in front of Karen, and yelled again, “I’ve had it.”

She stared at me. “What do you think you’re going to do with that? Stab me? Like hell you will,” she said, trying to grab it.

I threw the knife in the sink and slapped her, hard. She stared at me and blinked back tears. I said, “Yeah, okay, I’m not going to stab you, but you better leave me alone or I will give you such a beating,” finishing in a whisper and staring back, thinking where to hit her again. I don’t know exactly how but my mind had gone white hot with rage, and it was making me do things I would never normally do. And I really felt like I could kill her, just to get her to leave me alone so I could go have my coffee in my room and try to stop shaking.

She must have picked up that I was serious, because she backed away from me, with fear in her eyes, and let me leave. As I went to my room she called out, “You better hope that boy doesn’t tell everybody you know about this.”

I just kept going until I got in my room, sat down on my nice, comfortable bed with the quilted pink bedspread and three teddy bears, and sobbed until I fell asleep.