

CAPTIVE
♠ TRUTH ♠

A Novel

KAREN STARY



Can't Put it Down
BOOKS

Captive Truth
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Dedicated to our daughters' legacy

A short while ago, their frenzied desecration was an act of butchery, but now they are spent, like exhausted lovers after a furious rape. They have transformed into detached appendages, sanctioned by an indoctrinated clan. They do not speak to each other, they do not look at each other, for they dare not contemplate the very thought that their carnage may have been only tainted disillusion used to justify an archaic faith.

♠ Chapter 1: The Deal ♠

The Pocket Cards

In the game of poker, gamblers live between two worlds of delusion: the promise of the cards they have, and the fear of the cards they will get. The combination will determine the sanity, for the cards have no memory.

I

AN EARLY MORNING SUN had smeared a soft haze across my windshield as the pall of the work week vaporized into the glass. I followed.

Surprisingly, the miasma first appeared to be soothing, warm, inviting. Well, that is what I wanted to believe. In actuality, it was deceptively auspicious, for this Friday's closure stirred with a tentative promise of the forthcoming evening, in spite of the nip in the autumn air. I recalled how I had shivered slightly as I sat alone in my car, waiting for his call. My cell phone remained indomitably silent on the console, but within reach. Briskly, I stroked my upper arms, trying to chase away the chill inside the car.

I waited, glancing out the side window, staring at nothing in particular. Shifting my attention back to the console, I feinted reaching for the cell as my hand veered downward, flipping the knob for the seat warmer instead—a more prudent choice. Once more, I sat aimlessly trying to discount my apprehension and the silence. Finally, I could no longer ignore the unrequited urgency and snatched the cell from the console. I hesitated momentarily, then fervidly punched in his number. An exhaustion of rings collapsed into a “hello.” I was relieved that I didn't have to speak to voicemail. After a rambling of hollow pleasantries, I charily asked, “Are we getting together tonight?”

Later, I would chastise myself for the unrelenting replay of the exchange that followed. It was to be the beginning of my fall into the mirage.

“So, tonight...we're still getting together?” I repeated because there was no response the first time I asked. After too long a pause, he blurted, “I think we should cool it for a while.”

In the subsequent hours I could not quell the thought of how easily he had said those words. Although our relationship had been recklessly skeletal, it had been elusively nourishing. No, not just that. It had been passionately intimate. These words were a violation of that intimacy, and from the spit of a cliché, that fulfilling bond had become a naked uncertainty. I do remember how I had not wanted him to say anything else after he had said the words, “cool it.” But I didn’t tell him that. I just remained silent, like the indomitable cell phone. I rationalized that if I didn’t provoke him to go any further, his words would not pass the point of no return. But, to tell the truth, I already knew that it was past that point the moment he spoke. I could only think about how the warm car seat was incinerating my rear end. I guess when I didn’t immediately respond he felt obligated to continue his reasoning. “It’s just that I can’t handle three women at the same time anymore.”

That was when I fell into Alice’s rabbit hole. Oh, I was well acquainted with that little ditch. As I tumbled past the stumps of legitimacy of our intimacy, I tried to soften the crash. I convinced myself that perhaps some humorous remark might negate what he really was attempting to tell me. “You’ve been seeing three women besides me!” I playfully snickered, but I think that it came out more like a snip.

“No, no, three women including you,” he clarified without reservation. Yes, he was quite adept at shutting down a surly female!

His caustic response stung my concocted sense of humor. Yet, in the darkening absurdity of the moment I still wanted to revise the intent of his words. My thoughts continued to fester. Oh! That was a relief! Only two others! I thought he was going to recover from his delusion and admit that I was the most wonderful woman who had ever touched his life! Of course, he didn’t say those words, and I didn’t either. Perhaps I should have. It’s not that I cowered before the unforgivable. I had always considered myself a resilient woman. It’s just that I doubted even then that by vocalizing those words the direction of the discourse would really change. So, instead of a rebuke there was another pause, an implicit pause this time, for my turn to speak. However, I refused to say the words that would make the severing more palatable for him. In a lame way it was my own voiceless coup d’état.

Finally, he retorted more ruthlessly, perhaps to prod me closer to that inevitable. “You knew I wanted to see other women!” He punctuated “other” to disembowel further quirky bantering on my part. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable and wanted closure. However, neither of us spoke. Neither of us said anything. It was not the words but the silence which finally jarred me.

“Yes...the other women...yes, I knew about the other women.” I hadn’t liked being his backburner girl, and I had known that I was for some time in spite of my need to negate it until now. I’m sure he digested that thought, too,

for he cleared his throat as if he had just read my mind.

When he spoke, he tempered his voice, whining like the “wayward son” petitioning clemency. “It’s just that I can’t handle the guilt anymore.”

Oh yes! The convenience of guilt is always an appropriate resolution for civility. Nevertheless, I was moved by his effort to finally make an attempt to sound less standoffish. We both knew this justification was just another white lie, like all the white lies he used to build our relationship because he was...a kind person...a meticulous man with a tidy closet who could not live with clutter. Somehow, I had become the clutter in his life, and the reason for this exchange was to clean house, so to speak. Usually he cleaned on Saturday morning. However, my phone call prompted an early jump on cleaning day. I took a deep breath for I knew that, in spite what was unfolding, I had to make an attempt to harness my cynicism. The intimacy of our relationship deserved better than that...I was better than that! And besides, I actually was able to empathize with his struggle about letting me go. Like the other men, he always had this thing about “letting go” throughout his life.

I told myself that I should be angry about what he was doing, not just tell him the hollow words... Let’s talk about this, or I’m sure we could work this out. After all, we were old enough, educated enough, compassionate enough not to be prosaic, predictable, or scripted. Weren’t we a man and a woman of substance, midway in making an irreverent mistake? It’s just that, perhaps foolishly, I had always believed that we would be forever companions of the night, so that we would have meaning of day.

Instead, I lost my will to defend those words. I just gripped my cell phone tighter to stop it from trembling and tried to arrest any traceable quivering in my voice. I always like to appear in control. He knew that about me. He knew that I would present the front of an undaunted lady and not fall to pieces in his presence like a glass doll. However, as I pressed my mouth closer to the cell to speak, the cold metal numbed my diminishing breath even further. The conversation lagged. It was time for him to fade away into the distance of the morning, just like all the others had faded into the distance of the night. His breath wilted. “Maybe...I’ll see you around.” Trailed by a tired afterthought, “maybe...we could get together some...”

I cut him off to recoup that shadow of fraudulent dignity by finally releasing the words that he wanted to hear. I exhaled back, “I don’t think so!” And that was that.

Unfortunately, that type of finality has a face of betrayal, like allowing sand to easily slip through frail fingers while clenching a fist. The duplicity lies in the surrender of deceitful pride and pining hunger. Sure, “letting go” might be an altruistic definition of love, but its residue lingers in badgering doubt. I remembered that I was so afraid of how I would live the rest of my

life. I was not prepared for the fall...not again, not again...

In the weary minutes and callous seconds after that exchange I tried to figure out why and when the breakup really began. Did it loom within our silences months before when I had denied that our quiet contentment was really having nothing to say to each other? Did he want to say those severing words even then? Perhaps the most telling evidence of the forthcoming separation existed even earlier in the relationship. Was the evidence there when he turned his back to me in bed after he had too vigorously fondled? Was that the first snub? Even then, in spite of an uneasy inkling, did I too easily dismiss his indifference as I sank in a sweet flush of my own?

I wrestled with such thoughts as I gazed into the harsh glare, embedding the cell into my ear. I finally eased my grip on the phone and closed the exchange with another futility, "You know...that I love you."

His last words were, "Yes, I know." And I knew that I would never see or hear from him again. I was embarrassed. I was old. I was alone once again.

I clutched my cell tighter, arduously begging it for empathy, but its cover thoughtlessly snapped shut. Reaching beyond the steering wheel with detached bravado, I replaced it back on the console, my fingers refusing to release from its casing. I held this pose as if I had expired into some still life canvas, a solitary female in a silent world of a Wyeth watercolor.

The ticking of the vehicle's clock pelted the silence within the car like an obscene metronome. Incongruent thoughts continued to throb. How utterly confused I was. I began to worry that I had forgotten to go somewhere, wherever one goes after a breakup. I worried there was something I needed to do, whatever needs to be done after a breakup. But the "wherever" and "whatever" only ricocheted like vacant moans within the unforgiving timepiece. I remained in that pose for some time until I thought I'd better go. I moved my hands onto the steering wheel, but I did not start the engine.

The sky darkened. At first, it was just a sprinkle. Then the rain dribbled tender droplets against the windshield before pelting into a raging downpour. The glass was tainted in smeared invisibility. I thought that I better just stay put for a while, at least until the cloudburst let up. Besides, I really was in no condition to drive away as if nothing had happened. I lay my head against the headrest, closed my eyes, and drifted into another windshield from a distance evening, decades ago...

Lightening flashed in wicked onslaughts within the darkness, concealing the boy and girl inside the truck. It was close to midnight, and hopefully my father would not awaken. The pickup was parked at the far end of my driveway. The boy might still have been in high school, but he wasn't stupid. Arousing my father would not be a good scene. We had been drinking cheap beer while

parked off road by Old Man Mackey's rabbit farm for the last couple of hours, ever since we left the CYO dance, which was over at nine. Even though I was under age, it didn't seem to matter to the boy. He was eighteen, so in his mind it was okay for him to drink. I took the offered sips from his flask. Although the ignition was off in his truck, he kept the panel lights turned on in the cab and made sure that the radio was on low. The soft music was a soothing calm in sharp contrast to the harsh elements battering the vehicle outside. Whichever direction I looked, sheets of rain painted the windows into portholes of obscurity. We could not see what was beyond, but even more pertinently, no one could see what was happening within. We were cocooned in a haven of endless possibilities.

Reeking of stale beer, tobacco, and body odor, he leaned into me. I was repelled by him, but I didn't move away; I was expected not to. As if to remind me of that deafening tenet, lightening flashed, Zeus' thunderous boom. It was a forewarning... as a female, I was expected to submit. Clumsily, he continued to press his weight against me, anchoring my left arm. I tried to assure myself that this was not rape. It was just that interlude from innocence into becoming a woman. He said that he was a man of experience, and I need not fret. He said that he had everything under control. Yet, to be honest, I wasn't convinced. When he lunged into me his lips missed mine, his sweaty cheeks were way too sticky to be in control. But the misstep would not stop him for he was a boy about to proclaim his manhood. His lips were moist, mushy, and vulgarly aggressive. They pried mine open without asking permission. He invaded my mouth and ransacked my sensibilities. He thrust his tongue deeply into the cavity in cadent darts. I was uncomfortable, and there was pain. Fearing that the sides of my lips would split, I brought my hand up to his chest to push him back; he palmed the back of my hand into his. Just like his cheeks, his touch was clammy. Another lightning bolt ripped the darkness and illuminated his face. His glassy eyes were wild with anticipation. Yet, before the light dissipated, I saw his moist lids drowse in begging neediness. I instantly knew that this tower of strength was a sweating fool of incompetence, but in my naïveté I tried to convince myself that I was the one chosen to fulfill this deficiency. "I will truly be the only girl in his life," I kept reassuring myself. "He needs me, and most importantly, he adores me." Obviously, this was the onset of other delusions as well! But, what did I know then? Over time you would think that I would no longer fall for the sweet sensations, which delicately lift the tiny hairs on my skin into delirium. But I swooned then, just as I swoon each time I enter the mirage. I fell into the rhythm of his tongue and became that captured butterfly, frail, submissive, green to what was about to happen.

"I want you, Christine. I want you, Christine, Christine, Christine..." The

repetitive words were hypnotic. I liked the way he pronounced my name. His voice drew me deeper into him, and I sank into what I wanted to be true. There was no longer any space between us. The thunder continued to thrash against the outside of the truck, but it seemed so far away. I was safely wrapped within the blanket of his body. He began to knead my hand like it was soft clay. Then, in a symbiotic embrace, he moved our hands downward as if they were on a mission. I knew what he wanted. I had read about these moments in the cheesy romance novels I sequestered from Walt. They had saturated my teenage curiosity with lucid descriptions of tittering foreplay and salacious orgasms. But this was different; this was real. What I was doing was not mere words. His mouth swallowed my ear in a guttural plea, “Take me, Christine, take it.” Then with his other hand, I felt its nudge against the back of my skull as he gently but firmly pushed my head into his lap.

It was over very quickly. And when it was over, I really wasn’t sure it was over. I just remained very still. I didn’t quite know what to do, or what to say. He turned away from me and quickly rearranged himself as if nothing had just happened. I still did not move. I was afraid to move. Shame flushed through me. He must have realized my awkwardness because he briskly rubbed his hand over my shoulder blades. I heard him say, “You did good...Christine, you did good.” Then he, too, sat very still.

When I finally looked up, I saw that he was fixated on something outside his side window. He had the appearance of a wax mannequin, expressionless and hollow. A pungent bitterness seeped into the fraudulent music. Deception pitter-pattered in the rain. I moved back up into the passenger seat, and for some time we sat in the drunken fabrication of our own truth, under the spell of low music and dim lights.

“I hope I wasn’t...” I stuttered.

“Not at all; it was quite all right.” He cut me off. It was then that I realized that words really don’t matter after all.

The thunder had stopped. There was a soaked, clean, crystallized world on the other side of the beaded window. Inside everything seemed dim, muddled, no...more than that, imperceptible. Severing the moment into obscurity, he abruptly leaned over my lap and turned on the ignition. The motor barked a piercing whine followed by abrasive rumblings. It was my signal to leave.

When I spoke, the words sounded flat, even to me. “Well, good night.”

“Night.” His voice was quiet, clipped, empty.

I left the truck and my first sexual encounter—quiet, clipped, empty.

Remembering that interlude so long ago, I draw down the driver’s side window to rethink the latest intimate situation. A whiff of damp air brushes

my cheek. The mist brings a relief to the stuffiness within the vehicle and my mind. I start the ignition. Turning my steering wheel in the opposite direction from which I am parked, I head south for the Garden State Parkway. My destination is Atlantic City. I needed a sympathetic shoulder, and Walt will be there. My bag had already been packed for the weekend. It was prepared with another man in mind, but I will make adjustments.

It is a two-hour, tedious drive in Friday's rush-hour traffic on the Garden State Parkway. The road is damp and visibility compromised. I keep tight fists on the steering wheel as the countryside streams past my window.

Endless questions from former split-ups whiz by like pesky flies. Where did I go wrong this time? What did I say or do? Or not say or do? Was it my breath? Yet, in hindsight maybe it was his breath! After all, I am a modern woman, an adherent to equality, whether it involves intimacy or halitosis.

These are the familiar questions which had followed prior breakups, silly questions: obsolete ghosts never completely fading. Nevertheless, regardless of the misgivings, the answers always lead me to misconstrue that it must have been me, the earmarked jaded lover, who has misled her man down that road to discontent. The breakup had to be my fault! It had to be something that I missed!

Traffic has come to a dead stop. It must be because of some accident, I think, as police cars zip by on the service lane. Through my windshield, an endless row of cars amass, a graveyard of cadavers. Various pitches of sirens wail in the distance, forecasting that it will be a long wait.

Boredom coerces me to turn on the radio and stare into the vast terrain of the sinking day. As Sinatra croons, a specter of my father's countenance imprints itself through my side window. I try to blink the image away. But it refuses to dissipate. I address the eyes in the rearview mirror...

"Papa, could you make the music louder?"

"No!"

Papa always played the music low when I rode in the car with him. There wasn't much I could do about that. I had little clout, sitting too far from the controls. Besides, I was a girl and well aware what that meant, even at seven.

Slumped in the back seat of the old Chevy I would stare into that rearview mirror and watch my father's eyes as they slow danced with Old Blue Eyes in some weird duet. He seemed to be having a personal conversation with the singer, probably unraveling why he was widowed at such an early age.

"Could I ask you a question now, Papa?"

"No!" That was the defining 'No!'—the one that meant I dare not question further, even though I wanted to, even though I needed to, even

though I knew his answer wouldn't matter anyway. It's just that it was so hard growing up in a house without a mother to answer a young girl's relentless questions. Absurdly, I thought if the volume of the music was louder, maybe he would answer all my questions.

Unfortunately, the answers to my questions about being female would remain elusive. Even at eleven, shortly after the first spotting, I never was allowed to openly discuss what was supposed to be hidden. I was shamed into believing something was wrong with me. This self-inflicted inquisition usually ended with the notion that I must have some innate flaw, a flaw perhaps of being born female, like Eve, born second, without a soul, as postured in the Holy Book. Old Eve didn't know what the hell she was getting into, and invariably, it seemed, neither did I. Each month throughout my teen years I became ashamed again, acutely aware of my nakedness, like the first female. That shame was like what I felt after breakups, the shame that a man no longer wanted me in spite of the intimacy we had shared.

I revealed none of this to anyone except Walt, and he didn't count because he took none of this seriously enough to warrant serious attention. He was always wrapped up in his own miasma. Besides, he was a man! Would he truly be capable of understanding any of "this female stuff" as he called it?

Another siren, another police car, and then an ambulance...yes, this traffic will not ease up. I shut the engine, but the incessant clock's ticking within the silence of the car propels me to switch the radio back on. I play with the station dials thinking I might be able to catch "my song." That would help the time pass. I am only half way to A.C. and even further from home.

Yes...my home...my lovely townhouse situated on a mountain ridge overlooking the Hudson River. It has a captivating view of the river with its backdrop of the New York skyline. It is so picturesque and comfortable that many mornings it is difficult to leave, especially during the fall.

In my early morning commute to work I would search for the "song of all songs," the song that would be "my song." And when that day came, I was determined to capture this butterfly, never allowing it to fly away from me. That was when I would sink into the deluded promise to myself that perhaps another day, another place, another lover, another song would make my life different. The music beckoned me further into the mirage, a deception for impetuous fools deluded by the songs of the sirens.

Finally, it happened, quite unexpectedly. On one of those mundane mornings, I picked up the unfamiliar melody. I was immediately drawn to it, much like a deaf reptile to the swaying flute of the snake charmer. I could not catch the title in its debut, and so had to wait for it to be played again to retrieve it. Well, it did play again, and again. With each daily commute to the

city I would surf the dials, neurotically attempting to catch its lyrics from various stations.

Of course, I was not the only one attracted to this song. It zoomed up the charts and quickly became the copious darling of the airwaves for other female dreamers like me. Nevertheless, it was “my song.” I had adopted it, allowing it to seep into my subconscious. This obsession escalated, and when I snagged the tune in my ongoing quest, I would become so caught up in the lyrics that I would unabashedly sing aloud, making voice and melody mingle throughout the cavity of my sedan in my own glorious opus. Sometimes, in the zeal of this private performance, if I became conscious of other commuters glimpsing sideways from their cars, I would tone down my fervor and just slightly move my lips to mime the lyrics. Surely, I didn’t want anyone to think I was another crazy female. When you live close to New York City sometimes it is prudent to embellish pretense. Passion often comes with callous cynicism.

Inevitably the song remained in my head. It would begin with a soft melody, which would swell into a crescendo before the release of the lyrics. The verse would mist over me in a peculiar miasma:

*Strange, when you come to doubt your sanity,
When vision makes the tangible translucent,
And you can only focus on indiscriminate haunting;
When hearing makes words stutter,
And interim pauses collect meanings of incongruities;
When speaking only makes billows of breath,
Lovers’ lies,
Lurking within mirages of truth.
Doubt is a forsaken promise;
Passion is its deluded quest.*

Empty-headed mutterings chanted with the repeated refrain, “Doubt is a forsaken promise; Passion is its deluded quest.” Sometimes I would quickly turn off the radio, spooked. Better to remain distant than to reveal that the song was about my life. I feared that if I understood the meaning I would be impelled to take ownership of its message. Perhaps, in this particular libretto skulked another haunting, a more sinister haunting, ticking closer to where doubt and passion would bring about my demise.

I was faced with a dilemma. Should I detach myself from this song and have a lobotomy, which I obviously needed, or should I embrace the song and believe that I should enter the deluded quest? I had always seemed to struggle with the residue of the tattered threads in my life. Regrettably, I was to find that there was more than one way to deflower a female.

Enough of the backstory. Tomorrow I will finally have to deal with the song, for I have tickets to attend a concert at a casino in Atlantic City where the singer and his song will stir the muses to do their mischief.

It is already early evening, and the traffic jam shows that it will be awhile before I arrive in A.C. After this morning's rejection I entertain the thought that maybe I should not attend the concert tomorrow at all. I want to cancel the entire weekend! But, arrangements were made weeks ago when Walt had secured the concert tickets to coincide with some poker game at the same casino. I knew that he wouldn't join me and my date during the concert, or for that matter, probably any time during the weekend. Typically, we would separate on such jaunts, giving each other our respective space. From past understandings, Walt was well aware of how much I insisted on privacy when I went out with my men. Besides, it was not a problem since Walt would be involved with the poker action. However, the morning's phone call had changed the dynamics of the weekend. Perhaps I had better get in touch with Walt to tell him the latest situation. Fortunately, he answers on the first ring.

"Yeah?" Walt sounds preoccupied.

"Walt, this is Chris."

"Yeah, kid, What's up?" He really wasn't expecting a call from me until tomorrow.

"Well, Walt, it's this way, I'm on my way down, now."

"Really! Cool! I got the room for you guys tonight as well as tomorrow night."

"Well, that's just it. I'm coming alone."

"Yea. I thought the guy was coming with you."

"Well, he's not!" I sharply snap. I really am not mad at Walt. I am mad at the world...no, not the world. I am mad at myself! There is a second or two before he responds.

"Yeah. What gives?" Walt is good at picking up on unspoken details, the obscure discourse that revealed the real intention behind the words. It is a skill he probably cultivated from the subtle exchanges during poker. However, I do not want to be coy with him; he deserves better from me.

"He bailed out, Walt."

"So, he's coming tomorrow?" Walt was still not clear what I was attempting to tell him.

"No, the man has dropped out of the picture...for good!"

"The bastard!" Walt hammered pejoratively.

"Walt, he's not a bastard!" For some reason, I feel I have to defend my former lover. Don't ask me why. Maybe I am still caught in the rabbit's hole. "He's just another guy who had his own problems. And...well, things just

didn't work out, that's all."

"Listen, Chis, forget about the bastard."

"He's not a bastard!" I am more insistent.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say."

"Look Walt, I'm pretty wrecked about the whole thing. The breakup just happened this morning. And I'm still hurting."

"Got it." A more sympathetic Walt responds. "Just forget about him, Kid. You were too good for the..." He catches himself.

Walt is always on my side, making sure I am okay, making arrangements that are good for me. It is Walt who got the "comp rooms," so that I would be set for the weekend with my date. I had told Walt about the guy whom I had been seeing a lot lately, a man of interesting possibilities, as they say. I told him that I thought this might be "the one," and wanted to believe that this outing in A.C. would further that relationship. Walt had reacted indifferently at the time. But, of course, that is Walt, always the poker face.

Still, I didn't want Walt to now feel that all his plans were for nothing. I wanted him to know that there was something to be salvaged. "Walt, don't worry. I'm still coming down."

"Good...good. That's good." Walt sounded relieved. "So, where are you now?"

"On the Parkway, just past Point Pleasant exit, and I'm sitting in traffic...actually vegetating with the engine off... just sitting here, stewing. Walt, I'm really sorry I snapped at you. It's just that I'm a bit messed up."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, okay. Listen, Chris, you're staying with me tonight. Okay? I'll cancel the other room reservation. I got a nice room here at the hotel, a real nice view... overlooks the beach and all. Don't worry about tomorrow."

I would rather stay with Walt than be alone. He knew of my strange affliction for this elusive song and its hot singer. It was Walt, not the so-called "man-in-my-life" who purchased the hard-to-get tickets to the performance. That should have given me a sign of a brewing breakup. Besides, that was just like Walt, never waiting around for someone else to do the right thing.

"Walt, I hope I'm not interfering with your plans." Walt sometimes liked entertaining the finer sex on his little excursions.

"No worries. You will probably have the room all to yourself most of the night. I'm playing cards with a bunch of guys right now, and it'll probably go on for a while."

"Oh, so you made the final rounds in the tournament!" I finally was able to channel my self-absorbed agenda into interest in my friend.

"No, not exactly...may have a better gig."

"Oh?" I am confused. This tournament was all Walt talked about for

weeks. “So, you are not in the main poker room, anymore?”

“Well, I’ll tell you all about it when you get here. Just look for me.”

In fact, about a month ago, Walt had told me about the poker event in Atlantic City. He was to go a week before to check out the competition. It was one of those process-of-elimination competitions, “best man, last man standing.” And, of course, Walt would probably be in the final rounds by this weekend unless he decided to bow out early to keep a low profile for some future “Game of all Games!” as he often said. However, this week he hinted about rumors of some high rollers being there.

With that kind of crowd, he would never leave the tables. I tried asking him about these so-called “big wigs,” but Walt, being Walt, was evasive. I wasn’t offended. He usually was vague about particulars, especially when it involved “the cards.” In all truthfulness, I think that he doesn’t want to burden me with details. He has been like that since our childhood, and I long ago accepted the fact that he was not going to change. He has that uncanny tenacity to remain mum when he wants.

“I’ll leave the key at the front desk. Let yourself in, freshen up, get something to eat, and then get some rest, Chris. You probably need a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow you’ll be ready for the concert.” Just like Walt. He knew I would not want to miss that concert. And he always was able to say the right words to get me out of my funk.

But, then there was silence, and I thought we got disconnected. “Walt...Walt, are you still there?”

“Yeah, still here. Listen, Chris, I know how upset you get from these...incidents in your life.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it! At least, not now, Walt, not over the phone...not now.”

“Okay...okay, Kid. So, it’s this way...You don’t need to look for me. I’ll probably mosey into the room sometime in the early morning hours. Give me some time to close my eyes a bit, and when I get up, we’ll take a walk on the boards, get some Philly subs, and then we can talk. You’ll be okay, Chris. I’ll take care of you, Babe.”

That was how Friday night and the next afternoon were supposed to be before I attended the concert on Saturday night. However, the fates had something else in mind. Friday night would turn out to be quite differently.

II

AT THE CONCERT, AS I WAIT in my designated seat for the singer of “my song” to enter the stage, I know that I, too, am beckoned to a stage. Certainly, Friday’s painful rejection has once again dragged me down into the unforgiving rabbit hole of sunken memories. Nevertheless, I refuse to allow

that bleakness to ruin Saturday night. I want the music to pull me out of the hole, as it has so many times before. With undivided attention I lean forward in my seat and await the song. It is seven thirty-four in the evening. The performance is about to get underway. I inhale a deep breath to silence my thoughts, and I silence my cell phone.

Unfortunately, silence cannot quell the distant sirens that chant inside my head. It is just my overactive mind! I remind myself that it is only my imagination, and not some psychotic fixation. I justify my thinking by reminding myself that I am as sane as any other female who has undergone rejection. Defining my condition as insanity only undermines my credibility.

If you are to understand the message of my story, it must be understood that it is being told by a woman of sound mind.

As I lean into the concert seat, extinguishing a flailing breath, it is not a breath of submission, but a little more challenged. What else can a rejected female do but hope that there are different possibilities left in life? Is it not within the pause of breath that we are lured into the anticipation of new breath?

Maybe that is the reason I love those moments before a live performance when I can arrest the onslaughts that seem to continuously invade my femininity. I draw in another deep breath and use my restless hands to smooth away the wrinkles on my black taffeta skirt. I am ready to begin... again.

Doesn't it always seem that no matter how hard we try to obliterate those damn wrinkles they still remain, our unrequited desires? I admit that I have given too much attention to my appearance. I like to have some type of control over something in my life, even if it is only superficial. Being conscious of my appearance satisfies that need. That is why I am so compulsive about wrinkles. This vanity has been a fixation of mine since childhood when so much seemed out of my control. When I was seven, Walt would often scold me to stop fidgeting with my clothes, following up with a comment that this self-conscious twitch showed my insecurity. "Never show what you're feeling!" he warned. But I never was able to let go of this frivolous quirkiness.

I kink my neck to see if Walt, next to me in the place where my lover should have been, has noticed my insecurity. I try to ignore him and focus on the concert. To distract my hands, I gamely open my purse and withdraw a petite mirror and lipstick. I smear its color back and forth over my lips. As I realize the redundancy might appear strange, I stop, but, still continue to stare at the reflection. I cannot ignore the little creases beginning to form around my eyes. Sometimes I raise my eyebrows in an exaggerated attempt to smooth the lines, but they still return. I snap the lid shut and convince myself that I look good enough. "Oh, vanity, vanity, comrade of unremitting time!" Do I equate my dwindling looks with the loss of possibilities? Finally, I am able to

settle myself enough to wait for the song. I blink, but wandered aimlessly again...

Throughout the concert hall, discordant notes mingle with expectation. Musicians hidden deep in the pit tune their instruments in a prelude to the evening's magic. Random violin plinks and plunks stammer like timid rain droplets. As impending darkness drapes over us in an imperceptibly slow fade, I sense the audience restlessness. A solitary trumpet scolds in the obscurity of the hall and thins into the undertone of "hushes." I blink again. During this pause I try to arrest my inner chatter by focusing on insignificances. Suddenly, brazen floodlights assault my senses, screaming out into the music hall, momentarily blinding me, but, I dare not look away. I want to embrace the lights. They shift their round moon eyes, emitting bright beams that resemble ghostly triangular megaphones through the darkness, floating searchlights that collide swiftly over each other's paths. With an impulsive gasp they halt in midair. The performance is imminent. I cocoon myself deeper into my seat, burrowing away from any offensive intrusion.

But this can never be; I am precipitously disturbed. To my right is some commotion...something concerning the holder of the ticket stub for the seat next to mine. I simply ignore what has no relevance to me and instead resume gazing into the stationary strands of light now dissipating above my head. I can almost reach up and touch them. As I sit transfixed, I see the hint of dust particles in senseless disarray drifting through the diminishing light.

Once again, I am encroached upon...once again, to the immediate right, the bustle of covert activity continues. I shake my head in haughty dismay; this type of occurrence seems to be a frequent imposition in our society. Intrusive rudeness has unfortunately replaced courteous deportment. The seated man tempers his voice to some disheveled older teen who believes that he is in the correct location.

"But, I'm sure this seat is mine!" the lad retorts abrasively, providing a ticket stub as proof.

The exchange flattens into a tone which, obviously, suggests something that I am not meant to hear. More whispering ensues.

"I'm sure...work out...let's see..."

Once again, I strain to ignore this disturbance. What could possibly be the problem? My curiosity has been tweaked. I inconspicuously brush my chin over my right shoulder to snapshot the scene. In a blink, I catch him handing the young man back the ticket seat stub, folded in such a manner so as to conceal a hint of buried cash within. *Yes, Christine, obviously, there is some impropriety taking place!* But, I repeat to myself, *this business certainly does not pertain to me.*

I redirect my attention to the stage, barren except for the petrified

instruments in readiness for the dance. A solitary guitar leans slightly askew on its stand like some deserted lover forlornly awaiting its sweetheart. Close by, the lady in waiting, a microphone, limps off a slender stand, bowing her head in penitent prayer. A vacant stool stands in rigid, staunch chivalry. The audience waits; the darkness waits; I wait. The silence wafts with indiscriminate, muffled coughs. I sink further into the dim.

Yet, the scent of his aftershave can no longer be ignored. It is sweet without stickiness. I sink into that, too. Within my tight seat I try to reposition myself in a futile endeavor at unassuming posture, for I am quite aware that sitting to my right is an attractive man... a seasoned man... nonetheless, a very attractive man. As I shift to get comfortable, I inadvertently brush up against his sleeve. Although my shoulder only slightly grazes him, it is abrupt enough to warrant a response. As a warm flush sweeps over me I scold myself, *Oh no, Christine, you cannot allow yourself to fall this easily again, especially after yesterday! Do not engage this man, Christine! Ignore him! Do not utter a sound!*

But I cannot harness the customary decorum of good manners that dribbles out of my mouth, flowing out of like unruly drool. "Excuse me!" *So much for fortitude, Christine!*

The words are slushy, and my attitude is obviously a bit too edgy. I quickly rationalize that my attitude is justifiable. Perhaps some violation has been committed by this beguiling man, who may have been involved in a shady deal obtaining his seat next to me. However, rethinking the matter, maybe I am overcompensating because he is too, too attractive. Perhaps my cantankerous demeanor stems from this evening's uneasiness about myself. Whatever the explanation, certainly the residue of some precarious ghost seems to hover above me within the pesky overhead dust particles! *He probably will just ignore me.* I am wrong.

"Quite all right." He delivers his reply in a more civil tone than perhaps I deserve. "We certainly are packed in here."

It is obvious that he is attempting polite conversation, just as I am engaging in unwarranted mistrust. I silently chastise myself for my snooty attitude.

I turn and smile, wanting to retrieve a more appropriate sense of courtesy. For if we are not civil to each other, especially in the confines of artistic arenas such as this concert, where else can we replace those rigid formalities that keep us further from each other? I assure myself that this is the reason why I need to turn and smile, "for art and truth!" I smile and nod, nod and smile, and linger a bit more than a respectable nod, a synthetic doll with a plastic smile on a bobbing head.

And with that, his face folds in on me. My overactive imagination has

gotten the best of me. I continue to stare. Framed under slightly graying temples, his features are embedded with crevices that tell of histories of living. It is a face that quivers with interest, revealing perhaps too much too quickly. I am embarrassed that I have somehow transgressed into a place that I have no right to be without invitation. I pull myself away from looking at him with the pretense of committing my attention to the vacant stage. The senseless dust continues to float aimlessly in the light, but, the image of his face does not dissipate. Rather, it coagulates into a ghostly mirage in front of me. It haunts me. I cannot let him go. And therein lies the calamity, not to let go of what should be let go.

In spite of a possible fiasco, I brashly continue to reconstruct him in my mind: A firm chin cast with the darkened hue of a long day's unattended growth. Does this indicate he was consumed with something more pressing prior to attending a Saturday night concert? I have often been offended by the lack of attention to one's personal grooming. However, there is that curious feature of his face that compensates for any earthiness. He owns a sagacious smile that punctuates his thoughts. His mouth twists upward to one side, almost a sneer, revealing a smidgeon of upper teeth. His forehead complements the grin by tilting his eyebrows above cavorting eyes. It is a disarming smile. I consider how it would be very difficult not to fold under his charm, for I suspect it is a countenance that probably has come to his defense in many ticklish situations. As the mirage of him decomposes in the dust I wonder if he, too, is drinking me in. It is, of course, just wishful thinking; he is attractive, after all. Surprisingly, I do not want to release this rambling image that is sheathing me in a longing warmth.

III

SUDDENLY, LIKE A POP from a fizzing soda bottle, the image siphons to invisibility as applause thunders through the hall. Show time! She shudders as if from a chill.

Embracing their instruments, the musicians rise in the pit for their bows. A renewed ovation surges as the singer struts forth with deliberate conviction onto center stage to retrieve his waiting guitar. Unabashedly, he lifts it from its stand and flings the strap over his shoulder. He straddles the stool and slouches momentarily as if clutching a cherished lover. He bows his head in a brief, silent prayer, the reverence noticeable and quite intimate. The applause dwindles to a residue of irreverent, solitary claps and hoots. Finally, all sound subsides. From the hidden pit a distant trumpet blares. He strums his guitar. His lyrics launch from some distant land. The intent crystalizes in the dust and drapes upon her...

Strange, when you come to doubt your sanity,

A halo of light frames the singer's face as he continues to play her song. The soloist seems farther away than before, shrinking on the distant stage as the melody looms and his sultry guitar draws her inward. With each enveloping strum a tenuous connection forms between the singer and her. She squints for she can no longer see him. She has been kidnapped by the lyrics...

When vision makes the tangible translucent,

Her body swoons with the beguiling song. She rises and withers in the rifts and surrenders to the hypnotic notes. Time is suspended; she is only slightly aware that there is some hasty rustling across her, some lost playbill, picked up and returned to its rightful owner. She ignores the inconsequential activity as she melts back into the music...

And you can only focus on discriminate hauntings,

She drops back into the realization that her right shoulder is again pressing indiscreetly against his upper arm. She shifts away, too quickly, in a movement that suggests repulsion, certainly not her intention at all. She rushes her apology, "Excuse me, I hope I wasn't..." this time, she is not able to finish the thought since she really doesn't know how to complete it, just a hesitant pause, groping for some appropriate courtesy...

When hearing makes words stutter,

"Not at all... it's quite all right." His reassurance salvages her rambling humiliation. His voice is inviting, and she falters, trying not to be drawn into him again. She gives her head a quick shake in a paltry attempt to clear her mind. But the melody is such a slow, sad song. It pulls her to its sadness. She descends into a foreign land, a place where she does not belong, but fears she will eventually be. No! She cannot stop the plummeting! In desperation, her fingernails press against the armrests, gripping the edges tightly. She cannot stop the plunge! She realizes that her nails are not on the chair but embedded into his arm. She quickly opens her fists. Without looking at him, she mumbles, "I'm so sorry!" He does not respond...

And interim pauses collect meanings of incongruities,

She is sure that he is now looking straight at her, even though his head, like hers, has not turned away from the stage. *So much for being cool, calm,*

and collected, Christine, you are certainly the embodiment of poise! Well, there is no retreat for fools! She wants to say something but cannot form the words. She is just another paltry fraud...

When speaking only makes billows of breath, lovers' lies,

Anxiety drizzles like a curtain of mist; she cannot release her feeling of inadequacy. Beads of sweat trickle down her forehead, downward, past the back of her neck, downward, between the crease of her breasts, downward, over her belly, downward, and into the most intimate folds of her being, where the sweet rain lingers in warm puddles...

Lurking in the mirages of truth.

“Sexiest song I ever heard!” His voice is deep, dark, delicious. He leans into her. The warmth of his breath braises her earlobe and the passion of yet another deluded quest begins. Her heart pounds wildly.

“Yes, indeed!” she quips, trying to smother her forbidden thoughts and recoup any residue of composure. “If you think that is sexy, you should check out the video!” Her words sputter back with bohemian acumen. Surprised at her newfound wit, she smiles at him, slightly raising her eyebrows to punctuate some intended nuisance. He responds with a suggestive grin to reaffirm what is now understood only between them. His scent seduces her even more.

“That good, huh? I didn’t know he had a video!”

“Just search his website!” She lewdly pokes the flames. “I’m sure you will be impressed!”

“Really...that good!”

“That good!” She echoes back, nods again, smiles again. But, it is his signature smile that finalizes their flirting. Fortunately, this intimate exchange is quiet enough not to interfere with any other “patrons of the arts.” And if there was ever a singer to stir the Muses to do their mischief, this singer has just done that! Her fervor suddenly cools. Could there have been some misunderstanding in encouraging this stranger on her right, certainly a man of receptive possibility, if not a man of questionable credibility...

Doubt is a forsaken promise;

This precarious situation certainly has been fostered from yesterday’s musings. She has become that skeptical woman desensitized to possibilities, for...

Passion is its deluded quest.

She remains paralyzed for the next hour and fifteen minutes until the second encore is completed, and the houselights have flushed the hall. The show has ended. It is time to depart.

Rising, she is careful to conceal her countenance, which may reveal forbidden thoughts. She is unsure of his intentions. In the unforgiving illumination of the houselights, she turns her back to him, hoping never to meet up with him again.

However, *the best laid plans do go astray*. As the sluggish patrons stutter between the row of seats toward the main aisle, she continues to avoid him, yet, is keenly aware that he remains directly behind her. His presence blankets her as his warm breath feathers the tiny hairs at the back of her neck. His aftershave has lost its freshness and mingles with sweet sweat. She is not repulsed by this, in fact, she does not want to let go of his scent.

"I'm not sure we are really getting anywhere." After a pause, he revises the statement into a scintillating question, "Do *you* think we're getting anywhere?" He delivers this more as a defining statement than a question, possibly to engage her in some more repartee. She helplessly shivers for she knows that it is a question that she should ignore, but will not.

She turns her head slightly over her right shoulder and replies, "No, we certainly do not seem to be going anywhere. Perhaps the Muses have not finished with us yet." Even as the words spill from her lips, she fears they sound vulgar. What might those fates design for her and this stranger? Would they try to ensnare the two in their treacherous mischief? This was one of those moments when she wishes to possess some superpower to retract one of those sentences that periodically fly indiscriminately from her mouth. Something like Superman's power to turn back time by flying against the earth's natural rotation to erase the past to replay the present. As always it is too late; she has been here before and can predict the next move. *He probably thinks I am some ridiculous woman, not to be taken seriously, and will snicker under his breath, if he recalls me at all!*

He laughs, not really a hearty laugh, more an affirming grunt. *Maybe, Christine*, she continues to silently narrate, *he's not what you think he is!* They continue to inch their way between the narrow rows of seats. As they draw closer to the aisle, where all pretense may finally dissipate, they remain pensively silent. It cannot be denied that some connection has occurred between them, and in such a pause the difficult decision that can change the very course of lives lies before them. It is the decision that has plagued relationships between men and women throughout time. Songs are written