

# The Unfallen



*a novel  
by Greg Swann*

*to Ken  
who got me to the river  
and to Laurie  
who pushed me in*

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## *Overture*

They had brought a backpack half full of supplies and Devin threw it over his shoulder. He helped Gwen to her feet and they walked across the white sand of the dunes. They were almost to the other shore when he stopped in a deep depression in the sand. He said, "Where's the wind?"

She pointed to South of East and he walked toward a dune in that direction. He dropped the backpack and dug into it, pulling out a big wool blanket. He spread the blanket out flat and invited her to sit down.

After a moment or two, she said, "It's warm. It's very warm..."

"A trick my grandpa taught me. It's always warm in the sun if you can get out of the wind. The dune blocks the wind. The air is still cold, but the sun on your skin makes you feel very warm. You could sunbathe here and not get cold."

She smiled wickedly. "Is that a challenge?"

He smiled in return. "Maybe it is." He sat down next to her and took her face in his hands and kissed her with the longing he'd felt all day, all week.

He stretched out on the blanket and she laid down next to him, nestled into his side. They watched the gulls skirling overhead and heard the wind whistling around the sides of the dune. He stroked at her hair and she hugged him very tightly across the middle.

He said, "Hunter sleeps with me like this sometimes. He'll wake up in the night to go pee and then he'll come to my bed instead of his. He'll tuck himself into my arm and go to sleep that way, both of us very serene. He's slept on me since he was an infant, and I'll be very sorry when he finally stops forever. I've thought about sleeping with the two of you that way, Hunter on one side of me, you on the other. I think that would be just heavenly..."

She snuggled in a little closer. "You're seducing me, aren't you?"

"Not yet I'm not."

"Not that way. You're seducing me with your family. With this great orb of warmth that surrounds you."

"Not by intention, if I am. I hope you don't think... I hope you don't think I'm trying to manipulate you."

“No, silly. It’s just the way you are. People are either all the way in with you, or they’re all the way out. You have the magical gift of putting people in the center of your orb and saying—quite silently—this is the way things should be. And poof! They are that way, and everyone involved agrees to their toes that this is the way things should be. I had no idea what it meant to be intimate until I met you...”

“Please, stop. This is too much.”

“No, I mean it. I thought intimacy was sexual intimacy, and if not that then the kind of snickering gossip one hears in the powder room. I am always snubbed from that, by the way. I guess I knew that it was the kind of connection I have with Spencer, that kind of closeness that needs no repeated demonstrations. But with you it’s just there, all the time. The people who are close to you are *that* close to you, no separation at all. You grant them full access and full sight of you and full visibility in your sight. Am I making the least kind of sense to you?”

“...Maybe the least kind.” He chuckled.

“Devin Dwyer, you know exactly what I mean. You’re an astrophysicist of all things. At M.I.T. of all places. Who, on hearing those facts, would not presume that you were cold and aloof and remote and insectile? As unapproachable as the stars themselves. And yet you’re just the opposite. You’re lit by the flames of the poet’s passion and you shed your warmth everywhere, all the time.”

“...It doesn’t have to be one or the other, Gwen. The truth is, it can’t be. Heathcliff was half a man because he wouldn’t learn to use his mind. Your insectile scientist is half a man if he doesn’t learn to understand his passions. We name all these dichotomies and we say we’re describing opposites that can never be united. But a person can’t be whole—can’t be sovereign, can’t be unfallen—*until* they are united. Do I love you with my body? Yes. Do I love you with my mind, with my soul? Yes. Is there a distinction? Yes. Is there a meaningful difference? Never. We are both, we are reasoning animals. The insectile scientists and the nerds strive to deny their bodies. Heathcliff and the raging fembots try to deny their minds. It can’t be. It won’t work. Nothing can come of it but disaster, and nothing ever does.”

“You’re back to fathertongue and mothertongue again... Aren’t you?”

He chuckled. “I’m *always* back to fathertongue and mothertongue. If I’m any good at intimacy, it’s because I learned to speak mothertongue—from my grandfather, more than anyone else.”

She sat up and unlaced and took off her boots. He said, “What are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing.” She stood up and unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them down her legs, her panties with them. “I want you to speak to me in mothertongue, baby.” He sat up and leaned back against his hands and she stood over him, her better secrets almost in a better place. She still had her socks on, and her sweater and her shirt. She said, “This would make a beautiful photograph, don’t you think?” She laughed and tossed her hair behind her and a gust of wind caught it and carried it back and she looked so free, so lost to the world of strictures and proprieties and prohibitions. “Sit up and cross your legs. We’ll try this your way.”

He kicked off his boots and shucked his jeans and then he was as naked as she was, two half-dressed people in big, bulky Irish wool cable-knit sweaters. He crossed his legs and she put her hands on his shoulders and descended. She said, “Help me down. Don’t let me fall.” He held her body as she slipped down the front of him and locked her legs behind his back. She ended up with her behind in the cup formed by his crossed legs, her own arms and legs embracing him tightly. “Oh, this is divine. We don’t have to do anything else, this is plenty. I’ve never been so hugged before.”

He dug his fingers into her hair and pulled her face to his, kissing her hard. She towered over him and he was seemingly completely at her mercy. She set her arms on his shoulders and lifted herself enough to put him where he could do some good. Then she pressed herself against him and kissed him lightly on the lips and cheeks and neck.

She said, “No one’s ever done this before.”

“Seduced you on the beach? I didn’t do nothin’, your honor. It was all her fault.”

“No one’s ever treated me like a person before. And not just a woman. Do you know what I mean? No one has ever brought me on an outing with his family. And no one has ever, ever taken Spencer along for anything. Dinner, the theater, the symphony, the ballet, awful little supposedly romantic nightclubs. Taxis and limousines and gowns and glass slippers, Cinderella always coming out, doomed to a life of endless cotillions...”

His face was buried in her neck and his hands were buried under her shirt, treasuring her back. She lifted herself a little and took him inside her. She sank to him slowly, nibbling at his lips and watching his eyes.

“Yes...,” she said. “This could be *very* good. This could take years...” She moved her body against his slowly, like the waves dragging against the sand. They kissed, their lips touching, their tongues touching, nibbling, biting, darting, teasing, probing hungrily then breaking away to dart and tease again.

He said, “Do you know the word integrity? Do you know what it means? We have all sort of ideas about what that word means, but the word literally means ‘wholeness’. There’s more, though. To be integrated means to be composed entirely of one thing. No impurities. No corruption... A monolith has integrity. It’s a mountain composed entirely of one rock. A man, a woman, can have integrity, too. Not just honesty—everything. No impurities. No corruption. One idea, expressed in infinite variations...”

“What... What are you doing?”

Her eyes were closed but she felt him smile against her lips. “I’m making love with you. Do you hear the word integer in there? An integer is a number with no fractional part, but integer literally means ‘untouched’. Isn’t that a beautiful idea, to be untouched? So pure, so Apollonian. White sheets flapping on a clothesline on a summer day, kissed only by the sun and the breeze...”

Her arms were still planted on his shoulders and her fingers were dug into his hair. His head was thrown back and she was kissing up and down his neck as he spoke to her.

“That’s what I mean by unfallen. Not just uncensored, unchastised, uncondemned. Untouched by evil. Adam and Eve were condemned for trying to be

both, for trying to be more than animals, for daring to reason. I will not be damned for no crime, damned in advance for being what I am. There was no fall of man, and I was born unfallen. I can choose to be evil if I wish, but I can also choose only to be good. This is my choice, to be good, and to work always to be better.”

Gwen was lost but it didn't matter. He was sure she was with him, every step of the way. He clasped his hands to her hips and pulled her hard to him. “No impurities. No corruption. No sin.”

She moaned and he knew she was very close. His lips brushing against hers, he said, “No secrets.”

“No secrets,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper.

“No lies.”

“No lies.”

“No betrayals.”

“No... betrayals.”

“No shame.”

“No shame. God, Devin! Never any shame...”

“No regrets.”

“No regrets...”

And she was there and he was there and their lips were touching and their tongues were touching and she could see nothing, nothing, nothing but his eyes and he said, “Gwen! Dear sweet perfect love... No regrets, ever, no matter what...”

She collapsed against him and hid her face behind his neck. She cried out and he didn't know if it was from joy or pain or agony. She balled up her fists and pounded his back through his sweater. “Damn you! Damn you, damn you, damn you!”

He pushed hard on her shoulders, pushed her away so he could see her. “Gwen! What is it?”

“Nothing. Everything. Everything, god damn you.” She fell against him again and kissed at his neck and his ear and his cheek. “It's the treason in your eyes. No betrayals, Devin. No betrayals, ever...”

She sought for his lips and kissed him lightly, hungrily, again and again. There were tears rolling down her cheeks and he understood nothing, nothing but that he loved her.

# *Part 1*

## *Chapter 1*

With Gwen there was never any beginning. Everything always started in the middle and ended abruptly, explosively.

In the bustle of a thousand distracted night students she dropped her books with an explosive report that echoed all up and down the infinite corridor in the Rogers Building at M.I.T. She looked up with an expression somewhere between embarrassment and amusement at Devin—“Doctor Devin” the students called him—whose path was blocked by the scattered debris.

“Oh, look,” she said. “I've dropped my things like a stupid, stupid school-girl.” Her voice was almost a contralto, but she spoke very softly in the most delicate English accent. Her words were carried along by the breezes of her breathing, like the autumn leaves swirling in the winds outside.

Devin looked at the books and looked at Gwen. He said, “So you have.”

She knew he was mocking her, even though he evinced no evidence of laughter. For the briefest instant her lips pursed tight and she thought about saying something sharp. Instead she said, “I don't suppose you could help me pick them up...?”

Devin smiled a tight little smile, betraying entirely too much understanding. “I don't suppose I could.” He waited to see her reaction so she took care to give him no satisfaction. After a moment he said, “I'll be going now.”

He moved to skirt the books and she half reached for him. She said, “Wait. I, uh...”

He stopped still. He looked straight at her with a scientist's disinterest. She had the idea that he saw not her face but her soul.

She bit her lower lip. “I—”

“Say it. Just say it. It'll make all the difference with me, believe me.”

She pursed her lips in resignation. “I dropped the books on purpose.”

He nodded then shrugged, as if to say, “Yeah, I knew. Big deal. See ya' later.”

She said, “Wait,” even though he hadn't actually left. “How—how did you know?”

“Every year two or three little eighteen-year-olds have the same idea. They all think they’re the first to think of it, too. You’re not eighteen, are you?”

She actually blushed, and she was ashamed of herself for blushing but slightly thrilled, too. She placed a finger on her cheek and smiled beside it. “Not recently,” she drawled.

“How lucky for me. The eighteen-year-olds are off limits...” It took a moment for that to register with her, and before she had it quite processed he said, “Can I help you with your books?”

She laughed—a laugh that began in the middle and ended abruptly. It sounded to him like the tinkling of glass bells.

They gathered up the books and when she had them loaded back in her arms he said, “You weren’t planning to come on to me and then just walk away, were you?”

She put on the petite display of offended virtue. “Do you think I was ‘coming on’ to you?”

He shook his head, exhaling slowly. “Not good. I’m out of here at the first lie.”

She bit her lip, bit the bullet. “The truth is I was throwing myself at you.”

His eyes opened wider for the briefest instant and she wanted to slap him. Or kiss him. Or both. He stuck out his hand to shake. “Devin Dwyer.”

She wrestled the books into her left hand to free up her right to touch him. “My name is Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn Jones.”

He said, “What a lovely name,” but he didn’t notice her grimace. He looked over his shoulder. “There’s a lounge over there. Shall we sit down?”

It wasn’t a lounge, really, just an alcove in the infinite corridor. It was furnished with heavy sofas and tables in a style that might be called Danish Industrial—very bulky but clean of line and virtually indestructible. The tables were of heavy oak, rounded at every corner. The sofas were framed in oak and cushioned with thick slabs of foam covered in chocolate-brown vinyl. More comfortable than a hospital waiting room, and yet somehow less inviting than a dentist’s chair. It’s a subtle kind of architecture that presents the mirage of a lounge that no one is willing to use.

As if in testament to the art of that unknown architect, Gwen barely sat. She perched on the edge of the cushion at her end of the sofa. At the other end, Devin was quite at ease. He was turned to face her, his back leaning against the oak arm rest, one arm thrown up on the top of the sofa, one thigh half on, half off the cushion.

For a moment all she did was look at him, and she liked what she saw. He wasn’t a pretty man, but he was well put together and he seemed to be in good condition; she could see the outline of his thigh muscles through the fabric of his slacks. His skin was a shade shy of swarthy. Wiry black hairs emerged from the cuffs of his Oxford shirt, and she could see a tuft of chest hair peeking over his open collar. His hair was not quite black, but the brownness of it was there only by implication, in the glints and reflections made by the overhead fluorescent lights. His hair was thick and full and salted with individual strands of gray. Five or ten years hence he was going to be very interestingly gray, she thought.

But as much as she saw of him, in truth she could not tear her eyes away from his eyes... She liked looking at eyes, any eyes. She remembered the eyes of everyone she had ever known, with some of them that was all she could remember. She could take careful note of every flaw and facet in a horse’s eye, or in a fawn’s, or in a dog’s. Once at a zoo a female orangutan had come very close to her, close enough for her to see those immense, sad eyes. So close, so close, so close, yet never close enough. Almost human, close enough to reach but never close enough to grasp. She had cried about those eyes for weeks, and sometimes still her eyes welled up when she thought about it.

But in Devin’s eyes she saw everything that was forever beyond the reach of the orangutans. Fire! Strength and depth and purpose and understanding and gentle humor and raucous humor and fire and fire and fire... He was dark everywhere but in his eyes, dark complexion, dark hair. But his eyes were an earthy green, and they seemed to her to glow with a light of their own. His pupils were black, of course, black as ink, black as night, black as the vortex of the storm at the gates of hell. Surrounding them were small pools of the gentlest, most delicate brown, and those gave way to a green the color of new mown hay. The color ended abruptly in a tiny ring of very dark green. She had the idea that his eyes were fertile, verdant ponds, teeming with life. Against his dark skin his glowing green eyes whispered treason, and a snatch of poetry came to her unbidden: “all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes.”

She raised her hand to smile behind it. Byron is welcome most everywhere, but it wouldn’t do to let him know she had compared him to the lady of Byron’s delight.

He seemed unable to say anything, and she was used to that sort of thing, bored with it years ago. For his own part, he didn’t know what to say. She was beautiful, but that was nothing. But she was burning, burning, burning with the soul and substance of beauty, and that was everything. Her hair was blonde, fine white gold burnished to a warm glow. It fell to her shoulders like a veil and made her look young and chaste—and ripe. Her eyes were blue and deep and bright and full of laughter; they were eyes that saw behind every pose, every vain trick of clumsy subtlety. Her features were finely formed and he knew she would be heartbreakingly beautiful in repose. But she was an order of magnitude more lovely when her life was enflamed by her vibrancy. Her mien, her manner, her stature, her demeanor—all words from another century—spoke of elegance and dignity and grace. But the laughter in her eyes spoke of boundless mischief, and the two together, mischief and grace, were a combination he’d always looked for and never hoped to find.

She was a woman, not a girl, very much a woman. He was surprised at how much he noticed of her womanliness—not just her femininity but her fecundity. She made him want to make babies. Not just make love, make *real* love, the kind that matters, the kind that lasts, the kind that makes someone new to love as a reminder of the love already made. He smiled behind his eyes so she wouldn’t see, but still he smiled. He hadn’t thought that way about a woman in years. The truth, he admitted in the silence of his mind, is that he had never thought of a woman in that way...

“Can we start again?” she asked.

“Every day a new beginning. Every day another chance at grace.”

“That’s lovely...”

“Isn’t it? I have it on the wall in my office. It keeps me sane, I think.”

She pressed her lips with her fingertip. “The truth is—”

“Yes...?”

“Well, uh—”

Almost he reached out for her but she was too far away on the sofa. He said, “The truth is the only thing that matters to me. I went through an ugly divorce, and that doesn’t really matter, except that it made me a fanatic about the truth. I had the normal aversions and qualms about deception before, I guess. But now it’s more like an obsession. All that matters to me is the truth, and *nothing* matters to me but the truth, and nothing repels me faster than deceit. You don’t have to say everything you know, but you can’t say anything that’s not so. Is that fair?”

“Yours is a very demanding grace, I think.”

He shrugged.

She exhaled very slowly. “The truth is, I’m not a night student here.”

“I know that. I saw you in the lecture hall. I would have noticed you if you’d been there before.”

“The truth is, I’m a reporter.”

“I know that, too.”

“You do?”

“Gwendolyn Jones, Woman Of The Future, Boston Globe, Not For Women Only Pages. They really are for women only, you know.”

She smiled. “You mean men aren’t interested in floral arrangements and holiday center pieces? What a shock. Anyway, I didn’t come here for purposes of predation, no matter how promising that prospect seems at the moment.”

“Do you know you speak beautifully?”

“Thank you. There’s a ‘however’ in there, though, isn’t there?”

“You speak beautifully, but I have no idea what you just said.”

“I’m here on a story. Not to throw myself at you.”

“Too bad. I’m enjoying it. What story?”

“I call it ‘Love among the nerds.’”

He smirked. “I see. Have you come to make fun of all the little tongue-tied math geeks?”

“To the contrary. My idea is that social skills are just that—skills. That your math geeks seem socially inept simply because they lack practice. I thought it would be charming to show how good they can be at love, even if they might seem clumsy to others.”

“They can be, you know. I watch them, every year, the geekiest ones—and not all of them are like that. They’re so timid at first, so tentative. But practice makes perfect, and M.I.T. students are nothing if not great students. They’re good at everything except showmanship, and I like them a lot for that.”

“What luck I bumped into you. You’re writing my column for me.”

He smiled warmly. “I read your column. Could you have guessed that? I’ve always pictured you as a squat little woman with mousy brown hair and half-glasses.”

She laughed like a covey of doves taking flight. “And brown herringbone skirt suits.”

“And the fringe of a mustache.”

“What a frightful creature. Is that your idea of the Not For Women Only woman?”

“I have a better question. Is it your plan to bring an army of perpetually single women to M.I.T.? Crazy herringboned fembots seeking young nerds to devour?”

She smiled with a wicked delight. “We’ll just have to wait and see, now won’t we?”

He smiled in return, smiled with his whole body, from the crinkled up skin around his eyes to the swelling in his chest to a stirring he took pains to conceal. He liked this woman, liked her effrontery and her mischief and her beauty and her grace.

She said, “Will it ruin everything if I tell you these books aren’t mine? They’re my disguise, to make me look like I fit in. I borrowed them from a student in that glass room up the hall.”

“It’s called the Fishbowl.”

“How apt. Well let me return these to the Fishbowl and then you and I can go to dinner. On me. You’re research, so I can charge it the paper.”

“Dutch treat or I won’t go. The Globe doesn’t owe me anything. Anyway, I’ll walk with you to the Fishbowl. It’s on our way out.”

“But then you won’t be able to watch my behind. And I won’t be able to pretend not to notice you watching my behind.”

He started to say something then stopped himself.

“Say the truth or say nothing,” she admonished. “I rather like these rules...”

She walked away and he watched her behind and it was worth it and he was pretty sure she was making it worth it but she didn’t need to because it was worth it all by itself. It was shaped like an inverted St. Valentine’s heart and the drape of her camel’s hair slacks did nothing to hide it and the skin of his hands screamed out in yearning to touch it...

He was standing, waiting, when she returned. He had a navy blue wool anorak and he wore it unbuttoned, with the hood down. He helped her into her trench coat, his hands resting a second longer than necessary on her shoulders. He could feel the heat of her through her silk blouse, and he felt as though the blouse were not there at all, as though he were touching her naked skin. He shook his head to clear it, but it didn’t help. The scent of her was overwhelming. No fragrance, just the essence of heaven itself...

They burst out onto Massachusetts Avenue and it was cold but not bitterly so. The winds were gusty and fallen leaves swirled up in little temporary whirlwinds then scattered to the ground to wait for the next gust. It was late enough that the traffic had died down, and the air was clean and clear and brisk.

He said, “Where to?”

“There’s a place I know on the other side of Central Square. Do you mind if we walk?”

“I’d like that.”

They walked along in silence at first, past the Necco factory and the Nabisco bakery; an M.I.T. degree confers with it a life-long craving for Oreos. She set a good pace, and he admired the length of her strides. He imagined that it would be hard for people to keep up with her—intellectually, emotionally, physically. There was something about her that was simply elemental, a Promethean vibrancy oscillating at some outrageous frequency. Here, at last, was a woman who knew how to live...

Waiting at a corner for a light to change, she said, “May I tell you a secret?”  
“If you like.”

“It’s my name. I love it and I loathe it.” He looked at her sideways and she smiled and continued. “Gwendolyn,” she intoned slowly. “It rolls and it rambles on the tongue. It’s a name that ascends a spiral staircase, don’t you think? Can’t you just hear it? Gwendolyn. Just like creeping up a spiral staircase full of anticipation, thrilled to the core at what you’ll find on the landing. And when you get there what do you find? Jones. Thud. Stone. Mud. Clod. Jones. What a disappointment...”

He said nothing. He wasn’t completely sure she was serious.

“I would settle for even an awful name if it had majesty. Gwendolyn Kowalski. Who couldn’t shout ‘Stella’ to that? Gwendolyn Yamaguchi. A majestic name and lovely children to go with it. What an awful, awful disappointment, to ascend that staircase of a name again and again and never find anything but Jones at the top. It’s the great tragedy of my life. Yes, it is. The single most awful tragedy of my life is to be faced, every day, with the awful prospect of ascending the majesty and grandeur of Gwendolyn only to plunge into the awful pit of Jones.”

“...You’re kidding, right?”

“I am not. What’s your last name? Dwyer? Gwendolyn Dwyer is a good half-majestic, don’t you think?”

“Were you planning on marrying me, then?”

She was stopped short by the question, because that was just what she had been planning. Not planning, really, just not obstructing, not considering the absurdity of the proposition. “Perhaps I was simply planning to steal your name. What’s your middle name? Mine’s Penelope. I was named after my grandmothers, two perpetual virgins. They both found my parents on the doorstep, I’m sure of it. Come on, give. What’s your middle name?”

“Demosthenes.”

“Now *that* is majestic. Devin Demosthenes, a poet and an orator. You were born for the stage, weren’t you?”

“A truce between Ireland and Greece, I’m afraid.”

“Well that explains the Dwyer, too, doesn’t it? I daresay not much of the olde sod made it into you. Just the eyes, I think.”

“My father’s eyes. He had hair the color of a ripe tomato. He could get a sunburn looking at a picture of the sun.”

She laughed gently. They walked and chatted gaily all the way up Mass Avenue. She stopped in front of Bel Canto. “Is this all right? It’s pizza, sort of, for people who’ve had too much pizza. Not too stuffy, not too Yuppie, not too intimidating.”

“My grad students are always talking about this place. I’ve never been here.”

“Take a chance?”

“Sure.”

They got a table and he said, “I have to phone home.”

“Wife up waiting, is she?”

“I checked for a ring. Didn’t you?” When he returned he said, “I have a little boy. His name is Hunter. The third floor of my house is set up as a mother-in-law apartment and a B.U. student named Gretchen Wilcox lives up there and looks after Hunter when I’m not around.”

“I have a son, too. Not a little boy anymore. He’s just turned seventeen.” He looked at her in amazement.

“Anything is possible to those who are committed.”

“May I ask...?”

“Thirty-five. I went from the full flower of womanhood to the delivery room without stopping for cocktails. Not one of my wiser decisions, but the boy is a treasure. His name is Spencer and all the little girls follow him around and he doesn’t even notice them. How about you? How old are you?”

“Almost thirty-eight.”

For dinner they split a Torta, a sort of deep-dish, thick crust pizza with a sweet whole-wheat crust and sweet tomato sauce and sweet ricotta cheese and sweet mozzarella cheese. It’s a pizza by implication only, and it teeters right on the edge of being a pastry.

They dawdled over coffee and she said, “Now is when you’re supposed to tell me that you find me terribly, terribly beautiful.”

“I do, if that counts. But I don’t think I want to play the straight man in your comedy.”

“Good for you. It’s become tiresome. And not just recently. My role in this little charade is to hook my fingers right into some man’s nostrils—in the nicest possible way, of course—and lead him wherever I might want him to go. And he’ll go there, the fool. At the end of the night I can kiss him on the cheek or kick him in the balls and he won’t care, he simply won’t care. All I have to do is bat my eyelashes and toss my hair over my shoulders and that’s that.”

He grinned wickedly. “You have other assets.”

“That’s right. Eyes, hair and assets, that’s all I am. What do they think I want, simply to be adored? To be worshipped for accidents of nature?”

“There’s more to you than that...”

“Not by accident! And the outside of me is just a shell. It will weather and fade. But the inside of me grows more beautiful every day. And that’s the part that always seems so invisible...”

Very softly, his voice hardly discernible above the background noise of the room, he said, “Not to me...”

His hand was on the table and she laid hers atop it and squeezed and that was answer enough.

When they had paid the check, he slid a business card across the table. He said, “I run a lab at M.I.T. called the Ptolemy Project, the intersection of astro-

physics and software engineering. That's my real job. That card has my net address on it."

"How romantic."

"It's the dawn of a new millennium, baby. I know you have a net address. I'll bet the Globe maintains a web page of your columns."

"Who could have guessed that privacy was simply a side-effect of inefficiency?" She grinned and dug into her purse. She handed him a card of her own. "Are we ready to go?"

Bel Canto is about halfway between Central Square and Harvard Square. When they emerged into the cool of the night, they turned left, toward Harvard Square. They walked along in a contented silence, and she felt very close to him for no reason she could name. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his coat and his left elbow was sticking out there, like an invitation. Without asking permission she stuck her hand inside the crook of his elbow and kept it there. He looked down at her hand and smiled, so she knew it was all right. She knew they would look like an old married couple to the students pushing past them, one of those Yuppie couples who inhabit the high-rises on Mass Avenue. There's a first, she thought, to be tickled at being mistaken for married.

Central Square is the shopping district for a number of blue collar neighborhoods. As you walk out of it toward Harvard Square, you see a little bit of everything—the Cambridge Post Office and city government buildings, free-standing houses, high-rise apartment towers, frat houses for both Harvard and M.I.T., cheesy little office buildings, restaurants, bars, fringe businesses—everything. But as you draw near to Harvard Square, Harvard asserts itself, and the eclecticism of the no-man's-land between town and gown gives way to extremely absurd art galleries and extremely unappetizing restaurants and extremely fanatical radical bookstores and extremely incomprehensible retail stores devoted to every extremely incomprehensible pursuit or pastime known to the mind of man—or at least the Harvard man.

But even that can't last. The real estate in Harvard Square proper is extremely valuable. If you cannot pay the rent, the landlord will direct you to a more suitable location closer to Central Square. In Harvard Square itself, absurdity is found only out of doors.

And it was out in full force tonight. At the Harvard Square station of the subway the plaza was rife with milling weirdness. Little teenage skateboarders with their strange haircuts and black street poets and homeless Vietnam veterans with stress disorder and a taste for the vine and middle-aged men in three-quarter-length raincoats thumping bibles and hectoring anyone who would cooperate by ignoring them. And everywhere, everywhere, everywhere little brown-haired Madonnas from Southie and Revere. Brown leather bomber jackets and big hoop earrings and way too much make-up and way too many Marlboro cigarettes. Sitting on walls and benches or standing around in twos and threes. Big-boned girls with big round breasts and big round behinds hanging around in Harvard Square looking for a shot at something better.

And big round brown eyes, Gwen knew, big like a horse's eyes or a fawn's or a dog's. Big like an orangutan's eyes and just as lost, just as searching, just as

hopeful, just as hopeless. She felt her own eyes welling up and she squeezed Devin's arm. She said, "I've told you one of my secrets. Now it's your turn."

He smiled and he placed his right hand atop hers for a moment and it was nothing and it was everything. He said, "I know how to roll cigars. Is that a good enough secret?"

"Not likely," she scoffed.

"I really do. I learned when I was Hunter's age, five years old. My grandfather taught me how."

"Your grandfather taught you how to roll cigars? When you were five?"

"It's the truth. He was unfallen I think, just wild and innocent. He grew up on the streets of Athens, and there was nothing he didn't know before he had beard enough to shave. I was growing up on the streets of Boston and he thought I had the right to the same education he'd had. That was my youth, mostly, spending every afternoon with my grandpa. You asked for a secret and I'm giving you a history..."

"Well do go on." She pulled herself a little tighter to him and he didn't complain.

He smiled, a tight little wall of a smile that keeps things from spilling out. "Nicholas Demosthenes Constantopoulos, my mother's father..."

"Yet another Demosthenes."

"I don't know how far back it goes. A long way. It's Hunter's middle name, too. It's just one of those things that make a family. The family is who we say it is, and maybe the more we have to say, the more a family we are." He smiled again, from joy this time. "My family has a lot to say."

She laughed quietly. And she had the idea that he had pulled her still more tightly to him. They were walking the long way through the Square, looping around Brattle Street, walking very slowly. She put her left hand on his forearm, so now she was holding his arm with both hands. Her cheek was almost at his shoulder. She didn't feel quite confident enough to put it there but she didn't want to pull away either.

"My grandfather came to this country right after the first World War. He was fifteen and he stowed away on a freighter. Russia had gone Communist, of course, and Greece and Italy and all the Slavic countries were dallying with it, and he was convinced that if he didn't get out then, he might be stuck there forever. Killed even, because he never could keep his mouth shut.

"Anyway, just after the war was the beginning of the end of immigration in America. 'Give me your tired, your poor' was secretly revised to read 'Give me your blonde, your protestant.' Nobody meant anything by it, I guess, we just fear the stranger. The toe-headed Episcopalians who ran this country thought it was being overrun by Irish Catholics and Russian Jews and swarthy Mediterraneans and greasy Slavs with thick ankles and thick accents. My grandfather spoke just enough English that he was able to convince the immigration people that he had a job waiting for him as a translator for a Greek language newspaper. That's how he got in.

"But what an American he was! He did the dirtiest, filthiest jobs to accumulate capital, and he made little patriotic souvenirs, little flags and ribbons, by



hand at night. He had a Singer sewing machine that he bought at auction. It's powered by a foot treadle. I still have it; I intend to show it to Hunter someday when he decides he's overworked. *Nobody* worked harder than my grandpa. He'd make his little souvenirs and take them around to the parks or the beaches on Sunday. It was a way to make extra money, but it was always just Sunday out in the world for him, too. All the other immigrants loved this country as much as he did, so he always sold out.

"That was his break, that was his big idea. He took all the money he'd saved and opened a little sweat-shop on Kneeland Street. He made little souvenir flags and big flags for houses and flagpoles and enormous flags for statehouse lawns. He'd do any American flag, federal, state or municipal, and any historical American flag, but he never once made a flag from any other country, not even Greece. During the second World War he turned down a lot of money from the Canadians because he wouldn't make their unit flags.

"Before the war he married my grandmother and my mother was born and the Great Depression came and nearly wiped him out, but he didn't lay anyone off and he never missed a payroll. And every Sunday, rain or snow or shine, he'd go to a park or a beach or an historical site and push a little cart loaded with patriotic souvenirs."

Her cheek was on his arm by now and he either liked it or didn't care or hadn't noticed, she didn't know which. "And where in all this did you fit?"

He smiled warmly. "I grew up with him. My dad—we've barely even talked about him—my dad was a nuc in Rickover's Navy. He was away all the time, so we lived in my grandfather's townhouse in Bayview—I still live in that house. I went to Saint Timothy's, right around the corner from the house, and I'd go to my grandpa's factory up the block after school. I'd do my homework there or listen to my grandpa argue with the neighborhood merchants or we'd play chess together—completely unpredictable and he could kick my ass.

"Here's the secret. My grandfather knew this old black Dominican who had a cigar shop on Harrison Avenue. You could buy tobacco in the leaf there, Havana-seed tobacco from Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. But you could buy smuggled Havana leaf, too, if you proved you could be trusted. So my grandfather, a life-long anti-Communist, a dyed-in-the-woolen-underwear American patriot, defied the Cuban embargo so he could continue to roll his own Havana cigars. He never let me smoke one, because my mom would have killed him. But he taught me how to roll them, and I can still do it."

He was smiling everywhere, just beaming. She said, "You loved him very much, didn't you?" She regretted it at once.

Sadness dropped down on him like a curtain. "I miss him every day. Every day. Any time I need to see him, I can, though. I can see him laughing. Just wild and innocent and sweetly crude and gently rude and completely free in the shadows of the late-afternoon sun. Laughing from his throat like rocks in a barrel, laughing around a fat hand-made Cuban cigar..."

"He used to take me with him, every Sunday, once I got to be about Hunter's age. All week long he was a businessman. Not a big businessman, but quick and shrewd and clear-sighted and very decisive. On Sunday he was just

a sweet old Greek with a push cart. Always had time to chat with old friends and new ones. More often than not it was my job to move the merchandise, because he was having too much fun just being out in the world. We didn't need the money, it was just something he did. Something *we* did.

"We worked the Bicentennial together, and I'm glad we did because he... He died that winter. I was sixteen and too proud and then some, and it seemed like all spring and summer of 1976 he was rapping me on the back of the head and telling me not to be a horse's ass. We'd go to Breed's Hill or the Common or the Old North Church and all these ugly people in ugly summer clothes would show up and honor America by throwing tonic cans and gum wrappers at it. It offended me, particularly because my grandpa was the *real* glory of America and these corn-fed idiots just treated him like dirt.

"We worked The Esplanade on Independence Day that year, very big history-making day. Six-hundred-thousand drunken morons and The Boston Pops. And tall ships. And fireworks. We couldn't push the cart, it was too crowded, so we just stayed where we were, selling stuff hand over fist. But I was in the blackest mood I've ever been in.

"My grandfather *was* the American dream, every page of that story. My father was a Captain in the U.S. Navy. I was a teenage physics god who was really going places. And these fat stupid beery people were treating my grandfather like an organ grinder and me like his monkey.

"There's only so much you can say when a boy's almost a man, right? My grandpa pursed his lips and let me stew. We shut everything down when The Pops started the 1812 and he pulled me tight to him. I was maybe four inches taller than him by then, but it didn't matter, because he'll always be bigger than me. It was loud, loud, loud and I knew he was trying to say something to me but I couldn't hear him, I could just see the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"He grabbed me by the hair and pulled my ear down to his mouth. He said, 'It's not the people, it's the idea. The idea makes the people great, as great as they want to be.' And right then the cannons went off and the fireworks went off and the sky over the Charles was enflamed. And we stood there together crying, him for his America, and me for him..."

They had walked all through the Square and they were back in front of The Coop. He broke free of her and leaned against a wall, crying openly, looking at her through his tears. "That's the real secret," he said. "I never told anyone that before. I was married for seven years..." His voice was full of wonder. "I never told anyone that before..."

She reached out for his hands, just to touch him. But her pulled her full to his chest and put his arms around her shoulders. He said, "Is this all right?"

She said nothing, just wrapped her arms around his waist. He cried into her blonde hair and she felt very giving, very tender, but also very accepted, very needed. It was a nice combination.

"I never knew he could die... He was always there. Always. I guess I thought he always would be... I have all this stuff, all this Yuppie stuff. But everything I have that matters I got from him. I'd give up all the stuff just to have him back..."

They stood like that for a long time and after a while he stopped quaking and she knew he was all right. He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face up so he could look at her. He said, "Don't ask me for any more secrets tonight. I don't have the strength."

She smiled. "Tell me the truth, then. You're such a lover of the truth. Tell me the most devastatingly brutal truth you can think of."

"The brutal truth is—I like this very much. It's painful, and not just the secret. But I feel cleaner for having been with you. Younger. Happier, if you can believe that."

She put her cheek on his shoulder and hugged him very tightly, the only answer she felt safe making.

"The other brutal truth is that I have to go home. Hunter's already in bed and Gretchen has classes in the morning. And so do I."

She pressed her hands to his chest and pushed away. As she fell backwards she grabbed his hands and jerked him away from the wall. She spun free and skipped off. "Can you walk fast? I'll bet I can walk faster." She skipped out into Kennedy Street, skirting the mad taxi drivers. He tried to catch up, but she really was faster. He finally caught up to her by the great gaping maw of the subway station. "Can we take the T back? My treat."

"She can walk fast, but not far."

"Not in these shoes, anyway. And it is a long walk back."

"We could take a taxi..."

"I live in Newton Center. If I'm to send a child to college, I'd rather it were my own child. Come on, I'll race you to the bottom of the stairs."

She was off before he had a chance to protest and he didn't even try to keep up. She was waiting for him when he got to the bottom, two tokens in her hand.

There was a street musician, a folk singer, on the platform, and they stood watching him play, her back to his chest, his arms clasped around her waist. Again she felt very married, very oddly, very satisfyingly married.

They held hands on the train. There was some kind of delay on the Longfellow Bridge over the Charles and all the lights in the train went out. Out the window to their left, the lights of Boston owned the sky. To their right and behind them the lights of Cambridge and Charlestown owned the sky. And over the river a quarter moon held sway, admiring its own reflection in the water.

All that's best of dark and bright, she thought again. She turned to look at him. "Do you want to kiss me?"

"Don't ask me to want for you."

"Do I want to kiss you?"

He shrugged. "Beats me."

"I do want to kiss you."

He smiled wickedly. "Too late." He darted forward and brushed her lips with his, and she felt the barest hint of moisture.

She smiled in return. "Too little." She grabbed the hair at the back of his head and buried her fingers in it. She pulled his face to hers and kissed him deeply, tenderly, soulfully, enduringly. The lights came back on and the train started moving again, but it was a long moment before either of them noticed.

They both got out at Park Street and when she didn't say anything, he said, "I'll wait with you for the D train, then I'll walk home from here. I live over on the other side of the Medical Center."

"Won't that have you walking right through the Combat Zone?"

"It's not that bad. Besides, everybody down there knows me."

"Such a regular customer, are you?" The laughter in her eyes was lovely.

He shrugged. "I stand up for them with block association. The smut peddlers think I'm nuts, but I'm *their* kind of nuts." He leaned against a stanchion and pulled her back into his arms. "I want to see you again. You know that, don't you?"

"I rather had that idea..."

"I don't know what it is about you... It's not your beauty, Hunter's mother is very beautiful. It's something else. You're so wild, so free, so liberating... I'm not making sense. I don't know how to explain my response to you."

"You don't have to explain it. I can feel it." His faced turned beet red and she laughed out loud. "So now it's my turn to make *you* blush. Turnabout as foreplay, as it were." She put her hands on his cheeks and held him so he couldn't look away. "I wasn't talking about *that*, Devin. Although I am gratified. A woman likes to know she's made an impression."

"When have you ever not made an impression?"

"Tonight in the hallway at M.I.T.—or so I feared."

"I told you, I saw you in the lecture hall. Six hundred students in a darkened room, and I couldn't take my eyes off you. The brutal, honest truth." A train was pulling into the station and he saw it was a D train, a Riverside train. "Kiss me again, will you?"

"Don't ask me to want for you."

He nodded. "Yes. Of course. You're right." He smiled wickedly and did not move a muscle.

"You—bastard!" She pulled his face to hers and kissed him hard. "Take the next one for yourself or do without."

Her hands were still on his cheeks and he clasped them under his own and kissed her fingertips, not her lips. He said, "I'll call you."

"It's the dawn of a new millennium, baby." Email me." She winked and split his hands apart. She kissed him abruptly, explosively, and then ran for her train. He watched her as it pulled away and she stood by the door watching him.

He walked through the empty streets of downtown Boston, through the Combat Zone, where all the old Harvard men go looking for something worse among the tattered remnants of the brown-eyed Madonnas. When he got home, Gretchen had her books spread half across the dining room table, but the television was on so he knew she wasn't frantic.

She stood up when he came in and dragged her short brown hair behind her ears. She was of medium height and maybe a little bit stocky. Not fat, but her body was built to carry fat and she'd have to keep an eye on it her whole life. She wore jeans and a denim work shirt and white leather sneakers. She looked like nothing so much as a college student—an inside picture, not the cover, of a Boston University recruitment brochure. She said, "You okay, Doctor Dwyer?"

She insisted on the “Doctor Dwyer” and under the circumstances—a young girl living in the home of an unmarried man—it hadn’t seemed like a bad idea. He smiled just in his eyes. “Yeah, sure.”

“You just look different, that’s all. Did something happen?”

The smile spread to his cheeks. “Nothing. Everything. Go to sleep. It’s late.”

He hustled up the stairs to peek in on Hunter. The boy slept like the hands of a clock, his limbs thrown out in all directions. Devin straightened him out a little and tucked his blankets back in. Then he sat down in the old oak rocker that had belonged to his grandfather and began to sing softly—for his own benefit, not Hunter’s. It was something he did every night, no matter how late he got home. The ideal situation was to sing the little boy to sleep, but he couldn’t always do that. But he could always sing, and he always did—Greek folk songs he couldn’t translate and Irish ballads and pop tunes from his own youth. The songs didn’t matter and the sounds didn’t matter. It was the being there than mattered, and some nights Hunter would roll over and see him there singing and *that* was what mattered.

After a long time he kissed the boy on the cheek and pulled the door softly behind him. Just on a chance, he went to his study and logged onto his net account. Sure enough, there was mail from her already.

Date: Tue, 04 Nov 1997 22:16:05 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Brutal honesty

My father has a ploy that he works on the women he plies. What he'll do is drop a woman off at her doorstep, then race home and ring her up right away. He'll say, "I just couldn't bear to go another minute without speaking to you." According to him this serves to make them that much more pliable, but, as he only pursues the most pliable sort, I think he may be fooling himself.

In any event, I highlight my father's vain little ploy in order to insulate myself from it, I hope. Instead, I am writing to reciprocate the brutal honesty that you have so graciously conferred upon me.

Thus, to wit, and taking account of all the foregoing and all that which may be forthcoming (I love talking like the Assistant Undersecretary of the Posterior): Yes.

I very much enjoyed our time together and I very much want to spend more time with you. The rules of Coy Manipulation insist that I should never say things like this. I don't know what to do about that. But I am writing to you, not waiting for your overture, and that should tell me something, shouldn't it?

The brutal truth is, I like you, Dr. Devin Demosthenes Dwyer. I like you a lot. I wanted you to know that and just that.

There. Now you know.

Fondly,

Gwen

In his reply he snipped her to the quick, quoting only what he needed:

Date: Tue, 04 Nov 1997 22:51:27 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Re: Brutal honesty

>The brutal truth is, I like you, Dr. Devin Demosthenes Dwyer. I  
>like you a lot. I wanted you to know that and just that.

The brutal truth is, I like you, Gwendolyn Penelope Jones. I like you a lot.

>There. Now you know.

No secrets. No lies. No betrayals. No shame. No regrets.

Never.

My vow.

Devin

He roamed through the house turning off lights and locking doors. He got himself ready for bed. Then he went back to the computer for one last look.

Date: Tue, 04 Nov 1997 22:54:39 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Re: Brutal honesty

>No secrets. No lies. No betrayals. No shame. No regrets.

>Never.

>My vow.

No secrets. No lies. No betrayals. No shame. No regrets.

Never.

My vow.

Gwen

Devin climbed into bed and switched off the light, but he didn't go to sleep. And he had every confidence that in Newton Center she was awake, too. She made him content. She made him serene. She made him hungry...

## *Interval—Love among the Dwyers*

Date: Wed, 05 Nov 1997 06:54:14 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Love among the Dwyers

I slept badly so I decided to inflict myself on you. It would be more truthful to say that I slept badly because of you, so now I'm grasping at what little 'togetherness' I can have with you from this remove, at this ungodly hour. I have the CD player cranked up to a whisper, playing "Visions of Johanna" over and over again. I don't know why that, particularly, except that it fits so well in the silence and solitude of the emptiest hours of the night. And of course, I can't stop thinking about that all-night girl whispering of her escapades out on the D train.

I thought I wanted to give you the other half of my family story, just for the sake of filling out the form. I intend to do that, but I realized that the meta-topic, at which this note will only take a swipe, is Truth as we discussed it last night. I'll tell you more later (especially why), but what I want to tell you now is this:

1. I will not tell you any lie, ever.
2. If I must withhold something from you, I'll tell you that that's what I'm doing, and, if I feel I can, why.
3. Under no circumstances will I withhold from you information that will cause you to make an incorrect choice or decision.
4. If I decide I can no longer stand by these commitments, I will tell you at once.

Obviously I'm taking you very seriously; your mistake for not leading me around by the nostrils <grin>. If I'm taking you too seriously, it's okay; just say so. In my home, in my family, in my work--in my life--I am surrounded by creatures of outsized enthusiasms, and I am hardly the least among that company. If I am expressing more enthusiasm than you feel comfortable with, just tell me to cool my jets. You wouldn't be the first.

But you would be the first woman, and that is why I am so amazed and, I hope, so thoughtful--so full of thought. I won't say I've been thoughtless--void of thought--with the women in my life (and there have been very few, if you were wondering). But I'm sure I've been negligent. I can name my crimes quite cogently: silence and distance and lies. The lies were never black, just deliberate failures to correct misapprehensions (#3 above). The silence was the easiest, and sometime soon I'll explain to you the mechanics of distance; the readers of *Woman Of The Future* will surely be edified <g>.

The point is this: While I am not 100% culpable for the failures of my past relationships, I am assuredly 50% culpable, and it would be a contemptible lie to suggest otherwise.

And the point is also this: I know better, and, knowing better, I want to do better. The fact is that I want to do better with you, and the truer fact, I think, is that I want to do better because of you, because you are you.

Precisely how much more seriously can I take you after a first non-date...?

Very baldly, very frankly, very nakedly--the brutal honest truth: I like you so much that I would be devastated if I screwed this up. So I'm going to do everything I can think of to make sure I don't screw this up. If you want me by the nostrils--or by the balls--I'm gone. Never done it, never will. But if you want me by the heart...? Too early to make promises, but I am not going anywhere.

You called it "the rules of Coy Manipulation". I've always called it the Union of the Men--a standards-setting body that assures the maximum quantities of silence and distance and lies in all romantic relationships. I'm pretty sure I could get thrown out of the Union for this note, so don't turn me in. I'm pretty sure things are only going to get worse Union-wise--which means better <g>. I think there is something sick about a culture that encourages people to pursue 'safety' in relationships that are inherently fraudulent, based on poses and affectations and deceptions.

So you'll know, here's what I want: I want to feel for a woman the love I feel for Hunter, but more. More because she is an adult and an equal. And more because she is a woman and I'm a man. I have always had so much love in my life, the love of my family. I didn't realize how little I expected from romantic relationships until Hunter was born, until I realized that I loved him more after five months than I loved my wife after five years. That was very sad for all of us, and that's what I promised myself I would never do again. I'm not pressuring you or hustling you or hassling you or bleeding my aching need all over your pretty black shoes. I'm just telling you what I've been doing--mostly by not doing anything.

And you make me feel like doing something, and that's a huge credit at my bank. No pressure, no rush, no nothing. Nothing but you and me and the moon and the stereo. And these visions of Gwendolyn that conquer my mind...

Here's the rest of my family history. I'm telling you this stuff just so you'll know. You said something about reciprocity, so I want you to know that I never expect anything like that. I just don't work that way. I never want anything that's not mine. Conferring upon you 'gifts' you have not requested cannot create a reciprocal obligation, a debt. You don't owe me anything, and I want for you never to owe me anything. I want that for the simple and very selfish reason that I want to know that everything I have from you is a gift borne of your response to me, not a payment on an unowed debt or an act of charity--or pity. I probably don't need to say this, but I trip all over myself saying things I don't need to say.

My mother was born in 1931. She would have had a baby sister in 1935, except that the baby was breech and the umbilical cord was pinched and she died while she was being born. Her mother--my mother's mother, my grandmother, my grandfather's wife--died four hours later from internal bleeding.

For a while my mom grew up like I did, hanging out with my grandfather at the flag factory. She would have been there all day at first, because she was too young to go to school. And I've always wondered if she knows how to roll cigars <g>.

My grandpa used to go around at night preaching against the evils of Communism. The thirties were the Red Decade, and Boston was redder than New York, redder than Chicago. Massachusetts is where the Communist International turned two subliterate morons named Sacco and Vanzetti into a cause célèbre, and Boston and Cambridge were just crawling with Comintern agitprop and disinformation agents.

My grandfather read constantly and he could speak very convincingly in a gruff, shirt-sleeves kind of way, and he would go night after night to Masonic Temples or Knights of Columbus halls or labor union meetings or P.T.A. meetings. The Communists were very successfully turning anti-Franco feeling and the incipient anti-Hitler feeling into a vague sort of pro-Soviet feeling, and my grandfather was in a frenzy to induce the complacent Americans to \_see\_ what was being done under their noses.

Anyway, there was no one to look after my mother, so she was always there with him. Cigar smoke, cigarette smoke, the dirty wooden floors slippery with spilled K. of C. beer or spilled P.T.A. fruit punch. No place for a child. Except that, more often than not, there was another child at each one of these meetings, a little boy her own age named Kevin Dwyer.

He was as fair as my mother is dark, as fair a son of Ireland as there ever was. His mother was Cecilia Marie Cavanaugh Dwyer, as fair a daughter of Ireland as there ever was. Her husband had been a numbers banker in South Boston--in the thirties this would have been a middling respectable profession--but he had had competitive differences with a Dorchester bank and was delivered to his reward--in four pieces. The Widow Dwyer persisted as best she could, doing the ugliest kind of work twelve hours a day, six days a week. The seventh day she spent at church, two masses in the morning plus vespers and candles and who knows what else. And her evenings she spent like my grandfather, futilely warning the political sleepwalkers about the Marxist peril.

They had a practical need for each other, and I'll never know if their needs went beyond the practical. He called her 'Candy' as a pet-name, and my mother and Kevin--my father--and I grew up calling her Candymom. They lived under the same roof for longer than I've been alive. If there was a romantic love between them, or even just a sexual love, they were perfectly, faultlessly discreet. But there was very definitely an enormous family love between them, and through them to all of us.

Candy and Kevin moved in with my grandpa and my mother in the autumn of 1936. They had been living in an awful little basement apartment in Southie and my grandpa already had the Bayview house. He ran plumbing up to the third floor and hung a locking door at the top of the stairs and that became their new home, two bedrooms, a bathroom and a little kichenette. There may have been some token rent involved, but I'm sure the true deal was a practical sort of barter. My grandfather needed someone to make a home for him, to cook and clean and to look after my mother, and Candy needed a home to live in and food to cook and a means of making sure that her son didn't

come back from Dorchester in four pieces.

She must have been unbearably beautiful as a girl, because even when I was growing up she was blinding. Her hair was a flaming red and when it was down it fell past her waist. But it was never down; she wore it an impossible combination of braids and turns and piles that somehow packed it all in at the back of her skull and yet didn't look at all odd. She wore high-waisted, high-collared dresses, white or light blue, and ankle high shoes that looked like they ought to take half an hour to lace. Her eyes were as blue as sapphires, and she had minute and fractional control over the muscles around them. She could scold me thoroughly and at enormous length in a glance, but when she looked at me with love in her eyes, it was all the love there ever was, all the love in the universe.

My mother and father grew up together and didn't think twice about it, I'm sure. They went to St. Tim's together, then went to Boston College High School together. Kevin might have gone to Boy's Latin, but they didn't take girls in those days and my mom and dad insisted and I gather my grandfather and Candy winked and smiled and waited. My mother was gorgeous as a young girl, long straight black hair that seemed never to stop and enormous brown eyes. My father was tall and thin and pale, with nothing to define him but that red hair and those green eyes and that penetrating mind. The two of them grew up as a couple and neither one of them knew it until the last minute.

I don't know all the details of this--nor should I--but I gather my grandfather walked in on them one night when they were each making a careful study of the anatomy of the oral cavity. The next day he moved upstairs to Kevin's room and Kevin and my mother moved into his bedroom and that Saturday two priests, one Roman Catholic, one Greek Orthodox, said the words and my mother and father were married at the age of seventeen, still seniors in high school.

Candy taught my mother the arcane art of Catholic contraception--calendars, temperature charts and constant prayer--and that fall mom enrolled at B.C. and dad at M.I.T. They had the best of all worlds--youth and a first-class education, marriage and its attendant benefits, all paid for by my grandpa, cooked and cleaned-up by Candy.

We have all sorts of ideas about the family, some practical, some romantic, some purely fantastic--the creations of absurd fantasies. But in truth, the family is an attempt at a workable solution to the problem of survival. How can I stay alive? How can I assure my survival in a way that is, on balance, more fruitful and more

satisfying than a life in solitude? How can I assure the survival of my mate? How can I assure the survival and proper upbringing of my offspring? This is the function the family performs--practical, social, biological. Genetic homo sapiens are reproduced by the recombination of gametes, very clinical. But human beings are reproduced by families, and the quality of the human beings thus reproduced can be judged by the quality of the family doing the reproduction.

I think that my mother and father had the very best family ever. Whatever went on between them, if anything, my grandfather and Candy were in complete agreement about what they wanted for their children, now paired, someday to be the parents of their grandchildren. They didn't fight biology and they didn't fight the economic reality of the negligible earning power of undereducated children and they didn't do anything except make sure that two young people who had a great talent for living didn't get in their own way with a too-early pregnancy. It was as if Zeus and Gaea conspired to make a new and better Eden, a paradise where virtue and grace consisted of nothing other than the knowledge of good and evil...

After graduation my mom got a job as lay teacher at Saint Timothy's. My dad got his B.S. in physics and did post-graduate work in nuclear physics at the expense of the U.S. Government, courtesy of Admiral Hyman Rickover, who would show up twice a year with fat checks. Neither one of them needed money, since my grandpa was still paying for everything, so they just salted it all away. Eventually the Navy decided it could teach my dad more than M.I.T. could, so he took a commission. The center of the universe who is the center of the esteemed Ptolemy Project, your (never)humble narrator was spawned when my dad made Commander.

And that's the home I grew up in, me, my grandpa, my mom, Candy--and my dad in short and unpredictable, very intense bursts. A house full of fanatics, I have to say, but I learned a reverence--a passion!--for ideas that I would never have had without them. I grew up around very, very bright people who gently but persistently expected me to leave them hopelessly in the dust. I don't know that I have, but, if I haven't, it's not for a want of effort. If my parents had the best family, I surely had the next best, because I grew up with the best of everything. Not the best things. Not necessarily even the best ideas, although the quality of ideas was always very high. The best models of character and integrity and thoughtfulness and persistence and self-reverence and high regard for those who deserve it. I was lucky enough to live for many years among the very best people I have ever known, and I was lucky enough to learn what I could from their good examples.

This is something you never hear from anyone anywhere: My parents and grandparents were great and proud and perfect people, and if I am able to live up to even the tenth part of their greatness I will call myself blessed.

My grandfather died in the winter of 1976. I told you that. My father died in 1986, of cancer. We called it Rickover's Disease. Those old reactors were just open piles, like the Hanover reactor in Washington state, like Chernobyl. No shielding, no safety measures to speak of at all. My dad spent his time figuring out how to make nuclear power practical, and he gave his life demonstrating how to make it safe. The Navy brats called it the Funeral of the Month Club, as all the men he served with died one by one.

Candy inherited from my grandfather and mom had all the money she and dad had saved and I was making serious money by then, so the three of us together bought a ranch outside of Tucson, down by the Lowell Observatory. The two of them live down there and Candy, at the age of 89, plays 27 holes of golf every day. They tried to help with Hunter during the divorce, but, golf or no golf, Boston's winters are not kind to Candy's bones. We go down there three or four times a year--to see the sun and to see the stars at Lowell.

I grew up around great examples of love, I just didn't know what I was seeing. My grandpa and Candy loved each other enormously, whether or not they were 'in love'. I realize now that my parents must never have slept when my father had shore leave, because they spent all of my waking hours with me. I feel very bad for Hunter that I didn't pay better attention--first because my lack of understanding robbed him of his mother, and second because I want for him to have a chance to learn the lesson I learned too late.

Yikes! The implications simply shriek. But: No. I'm not looking at you as a possible mommy for my boy. Nor am I thinking of myself in the context as a possible daddy for your son. But I am very much aware that, if things work out for us, they could work out very nicely.

Yet again: Yikes! Clearly the man is thinking of marriage! Clearly I am. Not as a plan or a prospect, but simply as a possibility that has occurred to me, that occurred to me as soon as I saw you in my lecture hall, that kept nagging at me, that kept me up past dawn. I don't ever want to lie to you, and so I will be painfully naked and vulnerable instead. I have already thought of you in ways more intimate than I ever thought of my former wife. I don't mean sexual intimacy--although I will admit I've thought of you that way, too. I mean the kind of intimacy that passed between my grandfather and Candy, an intimacy borne of the shared pursuit of

noble and ennobling goals.

Thus: Forewarned is forearmed, and forearmed is as good as knocked unconscious in your better Boston bars. If you feel like running, you probably should. I am not going anywhere, and I will not blink, for fear that I might miss even an instant of this drama.

Whatever may happen, I thank you endlessly, boundlessly for the most thrilling night of my life. Nothing happened, really, but everything changed forever. Even if I never see you again, I am everlastingly blessed for having met you, Gwendolyn Jones. Don't ever doubt my gratitude.

Very fondly,

Devin

## *Chapter 2*

Devin endured an eternity of agony on Gwen's porch before he braced himself and rang the bell. He felt all of fourteen years old, and he smiled at himself, part in wonder, part in derision. He had spent hours in preparation—which suit?, which shirt?, which tie?, which shoes?—and then at the last minute he had changed everything. He was wearing charcoal gray slacks, a dark blue cashmere dinner jacket, a blinding white shirt and a red silk rep tie. He knew he looked like a fourteen year old preppie at the Homecoming Dance. He also knew he looked very elegant, very grown up, very well turned out. He also knew he knew nothing, nothing but the perfect certainty of doubt, and he bathed himself in paired fountains of elation and despair, pride and humiliation, anticipation and dread, fiery hunger and icy nausea. He was amused by all this of course, amused and frightened and anxious and thrilled.

The door was opened by as beautiful a boy as Devin had ever seen. He was tall and painfully thin; he couldn't have weighed 150 pounds soaking wet. He had fine white gold hair like his mother's and it fell loose all around his head. It hung over his collar in back and his bangs in front were too long, so the hair slid down into his eyes and he had to keep pulling it back into place. He had his mother's eyes and his mother's languid grace, and his face bore an expression of wry amusement—seemingly as its ground state.

Devin stuck out his hand. "Devin Dwyer. I'm here to pick up Gwendolyn."

The boy smiled like the dawning of a cloudless day. He shook Devin's hand, and Devin was surprised at the strength bound within that emaciated form. He said, "I'm Spencer. Her son." He had his mother's voice, almost, but the accent was a little thicker, the tenor was deeper, and he actually issued sounds and not just beautifully modulated breaths. "Please come in."

Gwen's home is on Crescent Avenue in Newton Center, a great gray Victorian mess of a house. Shake shingles and a slate roof and Doric columns on the porch and bulbous little Chippendale legs supporting the porch railings. It was a pocket history of everything that was ever bad or stupid or vain or pointless in architecture—just like every other classic home in suburban Boston. It was also large and



warm and very homey. From the outside, warmth seemed to glow out through the windows. On the inside, the warmth was everywhere, in the enormous Persian rugs laid atop bare parquet, in the wainscoted walls, in the charming faux-gaslight light fixtures, in the pictures and knick-knacks and mementos.

The living room and dining room were divided by a pair of floor-to-ceiling cherrywood bookcases, and Devin longed to take a look at the books crammed onto their shelves. But just as he was moving that way, Gwen appeared like a vision at the top of the stairs. Like a vision out of an agonizing dream he wanted never to end. He had actually forgotten how beautiful she was...

She said, "I hate to be such a woman, as it were, but the truth is I'm not quite finished. Can you bear to wait?"

"Nah, forget it. I'll just go home." He laughed and she laughed and Spencer laughed. "The other truth is that I'm early and we have plenty of time anyway." He turned toward the boy, still standing by the door. "Maybe Spencer could take me for a walk through the neighborhood?"

"I'd be glad to." He asked up the stairs, "Is that all right?"

"Go, go, go. I'll be ready in fifteen minutes, possibly twelve."

Devin and Spencer walked up Crescent toward Norwood Avenue, then cut down toward Crystal Lake. It wasn't quite full dark and it seemed like every minute or so they were accosted by teenage girls in sweat suits or skirt suits or jogging suits or cotton jumpsuits. They all knew Spencer by name and they were all seemingly charmed to bask in his benign indifference.

They stopped to look at the lake. The moon was had just risen over the treetops and the indigo sky was laced up with fleecy white clouds. Spencer said, "What is it you've done to her?"

"I'm sorry. I don't get that."

"She won't eat, that's one thing. She just forgets. If I remind her, she makes an effort, but she'll forget again with the fork halfway to her mouth. She can't carry on a conversation. I don't think she's read anything to the end all week. All she seems to be good for is smiling like an idiot and talking about you."

Devin smiled like an idiot.

"Is she in love, then?"

"More like infatuation, I think, if it's anything like what I'm going through. In the spring, all the new plants send up shoots, but only a few of them manage to take root and thrive. The rest wither and die."

Spencer looked doubtful. "I've never seen her behave like *this* before..."

"Maybe you're telling me more than you should." They started walking again, back around Norwood Avenue, back toward Centre Street. "You like the Celtics?"

"They're okay."

"I share a pair of season tickets with a guy I work with. You think you might want to go sometime?"

What those pretty little teenage girls would have given to see the enthusiasm in Spencer's eyes. Nevertheless, all he said was: "Sure."

They wandered back over to Crescent and Devin stopped in front of the house. From his trouser pocket he pulled a small canister and handed it to Spencer.

"What's this?"

"It's pepper spray. I had my mother FedEx it to me from Arizona. Very potent. Very dangerous. Very illegal in Massachusetts, I'm sure."

Spencer turned the can around and around in his hand. "What's it for?"

"Self-defense, essentially. But I bought so that you can defend your mother."

"From whom?"

"From anyone who might want to hurt her, but I got it so you can defend her from me." Devin held up his hand. "You have my solemn vow that I will never do anything to hurt your mother. But my vow is worthless if I'm a liar. In your hand is my warranty. If I'm a liar, you can send me to the hospital screaming."

Spencer said nothing, just continued to turn the canister in his hand.

"Your loyalty is to her," Devin said. "I think your mother and I are going to take root and thrive and grow and reach our branches to the sun itself. I think you and I are going to spend a lot of time together, and not just basketball games. There may come a time when you decide that you like me a lot, and I hope you will. But no matter what happens, your loyalty is to her, never to me. You are the man in her family, and it's your job to protect her and defend her and—god forbid—if necessary, avenge her. I'm bigger than you and older, craftier maybe, probably been in a few more fights. That spray makes us equal. You can take me out whenever you think you need to, and I'll be useless for half-an-hour and half-useless for half-a-day. Read the instructions, learn how to use it. Don't be stupid with it, it's very dangerous. Keep it where you can get at it. And if you feel that you have to use it on me, if I've hurt your mother or if I'm about to, you have my advance permission, right here, right now. Use it. Your loyalty is to her..."

"...Are you crying?"

Devin grinned. "I've been crying for days. Your mother can't eat, and I can't stop crying. It's not love, it's psychopathology."

Spencer laughed and Devin knew everything would be okay.

Gwen was waiting for them in the living room. She was poised and proper and perfect—and stunning. She wore a simple blue frock of a thick cotton weave, not a gown but merely a dress. It sought in no way to reveal the contours of her figure and yet managed to conceal nothing. She wore a white cotton blouse and white hose and a pair of simple blue flats. She looked as young and as chaste and as pure of heart as a schoolgirl—the schoolgirl who got the headmaster tarred and feathered. Devin marveled at the incredible, unbearable sexuality she was able to bring to an intentionally pedestrian outfit. On the sofa behind her was a thick white wool cardigan. She lacked only a pair of pale blue half-frame glasses to become Enchantra, Super-Human Sex-Goddess of the Library. He smiled at that image, because it was so perfectly her. Wild and innocent. Rapacious and unrepentant. Soaring and unfallen, soaring *because* she was unfallen. Only Gwen could bring an unendurable sexiness to an outfit that was a parody not of chastity but frigidity.

He dug into his pocket again and pulled out another canister of pepper spray. He handed it to Gwen.

"What's this?"

"Tell her, Spencer."

"He says we're to spray him with it if he ever bites the postman." They laughed and Spencer continued: "He wants me to feel safe when you're together. And I guess he wants you to feel safe when you're together. So he's armed us so we'll feel safe. Is that right?"

"Works for me," said Devin.

Gwen said nothing, just looked thoughtful.

Devin stuck out his hand again. "Spencer, it was a pleasure. I promise to have her home before my truck turns into a pumpkin."

Spencer shook hands and then just stood there.

Gwen said, "He's asking for privacy, dear."

Spencer half-nodded, half-bowed, and his bangs fell down into his eyes and he pulled them away and then retired. Languidly.

"He's a fine boy," said Devin.

"Too pretty by half."

"Just wait until he fills out. Then it won't be just the little girls trying to trip him."

She blew a gust of breath through her lips. "Aren't you full of good news?"

"In fact I am. I have another little gift for you..."

"Not a gun I hope." She grinned.

He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a jeweler's gift box. He opened it and showed her the contents, a gold chain composed of hundreds of interlocking mirror-bright cubes. He said, "I know you don't wear jewelry. I know you don't need to. But I wanted you to have this from me. This particularly, from me particularly. Someday soon I'll tell you my full reasons. For now can I ask you to wear it?"

She nodded solemnly. She didn't trust herself to say anything. He walked behind her and clasped the chain around her neck. It was long; it crested over her breastbone. He smoothed it out under the fabric of her blouse and the heel of his palm touched the top of one of her breasts and she stopped breathing in the middle of a breath and she wanted to grab that hand and press it full to her breast. She loved the feel of the chain on her skin. She loved the feel of his hands on her shoulders.

He said, "Wear this whenever you're glad to be with me. That way, if I see it's missing, I'll know I need to put things right with you." He leaned down and kissed her where the chain touched the side of her neck. He had to push her blouse out of the way, and she thought he could not have been more obscenely intimate if he had pushed her skirts up over her hips and had her right there. His lips touched her only for an instant, an eternal instant, and her skin seemed to burn in that spot.

He spun her around and kissed her full on the lips, stridently tentative, ardently tender, vehemently timid. She pulled him tighter to her and opened her mouth to him and kissed him with an ornate and fluent eloquence. It was a kiss that began in the middle and didn't end at all, it just endured, burning through both of them.

When they finally parted he said, "I've been waiting all week for that."

Lost somewhere, she said, "I've been waiting all my life for that..."

They snuggled for a long time and he teased the skin of her chest with the chain. She looked down at his fingers, imagining where else they might roam. She kissed his hand then looked up and said, "When's your birthday? Mine's April nineteenth."

"November fourteenth. Next Friday."

"Can we do something?"

"Afraid not. Hunter and I are flying down to Tucson to see my mom and Candy. We'll be there until the Friday after Thanksgiving. But we're having a leftover party at my house that night, and you and Spencer should come to that."

"A leftover party?"

"Everybody brings over their Thanksgiving leftovers and we share them all around and make them vanish. A minor tradition. Very homey. Very fun."

She picked up his hand and kissed the backs of his fingers one at a time. She said, "Did you really drive a truck?"

"Yuppie love. I brought the Range Rover."

"Hmm," she said. "Late thirties and divorced. His other car is a Porsche."

He smiled. "Single father. His other car is a Volvo. Plus I lease a Suzuki Samurai for Gretchen to use. Hunter thinks it's the cat's pajamas. But a jeep doesn't really seem like the kind of car you take on a date, so I brought the truck."

"Because a Range Rover does seem like the kind of car you take on a date. Is that right?"

"No, because I like to confound the valet parking attendants. It's a truck, but it's a truck that costs more than almost any car."

"Transfixed in mid-sneer. How horrifying." She put her thumbs in his sternum and squeezed a little. "Might I confide in you?"

He stopped breathing in the middle of a breath. "Always."

She rubbed her thumbs in small circles. "If we don't get out of here, then we'll *never* get out of here and Spencer will learn rather more than I want him to of the facts of life."

"...Maybe you're telling me more than you should."

"I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know, am I? I am aroused by you. You are aroused by me, I know it. The truth is, I am enthralled by you, and this is an entirely new experience for me. That doesn't mean anything's going to happen. But it's so, and we'd be liars to deny it. Wouldn't we?"

He said nothing, just kissed the skin at her breastbone then walked over to get her cardigan and the pepper spray. He helped her into the sweater then handed her the canister.

"What am I to do with this?"

"Put it in your purse. You never know when I might mistake you for the postman."

"But what if I should want you to bite me?"

"Bite me first. I'll retaliate."

"Hmm," she said. "A war of escalation. Sounds delightful..."

They walked outside and he helped her into his truck. When he got in the driver's side, she slid across the bench seat to the middle. "The Volvo has separate seats. Hasn't it?"

He grinned. "This did, too, when I bought it. The bench seat is a custom modification."

"How very thoughtful. All your many conquests must approve."

"I got it for Hunter. So we could sit closer together in the car."

"Works nicely for me, too." She snuggled in tight to him as he drove toward Boston. "I've been... enthralled by your email."

He smiled. "Who knew nerds could write."

"Who knew nerds could write so *much*? I swear I've done nothing all week but read and reply and re-read and re-read."

His smile deepened. "I've never written this way to anyone before. I guess I have a lot I need to say."

She laid her head against his upper arm. "Your sexual metaphors are..."

He looked at her looking up at him. "Yes...?"

She smiled impishly. "Effective. Most proficient." She giggled like a girlchild on a swingset. "So many of them are inverted, though. It had me quite mystified at first. I thought it was a mistake."

"It's not a mistake."

"But why are you so adamant about reversing our... endowments?"

"An equality thing, I guess. I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about love. I'm talking about life. I suppose I'm talking about way more than I should be at this stage of our orbit, but that's the way I am. I like the idea of being equals in everything we do, and a nice way to express that equality is to let you wield the pokey parts sometimes in metaphor."

"But only in metaphor, yes? No Nazi nurse costumes and strange rubber appliances."

"I don't think you'd look good in black..." She pinched him hard under the ribs. "I take that back. Here's a way you'd look exquisite in black. Imagine a black velvet floor length gown, sleeveless, backless, strapless. A black velvet collar holds the frontpiece, which runs from your neck down the front of you to wrap around your sides and plunge to the small of your back. Everything is revealed, everything is concealed, hidden behind an inky-black wall. The collar is fastened with a diamond, a big one, and you have a diamond-encrusted headband to sweep your hair back and straight down."

"What for shoes?"

"What do you need shoes for? Do you think I'm going to let anyone see you dressed like that?" He gave a wicked laugh.

"With a gown like that, I should think the only fit shoes would be glass slippers."

"Not very practical. No way to ventilate the sweat. What would be nice would be black patent leather sandals to show off your toes. Are your toes very pretty? I'm sure they are. Can we do another one? I've actually spent a lot of time thinking about dressing you."

"Not undressing me...?"

"Don't put the cart before the horse. First things first. What I thought about was a dove gray cashmere sweater dress. Turtleneck, long sleeves, ankle-length, cashmere everywhere from your chin to your feet."

"Am I to imagine for myself any undergarments? Your sweater dress sounds dangerously close to being loungewear, as it is euphemistically called."

Devin said nothing, just smiled.

"You're rather a wild man yourself, aren't you? That's what you said to me the other night. You said, 'You're so wild, so free, so liberating.' You have a spark of that, too. Different from mine, but just as playful."

"I've been having these... ideas about you."

She clasped his biceps with both hands and pulled her cheek tighter to his arm. "Oh really?"

"Not those kind. Well, yes, those kind, too. But I keep getting all these crazy images of you. The Greeks would have called them poetical, comedic actually. I wrote poetry when I was younger, but it was always very distant, very outward-looking. Never anything like this."

"You wrote poetry?"

"It's not such a long reach. 'Thoughtless' just means the failure to have thought. Thoughtful people can accomplish anything."

"Hmmp!" she said, mocking skepticism. "I'll believe it when I see it. Until then you are a poet by presumption. And all poets by presumption are bad poets, by default. So there."

He simply smiled. "Baby, you can put me in my place any old time."

They dined at Maison Robert in downtown Boston. Very old, very elegant, very expensive, very French. It's situated in an old gray stone mansion right at the top of the Financial District and in the warmer months one can dine al fresco at patio tables on the front lawn. Devin and Gwen were seated in a room with a great roaring fireplace and the light from the fire and the light from the candles on their table seemed to her to be the only illumination. She had the idea they were in solitude even though she knew better. It felt right, though. It felt perfect. She thought it might be the better part of heaven to spend all of eternity alone with this one man.

His hand was on the table and she locked her fingers in his. She said, "You shared a very troubling secret with me. Now it's my turn."

"I also told you that's not necessary. Gifts are not obligations."

"It's all right. I want to." She threw her shoulders back to throw her hair back over her shoulders. She knew it was very effective, but she wasn't doing it to be effective. But she was doing it to please him, to delight his eyes and mind. "My secret is, I'm not British. Well I am by blood. But not by nationality."

Devin said nothing. He simply looked confused.

"I'm an American, darling. Born and bred. Can you believe that?"

"No. I can't."

"It's true. On my saints. I was born in a nine-bedroom house at the dead-end of a dusty dirt road outside of Midland City, Texas. I'm sorry, I've mispronounced that: Teyecksas. My father was in the oil business. I'm sorry: the awl bidness. My mother raised me as a demi-chatelaine and my father raised me as

his warped idea of a Teyecksas Belle and I owe my sanity and my center of gravity to an ancient, emaciated Tejano maid we had. Her name was Consuela and she wore long skirts and long sleeves and lace shawls on the hottest days of the year and every bit of this is true whether you believe me or not.”

Devin smiled. He didn't know if he believed her, but it didn't matter. It was enough simply to sit and watch her talking.

“My father is Welsh. You understood this, right? ‘Jones’ is to Wales as ‘Lee’ is to Korea. Coal-miners, going back forever. My Granny Gwen had a bit of the spark and she planted it in my father and he swore he was never going to work in any dirty old coal mine. He went down to London after the war and tried his hand at this and that. My impression is that his strengths were draughts and darts, taking the occasional moment to ruin some poor father's daughter.”

Devin couldn't hide his laughter.

“It's ironic, isn't it? You have so much respect for your forebears, and I have so little for mine. Anyway, as fortune would have it, he ruined the wrong one. My Granny Penelope was widowed by the war, but she retained her husband's sidearm and she used it persuasively. My parents were married in 1955 in a ceremony it would be an exaggeration to call subdued. Granny Penelope immediately shipped her two embarrassments off to the United States, this being a display of the warmth the English have perfected after centuries of practice.

“But my father is lucky. He is not wise or intelligent or prudent or thrifty or kind or temperate. But he is lucky. And he was lucky enough to be coerced into marrying the one woman he would have married without coercion. My mother was goddess on the Earth, more beautiful than Spencer and I combined. What I saw of their love growing up suggests to me that it was wholly Byronic—which is to say poetically moronic. Jealousies and drunken rages and fits of pique lasting weeks and passionate reconciliations lasting minutes ending in an even greater level of turmoil. They were very much made for each other in the sense that neither of them ever had two clear, cogent thoughts in a row.”

Devin was looking down at the table, biting his lower lip, trying not to laugh at her story.

“Well do laugh. It is funny, isn't it? They were just children. My father was ten years too old for her, but it didn't matter, because they were both the same age. Four months short of fifteen. Forever. No plans. No money. No skills. No sense. But a great enormous passionate love for each other, a love that Byron himself could only equal, never surpass. They bought some kind of awful car dockside in New York and it finally broke down in Teyecksas. That's how ma daddy got hisself into th' awl bidness. He had nowhere else to go. He wasn't going to work in any dirty old coal mine. Instead he worked around dirty old oil wells. It's the American Dream, where any half-witted European can traverse half the globe to wind up where he started.

“But my father is lucky. He makes me believe that distribution curves are descriptive, not random. He never loses when he gambles. He may not win much, but he never loses. He goes to the racetrack every day of the season, and he always comes home a winner. I've met people at the other end of the bell curve, people who just can't win, who can make a machine malfunction when

it works perfectly for the people who use it before and after. My father is just the opposite. Not everything that can work to his advantage happens, but nothing that would work to his disadvantage ever does. I offer you no explanation. I am reporting phenomena I have observed, and it's possible that either my observation or my reporting are flawed.

“Anyway, my father started to invest some of Granny Penelope's money in the awl bidness, and right away he did very well for himself. Not as rich as Croesus, but rich enough to be invited to dine in the homes of the many Croesuses of Midland City. That's how he came to own La Hacienda dela Dirt Road. Cigars and cognac and cards one night until dawn and at the end of it my father owned more than three hundred producing wells.

“And that's how I came to grace this green Earth—although I remember Teyecksas as being more brown than green. My mother hated that house, hated being stuck out in the middle of nowhere. More than once I've had the idea from my father that he implanted her with me to give her something to do. A romantic and deeply meaningful origin, to be sure, but it's not something one gets to pick, is it? I was delivered by Consuela because the damned fool hadn't thought about how to get a woman in labor across seventeen miles of corrugated road.

“And thus was my upbringing, my life as an American. My father in his cups a little bit earlier every day. My mother a little more neurotic every day. The two of them constantly spiraling up their moronic, Byronic dance of despair, spiraling up and plummeting down, in phase with the moon. And Consuela, truly my consolation, swearing under her breath in Spanish.”

“You make it sound so...” Devin shivered.

“Quite the contrary. My childhood was wonderful. I learned at a very early age that Consuela and I were the only grown-ups in the house and I behaved accordingly. My father imported a tutor from London and I had a first-class education. Most of the day I was free to roam and I did, on foot or on horseback. Yes, I can ride very well, thank you, English and Western saddles. At the age of eight I was a golden haired rodeo queen, sixty-three pounds of silk and sinew on a black stallion named Penelope's Persistence—my father named that horse.

“My mother died when I was fourteen. Don't ask me how, I've never known. My father will say no more than that she ‘took a fever’. I've always had a suspicion that it was a fever of a Byronic nature, but I have no evidence either way. My father was disconsolate—in a lucky sort of way. Granny Penelope had died and left what she had to my mother, so it passed to him. He sold our oil wells to a consortium headed by Mister T. Boone Rayburn, who gave me his string tie when I asked him for it. We sailed for England from New York in the late spring of 1976. I saw your tall ships there before they went up to Boston.

“Think of it! We were so close to each other for a few days. You could have taken the train down from Boston and ruined both our lives.” She laughed.

“I don't think I would have noticed you at fourteen.”

She smiled in a way that was almost feral. “You would have noticed. I left Teyecksas just in time, I assure you. Nothing for it but to lament, I suppose. What's one ruined teenaged boy more or less? For that's what became of me in

London. I was not a tart, the very opposite. But I had my mother's beauty, as much of it as my frail body could bear, and the boys would come 'round and bay and scratch and rut and quarrel and make the most dreadful scenes—all to my perfect delight, of course."

"You were a tease."

"Not by intention, not by plan. It was the role assigned me by nature, I think. Theirs was to proffer in the most outlandish ways, and mine was to withhold—becomingly. I inherited my mother's poise, as well, and her grace and her good taste, and by that time my... assets were flourishing nicely, and I was something to behold, if I may say so myself. I was also too bright by miles and leagues and too well educated and entirely too well versed in verse, and the gallant young slobberers who persisted in pursuing me were cut quite to ribbons by the saber of my tongue."

"To tell the truth," he said, "I've had the idea that your incisiveness could cut both ways, so to speak."

She grinned. "So to speak. People who can play with words have always been safe from me. Plus which, I've mellowed with my advancing years. Anyway, my father was expending his millions here and there trying to establish himself as a proper clubman, and he hadn't the wits to figure out that the clubs you can buy your way into are a thing apart from the clubs you are born into. And, as always, I had the run of everything, without even good Consuela to keep me reined in.

"My father is a great brooding Byron of a man, a Heathcliff grown stout about the middle. I have not one iota of him in me except his sarcasm, and I am lucky enough to have that in a much lighter complexion. Can you imagine what it might have been like if Heathcliff hadn't run off? If Cathy hadn't gone and caught her death on the moors? Can you imagine Heathcliff and Cathy living together daily for ten or twenty or fifty years? That's what I lived with in Tavecksas, Blubbering Heights.

"And so isn't it a perfect justice that this is what I inflicted upon myself? At the age of seventeen I fell and fell hard. For Byron. For Heathcliff. For a great, dark, sarcastic, lumbering horse's ass just like my father, only thirty years younger. He was a poet, couldn't you have guessed? A great, dark, sarcastic, lumbering horse's ass of a poet, but my critical skills—already quite fine—were interrupted by a series of urgent messages from my solar plexus. And points south.

"My excuse is simply that I was unprepared. I was by then quite handy at disposing of the slobberers. They presented me no challenge. But Dirk—Spencer's father—was another matter. I had never responded to a man before, not *as* a man. I responded to Dirk very much as a woman, and he didn't have to importune. He was dark and mysterious and very Bohemian. Guinness stout and Gauloise cigarettes and unbearably bad German films. He was a horse's ass, of course. No plans, no money, no skills, no sense. Most emphatically no interest in being a father, so I had Spencer by myself.

"Entirely by myself, since my own father has never had any interest in being a father. It was interesting to me to read how much your grandparents did for

your parents, because my father did nothing for me. You gave the impression that if children make mistakes, it's at least partly the fault of the family. By contrast, my father regarded my downfall as his absolution. People are what they are and there's no changing them, I learned that long ago. There's a part of me that loves my father. There's even a small part of me that admires his better impulses. But at the core of me there is a deep and abiding contempt for a man who would default on every responsibility life conferred upon him, then rejoice in the inevitable disaster. My father didn't put Spencer in me and neither did Dirk. I did it. I was the only grown-up in my life, and when I failed to behave as a grown-up, I failed utterly. But it was not my job at seventeen or fourteen or eight to be a grown-up. This is what we have parents *for*, to permit us to be children, so that we can learn properly *how* to be grown up.

"You said you had learned by means of good examples, and you're lucky in that. I was lucky enough to learn from bad examples, and I may have fared just as well. I had little bits of money here and there, left me by relatives I'd never even seen. It wasn't much, but it was enough that I could rent a flat and stay home with Spencer until he weaned himself." She smiled. "Yes, Devin, these have been used for their intended purpose. Only slightly the worse for wear and tear, I hope. When Spencer went to Montessori school, I took a job doing translations for a financial newspaper in the City.

"I had an education trust that I hadn't used, of course, and that came to me on my twenty-fifth birthday. I had learned a thing or two about money, and I invested the whole thing and did rather well for myself, I think. I have the idea that you may be a little better fixed than me, but I am quite able to take care of myself. I'm telling you this for two reasons. First, as enthralled as I might be by you, I will never be in your thrall financially. That's my freedom. Second, because I will never need your money, you will always know that whatever response you have from me is won by your character, by your person, and not your portfolio. That's your freedom."

Devin nodded and that was enough.

"This story is endless, isn't it? All those years in the City, I had been writing little feature articles on the side. Advice to the heartbroken, relationship skills, putting your best foot forward, how to accessorize brown herringbone—all that Not For Women Only rubbish. Most amusing to me, because my one love relationship had turned out a complete disaster with a little blonde-haired bastard left in the ruins. But that stuff sold, and it bought us our little treats and treasures. After a time I was able to freelance exclusively, and I wrote a couple of books that sold fairly well in the Commonwealth countries."

"Why did you come—come back—to America?"

"The Globe recruited me, if you can believe that. A few little things of mine had been picked up in syndication, and I'd had things in American women's magazines. When the Globe was putting Not For Women Only together, they decided they needed a star. This I was not and am not, but there was no disabusing them of their illusion. So they paid our way over here and set us up in Newton and made me moderately famous with billboards and radio commercials. And that, as we Americans say, is that.

“And Americans are in such awe of the English. It’s sad, and I should know. At the paper they treat me like royalty and they defer to me in every possible way. I’m sure they think the Queen herself rings me up for advice.” She chuckled. “The English. What a charade! English poetry is Irish. English inventiveness and ingenuity and philosophy and economics are all Scots. English industry is Welsh. English wealth was expropriated by the boatload from India and Africa and America. The only two avocations the English manage to take seriously are drunkenness and sodomy. They borrowed the first from the Romans and the second from the Greeks. The vaunted English classical education amounts to a careful mastery of all the classical dissipations and vices. The Globe wanted to buy the crown of a headless king, but they didn’t get even that little. All they got was an American with an accent and a vocabulary. Isn’t that rich?”

He laughed with her. “What about you, though? What did you get?”

“I got my son out of there, and that was all I wanted. He’s got those looks and that accent as completely unfair advantages. He’ll have the best education my money can buy him. And in this country he can make something of himself, not become just another drunken dissipate.”

“I thought maybe you had moved to Boston because the weather is so much better.”

“Very funny. The schools are much worse, aren’t they? When we came here, they advanced Spencer a level. Should have done two, but it would have made him too much younger than his classmates. I think that’s why he feigns not to notice those little girls, because they’re all a year older than he is. How it breaks my heart, having been a little girl who was entirely too confident with the opposite sex at seventeen.”

“What if he meets a little girl as confident as you were?”

“Then I’ll show her Granny Penelope’s sidearm. And your can of spray for that matter. Armed to the teeth is what I am, just another good American with an attitude.”

He laughed and picked up her hand from the table and kissed it tenderly.

Their dishes had been cleared and their coffee had grown cold, but when they stepped out to the street it was still early evening. She pulled his arm around her and snuggled in tight against him. She said, “Take me down to the waterfront, sailor, and I’ll show you my tattoos.”

“You have no tattoos,” he scoffed.

She ran her free hand along the tight wall of his stomach. “Prove it...”

They walked down along Congress Street to the Quincy Market then cut under the expressway to the park on Atlantic Avenue beside Long Wharf. On the way he talked to her about a distinction he’d been trying to make.

“It’s your ‘Love among the nerds’ in a different way. Two different kinds of language, and all humans use both. I call them fathertongue and mothertongue. The terms aren’t mine—they’re Thoreau’s originally—and they don’t have very much to do with gender. I think our nerds are fabulously competent in fathertongue and largely tongue-tied in mothertongue. Here’s the distinction: Fathertongue is any notational system. Although mothertongue can borrow symbolic language for convenience, any completely mothertongue idea can be con-

veyed without abstract notation. Everything you hope to say to me in an encyclopedic kiss is mothertongue, and I am a most avid student. All true art is an attempt to communicate and amplify mothertongue ideas—passions!—in fathertongue.”

“I used to sing to Spencer when he was little. It didn’t matter what I sang, simply *that* I sang.”

“I sing that way to Hunter every night, even when he’s asleep. When he’s frightened or angry or over-tired, I’ll sit him back to chest in my lap and put my mouth right by his ear and just murmur to him softly. It doesn’t matter what I say, because the embrace and the murmuring and the confidence in my voice communicate the true message: ‘everything’s okay.’”

She clasped her arms around his middle as they walked. “I think you must be a wonderful father. Would you plant a baby in me?”

The question shocked him. Almost he stammered. “...Not tonight.”

“Not even after I’ve shown you my tattoos...?”

His face was serious. “I’m very happy right now, I can’t tell you how happy. I want to make sure I do nothing to wreck my happiness.”

“Mister, I’ll leave you wrecked *and* happy.”

He walked four or five paces before he spoke. “I know you’re just making a joke, but I don’t like that kind of joke. The implication, first, is that I don’t have a right to decide what I will and won’t do with my own body. Very sexist. And second, the joke implies that my integrity is of no importance to you.”

“Yes. You’re right, both counts. My apologies.”

He smiled. “Does this mean you won’t show me your tattoos?”

She tugged thoughtfully at her chin. “...Not tonight.” She laughed and broke free of him and darted down to the waterfront. They had the little park all to themselves and Devin had expected they would. Across the harbor the lights from the airport were blinding. Overhead the moon was kissing the fleecy clouds. When Gwen threw her head back, the skyscrapers of downtown Boston seemed to hang upside down, suspended from the sky.

He stepped up behind her and kissed the back of her head. He wrapped his arms around her middle, his thumbs brushing against the base of her breasts. It wasn’t intentional, not quite.

She grabbed his hands in hers and pressed them full to her breasts and held them there. She turned her head back and sought his mouth with hers, explaining her ardor fully with an encyclopedic kiss. When she turned back to face the airport, she slid his hands down the front of her, down her belly to the tops of her hips. She pressed her hands on his, pressing her body back against his, pressing her response to him into his pronounced response to her.

She said, “I’m not a virgin, Devin. I didn’t sleep with Dirk just the once, and I haven’t been... celibate since then.” He took a breath to speak but she reached over her head with one hand and gently pinched his lips together. “Let me finish. With Dirk I answered the call of my body in ignorance, and I paid for my ignorance. Later I answered the call of my body in full knowledge, in full control. But with you it’s more than my body calling, it’s my body and my mind and my... soul, I think. It’s an utterly new experience, strange and dangerous and thrilling and

very frightening. Nothing's going to happen tonight, as much as I might want it to. You control your body and I control my body, and we're both wise enough to foresee the disasters Lord Byron and his minions so gleefully overlook. But I want you, Devin Dwyer, I want you pretty bad. It's only fair to let you know."

Devin tried to speak but he couldn't. He kept trying to form words but he couldn't. Anyway, his breath was gone.

She spun in the circle of his arms and pressed his hands full to her behind so he would know she wanted them there. She said, "Don't talk. Just kiss."

That he could do. He kissed her hard and he pulled her body tight to his. He ran his hands up her back from her behind, along the thick weave of her sweater to her shoulder blades, to her neck, to her head. He plowed his fingers into her hair at the base of her scalp and pushed her mouth still more urgently to his own. It was an encyclopedic kiss, explaining his ardor fully. When he released her, she seemed unsteady.

She said, "That was..."

"Yes...?"

"Effective..." She laughed and skirted away. She skipped over to a park bench. "Come sit here, if you would be so kind." He sat on the bench and she climbed onto his lap, straddling him. "Isn't this lewd? You make me so reckless, so... wanton. I want you inside me, Devin. Very badly. But I won't let myself, not yet. So I want you next to me, so I'll know what I'm missing."

"You *are* a tease."

"You haven't seen the half of it." She pulled on the skirt of her frock, pulling it out from between them. She pressed herself hard to him.

"I haven't seen anything yet." He tenderly kissed the skin of her neck along the path described by the gold chain. He pushed his hands beneath her dress and pressed his fingers into the warmth of her behind, pressing her tighter against him.

"Pantyhole. An impregnable fortress. Better than chastity belts and they never rust or squeak."

He said, "Don't talk. Just kiss."

They kissed and explored each other's bodies in the most chaste and intimate of ways. After a long time she pulled away and put her lips beside his ear. Speaking just with her breath, her voice barely there at all, she said, "Do you know that I'm as vain as a kitten? I can't imagine that there's anyone who doesn't want to have me in his lap, stroking my fur, scratching behind my ears. I know it's not true, but I always feel that way, anyway."

His lips were brushing against the wispy fine hairs beside her own ear. "I'm sure every man who's ever looked at you would like to have you in his lap like this."

"While he's looking at me, yes. But after he's gotten to know me? Most men know in two minutes. The fools know in two hours. Once or twice a true idiot has hung in there for two weeks or more."

"...What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Everything. What are we, five days now? You haven't found me cutting and I haven't found a thing in you I want to cut. You show great promise, Doctor Dwyer."

"...You've lost me completely."

She buried her face in his shoulder and gently bit the skin. "You've found me. Completely..."

They kissed and cuddled in the park and nuzzled their way back to the truck and snuggled back to Newton and kissed very much more on her sofa and it was late by the time she was alone, preparing herself for bed. She showered and washed her hair. She combed it out and dried it standing naked before a full-length mirror. She took her time, getting to know her body as though it were something new to her—and in fact it was. Since Spencer's birth and weaning, she'd had no real use for it, no burning need for it to fulfill. At last she sat down at the computer to see if there was mail from him, and of course there was.

Date: Sun, 09 Nov 1997 00:39:42 -0500

To:gpjones@bostonglobe.com

From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu

Subject: Eliciting a response

I intend to be graphic, so read with your eyes averted <g>.

I told you about all the pretty clothes I want to buy for you, but what I really want to buy--and I can't, not yet--is lingerie. I went shopping Thursday afternoon, just to torment myself. I saw a lot of beautiful things, lovely silk robes and silk gowns and short silk gowns in solid colors that just make me ache and silk teddies and silk camisoles and silk panties, and oh how you could wound me by rubbing yourself against me wearing nothing but a scanty pair of cobalt blue silk panties. Do you get the idea I like silk? I like satin, too, especially the very thick kind, in those dreamy creamy colors. And I like soft cotton lace and knotted macramés where the weave is loose enough to reveal almost enough of your gorgeousness, where it makes me hunt and hunt and hunt to see the awful shards of you still concealed. I hate anything that's stiff or gaudy, all those awful French whore costumes, those glaring red bull's eyes for raging bulls who still may not be quite sure where to stick it after 27 years of marriage. I don't mind patterns, although I prefer solids, but I hate anything that cheapens sex, that makes it seem like something that requires sneering leering sleazy cheesy advertising. I like things that are simple and clean and that don't rob you of your beauty by pulling my eyes away with fleurons and faux gems and ribbons and buttons without buttonholes. Those short silk gowns are perfect, I think, the gown and nothing beneath it. Tiny straps at the shoulders, room for your breasts, then a straight plunge down to barely cover your behind, and that's all. Sometimes a little flare at the hip that I don't hate but could do without. The rest is you, barely covered you, barely hidden, wrapped as the prefect gift. If I ever give you one of those, I

won't let you take it off. I may tear it off you someday, but until then I'll always want to take you within it, every time you wear it. Your sweet opening is there, just there, nothing in my way. And your breasts and the skin of your back are mine through the fabric, or beneath it, or with it as I push it out of the way of my hungering.

This is true, and it hurts me as much as it hurts you: I wish you could come to me right now in a gown like that. Right here to my desk. Spin my chair around and sit facing me in my lap. This is so very much yours to control, isn't it? Your feet on the floor and your hands on the back of the chair give you all the leverage you need to control me utterly. Stuff me inside you and take me here, teasing the skin of my chest, of my belly with that soft silk. You're safe from me, completely in control. That is, until I run my hands all the way up your back, pushing that gown before me, and clasp my fingers across the bones of your shoulders. When I pull you down hard to me, you'll know who is in control, who has mastered whom. You'll know it by my moan of passion, by the shiver that races to every corner of my being. You can only hope to play me to a draw with your loving, because I'll always give as good as I get. But you can slay me utterly with your silken gown...

Art conjures, dear one. Fathertongue is always abstract, never physical. Unlike your sweet flesh, it has no substance. Unlike your hungry touch, it has no force. But art is the fathertongue that seeks to weigh down upon you and touch you in your most secret places. I say, "I seek to elicit a response," and what I mean is that I seek to elicit with vain abstractions a physical response. I would conjure forth your tears or the raging floods of your passion. I would make you sweat and ache and writhe and moan. I would bring you every tender gift of mothertongue with the explicitness, the definition, the precision and the permanence of fathertongue. But as much as I love this, and as good at it as I might be, I would much prefer to bathe you in mothertongue. Instead I must drench you with vain and imperfect abstractions and hope by awful approximation to touch you where you most urgently need me.

Is there any man more perfect for a woman so in love with poetry? Do I remain a poet by presumption. Well then, let me at least advance to being a bad poet in fact, rather than in fancy.

This is written for your voice. I love the way you say the word 'baby'...

let's make love like velcro baby  
it's the best thing we can do  
you stick to me like strapping tape  
i'll stick to you like glue

i'll cast my anchor in your harbor baby  
thrust my shovel in your earth  
cling by claws to your cavern walls  
test me take my worth

love's just a hint baby  
love's just a scent  
just a niggling squiggling clue  
could it be me  
could it be me baby  
could you be in there too

let's make love like velcro baby  
let's do it 'til we die  
grab me grasp me clutch me clasp me  
hook me with your eyes

With a pronounced response of my own,

Devin

She smiled, smiled from her eyes to her cheeks to her solar plexus. And points south. She shrugged off her robe and she was naked, not a stitch on her. She slipped under the covers that way, feeling the cool of the sheets against the burning heat of her skin. She wanted to sleep naked tonight. For him. So there would be nothing between them, nothing but fifteen awful miles of city and suburb...



uninhibited, unexpurgated--that all hell breaks out.

That's something that I've liked about you so far. You've resolved not to lie anymore, damn the consequences. I've resolved not to edit myself anymore, damn the consequences. I think we're both right, if only for reasons of time-economy; we discover earlier rather than later who cannot tolerate who we really are. But what I've liked about you is that you are bearing up to me quite nicely. I imagine being on the receiving end of me can be rather a glaring thing, yet you haven't shielded your eyes once. To the contrary, I think you pull closer to me at precisely those moments when others might be repelled.

That covers ground with me by yards and furlongs. Possibly I'll manage to chase you away just by saying this, but I trust you enough to take the risk: I yearn to share all of me with you. Not just my body, although that's a fine place to start. But my body and my mind and my soul and my thoughts and my feelings and my joys and my sorrows and--dare I say it?--all of my tomorrows. The entire army of herringboned fembots just gasped in unison. "Never talk about sharing!" they whisper shout. "And never ever talk about sharing everything!" I'll go them one worse by saying further that I desire--hunger--to make myself completely vulnerable to you.

What have you done to me? Nothing. Everything. Everything. These are the words we ascribe to Gwendolyn Jones: Impervious. Impenetrable. Imperturbable. Inviolable. Invulnerable. Invincible. Self-confident, self-motivated, self-contained. Self-sufficient, in every possible way. It has never once occurred to me to make myself vulnerable to someone, to show him the very things I withhold from everyone. I could write for hours listing all the many unprecedented things I've thought of doing with you, just ordinary daily life things that I've always done alone and never wanted to do with anyone else.

I want to cook with you. Isn't that odd? I don't just mean one or the other of us lounging about in the kitchen while the other works. I mean both of us working together to prepare a meal we'll sit down and eat together. I was thinking today how nice it would be to take a long trip in that Range Rover of yours, how nice it would be to fall asleep in a darkness lit only by the lights of the dashboard with my head pillowed on your thigh. I have thought more than once that I would like to sing you to sleep as I used to do for Spencer, just sing and stroke your skin until you drift off in peace, then simply sit watching you, watching you, watching you.

What have you done to me?

Here's what. You have dared to live. Do you know why I came on to

## *Interval—Love among the nerds*

Date: Sun, 09 Nov 1997 15:26:06 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Love among the nerds

Baby, you can elicit my response any old time...

I'm sorry I'll be missing out on your birthday. That seems rather silly, actually, taking account that I've missed all the others. But I'll send a little something by as a token of my (endless, boundless and in all ways quite enormous) esteem. Don't dare try to demur. My goal is to delight you, and your goal should be to let me. So there.

Also, Spencer and I will be honored to attend your leftover party. I shall do my duty as a true American and cook entirely too much food on Thanksgiving, so we'll have plenty to bring over. Please email me the details and driving directions. I am quite competent on the MassPike, if that helps, less so on Storrow Drive.

I wanted to take a moment to talk about this response you've elicited in such abundance. It is trite, I suppose, to say I've never f-f-felt anything like this before. But the truth--the awful, brutal truth--is that I have not. I feel cheated, actually. I've had my physical passions, some less unsatisfying than others. A few different times I thought I had a chance at something more, but nothing ever seemed to work out. I'm very good at withholding myself, of course, at delivering carefully measured child-proof doses of Gwen. That works well for everyone but me. It's when I don't withhold myself, when I deliver myself fully--unrestrained,

you, why I threw myself at you? It's because of the way you behaved--lived!--in that lecture hall. It was all just science, all just physics and astronomy, all very mechanical, very mathematical. But your love for it--your passion!--just burns and burns and burns all through you and you seemed to me to be a man in flames. You couldn't take your eyes off me and I couldn't take my eyes off you and I felt that I'd known you forever and yet never known that you could be possible. I felt like little Eva in the garden, one knee crossed over the other to hide my better secrets, and here at last had come Adam--or Prometheus--to tear away that awful flower of childhood, to make of me a woman, full and free and completely responsible. To deliver me from the dingy dimness of purgatory into the full light of a perfect innocence. You made me think of sex, Devin Dwyer, but it was the most beautiful, most perfect, most immaculate sex I've ever imagined.

I live to do life, but I live to understand it, too. I am gloried most when I guide my actions by the purest vision, and just the one or the other, the action or the vision, could never be enough for me. I need to be right, and the only way to be right is to discover the truth and then to act upon it. Mere discovery is masturbatory. Mere action is random. Only the two together, twined like lovers, can give birth to a wholly human life.

Only human? O, my people! Dare to rise that high!

Here's a poem for you. It's written for your voice, so the pokey parts are actually uninverted.

Hear me near me  
Take my hand  
Need me feed me  
Be I am

Wake me take me  
Sheathe my scream  
Keep me sleep me  
Watch me dream

Wear me tear me  
Seek me found  
Shove me love me  
Be my bound

Eye me sigh me  
High my low  
Wed me bed me

Never go

And thus to the column. This will appear in Friday's paper, but I think you might be in Arizona by then. Please understand that he is not you. I borrowed your appearance and some of your words, but that's all in fun. He is there to make my argument and yours, and, of course, I kept all the good jokes for her. As a matter of reciprocity, her response to him is very much my response to you. But you knew that.

Oh, also, I inverted a sexual metaphor in your honor. That may not make it past the editor. I pre-bowdlerized your poem, so that should be okay, although I have my doubts about some of the very sexy dialogue. Yet another good reason for sharing it with you this way.

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it...

Love (what a scary word!),

Gwen

WOMAN OF THE FUTURE

Love among the nerds

Fiction by Gwendolyn Jones

I saw the most beautiful couple walking hand in hand in the Public Garden in Boston. Physically beautiful, yes, but so much more beautiful in their souls. Doesn't that sound stupid? And how could I possibly tell it at a glance?

You answer those questions; I tried and failed. What's such a big deal? Holding hands in the park at sunset on a late-fall day. Could be marriage. Could be adultery. Could be a date, full of fear and torment, among secure adults beteened by circumstance. And yet... There was something different about them, and it's my job to see that kind of thing. He might grope for a roughhewn metaphor and say they had the horizon in their eyes. And she might find a way to communicate the state of their ardor--in the nicest possible way, of course.

Anyway, I followed them. It's what I do. Besides, I think I wanted a little taste of whatever it was they were drunk on. They took one of those meandering little tarmac paths that lead down to the lake where the Swan Boats are. If I hadn't guessed their intentions, I

would have known by that alone: they were headed into a place of secluded little glens where troths are plighted left and right. I stayed as close as I could without alarming them, and, when they chose a bench, I chose one near enough to hear even their murmuring. I had a volume of Ibsen with me, and I feigned to read from "The Master Builder" as my disguise. It seemed to fit.

"May I confess to you?" she asked him. She was a compellingly beautiful woman. Her hair fell to her shoulders, a train of gold, and even in the half-light I could see the life burning in her blue eyes. Her features were delicate and her composure was delicate. She somehow managed to combine the dignity of a duchess with the winsomeness of a girl. She wore a dark blue frock with a bulky white cardigan, a chain of glowing gold around her neck her only ornament. Not that she needed ornamentation--or anything else. She was nothing if not perfectly proper, and yet there was something innocently feral in everything she did. Her voice was lovely, too. It might have been a contralto at full voice, but she spoke very softly in a delicate English accent. It was more than breathy, it had a kind of brushiness; it seemed to leave an enduring trail of orderly sound in the air. "I feel I must confess everything to you and then bravely face whatever punishment you might mete out."

He could smile just in his eyes. He wasn't a pretty man. Ruggedly handsome, but only the most discerning would give him a second glance. But, if they did, they'd see a strength in his eyes, especially when they smiled, that you don't see everywhere. If she was the Sun crowned in gold, he was the fertile Earth, a composition in loamy greens and browns and grays. His eyes were a dusky green, but they matched hers in burning radiance. His hair was almost black, just barely brown, and on the fine edge of being shaggy, a week overdue for a cutting. He wore a charcoal business suit, nicely cut but nothing special. His face looked as though it had been cut from virgin rock. He looked like he'd make a good friend--or a superb enemy. When the smile spread to his cheeks, he said, "I think it's me who should be confessing."

"Oh, really? I shall enjoy punishing you, then. It's what I've dreamed of, in silence and solitude. It's been my secret shame. There. Now you know."

The smile spread to his chest at least and he seemed to grow larger as I watched him. "Punish me how, precisely...?"

"Oh, I shall merely scold you at first. I think you could use a good tongue-lashing, don't you? But then I'll slap you, slap you hard. I'll strike you again and again with the awful blows of tenderness. Really, I think there's nothing for it but to beat you mercilessly.

In the nicest possible way, of course."

I think he might have been smiling to his toes by then, and it was fun to watch in a furtive sort of way. He said, "I guess I'd better come clean, then..."

She touched him very gently on the hand. "You can always say anything to me. Anything! You can't be wrong. I won't permit it."

He chuckled. "...Okay. I think you're fixing something in me. Fixing something I hadn't even known was broken. Something I hadn't even known was \_there...\_ Does that make sense to you?"

She smiled in her eyes, too, but there was nothing mocking about it. "Oh, yes."

"It's almost as if... as if we speak two different languages, and I'd never guessed there was anything to be learned in yours."

"There's a lot to be learned, isn't there?"

His lips were parted by his smile and the fire in eyes seemed to flare. "A \_lot..."\_

Her hand was still on his and now she squeezed it. "But you've always been a good student, haven't you?"

"Oh, yeah. That's what I've been. Always had the horizon in my eyes. Couldn't see today for all the tomorrows in the way. 'Works hard, shows promise' on every report card of my life."

Her eyebrows arched. "All but one."

He nodded. "That's right. All but this one."

"Oh, no! But you \_do\_ show promise. Most ardently do you show promise. Most prominently." Her silent laughter was simply deafening.

He shrugged. "I don't know. You can't teach an old dog new tricks..."

"But you most assuredly can, if the old dog is willing to give it the good try. And you do seem very willing. Most enthrallingly willing, if I must reveal myself to you."

"I want that. I want you to reveal yourself to me in every way you can imagine."

"See there. That was almost poetical."

"...Sometimes I think you're laughing at me."

She clutched his hand still more tightly. Almost silently, her breath a part of the evening breeze, she said, "Never. Always. Never."

"Because you do bring out the poetry in me. I'd never even guessed it was there..."

She laid her head against his shoulder. "How lovely..."

"I've, uh... I've written a poem for you..."

She sat up and looked searchingly in his eyes. "You have?"

"I guess I was pretty uncomfortable doing it, but I didn't want to stop myself." He looked as though he were fourteen years old, an uncongealed mass of squirming yearnings. "It says what I feel, and I tried to make it funny. It's not that special."

She moved her hand to his forearm and squeezed it. "It's special."

"But you haven't even heard it."

"When was the last time you wrote a poem?"

"I guess... never."

"It's special." She slipped her arm under his and pulled him to her. She said, "Recite it to me. Declaim your longing for me and know that I am weakened by the very thought of it."

"...You see? That's already better than the whole poem..."

"Stop it," she commanded--in the nicest possible way. "Be who you are. I'm here, am I not? Do you need a greater proof of my response

to you?"

The smile returned to him, fuller than before. "In fact I do..."

"Then recite the poem, vain suitor. I'm not one of your girls next door. I can't be knocked over with a box of chocolates."

"Okay... The title is 'Love among the nerds'."

"'Love among the nerds?'"

He nodded. I think solemnly, actually.

"Fair enough. Declaim yourself."

He did himself proud. He wasn't Olivier, but he didn't run from his material either.

Let's get hitched like velcro, baby.  
It's the best thing we can do.  
You stick to me like strapping tape.  
I'll stick to you like glue.

I'll cast my anchor in your harbor, baby.  
Thrust my shovel in your earth.  
Cling by claws to your mountain walls.  
Test me. Take my worth.

Let's get hitched like velcro, baby.  
Let's do it till we die.  
Grab me, grasp me. Clutch me, clasp me.  
Hook me with your eyes.

"Well that's quite good," she said. "A metaphor nicely worked. Three, four--five levels in places." He was beaming and she gently prodded his ribs with her elbow. "Not half bad. For a start."

"I, uh... I wrote it for your voice. I love to hear you say the word 'baby'. I'd love it--I'd love it if you'd recite it to me sometime."

She melted into him still more deeply, her cheek on his chest. "Would tonight be too soon?"

He said nothing at all, and that's the very hardest language for good students to learn. The winter birds were chattering, wondering when their migratory companions might return. Far away I could hear children protesting that they didn't want to go home. The distant din of the rush-hour traffic was starting to wane. I knew she could

hear only his heartbeat. And I'd bet anything he could hear hers.

From the murky depths of the park there came a stumbling drunk of a woman, a lumpy, dumpy pyramid of self-willed degradation dressed in filthy brown herringbone. There might have been a human being in there once, but it had been flooded out long ago by liquor and the tears of self-pity. She stopped before the lovers and said, "Urk."

The goddess of the golden tresses looked her up and down and said, "How nice."

The drunken woman faltered, almost fell. She said, "Oh, god."

"But there is no god. There is only goodness."

"Hah! I'd like to know where I could find some!"

"Goodness is within you. If it isn't there, it isn't anywhere."

The drunk harrumphed, fencing off the truth with scorn. She stumbled on her way and the couple melted into each other as though nothing at all had happened.

A moment later the drunken woman threw up on her shoes. "Bwallt...!"

"Oh, look! She's cleansing herself. How primitive." She laughed and the nightbirds cried out in envy of the sound.

He was still looking at the drunk, perhaps in pity, and she clasped him by the cheeks and pulled his attention back to her. "You've been a most avid student, haven't you? I think I should like for you to show me more--of your promise, that is."

"Not so fast, lady. How can I punish you when I still haven't heard your confession?"

She smiled to the core of her being. "I shall confess to you fully, sweet prince. I shall divest myself of every proud secret. I'll conceal nothing from you, you may count on it. I will make my confession to you in the most tellingly perfect language I know. But I won't use a word. Does that make sense to you?"

Somewhere between a croak and a whisper he said, "Always. Never. Always."

She pulled his face to hers and kissed him more certainly than marriage, more certainly than the stately dance of the stars. After

an eternity they finished, but they didn't quite part. She spoke to him, murmured to him, her lips brushing against his. "'Get hitched', eh? Is that a proposal?"

He smiled to the core of his being. "Why no. I'm sure of my answer, so I've been waiting for you to ask."

"Are you so very sure of me, then?"

He answered her by kissing her back, hard, and I know that was the answer she sought. She broke from his lips to rush back to them, nibbling at him, biting at him, her tongue darting out to tease him. It was the most amazingly thrilling spectacle I've ever seen--and, yes, I watched.

She put her mouth next to his ear and said, "Take me right here or take me out of here, but take me, damn you!, before I am incinerated by your heat..."

He simply groaned, a perfect reply in a better language. His lips were beside her ear, brushing against her silky golden hair. He said, "Let's get hitched like fusion, baby. Explode into the stars..."

She started to melt, I think, but then she braced herself. She stood up, then pulled him up by his hands. "If you make me any hungrier, I shall have to punish you worse."

He smiled in his eyes, in his life. "In the nicest possible way, of course."

"Of course..."

She walked over and stood before me, waiting patiently. I stared hard at my book even though it was full dark and I couldn't see a word on the page. Finally I looked up and she said, "We'll be going now." The laughter in her eyes was raucous.

I smiled at her. I think everyone must. She rejoined him and they walked arm in arm, nestled very tightly, out of the park. To get hitched like velcro, I hope. Like fusion, I hope. Till they die, I hope.

## *Chapter 3*

Date: Fri, 28 Nov 1997 13:17:35 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: You

you come to me by starlight  
in a gown of gauzy white  
your sacraments revealed concealed  
high priestess of the night

you whisper vespers whisper prayers  
whisper vows of faith and fear  
in still and silent grace you stand  
as i in trembling awe draw near

i kneel in worship grasp your hand  
press it to my searing lips  
pray god to know the endless peace  
flowing from your fingertips

you come to me in night divine  
your glory lit by crowning gold  
you consecrate by hungry glance  
devotion's heat in evening's cold

you come to me i kneel i stand  
you lay me on the dewy ground  
you guide my worship guide my hands  
lead my heart your heart to sound

you speak to me with loving grace

you catechize in passion's glow  
you reach you teach you seethe and burn  
and i am blessed by truth to know

you come to me in gauzy gown  
high priestess of the night  
i lay in awe in faith in fear  
lifted to your heaven's light

The poem was waiting for Gwen when she got out of the shower. She had been checking the net habitually, fanatically, obsessively. She checked for mail from him even when she knew there would be none, when there *could* be none. She knew he was flying today and she felt certain there could be no mail, but she checked anyway.

She was naked, just a white shower robe half off her shoulders, and her hair was still wet. She could feel little droplets of water running down her back. But she was lost, too. She sat on the edge of her chair reading the poem over and over again. So chaste. So sexual. So reverent. So frenzied. So fearful. So courageous. So playful, yet so entrancingly serious.

He was teasing her, of course. For his birthday, she had sent him three gifts. First was a very scanty pair of cobalt blue silk panties, a creation of breathtaking omissions. Next had come an off-white silk gown, very short. And the third present had been an ankle-length white nightgown in soft tatted cotton lace. No sleeves, of course, and a plunging back, but it did look like a sacramental gown, like a wedding gown almost.

She shucked off her robe and went back to the bathroom to dry her hair. It had been an awful two weeks, awful and wonderful. She had had him all to herself for those first ten days before he went to Arizona, all to herself by email at least. But then she had to share him, and he was attentive and solicitous and there was a note or phone call every day and it wasn't the same *at all*. His notes were brief and hurried and she knew they had to be, but she had grown used to having great long letters from him, letters that she could read over and over again.

To compensate, she wrote to him at length, greater length than he had time to address, she knew. And her work suffered and she had begun adapting things she had written for him to her column and she knew they were too intimate, too vulnerable, and yet her reader mail seemed to double with each new column. He had cost her that, too, her professionalism, her cool detachment. She stood at the mirror, stopped, transfixed, the comb caught half-way down her hair. She stared through her own reflection, stared a hole through the universe. Him and his inverted sexual metaphors. She wondered if she had quite so many things stuck into him as he had stuck into her...

She shook her head and laughed at herself. She put down her comb and went to sit on the edge of the bed, her knees apart, her palms flat against the insides of her knees. It was a young girl's pose and it made her feel very vulnerable. She pictured his hands there instead, coming at her the opposite way, prying her open. That thought made her weak and there was something burning in

her throat and she threw her head back and the skin of her neck was stretched taut against the tendons. She lay back on the bed and touched herself here and here and here, not in stimulation but simply in recognition, in celebration.

She threw her arms out wide, her palms flat against the bed clothes, basking in the heat of her longing. Open to him, ready for him, accepting of him, vulnerable to him, needing him, needing him, needing him. Hungry for him, hungry in a way she'd never known before.

She made herself get up because she didn't want to. She went to her dresser and withdrew a pair of white cotton panties. She stepped into them, then fastened the gold chain around her neck. Then she sat down to write. She knew it would please him if he could see her this way. Her feet and her legs and her neck and her back and her belly and her chest and her breasts, all naked, with just a coy and token concealment of her better secrets. And with the gold chain there, catching the light and shooting it back in a warming radiance, to answer any doubts either of them might have.

Date: Fri, 28 Nov 1997 14:39:11 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: You

#### Introspectroanalysis

I took myself to the vet at the zoo  
To measure my animal heat for you  
He sounded my skull with a rap on my head  
And said I might need psychiatry instead  
The shrink had no patience for gross physiology  
The shrink had no practical use for ontology  
He said, 'I ponder imponderables, both little and small  
I measure immeasurables that aren't there at all  
If it's fever or burning or a chilling condition  
Get out of my office! Go see a physician!'  
The doctor was kind for a man in a hurry  
I told him about you but he said, 'Not to worry!  
You think you're the first girl with this problem I bet  
Take this prescription you coulda got from the vet'  
I said, 'Doc, forgive me, the thing is I'm not ill  
It's my thoughts, it's my passions, my pastimes, my will  
He simply possesses me with love soft and sweet  
From the ends of my hairs to the soles of my feet  
I sleep him, I dream him, I wake him and then  
He captures my soul for the whole day again  
I seek no escape. No! I AM his belonging  
I just want to know, is this love or mere longing?'  
He started to speak then he paused then reflected  
He said, 'On its face this is oddly completed

Here's my son-in-law's card, what an ass, what a jerk  
He's mostly no help but he sure needs the work'  
The son-in-law worked from a dingy apartment  
The off-off-off-off-campus physics department  
He called me an idiot, he called me a dope  
Then he took me to task with a spectroscope  
But the answer he found was an answer divine  
Not love, Dear, not lust, but the two locked in twine  
For he saw my passion burning bright  
At every wavelength of heaven's light

She got herself dressed and she was quite mercenary about it. A gray wool skirt, off the knee. No hosiery. A white cashmere sweater, vee-neck to show the chain, cuffs pulled up to the forearms. No brassiere. For shoes she wore a simple pair of flats in glove soft black leather. The outfit made her look young and ripe, like a college girl at a dance. The cashmere felt wonderful on the skin of her breasts, and she knew she would be aroused there all day. She knew she looked ravishing, and she knew she looked like a woman who wanted and needed and very much deserved ravishment. She gathered up Spencer and the food and they drove into Boston.

Bayview is a tiny little pocket neighborhood, the last of its kind. It consists of true townhomes, brick and stone and brownstone three-story houses, each one occupied by a single family. It's bounded by the MassPike and the JFK Expressway and the New England Medical Center and the Combat Zone, by eminent domain past and imminent. When the houses were built, it was essentially a little middle-class suburb; all the fathers would walk or take the streetcar to their jobs in downtown Boston. Single-family townhomes in the city are a costlier proposition today, and Devin's neighbors are all fairly prosperous people clinging to a small garden of civility against the onslaught of smoke and squalor.

Devin's house was right at the end of the block, facing the play-yard of Saint Timothy's. It was brick painted in a gun-metal gray with white trimming at the doors and windows. There was a wrought iron railing around a tiny little porch, more like a landing, and a wrought iron boot rail to harken back to the days, not that long ago, when Boston had been paved in mud. At either side of the door were two light fixtures in gleaming brass and frosted glass.

Spencer half behind her on the landing, Gwen pressed the doorbell.

The door was opened by a young girl in jeans and sneakers and a rugby shirt. "You must be Gretchen," Gwen said. "I'm Gwendolyn Jones and this is my son, Spencer. I hope we're not too early."

Gretchen took a moment longer than necessary examining Spencer. She said, "No. Yes. Everything's fine. Please come in."

Stairway up, stairway down, right inside the door. Classic Boston architecture, to congest the entire family at one spot several times a day. To the left of the stairs was the living room, a great open space, very masculine but very warm. One whole wall was devoted to bookshelves, and the bottom two shelves of each had been given over to toys and action figures.

Gretchen said, "You can throw your coats on the sofa for now and take a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. Spencer, will you be a prince and bring the food in from the car?"

"I'll help," Gretchen said, and the two of them went back outside.

Gwen hadn't worn a coat even though it was quite cold. Inside her sweater her nipples were knotted from the cold and from the tickling of the cashmere and from her longing and she was very much aware of them, could feel their motion in even the smallest breath. When Devin came down the stairs they seemed to grow even harder and they burned to be touched.

When he saw her he stopped. He hadn't meant to, he just forgot what he was doing, forgot where he was. She was so beautiful, so radiant, so perfect. He saw the gold of her hair answered in the gold of the chain and he saw her breast bone rising and falling with each of her breaths. He saw her nipples standing out so achingly hard and he assumed it was all for him and by then it was. He moved toward her and she moved toward him and they met in the middle of the room, not in an embrace but a collision. He hugged her so hard he lifted her from the floor, and when he realized he had he spun with her. He wanted to hook an arm under her knees and spin her all around the room, treating her in his arms.

Instead he set her down and stroked his fingertips along the downy fine hairs of her cheeks. He kissed her tenderly, longingly, enduringly. "I missed you," he said softly, his lips brushing against hers. "I missed you more than I knew I could."

She said nothing, just pressed her cheek to his chest and pulled herself more tightly to him. The burning in her throat was back, much worse, and her eyes were watery and wet. She wasn't crying, not quite, but she was right on the line. She was amazed at herself, actually, amazed and mildly disgusted and very, very happy.

He pushed back on her shoulders a little and looked down between them. Her cheeks were flushed and her chest was flushed and he could see an artery throbbing, throbbing, throbbing on her neck. Her hips were locked to his and her nipples looked like they were going to burn through the cashmere at any second. He said, "I don't know how you do it. You pick clothes that seem so chaste, so pure, so innocent. But when you wear them you look so sexy, so wild..."

"So hungry, Devin. It emanates from the core of me outward, so it doesn't matter what I wear. And I am terribly hungry for you. It's all I've been able to think about all day. And your son is here. And my son is here. And your young Gretchen is here. And your other guests will be here. And all day long, every time you look at me, you'll know that I want nothing more than to sweep every bit of everything off the dining room table and climb atop you right there and take you until you make me scream. That will be the penance you will pay for having invited me, to know that I can think of nothing but having you, and to know that you can't have me because you've infested your house with too many guests. You could teach Dante a thing or two, I'll bet."



He clasped his hands at her waist then pushed his way up the fabric of her sweater. He cupped her breasts in his hands and she drew in her breath quickly and forgot to release it. He said, "I like this bra. Do you have others like it?"

She laughed despite herself. "Just the one."

"I'll try not to wear it out, then." Her nipples were trapped between his fingers and he was kneading them, kneading them, kneading them.

"What—" she started, then started over. "What are you doing to me?"

"It's just a little something I learned from Dante..." He tried for a wicked smile but she knew he was as weakened as she was.

She moved his hands from her breasts, not because she didn't love it but because she loved it too much. She was just in time, in any case, because Gretchen and Spencer burst through the door with the chests of food. Devin pulled away and tried to look proper, but he couldn't hide the smile on his face. And he couldn't take his hands away from her entirely; he hooked his fingers into hers and held onto her that way.

"Follow me," Gretchen said, leading Spencer to the kitchen.

"I should help unpack that," said Gwen.

Devin nodded. "I need to get dressed."

"Whatever for? You look fine." He was wearing a dark green cotton sweater peppered with little flecks of red and blue and black. And deep blue sweat pants. No shoes or socks. "You said this would be a very homey party. And you look to be a man very much at home."

"You win. Hunter's napping; long day, long night. I'll go get him up and you can go help the kids in the kitchen. Can you find your way all right?"

"I'll just listen for kids in a kitchen. Can't go wrong, can I?"

He started to move away but they were still locked together at the fingers. She spun her hand around in his and pulled him back to her hard. She kissed him abruptly, explosively, enduringly. When their lips parted she let her head fall straight back and she seemed to speak to the ceiling. "I'm going to regret this, I know it. And I'm going to treasure my regrets for the rest of my life..." She laughed and kissed him again quickly and darted away.

In the kitchen the kids weren't doing much of anything, just unpacking the chests of food and spreading carefully wrapped bowls and platters all over the butcher block center island. It was a gourmet kitchen: refrigerators under the butcher block, a pot rack overhead, two conventional ovens stacked one atop the other and a huge range with a convection oven. Plenty of counter space, plenty of cabinet space, big, deep sinks. Gwen said, "Someone must like to cook."

Gretchen grinned. "It sure isn't Doctor Dwyer. I think this kitchen was set up for his mother or his grandmother."

Gwen was poking through the things that had been spread out everywhere. "Spencer, there's a bag of utensils in the back seat. We'll be needing them, I think." Spencer walked back out toward the living room. To Gretchen she said, "I'm going to need one of those ovens. Can I just have my way with it?"

"Sure. Take the top one. It's easier." Gwen started working and Gretchen said, "I, uh... I've been wanting to meet you..."

"Has he told you about me then?"

"No. Not much. Not anything, really. I just guessed. He's just been so different for the last month or so. Not even a month."

Gwen smiled. Almost she sighed. "Not even a month..."

"He's in love with you. Did you know that?"

"I didn't and I don't. Love is an easy word to say. But it's a very hard thing to live. Love that comes fast goes fast, don't you think?"

Gretchen's eyes were grave and a little teary. The skin at the sides of her mouth was stretched taut. "Don't—" she said. "Please don't..." She half turned and hid her mouth behind her hand.

"Whatever it is, just say it." Gwen smiled warmly. "I learned that from him..."

Gretchen turned back and her face was wracked by grief and she was right on the verge of bawling. "Please don't hurt him!"

Gwen held her arms open at her sides. "Come here, love." Gretchen folded herself into her arms and Gwen stroked at her hair. She wanted to sing to her as she had sung to Spencer. She said, "You love him very much, don't you?"

"Not that way!"

"I didn't mean that way. You love him as a friend, as a brother."

"As family. I come from a very close family and I wasn't sure I was going to make it when I came to school. But Doctor Dwyer and Hunter gave me back some of what I'd lost. They've given me a lot more since then."

Gwen said nothing, just hugged the girl and let her cry.

"I know she hurt him. Hunter's mother. He's never told me the story and I've never asked. But he was still getting divorced when I came here, and you're the first woman in all that time. That says something, doesn't it?"

"I won't hurt him, dear. No, I can't make a promise like that. I'll try not to hurt him. I don't want to hurt him. To the contrary." She smiled a secret smile into Gretchen's hair.

"How do... How do you do this?"

"Do what, dear?"

"We only just met and I—"

Gwen smiled. "It's a gift I have. Almost everyone who meets me hates me on sight. The few who don't tell me their deepest secrets almost immediately. I'm a catalyst of souls, I think." She kissed Gretchen lightly on the forehead. "Come on, love. Dry your eyes and let's get back to work."

Gretchen wiped her eyes with a paper towel. "I knew you'd be beautiful." "Thank you."

"He deserves someone beautiful. He's so beautiful. Well, he's not, but he is. Does that make sense? Sometimes I wish I could be beautiful..."

"But you are, dear, just as he is. Beauty comes from inside you. Your hair and skin are just there to contain it, to keep it from spilling all over. People who are pretty on the outside and empty on the inside aren't beautiful. I find them very ugly, don't you? A woman who is beautiful on the inside is simply stunning in the dark."

Gretchen smiled and a little of her beauty leaked out.

Devin appeared in the kitchen, Spencer beside him and a little boy in his arms. He said, "Hunter, that blonde haired lady over there is Gwendolyn Jones,

Spencer's mother. You can call her Gwen. Gwen, meet Hunter." Gwen gave a courtly half bow and Hunter giggled.

He wriggled out of his father's arms and went to stand in front of Gwen. He said, "You should have come to Arizona with us. I saw a lizard this big." He held his arms at about the width of his small shoulders. Across the room Devin held his thumb and forefinger about four inches apart.

Gwen picked the boy up and set him on the butcher block so they were almost eye to eye. His eyes were very much like his father's, but gray, not green. He had thin brown hair and it hung loose and straight and very shiny on his head. His teeth were straight and white and perfect. He was a beautiful little boy in a beautiful blue Nike sweat suit. No shoes or socks and little round toes that looked good enough to eat. She said, "The next time you go, invite me. I might come. I've never been to Arizona."

"We have horses. Can you ride a horse?"

Devin started to speak but she beat him to it. "It's been a while. Maybe you could show me."

While Gwen and Hunter chatted, Devin stepped over to murmur to Gretchen. If he noticed the tearstuff in her eyes, he didn't say so. "That Spencer's a good looking boy," he murmured.

"He sure is..."

"He's too young for you."

She snorted. "He's too everything for me. Hunter's more my speed, I'm afraid."

He put his arm around her and pulled her close to him. "I'm glad you could be with us this year."

She nodded and her eyes welled up again. "I like her. I like her a lot."

Devin smiled from his eyes to his cheeks to his chest. "Me, too..." At full voice he said, "Hunter, why don't you and Gretchen take Spencer down to the playrooms and show him all your toys."

"Playrooms?" said Gwen.

Devin chuckled. "An only child of too much money. There's an exercise room filled with my toys. And a family room and a computer room and we're thinking about building a train room, aren't we, Hunter?"

To Spencer, Hunter said, "I have a Nintendo 64!"

Spencer's eyes lit up and Devin said, "Here's your chance to get your butt kicked at basketball by a five-year-old."

"We'll have to see about that, won't we?" Spencer said.

Gretchen loaded Hunter into her arms and led Spencer back to the front of the house, to the basement stairs.

Gwen said, "Sun tanned, windblown, honeymooners at last alone..."

Devin smiled. "Do you want to cook? Or just simmer?"

"I think I should like to sizzle. But I think I will, anyway, so let's cook."

Gwen continued loading things into the oven and the refrigerators. Devin dug out a huge bowl and began to tear lettuce and cut vegetables for an enormous salad. He felt very close to her, very comfortable, and it was nice just to be with her.

"Gretchen thinks the world of you," she said.

"That's mutual. Hunter thinks she made the stars."

"You're surrounded by love, aren't you?"

He touched one finger—just one finger—to the back of her hand. "Almost enough..."

She felt the ground giving way beneath her and she pressed her palms hard to the countertop. "You really know how to make a woman feel needed..."

He grinned. "Homonyms. Is that 'needed' with an 'N', or 'kneaded' with a 'K'?"

She grinned back. "First one, then the other."

"No, first both, then both. The one is the other or neither is anything, don't you think? Would my touch mean anything to you without your knowledge of what I feel for you? Would you want my feeling without my touch?"

She pressed still harder on the counter and she couldn't look at him, but still she spoke. "I missed you very much, Devin. More than you can guess. I had your feeling but not your touch, but that wasn't the half of it. You've become a part of me, a big part. Twenty days, twenty-five days? I can't remember what my life was like before you. I think it must have been very dull."

He laid his hand atop hers and squeezed. "This is what I want, Gwen. First both, then both. If you want it, too, we can have it together. If we're strong enough, forever."

She wanted to turn and kiss him. For a start. Luckily the doorbell rang.

"Our other guests," said Devin. "I'll be back." When her returned, he was accompanied by a lovely black couple, still a little flushed from the cold. The woman was very beautifully pregnant, seven months gone at least. "Gwendolyn Jones, Xander Booth, my lab partner, and his wife, Winnie. Short for Alexander and Winifred, if you wonder how they've squandered their majesty."

"The names shorten majestically, too." She smiled warmly. "Please call me Gwen"

"I inferred your existence," Winnie said. She wore a white turtleneck sweater and a maroon maternity frock, very clean of line. And white hose, which must have been murder to get on. Her hair was down and flowing and her skin radiated the warmth of her pregnancy.

"Be careful," said Devin. "Winnie teaches philosophy to scientists. She'll trick you."

Gwen said, "Another poet. How lovely." She smiled impishly.

Xander chuckled. He was shorter than his wife by an inch or two, which was charming, and much darker. He was thick but very muscular, a wrestler's body. His hair was cropped close with a salting of gray at the sideburns. "She kept going on about magnetic lines of force and how Devin's diagrams had changed so suddenly and so radically that there *had* to be a woman in his life. I thought it was divination. Or worse, intuition. Damned if she wasn't right." He squeezed her hand. "Damned if she isn't always right."

"Xander was my lab partner in grad school," said Devin. "In astrophysics, if you're not Jewish, you're nobody."

"Unless you're Asian," Xander added.

“That’s right. I’ll admit that it rankled me. Here I was, busting my butt, and everybody treated me like I didn’t belong there. Then I hooked up with this guy and discovered I didn’t know the first thing about mistreatment.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Devin shook his head. “It was and it still is. It’s all math. Your math either works or it doesn’t, and your parents don’t have a thing to say about it either way.”

Xander half-smirked and gestured at Devin with his thumb but Gwen could see by the fire in his eyes that his mocking wasn’t serious. “He should be the philosopher of science.”

Gwen smiled. “So should we all.”

Xander and Devin went out to the Booth’s car to haul in their contributions of food while Gwen and Winnie finished the preparations. The men carried dishes out to the dining room and set the table together.

Xander said, “That woman is a knockout.”

Devin smiled. “Would you believe I don’t notice? I mean, I do. It makes me crazy every time I look at her. But then I look at her a second longer and I realize it’s *her* I’m seeing. Her person, her character, her soul. Not her body. She matches inside and out. But the inside is all I see after the first glance...”

“Buddy, you got it bad...”

“Buddy, I got it good.” Devin laughed.

“She gonna hurt you?”

Devin shrugged. “What if she does?”

“Yeah, right...”

“No. I’ve thought about this. What if she does? What have I lost, compared to what I’ve gained? When Nicole left me, that hurt. But it wasn’t because I loved her so desperately. It was because I didn’t, and I couldn’t admit to myself that I’d wasted her time and mine and robbed Hunter of the family he deserved. *That’s* what hurt, my failure, not her going. I need someone, Xander. I need someone for me, and I need to know that Nicole isn’t the last word on women in my life. And she’s so *much* what I need, what I’ve always needed. She makes me whole. She fills a part of me I hadn’t even known was empty...”

“Man, you’ve got to pull that thing in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re just out there, just hanging right out there. You’ve got to pull that back or she’s gonna cut it right off.”

Devin nodded. “Hold something back, is that it?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep it all in? Always keep a little something hidden?”

“Come on, Devin. This isn’t new to you.”

“Is that what you’re going to do with that baby out there? Never let him know for certain where he stands with you? Always keep him a little off balance? Always keep a little bit to yourself, a little spot in your heart where he can never go?”

“You know it’s not the same thing.”

“I don’t know that. And I can’t see why it isn’t. And I can’t see why I’d want it if it isn’t. I’ve already had a woman I didn’t dare to love, more than one. I’ve

already had women I wouldn’t let love me. I’ve had enough of that, more than enough. I want something better.”

“And what if there is nothing better...?”

Devin shrugged. “Then I’ll take nothing instead. You see me do it all the time at the Institute. ‘No compromise even if it means no funding.’ Hell, it’s on the wall in your office, too. Why should things be any different here?”

Xander shook his head and let the matter drop.

At dinner Devin had Hunter to his left and Gwen to his right. The Booths occupied the other end of the table, Xander and Winnie and baby makes two-and-three-quarters. Gretchen and Spencer were opposite each other in between. When they were all ready to eat, Devin spoke.

“I always feel myself at a loss at moments like this. I feel I should offer some sort of blessing, but I have no formal blessings to offer. My mother is Greek Orthodox and my father was Roman Catholic and my choice as a child was both or neither. I chose neither, with the result that such catechisms”—he looked straight at Gwen when he said that word—“as I might possess are too loosely attached to be of any use. But Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday, because I get to see all of my family, the family of my birth in Arizona and the family of my choosing here at home.” He squeezed Hunter’s hand and looked from Spencer to Winnie to Xander to Gretchen to Gwen. “For old friends and new, I give my deepest thanks.”

While they were eating, Winnie said, “Why are we graced with your company this year, Gretchen? I assumed you’d be with your folks.”

“I would be, normally. But this year they’re taking a second honeymoon in Cancun.”

“And they didn’t take you along?” Xander asked with a smile.

“Didn’t take her the last time, either, I’ll bet,” said Devin.

Gretchen smiled brightly. “*I’ll* never tell.”

It was three or perhaps four seconds later that a light dawned in Spencer’s eyes. He blushed furiously and Gwen smiled at him with her own private delight.

After dinner, they shuffled seats by interest, not quite by gender. Gretchen and Hunter went to the living room to play a board game. Devin and Xander and Spencer congregated at the far end of the table to talk about math. Winnie sat where Devin had been so she and Gwen could talk.

Gwen said, “I envy you your pregnancy.”

Winnie nodded toward Spencer. “It looks like you did all right for yourself.”

“He’s almost grown, though...” She smiled a bittersweet smile.

“Is that what you want from Devin, another baby?”

Gwen shook her head. “I don’t know what I want. I won’t lie and say I haven’t thought about it.”

Winnie gestured with her head toward the kitchen and Gwen got up and followed her. Leaning against the counter, her belly low and full, Winnie said, “If you can’t take that man’s ring, you have to tell him now.”

Gwen simply looked confused.

“Can’t you see how he looks at you? Every time he sees you his eyes just melt. I’ve known Devin longer than I’ve known Xander and I have *never* seen

him like this. Not through his whole marriage, and that's pretty sad when you think about it. If you want a baby, you can have one in ten months. That man can't say no to you."

Gwen smiled mischievously. "He's done pretty well so far..."

"He's going to ask you, Gwen. He may not know it yet, but he is. When he does, you have to know your answer. And if you know you can't marry him, you have to tell him now."

Gwen stood silently for a moment. "...You love him, too, don't you?"

"Like a brother I love him. Like a father sometimes. I have Xander because of him. Big risk; he could have lost both of us as friends. But he doesn't do things that way, he just does whatever he thinks is right. I love that in him, and I've learned it from him. He used to send Xander out on the road all the time. Anytime someone from Ptolemy had to go out to lecture or demonstrate or install something or whatever, he'd make Xander go. I don't know if Xander understood it, but I always did. He wanted to make it plain to those... assholes that Xander deserves to be where he is, that just because he's black it doesn't mean he's not fully qualified. He did that with me, too, went to bat for me with the Institute. And I've got two strikes against me. I'm making him sound like some kind of bleeding heart, but that's not it. All he cares about is justice, and he'll fight for anyone who's getting a raw deal."

"He told me he fights for the... merchants in the Combat Zone."

Winnie chuckled. "That's funny, isn't it? I know he hates everything about the Zone. He won't let Gretchen drive down there, makes her go all the way around, through the thickest traffic. But free speech doesn't mean anything if it doesn't mean the speech you hate. So there's Devin, fighting for the speech he hates."

"...What was that about lines of force?"

"I talk to scientists all day long. I use a lot of analogies to help them understand. What happened was that I noted a change in the way Devin was interacting with me, with Xander, with his students and his grad students. All kinds of little things. He'd lose his place in conversations, forget what he was talking about. I'd walk in on him and he'd be sitting there daydreaming and he wouldn't even notice me. His email got flowery all of a sudden. When did you two meet? The fourth? The fifth?"

Gwen smiled. "The fourth."

Winnie nodded. "The threshold of science is prediction." She grinned.

Devin stuck his head in the kitchen. "Gretchen and Hunter are looking for people to play Monopoly. Who's interested?"

Gwen said, "I'll do what you're doing."

"In that case, you're doing dishes."

"In that case," Winnie said, "I'm going to go sit down and get this baby off my feet."

Devin went back to the dining room to start gathering up dishes. On her way out, Winnie said, "It's in your eyes, too, girl."

Gwen smiled warmly. "I thought it must be."

She went out and helped Devin load up the dishes. Back in the kitchen he scraped and salvaged while she rinsed dishes and loaded the dishwasher. He

said, "Hold out your stuff and Winnie's. We'll do those by hand; the dishwasher takes forever."

"I think there's too much for the dishwasher anyway."

They worked together like an old married couple, or as she liked to imagine an old married couple could work together. She washed and he dried and she kept getting way ahead of him because he would stop to stand behind her and stroke her hair and kiss her temples. He wiped down the table and the counters and she cleaned the sinks and together they repacked Winnie's boxes and hers and stowed them in a walk-in refrigerator built into the back porch.

He stopped her in mid-stride and lifted her up and set her down on the butcher block. He stepped between her legs and she brought her face down to his, brought her lips down to his. She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him hungrily and for a long time that was all they did.

He said, "You make a bad host of me."

She grinned. "You make a delighted guest of me."

He laughed and she hopped down and there was no room for her in the space left by his body and that was perfectly fine with her. They held each other for a moment then walked out to the living room, her fingers hooked into his.

Xander had built a fire and they sat by the fireplace with him and Winnie while Gretchen and Spencer got their butts kicked at Monopoly by a five-year-old. For Gwen it was very warming, very homey. It was a family, something she'd never known. She'd always been so responsible, responsible for her parents, for herself, for Spencer. She felt—at least for today—as though she were a part of a web of shared responsibilities. Responsibilities of home and hearth and health, of course. But also responsibilities of happiness, of joy and beauty and grace. It all came from him, she knew. He was everything he admired in his grandfather, and without him they might all be strangers, busy people bustling past each other on the street. 'The family is who we say it is', that's what he'd said. This was Devin's family. It was made not of their love for him but of his love for them. She bit at her lip and held her eyes open very wide to keep from crying.

When Winnie and Xander got up to go she thought perhaps she should, too, but Devin asked her to stay. At the door, Xander tried to say something to her, but he couldn't find the words.

"It's all right," she said. "Winnie's already taken care of it."

He smiled warmly and she felt very much blanketed by his love—not for her but for Devin. They stood together on the porch and watched as the Booths drove away.

Back inside, Devin said, "Gretchen, can you and Spencer take Gwen down and show her the basement while I put Hunter to bed?"

"I don't wanna go to bed!"

"You don't gotta wanna," Devin began.

"You just gotta," Hunter and Gretchen finished in unison. The three of them laughed together.

"Come on, sport. Say your goodnights and let's motivate."

Hunter went around the room saying goodnight, starting with Gretchen, of course. He hugged Spencer, which didn't surprise Devin but may have surprised

Spencer. Gwen picked him up and he snuggled with her like he'd known her forever. She whispered something to him and he giggled and kissed her wetly on the cheek and hugged her hard and Devin was very proud for both of them.

Gwen went to the basement with Gretchen and Spencer and she examined everything with a dutiful interest, but in truth her mind was elsewhere. The playrooms were interesting, but the exercise room was more interesting still. Gretchen and Spencer intended to demonstrate a basketball game on the Nintendo game machine, but they were clearly more interested in playing the game than demonstrating it. She left them to it and crept back up the stairs, crept up to the second floor landing, where she stood waiting, listening.

Hunter's room was right off the landing. His door was half open and the glimmer of a nightlight leaked into the hallway. Devin was singing with a deep resonance and she could hear a rocking chair creaking on a hardwood floor. She leaned against the wall, just listening, just imagining what it must look like in there. Just loving him, she admitted to herself. Loving him for his family and his home and his son and for the love everyone rained down on him and for the love he rained down on everyone.

When Devin came out to the hall he saw her there and smiled with a wicked delight. He led her by the hand to his office and closed the door with his back.

"Not your bedroom?" she asked.

"If I take you to the bedroom, I'll want to lay you down. And if I lay you down, I won't want to let you back up."

He pulled her tight to him and kissed her hard. She was enveloped in his arms and he was holding her very tightly and her nipples were as hard as gemstones and she could feel them digging through her sweater and his, digging through to the heat of his skin. She grabbed one of his hands and thrust it between them, thrust it under her sweater. When the heat of his fingers grazed against her breast she gasped and collapsed against him. He was palsied by the touch, too, she knew it. She could hear it in his jagged breathing.

His other hand was under her sweater now, halfway up her back, his fingers between her shoulder blades. His hand was so terribly hot and she was sure his palm would leave a searing imprint on her skin. He pressed his hand down her back to her skirt to her behind to the back of her thigh then back up under her skirt to her behind. She reached behind her and pressed his hand more firmly to her, revelling in the heat of him through the thin fabric of her panties. His hand on her behind, his other hand tormenting her enflamed breasts, her head thrown back and her mouth open to the probing and parrying of his tongue—she had never been more open with a man, never more vulnerable, never less in control.

And then his hand left her behind and slipped around to cup her vulva and she knew her vulnerability had only just begun. She was already very wet and she soaked through the panties at his first touch. And he knew just how to touch, rolling and roiling in her enshrouded labia until he found her tender nerveflesh, already engorged. When he touched her there her knees gave way and almost she finished before anything had properly begun. It wasn't his touch,

she knew it. It wasn't even his feeling for her. It was her feeling for him—in her head, in her heart, in her heat, in the endless, boundless heat flowing from his fingertips...

He bent his leg at the knee and put his foot flat against the door. He grabbed her leg and hung it over his and she was completely open to him, completely accessible, completely vulnerable. His hand left her breasts and he plowed it down to join the other between her thighs. He hooked his fingers into the crotch of her panties and ripped and then there was nothing at all in his way. One hand went back to torture the skin of her neck and chest and breasts and one remained to probe and plunder her better secrets. He slipped one finger then two inside her and it felt wonderful and it felt awful. It didn't make her feel full, it made her feel horribly empty and the emptiness within her cried out to be filled.

She dug her hands under his sweater to his hips and pushed down on the waistband of his sweat pants and suddenly he was just there, full and naked in her hands. He said, "Now is when you're supposed to say, 'My god! You're huge!'"

She convulsed in laughter and collapsed against him and it dug his raging need right into the soft skin of her thighs and he wanted to grab her behind and keep digging digging digging until he uncovered his perfect destiny.

"Yes, please, now," she seethed.

He shook his head. "Your son is here and my son is here and Gretchen is here and we shouldn't even be doing this except I can't bear not touching you. You make me crazy. You make me hungry. You make me whole..."

His fingers were inside her and the flesh of his hand was just where it needed to be and she was blind and she was lost and she was found, so perfectly found. Her head was thrashing from side to side and she could feel herself clasp clasp clasp on his fingers and she needed to moan but she couldn't so she bit his shoulder hard through his sweater.

He let his fingers slip out of her but he kept his hand where it was, cupping her vulva. It felt very good to her, very warm, very protective. With his other hand he stroked at the fine blonde hairs on her cheek. He was murmuring but she couldn't understand him but it didn't matter because she understood him perfectly. Between his murmurs he was nibbling and biting at her lips and her skin and she knew without having to be told that he loved her, that he loved her better than he'd ever loved anyone.

She knew she loved him, too, and she knew she'd never loved anyone before, not like this. But she didn't tell him. She couldn't, not yet. She was already too open, too vulnerable, too out of control...

Her hands were still dug into his hard manhood. She squeezed him gently and said, "Are we just going to leave it like this?"

He grinned. "Never was there a sweeter agony."

"You haven't said how you like my birthday gifts..."

"Well, they're very pretty, but I don't think they'll fit me."

She squeezed him hard enough that he winced, winced and lunged a little. "They're receipts, darling. Like postage stamps or gift certificates. You redeem

them for something you want more.” She shifted her weight slightly and suddenly he was nestled in her wet curls. “Just that much, no more, I promise.” She used her hips in ways that he had never imagined could be possible and there didn’t need to be anything more. “You’ve also never said how you liked that story I wrote.”

“I had the idea you were rather fond of that blonde woman.”

“Of course I am. Aren’t you?”

“...Fonder by the minute.”

She kissed him hard and he knew she wanted to finish him that way, everything but the deed itself, but he couldn’t let her. He said, “I’ll be keeping these panties.”

“Do you have a sort of trophy room, then? Walls covered with dated plaques displaying the torn and treasured undergarments of all your many conquests? You’ll have to show me sometime. I love that sort of thing.”

“Laugh at me if you want to, but these underpants are mine. You can squirm all the way back to Newton.”

“Do you think you can get them without my help?”

His two hands met at a side-seam and that was that. He pulled the panties out and left them dangling from a finger.

She thrust her hips at him hard and almost she enveloped him. She kissed him abruptly, explosively. “You—bastard!”

## *Part 2*

### *Chapter 4*

With Gwen there was never any beginning. Everything always started in the middle and ended abruptly, explosively.

She kicked the door to the hotel suite shut and tossed her handbag aside and she was across the room in three quick strides. Her body hit Devin’s with a force that almost knocked him over.

He was half-dressed—half dressed-up, a dress shirt and blue silk boxer shorts—and she noticed and didn’t care. She was still dressed for the Boston winter and she didn’t care. Her hands were under his shirt and up his back, pressing his body tightly to hers. Her lips sought his and she kissed him hard.

She stepped back for a moment, her eyes smoky, almost raging, and threw off her trench coat, threw it on the floor. Then she was back against him and she grabbed his hands and thrust them between their bodies, pressed them against her breasts.

He hooked his fingers between the buttons of her blouse and ripped. Buttons flew everywhere and the fabric tore but he didn’t notice, didn’t care. No brassiere, and her nipples were stiff with need. He cupped her breasts full in his hands and her breath caught and suddenly he was kissing her, not she him.

She hooked her fingers between the buttons of his shirt and ripped. Buttons flew everywhere and she pressed her chest to his and that was enough, for about ten seconds that was enough.

She dug her thumbs into the waistband of his boxer shorts and pushed them down and out of her way. Her hands were on him and he wasn’t fully erect and then at her touch he was. She ran her hands up and down the length of him and down to his scrotum, the skin of it tight with need, and she needed him now, had needed him for weeks, she needed him now.

He stepped out of the boxer shorts and hooked an arm under her knees and picked her up and carried her to the other end of the suite. On the way she kicked off her shoes. He dropped her on the bed.

He threw his ruined shirt back off his shoulders. He stood before her proud and naked and pulsing with need. She noticed the tight plates of his muscles,

unblurred by fat, and she didn't care. She noticed the rich thatch of hair on his chest, black peppered with strands of gray, and she didn't care. She saw his breastbone rising with his thickened breaths and she saw his hands clenching and unclenching with the need to grasp her and she saw the dilation in his pupils and the flaring of his nostrils and the tiny beads of sweat forming on his forehead and his upper lip and she didn't care. She saw him proud and naked and aching with need for her and she didn't care. All she could care about was her own need for him.

She unzipped her skirt and started to push it down and he was on her in an instant, dragging her skirt down and her pantyhose and her chaste cotton panties with it. In seconds, there was nothing left of her hidden. Her blouse was still half on, half off her shoulders but it didn't matter. He could see the gold chain at her breastbone and he could see her breasts rising and falling with her uneven breaths and he could see her nipples, stiff and hungry to be touched. The expression on her face was at once feral and savage and serene and ecstatic, sainted by torment and glory. Her eyes were half closed and she wore the half-smile the Mona Lisa learned from little Eva. He could see a blood vessel pulsing at her throat and her cheeks and chest were flushed and red.

Her legs were half open and her better secrets were half revealed and she was red with need and glistening with arousal. He groaned involuntarily at the sight of her, so open, so hungry, so perfect. He dropped to his knees and grabbed her by the hips and pulled her to the side of the bed. His broad shoulders forced her thighs wide apart and he could see the flower of her opening fully and it was breathtakingly beautiful—the slickened vermilion of her need against her tight blonde curls—and he didn't care. The scent of her was rich and intoxicating but he couldn't take time to notice, not now.

He buried his face fully in the heat of her and she arched her back and dug her claws into his hair and crossed her calves behind his neck, pulling him more tightly to her. The flavor of her ambrosia was exquisite, sweet and salty and musky and almost metallic, and he wanted to notice but he couldn't, he was too hungry to devour her to savor her taste. He plunged his tongue deep inside her just to penetrate her in the most intimate possible way, then ran his tongue up to her throbbing nerveflesh and lashed it again and again. She answered him with tiny thrusts of her hips, using him, taking him, having him.

She pushed his head away from her and unlocked her calves. She kicked her legs high in the air and rolled quickly across the enormous bed. She lay on her side, her head propped on her hand, one leg stretched out, one bent at the knee, her opening, wet and plundered, fully in view, her shredded blouse by now halfway down her arms. It was a pose and he knew it was a pose and he knew she wanted him to look at her and he wanted desperately to look at her—so sexy, so open to him—but he couldn't, he couldn't bear not touching her.

He plowed across the bed to lay beside her but she pushed on his shoulders, pushed him down flat on his back. She threw her leg over him and she was atop him, astride him, her hands on his shoulders, her knees locked tight at his hips. Moving only her hips, she rubbed herself up and down the length of him, bathing him in her need. She dropped her body down to his, her elbows on the bed

above his shoulders, her fingers tangled into his hair. Her breasts were grazing against the skin of his chest, seeming to leave little trails of heat in their wake. She was kissing him with darting little movements and he knew she was tasting herself on his mouth and his lips and his tongue.

She plunged her tongue deep in his mouth and dug her fingers into his scalp and she raised her hips high and enveloped him and he was inside her and then he was all the way inside her. "Damn you!" she hissed, the first words either of them had spoken.

She sat up halfway and put her hands on his shoulders. She used that leverage to drag herself slowly up the length of him, to drag herself up then plunge down viciously, slamming him into the bed, again and again. The expression on her face was wild and free, the innocence of a hungry wolf. Her golden hair was hanging down beside her face and she was lost and she was found and she was lost.

She took him savagely, brutally, and he knew her response to him was *entirely* a response to him. He knew it because he wasn't doing anything. But then he clasped his hands on her hips and pulled her down to him, pulled her down, down, down to the root of him, thrust himself to his full depth within her, ground himself into her.

She collapsed against him and dug her nails into the skin of his shoulders. It hurt beautifully and she was biting, biting, biting at his neck and thrusting hard against him and he was thrusting hard into her, grinding hard into her and pulling her down to him so he could grind more deeply still.

He heard her breath catch and he knew she was going to finish. He said, "Yes, Gwen! Please, god, yes..." He felt her passion tear through her like a tidal wave, her head thrashing from side to side, whipping his face and neck and chest with her hair, her body pushing down, down, down on him, pushing down to capture more of him. And then he felt the wave crash and turn and she was clasping, clasping, clasping at him, pulling him more deeply into her body.

"Oh, god!" he said and for a second he was blind, lost, found, lost, palsied but still digging, digging, digging for his perfect destiny. He emptied himself into her and it seemed to go on forever. He felt the ripples of her clasping and he felt himself pumping more and more of his need into her and it seemed it would go on forever and he wanted so desperately for it to go on forever.

His cheek was beside hers and he spoke to her in a voice that was still half lost—half murmur, half whisper. "I love you, Gwen. I love you so much. I hadn't known I could love someone so much. I hadn't known that anything could ever be like this..."

She was lost, lost, lost but she heard him. She heard the sounds and the intonations and she heard the words, heard them and understood them. And she knew they were true and she knew he meant them. Worse, she knew they were true for her, too, awful and brutal and true. And she was lost and she was frightened and she was so very alone...

She pushed herself down on him to regain a sense of mastery. He was spent and flagging, but she pushed herself down to the root of him to keep him inside her. She could feel the paired nectars of their longing draining out of her,

draining down him to the bed below. She kissed him lightly and rapidly on his lips and his cheeks and his neck and his shoulders and his forehead. Despite her fear and her ambivalence, he had given her something she'd never had before, not just sex but love-making. She couldn't say it out loud, she could barely say it even in the quiet of her mind. But that was what this had been, love-making. Wild and innocent and savage and tender and physical and emotional, the whole of the body and the whole of the mind locked together if only for a few moments, grasping a treasure neither one could claim alone...

And what was that treasure? Or who...?

He felt her shiver and he thought it was part of the waning of her passion. He didn't need to hear the words from her. He thought he understood her perfectly in her frantic kisses and in the way she seemed to cling to him with every inch of her skin. He was serenely happy, at peace in a way he had never thought he would be. He was as sure of her as he was of the air, of the ground beneath him.

He kissed her hard and that was a welcome relief. She could lose herself in his kisses, melt into him and glide along as a thing of no fixed form or substance. She pushed his head to the side a little to give herself better access and probed deeply in his mouth. She was still on him, he was still in her, and she felt him stir a little, and that would be okay, too, to just screw right through this, whatever it was.

But instead he shook his head free and flipped her over on the bed and he was out of her and she was under him, all in an instant. He stood up straight on his knees his manhood hanging wetly between his thighs. She reached for him, to smooth the wetness, his seed and her longing, into his skin. He lurched forward and she thought he might fall on his hands. She asked, "Do you like that...?"

He groaned, but it was premeditated, a groan for effect. He said, "I like you..."

Both of her hands were between his thighs. One was massaging the skin of his scrotum. She said, "This is an ugly little appliance, isn't it?" He laughed and she continued. "I mean it. This—" she squeezed his member and he winced and almost lunged "—is so beautiful, and yet his siamese twin is so... ungainly. Oh, I suppose it looks all right when it's excited. But when it's just hanging around, it just sort of... hangs around, doesn't it?"

"To tell the truth, I've always thought it was bad engineering."

"An evolutionary afterthought," she agreed. "And the trouble with evolution is, close enough is good enough. If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Her hands moved to the delta between her own thighs. She was collecting the moisture from her dewy curls and pushing it out to the creamy white skin of her thighs. "Our own plumbing is no more attractive, I promise you. But we're lucky enough to be slightly more self-contained."

He had no reply to make. He could think of nothing and he could do nothing except watch her hands pushing the wetness out of her sex.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked. "I'm not teasing you. Nor myself, for that matter. I'm just touching. Just being. Just being 'wild and innocent'. You say that all the time, did you know that? I think it must be the highest state of

virtue for you, to be unchastened and still never evil. I like those words, 'wild and innocent'. I like thinking of myself that way. I like to be so perfectly proper out in the world and to have you know that I can be so perfectly lewd in private, all without ever being vulgar. I like sex—I'll bet you could tell—but I never want anything to be ugly or filthy or dirty or evil or furtive or scheming or wrong. I thought your poem was so beautiful—" Her voice collapsed to a whisper and he knew she was on the verge of crying. "I thought your poem was so beautiful because that's how I've always thought of this, as something holy, as a sacrament. Too perfect and beautiful to be touched by shame."

The tears were rolling down her temples and he reached out to wet his finger in one and he tasted the salt of her.

"Devin, I—" She started but couldn't finish. "I need to get up." She pulled her legs up from between his and rolled over to the edge of the bed. He collapsed into the space where she had been and rolled over on his back to watch her. She pulled off what was left of her blouse and at last she was completely naked, naked except for the gold chain. She stood up and began to walk languidly around the room. They were at the Four Seasons on Boylston Street, overlooking the Public Garden, and the suite was richly appointed.

She stood by a painting, an earthy abstract, an original oil of questionable resale value. Without looking at him she said, "This is all a little adulterous, isn't it?"

She didn't see him wince. "...Hypocritical, I suppose. I don't want Hunter to get the idea that pre-marital sex is okay. I also don't want him thinking that mothers—the women who sleep in the same bed as daddy—are so easily interchangeable. I can't think that you want your seventeen-year-old getting the idea that sex without benefit of ceremony is acceptable. And yet I'm a hypocrite because I didn't want to wait for you until we're married."

She looked at him then looked away. "Until we're married?"

"Until we're married. Unless we're married. If we're married. Am I being chastised for presuming too much?"

She gave no reply, just continued to meander around the room. She came upon his hastily discarded boxer shorts. She held them up by one fingertip. They were indigo silk with an abstract pattern in gold and red and green. She said, "I'll be keeping these. You took a pair off me, if you'll recall, and I'll have these as replacement." She stepped into the soft silk shorts and pulled them up her long, lean legs. He was devastated to see her behind disappear and then he was thrilled. She looked so sexy, naked but for the gold chain and his boxer shorts.

She knew without being told that he was enthralled to see her this way, this excruciatingly intimate way. Not nude, better than nude, her better secrets hidden in a raiment so intimately his. She posed for him as she wandered around the room, letting him see her hair or her breasts or her belly or the endless skin of her back or her legs taut with tensed muscles. She posed for him because she knew it would thrill him. And because it made her feel very sexy to thrill him. And because it made her feel in control, very much in control.

She stopped at the window overlooking the Public Garden, overlooking Beacon Flats and the Esplanade, overlooking the Charles. She stood with her arms spread wide at the window frame, silhouetted by the late-day sun. Anyone



looking up would have seen a half-naked woman leaning against a window, but she didn't care. She spun around and leaned on the window sill, looking for his eyes. She said, "You like to look at me, don't you?"

"I do. Yes. Very much."

"I like for you to look at me. It makes me feel very powerful." She cupped her hands beneath her breasts, seeming to offer them to him. "Don't you think these are lovely? I thought they'd never recover from Spencer's gnawings, but they still have a little spring to them, haven't they?"

He said nothing, just smiled at her.

"Do you think I'm so terribly vain? You don't know the half of it. But is it vanity or just an appropriate honesty? Don't you think my behind—my 'butt'; is that what men call it?—don't you think my butt is gorgeous? Appealing to both eye and hand, is it not?"

He laughed at her but he nodded his agreement.

"Devin, I know your eyes and hands like my butt. Do you like my thighs? Do you like the backs of my thighs? They're very powerful. Treadmill and stair-stepper and recumbent bike and weights—yes, I lift weights, just like you. My thighs and my knees and my calves and my feet. You wondered about my feet. Do they meet with your approval? I think my back is quite lovely and I never get to see enough of it." She twisted her head around trying to see her back and he laughed out loud. "And, of course, there's always my old stand-bys, face and hair and eyes. I could draw stares bundled up for the Arctic, just on the basis of my eyes. Don't you agree?"

"I'm enjoying this conversation, but I don't understand it. Do you need me to tell you you're beautiful? Aren't you telling me you already know?"

She pushed away from the window and walked toward him very slowly, one careful pace at a time, one foot precisely in front of the other. She walked like a predator stalking her prey. "Do you love my body, Devin?"

"I love the way you look. I love to look at you. I go crazy when I look at you. But I don't love you *for* your body."

Almost she grimaced. She stopped and put her hands at her waist, at the waistband of the boxer shorts. She threw her shoulders back and pushed her chest up then ducked her chin down to her chest. It was a way of usurping power, something she'd done unthinkingly since childhood. It was the pose of authority without the risk and the danger of eye contact. "I love the way your body looks. I loved it the moment I saw you, and I knew then that you would be beautiful naked. You're so strong, so strong everywhere. It's nothing for you to pick me up, is it? I like the scent of you, too. I think if we were parted for years, if I were deaf and blind, I would still know you by your scent. Does it give you pleasure to hear me make these confessions?"

He was baffled by the question. He started to speak but she cut him off.

"Do you know what I like to look at on your body? Do you think it's your feet or your calves or your knees or your thighs? Your legs are very beautiful, very powerful. Do you think I like to look at your abdomen or your chest or your back or that thick neck of yours? Do you think I like looking at your face, Devin? I do, you know. Your face is like granite, like steel. Do you think I like

looking at your manhood? I do, very much. I like it best when it's hard and huge and purple, pulsing like a flashing neon sign reading, 'Gwen! Gwen! Gwen!'"

"It will never say anything else, you know. You've ruined me for other women."

She looked up at him and smiled, but there was a shroud of mourning in her eyes. "I want to love you for your body, Devin. I want you to love me for my body. It's... safer. More contained. Easier to control... Do you know what I love to look at on your body? I love to look at your eyes, Devin Dwyer. I love to peer into the pools of your eyes and wonder what might be at the bottom, wonder if there *is* any bottom. I think sometimes that I want to dive right into your eyes, dive and swim and never surface. But I'm a afraid if I do I never *will* surface, that I'll never again touch dry land..."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks and that was all he really understood. He sat at the edge of the bed and he beckoned her and she rushed to him, standing between his knees, her hands on his shoulders, his arms hugging her around the middle. She stood there crying for a long time and he did nothing, said nothing, just held her.

After a while she put his hands at the waistband of the boxer shorts. She said, "Roll these off me, please."

"Are you giving them back?"

"I'm keeping them. But right now they're in the way."

He pushed the boxer shorts down her legs and she stepped out of them. He clasped his hands around her, his thumbs on the bones of her hips, and looked up at her, a question in his eyes, a question he couldn't even have expressed in words. She was looking back at him, and her eyes were still a little teary. But there was a fire in her eyes, a fire like a pool of lava, and he thought he understood that.

"Lay back," she said, stepping away to give him room to move his legs. He laid down and she set herself astride him again. She reached between her legs to get at him, pointing him toward his belly. She rubbed against him gently and said, "That's right. Plant yourself in my fertile valley and your crop will grow strong and tall." She laughed.

She was standing up on her knees and her breasts were rising and falling with her movements and he was watching her and she knew he was watching her. She said, "Do you know what I liked—before? Well, I liked everything, but the thing I liked best was watching you... arrive."

He laughed hard and it drove him into her and it hurt exquisitely. "A euphemism is almost as bad as a lie, darling. If you want to use the word, use it."

"All right. I liked watching you come. I saw it all in your eyes and it was hard for me because I was—I was coming, too. But I watched you and I don't think you could see me. I think you were blind, just then. It made me feel very powerful, to think that I had done this to you, that I had taken the granite and steel of you and melted it, melted it to a puddle. It made me... come harder, to know that it was you, that it was me, that it was your response to me wrenching your face in such an awful ecstasy. I never—" Her voice caught. "I never cared before."

She collapsed to him and hid herself in his chest, hid under the cascade of her hair. She was still rubbing herself against him but he thought she might be crying. But then she was back up and smiling, smiling wickedly, playfully. She brushed her fingers against his nipples. "Are these very sensitive?"

He nodded. Vigorously.

"Do they like to be kissed?" She fell forward and her tongue darted out and teased the little tip of one of his nipples while her hand squeezed and pinched the other. He was watching her and she was watching him, watching his eyes, watching the pain and pleasure race across his eyes. She thought about sucking him the other way, kneeling before him as he stood and watching his eyes as she used him with her mouth and her tongue. Almost she finished then and there, so thrilling was the thought.

She switched sides and she could feel him growing under her, growing in response to her wet torment of his tiny nipples. When he touched her nipples, it made her feel as if the inside of her had become a vacuum, crying out to be filled, a great yawning, yearning space that had to be filled at once, filled with him at once. It seemed appropriate to her that he had the complementary reaction.

Her own breasts were rubbing against the skin of his chest and belly and she was very wet and she had made him very wet. She threw herself back and raised herself up and grasped his hardness in her hand and guided it to her. She perched over him, just the purple end of him inside her and she watched him watching her. She sank to him then raised herself high again, so he could see. She sat down on him hard and ground herself into him, her blonde curls rasping against his of coal black. She leaned back so her chest was thrust high and so the locus of their union was not lost to his view.

She said, "Now I will take you slowly. Do you know why? Because now I can. I think I can never fully sate my hunger for you. But if I devour you quickly enough, I can gather the resolve to devour you slowly. I can take the time to do everything I want to you—*with* you. And you can watch my body. And I can watch your eyes..."

He said nothing. His hands were on her hips but not urgently, not graspingly, and she knew he was lost, lost better than before. It made her feel very sexy, very powerful. Very much in control. She dragged herself slowly up the length of him, then plunged to him and ground her pubic bone against his, again and again. She could feel him rising to meet her and the explosions tearing through her body became so much worse, so much better.

His eyes were locked to hers now but she didn't think he could see her and she didn't think he could see anything *but* her. The green of his eyes was so deep, so inviting, and she wanted so desperately to jump into those eyes, to lose herself *with* him, not *in* him, to twine herself to him in yearning, both lost, both hunting, both found.

And then she was there and she could see everything and she could see nothing, nothing but the deep green pools of his eyes. She wracked herself to him and his grip on her hips was bruising and he was using her, using her, using her with his strength. She watched the storm building, building, building in his

eyes and then he was there and she could feel him digging, frantically, deeper and deeper into her, digging for the perfect treasure he could see behind his eyes.

And she was ruined and she knew it. Ruined because she needed to resist him and ruined because she couldn't. She collapsed to his chest and held him, held him despite herself. She knew she needed to talk to him and she knew she couldn't. She kept thinking that there was someone she could tell this to, someone she felt safe telling her deepest secrets. She smiled despite herself at the irony: it was him, of course. That was the price of this ecstasy, this elation, this fear, this despair. She had gained a lover and lost her only true friend...

He was stroking her hair and murmuring to her and she heard him and she didn't listen to the words because she didn't need to. She knew he loved her, loved her better than anyone ever before, loved her more than his own life, maybe. And she knew she loved him the same way and she didn't know what the hell she was going to do and she knew what she never wanted to stop doing.

She pulled herself up because she didn't want to, putting her hands on his shoulders. "I think you must have had a grand evening planned for us. Is it entirely ruined?"

"We had dinner reservations at the Café Budapest. Surely we've blown that. And we have tickets for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. We can still make that, but we might be late."

"The program?" She traced a question mark on the skin of his chest with her fingernail.

"Listz and Saint-Saens. Mostly Listz."

"I see." She smiled. "A big romantic Hungarian meal, then big, romantic Hungarian music, then what? A limo?" He nodded. "A limo back here and then, finally, hours and hours after I get here, we have a big, romantic Hungarian union. Is that the way you had it planned?"

He smiled sheepishly. "I thought you'd want to be seduced."

"I did. I do." She grinned. "You could have had me that first night, Devin. It's not what I would have wanted, but I couldn't have said no to you, not after we kissed. When you got off the train with me, I thought that was what you were planning, to spend the night with me. I don't know how I would have hidden you from Spencer, but I would have. No, I am not so easily had, very much the contrary. But you had me from the first, in the subway station, on the train, in Harvard Square, at M.I.T., in your lecture hall. From the moment I saw you, it was worse than Dirk, worse than anyone, worse than anything, ever."

"Worse? Don't you mean better?"

She balled up her fist and batted him on the chest. "No, I mean very much worse, thank you."

He shrugged. "We don't have to go out if you don't want to."

She laughed. "My blouse is in ruins. I think it would attract attention."

"I brought clothes for you."

"Do you know my size?"

"Gretchen told me what to get."

She rolled off him and she was up and off the bed in an instant. "Show me, if you would be so kind."

He got up and walked to the closet and she watched his behind as he walked and it was worth it. He returned with a beautiful dove gray cashmere sweater dress, ankle length. Not a turtle neck, a cowl neck, so much more elegant. It was breathtakingly beautiful and irresistible to touch. She said, "Devin, this must have cost a fortune..."

He shrugged. "I had a coupon."

"Oh. Well. That makes all the difference." She kissed him hard and took the gown from his hand and admired it in her own hands then carried it back to the closet. She grabbed him by the fingers, dragging him along with her.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the shower first. After that to the stars..."

The bathtub was the size of a small pond so they took a tub bath. She tied up her hair and he washed the sweat and sex off her body and she scrubbed him clean. He buffed her dry with a thick white towel and by the time she had dried him he was hard again, hard and purple and needy. She was drying his legs and she took him into her mouth just for a moment, just to tease him, just to see the reaction in his eyes.

She walked naked back to the bedroom. She said, "Just the dress, yes? Nothing underneath it? Is that what you had in mind?"

"You could do that, but I brought these, too." He held up the cobalt blue panties she had given him for his birthday, a strategically negligible quantity of silk.

"Or I could wear my boxer shorts, couldn't I?" She smiled with her eyes.

He nodded. "You could do that."

"I think I'll wear those instead. They're completely obscene, don't you think?" She stuck out a foot. "Adorn me, if you would."

"Nothing could adorn you."

"Nothing is. And soon almost nothing will."

He slid the panties up her legs, taking his time, giving his hands every opportunity to treasure her. He was sorely tempted, when he pulled them to her hips, to rip them right off and have her there, standing up or on the carpet or on the dresser or he didn't care where. Instead he helped her into the dress, not because she needed help but because he wanted to be a part of her adornment.

It fit her like a second skin. Not tight, but from her shoulders to her knees no secret of her anatomy went undisclosed. The cashmere against her skin was breathtaking, like the touch of his fingers everywhere, from her neck to her ankles, from wrist to wrist, the touch of his fingers everywhere all at once. Her nipples were hard little gemstones, little rubies, and they proudly proclaimed her response to him through the fabric. With him behind her, she admired herself in the full-length mirror. She smoothed the cashmere from her belly to her hips, just to touch it. She said, "Devin, it's wonderful..."

He smiled his reply and she turned to kiss him and the kiss was wide and deep and very warm, like a pool where a hot spring bubbles forth. He immersed himself in the warmth of her kiss and he felt the heat of her through the dress and he felt the cashmere against his naked skin and he wondered why they were bothering to get dressed.

"None of that," she said, peeling his hands off her behind. "You've made me go to the trouble of adorning myself, so now you must show me off."

He chuckled but he said, "I hope you don't think I think of you that way. You're a very beautiful woman but you're not some precious ornament I wear on my arm."

"Would you love me if I were ugly? One of your herringboned fembots?"

"Then you wouldn't be you. It's you I love. Not your eyes or your hair or your assets. They thrill me, and I love that they're a part of you, that they're so perfectly in keeping with what you are. But it's *you*, the inside of you, the motor that drives you, the thing that makes you walk so fast and talk so delightfully and make love so urgently and kiss so completely, the thing that makes you *know* so perfectly well what matters in life—that's what I love, that's what I'm here for. I love your soul, Gwen. I'm glad you body matches it, but it's your soul I love. I'd love you if I were blind."

There were tears rolling down her cheeks but her eyes were smiling so he knew everything was all right. She dug into the cowl neck of the dress and pulled the gold chain out and draped it on the outside of her collar, and that was answer enough.

He was still very erect and she grabbed him full in her hand. She said, "It seems I get to show you off, too. The fembots will be positively green..."

He laughed and it drove him into her hand and he wanted to find a place that felt the same only better but instead he set about getting himself dressed. "The symphony?" he asked.

"Can we just take a walk? Listz is divine, but I'd rather hear from you."

"Fine with me. We ruined the only dress shirt I brought."

He dressed himself in slacks and a bright red sweater. No underwear, since his were now hers, and he was rather badly contained in the slacks at first. He put on his overcoat and helped her into hers and they were ready to go.

They walked up Boylston Street to Tremont, then up Tremont toward the center of the city. He stopped in front of St. Paul's Cathedral, right at the top of the Commons. He said, "I was married there. It seems like such a long time ago..."

"A very Catholic wedding, I imagine."

He smiled. "Very Catholic. It didn't matter to me and it did to her, so that's where we were married." They had turned into Downtown Crossing, heading down the cobble mall to Washington Street. "You should ask me about my marriage."

"Should I?"

"I think you should. I'm a demonstrated loser at romance, after all. I should think that would be grounds for concern."

"I'm in no position to throw stones, I think. But suppose I were to ask you. Wouldn't you simply tell me it was all her fault?"

"That's the point. It wasn't. When two cars crash, maybe it's one driver's fault. But when a crash takes years to work out, both of the people involved are volunteers, and both of them are responsible."

"How awfully big of you to bear some of the blame."

He shrugged. "We don't have to talk about this if you don't want to."

"I do. But I think I need to eat. I'm afraid you've stripped me of my reserves. Among other things." She grabbed his hand and led him down the Washington Street mall. She stopped in front of a small restaurant. "Is this all right? It's just soups and salads, but everything's fresher than tomorrow."

"You're a cheap date, Gwen."

She smiled wickedly. "And... accessible. If properly seduced."

When they had ordered he continued, and they talked all through the meal. "I told you tonight how much I love your soul. I never once said anything like that to Nicole. Never. I told her I loved her and I thought I did, but I never thought to define and understand that love. And the truth is, a lot of the time I didn't even say, 'I love you.' Just, 'Love you,' a verb and an object without a subject. It wasn't an embrace, it was a dismissal. 'Love you. 'Bye.'"

"Aren't you being rather hard on yourself?"

"Do you want to know the real trouble, Gwen? Because you've put your finger right on it. I'm not being too hard on myself now, I was too easy on myself then. This is so stupid, and yet it hovers around everywhere like a cloud of gnats. I would *bate* it if anything ugly came between Hunter and I. I'd do anything to avoid that. I would *bate* it if Xander got the idea that my affection for him has limits, that my interest in what he says is faked. We've had our rough spots, Xander and I, and both of us have worked hard to get past them, because our relationship is so important.

"But—boom!—this is marriage to a fault. Keep the sex coming. Keep the meals coming. Try not to spend too much. And get out of my light. It was never that bad, but there was a hint of that from the very beginning. And that's just the expression. The reality is so much worse. Not only am I not going to do the work it takes to maintain this relationship, I am deliberately, adamantly, even *philosophically* opposed to doing with my wife what I would never hesitate to do with Xander or Hunter or anyone else. I refuse to repair this relationship or even acknowledge its decay *because* it is—at least nominally—the most important one in my life."

She traced a circle on the tabletop with her finger. "But that's a two-way street, isn't it?"

"I suppose. If not directly then in some reciprocal way. But all I'm talking about is what *I* did—which mainly consisted of what I didn't do. I promised to tell you about distance. On the surface, distance means just that, physical distance, mothertongue for, 'I don't want to be near you.' There was a lot of that, none of it conscious. I never stayed by her side at parties, for instance. I made her keep my pace when we walked, and I walked ahead of her if she couldn't. I never sat next to her at a restaurant table, and if I could arrange it, I'd sit at the opposite corner. I never wanted to do anything with her, and if there was something we could or should do together, I'd make excuses to do it alone, or stick her with doing it alone, or just do it pre-emptively, *fait accompli*. If I were paying attention, of course I would say, 'Wow, Devin, you're married to someone you don't want near you.' But the problem is the only way to stay married to someone you don't want near you is to forbid yourself to pay attention.

"And there are other kinds of distance. Mothertongue doesn't parse, so if you want to establish a distance between yourself and someone who loves you,

pretend to attempt to parse mothertongue expressions into fathertongue. They won't make sense, because mothertongue is about feeling not sense, touching not talking. But you're one up, and smugly, too. And your spouse is one down."

"I don't think I'm understanding you."

"Okay. I'm working in my office at home and Nicole comes upstairs with a slice of pie for me. I go one up by saying, 'I didn't ask for any pie.' She says, 'But I thought you might want some.' I reply, 'If I had wanted some, I could have gotten it for myself.' She goes back downstairs with the pie, hurt, hurt for having her very nice mothertongue overture spurned as nonsense in fathertongue."

"But if you really didn't want the pie... What should you have done?"

"It's not about pie. It's about love. She's all alone in the kitchen and I'm physically distant in my office and she wonders at some level of consciousness, 'How can I show him that I love him?' And here comes the piece of pie, not food but a symbol of her love for me, a small expression but by no means a meaningless one. If I had loved her, or if I had been willing to let her love me, what I would have done is set the slice of pie on my desk. Then I would have thanked her and kissed her and maybe squeezed her on the rump and told her I had a little slice of something for her later on. I would have answered mothertongue in mothertongue instead of seeking distance in fathertongue."

Gwen said nothing. She was poking around in her salad and scowling.

"Silence is another good way of distancing yourself from your spouse. There's so much you can't talk about, because, if you do, the marriage will be wrecked. So you don't talk about it, you don't even dare think about it. And she wants to talk *all the time*, but she only wants to talk beside the point, between the points, never *to* the point. I guess it's for the same reason. We say that men are alienated from their feelings and the implication is that there's some sort of evil alienator lurking about. But the truth of the matter is simply this: Men are not permitted to quit.

"Not permitted by whom? By the culture, by their friends and family, by their spouses, by themselves. If a married woman decides her job isn't fulfilling enough, she stays home and freelances for a while. If a married man gets an inkling his work is making him unhappy—he slams the door on that thought *right now*. Especially if he's a father. If he has a suspicion he married the wrong woman—slam that door, too. If he has a little wisp of a fantasy that he'd like to chuck it all and run off to Tahiti like Gauguin—slam! He has feelings. No human being is without emotion. But he fears a vast host of his emotions, first because he is in a trap he won't permit himself to escape, and second because his cultural role effectively forbids him to escape.

"Now put this poor guy in the middle of one of those horrible, 'Honey, what's wrong?', conversations. What's he going to say? 'I wanted to fly and I'm stuck as a desk pilot. I wanted to see the world and all I see is the taillights of the car in front of me, that and your big butt, bigger every day. I wanted to do something with my life and all I do is run around in circles like a dog chained to a stake.' Does he say that?"

She smile wryly and that was answer enough.

“No. He says, ‘Everything’s fine, honey. Everything’s just fine. Love you. Bye.’” Devin laughed. It was a hard and bitter laugh. “She knows it’s not fine and she’s got to keep picking at it. He won’t admit it’s not fine and he’s got to keep running from it. And every truth he withholds comes back as an enormous lie—grousing over nothing, outraged criticisms of trivia, sarcasm and cynicism and geysers of black bile. All a dog can do is pull at that chain, after all, pull at the chain and bark out empty little threats.”

He had a slice of quiche but he hadn’t touched it. He pushed it away from him and said, “Silence and distance and lies are all you need to destroy any marriage. Physical violence and emotional abuse are bombs and guns, obvious weapons of destruction. But silence and distance and lies are like a corrosive gas. In time, everything is destroyed. You start out with love and a deep and—you hope—abiding passion. Your beloved is closer to you than your closest friend, dearer than your dearest relative. And when the corrosion is complete, you despise that person completely, and you can’t even bear to look at her.”

Gwen pushed her salad bowl away. “Why? Why would you do that?” She asked the question, but she was very much afraid she knew the answer.

He smiled, and it was a smile uncontaminated by even the smallest hint of happiness. “I used to think it was something like spite. You forbid yourself to say yes to something you could want and should want and may never be able to replace—you forbid yourself to say yes in order to hang on to the power to say no. It’s not just independence, a state of not being owned or enslaved or whatever. It’s a spiteful little betrayal of your own vows and commitments. I see stuff like that all the time, not just in marriage but everywhere, and I thought it was the same thing.”

“But now...?”

He shrugged. “Now I don’t know. I think maybe you can’t make those vows and commitments with anyone except the right person.” Her hand was on the table and he laid his atop it and squeezed. “If you make those kinds of promises with the wrong person, you’ve compromised yourself and you’ve compromised the relationship and chaos ensues. I don’t think it’s a necessary consequence that you have to break your promises, but you have to find a way, one way or another, to divert energy from a circuit that can’t bear it. If you can’t, it has to blow.”

She snuck her hand out from under his then laced her fingers between his. “And with the right person...?”

“Are you teasing me? Do you know how many things I’ve told you that I’ve never told anyone? How many little things I do with you in my mind? There aren’t any vows or commitments between us, but that doesn’t matter at all. I’m more tightly bound to you than if we were lashed together with chains. I’m not enslaved to you. I’m not in your thrall. I’m a volunteer, baby, utterly yours and entirely uncompromised.”

She was playing with her unused butter knife, spinning it on the surface of the table. “...Aren’t you confessing rather a lot?”

“What if I am? It’s the truth. I never felt anything like this for Nicole, but I never told her what I did feel. That was wrong. I don’t want to be wrong anymore.”

“...But what if the feelings aren’t... reciprocated?”

He smiled, and it was a smile uncontaminated by even the smallest hint of unhappiness. “What if they’re not? I can’t do anything about that, can I? I can’t even control my own feelings, much less yours. But even so, it doesn’t matter. My loving you doesn’t have anything to do with your loving me. Hunter was months old before he could do anything but soak up love and give nothing back. But I loved him so much it made me ache. I ache much worse for you, Gwen, and it doesn’t matter very much what you do about that. What matters is you. What matters is that you *are*...”

“You’re trying to make me cry again, aren’t you?”

His eyes were grave, more grave than she’d ever seen them, more grave than she’d ever seen anyone’s eyes. “I never want to hurt you, Gwen. I never want to disappoint you. I never want to let you down.”

His voice broke at the end and she knew he was on the brink of crying himself. Their hands were still laced together on the table and she laid her other hand atop them and squeezed both together. She said, “Let’s get out of here before we both make a scene.”

They meandered slowly along the outdoor mall looking at the Christmas lights and displays. It was late enough that Washington Street was almost deserted and Gwen felt very much alone with her man. She could go that far, anyway—her man. They stood for a long time looking at the Christmas pageantry in the windows of Jordan Marsh. He stood behind her with his arms around her belly and she remembered standing with him that way on the platform of the subway station at Harvard Square. Tonight she could see his eyes reflected in the plate glass window and they were alive with delight at the ingenuity of the spectacle. And they were burning with his love for her. She looked at her own eyes in the window, looked for some sign of fear or confusion or despair or loneliness or doubt. But all she could see was contentment, a deep and enduring peace that began in his embrace and infused her whole being. She scowled at herself, for what she wasn’t sure. Then she smiled at herself, mockingly. Then she pulled his arms still more tightly around her and laid her head against his chest and closed her eyes entirely.

On their way back to the hotel, he pulled her into a small alcove in the side of an office building and kissed her hard. He was leaning against the wall and it pressed her to him perfectly. His fingers were dug into her hair and her hands were clasped to his cheeks and they were kissing ardently and he knew their kisses were tokens for the much greater intimacy that had known, would know together.

“This is a horrible torment,” he murmured. “Isn’t it? To be so hungry and to have no way to feast...”

“Do you think I’m so terribly inhibited?” She smiled wickedly and stuffed her hand into his trousers. “I like these knickers. Do you have others like them?”

His breath was trapped in his lungs and he had no way of talking at all.

“Think of it,” she said. “We could have each other right here, standing up, just as we almost did in your office. This wonderful dress will push out of the way easily, I should think, and these silk panties can present no challenge to a

man of your strength. And you're certainly properly arrayed. We could do it right here and maybe have a night to remember for the rest of our lives. Or maybe we could get ourselves arrested instead. Coitus interruptus of the most disturbing sort. I wonder if the Globe would print the story. I know the Herald would."

She laughed and squeezed him hard and despite everything he was tempted. She said, "Don't ever tease me, Devin. I can't say no to you and I won't permit you to say no to me. So be prepared to deliver what you promise. Because I'm always prepared to collect."

And it was back at the hotel that she collected her due. She took him from above again and he thought to complain but he couldn't complain because it is absurd to complain about perfection. She was very tender and loving with him afterward, very warm, and he wanted desperately to sleep beside her. But she had to go home and he had to go home. They both had to skulk home like furtive adulterers, hiding not their shame but their glory. She left him lying on the bed when she went to take a quick shower. She returned wearing the gray sweater dress and she looked so beautiful in it that he wanted to take her out of it, to take her again and again, as many times as his body would permit.

She sat down beside him on the bed and curled her fingertip in the hairs on his chest. She said, "I've left you a note on the bathroom mirror. A lipstick letter, is that what they're called? I don't even wear lipstick, but we're always getting samples at the office, so I brought one along. I'm an American woman, after all, and my understanding is that when an American woman has something vitally important to convey to her man, she must write it in lipstick on the bathroom mirror. Isn't that the custom?"

He knew she was teasing him, but even so an icy dread wormed through his intestines.

She smiled. "I've managed to worry you, haven't I? You don't need me, you'd just die without me. Isn't that true?"

"I wouldn't die. But I wouldn't want to live as much as I do right now. 'Does it give you pleasure to hear me make these confessions?'"

"In fact it does. You say things I've never expected to hear out of anyone. You say things I didn't know anyone could say..."

He said nothing. She wasn't looking at him and he didn't care, not much. He said, "That gray limo parked out front is for you. It'll take you home."

"I drove, darling. My car's in the garage downstairs. The limo will take *you* home."

"...I don't want you to go, Gwen. This is the other way of expressing distance in mothertongue. I want for there never to be any distance between us. Not emotionally and not physically. Never."

She smiled wistfully and leaned forward to kiss him, not on the lips but on the forehead. She said, "Good night, Sweet Prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." She kissed him on the mouth, quickly but tenderly. "The rest is silence." And then she was gone...

And his certainty seemed to go with her. Because he very much feared what might be written on the bathroom mirror, he forced himself to go look. In the

mirror he saw himself, very naked, very well used, but very young-looking, very free, very wild, very innocent. And he saw her 'lipstick letter', her vitally important message. It read,

*Be who you are.*

*Do what you want.*

*Have what you love.*

light. But it may be that the universe can be integrated only by means of the right metaphor.

I wish I could watch you sleeping, my love. I wish I could brush at your hair as you slumber. Sleep peacefully, inferno of life. Tomorrow we will reach with our light for the ends of time.

I love you,

Devin

Date: Sun, 07 Dec 1997 22:27:33 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: The chain

I promised to tell you my full reasons for buying you that chain. The truth is I hate chains. They symbolize for me everything that is loathsome in human relationships; they symbolize slavery. But from the very beginning I have wanted to bind myself to you completely--me to you, not you to me--and the chain is my way of expressing that desire. It is the means by which I seek to be locked inside your life forever. I recognize fully the implications of the things I'm saying, and that's why I'm going to such lengths to say these particular things. I want nothing to be hidden from you, Gwen, I want nothing held in reserve, I want for there to be nothing that I can take back later with a sleight of hand or a sleight of mind. Regardless of what you do, this is what I am doing.

I have things to watch for with you, which is a good reason to be glad to have you when I'm old enough to know how to treasure you. In our box of family photos there are gradually fewer and fewer photos of me. I understand that as a cue now: If the frequency with which your spouse seeks to preserve your likeness is in decline, your marriage is in trouble. I can think of a hundred dozen other little things like that, things I should have noticed but didn't, but I wish now to know better. I want it to be forever with you. You don't have to promise anything to me, because I know you'll never let me have what I haven't earned. I intend to earn everything, and I intend to keep it forever. It's important to me to be scrupulous for my own part, to never let things slide, to never default on you. She Done Me Wrong, but I am not without culpability and I don't want to do anything like that with you.

I never make promises I don't intend to keep, and I never issue words I don't intend to be held to. I am issuing these words now so that you'll have them, should you ever need to rub my nose in them.

## *Interval—Love among the stars*

Date: Sat, 06 Dec 1997 23:46:18 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Love among the stars

Let's make love like fusion, baby: At the speed of light, space, time, mass and energy all become one thing, one singularity. At the speed of light, physics, quantum physics and astrophysics all become essentially the same science. I like the idea of outsized human ambition, and I think it would be wonderful to aspire to be a star. Not a TV or movie star, but a true citizen of the galaxy. We could be a double star system, you and I, bound together by our enormity, a flux of glowing star stuff constantly passing between us. We live by symbols. I like living by big ones...

But there is more. Niels Bohr is the father of quantum physics. It was he who first showed that the energetic states of sub-atomic particles exist at discrete quanta, no middle. When you apply energy to a baseline-state electron, it will remain at that state until the application of energy is sufficient to excite it to the next discrete state. This is the actual quantum leap, the jump from one state to another with no interval.

I've been thinking about this in a host of contexts. Our own ascending levels of excitation, obviously, but also with respect to the idea of rising and growing with you forever. And also in the context of our being stars together and birthing universes as the get of our seething. Possibly the universe is actually integrated--all one thing. This is one interpretation of the quantum mechanical conundra: that the entire universe consists of a single, primal electron looping back and forth on itself endlessly at the speed of

I intend to deserve you. And I intend to keep you. And I know I will keep you only by continuing to deserve you. I hope never to disappoint you, never to let you down. But I will damn myself now, in advance, on this page, if I should ever give you hurt from malice, from inattention, from laziness or from contempt. I live to worship my life, and I make me this oath: Any failure of mine, now and forever, to fully earn and deserve your unbounded devotion, I must regard as an act of self-destruction. You are so much a part of me now that to slash and claw at you is to slash and claw at my own face, my own heart. I'm going to put these words where I can see them all the time, because if I forget myself I will lose you. And if I lose you, a part of me, the best part of me, will die forever.

I don't need you to tell me that this is what you've been grailing for for half a lifetime. I don't need you to tell me because I have, too. You'll have it from me. I'll have it from you. We'll have it together. We'll have it forever.

This is a way I want to make love with you, my darling one. This probably can't be the first time, any particular time. This is a love without urgency. This is a love without end.

I think this happens during the day, although it doesn't have to. I like making love in the day. I like to see everything, especially when my eyes are closed and clenched. What's happened is that we've coupled, feverishly, and the worst of our desires are sated. We've held each other and kissed and cuddled and caressed and murmured and the sweat has dried from our skin and the words have grown thick on our tongues.

It's then that I'll lead you by the hand to the shower. Another day you can cherish me, but today is my day to worship you, to have you, so just scrub me down fast and turn me loose. I want to bathe every part of you in the shower of the love I feel for you, treasure every bit of you in detail. I want to wash your hair. You have no idea how your hair thrills me. I want to lather it and dig my fingers deep into your scalp and comb them back through your tresses again and again. I'll rinse you clean of soap, running the water back from your raised forehead. Then I'll guide the flow to your breastbone and pull in close behind you. My hands flat and hungry, I'll sleek the water down the front of you, from your breasts to you belly to your hips to your thighs. Again and again I'll push the sheets of water down your skin to feel the heat of the water against the greater heat of you. I know you can feel me behind you, I know there's no possible doubt you can feel me behind you.

When I've all but driven myself insane, I'll step out and dry myself off, letting you bask in the warmth of the water. When I'm ready for you, I'll take a thick, rich towel and buff your body dry from the tip of your nose to the tips of your toes. I'll dry your hair, as much as I can with a towel, then wrap your body in a thick white shower robe. I have a heavy comb with wide-spaced teeth that I bought just for your hair, just because I know it will look lovely combed out straight in thick, wet clusters.

I'll lead you back to the bedroom, and this is how I will have you. I'll sit on the side of the bed, my feet on the floor. You will stand before me and I'll untie that robe and open it, delivering the feast of your glory to my hungry eyes. Don't shuck it off your shoulders, keep it on. You make me twice as hungry half-dressed, clothed yet naked, protected yet vulnerable to anything. I give you clothes only to take them off you, to leave them on you, to leave me on you when I cannot be within you.

I'll lay back for a moment so you can climb atop me and when I sit back up I want you to wrap your legs around my back. This is the way I want you, with you in my lap, holding me tight with your arms and your legs.

Don't take me inside you, not yet. It's not time for that yet. Pull yourself in tight to me, though, and rub yourself along the length of me. I like that, I like it a lot. I like the feel of the fire burning deep within you, and I like the slickness and the scent of your desire for me. Kiss me hard, kiss me deep, kiss me from above, your mastery complete. In turn I will explore the smoothness of your skin, still a little cool and damp from the shower. I'll push the fabric of your robe aside and dig my fingers into the flesh of your behind, pressing you down hard against me, pressing myself hard against the locus of your pleasure. Ride me this way, Gwen, ride me forever.

And when you've all but driven yourself insane, pull your hips up to the tip of me and take me into your depths. Sink to me slowly so that I can feel every fold and ripple of you, every pounding of your pulse. Sink yourself to me until I am buried within you, buried to the ends of me. Hold me that way, your lips, your arms, your legs, your love, your mind, your soul, your life, your being. Clasp me tight to you in every possible way and feel me reaching, yearning, clawing to pull myself even closer, even tighter, even deeper inside you. I am hard and purple and huge for you, but I strain to be larger still, just to be more conjoined to you. Hold me tight and don't move for a moment, just feel me pulsing, pulsing, pulsing in the pool of your silky heat.



Then take me, Gwen, take me as you need me. But you're trapped, aren't you? It's not so easy to move. You can throw your arms around my shoulders for leverage, but the way we are locked together forces you to move slowly, deliberately. And that's the way I want you. I want to be locked inside you forever, and this is a way of doing that. I just want to drive, drive, drive and I don't care if I ever arrive. Hugging forever is wonderful because it has no clear-cut terminus. Kissing forever is wonderful because there is no physiological alarm screaming, "We're finished now!" I want to have you forever in endless hugging, endless kissing, endless writhing, and I want not to be interrupted or denied or inhibited by some great heaving calamitous orgasm. Not yet, anyway.

What I want is to love you. I want to express my love for you in every way I can, in every way I have. With my whispered words. With my searing tongue. With my teeth and with my hands and with my skin, so burning hot. I want to express my love for you with my mind. And I want my mind's best expression of my love for you to be my aching hardness buried so deep within you. Not agape. Not eros. Both. Not soul. Not body. Both. Worship and lust, paired. Devotion and longing, paired. Hunger and feasting, paired. You and I, paired, expressing emotional love physically and physical love emotionally and the two together, always together, always paired. Always the same one thing, always nothing if the one is without the other. This is what I want. I join my body to yours to express how deeply I yearn to join my mind, my soul, my life, my being to yours.

And this way of making love is the best way of expressing that. We are locked together, locked like the links of that chain. Your legs locked around me bind me to you and the hasp of my hungering binds you to me and we are locked together in a slow, seething dance of passion, a dance I want never to end. This is the way I want you, Gwen, this is the way I want you forever.

But you hunger and I hunger and you ache and I ache and you writhe and writhe and writhe and your reaching, grasping, clawing, gnawing makes me hunger and ache and writhe within you. I want never to finish but I must, I must, I must. And I can tell by your breathing, by the breaths you are too busy to take, that you must, you must, you must finish with me. So now, at last, I'll help you.

I clasp my hands at your hips and now you are mine to do with as I please. Did you have complete mastery before? Now you are completely mastered--except that I am so completely slayed by your mastery of me. But now I can pull you down hard against me, pull you down, down, down, until I am buried to the depths within you, until your pubic bone is grinding tight against my own. This is the way I will take you now, hard thrusts covering tiny fractions of an inch. I want you hard against me, hard against me, hard against me, but I want you never away from me, never so far away that I can't feel every hair of you. I'll grind myself against you, pushing deeper and deeper within you and I'll know I've found the full and final depth of you when I hear your breath catch and tear in a whimper and when I feel the waves of ecstasy pulsing, pulsing, pulsing all down the length of you.

That's when I'll release myself, that's when my ecstasy will pair itself to yours. I'll feel you pulsing, pulsing, pulsing and you'll feel me pulsing, pulsing, pulsing, pumping you full of my seed. I'll pull you tighter and tighter and tighter to me and you'll know by my own whimpering how much you've given me, how much you've taken from me, how much you've given me.

Don't stop. Don't move. Don't you dare go anywhere. Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me a hundred dozen everywhere, kiss the drops of sweat on my forehead, catch them on your tongue as they roll down my cheek. Hold me, hold me, hold me--hold me with every inch of your skin. Keep your legs locked around me and your arms locked around me and keep your soul locked together with mine. Just because we've finished, it doesn't mean anything has to end. I want this never to end. Keep me inside you even as I grow small and weak, even as the paired nectars of our loving drain out of you and trickle down along my groin. Keep me locked inside you until I grow hard again. Our driving, driving, driving may have to be punctuated by stops, but I want for it never to end. Keep me locked inside you--for my mind, my soul, my life, my being are locked inside yours.

Keep me locked inside you forever...

Devin

## Chapter 5

“Do you know how much I enjoy watching you walk?” Devin asked.

Gwen smiled demurely and he knew it was a pose, because, while she was many different things, often many at once, she was never demure.

“When you walk, nothing above your hips moves, not if you don’t want it to. You walk with your feet and your knees and your thighs and your hips. You don’t swing your arms or sway your shoulders or bob your head. Your upper body is perfectly still.”

“Is that so unusual?”

“I think it is. When I first noticed it, I wanted to say you were languid. But languor is such an ugly kind of...”

“Lassitude?” She didn’t quite laugh at him.

“Precisely. You’re a vibrant snot, and there is nothing languid about you. And yet you move so gracefully, even at top speed, that you make everyone else look sloppy and frenetic and spastic.”

“Sometimes I wiggle my behind. Does that qualify me to rejoin the human race?”

“To the contrary. Your butt alone is enough to make every other woman hang her head in shame.”

“I see. Do you suppose the other women snubbed Helen of Troy in the powder room?”

He laughed and that was good enough. They were walking on the beach at Plum Island, a wildlife refuge near Newburyport, south of the New Hampshire border. The children—Hunter and Spencer and Gretchen—had run on ahead of them, racing somebody’s dog to some unknown destiny. The day was very clear and surprisingly warm for mid-December. There were a few people on the beach, most of them running their dogs or running the legs off their children. The air was rich with the smell of the sea.

She said, “I like this sweater.” He had bought big, bulky Irish wool cable-knit sweaters for all of them. It made them look like one big family and she knew that was what he had wanted. Hiking boots and blue jeans and five peo-

ple driving up the coast in the Range Rover dressed all alike. “I hope you have plans to take me some place where you can take it off me.”

“Don’t ever tease me,” he quoted. “I can’t say no to you and I won’t permit you to say no to me. So be prepared to deliver what you promise. Because I’m always prepared to collect.”

She smiled at him and that was good enough.

Hunter came racing back carrying the carapace of an expired crab. He brought it to Gwen, not Devin, and that was just fine. He said, “Look at the turtle shell I found!”

“It’s awfully red for a turtle, isn’t it?”

“It’s a red turtle. There’s a *bunch* of ’em here.” With that he raced off again.

“He likes you a lot,” Devin said. “He talks about you all the time.”

“I can’t think that I’ve done so very much to earn his regard.”

Devin shrugged. “You treat him like I do, like Gretchen does. Like a person, not a baby, not something to be talked down to and dismissed. There’s probably more. You’re so much at ease with yourself. Maybe you put him at his ease, too. Certainly you have that effect on me.”

“Are you so terribly anxious when I’m not around?”

“...Actually, yes. Now I am. I hate it when you’re not around, and I have no patience in the hours before I get to see you again. Is that what you wanted to hear? But no, I’m not normally anxious without you, and I’m sure I was passably calm before we met. But when I’m with you... It’s different. It’s a calm, but it’s a frenzied calm, a savage and brutal and frantic kind of peace. I’m infused by you all the time, but when you’re near me, when I can see you, when I can *smell* you—that’s when I feel complete.”

“...You’ve never been in love before, have you, Devin?”

“I don’t think I have. Nothing like this, never. How about you?”

She said nothing but she grasped his hand in hers and laced her fingers between his. They walked that way, hand in hand, for a long time.

“We used to stay here every summer. Me, my mother, my grandpa and Candy. My dad when he could. The whole month of August, every year.”

Gwen swept her eyes from the ocean to the beach to the miles and miles of barren dunes. “Did you sleep in tents?”

He laughed and squeezed her hand in his. “Not out here. At the other end of the island. There are beach houses there, and my grandpa would rent one for the month and he’d stay in the city all week and come out on the weekends. My mother and Candy and I would stay out here for the whole month. We’re in the lee of Cape Ann, so the worst storms never make it here, and what I remember is day after day of hazy, sultry summer days.”

“I’m amazed that a beach this beautiful should have so few people on it.”

“There were even fewer back then. This island belonged to the Navy, going back to the Revolutionary War. We’re right at the mouth of the Merrimac River, and the Merrimac was America’s first industrial highway. Quaint little Newburyport used to be a real player in world trade. Anyway, the Navy clung to this island long after they had any reason to, and it was only about twenty years ago that it was turned over to the federal park system. When I was growing up, *nobody* came

out to this part of the island. All month long it was just me and the gulls and the ducks and the geese.”

“Whenever you talk about your youth, you always make it sound so perfect. It’s really quite disgusting of you.”

He shrugged. “Do you suppose the other men snubbed Ulysses when they were picking teams for softball games?”

“Touché, mon brave. A worm done to a turn, who could argue with that?”

He pulled his hand from hers and pulled her under his arm. He said, “I had my first... affair of the heart on this island. A very lively young lady named Catherine Goldstraw. Scots-Irish and English Catholic, every persecuted minority in the British Empire, all under one head of shiny black hair. Pale blue eyes and lips like a china doll.”

“Am I to be made jealous?”

He smiled and she could feel his smile in his chest. “Like Helen herself, nothing can compare to you. I’m just telling you what happened. I was fifteen, almost sixteen, and she was at least a year older, maybe two years. I was deeply smitten with her in a puppy-love kind of way, and she led me all over this island, her two fingers hooked right into my nostrils.”

“Oh, so now I understand why you are immune to my charms.” She laughed.

“She wasn’t like you, though. She had your spark and your energy, but there was a darkness to her, too. I was reading Ibsen that summer and I thought she was like Hedda. Not stupidly self-destructive, but as likely to find her amusement in the dark as in the light. That’s actually a funny thing to say, because the night before she left here, she taught me astronomy.”

Gwen looked confused. “Weren’t you interested in astronomy before then?”

“Sorry. Euphemism. I mean she showed me the stars. My first time. Very big surprise for me.” Gwen said nothing. He stopped walking and lifted her chin to look at her. Her eyes bore the smallest touch of sadness. “I hope I didn’t hurt you, talking about that.”

“No. How could you? I was just thinking that I wish I could have been your first, your first and last and only. And I wish you could have been that for me.”

He smiled at her and it was smile more warming than a kiss. “You’re my first love, Gwen. The first time I’ve ever been in love. Everything up to now has been practice, and I’m *glad* I didn’t know you at fifteen or seventeen or twenty-eight, because I would have screwed the whole thing up. I have you now because I’ve earned you and because I deserve you and because I know finally how to treat you as you deserve to be treated. I couldn’t have had you when I was younger, because I was too stupid to appreciate your immense value. You’re my first, my last, my always. Don’t ever doubt it.”

She buried her head in his chest and squeezed him hard about the middle. They stood that way for a long time and he could feel her hair tickling at his chin and his cheeks as he looked out at the sun hanging over the ocean. The smell of the sea had woven itself into the scent of her, and the two together made him feel very much at home, very much at peace.

He spoke to her, murmured to her. “I love you more than anything, Gwen. I didn’t know, I had no way of knowing it was possible to love someone so

much. You’re my last no matter what happens, because nothing could ever replace you in my life. Nothing...”

Without looking up she started walking and they walked that way, her arms locked around his middle, his arm over her shoulder, her face laid against his chest. Up ahead the children were playing Monkey in the Middle with a Frisbee and Hunter had no idea that the older two were spotting him many, many advantages. Devin sat down on a dune and leaned back on his elbow and Gwen snuggled into the lee of his shoulder, where the worst storms could never come.

“You love the wild and the innocent,” she said. “The unfallen—that’s another word you use all the time. Do you know what I love? I love sovereignty. Self-control. Self-responsibility. Self-realization. Self-reproach, even, should reproach ever be necessary. I love Ibsen too, but do you know what is my favorite play? It’s *Cyrano*. Not for Roxane. Who cares about another dumb blonde with too many boyfriends? No, what I love in that play is *Cyrano* himself. He says, ‘I stand, not high it may be, but alone’, and it takes my breath away, every time.”

Devin said nothing. He wove his fingers into her hair and combed down slowly, treasuring the silkiness of her tresses.

“Do you understand what you’ve done to me? You told me all about your silence and distance and lies. Do you understand that story from the other perspective? Do you know what those women are doing when their men are trying so hard to hide from them?”

“...I’ve always thought of it as two clams, one striving to be closed as tightly as possible, the other as open as possible.”

“That’s not half bad—as analogies go. A clam is either impervious to injury or it is totally vulnerable. Your men ‘clam up’, don’t they? They refuse to ‘open up’ and share with their women. Do you think the women are opening up as much as possible, making themselves completely vulnerable?”

“I’ve always thought so. I have virtually no first-hand evidence, of course.”

“That’s just what she says she’s doing. What she’s really doing is betraying who she is, in the hope that, by being someone different, *he* will treat her differently.”

“...You’ve lost me.”

“It’s the business I’m in, isn’t it? Fifteen days to a brand new you! The thirty-minute makeover! How to be the woman of his dreams! Reduce! Replace! Refinish! Renounce! Rejoice in your elemental nothingness! I don’t write that rubbish, I never have. But there’s plenty of it out there. It’s a simple enough syllogism: If I change myself, it will change him. If I lose these twenty pounds, if I try this new hair style, if I ignore my own interests and pretend to be fascinated by his, if I stand on my hands and applaud with my feet, *then* he’ll notice me, *then* he’ll treat me as I want to be treated, *then* we’ll be soul mates instead of just house mates.”

“Is it really that bad...?”

“Dear god! It’s so much worse. He doesn’t love me, not really, and I know that but I can’t say the words. So instead I will fold myself lengthwise along the spine. Who knows? Perhaps he’ll love me then. If he doesn’t, I will fold myself in half again at the waist. Then again at the knees and shoulders. Then again and again and again,

making myself smaller and smaller and less and less demanding. Less needy, I hope. Less obtrusive. Less an annoyance to him. Less a curse, to speak the awful truth. He makes himself unavailable, so I strive with all my might to make myself unavailing. He wants to be uncompromised, and I do nothing but compromise myself, night and day, awake and asleep, always. This is my destiny. This is my choice. This is my life, a life composed entirely of absences and emptiness and nothingness.”

He said nothing and she wondered if he was listening until a tear dripped off his cheek and onto hers.

“Did you understand what I wrote on the mirror? ‘Be who you are.’ The most important thing I know. Feminism is such a stupid joke. Women in the boardroom? Women in the legislature? Women on top or women without men—what does that have to do with anything? Women subordinate *themselves*. By choice. They never really learn how to stand alone, anyway, and they think it’s what they have to do to get men. And the kind of men they get that way just make it all worse. They’re not very much to begin with, and they betray what little they are for a kiss and a promise, and they go on betraying themselves, year after year, with the sage guidance of all those allegedly feminist women’s magazines. Be who you *are*. You must be a sovereign, an individual, a soul unto your own. Until you can do that, you can’t have anything worth having—not love, not money, not things—and you can’t hang on to the things you get.

“Do what you want.’ What *you* want. Not what your parents want. Not what your husband wants. Not what the sisterhood wants. Do what *you* want. Follow your own mind, follow your own heart, follow your own star. Stand alone—not high it may be, but alone. Do you know who I respect? I respect divorced women who stay divorced. The ones who rush right into another disaster have learned nothing and probably never will. But the women who have subordinated and renounced and deferred and *still* wound up out in the cold, the ones who learned better, those are the women I respect. Self-control, self-responsibility, self-realization, all in abundance.

“Have what you love.’ It’s a procedure. An algorithm—is that the right word? You may not be able to have what you love. Probably it’s the rare case to have *all* that you love. But you can’t have any of it until you are fully you, until you have ceased to betray and renounce yourself, until you have given yourself permission to *be*.

“Permission to be... There’s a poem in there, isn’t there? ‘I am Ozymandias, king of kings. Look upon my works ye mighty and despair.’ Shelley was sneering at the frailty and mortality and futility of greatness, but I think he got it just wrong. Ozymandias was mortal, but he was proud of his enormity while he lived. That’s what I despise about women, that’s what I despise in the Not For Women Only woman. All she wants is an excuse to grow smaller still, to be less of herself, to be less a person, less an entity, smaller and less significant than a speck of dust. Devin, do you love me because I’m so terribly small?”

He laughed. “Hardly.”

“Do you love me because I’m so completely deferential? Because I’m so unassuming and self-effacing and pliable? Do you love me because I’m so diminutive, the perfect little pocket-sized helpmeet?”

He laughed harder. “You know better than that. I love you because you’re immense. I hadn’t known you for half-an-hour when I compared you to Prometheus in my mind. Does that answer your question?”

She smiled and even though her face was pressed into his chest he could feel her smiling. “I told you I’ve stopped editing myself for people. I was never a Not For Women Only woman. I never diminished myself or degraded myself or denounced myself. But I used to hide myself—*most* of myself. I stopped doing that because it was useless. In hiding myself, I was pretending for others to be someone I’m not. Not posing or acting, not portraying a lie. But forbearing to live the whole truth of my life. That had ugly consequences. First, it made *me* feel awful, made me feel there was something wrong with who I am, that I had to hide myself in shame. And second, it was horribly stupid strategically. Do you see why? The people you might attract being other than whom you are are not the people you would wish to attract. This is so stupid and so obvious, but it took me years to figure it out. To the extent that I wanted people in my life, I wanted people like me—people like you, Devin Dwyer. So how did I go about trying to find them? By being *not* like me. Very stupid. Very common, but very stupid.”

Devin said, “I’m glad you are who you are. I told you it’s you—the you of the inside—that I love.”

He felt her smile again. “Last Friday at the hotel, I thought about saying something smart like, ‘You’re the best man I’ve had in years.’ The joke of it is, you’re the only man I’ve had in years. I don’t even remember what love-making was like, before. I’d like to say that being with you is better than anyone, ever, but I can’t even make a comparison. Being with you is perfect, though, and not just when you’re within me. From the very beginning you said you wanted nothing but honesty, and I’ve been nothing but honest with you. I’ve been almost completely unedited with you, and I’ve liked it a lot.”

He said nothing, just pulled her more tightly to him and watched the children playing on the beach.

She said, “You promised to tell me about your divorce, but all you really told me about your was your marriage. Not even your marriage, really, just about how marriages go wrong. On the night we met, you said your divorce was ugly. How was it ugly?”

He took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. “Okay, there are three kinds of divorces in the United States. One, he capitulates instantaneously and pays a lot of money in child support to see his children almost never. Two, he fights like a dervish and then is ordered to pay a lot of money in child support to see his children almost never. Three, she sticks him with the kids and pays nothing in child support.”

“Is that your situation, number three?”

“No, I’m the fourth way, a statistical anomaly. I was headed for number two, except the almost unprecedented happened: I won. Did you see all the dads and kids at McDonald’s?” They had eaten at a McDonald’s in Danvers on their way up, at Hunter’s insistence. “All the non-custodial daddies with their non-custodial kids? I see them everywhere. It makes me very sad. Probably a lot of

those guys didn't know what they had while they had it, but they sure know it now. They get to pay thirty or forty percent of their income, after taxes, and if they're really lucky they get to see their kids fifteen percent of the time. It's not as bad for the kids as growing up without a father, but it's not as good as growing up with one, either."

"What was different in your case?"

Devin smiled. "I had two inestimable advantages. Nicole was very stupid and the judge was very smart. Understand, I was a sure loser. I have testicles—you've told me how ugly they are. In divorce court, there's a fifteen yard penalty per testicle on every play. If you think feminism is a joke, try living in a man's world. It's a man's world except that a married man spends eighty cents of every dollar he brings home on people other than himself. It's a man's world except he'll die fifteen years before her, work himself into the grave, and she'll live those fifteen extra years on money he salted away. It's a man's world except that the thing that makes a man a man and not just an overgrown adolescent—his fatherhood—can be taken from him at any time, and he has almost no power to resist."

"But I've heard that fathers win in something like seven out of ten cases that go to trial."

"*That go to trial.* Almost no divorces go to trial. All the preliminary proceedings are designed to break him financially, so he'll capitulate. The tiny number of contested divorces that go to trial are almost all sure winners—she's a drug addict, she's a nymphomaniac, she's in prison. And even then, fathers still lose three out of ten. I know there are a lot of bad fathers out there, but there are a lot of bad mothers, too. Put a good father against a bad mother, and the mother wins. It's a man's world, except when it isn't."

"Anyway, custody battles work like this. She wants out of the marriage—three fourths of all divorces are filed by women—and she by now despises her soon-to-be-ex-husband. She wants to hurt him, hurt him as badly as she can, but the only weapon she has left is the children. So she asks for some insane restriction on visitation. He's going to have to pay huge child support and he will *never* be permitted to see his own children. Perhaps it happens that men do this vindictively, too, but I've never heard of it happening that way. Anyway, his choice is either to sue for peace—more money for *some* access—or fight for custody. If he fights for custody, he'd better have something pretty compelling to say, because her lawyer is going to invent some whoppers about him. I told you I'm a fanatic about the truth. It's because I've been lied about so viciously. So a dad fighting for custody has to have something very serious to say, and he has to be able to prove it beyond all dispute, because as long as those testicles are hanging between his legs nobody cares."

"I had nothing to say. Nicole's okay as a mother, and I'm okay as a father, and that means I lose. She had been adulterous—which counts for nothing—but her new lover lives in New York. An old boyfriend, and she'd hooked up with him again by email, very modern. She wanted sole custody of Hunter, and she wanted to move him to New York, to her new boyfriend's apartment. Again this counts for nothing. In Massachusetts you can do this—at the discretion of the judge. But the judge was a sly old coot just like my grandpa. I knew I was okay the minute I saw him. At the trial, he made it very plain that he thought moving a child away

from either parent was wrong. That the state's interest in the child was in keeping the family together, and that the way to do that was to prevent the child from being moved away. Which did Nicole want more, Hunter or the new boyfriend?"

"A regular King Solomon, your judge was."

"I thought the same thing. It's the law at its very best, and I rarely have good things to say about the law. So I was headed for number two and wound up with number three. All she had to do was say, 'Of course I'll stay,' and she would have won. I'd pay some huge fraction of my income to see Hunter every other weekend and Wednesday nights for dinner. Instead she dared the judge to take her child away and he did. I'm the anomaly, a dad who won."

"And does she pay you child support?"

He smiled derisively and that was answer enough.

"Spencer goes to visit his father at Christmas. That was our compromise. Dirk didn't give a damn until I was leaving. He'd come around two or three times a year. Sometimes send a birthday gift, sometimes not. But when I told him I was moving to America, he insisted that he had to maintain his relationship with his son. He's never paid a penny of support either, but that's not the point, is it? So Spencer goes over for two weeks at Christmas and three weeks in the summer, and Dirk pays the airfare, amazingly enough."

"When does he leave?"

"Friday. The nineteenth."

Devin smiled devilishly. "Hunter spends Christmas with his mother, Thanksgiving with me. He leaves on Friday and comes back on Saturday the third of January, two weeks and a day."

"Am I to infer from that smile that you're planning our honeymoon?"

"You may infer what you wish, my lady. If you want to stay at my house for those two weeks, you'll be very welcome."

"What if I want you to stay at my house?"

"Your neighbors will spy on you. But if you don't mind, I don't mind. I love sleeping with you, but what I really want to do is *sleep* with you. I want to hold you all night long. I want to hold you forever..."

She threw her head back on his shoulder and pretended to swoon.

He said, "Sit up a minute. I'll be right back."

He walked down to where Gretchen stood. He said, "Gwen and I are going to hike over to the other side of the island. You guys stay here or we'll never find you."

Hunter said, "Can I come with you?"

"It looks like Gretchen and Spencer need your help learning to play Frisbee."

They had brought a backpack half full of supplies and Devin threw it over his shoulder. He helped Gwen to her feet and they walked across the white sand of the dunes. They were almost to the other shore when he stopped in a deep depression in the sand. He said, "Where's the wind?"

She pointed to South of East and he walked toward a dune in that direction. He dropped the backpack and dug into it, pulling out a big wool blanket. He spread the blanket out flat and invited her to sit down.

After a moment or two, she said, "It's warm. It's very warm..."

"A trick my grandpa taught me. It's always warm in the sun if you can get out of the wind. The dune blocks the wind. The air is still cold, but the sun on your skin makes you feel very warm. You could sunbathe here and not get cold."

She smiled wickedly. "Is that a challenge?"

He smiled in return. "Maybe it is." He sat down next to her and took her face in his hands and kissed her with the longing he'd felt all day, all week.

He stretched out on the blanket and she laid down next to him, nestled into his side. They watched the gulls skirling overhead and heard the wind whistling around the sides of the dune. He stroked at her hair and she hugged him very tightly across the middle.

He said, "Hunter sleeps with me like this sometimes. He'll wake up in the night to go pee and then he'll come to my bed instead of his. He'll tuck himself into my arm and go to sleep that way, both of us very serene. He's slept on me since he was an infant, and I'll be very sorry when he finally stops forever. I've thought about sleeping with the two of you that way, Hunter on one side of me, you on the other. I think that would be just heavenly..."

She snuggled in a little closer. "You're seducing me, aren't you?"

"Not yet I'm not."

"Not that way. You're seducing me with your family. With this great orb of warmth that surrounds you."

"Not by intention, if I am. I hope you don't think... I hope you don't think I'm trying to manipulate you."

"No, silly. It's just the way you are. People are either all the way in with you, or they're all the way out. You have the magical gift of putting people in the center of your orb and saying—quite silently—this is the way things should be. And poof! They are that way, and everyone involved agrees to their toes that this is the way things should be. I had no idea what it meant to be intimate until I met you..."

"Please, stop. This is too much."

"No, I mean it. I thought intimacy was sexual intimacy, and if not that then the kind of snickering gossip one hears in the powder room. I am always snubbed from that, by the way. I guess I knew that it was the kind of connection I have with Spencer, that kind of closeness that needs no repeated demonstrations. But with you it's just there, all the time. The people who are close to you are *that* close to you, no separation at all. You grant them full access and full sight of you and full visibility in your sight. Am I making the least kind of sense to you?"

"...Maybe the least kind." He chuckled.

"Devin Dwyer, you know exactly what I mean. You're an astrophysicist of all things. At M.I.T. of all places. Who, on hearing those facts, would not presume that you were cold and aloof and remote and insectile? As unapproachable as the stars themselves. And yet you're just the opposite. You're lit by the flames of the poet's passion and you shed your warmth everywhere, all the time."

"...It doesn't have to be one or the other, Gwen. The truth is, it can't be. Heathcliff was half a man because he wouldn't learn to use his mind. Your insect-

tile scientist is half a man if he doesn't learn to understand his passions. We name all these dichotomies and we say we're describing opposites that can never be united. But a person can't be whole—can't be sovereign, can't be unfallen—*until* they are united. Do I love you with my body? Yes. Do I love you with my mind, with my soul? Yes. Is there a distinction? Yes. Is there a meaningful difference? Never. We are both, we are reasoning animals. The insectile scientists and the nerds strive to deny their bodies. Heathcliff and the raging fembots try to deny their minds. It can't be. It won't work. Nothing can come of it but disaster, and nothing ever does."

"You're back to fathertongue and mothertongue again... Aren't you?"

He chuckled. "I'm *always* back to fathertongue and mothertongue. If I'm any good at intimacy, it's because I learned to speak mothertongue—from my grandfather, more than anyone else."

She sat up and unlaced and took off her boots. He said, "What are you doing?"

"You know what I'm doing." She stood up and unbuttoned her jeans and pushed them down her legs, her panties with them. "I want you to speak to me in mothertongue, baby." He sat up and leaned back against his hands and she stood over him, her better secrets almost in a better place. She still had her socks on, and her sweater and her shirt. She said, "This would make a beautiful photograph, don't you think?" She laughed and tossed her hair behind her and a gust of wind caught it and carried it back and she looked so free, so lost to the world of strictures and proprieties and prohibitions. "Sit up and cross your legs. We'll try this your way."

He kicked off his boots and shucked his jeans and then he was as naked as she was, two half-dressed people in big, bulky Irish wool cable-knit sweaters. He crossed his legs and she put her hands on his shoulders and descended. She said, "Help me down. Don't let me fall." He held her body as she slipped down the front of him and locked her legs behind his back. She ended up with her behind in the cup formed by his crossed legs, her own arms and legs embracing him tightly. "Oh, this is divine. We don't have to do anything else, this is plenty. I've never been so hugged before."

He dug his fingers into her hair and pulled her face to his, kissing her hard. She towered over him and he was seemingly completely at her mercy. She set her arms on his shoulders and lifted herself enough to put him where he could do some good. Then she pressed herself against him and kissed him lightly on the lips and cheeks and neck.

She said, "No one's ever done this before."

"Seduced you on the beach? I didn't do nothin', your honor. It was all her fault."

"No one's ever treated me like a person before. And not just a woman. Do you know what I mean? No one has ever brought me on an outing with his family. And no one has ever, ever taken Spencer along for anything. Dinner, the theater, the symphony, the ballet, awful little supposedly romantic nightclubs. Taxis and limousines and gowns and glass slippers, Cinderella always coming out, doomed to a life of endless cotillions..."

His face was buried in her neck and his hands were buried under her shirt, treasuring her back. She lifted herself a little and took him inside her. She sank to him slowly, nibbling at his lips and watching his eyes.

“Yes...,” she said. “This could be *very* good. This could take years...” She moved her body against his slowly, like the waves dragging against the sand. They kissed, their lips touching, their tongues touching, nibbling, biting, darting, teasing, probing hungrily then breaking away to dart and tease again.

He said, “Do you know the word integrity? Do you know what it means? We have all sort of ideas about what that word means, but the word literally means ‘wholeness’. There’s more, though. To be integrated means to be composed entirely of one thing. No impurities. No corruption... A monolith has integrity. It’s a mountain composed entirely of one rock. A man, a woman, can have integrity, too. Not just honesty—everything. No impurities. No corruption. One idea, expressed in infinite variations...”

“What... What are you doing?”

Her eyes were closed but she felt him smile against her lips. “I’m making love with you. Do you hear the word integer in there? An integer is a number with no fractional part, but integer literally means ‘untouched’. Isn’t that a beautiful idea, to be untouched? So pure, so Apollonian. White sheets flapping on a clothesline on a summer day, kissed only by the sun and the breeze...”

Her arms were still planted on his shoulders and her fingers were dug into his hair. His head was thrown back and she was kissing up and down his neck as he spoke to her.

“That’s what I mean by unfallen. Not just uncensured, unchastised, uncondemned. Untouched by evil. Adam and Eve were condemned for trying to be both, for trying to be more than animals, for daring to reason. I will not be damned for no crime, damned in advance for being what I am. There was no fall of man, and I was born unfallen. I can choose to be evil if I wish, but I can also choose only to be good. This is my choice, to be good, and to work always to be better.”

Gwen was lost but it didn’t matter. He was sure she was with him, every step of the way. He clasped his hands to her hips and pulled her hard to him. “No impurities. No corruption. No sin.”

She moaned and he knew she was very close. His lips brushing against hers, he said, “No secrets.”

“No secrets,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper.

“No lies.”

“No lies.”

“No betrayals.”

“No... betrayals.”

“No shame.”

“No shame. God, Devin! Never any shame...”

“No regrets.”

“No regrets...”

And she was there and he was there and their lips were touching and their tongues were touching and she could see nothing, nothing, nothing but his eyes and he said, “Gwen! Dear sweet perfect love... No regrets, ever, no matter what...”

She collapsed against him and hid her face behind his neck. She cried out and he didn’t know if it was from joy or pain or agony. She balled up her fists and pounded his back through his sweater. “Damn you! Damn you, damn you, damn you!”

He pushed hard on her shoulders, pushed her away so he could see her. “Gwen! What is it?”

“Nothing. Everything. Everything, god damn you.” She fell against him again and kissed at his neck and his ear and his cheek. “It’s the treason in your eyes. No betrayals, Devin. No betrayals, ever...”

She sought for his lips and kissed him lightly, hungrily, again and again. There were tears rolling down her cheeks and he understood nothing, nothing but that he loved her.

After a long time, she pushed on his shoulders and stood herself up. She looked down at herself, at him. “This could be messier than we had anticipated...”

“Daddyman to the rescue.” He dug into the backpack and pulled out two small plastic bags. He tossed one to her. “Wet washcloths. I always travel with five or six, have since Hunter was a baby. Shall I avert my eyes?”

“You know all my secrets.”

“...Do I, Gwen?”

She saw the concern on his face and she had no way to answer him. “Get dressed. We’ve taken a frightful risk. If the children come looking for us, we’ll both be sorry.”

He frowned but said nothing. He set about getting his clothes back on.

She held his hand on the way back but he was silent and she was silent and she didn’t know quite what to say. They sat together on the beach, not quite touching. She wanted to lay her head on his chest but she didn’t. Hunter came bounding over and he threw himself into her arms and snuggled up tight against her. Devin smiled at her, smiled at the two of them, and she thought everything might be all right.

Spencer and Gretchen were stunting with a soccer ball and Gwen said, “Those two seem to be getting on quite well.”

“Just as friends, though. I talked to Gretchen about that.”

“All I meant was as friends. I think it’s good for Spencer to have a girl he can just be himself with, without having to be so painfully shy.”

“It’s good for Gretchen, too. She’s god’s own homebody, so she ends up spending all her time with us. I’m grateful—and I know her parents are grateful—that’s she’s not a part of that B.U. drinking scene. But Hunter and I aren’t exactly her age.”

“Not exactly...”

“Now you’re stuck,” Devin said. He gestured with his head. Hunter had fallen asleep on her breast.

“Does he always go to sleep so quickly?”

“Like throwing a switch. One minute he’s jumping on the bed and shouting at the top of his lungs, the next minute he’s snoring. He can fall asleep standing up.”

"It's getting late, isn't it?" The sun was hanging low on the horizon and the night's cool was moving in.

"No, it's just winter in New England. There's a seafood place I know on the other side of the river. I thought we could go there for dinner. Steamers like you wouldn't believe. Do you know what steamers are?"

"Tell me."

"Clams steamed in the shell. You dig them out by the neck, dip them in water to wash away the sand and grit, dip them in butter to add cholesterol, then eat 'em whole. Just fabulous. They have lobsters like you can't get in Boston, too, plus a lot of other seafood, all today's catch."

"Is it a nice place?"

"Just awful. It's supposed to look like a boat, but it doesn't. Inside it's like a cafeteria that hasn't been remodeled in forty years. The food is terrific. The atmosphere is abysmal. It balances."

"It sounds wonderful. What will we do about my young charge here, though?"

"He'll wake up when it's time to eat. Then he'll go back to sleep in the truck. You're going to want me to carry him, though."

"I can manage."

"He's pretty heavy..."

"It's been a long time since I've had a child in my arms. I... I find I miss it..."

Devin stood up then helped her up so she could stand without disturbing Hunter. He dusted the sand off his behind and hers.

He was going down to round up Gretchen and Spencer but she stopped him, grabbed him on the sleeve of his sweater. She said, "Devin. I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for being so good to me. Thank you for sharing so much of your life with me. Thank you for sharing so much of your *self* with me..."

"...That sounds so final."

"I don't mean for it to. I'm just very grateful to you, that's all. More grateful, I think, than I know how to express." She smiled winsomely and it made her look so young and beautiful that he ached from his throat to his chest.

He put his hand on her face and brushed his thumb against the hairs of her cheek. "You've given me more than I ever thought to wish for. I think we're even."

She looked down and he didn't know why. He thought it was to kiss his hand.

Together they walked off the beach, side-by-side, like a family, five people in big, bulky Irish wool cable-knit sweaters and hiking boots. Gwen carried Hunter in her arms and Devin had Spencer under one arm and Gretchen under the other, the backpack thrown across his back. She felt herself very much a part of his family, and she knew that was what he wanted. She knew that was all he had ever wanted. Great and immense and gloried and unfallen, a life together without one second of guilt or apology or remorse...

I don't think we're even, she said to her soul. I don't think we're even at all...

## *Interval—Love among the Vikings*

Date: Sun, 14 Dec 1997 23:14:36 -0500

To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu

From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com

Subject: Love among the Vikings

To sing, to laugh, to dream,  
To walk in my own way and be alone,  
Free, with an eye to see things as they are,  
A voice that means manhood--to cock my hat  
Where I choose--At a word, a Yes, a No,  
To fight--or write. To travel any road  
Under the sun, under the stars, nor doubt  
If fame or fortune lie beyond the bourne--  
Never to make a line I have not heard  
In my own heart; yet, with all modesty  
To say: "My soul, be satisfied with flowers,  
With fruit, with weeds even; but gather them  
In one garden you may call your own."  
So, when I win some triumph, by some chance,  
Render no share to Caesar--in a word,  
I am too proud to be a parasite,  
And if my nature wants the germ that grows  
Towering to heaven like the mountain pine,  
Or like the oak, sheltering multitudes--  
I stand, not high it may be--but alone!  
--Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*

I don't think I'm going to write about love-making, at least not tonight. I want to, and I think it would be thrilling, but I don't want any part of reality to be prescribed or circumscribed or in any way delimited by my explications. I want to tease you with no more



than the scent--like the smell of dinner in the oven, like the smell of water in the desert--and leave you in the same besotted condition I find myself--mouth watering, nostrils flared, pupils dilated, pulse pounding at my temples, my tongue thick and useless, my chest flush and full, tiny beads of sweat gathering on my upper lip. I want the moment before you take me again to last an eternity. As rich as having you infinitely, endlessly has been, I don't want it to rob me of one instant of this ravenous anticipation, this exquisite hungering for you.

Have I made you weak? As weak as you have made me? You make me write beautifully, Devin. Not coherently, always, but beautifully. I've been writing and writing and writing for years, but this is a whole new world for me, a whole new level of exultation. Whatever else I have from you, I am grateful to you for bringing me to this.

And I do think I may write about "Love among the Vikings", because I want you to understand me. If I have the power to make you weak, I derive it from your own power to palsy me so thoroughly. I am a skyscraper of a woman, a giant of steel and stone, and yet I love it that you are able to reduce me to rubble with your eyes, with your smile, with your caress, with your loving words. I am vulnerable to no one but you, and yet I would wish to make myself totally vulnerable to you, open to any wound you might choose to inflict, confident that you, too, are a giant of steel and stone, confident that at the moment of agony, at the moment of the unendurable, you will collapse to rubble beside me. There is no violence within me but for the awful blows of tenderness. There is no savagery but the savagery of my unrestrained passion for you. I would not dominate you, and I would not submit to you, except in that moment of unbearable ecstasy when I must do both at once.

I think you may be a deeper, more soulful kisser than I am. I like to tease and turn and dart and quiver--and attack. I like to kiss deeply, the crowning glory of a fevered, full-body embrace. But I also very much love to graze my lips to yours, barely touching you at all, or trail the very tip of my tongue over the skin of your cheeks. I trail my lips and tongue down along your neck, biting gently, then not so gently, at that taut-stretched skin. I could spend hours and days and eternities kissing at your neck and your heaving chest, but I hunger for your hungry lips.

Embrace me now, fully, when we are not so hideously arrayed in fully-clothed propriety, and let the twining of our tongues match the twining of our bodies, the twining of our hearts. I am your warfaring Viking, my dearest one, and I rage and burn and voyage and return for you alone. When I raise my sword proudly to the sky, it is in the hope that it will slice away a shaft of sunlight and rain

it down on your radiance. When I drive my sword into the mountaintop, it is to stake not my claim, but yours. My empire, my body, my passions--your dominions, captured and won. When I bury the sword of my tongue within you, it is to invite your conquest anew. The world is mine but I am yours, and you won me with a kiss.

I do feel that way sometimes. I do feel that way tonight--every sweet metaphor perfectly inverted. But it's only fair to tell you--sometimes I don't. I do think of myself as a Viking warrior, very much a Norse man. I identify with Cyrano and dozens of other romantic heroes--all men. There's nothing odd about me, I'm quite sure. But the life I've lived and the battles I've fought and won have given me the kind of independence men grow up with, but women--if they are lucky enough--have to discover. I stand, not high it may be, but alone, Devin Dwyer, and there is within me a fear of you to match my passion for you. You've done nothing wrong. There's nothing for you to fix--men being such avid repairmen. And there's nothing for you to do for me--men being ever at the ready to take charge even where no charge can be taken. The problem, I suppose, is that there's only room for one Viking on the mountaintop. To answer to no one means, ultimately, to speak to no one, doesn't it?

It's a pretty little mess, beyond all doubt. I haven't been able to say any of this to you in person, so I'm taking the coward's way out and saying it in email. There's more, but this will do for now. I love everything we've had so far, but I fear what is to come as much as I hunger for it. I have never once been conflicted, at least not since Spencer was born, so this is yet another unprecedented response you have drawn from me.

I wish I could say more. I wish I knew more. It would be much easier without you. I'd hate it without you...

Gwen

Date: Tue, 16 Dec 1997 00:32:41 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: ...!

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less  
Had half impaired the nameless grace  
Which waves in every raven tress  
Or softly lightens o'er her face,  
Where thoughts serenely sweet express  
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek and o'er that brow  
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,  
The smiles that win, the tints that glow  
But tell of days in goodness spent,  
A mind at peace with all below,  
A heart whose love is innocent.

--George Gordon, Lord Byron

Every moment that I absolve myself of the grave responsibility of sneering at the Byronic I spend reading Byron. This is true, the uttermost secret hypocrisy of my life. Please don't tell anyone, because my reputation will be shattered.

Another secret is this: I thought of you in the context of this poem on the night we met. I've noted your features in some detail and I am quite sure you are not a she. For one thing you have a pronounced protuberance that is sometimes more pronounced than others. For another, you're very much too hairy, although I suppose there's a continuum for that sort of thing. Do you suppose there are any women hairier than you are? Do you wonder if there might be fetishists devoted to that one peculiarity? Would you be willing to ask your friends in the Combat Zone if they have any back numbers of 'Hirsute Mama' magazine?

But I'm teasing you, of course. I didn't shed myself of clothing to talk about poetry or hair fetishes. And, yes, I am naked as I write to you. Cross-legged on the bed--take a moment to picture that in detail--with my cute little PowerBook and the door to the bedroom locked so Spencer cannot discover what a simpering, lascivious and possibly addle-pated romantic his mother is.

And of course I know you don't even seek me naked. You want me at some level of undress that thrills you with concealment without impeding your access to my better secrets in the smallest way. We have a fair compromise, though, I think. Because I am not completely naked. I'm wearing the gold chain to keep you locked inside me forever. I would be very cold without it.

And here is what I want to do to you tonight, my innocent. For it is night, and it is me doing the doing. For one thing, I want it to be so dark that you can barely see my fingers as they brush your eyelids closed. I like the light as well as you, darling, but tonight I am a troll, a heavensprite, and I would minister to you. And for illumination my ministrations require but one small candle, a votive candle, placed far across the room. A votive candle for I make me my vows by the glimmer of a reflection's reflection off the ceiling off the wall. Tonight you are mine, sweet prince, and tonight I will leave none of you unpalsied.

For this is my desire, to take you and ache you and rip you asunder, to quake you, to break you to a wonderful wholeness. I want to temper your steel in my forge, of course. But I want to temper you everywhere, to fire you with the flames of me until you shatter or melt or glow to the fiery red core of you. Isn't this lewd? I should like to bathe you everywhere in my moister kisses, leave no stretch of your skin unfragranced by me. Marked. My man. I know him by the scent...

But there is so much more I want to do to you--to you, not with you or for you--and I require from you only two things. You must tell me the truth about what feels good and what feels better. And you must do nothing at all in your own behalf--or in mine. Are you the object of my worship? Of my longing? Of my passion? You'll never know, will you? You are the object of my desiring, and I desire you weak and palsied and delirious and exhausted, but it remains a mystery if I seek this outcome for your pleasure or for my own.

Poor vain Delilah! She used the wrong scissors on the wrong hair! I do not seek your conquest. There can be no love between masters and slaves. Nevertheless I would hope to leave you slain with my better weapons, delivered to heaven--or Valhalla--suitably sated and fragranced. This is my vanity, I know. I can't kill you with my sex nor would I want to, and I know I'll hate it when you die. But I think I can make heaven seem second-best, a drab and lifeless dungeon, if I work at it.

And I do plan to work at it. For a start, just to tease your eyes in the gloomy darkness, I think shall lower myself to your face. Do you feel the curls of me brushing against your cheek, marking you with the flowing of my love for you? Don't you dare put out your tongue! I know what you like, Devin Dwyer, and you can't have it. If you make the smallest movement in your own behalf I'll stop at once. I'll leave you hanging there at the precipice of disaster and you can find your relief with whatever hyperactive appendage seems most useful. If you want me tonight, then you must have me my way. And my way is to have you this way, all my way, to have my way with you completely.

Swim in the scent of me. Feel my moist kisses all over your skin and breathe and breathe and breathe me. Do you dream that scent, Devin? Does it make you hard in the night? I should come to you in the darkness, the Succubus turned holy, and haunt you with my scent. I would waft in upon you in a moment of longing and stir your soul and stir your passion and leave you aching, aching, aching to bury your need in me. But tormenting you this way is even better, for I am here and real and the slickness and the scent of me are real and I can make you ache and ache and ache for the treasures that are mine alone to bestow upon you.

I'll move my way down your body, searing you with the heat of me. I like the feel of your skin against mine and I'll press myself to you, searing me with the heat of you. I'm going to kiss you, Devin. I'm going to kiss your lips and your cheek and the skin of your neck. Just below your ear, where the artery lies beneath the skin--and because your heart is beating so hard--the scent of you is very strong. And it is the smell of you, of you, that is making my head spin and my knees go weak and that's why I collapse against you despite myself. Between us there is heat and urgency, yes. But there is also a deep peace and a feeling of belonging. And love like I've never known it. And acceptance like I've never hoped to know it.

Do you know what you do to me, my dearest? I know you do, but I know you don't, not really. Men are so controlled. Your control frees me to weaken, and I revel in the awful, wonderful ways you weaken me. But your control enslaves you, and that's why I want to keep control now, even when I almost can't, so that you may be free for once to weaken, to melt, to bask, to die, to live.

I'm going to kiss your mouth, Devin, and I can't ask you not to kiss me back, I can't and I won't. But I'm above you and mine is the freedom to move and to imprison and to escape. I like to graze my lips against yours, just that and no more, almost not touching you at all. I like to tease you so gently with my tongue, painting my

passion on your lips and tongue with the tip of a sable brush. I like to nibble at your lips, coming close enough, staying long enough, that you imagine you can capture me, then pulling away at the last instant. I am yours, my darling, but I am always your quarry, never your pet. But I am your hunter as well, and as much as I might love to tease you, I love to trap you, pinioning you beneath the enormous weight of my searching tongue. And as much as I love probing the scalding cavern of your mouth, so much more do I love being probed and pinioned by you.

You make me so hungry. You make me so clean. The skin of my chest is flushed and burning hot. Can you feel it searing into you? I shift my weight a little and suddenly I am there, implanted on your thigh. The muscles of your thighs were one of the first things I noticed about you. Men have plenty of places to hide fat on their bodies--and in their minds and in their lives--but a muscle either shows or it doesn't. I make me my confession: I wanted to feel your thigh this way the instant I saw it.

It's oriental erotica brought to life, a penis eighteen inches long and twenty-five around! I'll rub myself so wantonly, so lewdly on your hard muscles and graze my nipples on the heat of your chest and kiss you, kiss you, kiss you between the breaths I can barely remember to take. I have my hands dug into your hair at your temples and your body is mine, mine, mine--mine to control, mine to use, to take, to seize, to own, to free, to need, to free.

I want to take you, Devin. Am I too bold? Yes, I am much too bold, entirely too bold, perfectly and exquisitely and unbearably too bold. I love riding your thigh this way and I know I could ride it to a very happy ending. But I can feel you grazing at my side, at my hip. Are you reaching for me? Are you thrusting at me? Who could blame you? You're so hard, so purple, so needy.

So I'll throw myself astride you and swallow you whole. Were you expecting more teasing? Are you a timid virgin? Am I? I have teased you enough, I'm afraid. Enough for you and entirely enough for me. For as much as I might wish to torment you endlessly, I cannot. In torturing you I torture myself, and in a moment or an hour it is I who will shriek with your cry of surrender...

I surrender to you, Devin. For now. But I do not relinquish my control. Tonight I will make a woman of you--mine to control, mine to take, my charge, my responsibility. I won't simply take you from above--I always do that. No, tonight I will take you, take you as my own, take you and leave you no power to resist me, no will to resist me. Are you the prisoner of my scent? Are you the prisoner of my touch? Are you the prisoner of my sex, raking up and down you, searing your skin with the fiery coals of me? Or are you the captive of my heart, of my passion, of my longing, of my worship?

Can you speak? Can you put your lips together and form words or are you too lost? I want you that lost, Devin. I want you to be that free, that safe, that open. I want you to be able to surrender your control to me for once, for tonight, and free yourself to feel so completely that you are lost, lost, lost--lost in the shell of my embrace.

Speak to me with your kisses instead. Kiss me your hunger. Kiss me your seething. Kiss me your driving, your writhing, your striving. Kiss me your question and I'll kiss you my perfect answer.

My perfect answer, my perfect hunger, my perfect need. My perfect question, question, question... There's no stopping you now, is there? I can feel your hands on my hips and I can't even think to ask you to stop using me, using me, using me. Oh god! Oh Devin! Oh my dear sweet perfect love! You make me so crazy, you make me so hungry, you make me so glad, so glad, so glad, to be alive. I love to have you inside me and I love for you to push me, push me, push me down, down, down on you, push me down and push yourself up and slam yourself into me so hard, so deep, so perfect...

So perfect, Devin, you make me come so perfect. Can you feel me? Can you feel me pulsing all along the length of you? Pulsing, pulsing, pulsing--pure and perfect agony. Are you coming, too, dearest? I can't tell, I'm too lost, too found, too hunting. I wrap my arms around your shoulders and force my whole body down on you. I'm not coming for your sweet manhood, my darling. I'm not coming for your eyes that whisper treason even in the darkness. I'm coming for you, for all of you, for your body that makes me so crazy and for your mind that makes me so sane and for your soul that makes me so sainted, so sanctioned, so clean. My glory is that I can be so achingly naked for you.

After a long time--it seems like forever and I wish it could be--our writhing slows. Your poor little spent manflesh pops out of me and I lower my legs to rest against yours. I'm still hugging you at your shoulders, and I want never to let you go. You raise your head and bring your lips up to mine. Kiss me, darling, kiss me for all that

we've had and all that we will have together. Kiss me your thanks and I'll kiss you mine. Kiss me your promise and I'll kiss you my prayer.

I'll let my hand trail down to you one last time tonight. I want to bathe my fingers in the paired wetness of our loving. I bring my fingers up to our lips and we can kiss between them, our musky honey bound together in love's perfect marriage. Kiss me your hunger and I'll kiss you my need. Kiss me your always and I'll kiss you my forever...

Very lovingly,

Gwen

## Chapter 6

Date: Wed, 17 Dec 1997 06:51:27 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Kiss me...

kiss me your glory i kiss you my joy  
kiss me your giggling girlishness  
i kiss you my mannish boy

kiss me your tickling i kiss you my laughter  
kiss me your before your before your before  
i kiss you my ever after

kiss me your promise i kiss you my prayer  
kiss me your fire i kiss you my air  
kiss me your hunger i kiss you my need  
kiss me your giving i kiss you my greed  
kiss me your worship i kiss you my vow  
kiss me your present your presence your presents  
i kiss you my endless now

kiss me your seeking i kiss you my knowing  
kiss me your staying your staying your staying  
i kiss you my never going

kiss me your wisdom i kiss you my clever  
kiss me your always your always your always  
i kiss you my always forever

“What’s wrong?”

Gwen had awakened to find Devin sitting cross-legged at the far end of the bed, staring at her.

“Nothing. Everything. Nothing.”

“Really, what is it?” She sat up in bed and the covers spilled away. She was wearing the off-white silk gown she had given him. One of the thin straps was off her shoulder and her breast was half revealed.

“...I haven’t felt all that... connected to you. I’ve loved having you here. I’ve loved cooking with you and having you to talk to. I’ve loved sleeping with you. In some ways it feels as though we’ve lived together forever and not just these two weeks. But I keep waiting for something more. I keep thinking there’s something hidden. Something important.”

She took her time replying, and she didn’t notice but her mouth was concealed behind her hand. “...What would make you think that?”

“I don’t know... Do you know that you’ve never said you love me?”

“Oh, Devin! Don’t you know how I feel about you?” She half-reached for him with her right hand.

“I know what I see in your eyes. When I see that, I think you’ve never loved anyone else. But you’ve never actually said the words...”

She said nothing and he waited through five awful beats of his heart.

He pursed his lips tight and released them with a smack. “Well, that’s answer enough, isn’t it?”

“Devin, it’s not what you think!”

“I don’t think anything. I don’t know anything. ...I don’t know what I’m doing.”

He swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood up. He was naked, but there was nothing erotic about it. It was the nudity of the shower, of the closet. It was the nudity of solitude. They were together, but she was alone, and now he was, too.

“Where... where are you going?”

“To the guest bedroom. I’ll sleep there tonight.”

“But why...?” Her face was torn by grief, but it was a grief without surprise.

“I don’t feel... safe... right now. That’s a strange word to use, but it’s the right one, I think. I don’t feel safe with you tonight.”

She held her arms out, inviting him into her embrace.

He shook his head. “That’s what we always do, try to screw our way past the hard parts. I love you so much, I need you so badly, I feel for you so deeply when we make love—I’ve been willing to accept that. But I can’t anymore, Gwen. It’s not enough. *Mothertongue* is a language for communicating everything that’s already understood...”

They were two days and some few hours shy of two months together and she spoke to him sharply for the first time: “*Mothertongue* is just a term in *fathertongue*!”

He nodded, perhaps sadly. “And ‘love is just a four-letter word’... We’ll talk in the morning.” He walked out of the room.

But of course they didn’t talk in the morning. She had to work and he had projects to oversee at the lab and they ate breakfast alone together over thick slices of silence. At the door he kissed her his question and she kissed him her glare. And then she was gone...

Devin took the T to the Institute, an icy dread worming through his intestines. He loved her more than anything. He needed her more than anything, more than food, more than the air he breathed, more than life. And yet he felt... cheapened, used, compromised... Whored, even, and the pain of that thought made him wince. Whored not by her hunger, but by his own need for evidence of her hungering. That was the worst of it, he knew. The fault was never hers. She had withheld from him only treasures he had never thought to demand...

He had thought he understood her without words, but there can never be a demonstrated understanding without words. Compared to a kiss, compared to a caress, compared to the passion of love-making, fathertongue is brassy and clumsy and cluttered. But compared to a kiss or a caress or love-making, fathertongue is fixed and firm and undeniable. A kiss can convey everything—or nothing—and who's to say which is which? Enumeration is the threshold of reason, the threshold of civilization, and every awful insult ever flung at humanity has come down to maligning the mind for counting, for comparing, for evaluating, for preferring, for *validating*. Human beings, reasoning animals, are said to be fallen because we have tasted the fruit of the *knowledge* of good and evil, the *knowledge* of the better and the worse, the *knowledge* of the greater and the lesser, the *knowledge* of the desired and of the shunned. We are damned because we are *not* uncritical, *not* stupidly willing to accept a smile as assurance, *not* willing to find a promise in a kiss. We are damned by all of religion and by most of philosophy because we are *not* merely animals.

He was sitting, glaring, staring a hole through the universe, and he came to himself with a start at the Harvard Square station, two stops past the Institute. He jumped out of the train just as the doors started to close, but instead of walking over to the other platform to catch a train back to M.I.T. he bounded up the stairs into Harvard Square.

It was a bitterly cold day and he wasn't dressed for it but he didn't care. He needed to walk and to think, to kick the world like a rock and follow it, to see where it might roll. The Square was half empty and surprisingly civilized. The students were all home for the holidays, of course, staying in the good graces of daddy's money. The usual cadre of the lost and the damned were out freezing in the plaza, but they were still flushed and full from turkey and leftovers from St. Vincent's and bundled up in new scarves from St. Jude's. And everywhere there were mommies or daddies, rarely both together, with the kids. The day after New Year's is the suburban kid's big day in the city. No school and mommy's boss is in Aruba, daddy's boss is still hung over, so the kids come to town, come to work, come to lunch, come to shop, come to see *homo urbanus* in his native habitat. Play with the computers at the office, buy a few new books at Wordsworth's, take in the last performance of *The Nutcracker* at The Wang Center then trundle back to Swampscott or Holbrook on the M.B.T.A. commuter train.

Devin looked at the little demi-families and felt jealous, almost. The women were so perfectly suburban, their hair too short, too styled, too permed, too sprayed. They were thick through the middle beneath their woolen overcoats, brown and blue and gray, and thick at the ankles. But there was a settledness to them, a setness, an acceptance and a satisfaction. They knew their place, and their

children beside them, ahead of them, behind them, declared to the world who they were and what they were doing. They were very married, no hint of a doubt.

The men, too, if not quite as convincingly. Even the men without kids in tow made their station in life known, revealed themselves with their hats. A single man might wear a hat if he's a fop or a boulevardier, but only married men wear those sensible Russian fake-fur caps. Only married men wear garish polyester knit watch caps with stately, staid overcoats. Only married men and very young country boys wear hats with flaps and straps. Behind every man in a sensible hat there is a woman who nags at him when he forgets it.

Devin smiled at himself despite everything. He was envious and he knew it. Envious not of the suburbs and the commute and the tedious jobs and the children too long in the company of clinical strangers. Envy excises the unenviable with a surgeon's skill, after all. But he was envious of the settledness and the setness and the acceptance and the satisfaction. He was envious of idea of being finished, of having that huge vacuum of doubt in his life sealed up for good.

And he knew that was stupid, too, but it didn't matter. Lovers say "forever" when they mean, "I can't bear to look." Love's not an investment, it's more like a bet. You bet everything you own and everything you ever hope to own, and you have nothing to go by except your willingness—or your claim of willingness—to risk everything on a roll of the dice. Young lovers, dewy-eyed and hormonal, say things they'd scoff at if they weren't so besotted and they make promises they cannot possibly back up with a meaningful warranty. It's not even sexual, at least not entirely. Surely all the boys try to come up with the phrases that make buttons pop, but they have to say those things in their own behalf as well. "You're my one and only." "There will never be another." "My soulmate, my life's mate, my treasure, my deliverance."

In fathertongue it's all ridiculous, one one-and-only after another. In mothertongue it's everything. The love is not the kisses or the caresses or the love-making, furtive and tender and rushed. The love is the words, the words that hang in the air between the two lovers, that hang there and connect them and guide them even when they're apart. It's easy to say them, and it's easy to mean them when you're dewy-eyed and hormonal. It when the hormones are flushed from your system, when the dew has evaporated and the corsage has begun to wilt—that's the difference between love and a marriage.

When he says, "I will love you forever," it's not an impossible promise to her to receive his love, its an impossible promise from him to keep giving it, to give it when he needs more than anything to recede, to retreat, to retrieve that joie de vivre he had before his hormones stuck him with a mortgage and a going-nowhere job and kids who can't quit costing and a wife who grows thicker about the middle every day. And there's always a bottle or a golf course or a football game. Or a woman.

When she says, "I will love you forever," there is no asterisk beside her words with ten paragraphs of fine print at the bottom of the page. And when the babies she carries, she says for him, rob her of everything, she doesn't know, not then, that they'll never *stop* soaking up every ounce of her energy. And when she's heard everything he has to say ten times and then ten thousand

times, she tells herself they're on an adventure together. Except there's no adventure and they're never together, never for long. And he's never so absent as when he's beside her and she's never so needy as when she can't bear to beg.

In a moment of elation he bets his life on a dream. In a moment of elation she bets her life on a dream. The lucky ones find a way to live with the letdown, the disappointment. He's got his career and Junior's little league team. She's got her home or her career and half-a-dozen volunteer organizations. Maybe they garden together, not talking too much but intimate, at least, in their silence. Not a passion, not an adventure. A partnership, a thoroughly grown-up compromise with shattered expectations.

The tragically unlucky ones rebel in one way or another. Maybe the promises were not sincere, or maybe it was just the elation talking. Maybe the words hang in the air as a reproach, neither embraced nor shunned, a dirty look that neither of them can bear to look at for long. And there's always a bottle. And there's always a therapist. And there's always a diversion, the job or the golf game or the workshop in the basement. And there's always a friend next door to confide in, to bleed off the pressure while feeding the anger. And there's always another woman. And there's always another man.

And divorce tears through the subdivisions of stately American Dream homes, each more imposing than the last, tears through like a slow-motion tornado, devastating one home and then the next. She confides in her girlfriend, herself newly divorced, and the confidence is so very delicious because she is never in the wrong. He confides in no one, but he and the boys manage to establish between chortles that men are never foolish and women are never otherwise. First they were friends and then they were lovers and then they were a couple for an instant, for an hour, for a day, for a year. Now they are enemies, and each of them identifies the other as the sole cause of everything that's wrong.

And then they are divorced and she and the kids live on in the stately American Dream home until the foreclosure and he eventually moves into the second home with the second wife. And she supports the family with the money she takes from her first husband and he sends his money off to his first wife, who uses it to support her own second husband, himself indentured to his first wife.

And so on. And the marriages become shorter and more frequent and more frantic and the houses get smaller and smaller and smaller and the money is harder and harder to come by. And the horizons seem to shrink. And the expectations seem never to stop shrinking. More bottles. More therapists. More secrets. More lies. More adultery, always more adultery, and it becomes less and less a pursuit of something better and becomes instead simply an escape, a refuge, a foxhole for the weary and the war-torn. It becomes at last, beyond denial, what it has always been, a bomb lobbed into a marriage for the sole purpose of destroying that marriage.

And then one day, one very sad, very tired day, the lovers of love, the makers of infinitely malleable promises, the people for whom "forever" may not even mean "now"—one day they give up and compromise, they find a way to live with the letdown, the disappointment. He's got what's left of his career and what's left of his children, every other weekend and Wednesday nights for din-

ner. She's got her job and half-a-dozen 12-steps groups. Maybe they garden together, not talking too much but intimate, at least, in their silence. Not a passion, not an adventure. A partnership, a thoroughly grown-up compromise with shattered expectations...

And no, damnit!, Devin said in the quiet of his mind. It's not that way. It's not Heathcliff or the ants, or Heathcliff and Heathcliff and Heathcliff and *then* the ants. Love is not a dalliance of youth, a dew that evaporates and never returns. And love is not an opiate, an awful narcotic that elates without ever ennobling and leaves you in the end sick and crawling and craving another dose. Committing to marriage does not require the renunciation of love, and embracing love does not require the renunciation of commitment. Either course is simply a route to torture, the freezing hell of benumbed emotions or the fiery torment of a lifetime of betrayals.

And *no*, damnit! Life is *not* hell, and living it is *not* an endless process of self-annihilation. I'm not just a mind, I'm not just a body, I'm both. It can't be that there's no way to have both, the mind's logic and the body's passion. No—the body's logic and the mind's passion... He smiled for an instant despite himself and noticed himself looking like one of the lost and the damned, staring, glaring at his reflection in a shop window.

A little girl was looking up at him and he didn't know why. Perhaps she thought he was another Harvard Square crazy. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his anorak and he gestured with his head and shoulders at his reflection. He said, "He looks like a man with something to prove." He smiled and the little girl smiled and walked on.

He looked at his watch: almost eleven. In the space behind his eyes he saw his grandfather so he walked to a pay-phone and did the hard thing. He called her.

"Are you free for lunch?"

"...I can be."

"Can you meet me at Bel Canto?"

"I suppose so."

"Look," he said, "if it's inconvenient, just say so."

"No. No, I'll be there." There was a long silence. "Devin? Devin, I..."

He shrugged and he knew she couldn't see that, but he shrugged anyway. He said, "About an hour," and hung up.

He was there way ahead of time and he saw her come in. He didn't want to stand, didn't want to help her with her coat, but she was so windswept and beautiful that he was up and helping her before he thought to stop himself. With her coat half down her arms he pulled her back to his chest and barely grazed her neck with his lips. It was the briefest instant of the most breathtaking intimacy, as familiar as an embrace, as familiar as a slap, yet utterly unnoticed by the other diners. He wanted to slap his own face for betraying that weakness, and he wanted to hold her forever and damn the consequences.

When they were seated, when they were settled, when they had ordered and furtively trafficked in the devious contraband of small talk—she had, anyway—when the silence planted itself between them and made plain that it would not suffer to be ignored—that was when Devin spoke.

“Do you know what I hate worse than anything? I’ve told you everything about everything I love. Do you know what I despise?”

Gwen gnawed at her lip and said nothing.

“It’s suffering,” he said. “I hate it worse than anything. Pain and doubt and anger and fear and despair and dismay and resentment and recrimination—you name it, I hate it.” He grinned. “I like to laugh. And better than laughing I like to smile. And better than smiling I like to glow. Have you seen me glowing? That’s a very Gwen-like question, isn’t it?” He smiled and the smile mellowed to a glow. “That’s the ground-state of me, glowing. It’s more than mere happiness and yet not as frenzied as elation. Warmth and purpose and benevolence and pride and eager anticipation and fearless action and fond remembrance. Joy is the right word, joy as the background music of my life.”

She smiled wryly. “Your life in a major key.”

“That’s right. With tympanic emphasis at the life junctures. It’s when the music goes sad and syrupy that I come to hate it. Not because tragedy doesn’t happen. It does. But because, except for accidents, tragedy *need not* happen. When something goes wrong, I always try to figure out what *I* did wrong. Not everything bad that happens is my fault, obviously. But almost every tragedy is avoidable, and I think one of the important challenges of life is learning how to avoid disaster. If there’s any good in pain, that’s it, to learn how not to make the same mistakes again. If I have to suffer, I will, but not one second longer than necessary. And, if I’m wise, never the same way twice.”

Gwen had ordered a spinach salad but she hadn’t touched it. She sat looking at him for a long moment and he sat looking at her. Under the circumstances he thought it was very cowardly of her and under the circumstances he was very grateful for her cowardice.

He said, “I’ve wasted my whole morning. Almost never happens. I spent the whole day walking around in Harvard Square thinking about marriage and disaster.”

She smiled a smile of great gravity. “Marriage and disaster. Find the one and you’ll find the other, is that it?”

He shrugged. “Carrying the exception to the norm.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Betting against the field. The fallacy of the long shot. It’s what people do, it’s what everybody does. Me, too.” He shrugged again. “Maybe you’re right.”

She was perplexed and it showed. “Devin, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He pursed his lips tight and blew a small puff of air out of his nose. “Lucky you... You’re not eating. Are you done? Can we get out of here?”

She pushed her plate away and stood up. He dropped a twenty dollar bill on the table and pulled on his anorak. He stood behind her to help her with her coat and then he just stood there, his lips pressed to the back of her head, looking at the world over the top of her hair. She pulled his arms tight around her and leaned back against him, pressing her body into his. She said, “We should stand like this until we understand each other.”

He broke away, not abruptly but with a pronounced finality. “We shouldn’t stand like that unless we understand each other... Come on.” He walked out of the restaurant and after a moment she shrugged her shoulders and followed.

On Mass Avenue he said, “I’ll walk you to your car.”

She shook her head. “No, Devin. You invited me to lunch and we didn’t eat. You want to talk but you won’t say anything. I’ll walk *you* to M.I.T. On the way you may inadvertently let something slip.” She smiled and he knew she was smiling to humor him, but it didn’t matter. She put her arm in his and they walked toward Central Square.

“Do you know how birds mate?” he asked. “Or mammals? Insects, too, I guess. Maybe everything, but certainly everything big enough to watch. Do you know how they mate?”

He could feel her smiling even though he didn’t look at her. She said, “Pray don’t keep me waiting.”

“The female resists with alacrity, that’s how.”

“Turns away all comers, as it were.”

“Pottymouth. But that’s the essence of it. She declines and diverts and resists and repels and she’s not friendly about it, not at all.”

“The egos of all the males thus denied must be quite crushed. How tragic.”

“The brutal justice of nature. Her genes command her to seek the best available to her, and so she ultimately mates only with the male she can’t resist. Literally cannot resist. The entire wild kingdom is crying out for therapists to soothe the crushed egos of the frustrated males and rape counselors to succor the satisfied females.”

“‘No’ always means ‘no’ until it means ‘oh, baby...’ Is that it?”

“I’m not making an analogy.”

“What are you doing, Devin?”

He shrugged. “I’m just talking. I think all the time. I love to think. But mainly I think about the things I love, and there are an endless number of things I’ve never thought about at all. I never think about something until I do, but *when* I do, I try to think *all* about it. I try to see all the way through to everything.”

They walked half a block before she spoke. “I didn’t promise to marry you, Devin Dwyer.”

“No. You didn’t.”

“I didn’t promise to find you irresistible, either.”

He laughed through his nose, his lips pressed tight together. “Nobody can promise that. It’s the beauty and mystery of art, tragedy and comedy all rolled into one. Love is a response, and I can’t control it and *you* can’t control it. I would wish to say, ‘Love is a response to values’, and I believe that and I believe I can defend it with some rigor and it all looks very nice inscribed in a theme book, fathertongue at its finest. But I’m a mammal, and as much as I admire your virtues and values, and as eloquent as I can be in detailing them, it remains that you smell right to me, and I might never notice your virtues and values if you smelled wrong to me.”

“I see. Do you intend to nip at the back of my neck until I relent and mate with you...?”



He knew she was teasing and he knew she wasn't. "That's the point, isn't it? I can't cause you to relent. I can't restructure the universe so that I smell right to you if I don't. I can work and slave and study and practice and seethe and yearn and burn for something, but there's no way to be sure I'll get it. Not just love, everything. That's why you have to drive on your own motor, because no matter how hard you work, at the end of the day maybe all you'll have is the work."

They walked, one step after another, and she said nothing.

"I'm not making any sense, am I? I'm just rambling. I have to remind myself I'm an animal sometimes. I don't mean I'm disconnected from reality, I just spend too much time juggling abstractions. Even *that* is a metaphor, and I'm just crawling with them. When the cylinders fire, when the gears mesh, when the wheels spin, when the jets roar—I live my life in silence and solitude 'grappling' with the intangible. Without shape, without color, without mass, without texture, without even a hint of a scent. When we imagine the work of a scientist we envision the screech of chalk on a blackboard or indecipherable notes scratched on paper. Numbers and vaguely familiar symbols and beakers and controlled flames and incomprehensible machines. If I wanted to illustrate the real job of a scientist, I might show an elaborate dance of colored threads weaving themselves into a tapestry. But even *that* would be a metaphor. It's not a seeing or a hearing or a touching. It's not a sensing. It's a being. In your mind you become the system, you become the model, you become the machine. Not in numbers, not in gross calculations, not in anything that you can transcribe in chalk marks."

"Not in fathertongue?"

"That's right! It's mothertongue. Damn! I never thought of that before. Thank you. It's mothertongue and nothing else, an extreme kind of empathy, I guess."

"Empathy for a machine...?"

"Empathy for a model of a machine, or a model of an abstract system, or a model of a star. Do you know what it feels like to be a star? I do. That's what scientists do, the ones who can really do this job. They find a way to see behind their own eyes, then transcribe their observations. You walk with your muscles, not your mind, but your mind had to teach your muscles how to walk. The people who push back the darkness do it by mastering the words. Walking becomes part of your legs and the words become part of your tongue and then the truth—"

Her grip on his elbow tightened. "Yes?"

"The truth is in your kiss. You kiss the truth and you speak it, and the one is the other or neither is anything and everything is a lie."

They walked and walked and she said nothing.

"You didn't make any of those promises I heard."

"...What?"

"Nothing. Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"Devin..."

He put his hand on hers and squeezed. "Really. It doesn't matter."

He hailed a cab in front of the Rogers Building to take her back to her car. Cambridge cabs can't pick up fares in Boston. They have to deadhead back when

they get a trip across the river, so there are always plenty of empty cabs at M.I.T. Standing at the door of the car she turned to kiss him but he shook his head.

"Why can't I kiss you?"

He smiled weakly.

"Why can't I kiss you, Devin?"

He shrugged. "You have to speak the truth before I can hear it in your kiss. I'm very sorry..."

Her face was torn by an unbearable sadness and he turned before she could see the grief in his own.

Even then he didn't go to the lab. He watched her cab pull away from the top of the steps then he walked back down to Mass Ave. He walked over to Memorial Drive, then down to the tarmac walkway by the river. He put his elbows on the railing and leaned out over the water, watching Boston ascend from the Esplanade to Storrow Drive to the stoical brick buildings of the Back Bay to the proud towers of the Prudential Center. The blue mirrors of the John Hancock Tower gave a slice of color to the slate gray sky of winter and the spire of the Trinity Church reminded the skyscrapers that neither ascendancy nor majesty are new to New England.

His eyes drifted to the hole in the skyline that is the Common and the Public Garden, where Gwen had imagined their loving counterparts. Beyond it he saw the Four Seasons Hotel, where they had first made love. In the far distance he could see the skyscrapers of downtown Boston, pinstriped gentleman of the most gentlemanly kind of high finance. At the top of the Quincy Market was 60 State Street, the Sheraton Corporation Tower, a good neighbor to its ancient brick neighbors in a stately marble of pleated brown. Behind it, he knew, beyond the expressway, was a tiny little waterfront park where a woman of incomparable beauty and grace had graced him with a vision of a feral and completely shameless sensuality, an innocence that was mischievous without ever being destructive, wild without the smallest taint of the thoughtless or the accidental or the uncontrolled...

It was freezing and he wasn't dressed for it but he didn't care. He pulled his hood up and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and started walking. Not walking *to* anywhere, not even walking away, just walking to find answers to all the questions he didn't dare put into words.

Love really *is* a response to values, he told himself. She might look right and she might smell right, but she *is* right, right in her soul, right for all the right reasons, and that, he knew, was what he loved in her. He craved her probing kisses and her searing touch and the scent and the savor and the seething of her love, craved them as an unthinking animal and as an always-thinking man. He loved to be with her and he felt a frenzied calm of wholeness when he was with her—that and something more, something warm and glowing that seemed to envelope them both, to enclose them in a perfect solitude no matter where they were. He loved to stand behind her, his arms around her middle, and he loved to talk with her and to think of her and to wait impatiently for her to return to his side, to his arms, to his bed. But more than all of that he admired her, valued her values and her skill and consistency at upholding her values. He revered her reverence and her reverencings. He loved her for what she had done and for what she had never done, what she would never do and what she would

never fail to do. Even this, even now, even everything he couldn't face and couldn't turn away from—it wasn't weakness, it was the most profound strength, the most profound and glorious and beautiful and awful and terrible strength. His own strength, too, and that just made everything worse. What am I made of, that I can live through this...?

He smiled at himself, smiled and folded himself more tightly against the whipping of the afternoon winds. He walked all the way to the Longfellow Bridge and he thought about walking across the river, walking all the way home. Instead he put the wind at his back and walked to the subway station in Kendall Square.

The house seemed very empty, a lightless cavern resounding with echoes. None of Hunter's boisterous noises and none of Gretchen's steady warmth. And nothing of Gwendolyn, nothing that he could see or smell. The house was purged of so much of its past, purged by the awful exorcisms of death and divorce. And now it seemed to be bled of its future, too, bled to a pallor to match the ugly afternoon sky. He went through the house turning on lights, far more than he needed, just to push back the encroaching darkness. He lit a fire, not for heat but for the feeling of being in a home, a place for a family, and not just crypt temporarily void of an occupant.

He met her at the door and he hugged her hard in the foyer, by the stairs going up, by the stairs going down. He pushed his fingers into her hair at her temples and kissed her hard, kissed her with all the love he could find in his soul.

She threw her head back and he kissed at the skin of her neck, kissed the skin under the gold chain, still cold from the night air. She couldn't see the tears welled up in his eyes and she said, "This is more like it."

He shook his head hard and fast. "No."

She looked at him then and saw the tears. "No?"

"No. I've packed your things. You can't stay here tonight."

He watched the emotions that played across her face, shock and horror and a tight-lipped anger and a boundless sadness. Everything except surprise.

He said, "Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck." She smiled warmly in recognition and he nodded. "What do you suppose Cathy would have done if she had managed to catch Heathcliff?"

"What...?"

"Isn't that the real story, the Cathys and the Heathcliffs, the mermaids and the minotaurs? She loves with her mind and her heart and he loves with his hands and his loins, and things don't work out—how could they?—but it's not her fault, it's never her fault. She wants to love, love, love and he just wants to screw, and Venus and Mars are never all right tonight. They don't sell those magazines to men, after all. They don't write those books for men."

"...What are you saying?"

He shrugged. "What if Cathy had caught up to Heathcliff out on the moors? What would happen next? What if she found a man who loved her in the way she said she wanted to love a man, who loved her with his hands and his loins and his heart and his mind? What then? It's easy to say you want something if there's no hope you'll ever get it. What happens when you do?"

She pulled away from him and strode to the other end of the foyer, her arms folded tightly, her back to him.

He said, "You wanted the poetry, right? *Where* did you want it? On a page? Where it's safe and lifeless and undemanding? Little black marks on a printed page, the brilliant disguise of an unbounded emptiness... *This* is poetry. *This* is drama. *This* is life. Right here, right now. You were so lucky, weren't you? You had men who wanted you but didn't really love you, wouldn't let themselves, wouldn't risk it, wouldn't try. So you could dismiss them and repel them with your scorn. You gave them a reason to thank themselves for not taking the chance and you gave yourself the proof, over and over again, that no one ever would. You could write about them to an avid readership of women who were all doing the same damn thing, one way or another. All the little Cathys freezing on the moors, always perfectly safe from finding out what *they* are prepared to risk. Well *here* is your problem, Gwendolyn Penelope Jones. *Here* is your grand dilemma. Now there's no more dreaming, is there? Now there's no more pining. This is the poetry off the page, baby, and now you have to *do* something about it. Welcome to my life... Welcome me to yours..."

She turned to face him. Her eyes were rimmed in red and there was one lonely tear trailing down her cheek. She said, "Kiss me your staying, your staying, your staying. I kiss you my never going'..."

"That's right. I still mean it. I always will."

"Then *why*...?"

He smiled and it was the saddest thing she'd ever seen. "The truth of your words is in your kiss. But the truth of your kiss is in your words."

She ducked her chin into her chest, her arms hanging loose at her sides. Looking at the floor she said, "Devin, I..."

He shook his head but she couldn't see. "Not here. Not now. Not like this. What good would it do?"

She looked up and smiled weakly. He held his arms apart at his hips and she rushed to him, burying her face in his chest.

He pushed gently under her chin, raising her mouth to his. He kissed her passionately, nakedly, without the smallest hint of force. It was a kiss that began in the middle and didn't end at all, it just endured, burning through both of them. His lips still touching hers, he murmured, "Kiss me your always, your always, your always. I kiss you my always forever'... I love you, Gwen. I love you more than anything. I always will. Don't ever doubt it."

Her eyes were blue and huge with sorrow. "Let me stay tonight."

His lips pulled tight in a smile that might have been a grimace—resignation, acceptance, agony. He said, "I want you to. God how I want you to. But you can't..."

Despite everything, because of everything, she was angry. Her hands were balled up in tight little fists at her sides and her eyes were narrow slits. She said, "You—bastard!"

## Part 3

### Chapter 7

With Gwen there was never any beginning. Everything always started in the middle and ended abruptly, explosively.

In the stages of her grieving, anger was first among equals. Anger had been her lifelong best enemy, so why not put it to use here, where it could do so much ill? It couldn't be her fault—how could it? Whatever point he had, assuming he did have a point, could not warrant this, this... atrocity. To be spurned, rejected, cast out into the freezing night without even the smallest hint of an explanation. Made to look ridiculous. Made to feel cheap and small and grasping, like some venal little schoolgirl conniving for a second dessert. Made to feel craven and weak—all so much the worse because it was her strength she offered him in trade for his. Made to feel evasive, furtive, cowering. Made to feel...

Responsible, she admitted in the quiet of her mind, in the quiet of the freezing night. She was sitting in her car, parked up the block from his house. Just sitting there, engine off, her hands in a death-grip on the steering wheel. Her breathing was hot and ragged, jagged, on the needle's point of crying, and the windshield in front of her was haloed in the frozen crystal of her breaths.

He had done something she had never expected, never had known: He had held her responsible for what she had done. For what she had not done. For what she had wanted to do but had not done. He had done for her what no man had ever done before. She smiled wryly despite herself. Hadn't he just? So very many things that she had never thought to think could ever be possible, at least not in full consciousness. He had carried her in his arms to the sweet gardens of the poet's promises, gardens she had been quite sure could not exist. And the perfect justice of it, she knew, was that she had carried him, too, in the same way, with the same gentle strength and the same savage pride and the same serene conviction of the perfect justice of... of love.

Love, not sex, not thoughtless passion, not the grim Dionysian dance of faked elation. Real love, the thing that ennobles, the thing that endures, the passion that persists when the scents of passion's seething have wafted away in the afternoon breeze. In all her life, in all her years of writing about love to people

who claimed to know nothing and wanted nothing more than to sustain their ignorance at all costs, in all that time she had never once entertained the possibility that real love, the poet's love, the love of the sages, the love of the ages, the love of passion and purpose and pride and power, the love that starts in the middle and never, ever ends—she had never once thought to consider to suppose to imagine that such a thing could ever exist.

It had been her comfort, actually, she conceded. One up on everyone in advance, entirely unbeknownst to them. They would scurry and scamper, seeking after the imaginary grail of all those poems, all those books, all those films, all those songs. Scurrying about like mice or bees or ants, making up for their lack of a design with random energy and massive redundancy. She had loved everything about humanity, at least the *idea* of humanity, and she had had a lifelong contempt—neither hot nor cold but a tepid, disinterested kind of contempt—for human beings. Grailing after love without ever working to be lovable. Grailing after wealth without ever lifting a finger to do the work required. Grailing after happiness without ever doing anything in their own behalf, always looking outside themselves for guidelines and directions, seven easy-to-follow steps to passion and purpose and pride and power. Grailing after sovereignty without ever being sovereign, without ever even *once* taking responsibility for the grave responsibility of being alive as a human being.

And responsibility she understood perfectly. Responsibility for home and hearth and health and happiness. Responsibility for getting a job and keeping it, for clawing one's way up the income tree so that each year would be better than the last, each day better secured than the day before. Responsibility for one's own life and responsibility for the life of a helpless child who may not have asked to be born but certainly did not ever ask to die, to be killed or to be made to suffer or to want through no fault of his own. She understood responsibility as a father understands it, as her own father never had, and also as a mother knows it. Her circumstances may have taxed her doubly, may have demanded more from her than others are expected to pay, but they had rewarded her doubly as well. She knew responsibility as few others could claim to know it, in full and perfect and undeniable solitude.

And she understood love, too, understood the love the poets almost always take for granted, the love of a mother for her child. The truth, she had to admit, was that after Dirk she was all but ruined for love. But then a nurse had laid Spencer on her belly and he was covered in blood and she was drenched in sweat and they were both crying and she pulled him to her and he latched onto her breast and he felt so *right* to her and he smelled so perfect. He couldn't speak and he couldn't ask and he couldn't take and he couldn't grasp, but the scent of him, the heavenly aura of him said, "You will want to take care of me and you will love doing it." And she had taken care of him and she had loved taking care of him and he had taught her a love that inspires no poets, that does not thrill or enthrall, that does not quicken the pulse or enflame the loins. It was the love that made his happiness the key to her own; his needs and his purposes and his growth and his education and his surroundings were her first concern. Not the slavish devotion of a self-willed victimhood, but the proudest accomplishment

of a proud and accomplished life. Spencer had taught her the love that ennoble and endures, the love that starts in the middle and never, ever ends.

'Love is not love,' she said to herself, 'which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove.' Almost she could find her way back to the anger, but she knew there was no justice in that. What Devin had done was no more than what Spencer had done, no more and no less. He had simply demanded that she live up to her love, take responsibility for her feelings. He knew more about her than she had ever told him, and the worst of it, the insufferable worst of it was that he was right. She knew she loved him and *he* knew she loved him and the awful unbearable arrogance of the man was that he would not leave it there, would not let her pass, would not be blandished with a whisk of her breathtaking blondishments like all those men before. Unlike Spencer as a baby, he was prepared to give as well as take. But unlike any other man she'd ever known, he expected to take. Not her company or her blandishments, not her soulless passion. He wanted *her*. All of her, her body and her soul and her mind, all together, all at once, all the time.

Dirk had had her passion but never her mind. The men she'd had since then, the few who could stand her or who pretended they could, hadn't even gotten that much. They had answered a need, physiological, almost clinical. But Devin wouldn't settle for her need, and he wouldn't settle for her passion without her mind. And *she* wouldn't settle for it either, that was the agony. To be half asleep and infatuated she could understand. She'd made a career of understanding it. But to be wide awake and in love—in love *because* she was wide awake—this was new and thrilling and terrifying. And Devin knew, he knew everything. In the bleak night sky she could see him smiling, not mockingly, not smugly, but with the kind of serenity that had graced Spencer's face when first he learned to smile: "This is how things are and this is how they should be and this is how they *must* be or nothing is right and everything is wrong."

If he were mocking or smug or gloating or superior it would be all so much easier to dismiss him, to snap her fingers and say, "*That* for your opinion." But he was serenely certain and he was tragically certain and she knew with an awful certainty of her own that he was right, right from the skin to the core, right like one of his monoliths, all one thing, all one rock of conviction, no sin, no stain, no fissure, no corruption.

And that was the thought that gored her, that she knew he was right and she was wrong, or at least that he was *more* right and she had been much too wrong. There never are any surprises, are there?, she asked herself. She had known what he wanted from the very beginning. He had made no secret of it, and she had known without having to be told. Winnie Booth had told her, too, in so many words. Not marriage but 'the marriage of like minds,' the wedding of two worlds, the blending of two souls into one. The poet's promise in the physicist's disguise. She had known what he had wanted, what he *still* wanted she was sure, and the unbearable agony was that she wanted it too, wanted it worse than anything, and yet she couldn't speak, couldn't ask, couldn't take, couldn't grasp. Couldn't even scream out her fear and pain and terror and elation and desire and hunger, the ravenous hungering of a soul forever starved. She couldn't do anything but watch

numbly as everything she'd never dared to dream could be possible slipped through her fingers, slipped through to freeze in the empty streets of the Boston winter.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the rear-view mirror. Big blue eyes, big and wet and hurt. Big like a horse's eyes or a fawn's or a dog's. Big like an orangutan's eyes and just as lost, just as searching, just as hopeful, just as hopeless. So close, so close, so close, yet never close enough. Close enough to reach but never close enough to grasp...

She felt hollow inside, as if a cannon had blasted right through the middle of her and left her punctured, perforated. She wanted to cry, wanted very desperately to find a release, *any* release, but she could do nothing more than clutch the cold steering wheel and stare hard at nothing, stare a hole through the universe. She felt not that an awful injustice had been done to her but, so much worse, that an awful and perfect justice had been wreaked upon her and that she had gotten no more than she deserved, no more than she had asked for.

'Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,' she said in the quiet of her mind, in the quiet of the freezing night, 'but bears it out even to the edge of doom.' That was her bone to gnaw upon, she decided, as she started the car and drove herself home. The cold shoulder is no fit breakfast for a guest, but beggars can't be choosers, can they?

When she got home she knew she couldn't sleep so she didn't even try. Instead she cleaned her house from top to bottom, spent hours and hours cleaning and scrubbing and polishing. She was never without anger and she was never without resignation but the worst of her fates was that she was never without the perfect understanding of what had happened, of the wedge she had driven into her own life.

The sun was peeking over the edges of the mansards and gables when she finally gave herself permission to rest. She laid down on her bed, she thought for just a moment, and fell asleep instead. By the time she awoke, she had to hurry to the airport to meet Spencer's plane. Gwen was nothing if not plucky and she did her best to rise above her disquiet. Spencer was bubbly and full of energy and bursting with stories to recount and if he noticed that anything was wrong he kept it to himself.

She excused herself and went to her room when they got home and when she came down to prepare dinner she found he had made plans to eat with a friend. They drifted through the weekend like that, Gwen spending most of her time in her room. Sometimes crying but often just sitting cross-legged on the bed staring at her hands. Surely Spencer knew something was going on but he kept his thoughts to himself.

She welcomed the relief of work on Monday, but it was no relief. Her concentration was gone and she couldn't follow the simplest train of thought. She felt very thready, very attenuated, at a remove from herself. She was on the edge of being nauseated all the time and she had no appetite at all. That morning she had weighed herself and found she had lost eight pounds. It was the ideal Not For Women Only feature: Lose the weight and the rest of your life with it...

At night she sat in her room and wrote poetry, searingly painful, achingly vulnerable. She emailed it to him not knowing what to expect, knowing only

that she had a right to speak to him until he asked her to stop, knowing that she didn't want to stop speaking to him no matter what. For her column she slapped together something on grieving because it was on her mind, because nothing else was on her mind. She wrote it in the very worst way, stringing together bits from the Nexus database and the internet. It was exactly the way everyone else wrote, chop and drop, rape and run, and exactly the way she had never written and she was ashamed of herself for drifting into the slipshod world of aimless hackery. To make it all worse, her editor had praised the piece to the skies, hinting that she was finally getting the hang of things.

Finally on Friday, not knowing what to do but knowing she had to do something, she called Winnie Booth and asked if she could meet her for lunch. She stopped at Toscannini's in Central Square for ice cream then again at Bertucci's, where a pizza was waiting for her, and she met Winnie in a little lounge overlooking Killian Court at M.I.T. They shared small talk over lunch. Winnie was so big with the baby she seemed about to burst and she used her belly like a little table.

"You can afford to eat like this," Winnie said, "but I can't."

"...This is the most I've eaten in a week, I think."

"That bad, is it?"

Gwen put on her best plucky expression. "Nothing's bad. Just... different."

"My mistake. Devin comes to the lab on Monday with a face like he's running for county coroner, but nothing's bad. Your eyes look like they haven't got a tear left in them, but nothing's bad. What could be bad?"

Gwen smiled sheepishly and that was answer enough.

"Do you know the best philosopher I ever studied under? It's Devin's grandmother, Cecilia, Candy. No credentials, no college education, no pedigree of any kind, just a mind that can see through twenty miles of bullshit and will not let you get away with a thing. When I first met her, I was the worst kind of smug, college-bred jackass. Knew everything and deferred only to curriculum vitae longer than my own. And that woman just took me apart. Nothing vicious about it, there's not a drop of cruelty in her. All she really does is ask questions. But she asks questions that make it painfully obvious that everything you had been so confident about was constructed from solid quicksand.

"The first few times I talked to her, she dismantled me completely in seconds flat. I'd scurry back across the river, back to the Institute, and try to think of better arguments. I was *sure* I was right, after all, and it must be that my teachers and my books hadn't anticipated such an eccentric point of view. She *is* an eccentric, you know. She's as eccentric as Socrates, and you know what they did to him.

"Anyway, after a while I stopped fighting her and just listened to what she had to say. And it was months later before I was willing to admit that she knew all *about* philosophy and I knew nothing but the garbage they stuff into the books to keep the covers from collapsing. That was a very hard admission to make. I was a prideful child—could you have guessed? I'm younger than that now..."

"Anyway, Candy is one of four gifts I've had from Devin. The first is Xander, I told you that. The second is Candy. She changed my whole career, and I share her gifts with all my students. The third is Devin himself, and I know that so

much of what I admire in him comes to him from Candy and from Nick, his grandfather. And the fourth is the idea of family that I learned from Devin's family, learned by watching the way they love each other all the time.

"By the time I met Devin his grandfather and his father were already gone. It was just Candy and Devin's mother and Devin and Hunter. And Nicole, but she was never really in that family, and it hurt me to see it. But they were always together, always doing things together, always touching and talking and laughing. And Devin carried them with him wherever he went, still, always. There's a piece of Candy living in me, but if I need more of her, I can find her in boundless quantities in Devin's office, still more of her at the house. They're all still alive in him, all still right *here*, three generations of that family bundled up in him all the time. And when Hunter is older, there will be four generations in him. They're all about tradition and remembrance and respect and careful observance, but that's not what I'm talking about. Devin is *in* his family all the time and he always will be and it's not because of any traditions. He's in them and they're in him and they're all together, side by side, all the time and it's because of..."

Gwen frowned. "Yes...?"

"What's the word I'm looking for?"

"...Love?"

"A-plus. Nice work. You'll do well on your mid-terms."

"I'm so pleased," Gwen drawled, smiling. "Why are you telling me all this?"

Winnie smiled in return, a mock-nefarious grin. "Guess."

"If you're trying to tell me why I should want him, you can stop. I already do want him. I just don't know quite *how* to want him."

Winnie's smile deepened. "I went to Cecilia Dwyer's Finishing School for Lady Philosophers. I never tell anyone anything. I just ask people hard questions and make them tell *me* what's true and what isn't."

Gwen said nothing for a moment, just looked out the window. "Shall we eat this ice cream before it goes entirely soft?"

Winnie chuckled. "It took me two years to get used to the fact that people here will eat ice cream on the coldest days."

"It's warm enough in here, isn't it? I wouldn't want to have it and then race right outdoors, but I don't think you have any business going outdoors anyway."

"Too true. We'll have to do this again in the spring, because I'd like to show you this place. Can you read the inscriptions on the buildings outside? This is M.I.T.'s way of honoring all the great men of science. Galileo, Kepler, Fourier, LaPlace. Aristotle, toward whom every branch of science must bow. Hundreds of names, some larger, some smaller, almost all of them men. Does that seem odd to you?"

Gwen knitted her brows. "Should it? The great men of science were actually men. How could you list their names without making a list of men?"

"Are you unenlightened? Why should men get all the credit just because they did all the work? My mechanic fixes my car so it runs, but I can repair it just as well myself. I'm differently inclined, mechanically speaking, so it doesn't run when I finish with it, but why should we judge the work of a mechanic by the outmoded and subversively patriarchal standard of whether or not the car runs?"

Gwen smiled. "Now pull the other one."

"The strictures of antiquity are not true because they're old. That's the anti-quarian fallacy, the cornerstone of conservatism. But the one thing we can say about classical ideas, as compared with newer ones, is that they have stood the test of time. We have five thousand years and more of human history, and that's a pretty good database from which to draw conclusions. Science? Men. Engineering? Men. Medicine? Men. Music? Men. Sculpture? Men. Painting? Almost entirely men. Literature? Largely men with a few women, especially in poetry and prose. There are almost no women playwrights we remember. Philosophy? All but entirely men. Why should it be that so much that we see as being characteristic of 'The West', in capital letters, should be so dominated, at least at the very top, by men?"

"That doesn't seem to be a very fruitful line of questioning. It is so because it has been so. If you're arguing that we should not dilute the contributions of men by laying false claim to an equal stature for women, I agree with you. Women have done many interesting things, but the *Organon* and the *Summa Theologica* and the *Eroica* were all produced by men."

"But *must* that be so? It is so, surely, but aren't we all equals? We said one man cannot claim to be king, claim to be privileged by god to reign over others, and the monarchies were razed. How can it be that only a man can fix my car? There are some really talented physicists of the second rank who are women, and a few of the first rank. Why are there no first class women mechanics?"

Gwen tugged at her chin. "I would suppose there simply aren't that many women who are interested in repairing cars. It's very dirty work, isn't it?"

"Bingo! I could ask variations on that question all day at a meeting of feminists and never get a straight answer. *Maybe* women could be as good as men at repairing cars, but we don't know because little girls don't want to spend hours and weeks and months and years up to their elbows in grease. The truth is, they don't have to. If they want a mechanic's income, they can marry a mechanic. If they want a doctor's income, they can marry a doctor. This is heresy of the first water, so don't tell on me. But there's a reason to think about heretical ideas, even at the risk of the Inquisition. 'We must follow the argument wherever it leads.' And our dear friends the feminists are willing to read anything except text that parses into clear, discernible meaning. And the very *last* thing they want to hear, the very last idea the Enlightenment wants to consider, is that human beings, while not ruled by their biology, are nevertheless animals with a particular inviolable nature. Can you think of a biological reason why men should do all the scut work in the world instead of women?"

"I assume you're going to say because of pregnancy and childbirth, but isn't the premise open to question? Isn't that one of the key complaints of feminism, that women get stuck with all the dirty jobs?"

"Wrong and wrong. You'll have to stay after and wipe down the chalk boards. Women get stuck with the cleaning and the laundry and the diaper changing, and they work in schools and libraries and hospitals. But men get killed or badly injured at work, and almost everyone who gets killed or badly injured on the job is a man. Men take high-risk jobs for higher pay. Men do the

jobs that require a total commitment, unlimited overtime without any extra pay. Men work themselves into an early grave, everyone knows this, whether they fix cars or compose symphonies. Why do they do it?"

"...Competition for women?"

"Bingo! It's actually simpler than that, simpler and more complicated. Aristotle's name is huge out there. Galileo's name is huge. But you can do something that Aristotle could never do. You've done it once, and I think you want to do it again. I'm doing it now, and I haven't seen my feet in weeks."

"Women can have babies. Is this news?"

"The implications of that one simple fact are what make us what we are. As a species. As a culture. As individuals. If you're very lucky, you have maybe thirty-five years of eggs in your body. They were all there before you were born, and you can't get any more. The maximum number of babies you can have is just over four-hundred. Nobody wants that many, but you throw egg after egg away, once a month, 'the curse'. If you really worked at it, you could have ten babies in your lifetime at most, and the fact is you'll be lucky to have two or three. On the other hand, if I waddle down the hall and give Xander a good yank, I can pull half-a-million little Xanders out of him, and he'll have half-a-million more armed and ready by the time we get home. Sperm cells are insanely abundant and egg cells—and the conditions necessary for their proper gestation—are insanely scarce, and everything that we think of as human behavior is a reflection of these two simple biological facts."

"And if I should answer that biology is not destiny?"

"It isn't. It's just a tireless goad. In terms of simple genetic recombination, men are redundant, ridiculously so, and women are precious. In a Garden of Eden consisting of one man and twenty-three women, in a year's time there would be twenty-three new babies. But if there were one woman and twenty-three men, at the end of a year there would be one woman, one surviving man, and the man would kill her baby if he thought it wasn't his own. *That* is the state of nature. Does Devin talk to you about fathertongue and mothertongue?"

Gwen rolled her eyes mockingly. "All the time."

"He tries to make it sound very gender neutral, but the truth is that notational systems are created by men for very masculine purposes. Women are debilitated by babies. Behold my debilitation. Between pregnancy and child-rearing, a woman is fairly defenseless for two or three years. For ten or fifteen if she has one child after another. The job of men, *the* job of men, is to die so that women and children will live. If this is not the most profoundly anti-Enlightenment statement you have ever heard, you can have double your tuition back. Biology is not destiny, but a man's biology urges him at every turn to impregnate as many women as possible, as quickly as possible, before someone else takes them out of play for two years or more. The Legions of the Half-Million are fully-formed and fully-armed several times a day, and his unfiltered appetite is to set no impediments before his appetites. This is what his body wants him to do. Why shouldn't he do it?"

"I'll answer for myself. Because he wants to make sure that his offspring survive. He wants very badly to satisfy that urge, and who am I to blame him?"

But if he rapes every woman he sees, he risks being killed by some man who views himself as her protector.”

“Or by she herself. She’s not helpless, after all.”

“That’s right. And in any case, the chances are that any children he fathers this way will die. They’ll either be murdered by the mother or her menfolk, or they’ll simply die of starvation or exposure, because the mother will not be able to provide for herself. We’re not reptiles. Fathers can’t just spray the egg and slither away. Gestation for human beings takes fifteen years or twenty years or forever, depending on how you measure things. He wants to father children who will survive to adulthood, and the way he does that is by sticking around. To provide for his woman and their children and to protect them and to lay down his life, if necessary, so that they will live.

“Her job is basically changeless. She nurses, she cleanses, she succors and comforts and soothes. She nurtures, and while women today have better tools than they had five-thousand years ago, the mother’s primary tool will never change: mothertongue. This is how we rear our children and neither god nor man nor kings nor media princes nor radically-feminized Focouldian philosophers can change it. This is what we are irrespective of our reason.

“A mother’s world is unchanging, and a father’s world never *stops* changing. No matter how well he does at his job of providing for and protecting his family, he can always do better. This is what fathertongue is *for*; and the threshold of human civilization is enumeration, the primal notational system. One antelope, two antelopes, many antelopes. Hmmm... Many antelopes. Seem like good place to live.”

Gwen laughed delightedly and Winnie joined her.

“It’s funny, but the sad and glorious fact is that we are not born knowing how to stay alive, and it’s men who are normally stuck with the job of figuring out *how* we can live—and live better each day, each year, each generation. That’s the first function of fathertongue, work, solving the problem of survival. You can’t solve any problem in mothertongue. You can’t *reason* in mothertongue, only feel. Fathertongue is the language in which we think, and historically, culturally, men have done it. They’ve had the time to do it, and they’ve had the impetus because of their biological role. Perhaps things need not work out this way, but this is the way they *have* worked out.

“The second function of fathertongue is justice. Whether they like it, and whether *we* like it, they are our warriors. They are hugely redundant genetically, and therefore they are expendable. Oops! Another heresy... But men don’t want to die, and we don’t want them to die, and even though they are redundant genetically, their skills at production and protection are not expendable. Fathertongue is a means by which men can try to resolve disputes with words instead of weapons.

“The third function of fathertongue is beauty, high art and low, poetry and courtly manners and civility and graciousness. Partly this is competition for women, and partly it is simply competition among men, establishing the lesser and the greater, the ridiculous and the sublime. His genes goad him to pursue the best woman he can find and her genes goad her to find the best man. He judges

her by her appearance, at least at first. Is this shallow of him? No. He’s looking for good bones and healthy skin and bright eyes and full hips; he’s looking for a good, sturdy mother for his children. She judges him by his accomplishments, by his wealth or his reputation for skill or his creations. Is this shallow of her? No. She’s looking for the man who can best assure and protect her life and the lives of her children. Deriding human beings for doing what they must do in order to *be* human beings is a very stupid and very ‘Enlightened’ thing to do.

“The fourth function of fathertongue is worship. And I think more than anything else, fathertongue seeks to worship itself. The feminists insist that men are inherently rapists, that *all* men are rapists. This is the opposite of the truth. Human civilizations are all the product of fathertongue, and the purpose of civilization is to prevent rape, to make the world safe for women and children. To make a world where women are not raped and killed and where children are not stolen and sold and raped and killed. Civilization is the means by which men make the world safe from their worst impulses, and it is remarkably successful. And the most loving language of fathertongue is reserved in reverence for itself—witness Killian Court.

“Devin doesn’t believe in god and I don’t either, but we both believe in worship, in reverence, in redemption.”

“Worship of what? Reverence for what? If he doesn’t believe in god, what does he believe in?”

Winnie issued her nefarious grin. “Guess.”

“What about you, then? What do you believe in?”

Winnie’s smile mellowed and she touched herself on the belly. “I believe in love. Don’t tell my students, because I can’t prove a thing. But the same Aristotle who wrote the *Organon* said ‘love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies’. That’s what I believe in, Gwen. That’s what I think men and women ought to do, what they achieve in their very best moments. We owe so much to Aristotle, and I’m very grateful for every gift he gave us. But at night when I pray to the god I don’t believe in, I pray that Aristotle knew that kind of love. It would be tragic for us to have all these gifts from him and for him not to have had that one precious gift for himself. It would be tragic for anyone to let something like that slip away...”

Gwen grinned. “I thought you never tell anyone anything.”

“I never do. You can lead a mind to reason, but you can’t make it think... They have to work so hard to get to the place where we go every time we pick up a baby. Devin’s different. He’s been a mom for so long, plus he comes from that wonderful family. But he’s still a man, and you’re still a woman...”

Gwen nodded. “I think I knew that.” She smiled.

Winnie pulled a small card from her purse and stuffed it in the pocket of Gwen’s waistcoat. “I want for us to be friends. Regardless of what happens between you and Devin. Will you come to see my baby?”

“I’d be delighted.” Gwen bit her lip and blinked back tears. “I’d be delighted...”

Winnie smiled warmly, radiantly. “I’ll have Xander call you from the hospital. Later today if I’m very lucky...”

That night when Gwen was undressing, she read the card Winnie had given her. It was an M.I.T. business card with Winnie's home address and phone number written on the front. On the back were two quotations. Gwen read them over and over again and finally she worked up the nerve to call him.

"Are you busy?"

He smiled and she could feel him smiling through the phone, could hear the skin of his face stretching tight in the way his breathing changed. "It's ten o'clock at night. I'm usually not busy at this hour."

"Oh. Well. I've seen that office of yours, haven't I? And I've had mail from you later than this."

"I'm not busy, Gwen."

"Nor am I, alas. Or perhaps thankfully. And so I thought I'd give you a ring."

He said nothing for an agonizingly long moment and she thought he might say nothing at all. "...Is that what you thought?"

She blew the smallest puff of air out of her nose and bit her lip at the same time. She assumed he could see her as well as she could see him, see her expressions in the small sounds that accompanied them. "Say the truth or say nothing, is that it?"

"No. Yes. No. I'm glad you called. I don't want to punish you for it."

"...You're glad I called?"

"No, I hate it that you called. And I'm delighted to speak to you. And I hate it that I'm delighted. And please don't hang up." He laughed and she knew it was despite himself and she laughed with him for another reason.

She said, "I've... I've missed you."

Again there was a long silence. "Now you have to speak the truth."

She bit her lower lip very hard and blinked her eyes very fast. "What if I can't...?"

She could feel his lips purse, as if his cheek were right next to her own. "Then you have to miss me. When there's nothing you can do, do nothing. I wrote that on my own bathroom mirror." He chuckled without the smallest hint of mirth.

It was her turn to be silent and he let her. Finally she said, "I've been thinking about Ibsen."

"Have you?"

"Yes. I was quite taken with him as a girl. I used to imagine what it would be like to live among people who spoke that way, such ordinary words so laden with hidden meanings."

"Was Hilde your favorite?"

"Hilde was *your* favorite, I'm sure. I thought more of Hedda in those days. And in making that observation I invite you to infer precisely nothing. And I do not have Granny Penelope's sidearm, if you were wondering."

He chuckled, this time an actual laugh.

"But it's this awful winter that's got me thinking of Ibsen now. It gets dark so early and I stand at my window and I watch the snow swirling down in the halo of the streetlight, swirling down then vanishing into the blackness. I can see the street and the cars and the houses, but after a while I can't see anything

at all, just snowflakes and the void. And then I feel as if I'm trapped in one of those awful houses overlooking a fjord, trapped forever with the ghosts of my sins and my obsessions..."

He said nothing and she wasn't entirely surprised.

"You think I'm being melodramatic, don't you?"

"...I think you're asking for what you can't have in a way that's beneath you."

She scoffed and for the first time since she'd known him she spoke to him with the finely-honed edge of contempt in her voice. "What can't I have, Devin Dwyer? Are you saying I can't have a man?"

"I'm sure you can have almost any man you want."

"...But not *the* man I want." The contempt was gone from her voice, replaced by an unbounded sadness.

He was silent for an endless time and she could hear him breathing and she knew he was fighting back tears, just as she was. "You can't have anything you want until you dare to want it..."

She said nothing and he knew she was crying and he wanted to comfort her and he knew he couldn't. He listened to her breathing; no sobs, just the ragged kind of breathing of someone who is trying very hard not to cry.

He said, "What's that music I hear."

He could feel her smiling, that brave 'I'm not crying' smile. "It's Mendelssohn. The trios for piano and strings. Comfort for the soul on a winter's night on the fjords." Her smile changed to something more wry and he could feel the change.

He smiled with her. "I've been listening to the country station."

"Country music in Boston?"

"You can find country music in Tokyo. It's the universal language of pain. On Fridays they really lay it on thick. Cheatin' songs. Hurtin' songs. Leavin' songs. Don't screw it up, boys. Take that paycheck home. There's nothing you can have for seven hours that's worth losing what you've had for seven years, so don't screw it up."

"Is that what you think you've done?" she asked. "Screwed it up?"

She could hear the sadness in his voice before he had said a word. "...That's what I think you've done."

She was silent for a long, long time, and when she finally spoke there seemed to be no connection to what had gone before. "I love to talk on the telephone. Did you know that? We've traded so much email and whispered so many secrets mouth to ear, and I've actually felt cheated. There's so much missing from a telephone call, but so much that's so tellingly there if you listen for it. It's as if the world were a fabric, like a tablecloth, and the telephone pinches two spots of the fabric together, so that two people who are tens or thousands of miles apart are precisely and perfectly next to each other. Mouth to ear, close enough to breathe and whisper and sigh. So much is hidden, but so very much more is revealed."

She could hear him breathing and she could feel him smiling and she knew his green eyes were enflamed. "Gwen, I'll always love you. You can be hurt if you have to, but don't ever be jealous. No one could ever replace you in my life..."



“Devin...”

“No. It can’t be that way. I don’t believe in loyalty, personal loyalty. If you said that to the people who know me, I’m sure they’d be surprised, because I’m sure I seem to be devoutly loyal to them. But what I’m loyal to is principle, and if I might seem to be faithful to a person, it’s because that’s the means of expressing fidelity to the principle. I won’t say I never betray a principle, because sometimes I do—by mistake. But I never *knowingly* betray a principle.”

A hint of the contempt crept back into her voice. “No matter how much it hurts.”

She heard the puff of air that came before his smile of acceptance. “In any conflict between bad and worse, bad is as good as it gets.”

“Is having me so very much worse than... not?”

“The words are, ‘I love you’, those words, that order. If I betray my own ego, there’s no ‘I’. Then no ‘love’. And soon enough no ‘you’. You wanted to find love among the nerds and here it is, the calculus of loss, the mathematical language of pain...”

“What if... What if I were to say, ‘I love you?’”

He chuckled. “Is this an auction? Are you placing a bid?”

“Please don’t... Please don’t be cruel.”

“Gwen, I know you love me.”

“You do...?”

“You love me more than anything, like I love you. I’m in you all the time, you’re always talking to me in your head. I’m in you to the bone. I’ll be with you forever. I’ll be with you on the day you die.”

“Then... God, Devin, *why?*”

“You don’t have to *say* it. You don’t have to *feel* it. Well, you *do* have to feel it. But you have to *live* it. It can’t be something that you feel and don’t do. ‘Just the one or the other, the action or the vision, could never be enough for me.’ Someone I love said that. I know you love me, Gwen. I know you love me more than any man you’ve ever known or ever will know. But I know you love something else even more...”

She was trapped and she knew it and she knew he knew it and still she spoke sharply. “So my love for you has to be unconditional, is that it?”

He issued the softest of chuckles and she knew it wasn’t derision and she knew it was, the worst sort, the derision of the comically harmless. “I’d hate that. I want to earn everything I get, and I want to earn your love more than anything else. Real love can be endlessly accepting, but how could it be unconditional? There are billions of women on the Earth and you’re the only one I love. I’m the only man you love. Your love can’t be unconditional. But it can’t be expressed in the subjunctive, either.”

“Ouch,” she said. “He pricked me with an arrow from mine own quiver.” She laughed.

“Gwen, I’ve... I’ve missed you, too.”

He could hear her smiling. “Is it the arrows and quivers you’ve missed, then?”

“The prickings and the quiverings, I think.”

“Do you dare intimate that I quiver?”

“I was speaking of myself.”

“Devin...”

“No.”

“Just to see you.”

“No. I can’t just see you. I can’t look at you without touching you. I can’t think of you without wanting you. Is that what you want to hear? But it has to be both, Gwen, just the way you said. The thought and the deed, and either one alone is nothing. Love-making as the expression of love and every loving thought an act of love-making. I love to be inside you, you know that. I love to be enveloped by you. I love to be locked together with you from our heels to our hips to our shoulders to our lips. But that’s just one way I have of making love with you, and not always the best way. I love to cook with you. I love to sit beside you in the car. I love to walk next to you and feel your legs brushing against mine. I love to talk with you, Gwen, I love it right now. I love to *think* of you, and you’re so much a part of my thoughts that I don’t *have* any thoughts that you’re not a part of. You’re there with me always, always right beside me in my mind. Do I want to see you? Do I want to make love with you? I want it so much it makes me crazy. I want to kiss you until I can’t breathe. I want to touch your skin and I want never to *stop* touching your skin...”

She was crying and he knew she was crying and he knew if he was with her he’d hold her and then they would make love. And he would love her. And he would hate himself.

“It has to be both,” he said. “The action is the idea and the idea is the action. Without that, there’s nothing. I want both. I want everything...”

“...And what if you can’t have everything?”

She could hear the phone shift against his head and she knew he had shrugged. “You know the answer... It’s funny, I guess. *This* is the way to get drummed out of the Union of the Men. Integrity is viewed with suspicion in every context, but it is held to be completely without meaning or merit in the bedroom. ‘A stiff prick has no conscience’ is what the boys say to each other, one of those clumsy jokes otherwise decent people use to excuse their worst impulses. But that is when principles matter, when they’re challenged, when your every yearning and appetite is crying for the one thing your will must forbid. Integrity is wholeness. Undivided. Undiverted. Undiluted.”

“Unfallen?”

“That’s what it means.”

“Untouched...?”

“If necessary.”

“Do you... do you cry for me sometimes, Devin?”

“I’ve cried for you every day since the day I met you, since you made me cry in Harvard Square. I used to enjoy it more...”

She was standing at the window and she could see his wry grin in the blackness beyond the halo of the streetlight.

“But that doesn’t change anything, Gwen. I love you forever. I love you more than I’ve ever loved any woman, more that I ever *will* love any woman. I’ll love you every day until the day I die. But that doesn’t change anything.”

She said nothing. When there's nothing you can do, do nothing.  
Very softly, very sadly, he said, "Don't call me too often."  
"Does that mean it's all right if I call again?"  
He was quiet for a very long time and then finally he spoke even more  
softly. "Don't call me too often..."

## *Interval—Love among the ruins*

Date: Sun, 04 Jan 1998 22:12:41 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Permission to be

She gave herself  
permission to rave  
permission to crave  
permission to need  
permission to feed  
permission to try  
permission to fly

She gave herself  
license to take  
concession to ache  
allowance to hear  
acceptance to fear  
authority to know  
sufferance to grow

She denied herself  
permission to feel  
permission to heal  
permission to share  
permission to dare  
permission to give  
permission to live

She denied herself  
the need to confess

the urge to possess  
the power to cede  
the courage to plead  
the freedom to chain  
the will to remain

She denied herself  
permission to you  
permission to me  
permission to be

Date: Tue, 06 Jan 1998 23:07:17 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Dream

I had a dream I saw you.  
I dreamed you happened by.  
I tried to reach you beg beseech you.  
I couldn't catch your eye.

I heard a poem you whispered.  
I heard you breathe my name.  
I sang about you life without you  
every day the same.

I spoke to you in silence.  
I spoke to you in dread.  
I named my fear you not to hear you  
except inside my head.

I read your words unwritten.  
I heard you make no sound.  
Live me die me say goodbye me  
here but nowhere found.

I thought I knew forever.  
I thought I knew for good.  
Tell me show me never go me.  
I thought you never could.

I had a dream I saw you.  
I dreamed you couldn't stay.  
You kissed me blissed me vowed to miss me  
and then you went away.

Date: Wed, 07 Jan 1998 22:48:26 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu

From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Ruins...

It isn't your fault you talk to me.  
It isn't as if there were sound.  
You echo to me from a spot I can't see.  
From nowhere you're always around.  
In absence you're always unabsent.  
Unsilenced unthoughts unintoned.  
But if I can never be with you  
let me be without you alone

I never besought me to be this besotted.  
I never once wanted to need this disgrace.  
I never had grasped never begged never asked  
never pictured the picture I hold of your face.  
I don't need your love or your blessed undressing.  
I'd be blessed to be ever your friend.  
But if this can have no beginning  
for god's sake let it come to the end.

My thoughts of you are all unreal.  
Imaginings treasured as jewels.  
I followed your lead and hoarded my need.  
In the end I just followed your rules.  
Forbidden kept hidden kept silenced kept out  
kept from showing the gems I contrive in my head.  
But if you can't be in my thoughts  
then be in my memories instead.

Cowardice flees from the obvious.  
Unnoticed it hopes is unsaid.  
But courage is left to the hopeful one  
when all that she's hoped for has fled.  
It isn't the courage that's biting my lip  
but still it falls to me to say:  
If you can't be beside me  
then at least please go away.

Date: Thu, 08 Jan 1998 21:56:03 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Love among the ruins

In the end there was never a beginning  
an outcome I should have expected.  
Nothing lasted to the last.

Nothing passed from the past.  
In the glass nothing ever reflected.

In the clearing he never came near me.  
In the shadows he never could stay.  
He whispered salvation  
by assured implication  
but tomorrow's tomorrows are never today's.

In the silence I spoke without speaking.  
From my echo I inferred his reply.  
My swordtongue did battle  
full licensed to prattle  
full armored to fend off the force of his sighs.

In the night there was no spark of dawning.  
In the black there was no prayer of white.  
The promise was wasted.  
The fruit left untasted.  
The day chased of every last glimmer of light.

In the beginning there was never an ending.  
The unuttered can draw no last breath.  
Undenied unassented.  
Unbereaved unlamented.  
The unbirthed is unmourned without death.

Date: Sat, 10 Jan 1998 01:34:19 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: My dream of rapture

Passion embraces in stillness it chases  
Our faces the places I picture us there  
A breath caught and captured a moment's sweet rapture  
Sweet rapture's embracing a vision a prayer

A tug a deft touch I've missed you too much  
I've missed every minute every day every year  
A life lost to seeking to silences speaking  
To seeking to finding to having you near

With fingers locked tight our eyes talk delighted  
So brightly rejoicing release from the night  
You pull to enfold me to boldly control me  
Your strength is my weakness my vision your sight

Your skin pressed to burn me to warn me you've earned me  
To feel me to seal me to seal you to me  
The taste of your kisses the nectar of bliss  
The whisper the promise of passions to be

Picture the moment of tenderness splendor  
Envision collision of planets of stars  
Sun-baked and earthquaked and violently languid  
Blanketed godthings Minerva and Mars

Solitude shimmers a vision's perfection  
Embracing a passion we're not free to share  
So I grasp at the sunlight that captures your body  
And kiss at the breeze that enraptures your hair

Date: Sat, 10 Jan 1998 01:41:33 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: You

I do want to talk to you, fairly desperately, and this is no substitute for that. But this is easier. And safer. And fairly permanent, and I am burning with urge to make things permanent just now. Hunter finally came home Saturday, and having him away always rips me up. I expect you know the past week hasn't been any easier for me than it's been for you. And then there was you, just you, who has had me more or less completely tattered for months, not counting all the years I lost waiting for you.

I do love you, Gwen, or else I don't know what love is at all-- always possible. You are always right here, right next to everything in my mind. I think if I were avoiding an auto accident or having an excruciatingly painful operation, I might be able to forbear thinking of you for a second or two, but I wouldn't want to swear to that without putting it to the test. That much of this is amazing to me, that you could become so bound up in everything I do; you're everywhere I look and you're all I ever see.

This is a true fact, neither proud nor shameful: Before Hunter came along, I had never really shared anything with anyone. Nicole used to talk about sharing all the time, and I had no idea at all what she meant. Wasn't she sharing in huge blocks of my time? Wasn't she sharing my income? I was never one for splitting the donuts in half, but there were always donuts enough to go around. One-for-you, one-for-me--what could be more sharing than that?

Until Hunter came along, I had never thought to let another person inside my mind. Just to be there, to be there with me always, to dance and sing and sleep there, exuding warmth and the aromas of the familiar and the dearly loved. I love it when Hunter sleeps with me, but there is never a time that Hunter doesn't sleep with me; he'll be a baby in my arms when he has babies of his own.

That's not precisely right. My family was always with me--\_is\_ always with me--but it's a different thing. It's something I grew up with and never thought to doubt. And it's an undemanding kind of love that's just \_there,\_ like a thick down comforter on a cold morning. I didn't have to decide to let my mom or Candy or my grandpa into my life, and I didn't have to volunteer to give them much that was my own. With Hunter, I wanted to be completely \_there\_ for him, completely open to him and completely available to him, no secrets, no lies, no hoarding, no hiding, no walls. It was a love like I'd never known, or like I'd known it only from the other direction. Not his love for me, which is very large. But my love for him, which is infinite, unbounded.

That's what I have with you, I guess, even now I guess, and what I want to have with you and what I'm scared to death of having with you. Scared worse of \_not\_ having with you. I've never been afraid of you hurting me, not even now. But all along I've been afraid of not being enough for you, not being right for you, not coming through for you. I don't know what you want, and I'm scared of not knowing what you want. But what I want is this: I want you with me always, always twined into my mind, exuding warmth and the aromas of the familiar and the dearly loved. I want very desperately to plunder your passions, don't ever think I don't. But much more than that I want to hold you, to hold you next to my body as much as you'll permit and to hold you next to my soul in the awful hours you must be away from me.

Sharing my wealth and my property and my income is easy; it's only money. What I want to share with you is my dominion, the me I let no one see before Hunter came along. I am charmed and delighted when you wince at the thought that I have bedded other women. But there has never been another woman in my life, not one who has seen even the smallest hint of what I've shown you without a twinge, without a second thought. Others may have had my body, and I am at best a fleeting memory to them. To you alone I offer my soul, and my hope is to come to be as much a part of your life as you are of mine.

I can't imagine--and I love to--what things might be like a year from now, or ten, or thirty, if we can find our way back to the true course. As much as I love him, Hunter can only grow away from me. I like to think that it's possible for me to grow always ever closer to you, and you to me, for you to sleep inside me always, always

keeping me warm. I want to give you everything I have always withheld, everything I have hidden within myself, and I would be blessed and honored to spend the rest of my life making new treasures to lay at your feet.

There's this, too: At a certain level of elation or need or wonder or serenity, it doesn't even matter to me what you do. I need you and I want very desperately for you to need me in the same way, but I need you regardless. That you love me--and I do believe you love me--is wonderful, but what matters to me is that I love you. I think that's why you scare me and thrill me so much, why you make me so ravenously hungry, because this really is love, love the way I have it for Hunter, a love that doesn't expect or demand or require anything, that is sufficient and entire and perfect unto itself. But this is so much better than what I feel for Hunter, so much bigger. And the richest thought of all is this: What if it were both ways? My mother loved me like I love Hunter like he will love his children. But what about two adults, fully capable of this kind of devotion. That's where we were headed, at least that's what I thought. That's where I want to be.

If it burdens you to have me say all these things, I'm sorry. I feel myself compelled to speak because I am too sorely tempted to keep silent instead. This would make a good habit of love, I think, to share precisely in those moments when one is tempted to hoard, to hide, to cache away the very treasures that can have no value \_until\_ they are shared.

You are so much mine, Gwen, and I long to be yours and I want very desperately to be worthy of being yours and I want never to fail of that worthiness. I am in tatters for you, and I think I always will be. But I am remade, too, a better me and stronger, prouder and stouter of resolve, more loving, more giving, more passionate and more vulnerable and more willing to risk pain. I am a better man because of you, and I want always to be better still. Better for the sake of being better and better for you, a better fit, a better answer, a better ecstasy. You're with me even now, even when you're not, and you'll be with me forever no matter what happens next. You'll be with me and I'll be stronger because I am inspired with you.

I want you with me always, Gwen. I want you with me forever.

All my love, forever, no matter what,

Devin

Date: Sat, 10 Jan 1998 02:05:52 -0500  
To: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
From: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
Subject: Re: You

I send him a poem and he sends me a symphony. I have to digest this and it's too late for either of us to be up. Can you answer me a question, though, or make me a vow, or at least light my way back to the path? Promise me we're not done yet. Promise me that much. Promise that you haven't given up.

Gwen

Date: Sat, 10 Jan 1998 02:09:31 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Re: You

>it's too late for either of us to be up.

It's too late for either of us to be up alone <g>.

>Promise me we're not done yet.

God, I hope not...

>Promise that you haven't given up.

I haven't given up, Gwen. I can't. But I can't think of anything to do, either...

Devin

## Chapter 8

Winnie Booth stopped in the door of Devin's office. "Today's my last day," she said.

Devin looked up, distracted. "Oh. Oh, are we doing something?"

She chuckled softly, shaking her head. "I've been waiting for you to come and talk to me. I ran out of time to wait."

"To talk to you about...?"

"Don't hide from me, Devin. She came to see me last week. Now you've got me wondering what the hell is wrong with you."

"She came to see you?"

"Last Friday. I thought she might call you."

He smiled. It started as a smirk but he couldn't sustain it. "We're talking. Trading email anyway. There isn't any ice between us."

"Maybe there should be. Strong enough for one or the other of you to walk across. Better yet, meet in the middle."

His smile turned derisive and she knew he was laughing at himself. "Come in, Winnie. Take a load off your... load."

She laughed with him. She was at that last agonizing stage of pregnancy when a woman seems to be more than half baby. She lowered herself gingerly in one of the chairs in front of his desk. She said, "People get out of your way. When you're this pregnant, everyone is convinced that the baby is going to pop out right on them. I have walked these halls for almost six years and I have never been so unjustled."

Devin said nothing. He affected to stare at one of the hundreds of pieces of paper scattered randomly on his desk.

"What are you going to do? Just let her go?"

He shrugged. "I sent her away. I sent her home anyway. I haven't asked her back."

"So that's that, is it? Doctor Devin falls in love for the first time in his life, then he falls right back out. Is that how it works?"

He winced and held his breath, letting it out slowly through his nose. "I really don't want to talk about this, Winnie."

She smirked into tight-pursed lips, concealing precisely nothing. "I noticed," she drawled. "But I *do* want to talk about it. Does that put me on your shit list? Are you going to cut me off? Not come to see me in the hospital? Not come to see my baby?"

"Winnie," he said, exasperated. "It's not the same thing."

"Isn't it? Why isn't it?"

"Because it isn't!"

She smiled brightly. "Because-I-said-so solipsism, the fallacy of brow-beating. Minus five points. Surely you can do better."

He sighed. "It's just not the same."

"It's just love, isn't it? Isn't that what you told Xander? Just love like you have for him or for me or for Hunter, but more?"

"I'm not *in* love with you, Winifred Booth."

"So of course you treat me better. How does that follow?"

He had his fist pressed to his lips but he was smiling behind it. "You're very good at this. Do you know that?"

She smiled again. "I learned from the best..."

Devin looked up to see Spencer standing in the doorway. The boy was bundled up in a parka at least four sizes too large for him and his cheeks were flushed from the cold. He said, "Have I come at a bad time?"

Devin laughed out loud. "No. Come in. Sit down. The Grand Inquisitor's already here."

"...I'm afraid I'm a bit lost."

"Nothing. Never mind. Did you come to talk about your mom?"

The boy smiled weakly. He stood behind a chair, not quite staying, not quite going. "I guess so."

"Take your coat off. Sit down. You remember Winnie Booth from Thanksgiving. She's here for the same reason."

"Just call me Torquemada," Winnie said, smiling. "Have you been here before?"

"It's my first time. I just thought... I thought someone should do something..."

Winnie nodded. "That's what I thought, too." Devin glared at her and, while there was a forbearance in it, it was not infinitely forbearing. "'Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in.' And your family is composed of the people who have sense enough not to go away when you don't know how desperately you need for them not to go away."

"Mother-knows-best fallacy," said Devin.

Winnie nodded. "Have it your way."

Devin said, "Spencer's quite the young math god. A.P. calculus, A.P. physics, number theory last year for summer camp. You're a Senior at Newton this year?"

"Boston College High School."

Devin smiled. "My parents went there. Where have you applied for college?"

Winnie said, "You're changing the subject, Devin."

"Give it a rest for now. You've done what you came to do. Where have you applied, Spencer?"

"Stanford, Princeton, Cal Tech. And here, of course."

"Do you want to go to M.I.T., or did you apply here so Cal Tech won't take you for granted?"

Spencer smiled with genuine amusement. "I hadn't thought of things in that way."

"Well, if you want to go here, you should suck up to Winnie. She's on the Admissions Committee."

"Don't let him snow you, Spencer. His family endows half of the Physics Department. If you've got the scores and you want in, he can get you in."

"I had just assumed it was all a matter of merit."

"It is," Winnie replied. "For the first cut. If you haven't got the scores and you haven't got the high school preparation, then *nobody* can get you in here. But after the first cut there are thirty kids for every available seat. We have to have some way of choosing them, and having a sponsor in the faculty is a way that works. Having two or three works better."

Devin smiled. "In a one horse town, it pays to know the mayor. No pressure either way. If you want to go here, Winnie can make it happen. And it's one hell of a lever to use on Cal Tech, for that matter. I know your mom would like it if you went here, even if you decide to live on campus. I'd like it, too. Think about it and let me know."

"Is there room for one more?" Xander asked from the doorway.

Devin said nothing, just rolled his eyes.

"Are you two the tag-team love doctors?"

"If we are, the patient is being difficult," Winnie said.

"You should listen to her," Xander said to Devin. "She's right, and being right is all that ever matters to you, isn't it?"

"Do you carry every little thing I tell you back to your wife?"

Xander smiled brightly, refusing to be affronted by the accusation. "Every little thing."

"But I was wrong then, according to you. And yet I'm wrong again today. How can that be?"

"I was wrong then," Xander said. "You're wrong today."

"Your proof...?"

Xander said nothing. He was standing behind Winnie and he put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed gently.

"That's all the answer I'm going to get, isn't it?"

Xander shrugged. "What answer are you looking for? You were right and you knew it and you know it now. You know what you're looking for and you know it doesn't exist. You've got to make something up, so you can hang your hat on it. That stuff might fly with other people, but not here, not with us. Christ, Devin, where did I learn to talk like this?"

Devin chuckled, confessing defeat.

Winnie had a small white card in her hand and she gave it to Devin. She said, "Put it away for now. It's soul food, food for the soul. Read it when you're feeling hungry."

Devin nodded and stuffed the card into his shirt pocket.

Xander said, "I left the car right in front of Rogers, so we should probably get going."

"He'll risk getting towed to save me a few steps," Winnie said. "That's the love that speaks for itself." She grinned, but there was so much warmth in it that no one could doubt she was serious.

"I'll walk out with you," said Devin. "I'm not getting anything done anyway. Are you free to take a walk with me, Spencer? I think I could use the company."

Spencer nodded and they bundled themselves up and walked through the network of underground corridors that connect the buildings of M.I.T. They took the elevator up in Building 10 and walked down the infinite corridor to Massachusetts Avenue.

Xander's car was a sleek black Saab 9000 and Devin laughed at him. "They're going to *love* to take this in trade on a minivan! Winnie, you'll know he loves you when he gives up this car."

"You're telling me," said Winnie. "Getting in is easy, but getting out is so hard."

Devin took her hands in his and she knew by his eyes that he was dead serious. "It'll all work out, Winnie."

She smiled, teasing him a little. "I take it you don't mean the baby. I know it will work out, Devin. And I know you'll do the right thing. I believe in you like you believe in the orbits of the stars. I know you'll always do the right thing. I can't guess what it might be, but I know that when you've done it, I'll say, 'Yes, that was the right thing to have done.'"

Devin smiled and she saw the love of Candy Dwyer in his eyes, all the love there ever was, all the love in the universe.

She said, "She loves you, Devin. And you love her. And there's nothing wrong in that. Find a way to make it right..."

Devin stood with Spencer as the car pulled away. He said, "Are you cold? Can you stand to walk?"

"I'm all right."

"Let's just walk, then. I learned how to think on the streets of Boston and Cambridge. I don't always find the answer I'm looking for, but I can always walk my way to peace, to serenity." They walked their way to the Harvard Bridge across the Charles—named the Harvard Bridge because the students of M.I.T. thought it was too badly designed to be called the M.I.T. Bridge. Elements of the more-or-less perpetual repair crew were out in their orange vests and traffic was backed up in both directions. The walkways were free, though, and they walked, one foot in front of the other, without speaking.

Finally Devin said, "Are you a boy or a man, Spencer?"

"I'm not sure I get that..."

"It's yours to say. People will treat you like a boy for the most part, I guess. But if you decide you're a man, and if you decide to behave like a man, who can stop you?"

Spencer grinned, his smile as bright as the sun. "There's that, isn't there?"

"I ask because I think it's a very brave thing you're doing today. A boy might just let things slide, decide it's not his concern, decide there's nothing he can do. Are you being a man today?"

"...It's just that she's been so—am I telling you more than I should? She's been so sad."

Devin nodded, a grim acknowledgment. Facts are facts.

"What about you? You seem to be holding up well enough."

He shook his head. "I do my crying in the rain... I don't know how she feels, but I feel pretty rotten. I look at myself and I see two arms and two legs, but I feel as though huge chunks of me are missing, just gone. Cut away, cauterized, numbed, but gone..."

"Can I... Can I ask what's gone wrong?"

"I wish I knew. One of the things I try to do, one of the things I resolved to do when I decided that I was a man, is to try to figure out what *I've* done wrong. It's so tempting to blame other people or god or the malevolent fates when things go wrong, but usually it's something you yourself have done, something you could have and should have done differently. The worst of it is, most of the time you *know* you're doing the wrong thing but you ignore that knowledge and then later you try to pretend to yourself that you were ignorant all along, that you couldn't have foreseen what was coming. It's a comical business, sometimes, being a human being..."

Spencer said nothing, just walked along with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his parka.

"You're waiting for me to tell you what I did wrong. The trouble is, I don't know. Maybe I let things go too far too fast, and maybe your mother did, too. But everything seemed right until all at once it seemed all wrong. I can conjecture about what should have been different, but that's all I can do."

"I'm listening."

"Are you a boy or a man, Spencer? You're asking questions, but the answers to those questions might reflect badly on your mother. Are you sure you want to continue?"

"...I want to know if there's something I can do to help."

"That's a good answer. A very manly answer. I'll do my best to live up to that." Devin took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "My problem was that I stopped trusting your mother. No, that's too strong. I stopped feeling as safe as I had with her, and the change was enough that it scared me very badly. I don't know what's going on with her, and no matter how well we might guess, we can never know what's going on in another person's mind. But if she were a man, I'd feel a lot more confident about my conjectures. That's what scared me, I guess, that she looked to me like I had looked to myself before, a long time ago..."

"I'm not following you."

"It's about marriage, Spencer. You know that, right? I don't know that your mom and I were going to get married, but until a couple of weeks ago I thought for sure we were. We hadn't talked about it, hadn't planned anything. It was just the road we were traveling and I didn't see anything to throw us off that course. I was married before, to Hunter's mother, and Gwen started to feel to me like I had felt to myself when I was married... That's not clear at all, is it?"

Spencer grinned and that was answer enough.



“Okay, let’s do it this way. My grandmother taught me to tell stories as a way of demonstrating ideas, so I’m going to tell you a story. When I first got my lab at M.I.T., I was delighted pretty much constantly. I didn’t have much in the way of funding then, and I was working around the clock, but I was getting results and the results were right in the zone, right where the theoretical model said they should be. I got hardly any sleep, but I made up for it with coffee and elation. I just walked around on clouds.

“One night I left the Institute very late and I hailed a cab right there on Mass Ave, right where we said goodbye to Winnie and Xander. The driver was a Palestinian and he was busting ass just like I was, a different job but the same total commitment. We were made for each other that night. I love everything this country stands for—everything that it *used to* stand for—and the people I love best are the immigrants, the ones who *know* how good they have it by being here. I can talk—can you tell?—and when I’m in the right kind of mood I can sell ice to Eskimos. I was just soaring that night and I needed to sing the praises of America and that was exactly what that driver needed to hear.

“You know how this works, right? People come here from Palestine or Eastern Europe or Africa or Taiwan and they take the dirtiest, most awful jobs and they bust their asses night and day and the lazy slobs who were born here just treat them like shit. This was my grandfather’s life, this isn’t something I had to discover on my own. Anyway, they come here because they’re willing to work hard and they want to live where hard work pays off and they work and work and work, driving cabs, running fruit stands, pushing food carts downtown. And they bust their asses and they lean all over their kids and the kids go to M.I.T. and Johns Hopkins and become the next generation of first-rate doctors and scientists.

“But still the lazy slobs treat them like shit, and that’s why I knew that driver needed to talk to me. He was taking care of business, and that’s what matters at the end of the day. But if you’re right, right in your soul, right in your bones, it doesn’t hurt to have somebody say so once in a while. And that’s a job that I can do...

“So he drove me home and I talked to him. Without coming right out and saying so, I told him all about why he was right, why the things he was doing were good and noble and admirable, why he should be proud of himself and why he should *never* be ashamed of being proud of himself. Make money. Provide for your family. Educate your children. And never apologize. *That’s* the American dream, and the people who dare to live it are the *true* Americans. By the time we got to the house *he* was soaring, and that was just what I wanted. I love my life, and I was proud of myself for sharing that love with someone who deserved it.

“Okay, that’s the happy part of the story. Maybe fifteen months later, a lot had changed. I was married and my marriage was a frozen wasteland—my own fault, don’t ever think otherwise. Things weren’t great at the lab, either. The numbers weren’t always in the groove and I didn’t know why. We had more money but that just meant there was more bureaucratic bullshit to plow through. We had ramped up from a pilot program to the full project and we were doing fussy little monitoring jobs on equipment all over the world, plus some in orbit. One

night I got out so late I might as well have not bothered to go home. We’d been having transient hardware failures and the data was corrupted and we had no idea how far back we had to wipe it and finally I just gave up and let it lie. I was grumpy and tired and useless and I knew I couldn’t do anything anyway, not the way I was feeling. I growled my way out the door and went home to sleep.

“I grabbed a cab and got that same driver. He remembered me, of course, and I could see in the mirror that he wanted it again, wanted me to take him soaring with me. But I couldn’t do it that night. I didn’t have it in me, nothing like it. That’s no sin, I guess, but the sinful thing is that I didn’t do *anything*. I knew he wanted me to talk, but he didn’t come right out and say so. He hinted around a little, made a few small overtures, but I just froze him out. I was pissed off and grumpy and I argued silently to myself that he had no goddamned right expecting me to lay on a show for him the way I felt. I sat in the back of that car and sulked—that’s the right word. I sulked all the way home.

“That was shameful, Spencer, one of the most shameful things I’ve ever done. I’ve never forgotten that night and I’ve never stopped feeling guilty for it.”

Spencer looked confused. “Perhaps I’m missing something. What was the big deal?”

Devin shrugged. “Maybe it doesn’t seem like that big a deal, but it is. We hadn’t had a silly little chat that first night. I had shown that man my soul and I had coaxed him into showing me his. There weren’t any promises between us, but I had given him the right to expect a certain kind of intimacy from me—so much more remarkable *because* he was a cab driver—and then I had pulled that intimacy away without even the courtesy of an explanation. Do you see where I’m headed?”

“Frankly I don’t.”

“It’s marriage. That driver and I were married in our odd little way, and I pulled back on him, pulled back without a hint at a reason, just like I was doing in my marriage to Hunter’s mother. You behave in certain ways and you lead people to have certain expectations of you. If you’re comfortable with those expectations and if you want to make everything that much more secure you say the words out loud: This is what you are to me and this is what you will always have from me and I give you my solemn vow that I will never withhold from you anything that is yours to demand. That’s what we do at our very best. But what if you’re not comfortable with the expectations? What do you do then? Maybe you follow through anyway, but you never take that extra step, you never put it into words. You’re accountable for what you do as well as what you say, but if you don’t come right out and say it, you can always deny things, you can always claim you were misunderstood. Come on, Spencer. I’m not telling you anything you don’t know...”

“I guess not. ...Are you saying this is what she’s done?”

Devin shook his head. “I don’t know. It just felt like that to me. I felt as though we could soar forever so long as I didn’t ask her to make it a promise.”

“Well, you can’t have that, can you? I mean, you can’t both be in perfect form every day. What happens when you have another bad day? What happens when she does?”

Devin smiled, a tight, bitter little smile. "The problem with the cab driver wasn't that I'd had a bad night. The problem was that I wouldn't acknowledge our 'marriage'. The honest thing to have done, the honest thing to do in a *real* marriage is to say, 'I'm not up to soaring today. If you are, I could sure use your help. And if not, let's find a way to help each other back to the sky.' That's what men do. That's what women do. That's what grown-ups do."

Spencer made no reply and they walked in silence through the Back Bay of Boston. At the Auditorium stop of the T Devin said, "You can get a train home from here."

"Are we finished then?"

Devin smiled to himself. "God, I hope not... Listen, the Phoenix Suns are in town in a couple of weeks. I promised you a basketball game and that should be a good one. Battle of the coaches, Pitino versus Ainge, two of the smartest guys in the N.B.A. You want to go?"

"Sure."

"...Spencer, this is a very good thing you did today. A very manly thing. It took guts..."

The boy reacted boyishly, but Devin knew that was just from habit. There was a sadness in his eyes and a resolve and a measure of pride and he was every inch a man.

'Soul food,' Winnie had said. 'Read it when you're feeling hungry.' Devin felt very hungry in his soul and he dug into his pocket to see what she had written. It was two quotations, written in pale blue ink in Winnie's delicate hand.

The first was from Robert A. Heinlein: "Love is the condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own."

The second was by Liciano De Crescenzo and Devin read it over and over again, blinking back tears. "We are each of us Angels with one wing, and we can only fly embracing each other."

Devin looked at Spencer with glassy eyes and said, "I'll do something. I don't know what right now, but I'll think of something to do..."

Spencer nodded and there was so much strength in him and so much confidence and Devin felt very young and weak and he was glad he had someone as strong as Spencer to help him find his way back to the sky, to help the two of them remember how to fly...

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 1998 23:08:22 -0500  
To: gpjones@bostonglobe.com  
From: drdevin@ptolemy.mit.edu  
Subject: Devotions

I have a little note that I taped to my bathroom mirror after our first real 'date' together. It says, "What would I do if I lost her?" Maybe that's ironic now, but it's still there, and it's still a question that preys on my mind.

I promised Spencer I'd do something I and don't what to do. The one

thing I know I should do is tell the truth, by which I mean the whole truth, with nothing held back. I think I've been completely forthcoming with you all along. Certainly I've wanted to be, and I've never felt that sick urge to keep something concealed. But unconcealed is not always fully revealed, and the one thing I know I can do tonight--and should do--is reveal myself to you.

These are my expressions of my devotion to you, Gwen. Some of them you've seen in mail from me, but others are from things I wrote to myself. I want you to have this now, regardless of what happens with us, because this is the full truth of my feeling for you, fully revealed.

Whatever happens, please don't ever doubt my love for you.

Devin

1. I love you and I yearn for you and I would not miss any of this, no matter what. I am too enthralled by my life to notice anything but how much more alive I am than I was before we met. Whatever I may have to pay for this, it's worth it.
2. For every small virtue I might imagine for myself, I envision it as originating in the core of me and emanating away in all directions. I understand the accepted justice of reciprocity and I am very far from averse to receiving as well as giving, but I don't like to think that any good act of mine is motivated by a concern for some good being done to me in return. This is not altruism, and I want never to be sullied with something so vile. Instead it is the most perfect expression of selfishness, I hope, a glorying of the self that is most fundamentally solitary. I do what I do because I wish it done, and that I hope for and sometimes achieve the delight of others is a secondary consequence. I like to do things for you, Beloved. I like to speak to you and write to you and send you small things that I hope will delight you. I like to think of a smile gracing your sweet lips, and I like to imagine that the impetus for that smile originated in the core of me. Very selfishly, I would like to surround you in me. Not to smother you--please, never! But to rain down on you like the petals of orange blossoms, to nestle in your hair and on your shoulders, jealously drinking in the fragrance of you. Nature's perfection is beautiful and evanescent, abundant and still so terribly ethereal, proud but all too tragically ephemeral. Your mind's perfection endures, and this is why glorious nature must always kneel to you. But when I kneel to kiss your hand, don't think I am debasing myself. I am honored to know you and I honor myself by knowing your

value. I would lay my gifts at your feet because that is where they belong.

3. I think I have never, ever been attractive to any woman, and yet I have always thought that it was precisely this oversized drama that should make me irresistible. Why settle for a shower and a rub when you can have open heart surgery? It's funny but it's true nevertheless. I've had a life-long craving for a woman who can take it like this. I love watching you spar with me, and my pulse is pounding right now. I am a creature of enormous intensity. I have expressly and intentionally set out to make a giant of myself, a thing of the most outrageous extremes. I do my best to say exactly those things that others might prefer to leave unstated, and I am seemingly incapable of leaving anything unsaid. I don't but doubt that there's a lot about me that's still wrong, but I know there's much that is right, fundamentally right, and I never stop working. I am enthralled by life, and I love it best when I am so swept up in it that I can't spare a second to notice how swept up I am. What you've given me is priceless and I am in your debt. If you dance with me, I will repay you coin for coin, three nines fine. No secrets. No lies. No betrayals. No shame. No regrets.
4. Drenched! You are dear to me--for one reason--because I have consciously decided that you are the woman in my life from whom I will not conceal. I am utterly open to Xander, but only to him, and I have never done this with a woman. This is the high prize I would lay at your feet, trusting you not to spurn it. I demand nothing but what you can give me freely, but I savor every drop of that sweet nectar. I have thirsted for this, thirsted for years, and I would joyfully drown.
5. I would love to whisper to you until you can no longer breathe. You must know I am ravenous for you. Does it thrill you to be so avidly desired? Do you gloat to the mirror to know that I have imagined your face so lovingly? Are you proud to have this immense power to conquer the unconquered?
6. I wake for you, aching for you, late, late at night. Nicole and I almost never slept in the same bed and that seems distant and unreal to me. I don't have to have you when I'm like this, but it would be nice to have you next to me, to be able to pull you to me, to have that contact. I think of the peace I feel, the almost glandular peace I feel when Hunter comes to sleep on me, and I wonder how much better it might be to have you tucked in under my arm, your head on my chest.
7. God I love you! That's all I have to say. It works out that I

have to say it, softly but audibly, several times a minute. All that, all that, all that, but mostly this: I just want to be near you, all the time. I think you must smell right to me, smell like family. I like--really like--everything I've seen of you, but there is something about you that transcends the evidence. I could get thrown out of the Fathertongue League for saying stuff like this, and none of it would have meant anything to me before Hunter smelled so right to me. Not just a baby, my baby. I want you near me all the time. I want to listen to you breathing. I want to see your things and hear your voice and touch you, just touch you on the neck or the hand, just for the sake of having that connection. I am awed and elated and deeply grateful.

8. I love you so much it makes me burn from the inside out. I love you everywhere I look. If you really mean it, say it. I'll believe you. If you can't, it's okay. I will wait for you forever. There is nothing that I have ever wanted the way I want you.
9. I've been thinking about going to church with you. I haven't seen the inside of a church since Hunter was christened. But it's fun to think about getting dressed up with you and sitting beside you for half a morning every week. You could talk me into just about anything if I get to do it with you. Hunter and I went half-way up Mount Rainier last year. There are some beautiful waterfalls up there, and it would be divine to photograph you beside those falls. I'd love to prowl New York or London with you. There are ruins near our ranch in Arizona where the whispers of antiquity deafen, and I'd love to show them to you. Driving on I-10 late at night, barely able to hear the sad songs from the Country radio station, you asleep in the seat beside me, that look of peace on your face lit by the dashboard lights--that's heaven. That's all the church I need. God I love you, Gwen. One day you'll hear me toast to second chances, and then you'll know how grateful I am for all of this.
10. I promised you a rub a long time ago and I've never delivered, so I think that's how I'll kiss you now. Not that way, darling; keep your shirt on. No, what I want to do is sit beside you as you lay on the bed and knead your shoulders and neck through the fabric of your blouse. I'll sing you all my favorite lullabies, and it happens that I am a truly amazingly excellent lullaby singer, since there is absolutely nothing about my voice anyone would stay awake for. You and me and the afternoon breeze, my dearest one, as you drift deeper and deeper into the peace that flows between us. I'll keep touching

- you even after you slip off to sleep; I want never to stop touching you. I'll push your hair off your shoulder and kiss you right on the nape of your neck. Then I'll go make us dinner while you sleep. When you wake you can tell me something you've never told anyone and I will find my perfect destiny in the brightness of your eyes.
11. Sometimes I wake up in the middle night and I see you standing in the darkness, backlit by the eerie light of a pulsing blue orb. You're garbed in nothing but poetry, opaque yet completely pellucid. Later there's shredded poetry everywhere.
  12. I miss you a lot. I don't want everything to sound like lust, because it's not. I just like you, and I don't like very many people. I like being able to talk to you. I can manage solitude better than a monk; I've done it forever. But I was never lonely until I figured out I might not have to be.
  13. I would love to photograph you. I mean nothing subterranean. I would just love to sit you and pose you or take you outside and walk with you or just sit across a table from you talking, capturing the life that races across your face. I'd like to fill the frame with you and gather the drops of your beauty into a pool. So I could dive into it whenever I need to bathe in you. Which is now. Which is often. Which is now.
  14. Your radiance infuses and perfects me. Words are my loyal friends, but with you they betray me: The best way I have of communicating my passion for you is with a groan that turns into a growl. You make me ache. You make me hunger. You make me whole.
  15. Please stop comparing me to anyone who won't let you have whatever you need. All I want is your response to me, your response. I can't cause it, I can't rush it, I can't replace it, I can't do anything but bask in it when it comes, if it does. Have what you love, whatever that is. There is nothing for me to claim as a value in your being unhappy.
  16. People who expect to be trusted without warrant or evidence or cause or follow-up are liars in spirit if not in fact. The truth of my life is in my deeds, not in my words. I'm very much aware that you've been scrutinizing me pretty closely, and I like that. I certainly would not want to be "valued" despite what I am (the terms collide). One of the things that impresses me hugely about you is your intense scrupulousness not to claim more than you think is your due. That means much more to me than any aspect of your femininity. That I can love you is great. That I can respect you is essential. I don't want any woman I think is unworthy of me, and I want desperately never to be unworthy of the woman I want. This is not poetry. This is not romance. This is not make-believe. This is my life, everything I've ever been, done, wanted, failed at, succeeded at, idealized, realized. I've never known self-loathing, lucky me, but the times I've come closest have been the times when I've strayed from this course. I won't ever stray again. And if you see that I do, run away then, not five or fifteen years later. No one can betray self-knowledge in the way that I understand it now--in the way that I worship it now--without the direst of consequences. And the unjust seek always to impose their debts upon the innocent, so if you see me lie to you, run then, for I will have betrayed the values upon which my life depends.
  17. There's an open pit copper mine in Kearny, Arizona, where they pull out 7,000 tons of rock for every ton of refined copper. With that kind of ratio, you might say, "Why bother?" The answer is: Gwen. I wasn't looking for this. I've always been content with being kneaded once in a while, and my desire even for that would decline as the price in silence rose. I want you to need me, Gwen--I love to say and write your name--in every way you can think of. And god do I need you! Every way you're imagining--but harder--but mostly I just need to be with you as much as I can. Just like my family. I want to hear everything you have to say, and I want to hear anything you have to say. I want to touch you just to have contact with you and I want to spend every moment I can beside you. I love it that you're in the world and you don't have to do anything besides that. That's plenty. I love your response to me, but I don't need it. All I need is my response to you. All those empty women looking for the mermaid's love. All those empty men looking for the minotaur's love. I am whole and you are whole and we can be full and beautiful together.
  18. I like it that you're beautiful, but it's not a big thing to me. I said you're beautiful on the inside and that's the truth. I can say this, too: I know I would love you if I were blind. I'm good at saying these things, obviously, but I need you to

understand that I am sincere. Thus to say this: You will grow older, my dearest. You will grow old beautifully, I think, but still--your tresses will gray strand by strand, your skin will wrinkle and spot, your vision will fail you, and someday, alas, your bones will begin to refuse to carry you at full stature. My plan is to spend the rest of my life with you, and I want you to understand that I've thought all about this. I know it's presumptuous to a fault for me to plan for decades, but this is the way I am, full-blast or full-stop, no middle. Anyway, the beauty that glories the outside of you is going to weather a bit in five decades' time. But the beauty that glories the inside of you will come to its fullest flower between now and then. The beauty of yours that I love is the beauty that will never fade.

19. Why am I confident that we'll be together forever? The fathertongue answer is that I'm not. The mothertongue answer is that I think we must be. I don't believe in destiny, Gwen, but I do believe in the power of fundamental choices. My guesses about you--and in fathertongue all we have to predict the behavior of other people are guesses--argue that you should bond to me for the same reasons that I want so desperately to bond to you, because what we have sought from life, what we have found and what we still seek are so much alike. I told you once that I thought a certain type of woman should find me irresistible. No one ever has, but I believe with all that's in me that you will. I am as vain as an infant! I say: I believe you are woman enough to prize me. I exalt you by exalting myself! Thus am I made. Thus have I made myself. But the obverse is true, too. As much as you might have been worshipped, I don't think you have been prized as I will prize you. I hate, hate, hate the idea of being "made for each other, dahling". And yet I am as sure of you as I am of the sun. And whatever may come, I love being so visible to you. I love being fully real outside me, for once, instead of always inside. I needed you more than I knew. I value you more than you know. I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love.
20. I am as confident of you as I have ever been of anything. If you want to dominate me in life--not in sex but in my soul--this would be the time to reject me, as a means of forcing me to your will. I will be wholly open with you for two reasons: first, I don't believe you would ever seek to dominate my soul, and second, because I wouldn't submit to you if you did. I will freely give you my everything in exchange for yours, freely given. And I know I will have your everything forever only when I have earned it forever. I am through with zeros and I am through with fractions. I want totality and nothing less, and

I want it in the only way I can have it: by being it. I will explode within you like a nova and you will explode atop me like a nova and we will sow our glory and our grace throughout the universe. This you will have from me. This I will have from you. This we will have together, endlessly, unendurably, exultantly.

21. I'm not going anywhere, forever. I will wait for you for as long as you need me to, and I will continue to wait for you after you have commanded me to stop waiting for you. I told you that I want the totality, nothing less. If I can't have it, I'll have nothing. Any frail substitute for you would be nothing anyway, and I prefer my nothing uncontaminated by artifice. I am yours and I will never not be yours; I think I never was. You may dispose of me how you choose. I am not Byronic, even though I might sound it right now. I have waited for you for all my life, and that was the hard part. I am practiced now, and I can wait for you infinitely.
22. I love to kiss and to do nothing but kiss and caress endlessly. One way I would love to torment you is to lean myself up against some building, on the twilit streets of Boston perhaps, and pull you to me hard, so that were nestled together in excruciatingly lewd, fully-clothed propriety. I would kiss you there and hold you so tightly to me and kiss you and kiss you and kiss you until I couldn't bear to go another second without having you and still I would kiss you and bury my long fingers into your hair at the base of your skull to pull your searing lips still more dearly to my own. And I would ache for you, my darling, in every vein and pore, and still I would kiss you, tormenting you, tormenting me, tormenting you. Mere erotica is like scratching your head with a rake. And mere sex is a grand feast composed solely of cotton candy. I will never have mere sex with you, my love. We will twine our souls together and express it with our bodies, with our tongues. I would penetrate you as often as I can, but I would be penetrated by you always, endlessly. You make me ache. You make me shiver. You make me crazy.
23. I never say anything I don't mean. I know you've been parched for a watering hole, too. I know there's a part of you that feels this drenching I've rained down on you must be a mirage. It isn't. You have me, and you have me any way you want me, any time you want me, period. I'll wait. I won't be jealous or demanding or impatient. I won't be any ugly thing at all. First because I'm not, second because I'd hate to be ugly in your sight. There is nothing any other man can have from you that's mine, and there's nothing I can have from you, now or ever, that's his--or anyone else's. I can't replace your past and I don't intend to try. I do

intend to be the ultimate unrepeatable experience of your lifetime--and I think I'm off to a good start. You have been that for me, and we've but barely begun, treasured one. My hope is to spend the rest of my days pressed to you fervid skin. My vow is to love you forever no matter what. My promise is to bring you nothing but honor and joy in whatever relationship we may have. I worship you, my dearest, and I need nothing from you to fuel that fire. I will have the response I have earned from you, when and as I earn it. I don't ever want anything I have not earned, full measure, full price, so I have no reason to be impatient. We will devour this bread when it's fully baked, not before. And: I have perfect confidence in you, which I guess amounts to perfect confidence in myself. You and I are going to spend the rest of our lives together. I have no doubt of this at all. I am serene--glowingly. Take your time, my love. Do what you must. You'll come to me when you know you've earned me, and I won't want you before then. I will devour you when you are fully baked, the sweet butter of you dribbling down my chin. You are my vision, precious one. You alone are the prize I would seek from this bountiful Earth. We are beauty and the beast, we two. No one would want me, no one but you. But everyone wants you. I do not compete. I never want to be "better" because it's too important for me to be good. They may have sweets for you, my sweet, but I offer you the bread of life. Devour it with me and let us twine our visions and yearn for them together.

24. There is no before except in memory. There is no later except in anticipation. Reality is only now, position and momentum. I would fill my now with you, forever. You know I hunger for the all of you, but in all of our years and all of our days, in the few decades of now we can count on, I will always want to have some of you. I can't imagine being in the same room with you and not touching you. I would touch you fully all the time, but even a volcanic ardor has limits. But I would touch you no matter what. It would thrill me just to lay my hand atop your wrist or to stand behind you as you sit and gently stroke the hair from your temples back over your ears. My fingers are calibrated to precise levels of tender brutality--from a whisper to a scream. I can grasp you and clasp you as tightly as I might need; I'm very strong. But I can also stroke you so lightly that I touch not just the hairs but just the ends of the hairs on your skin, the soft kiss of a butterfly's wings. I lust for and imagine in great detail your back, and there is paradise enough for both of us in the lush Eden at the base of your spine. I will worship you there when you are not hideously arrayed. But I will worship you always and everywhere. When we sit together in all the empty halls of grim propriety, you will know by my gentle stroking of your hand or your arm that I yearn

with all my being to fill every instant of my endless, evanescent now touching you in every way I can. We are what we do, the commitment of action. My words and my eyes may tell you more completely, but my hands will tell you ceaselessly how much I love you.

25. Here's what I want: You. Not just your body. Not just your mind. Both. Not just your present or your future or full knowledge of you past. All of them. Not just your joys but also your sorrows. Not just your pleasures but your pains, too, god make them few. I want every moment of your life you will spare me and I want to rob you of your sleep so that I might have more and more and more of you. When you stand before me wearing nothing but a thin chain of gold around your neck, I want to know that you are bound to me not by my will but your own. This is how I wish to bind myself to you, Beloved. Not your slave. Not your master. Your equal and your life's partner. Bound by nothing but uncoerceable choice. Bound to remain by the perfect logic--fathertongue's reasons and mothertongue's passions--motivating that choice. Thank you--god!--thank you for all of this. Unrepeatable. Unforeseeable. Inexplicable. Indescribable. Inexhaustible. Unforgettable. Irreplaceable...
26. I really like it that you're there. Zero implications or overtones. I just like it that you're alive and that I know you and get to talk to you. You're a bright spot on my horizon, a place where my eyes can always run to escape from darkness. I'm blessed by you, and I'm very grateful.
27. Do you seek safety from me, Beloved? It's yours, as much as you might need. You are safe from me like the grasses are safe from the dew.
28. Hunter came to sleep with me last night. He was very snuggly and I was very snuggly and I dreamed he was you. Nothing erotic, just closeness and tenderness and intimacy and warmth. I do like you a great deal. I do admire what I've seen of you. I do hold you very dear in my heart. I do long to hold you very dearly in my arms. This is the truth of my life. This is the truth of my heart. I told you I'd really like to have the two of you sleeping half atop me from either side. I think that would be the ultimate in perfect lovingstuff. A lot of the time when Hunter is asleep on me, I'm awake. I like it so much I don't want to miss it. Other times, we'll lay down to watch a movie, and I'll drift off without him, and I know he feels so perfectly comfortable that he just stays there. I'll teach Hunter a lot in his life, my ethics, my honor, I hope especially. But I've been teaching him my serenity since the day he came home from the hospital, and that's

the spot from which he's going to learn the best of what the world can teach him. Anyway, I think it would be grand to have the two of you pillowing yourselves on my body while I lie awake, gently petting your skin and his. I'll slip off to sleep in perfect serenity, in perfect peace, in perfect bliss.

29. Sometimes I think you're in disguise. It's okay. Everything's okay. In the secret space behind your eyes, the place where all your best treasures are stashed, you can whisper, "I am loved and I will love and I will be loved. My heart, my heat, my destiny." As you walk from place to place in your life you can put me beside you--or behind you or beneath you--and know that this is a place where I want you, too. If your cheeks flush and a secret smile graces your lips, no one will know, not even me. You can have me when you've had enough of not-having me. My heart, my heat, my destiny.
30. I've been sitting here for a long time trying to think of what I want to say to you. Loving kisses, tender caresses, sexy embraces, frenzied thoughts of tendons taut, seizing, pleasing, never releasing, crying "Gwen...!" in a moment that really matters, an instant's eternal kiss, an us ever-waxing. But the words I want most to say to you, the words I want most to matter, now and forever, are these: I will never betray your trust. I have too many hopes and too many prayers of growing larger with you, but it would break my heart to see you diminished in even the smallest way. The truth of my words is in my kiss, but the truth of my kiss is in my words. I lay them both at your feet. When you grasp them to your breast, when you press them to your lips, I will honor myself by honoring you.
31. I had so many interesting thoughts of you last night that I felt myself compelled or at least obsessed to cry out your name. I hope you heard me. Anyway I promise to share the interesting thoughts with you in a more interesting and less contemplative way. After all, thoughtful people can accomplish anything if they put their bodies to it. I love you like the trees love the sun, as my nourishment and as my enrichment and as my glorious adornment and as the object of my devout worshipping. Adorn me, Woman, and let me repay you for the divine radiance you rain down on me.
32. No tricks, no traps, no chains, no walls, no fences. You haven't promised me anything and you don't owe me anything. Whatever you want is okay, Gwen--more, less, none. I don't want you to feel that you're compromised or bound to things you've said or committed to more than you want. I don't want you to worry about protecting me, either. If you want to save me from being

unhappy, don't make yourself unhappy in my behalf. Not having you I could take. But it would be awful to have not-you. Does that make sense? I talk too much to say nothing, so my only hope for justice is to say everything, everything I can think of. Have what you love, whatever it is. That's what I want. If I don't have to say this, that's okay, too. I believe in saying the things I don't have to say. More important than my love, I give you my respect.

33. I like you a lot. Someday I hope to show you how much. You don't even know how much it means to me to be able to talk to you.
34. What I want more than anything is to see delight and wonder and peace and joy on your face and never the contraries. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone or anything and it's a love without context or boundaries or motives or objectives or limits or expectations or anything. It just is, like my love for Hunter. But more. And better. Loving you ennobles me, I think, but even that doesn't matter. What matters is you.
35. One of the things I love about you is that I have to compete to talk with you, which hasn't been a part of my experience for a long time. With people not as smart as you--and not as stupefying to me--I am so far ahead so fast that they let me dominate and pontificate. I'm used to having a lot of things all my way, and I like having to share. I like not having to bear full responsibility for everything, and I like sharing anything at all with you. If you want, you can make sure that I will never again get to eat the last bite of my own ice cream <g>.

36. I used to have a Father's Day suit, a pair of surgeon's scrubs I wore when Hunter was born and then every year on Father's Day. Those scrubs are missing and my guess is that Nicole swiped them to confer them upon her new husband. If this is true, it's sad and stupid, because all she would want to transfer is the meaning of those scrubs, but all she can transfer is the substance, the fabric. The meaning resides in my spirit and it cannot exist elsewhere. I liked to remind myself of my past with those scrubs, but I don't need them to cause my memories, nor can they cause my memories to exist in another person's mind. Liars only want things they cannot possibly ever have. Nature is just and the perfect curse of vice is condemning one's soul to live perpetually in squalor, with every treasure of life perpetually out of reach. My goal is to prove that the perfect reward of virtue is to glory your spirit in boundless meadows of splendor. Your spirit in particular, Beloved, yours and mine together, in the rapture of an endless kiss. My gift to you is simply this: An undistorted mirror. How lovely you are! How deeply, completely, compellingly beautiful you are from the skin to the elemental core of you! Don't dare say you disagree. Lying about oneself is small and unbecoming when done to lay false claim unearned virtue, but it is a sacrilege when done to deny virtues hard-won and fully paid for. It is not a vanity to acknowledge the perfect beauty of your perfectly beautiful soul, and it is very much a vice to deny yourself the credit you have earned and deserved for so terribly long. Look in that mirror for a minute or an hour and simply bask in self-adoration. Who in the name of all that I hold so very holy could deserve that honor more than you? I want-- desperately--to touch you in every place you can be pawed at. But only as a reward and a sacrament and a consecration for having touched you most lovingly in those places that can never be pawed at. Love and desire and spirit, and bodies crashing together as the expression of that paired and passionate response. And never anything less.
37. I keep writing integrity to you, and I know I've told you what I mean, but this is one of those things that I suspect doesn't translate well. I am only always ever talking about one thing. Mail to you, poetry to you, talking with you, everything, always, period: only one thing. I am always only ever talking about integrity, which in a precise definition means accepting that human beings are exclusively self-controlled, controlled only from within by the ego, and responding accordingly. Which in turn means never acting in a way that feigns belief that this ontological fact can somehow magically be temporarily untrue. I don't try to own people or dominate them or tell them what to do. This is not possible in fact. I do not pretend for the sake of some vain advantage that something I know cannot be true somehow is true in

this one special circumstance. Pretending to believe in unreality is self-destructive. I have control over one ego in the universe, and I will not inflict damage on it in pursuit of the impossible. This is egoistic to nine decimal places. Trying to dominate you would damage you, but the controlling factor is that it would damage me. I don't need to keep saying this because this is all I am ever saying, in my work, in my life, in my demeanor, in my everything. The other part of this is that people don't say the things I say, even though they know them just as well as I do, because as soon as you say these things, you are thereafter, with the people you're speaking to, forbidden to evade or contradict or hustle or jive. People hold out the opportunity to lie, which means to pretend to believe in unreality or to pretend not to believe in reality. People hold out the opportunity to pursue self-destruction as a means to the end of an unearned advantage, the acceptance of which is itself self-destructive. People make war on the ego by refraining to tell the full truth of what they know of life in order to make war on the ego by telling lies about what they know of a particular circumstance in order to make war on the ego by accepting values they know they have not earned, do not deserve and cannot retain as a matter of right. I do not ever consciously, willingly, knowingly make war on my ego. I have in the past, but I have learned better. No one can say the things I say in deceit or in jest. No one. Never.

38. I write because I don't want to die. I know I'll face the true death one day, the same as everyone. But the me of my past dies with every thundering bootstep of the march of now. I keep what I can of my life in distilled bottles of me that I can sip at when I need them. I read my words to remember who I was, who I am, who I intend to be. Most of my past is dead except in memory, the same as with everyone. But little pieces here and there that I took the time to save, those live on--for me, at least, if for no one else. As you read the things I write to you, think of me kissing your neck and breast along the path of that chain. The one is the symbol of the other, and the two together are the life I want never to die.
39. Falling down is easy. It's getting up that's hard. I always want to do the hard thing. Being down is awful. Staying down is tragic. Staying down is evil, I think. This is one of the things that made it impossible for me to live with Nicole. She treasures all her wounds and wounds all her treasures, thus to make new wounds. She has never once managed to forget a slight or a humiliation, and she has never been able to retain or even experience a single moment of undiluted joy. I actually have happy memories of my life with her--firing the cannon blast that resulted in that walking fusillade named Hunter, for example, or his birth. I'm sure she



has none of her life with me, nothing but a vast album of photos of her scars. The evanescent now is a company ever on the march, and all we have of the campaigns of our lives are our memories. If we pick the wrongs ones, or if we pick at them, trying to change them, it's as much as never having lived. If you lament your many losses, you'll have many more. Anyway, I think I'd like once in a while to weep into your shoulder, although I would never permit it to become an indulgence. I am an ascetic and a stoic in certain ways; not a martyr because I refuse to die; I hope someday a hero. But I like the idea of needing you as I have never needed anyone. And especially do I like the idea of being needed. You said, "A deep peace and a feeling of belonging." That's exactly right. That's what I have with Hunter, and that's what I've never had anywhere else. What an amazing thing it would be to have it with an equal. I want that. I want it for you, too. I want it for us together. God, what a treasure you are to me!

40. I know I am saying to you precisely the things that the Not For Women Only women pray their men would say to them. This is not by plan; I never plan anything. It's just burbles out of me in response to you. Those women would do anything for a man's unbounded devotion--anything except deserve it. The Union of the Men might want to kick me out for even talking about unbounded devotion; the bylaws specifically rule that it is precisely this that must always be withheld. For my own part, I believe that I will earn you and deserve you and have you forever, not because I worship you, but because I am and will remain worthy of your unbounded devotion. Like you, I am every bit as vain as a cat, and I never doubt that you'll want me in your lap--or that I'll want you in mine. I like teasing you like this. I love to say the "jinx" words to you, the words lovers never dare utter because they invite defensive scorn. There can't be any leashes among equals, no deliberate offputtings of balance. And there can't be any equality among people who don't feel safe enough to ask for what they want.
41. I am so proud of myself for having this contact and intimacy with you, and I hope to be very much prouder of myself later. Not a trophy, not a prize, but very much a reward. I believe for no good fathertongue reason that you and I are each the reward the other has earned and deserved. You have my word that I will never speak to Spencer's father, but, if I did, I would want to ask him what kind of an idiot would let a treasure like you slip away.
42. At the time that I married Nicole, I had zero expectations of women generally. This was not a thought-out misogyny, just a consequence of not having thought at all. My experience of women was that, while useful, they weren't really in the game. First,

I'd always done very male-dominated things. Second, the women I knew from those things were always looking for advantages and favors, and they weren't serious about working in any case. Third, most of what I do is intensely solitary anyway. I had not thought of men in any sort of partnership capacity, so it would never have occurred to me to think of a woman in that way. What for? A very stoical kind of family hero kind of pick up the slack kind of pick up the pieces kind of self-congratulatory asceticism, none of it the product of conscious awareness. Part of the fun of starting up the Ptolemy lab was being around hordes of really talented, really productive, really serious women-with-jobs for the first time in my life. I was slayed. Obviously I've thought about this stuff in ways I never had before. My intimacy with Hunter told me what I was missing with Nicole. Xander and Winnie made everything worse, of course, by making everything better. And I had to think everything through as a result of the divorce. You've been an excellent goad, too. And then there is you. I am sure of two things. 1. I would not be as serious about being serious with a woman smaller than you. 2. I have no intention of having anything to do with a woman smaller than you. There's just no point. If I had known this before, I wouldn't have married Nicole. Certainly I did her no favors. Anyway, do keep your eye on me. I don't resent scrutiny, I welcome it. That which is easily won is easily lost, and I'd welcome knowing for my own sake that I have met your tests. Certainly it would do neither of us any good to have you if I failed them. I wanted Nicole because I wanted to be a father. I want you for you. I want a lot more from life than I've had so far, and that's a difference, too. But I do bear watching, and I don't want to be let off the hook if I'm wrong. I want to be right for the right reasons, always, most especially with you.

43. You are very dear to me, the moon always over my shoulder, my light in the darkness. I turn to look at you more than you might guess, and I'm always glad for what I see.

44. I saw a painting that reminded me of you by being too much unlike you. ('My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.') It was "Midsummer Eve" by Edward Hughes, a winsomely beautiful blonde-headed girl--not a woman. I liked her even though I might not in person because she speaks innocence and nothing else. Not to say that she is evermore incapable of carnality, but simply that she is in every way the opposite of venality. I think you are more whole--lovelier and more womanly and more worldly, all still without being spattered by life. She is the soul of your innocence and you are the body of her wisdom.
45. You people my dreams, my love, with an unbearable innocence.
46. I'm very fond of you. I guess you know that. What I'm sure you don't know is that it would be a hell of a lot more convenient for me if I weren't. Dismissing people is easy. Accepting them, for me at least, is very hard. I admire your goodness, and I'm glad to know someone I admire so much.
47. Last night at bedtime Hunter had to pretend he couldn't sleep and that he had to come down and snuggle with me. Every night there's a new hustle and they never work and he never stops trying. I was watching a movie and he pretended to be deeply interested in it, too engrossed to even consider the possibility that his role in life called him elsewhere. After three or four minutes of pretending to ignore me because he was too involved with the movie he looked up at me with a very serious expression and said, "Does this movie have any alligators in it?"
48. It would be very nice to have you for lunch. Yes, to have you for lunch, and wouldn't I service you with a smile? But it would be a very wonderful thing just to have you here beside me, to eat with you and talk with you and be with you in the most sensual kind of chastity. It's your mind I love, Beloved. The world is crawling with bodies, after all, and all they manage to do is crawl. I'll write my truth on your skin with my hands and with my tongue and with that bulkier stylus, but my truth is in my kiss and my kiss is in my words and my words are in my skin, and if I can't love you in my words then any other dance my tongue might do is a lie. More than any other thing I want with you or from you, I want never to lie to you, not with my words and not with my skin. My truth is in my kiss. When you have it, you'll have my heart.
49. I love you a lot a lot a lot, and I want never to be a disappointment to you. I want to craft loving words for you always, and loving you brings me very lovely words. But the truth of my life is in my deeds, and as much as I long to speak my love for you, still more do I long to live it. Talk is cheap, after all, so I hope you will hold me to my words. Hold me tight, and pinion me with your kiss, just to be sure.
50. The gift of adulthood is realizing that there are only so many people you can embrace without reservation and having the good sense not to throw them away.
51. I dreamed I saw you just now, sitting in the back of a classroom for some reason. You didn't notice me but I couldn't take my eyes off you. You were ravishing, heart-rending, your eyes so eager and alive, hearing by second sight everything that wasn't said, your manner so graceful and dignified without ever being stiff. Everyone else in the room was entranced by you, too, of course, and I was both jealous and joyous of that fact. I wanted to say to them, "Her features are an accident of nature, but her beauty comes from within. You can have it, too. It's not something you seek and seize, not something you tear from the soil and hoard to your breast. It's something you must do, and until you do it, until you live it with your whole soul, it can never be yours." You walk the Earth as proof of the grace of god and mind, an object lesson in what rational animals can achieve when they dare to live as human beings. I love you very much. I long to seize your beauty by being it.
52. Everybody dies, but hardly anybody lives. I'll take my chances. How about you?

## *Interval—Love at the speed of life*

The Boston Globe

Friday, January 23, 1998

### **Woman Of The Future**

# Courtney at the speed of life

FICTION BY GWENDOLYN JONES

“Lord-a-mercy!” I said in my thickest southern drawl. “Somebody tell god to take the rest of the week off. He has made perfection, and there ain’t no topping that!”

The beautiful blonde woman scowled and blushed at the same time. It made her look seventeen again.

“Where *is* your charming husband? I can’t believe he’d ever dare to leave your side.”

She shook her head gravely, and maybe that was my cue to lay off. Or maybe not...

“Well, tell me what you boyfriend looks like, then. So I’ll know who to run from.” She chuckled. “No boyfriend.”

“Well, then, the next man that asks, you tell him I’m sprouting gray hairs in patches and I carry a little paunch. I’m half-a-step slower than I never was. I’m

ugly as sin, and I stink something awful toward the end of the day. You tell him that’s my description.”

She drew a finger across her eyebrow, the hair so fine it was almost white. Her eyes were blue and deeper than a quarry lake, alive with the light of mischief. “Am I to take that as an offer?”

I nodded gravely. “What fool could pass on perfection?”

She smiled a wistful little half-smile. A woman with a secret, a woman with a story to tell. “I think it was you...”

I wanted to stay and talk but somebody pulled me away. It was a New Year’s Eve party at my sister’s house. I was the guest of honor, the prodigal son returned, and I hadn’t seen some of the revelers for twenty years. I kept getting bounced around the room, passed like the torch of sobriety from one drunk to the next. But my eyes always sought her out, sought her supple perfection amidst all that was chaotic and deformed. She moved like liquid glass, like a cat, like a leopard. Her hands preceded her always, and she caressed everything with long, slender fingers. It was as though she had the power of vision in her fingertips, and she saw more than you or I will ever see with mere eyes.

She moved, and she graced the universe with her touch, with her glance. She made me hungry, hungry in a way I haven’t known in more years that I care to think about, hungry for things I walked away from a lifetime ago...

And then she was gone...

I jerked my head around stupidly, peering into every corner, but I knew she was gone. I was surprised at the loss I felt, and I thought about just letting it drop. But then I grabbed my coat off a bed and busted out into the freezing night.

I hollered up the icy hill, “I’m following you, pretty lady! I ain’t gonna let you get away!” I couldn’t see her, but I knew where she was. I always knew where to find her...

I never chased her up that hill, and I never chased her down it. But for three nights in a row, a lifetime ago, she stood with me all the way down at the bottom of that hill. All the way down at the river. Tossing pebbles into the water. Weeping with me for my dead.

\* \* \*

It was the summer I discovered sadness. It was the summer when everything changed. It was the moment of glowing perfection just before the dawning, when all of life is a stark silhouette, a black mystery against a golden aura in the instant before the sun ruins everything by making it obvious and banal. It was the summer I left home.

Of course, no one ever really leaves home. We just walk away, coming back less and less frequently. And every time we come back, there’s less and less of the indiminishable everything we thought must always be there. Relatives die off one by one. Old friends move away. Schools and houses and buildings are abandoned, cackling through broken-toothed windows as we mourn them. Until one day, one very sad day, there’s nothing left at all, nothing but the memories we carry with us indiminishably, inextinguishably. Life begins but it never ends, and at the speed of life events have sequence but no duration, no expiration.

It was the summer I discovered sadness. It was the summer my grandfather died.

I had already left home once. Not for keeps, but I didn't know that. I thought I was gone for good. I thought I was the top rider in a one-man rodeo, couldn't nobody stop me 'cause nobody'd dare to try. I was nine parts foolish vanity and the tenth part groundless pride, but it was a fine and perfect pride. I taught haughty to flamenco dancers on the side, and they paid me in silver dinares. I pretty much figured I wouldn't bother to go back home until I could return suitably laureled, hailed by herald trumpets.

In fact, I was living in a building too far gone to qualify as a tenement, but I was too stupid—and too proud—to be miserable. And then I got the word that my grandfather had died and I had to abandon all my worldly possessions—about twenty-nine dollar's worth, net—and scurry back home to see him waked and buried.

I hadn't known. I was the working prototype of a young idiot, and I hadn't really known—in my guts, in my bones—that people could die. You read about it, you hear about it, you see it a dozen times a day on TV. But until death comes to someone you know, someone you love, someone you never doubted would always be there... I was numb and useless that first day of the wake. Couldn't do anything, couldn't even cry.

She was there at our house that night, there for my sister. Courtney Lancaster, the little girl on the hill. She was my sister's age, a year-and-a-half older than me, and she'd always been around the house. Silky blonde hair in french braids, wrapped up around her head like the girl on the Swiss Miss box. In khaki shorts with cargo pockets and starched white blouses. And later in painter's pants and denim work shirts with tiny mother-of-pearl snaps instead of buttons. In parkas and pea coats and watch caps and miner's boots. In sandals and summer suits and big floppy white hats. Her skin would tan to a golden brown in the summer and the fine white hairs on her legs were never touched by a razor and I never thought a thing about it. Of all my sister's friends, she was the one who seemed least like a girl. And therefore, by my standards at the time, most like a human being.

But now she was all woman. Her dad was a consulting engineer and she had spent a year in Europe with him. Knowing what I know now, I would have understood immediately that there was a man behind the metamorphosis. But at the time, I was stunned, even outraged. She was wearing camel's hair slacks and a creamy white silk blouse, very fluid. Her hair was brushed and brushed and brushed until it seemed to glow with a light of its own. She wore no make-up, no jewelry, nothing to hide or cheat or disguise, nothing to detract or diminish or disfigure. I could hardly bear to look at her; I kept having to look away. It wasn't lust, it was simply radiance. She was too blindingly beautiful to be looked at for long.

After dinner, she started flipping through my records and asking me questions about them. It surprised me, sort of, because I hadn't known until then that it could be possible for a woman to be both beautiful and serious. The old Courtney-in-khakis could be serious, but Courtney-in-camel's-hair? My sister was a little put out, too, even though I wasn't doing anything—not then, anyway—to swipe her friend.

She spun up Dylan's "Blood on the Tracks", easily the best album since "Blonde on Blonde". She stopped at "Simple Twist of Fate" and played it over and over again, and I thought my sister was going to tear out her hair. For my own part, I was charmed by her attentions, but I had other things I wanted to do.

I had my mom's car keys and I spun 'em on my finger. I said, "I'm going out for a while. You wanna come?" I didn't know why I invited her, and I didn't know why I was so delighted when she nodded and said she'd come along.

I knew of a liquor store where the clerk was drunk every night after eight o'clock or so. Never carded anyone, and couldn't read the numbers even if he had. I scored us a quart of beer and drove her all the way down into the heart of the bottom. At the bottom of the hill there's a little park platted out in the flood plain of the river. It's good flat land and it makes a fine softball field come April, when it finally dries up. In the late summer it's dry as dust and the river's hardly deep enough to soak your shoes. It's dark and quiet and there was never anybody down there at night, nobody but me.

That first night we didn't talk all that much, just nursed the beer and kicked some rocks around. I wanted to talk about my grandpa, but I kept choking up and I didn't want to cry in front of her. I knew she had something she wanted to tell me about, too, but she was having troubles of her own. But we managed to find serenity in the comfort of an easy silence in the quiet of the night—crickets chirping, the river burbling, and, far off, the high white whine of the highway.

I dropped her off at her folks' house, the fieldstone ranch house at the top of the hill. Without looking up from the steering wheel, I said, "Thank you, Courtney."

"For what?"

I blew a puff of air at my nose. "I don't know. Thanks for coming to the wake, thanks for being there for the family, all that stuff. But that's not what I mean." I took my time thinking and she let me. "What I want to thank you for is not posing. Does that make sense?"

She laughed. "Not a bit."

"You're not a pose, you're not an act, you're not a show. You're just who you are all the time, so I don't have to try to figure out who you want me to be. I can just be myself. All the time. I always liked you, but until tonight I didn't know why. You're whole enough to be quiet..."

"Maybe," she said with the light of mischief in her eyes. "Or maybe I'm just empty. Nothing to say, and the good sense to say nothing." She laughed, and she was beautiful in her laughter and she knew it.

She ate with us again the next night and she went out with me again. This time I didn't even bother about the beer, I just drove straight to the river. We sat cross-legged on top of a picnic table, facing each other, bouncing a tennis ball back and forth between us. I was able to look at her, partly because I was more comfortable with her, and partly because it was so dark she could hardly blind me with her beauty. We sat there for most of the night, telling lies, telling jokes, telling the brutal truth in raucously funny ways. I can't remember a single thing we said that night, but I'll always remember it as the happiest night of my life. I can find my peace in solitude, in a cave or a canyon or just on a lonesome old road. But that

was the one night of my life when I found a perfect peace in the company of another human being. My gift, my treasure, from Courtney Lancaster.

On the third day we buried my grandfather. Seventy-four years in the same one parish, and the monsignor himself said the words. Afterward there was a big blow-out at the house, a 16-gallon keg and a fat guy in a red satin vest with an accordion. Everybody who'd cried for my grandpa for three days wanted a chance to cheer, to lift a cup from sadness and raise it up to joy. To praise my grandfather for his virtues, and to praise those virtues of his that live on in those who loved him. And if you need to clear a knot of grief from your throat, a good way to do it is to make some noise.

We stayed for a while, but not too long. She left with me and I knew she would. I expect you can guess where we went.

It was a somber night at the river. The sky was shrouded in clouds and the air was sticky and close. I stood by the water and listened for the whine of the highway and I could hear her rustling behind me. I couldn't bear to look at her, and I didn't know why. That was when she told me about her man, the man behind the metamorphosis, the man she'd met in Europe. The way she described him he sounded much older, but we were so young that everyone seemed much older to me. She was flying back to join him the next day, a sort of trans-Atlantic elopement. Her parents were fit to be tied, but what could they do?

I had plans of my own, and I laid them out for her, still not daring to turn to look at her. After a while I tried to talk about my grandpa, about all the things we'd done together over the years. But my voice was rent by sobbing and I knew she couldn't understand me. After a while I couldn't understand myself, and I just stood there weeping, grieving for a man I'd never learned to love until it was too late.

I could feel her right behind me, could feel her breath behind my ear. I knew if I turned she'd hold me, and I could bury my grief within her. And I knew if she reached for me, I'd turn. But she didn't reach and I didn't turn. And after a minute or an hour or an eternity, I crouched down and grabbed a handful of pebbles. I started tossing them, one-by-one, into the water. In a moment I felt her move away.

A long time later she said, "I need to get going."

I tossed her the car keys. "Take the car to my mom. Someone'll give you a lift up the hill."

"I can walk up."

I nodded. "Or you can walk up."

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

I smiled at her and the clouds parted and a glimmer of moonlight lit her radiance and blinded me everlastingly. "I'm going to miss you every day, Courtney Lancaster. I'm going to miss you every day from now until forever."

She started to say something but I shook my head. I pressed a finger to my lips. "Walk away," I said. "Walk away and don't look back."

She leaned over and brushed my cheek with her lips and as she pulled away I felt the downy fine hairs on her cheek and I caught the scent of her. No fragrance, just the essence of heaven itself.

And then she was gone...

I stood there tossing pebbles into the water until the dawn broke over the treetops. Then I walked along the bank of the river until I came to the highway bridge. I scrambled up the embankment and I started walking down that lonesome old road. And I never looked back...

\* \* \*

She was waiting for me when I got to the top of the hill on that icy New Year's Eve. The house was bigger than I remembered it, bigger and more imposing. It sat on four or five acres, surrounded by a split-rail fence. There were no stables or corrals, but everything about it said equestrian. There was a covered walk-through between the house and the garage and behind it was a huge fieldstone patio. Her dad had built a big brick barbecue and faced that in fieldstone as well. That was where I found her, sitting by that barbecue. She had built a fire and the heat of it kept the cold at bay. The flickering light chased the years away from her face and she looked to me like the little girl, the full-grown woman, who had blinded me in the moonlight twenty years before.

She smiled at me as I stood before her and I was blinded yet again. She said, "I'm glad you followed me."

"You knew I would."

She bit her lower lip. "I hoped you would."

It was my turn to smile. I said, "I hate to be lied to, and you always tell the truth. Even when it's the hardest. That's what I've always loved about you."

Maybe the word shocked her, I don't know. I went on before she could stop me. "I *have* always loved you, Courtney. Every day, just like I promised." I smiled a tight little smile, but the truth is there was a wetness in my eyes and a burning spot in my throat. "I loved you every day, and I never once let you know. You and my grandpa, I thought about you both every day. I wanted the two of you to be proud of me, and I wanted for you never to be ashamed of me. Everything I've ever done, I wanted to live up to you, to you and my grandfather. Doesn't that seem stupid?"

Her own eyes were wet and she did nothing to hide it. "I don't think so."

"Courtney, my grandfather has been dead for twenty years. I haven't sent you a card or a letter for twenty years. Not even a phone call. My grandpa can't count my worth and I never gave you the chance. I write these stories that no one wants to hear. I walk around making this catalog of the absurd. But the true fact of my life is that I measure myself against two ghosts, a dead man and a lady who vanished. I have to laugh at myself, too, when I'm stupid. It's only fair."

She nodded and that was good enough.

I heard a noise behind me and I spun around to see two small creatures in bed clothes creeping up on us. The back door to the house was half open and I strode over to pull it closed. When I returned the two creatures were snuggled under Courtney's arms. She said, "Permit me to introduce Samantha and Jennifer."

Samantha was about nine, and she had inherited every ounce of her mother's beauty and a drop or two more. She was dainty and ladylike and she wore a flowered flannel nightgown with tatted lace at the collar and cuffs. On her feet were fuzzy pink slippers.

Jennifer was seven or seven-and-a-half and she held title to every last acre of Courtney's tomboy arrogance. She was beautiful in her own way, but she was more brash than anything. Her nightgown was an adult's fleece sweatshirt, and she hadn't bothered to pull her hands through the enormous sleeves. She had walked out on the freezing flagstones bare-footed, which I wouldn't do on a bet.

I bowed to the waist and Samantha giggled. Jennifer snorted, and who could blame her?

Courtney said, "Why aren't you guys in bed? Where's the sitter?"

"Asleep on the sofa," Jennifer scoffed. "Where else?"

"Oh. Great... Well, get it moving."

Samantha wheedled, "Sing us a song first. *Please.*"

"No," said Jennifer, a glint of evil in her eyes. "Make *him* sing."

Courtney was about to intervene but I said, "I'll be happy to. This is a song your mother used to like. I'm only gonna sing the first and last verses, 'cause I don't care for the rest of it." I cleared my throat and started to sing "Simple Twist of Fate".

*They sat together in the park  
As the evening sky grew dark.  
She looked at him and he felt a spark tingle to his bones.  
It was then he felt alone and wished that he'd gone straight  
And watched out for a simple twist of fate.*

Courtney smiled at me and I thought my knees might buckle. Jennifer said, "You sing like a duck!"

I gave a solemn nod. "Proudly, like a duck."

*People tell me it's a sin  
To know and feel too much within.  
I still believe she was my twin, but I lost the ring.  
She was born in spring, but I was born too late.  
Blame it on a simple twist of fate.*

Courtney coughed softly. "I *was* born in the spring."

"I know it."

"What about you, mister?" Jennifer asked. "Were you born too late?"

"Why, no. I was born just in time. If I had been born even one minute later, who *knows* what might have happened?"

"What?"

I shrugged with my palms open at my shoulders. "Who *knows*?"

"He's teasing you," said Samantha.

I nodded. "You'd better go to bed, kids. You've met your match."

Samantha giggled and Jennifer laughed derisively and I wanted to hug them both. Courtney dumped them off her lap and pushed them toward the house. I was sitting by the fire when she returned.

"They're great kids, aren't they?"

"They are."

She smiled a tight, bitter little smile. "Their father didn't seem to notice."

I looked into the fire. "Where are your folks?"

"Colorado."

"Your dad building a bridge?"

"A string of bridges. A brand new highway from Nowhere to Nowhere Heights. Your tax dollars at work." She laughed. "Mother wants him to retire, but I don't think he's ready."

I said nothing, just let the crackling of the fire fill up the silence. The night sky was clear and bursting with stars. The air was crisp and clean and very cold. After a long time, I said, "I'm at war with death."

She smiled wryly and said, "Are there many casualties?"

"Go ahead. Make fun of me. I deserve it."

"No," she said. "Talk to me. Tell me what you never tell anyone."

I nodded gravely. "I always have. I always will." I took my time thinking and she let me. "I didn't know what I was doing, when I started this. I wanted people to stop dying, but I didn't know what I meant. It sounds stupid, right? People die, it's a part of life." I grinned despite myself. "The last part."

She laughed like glass chimes tinkling in the winter wind.

"But that wasn't it," I went on. "I'd see homeless people pushing shopping carts and sad, tired people shuffling along and little kids who wouldn't look up from the ground, and I'd think—what I want is for people to stop dying before their time. But that's what doctors do, isn't it?"

"And I got older. I hope I got wiser. And I got better and better at seeing what I'm talking about. And better and better at talking about it. And I got to a place where I could mesmerize people, just like a revival preacher, just like a snake charmer. And I'd talk and I'd talk and I'd talk and people would watch me and they'd say, 'This man is crazy. This man is possessed. This man is god. This man is the devil.' They'd look at me and say, 'This man is *right*.'"

"And I'd look back at them and I'd know I'd said just the opposite of what I wanted to. Because I didn't want to tell them what *I* know, I wanted them to tell themselves what they had always known, without having to be told. And one day I realized that *I* had known all along what I wanted..."

She waited and waited, and finally she said, "Well?"

I shrugged. "I wanted them to stop dying while they were still alive."

She nodded in recognition and I knew she would. And I knew the idea was new to her and I knew she'd known it forever, just like you have.

I pointed one by one at all the houses on the top of the hill. "There's a story in every one of those houses. A story you've never heard before, except you know it by heart. And every one of those stories is tragic, and every one of them is comical, and every one of them is universal. Every one of those stories is different, and every one of them is the same. And every one of them is about nobody but you. You're presented with the choice to live or die, and the story is which you chose and why."

She didn't feel pressed to say anything at all, and that's the most amazing trait I've ever observed in any human being.

I said, "At the speed of light, events have sequence but no duration. Every point on the line of time is the same one point, and events occur in order, but they all happen at the same time. No before. No later. Just now. Forever." I smiled

brightly, because the idea is boundlessly funny to me. "I think about that, because all these stories seem so universal to me, and I wonder what universal might mean. When I write a story, I can freeze the people, I can freeze the events, I can leave it there like a trail marker, something that lasts forever. And when people respond to that, it's not something I'm telling them. It's something they've always known. We're all made of star-stuff, millions and millions of years of accumulated nuclear waste. What if universal means something we all own from the birth of the universe? We seem so temporary. We're born, we live, we die. But what if there's a piece of forever inside each of us? Maybe that's the thing that admits the truth. Maybe that's the thing that discovers, again and again, the things we've always known..."

There were tears in her eyes and I was glad of that. There were tears in my own and my voice was broken; the best I could do was a sort of a croak. "I want to live forever, Courtney. I don't ever want to die."

She smiled at me and I saw her lovely hand on the arm of her chair and I wanted to pick up that hand and press it to my lips, just hold it there, forever. But I didn't, and I knew why I didn't. I said, "But I die with every choice I make. When I choose something, a vast array of futures open up before me. But a vast horde of other futures collapse and vanish, everything that might have happened, but won't. All these lives in front of me. All these deaths behind me." I laughed. "The stories are about nobody but *me*. I'm presented with the choice to live or die, and the story is which I chose and why."

She traced a circle with her finger on the arm of her chair. She said, "You could stay here."

I tried not to move. I tried not to react in any way at all.

She gave a nervous laugh. "I didn't mean that the way it came out. I meant you could stay here in town, couldn't you?"

I shook my head. "You'll always be the lady on the hill. And I'll always be the man with one foot in the next town."

She said nothing, just stared into the fire. After a long time, I heard the report of a firecracker down the hill. I said, "I hadn't intended that."

"Intended what?"

More firecrackers, a whole string of them. "Happy New Year, Courtney."

She smiled. "Happy New Year."

"In a story, I could make this so much more... elegant."

"Tuxedos and gowns, I would hope. And champagne."

"No," I said. "At the stroke of midnight, we'd each down a tiny little snifter of Grand Marnier, then smash the glasses in the fireplace."

"And then what?"

"And then we'd kiss, the orange nectar still thick on our tongues."

She said nothing for a long moment. "Do you want to kiss me...?"

"Here's another story. Imagine a drunken hummingbird who's gotten himself hooked on Grand Marnier. Wouldn't that be funny?"

She said, "Why don't you come over here and kiss me?"

I shrugged. "You can't reach and I can't turn."

"I don't understand that."

I smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "Of all the people we went to school with, you and I are the only two who haven't changed... They're like trees bending in the wind or boats buffeted by the seas. But we are monoliths, and after twenty years we're barely even weathered. That's an accomplishment, isn't it?"

"I see." She smiled a tight, bitter little smile. "I'll always be the lady on the hill, and you'll always be the man with one foot in the next town."

"That's right." The tears were rolling down my cheeks, and I didn't try to hide them. "We made our choices, both of us, and we have to live with them. Death is what happens when you make war on your life. Death is what happens when you betray who you are... We live forever to die in an instant. To die forever, again and again... A life defiled by a thousand small deaths, or death defied by an uncompromised life. Isn't that the story?"

I smiled at her and she looked up at me and she was the only woman in the universe, forever. I stood up, and she stood before me, just inches away. The fire lit her radiance and the depths of her beauty blinded me everlastingly. I said, "I'm going to love you forever, Courtney. I'm going to live forever, and I'm going to love you every day."

She started to say something but I shook my head. I pressed a finger to my lips. "Walk away," I said. "Walk away and don't look back."

She leaned over and brushed my cheek with her lips and as she pulled away I felt the downy fine hairs on her cheek and I caught the scent of her. No fragrance, just the essence of heaven itself.

And then she was gone...

I turned and walked down the hill, walked all the way to the highway. I walked my way down that lonesome old road, all those lives in front of me, all those deaths behind me. I walked away and I didn't look back.

But you know where to find me, don't you? If I'm not making cheese-burgers from all your sacred cows, then I'm running your fingers through the matted hair of yet another wretched untouchable. But at the speed of life events have sequence but no duration, no expiration, so I expect you can always find me unguarded in that moment of glowing perfection just before the dawning. Down at the river. Tossing pebbles into the water. Weeping for all my dead.

## Chapter 9

She was there.

Gwen was there in the bustle of a thousand distracted night students in the infinite corridor, the most natural thing in the world. She was wearing the dove gray cashmere sweater dress, no overcoat, with a glove soft gray leather clutch purse tucked under her arm. Her hair fell back to her shoulders, a veil of burnished platinum. Her eyes were burning, enflamed, but her expression was serene. Her palms were open at her sides and she looked to Devin like a woman calmly prepared to meet any fate. But she intended to meet it; she wouldn't wait for it to befall her.

He stood before her, tossed in a sea of torment. He wanted to speak but he felt as though his jaws were wired together. Besides he couldn't think of anything to say. She was so beautiful. So winsome and chaste and perfect, and so terribly brave. He knew what it must have cost her to come to him, and that was what decided him.

He was carrying a pair of books and he dropped them with an explosive report that echoed all up and down the infinite corridor. "Oh, look," he said. "I've dropped my things like a stupid, stupid schoolgirl."

"What about your integrity, Devin Dwyer?"

He shrugged. "What do you think that was? What about your sovereignty?"

She smiled like the dawning of a cloudless day. "What do you think this is?"

He smiled with her and she knew she could get lost in the deep green pools of his eyes. Whispering treason. Whispering fealty. Whispering love.

He said, "I like that dress."

"A woman can't afford to leave anything to chance, can she?"

"Nor to the imagination. If I didn't know you better, I'd certainly want to."

He grinned impishly.

She took one small step forward and she was next to him, feral and fervid and innocent and demanding. She said, "Don't talk. Just kiss."

They kissed for an endless time and she knew she was lost and she knew he was lost with her and she knew that there was nothing she had ever wanted

more than to be lost forever, found forever with him. She was bound to him and it was the most liberating feeling she'd ever known.

He broke the contact, pushed her back at the shoulders and stepped away so he could see her. He said, "I've been waiting for weeks for that."

Lost somewhere, she said, "I've been waiting all my life for that..."

She moved to kiss him again but he stopped her. He looked searchingly into her eyes. He said, "Don't kiss. Just talk."

She nodded solemnly. "I love you, Devin. Is that what you need to hear? I love you more than anyone, more than anything, more than my own life. I can live through anything, but I don't want to live without you. It's hard... for me to say these things. Harder than anything I've ever done. But the hardest thing of all would be to let you go without a fight. I'm here to fight for you, Devin Dwyer. I'll do what I must to keep you, anything I can do. I love you, and that's all that matters to me..."

"We're getting married, yes?"

"Are we?"

"Aren't we?"

She smiled, and that was her full answer. As amendment she said, "If you want me to I'll marry you. I don't require it, though. All I want is you, however I can have you."

He nodded. "Four Seasons?"

She grinned. "I'm dressed for it, am I not?"

"Overdressed. A correctable nuisance. Grand Marnier?"

"But of course. By room service."

"Did you bring your diaphragm?"

She smiled with a devilish delight. "A woman can't afford to leave anything to chance, can she?"

"May I have it?"

"What?"

"May I have your diaphragm?"

She dug into her purse for the flat plastic case. She handed it to him, a question in her eyes.

Devin took the diaphragm case and sailed it high across the hallway. It bounced off the wall and landed in a trash can. He said, "Are you still with me?"

She bit her lip hard. Not in rebellion, not in rejection, just in... reaction, she decided. She took his hands in hers and pulled him back to her. She spun her hands around until their fingers were locked in twine and she bound their bodies together that way, at the arms and at the hips. Her lips were touching his, not pressing, just brushing against them. Her eyes were locked to his and she said, "Does this movie have any alligators in it?"

He smiled and she felt it more than saw it, felt it in the way the shape of his lips changed against hers and felt it in the way the pools of his eyes grew warmer and deeper. "Not anymore..."

He was more ready for her than she had guessed. They stopped off at his office so he could call Gretchen and he emerged with an overnight bag.

"Am I to infer that you were expecting me?"



Devin smiled. "In the nature of a prayer, I think. I've had it here all week. Do you need to call Spencer?"

"I've told him not to expect me."

"Am I to infer that you were that confident of the outcome?"

"Not confident at all. Very much the opposite. But I had to take my chances, as someone I love said to me. At the very worst you could have turned me away and I could have gone and gotten roaring drunk and slept it off at a Holiday Inn."

"Roaring drunk. What does that take, about four drinks?"

"More like two. Drinking is a vice I've never cultivated. I'm a little wary of the Grand Marnier, to be honest."

"We can skip it if you like."

"No, I rather like the idea of it. Drinking to get drunk is a slow and costly way to achieve unconsciousness, but a drink as a symbol, as a seal, as a consecration—that makes a certain kind of sense to me. It can be our little code, can't it? When we're out among people you can look at me and say, 'Grand Marnier?' and that will mean, 'take me someplace and consecrate me, baby.'"

He was leaning against the door of his office and he pulled her to him, pulled her full to his body. He put his hands on her face and pulled her lips to his and kissed her hungrily. He broke away and brushed his lips against the downy fine hairs on her cheek. He said, "Take me someplace and consecrate me, baby."

At the Four Seasons they couldn't wait, of course. Devin rented a suite with a fireplace and in the elevator he tipped the bellman to go away. They were in each other's arms before the door was fully closed behind them, waltzing blindly toward the bed.

Devin was bunching the cashmere sweater dress in his hands, pulling it up her legs. When he got the hem to her thighs he pushed his hands beneath it and raced upward. When he came to her behind her breath caught and he said, "You're completely defenseless..."

Gwen grinned beside his ear. "As the day I was born. I know this is the way you've wanted me to wear this dress. And... If I were to make a confession..."

"Yes...?"

"As much as this fabric tickles me everywhere, it tickles me especially well where your hands are now."

"I could tell you were aroused at M.I.T. You have two pointy little informants on your chest. But I wasn't sure if it was me or the dress."

"I'm not sure there's a difference. When I wear this dress, I feel myself completely surrounded by you, submersed in you... I can't believe I just said that..."

Devin shrugged and her face was buried in the lee of his shoulder so she felt it rather than saw it and she danced it with him, too, her head rising with his shoulders. "Have you lost what you've always had, or have you gained something you never had?"

She made a fist and twisted it hard into his ribs. "Don't rub it in, buster."

"But that's *exactly* what I intend to do."

He drove his hands up her sides and suddenly the hem of the dress was at her breasts. She stepped back a little and raised her arms over her head and he pulled the dress over her head and past her fingertips and she stood before him

naked, nothing but the gold chain to adorn her. Her arms were still high over her head and she was taut in every muscle and tendon, stretched to reach, stretched to seize. Stretched to pluck the fruit of the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil, the *knowledge* of the better and the worse, the *knowledge* of the greater and the lesser, the *knowledge* of the desired and of the shunned. Stretched to her full height and her full stature and her full glory, stretched to grasp the lovely life divine.

Devin groaned, the only answer he could make. He sleeked his hands down the length of her body and she trembled at his touch. She relaxed herself and dropped her arms to his shoulders, little Eva in the garden, but without the one knee crossed demurely over the other to hide her better secrets. She said, "This would make a lovely photograph, too, wouldn't it? Me in my perfect nudity and you so 'hideously arrayed'. I've never thought of myself as a cheesecake model before—although I've certainly heard enough in the way of clumsy offers. But you bring out the wanton in me—wanton as a noun. Not a slut, not a tart. More a vision, I think, a vision of an unbearable sensuality. I wouldn't actually want to appear in that kind of photograph, and I certainly wouldn't want anyone to see us this way. But if they did, I would hope they would be discerning enough to say, 'So much have I missed in life!'"

He looked down between them, to her breastbone rising and falling with her breaths, to her proud breasts, the nipples hard with need, to her flat belly and her blonde curls and her long, firm legs and her gorgeous, delicate feet. He said, "So much have I missed in life!" He threw one arm behind her back and hooked the other under her knees and he picked her up and carried her to the bed. He stood back and hurriedly undressed himself. "Now you'll see me hideously disarrayed."

She laughed but she watched and she knew that he was quietly delighted at her hunger for the sight of him, for the smell and touch and taste of him. She had never been anything but a body to anyone who looked at her and he had spent his whole life being nothing but a mind. She loved being loved by him because he loved *all* of her, her body and her mind and her spirit and her past and her future and her fevered and fervent now. He loved being loved by her, she knew, because she loved *all* of him, loved him for his body and his mind and his soul and his principles and his prowess and his passion, the endless burning passion of him that had drawn her to his flame from the very first.

And then he was standing naked beside the bed and she wanted to lean up on one elbow and take him into her mouth, not as an expression of dominance and not as an expression of submission but simply as a way of expressing her love—and her need—for him. But she had other needs to fulfill, so she rolled over to make space for him on the bed.

He leapt beside her and they lay on their sides, kissing, touching each other, remembering each other. She threw a leg over his but he pushed it back and pushed back on her shoulders, pushing her flat against the sheets. He drove a knee between hers and then he was on her and then he was within her, his hands behind her back, urgently pulling her to him by the bones of her shoulders. She thought to complain but she couldn't complain because it is absurd to complain about perfection.

Her breath was caught in her throat and her eyes were locked to his and he was using her brutally, savagely, and she knew he wanted her in the same way. Her heels were dug into the tight muscles at the back of his thighs and she was pulling him hard to her, slamming her body against his. Her fingers were buried in the small of his back and her mouth was pressed against his and she was talking to him, whispering to him around their fervid kisses. "God, Devin," she said. "So good, so good, so good. You make me come so good... I need you. God, I need you more than anything...! I love you, Devin Dwyer... I love... you... forever..." And she was there and he was there and she was lost and he was lost with her, right beside her, always there beside her, and she was lost in his eyes and he was lost in her eyes and she was so found, so perfectly found, so perfectly lost together forever with him...

He collapsed atop her and she reveled in being weighed down by him. She was compressed beneath him, her body providing some of the support for his. She liked it, she admitted to herself, more than a little surprised. Not a subordination, not a subjugation, simply an acceptance, a very welcome, very married kind of feeling. Tough enough to be tender, strong enough to be weak. Safe enough to be vulnerable... She was running her heels up and down the length of his legs and her arms roamed the vast expanse of his back.

He was still inside her, still digging a little, and he was murmuring into her ear. "Gwen, I don't know what I would have done if I had lost you forever. I would have done it, I guess. That's the way I am. But I would have hated it. I've always loved my life, and I would have mourned it forever without you."

She kissed in the space behind his ear and that was answer enough.

They kissed and nuzzled for a long time and Gwen could have happily kissed and nuzzled forever. When he rolled away he returned to the bed with the overnight bag. "I brought this for you, for tonight." In his hand he held the tatted lace nightgown she had given him for his birthday, the wedding gown, the gown of gauzy white.

"I had wondered if I was ever going to get to wear that."

"I'm rushing things, as always. I should make us wait until our wedding night. But I want you to have this tonight. I want *us* to have this tonight."

She nodded solemnly and stood up on the bed to pull on the nightgown. It fit her like a second skin. It fell to her ankles but left her arms and back naked and defenseless. It covered her sex and it covered her breasts and it concealed precisely nothing. It was hers, of course, hers as nothing else could be, the perfect expression of her chaste sensuality. Wild and innocent. Rapacious and unrepentant. Soaring and unfallen, soaring *because* she was unfallen.

Devin smiled from the depths of his soul and held out his arms to her. She stepped down from the bed and into his arms and he kissed her tenderly, achingly. It was a kiss that began in the middle and didn't end at all, it just endured, burning through both of them. He broke from her and buried his face in the lee of her shoulder, shielded under the cascades of her hair. He said, "*This* would make a beautiful photograph. Me so hideously disarrayed and you so gloriously adorned and both of us so divinely in love."

"Is it your wish to make people so terribly jealous?"

"I don't want them to be jealous, but I think it would be a good thing to show them what is possible. If I could do one thing for my brother humans, that would be it. I would entreat them to reach for more, never to settle for anything less than exactly what they want."

"Is it just as easy at that?"

"Second hardest thing there is. But the hardest is *not* having what you want. And I should know..."

He lifted his lips to hers and kissed her hard, his fingers buried in her hair at the base of her skull. He was more than half supporting her and she knew if she fell back to the bed he would take her again and that was what she wanted tonight, that was her gift to him and her grant, to be taken.

But instead he shook his head. "Not yet. Let's have that drink first."

"You're not exactly dressed for room service."

"I brought a bottle with me. I bought it today in Kendall Square after I read your story. I hope you don't mind." He rummaged through the bag and pulled out a bottle of Grand Marnier and two tiny brandy snifters. He poured each glass half full and handed one to her.

"That's right," she said. "You haven't told me how you liked the story."

"I had the idea you were rather fond of that blonde woman."

"I was. I am. But do you think she is intended to be me?"

"If you were writing to me, I think they were each intended to be both of us. I think he was more you than she was, but you gave him my grandfather. And you gave him that little speech about monoliths. I think you were trying to scare me to death. It worked..."

"It worked for me, too. How free am I if my only freedom is to choose catastrophe? I can reach and you can turn. Does that make us hypocrites? Have you yielded to temptation, Devin Dwyer? Are you fallen now?"

He smiled and it was a smile that wiped the blackboard of human history of five thousand years of error. "I'm elevated and you know it. So are you. And this is only the beginning. We'll embrace each other and soar upward forever... Come to the fireplace."

"You are a creature of ceremony, aren't you?"

"In the right moments." He led her by the hand to the hearth. It was a gas jet but he didn't bother to light it. He said, "You make the toast."

She nodded and looked straight into the depths of his green eyes. She said, "'Every day a new beginning. Every day another chance at grace.' To second chances."

He smiled his delight and they threw their heads back and drank and together they smashed the glasses in the fireplace. The cognac still burning in his throat, he turned to kiss her and he tasted the orange nectar on her tongue and he tasted the bread of life in her soul.

They tumbled back into bed and she lay on her back, fully expecting him to take her from above again. Instead her pulled her atop him and pulled the nightgown up over her hips.

She said, "I wasn't sure you'd want me this way again."

"I want you any way you want me, so long as it's for love and for lust and not power or safety or control."

She smiled. "That's the way it is with you, isn't it? I want to find my safety by directly controlling everything that affects me. You want to find your safety by understanding every little last thing in words. Tell me that's not the truth." He started to speak but she said, "Say the truth or say nothing..." She laughed her delight.

She was on him and he was full and hard and she took him into her and settled to him slowly. She said, "This is what we have to watch for in each other, isn't it? In ourselves, more than in each other. I have to accept that you'll have control over some parts of my life. And you have to accept that not everything can be explained in detail right away. Do you think we can manage that? Someone I love said, 'Thoughtful people can accomplish anything if they put their bodies to it.' How about it? Are you willing to put your body where your mouth is, Devin Dwyer?"

He started to say something and then stopped himself. He started again and stopped again. Finally he said, "Don't talk. Just kiss."

Gwen smiled from the depths of her soul. "Now he's got it. The key to everything—" He cut her off with a hard kiss, his tongue probing deep into her mouth. When he broke away she was breathless but still she finished her thought. She said, "—is timing."

He laughed with her and she knew he was gravely serious and joyously serious and very, very serious about joy. She knew it would always be that way between them, serious and joyous and serene and uproarious and very, very safe. She smiled to herself with the kind of serenity that had graced Spencer's face when first he learned to smile: "This is how things are and this is how they should be and this is how they *must* be or nothing is right and everything is wrong."

Much later they slept, the gown down to Gwen's ankles, Gwen submersed up to her neck in Devin. When the phone in the suite rang he answered it in the middle of the second ring.

"It was Gretchen," he said when he had hung up. "Xander called the house. Winnie had a little girl. Eight pounds, two ounces. Nineteen inches tall."

"Oh, Devin!"

"Let's get dressed. His folks are in California and hers are in Maryland, so we're all the family they've got today. Do you want to take a shower?"

"No, let's just go. I want to see the baby."

"I didn't pack any extra clothes for us. I didn't think we'd need them."

"I don't think they're going to care how we're dressed."

Dawn was making promises behind them as Gwen drove them down Charles Street to Mass General. The nurses clucked their disapproval at receiving visitors so early, but obstetric nurses like babies even more that they like rules so Gwen and Devin were suffered to enter. They found Xander standing by the huge window of the nursery. There were only a few new arrivals and all of them were quiet. Little Baby Booth, swaddled in pink in her isolette, had glowing skin of a delicate brown, the color of coffee with clabbered cream. Tiny black curls escaped from the white stevedore's cap that the nurses made all the babies wear. She was asleep, and god himself could not have matched her for serenity.

And Xander was beside himself, of course. He hugged and kissed them both and seemed not to notice that they were together and he talked incessantly about how beautiful the birth had been and how strong Winnie was to bear up to that and how his daughter was so perfect and so patiently forgiving of the hospital's endless rules and rigmarole. After a while Gwen kissed him on the cheek and wandered down the hall to find Winnie's room. Devin stayed with Xander, the two of them marveling at the tiny little human being Xander and Winnie had made when they made love together.

Devin said, "This is what you need to remember. Someday when you see Winnie all dressed up to go out with you, you'll be tempted to say, 'This is my wife at her best.' But that's not so. Tonight you saw your wife at her best. She did something you could never do, not even if you were equipped for it."

Xander chuckled. "You're telling me! They called me the birthing coach, but my job really was to be the cheerleader. I did my best, but she had no use for me just when everything was the hardest. The worst of it was, I couldn't have done it then even if she had wanted me to. I spent the last few minutes just clutching at her hand and praying that she'd be all right. When she started those last pushes, I could not believe that *anyone* could live through that. And then the baby was on her stomach and she was exhausted but she still had energy enough to be elated, to love that baby and to take time to show her love to me and to bring the three of us together, to make a family of us. Anyone who calls women the weaker sex has never seen childbirth..."

"That's the point. Tonight you saw what she can do in her best moment, and tonight will always be the best moment of her life. If you're ticked off at her sometime—she forgot to pick up your suit from the cleaners or she burned the dinner you were starving for or she doesn't have the time to treat you the way you think you should be treated—remember this night. This is what she is and this is what she can do and that little girl in there is what she gave you because she loves you so much. She put herself through hell so a piece of the two of you can live on after both of you are gone."

Xander grinned and his grin spoke volumes. "Are you saying this for my benefit, Devin?"

Devin grinned in return. "Maybe not... Congratulations, dad. All that education—college, post-grad, post-doc, the lab—and *this* is the most important job you'll ever have. That little girl is lucky to have you. So is your wife."

Winnie was protesting when Gwen walked into the darkened room. No lines or leads or probes or IVs, but still the hospital is a clinical place, nothing at all like a home. Gwen took Winnie's hand in hers and Winnie opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

"Hey, girl," she said.

"She's beautiful..."

"Nine hours. The nurses said I was lucky. I didn't feel that lucky going through it. But then they put her on me and she sucked at me and I cupped her little body in my arms and I was ready to do the whole thing all over again. 'Saddle up, Xander. Let's make another one.'"

Gwen smiled and blinked at the wetness in her eyes.

"You're dressed nice for the hospital," Winnie observed. Gwen's smile broadened. "He's here with me."  
"Somebody must have smacked him on the head with a newspaper."  
She chuckled. "Somebody did. We were... together when we got the news about the baby."  
"Together, were you? With or without birth control?"  
Gwen started to hide her mouth behind her hand but she stopped herself. "Without," she said.  
Winnie smiled serenely and that was answer enough.  
Devin stuck his head into the room. "Hi, mom."  
"Did you see my baby?"  
"Couldn't take my eyes off her." Devin strode to the other side of the bed and took Winnie's other hand. "As lovely as her mother, but pocket sized."  
"Are you going to make her a playmate?"  
Devin looked at Gwen then back to Winnie. "We're working on it."  
Winnie's smile was a fragile thing, precious but tenuous. "Did Xander tell you her name?"  
Devin shook his head.  
"Cecilia Marie Booth. Don't tell Candy. I'll tell her when I call her."  
There were tears in Devin's eyes and the only answer he could make was to squeeze Winnie's hand.  
Gwen said, "Go to sleep, dear. We'll be back later today with gifts for Cecilia."  
"A month ago Xander bought her a bear that's bigger than she is."  
Gwen smiled. "You're both very fortunate."  
Winnie nodded, looking from Gwen to Devin. "So are you..."

\* \* \*

They were married on the nineteenth of April, Gwen's birthday, at St. Timothy's. Little Cecilia Marie was christened first, with Gwen and Devin named as her godparents. Xander and Winnie were best man and matron of honor, and Spencer and Hunter were the ushers. Gretchen was too old to be convincing as a flower girl, so she stood in as mother of the bride, bustling everywhere and worrying about everything. Gwen's father did not reply to his invitation so there was no one to give her away. Not that she minded; she didn't care for the idea of being passed as property from one man to another. The ceremony was unorthodox in the literal sense—Devin was divorced and Gwen had a child out of wedlock and was not quite visibly pregnant with another. But St. Timothy's had habituated itself to seventy years of steady generosity from Candy Dwyer and her family, so it was prepared to be generous in return. Gwen wore a gown of gauzy white, of course, at Devin's insistence, and if anyone was scandalized they kept it to themselves. The little church was filled with family and friends, people from the Institute, people from the *Globe* and many, many children. On the steps outside the church Gretchen caught the bouquet and blushed to her ears.

The reception was held in the back yard at Devin's house—Devin and Gwen's house. It was a beautiful spring day, warm without being hot, the sky clear and bright and very blue. The house was crawling with caterers and guests

and the back yard was crowded with tables and folding chairs. There was no bar, but waiters with bright red cummerbunds carried trays of champagne flutes at shoulder height. There was no band; instead Gwen had insisted upon and recruited a chamber ensemble from the New England Conservatory of Music. The kids weren't above working in danceable pop tunes by request, but they were danceable pop tunes rendered in strings so everyone was happy.

When they cut the cake Devin didn't smear it on Gwen's face and Gwen didn't smear it on Devin's face. Devin asked Xander to make a toast, but he deferred to his wife.

Winnie held up her glass to the new couple. She said, "I believe in love. I believe in marriage. I love this country because this is the one nation of the earth that was founded on the premise that individuals have rights, that each of us has every right to be and do whatever we want in life. But marriage is a moral institution more than a political one. I'm sure everyone here upholds the idea of individual rights. I know I do." She nodded toward Devin's grandmother. "Candy does. Devin does. But marriage isn't about individuals, it's about families. We didn't dress up today to help Gwen and Devin get started on an extremely long date. We joined them together, *bound* them together, but we didn't do that for their sake. I'm sure we all hope they find a grand gratification later tonight, but we didn't come to their wedding to celebrate their gratification. The pleasures of marriage might be the icing on the cake we're eating, but we came here for the cake, not the icing.

"Marriage is about family. Marriage is about community. Marriage is the means by which we create a family where there was none before, and the people who were married today were not Gwen and Devin but Gwen and Devin and Spencer and Hunter and another little one whose name we don't know yet. And Devin's family. And Gwen's family. And Gretchen by concatenation. And me and my husband and our baby. And all of you. The family is the building block of our civilization, and marriage is the method we use to bind individuals together into families and to bind families together into communities.

"We're not here as witnesses. We're here as *participants*. We're here to celebrate this wedding and to honor the newlyweds and to confer our gifts upon them. But we're also here as members of our community to express our loyalty to this new family. To the family. Not to Devin, not to Gwen, not to the boys as individuals. To this new family that we have helped to make today. I owe a lot to Devin's family. Because of his grandmother, I have become a professional champion of words that 'modern' people are too embarrassed to say. The word that applies today is an ancient and honorable one: fealty. We came here today to swear our fealty—our loyalty, our fidelity—to this new branch of the Dwyer family. May it grow straight and strong!"

Her listeners cheered and drank to her toast and more than a few of them brushed tears from their eyes. And then it was Devin's turn to speak and he was gloriously arrayed in his black tuxedo and his gray silk vest and his royal blue silk cravat. He said, "I can't compete with Winnie for either wisdom or eloquence, so I won't try. Instead I'll say something I promised to say to my wife—my wife; I like the sound of that. I promised to say this to my wife three months ago. She

said it to me first, but that's just her way." He turned to face Gwen, his eyes locked to hers, and raised his glass to her alone. He said, "To second chances!"

Later Devin found Gretchen and Spencer leaning over the railing of the summer porch on the second floor of the house. It looked out over the back yard and the two kids were talking as they watched the guests dancing and milling about.

Devin stepped up behind them and put his arms over their shoulders. He said, "I used to spend a lot of time up here. Candy and my grandfather would sit out here on Saturday afternoons and she would read to him. Thoreau and Jefferson and Herbert Spencer and all kinds of wonderful books, and I didn't understand half of what I was hearing. But it was a great way to learn, because I'd go back in the house and pore over my books and try to figure out what they were talking about. There's so much family in this house. I'm glad there's going to be so much more..."

Gretchen's eyes were wet and she was gripping the railing very hard.

"I'm happy you could be with us today, Gretchen. I'm happy you're a part of our family. I know you'll have to go away someday, and that's the way things should be. But I hope you'll never stop being a part of our family, as much as you can be."

The tears were rolling down her cheeks now and she couldn't wipe them away fast enough. "Thank you, Doctor Dwyer."

"Please, call me Devin. At least for today. Tomorrow you can do what you think is right, but today let's be equals, two adults—three adults—one a little older than the others."

Gretchen smiled around her tears. "Okay, Devin. Do you see Hunter dancing with Gwen?" She was waltzing with the little boy, a little out of place in a tuxedo of his own. Her hands were down to meet his and she was letting him lead and he was doing well enough. "Look how he presses his ear to her tummy."

"He's listening for the baby. We told him about the ultrasound and he's convinced he should be able to hear the baby's heartbeat with his own ears."

Gretchen took another swipe at her tears. "I think I'll go down and see if I can get the next dance."

"Save one for me," said Spencer.

"And one for me, too."

Devin and Spencer watched from the railing as Gretchen cut in on Gwen, spiriting Hunter away. Gwen took Cecilia from Winnie's arms and danced slowly with the little girl, her nose pressed to the baby's head to drink in that rich baby smell.

"Are they treating you like a man or a boy?" Devin asked.

"A little of both, I'm afraid."

"Comes with the territory, I guess. People can be so stupidly awkward sometimes. I bought a wedding gift for you. I left it in your new bedroom. Did you see it?"

"It wouldn't be that baseball bat, would it?"

"It would."

"It's not for playing baseball, is it?"

"You know what it's for."

"Devin, I—is that what I should call you? Should I call you 'dad?'"

"I'm not your father, Spencer. I wish I were, but I can't be. I'll be the best friend I can be to you, and I'll be very honored to serve *in loco parentis*. But your father is always your father, and I'm eighteen years too late to be anything but your step-father. Call me Devin and we'll be men together."

"Devin, I don't want to beat you up."

Devin grinned. "Believe me, I don't want you to. I just want you to have the power to do it, if it should ever be necessary... Winnie's toast was beautiful, wasn't it? I don't believe in loyalty the way people usually use that word—which amounts to honor among thieves. But I believe in family. You're a part of our family now, we're family together. But you'll always be the man of *her* family, and it will always be your job to defend her. I believe in symbols, too, and ceremony. That baseball bat is a symbol for your responsibility to her as a man. When I give it to you and when you accept it, we both acknowledge the reality of your life: protecting her from me is your job, and you know it and I know it and we both want her to be safe. You'll never have to defend her from me because I'm man enough to admit the truth. How about you?"

Spencer smiled and there was nothing at all boyish in his face. "You're crying again, Devin."

Devin smiled around his tears and there was nothing at all boyish in his face. "Pity me when I stop crying."

By the time Devin got back to the party Candy had taken her little namesake from Gwen and she was showing her off all around the yard. Gwen was alone for the moment and Devin came upon her and simply looked at her, his eyes filled with love, all the love there ever was, all the love in the universe. The love that ennobles and endures, the love that starts in the middle and never, ever ends.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "You've been crying."

"It's no big deal. I've been crying for months."

"Not like *this*. What's happened?"

He shrugged and grinned. "The catering crew is crawling with college girls. I gave one a little pinch on the butt and she hit me with a shot of pepper spray. I think she was being coy, don't you?"

Gwen said nothing, just laughed.

"Anyway, I've heard it's harder for married men to get dates, so I thought I'd get a jump on things."

"So to speak..."

"Of course, I could always get a jump on you instead." Her eyebrows shot up for the briefest instant and he knew better than to push things with her. "Or I could put you off with a kiss and a promise..."

She grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him tight to her. "Are you going to do something or just talk about it?" She put her other hand on his neck and pulled his lips to hers. It was a kiss of communion, a conjoining of bodies and minds and souls—and of *time*, the endless, boundless time of the universe. It was the kiss that sanctified and gave meaning and reality to the legal and religious words that had been incanted earlier. By the priest they had been joined in law, joined together with the community. Now were they joined to each

other, forever, locked together by an endless kiss. All around the yard the married men and women looked at each with secret smiles.

He said, "Can I tell you the truth?"

"Always..."

"This—right here, right now—this is the happiest moment of my life."

"Mmmm... Mine, too..."

"Really? In that case, maybe we should skip the wedding night."

She was still lost in the endless, boundless time of the universe. It took a moment for her to say, "...What?"

"Sure. What could it be after this except a big letdown?"

"You—bastard!"