

"Coming Home"

November 2014

"It's smaller than I remember," Craig said, to no one in particular.

It was a bright fall Friday afternoon. Craig Stevenson, twenty-one years old, stood at the back of the Central Baptist Church sanctuary, surveying the room.

His left hand grazed each pew as he walked slowly down the aisle, toward the dais and the pulpit, as if, by mere touch, he could channel memories of his childhood.

At the front of the sanctuary, he turned and looked back up the aisle, toward the door, and above it, the balcony.

"Excuse me," a voice to his left interrupted, "may I help you?"

Startled, he turned toward the voice, and discovered an aging man, balding, carrying a tray of cleaning supplies and pushing a vacuum cleaner.

"No ... not really. Just looking around."

The custodian took a rag from his back pocket and began polishing the candlesticks.

"If you need some quiet time, I can come back."

"Uh ... no, that's not necessary. Like I said, I'm just looking around."

"Well ... Let me know if I'm bothering you. Like I said, I got stuff I can do someplace else if you need some space."

"Really, I'm fine. It's nothing like that."

"Okay."

The custodian finished with the candlesticks, and began on the offering plates.

"How'd you get in here, anyway? Didn't see you come in by the office?"

"Front door. The left one. It was unlocked."

The custodian sighed a heavy, Irish sort of sigh.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, it's just ... whenever I'm not at church on a Wednesday, somebody forgets to lock a door. Twenty-three doors in the place. They always miss one."

"Sounds like a problem. Ever had anything stolen?"

"No ... never have. But, you know, it's not safe, leaving doors unlocked nowadays."

"No, I guess not."

The custodian pulled a can of furniture polish from his tray, sprayed it on the pulpit, and set to work.

"So, what made you stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Stop here ... and come inside."

"Oh ... that. Well, I used to come here, when I was a kid."

"No kidding."

"Yeah. I finished community college last spring, and I got accepted at the university here, and, well, I kinda wanted to see the old place. Been meaning to get over here for a couple of months."

"Well, what do you think?"

"It's the same as I remember, only, well, it seems smaller. In my memories, this is supposed to be a cathedral."

"That doesn't surprise me. When I was a kid, my grandfather had a general store up in the mountains. Sold all sorts of things: groceries, hardware, clothes, even. We'd go visit, and in my mind, the place was just huge."

"Then, when I was in my thirties, I went back to see it, and it was just tiny, not much bigger than a convenience store. But, in my head, the way I remembered it, it was like a Walmart."

"Just goes to show you, doesn't it?"

"Show me what?"

"That sometimes, it's not the size of the place that matters, but the size of the things that happen there."

Craig thought about that for a second or so.

"Yes, I guess you're right. Never thought about it, though."

The custodian had moved to the piano, and was polishing its deep black lid.

"Is the same preacher here?"

"That depends, how long ago we talking about?"

"Twelve, thirteen years."

"Oh, well ... if that's all ... yeah, same preacher. Pastor Matthew James been here over twenty. If you got time to wait, he'll be back from lunch soon."

"I can't ... I've got a class at two. Gotta catch the bus back to campus. Can't stay long. Didn't plan to. Just wanted to see the old place."

The custodian had continued his work on the organ and the choir rail.

"Why'd you leave?"

"My dad died. Killed in a car accident. Mom remarried, and we moved across the state."

The custodian stopped in mid-stroke, turned to face Craig, peering intently into his face. Recognition dawned on his face.

"Your name's Craig, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Craig Stevenson."

"Good Lord, why didn't you say so to start with?"

"You didn't ask."

"Well ... no, I guess I didn't. What an idiot I am."

The custodian dropped his rag, crossed to where Craig was standing, and took him by both shoulders.

"I can see it now. Craig, you probably don't remember me. I'm Paul Meyers. I knew your dad. He was a fine man and a good friend. It took a toll on all of us when he died in that accident."

"Like I said, you probably don't remember me. But, I remember you. You were six years old, in my RA group. And, here you are! All grown up. Look at you!"

"Mr. Meyers? Really?"

"Yes, son, really. Welcome home."

“Thanksgiving Plans”

“Mom, I told you. I can come home for Thanksgiving, or I can come home for Christmas. One or the other. I don’t have money to make the trip twice, and you don’t, either.”

Craig put the cell phone down on the dresser, and pressed the ‘speaker’ icon, so that he could use his hands to tie his tie.

“I know, son. I know you’re right. It’s ... just ... this is the first time we’ve ever celebrated Thanksgiving without you.”

His mother sounded close to tears, but there was not much to do about it. He could only spend his money once ... on a bus ticket or on books for next semester. He’d run the numbers.

“It won’t be so bad, Mom. You’ll have Todd and Karen. You’ll spend the whole weekend planning the baby shower.”

Todd was Craig’s older brother. Half-brother, actually. He was five years older than Craig, the son of his mother’s second husband, Gerald. They were expecting their first child in the spring.

“It won’t be the same.”

Craig sighed. It wasn’t that his mother was frivolous when it came to money. She was actually pretty frugal, to tell the truth. But, it bothered her, nonetheless.

“No, Mom, it won’t be. I get that. But it will be okay, and we’ll have a great time at Christmas.”

“I know, but the thought of you staying there in the dorm all weekend eating cafeteria food ... ”

“It’ll be okay, Mom. Really. I’ll be fine.”

“I worry about you, Craig. It’s what mothers do.”

“I know, Mom. And telling mothers not to worry is what sons do.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I love you, Mom. I’ll call you on Thursday.”

“I love you, too. Bye, son.”

Craig heard the line go dead, and then, punched the ‘end call’ button on his own phone.

The call had come at the worst possible time, and now, he would have to hurry if he was to make the bus which would carry him to the bus stop a couple of blocks down from the church.

He grabbed his jacket, stuffed his wallet and cell phone into his pockets, and headed on out the door at a trot.

He reached the bus stop just as the bus was easing away, but caught the driver’s attention in the mirror, and he had mercy, stopping long enough for Craig to sprint the final few yards and climb aboard.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“No problem,” the driver replied. “It’s Thanksgiving. Good karma, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Craig replied, marveling at the strange mixture of Eastern and Western theology.

December 2014

The bus took twenty minutes to navigate the eight miles to the church’s neighborhood, and in another five minutes, Craig made the brisk walk from the bus stop to the church.

The college fellowship met on the second floor of the education building. The room bustled with activity, as students clumped together in animated conversations, clutching coffee or hot chocolate available from a long table in the corner. Music was playing from a stereo system, and, on a small stage along the far wall, a couple of musicians were trying to tune their guitars above the din.

“Hi ... I’m Jackie,” a bright blonde coed greeted him.

“Uh ... Craig.”

“First time here? Well, sign in right here, and there’s coffee and stuff in the corner, and ... let me introduce you to a couple of people ... this is my boyfriend, Chad ... and this is Pete, he’s in engineering ... and this is Chris, he’s ... well, Chris what is your major this week?”

“Political science, Jackie ... and you know it’s been that way for a year and a half. Nice to meet you, Craig.”

“And this ... ” Jackie continued, introducing Craig to half a dozen more people before guiding him to the refreshments, and leaving him with Chris.

“So ... where’s home?”

“Little town up in the mountains, near Staunton.”

“Going home for Thanksgiving.”

“No ... staying here. Studying ... gotta work on Friday.”

“I hear you. So, put your name in the pot, yet?”

“The pot?”

“Oh, that’s right ... sorry ... the church families invite the college students who are stranded in town to have Thanksgiving dinner with them. You put your name in the pot, and tomorrow, the pastors match up the families with the students. You’ll get a call tomorrow from someone.”

“You’re kidding. ”

“Absolutely not. It’s great. Real home cooking, turkey and all the fixings. They send kids in pairs. Wanta go with?”

“Well, I figured I’d just eat at the cafeteria.”

“Cafeteria’s closed on Thanksgiving Day. Come on, it’ll be great. You’ll meet some really nice people, and get a great meal, and ... all you gotta do is fill out the card, and put it in the bucket over on the table.”

Craig fingered the card that Chris has handed him.

“Come on ... I need a partner, anyway.”

Craig relented and scribbled his name and phone number on the card.

“Great!” exclaimed Chris, who then plucked the card from Craig’s hand, crossed the room, and dropped it in the bucket.

Just that moment, a student stood on the small stage, tapped on the microphone, and called the gathering to order.

“Welcome to Central Baptist!”

“New Year’s Eve”

January 2015

It was only 9:30 p.m., but the restaurant was already rocking. Large-screen televisions were ubiquitous, broadcasting several different college bowl games for the patrons.

Most of the attention was directed toward the big screen over the bar, which showed the Gator Bowl game in which State was playing. Groans or cheers erupted after every play, depending on what had happened.

Craig balanced a tray of glasses filled with ice water in his right hand, and greeted the new group of six college students who’d just sat down at the big table in the middle of his section.

“Hi, guys, I’m Craig, and I’ll be taking care of you this evening,” he said as he placed a glass in front of each patron. “What can I get you to drink?”

Everyone ordered a beer of one sort or another, except for the girl at the end of the table.

“Unsweetened tea with lemon,” she said.

“She’s the designated,” explained one of the boys.

She shot him an exasperated look.

“Well, I’ll be right back with your drinks. In the meantime, check out the specials on the menu insert, and we’ve got a great buffet tonight ... all you can eat seafood, prime rib, and barbecue, plus tons of veggies and salad fixings, for just \$20.00 apiece. Comes with champagne at midnight for the ball drop.”

“We’ll let you know ... give us a minute.”

“Absolutely ... be right back with those drinks.”

Craig left the table, and went to the drink station to fill the glasses. The food for another of his tables was ready, and after delivering that, he brought the drinks out to the new group of six.

“Now,” he said, “are we ready for an appetizer?”

“No, thanks, I think we’ll all get the buffet.”

“Great, you won’t be disappointed. Dishes are on the buffet ... just use a clean one every time you go back. Enjoy.”

Craig returned to the table about ten minutes later with a pitcher of iced tea to freshen the girl’s drink. He noticed her fingering a diamond solitaire on her left hand.

“Nice ring.”

“Thank you,” she replied, blushing slightly.

“It’s beautiful. Christmas present?”

“Yes ... Still feels kinda weird.”

“Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Preston ... he’s the one in the brown jacket, up there,” she said, pointing to a tall young man standing a couple of rows back from the bar, intent on the football game.

“You guys go to State?”

“He does. Not me, though.”

“Rachel goes to Princeton,” her friend interjected. “Full ride.”

“Erin ...”

“She doesn’t like to brag.”

“Well, ... congratulations,” Craig smiled, “on both accounts.”

A roar went up in the restaurant, as a State receiver caught a pass in the end zone. Rachel flinched.

“I take it you’re not a football fan.”

“Not really. Too violent for my tastes.”

“Don’t get her started,” Erin interrupted again. “She’s got a long rehearsed rant about football that takes about ten minutes.”

“Well, afraid I don’t have ten minutes, but ... do you need anything else?”

“No, we’re fine right now. Thank you.”

“Enjoy the evening.”

Craig visited the table several more times during the evening, refilling glasses, fetching more drinks, and removing used dishes.

The football game wound down ... a State victory which put almost everyone in an even more jovial mood than before.

The televisions switched to the New year’s Eve broadcasts from Times Square in New York, and Craig, along with the other service staff, circulated among the patrons with trays of champagne glasses.

“The ones with the pink ribbon around the stem are non-alcoholic,” he explained.

Rachel selected one of those, and lifted her glass with her friends to observe the final seconds of the year.

“Ten ... nine ... eight ...” the crowd chanted the seconds down.

“Three ... two ... one ... Happy New Year!!”

Preston and Rachel clinked their glasses, and drank their respective drinks. Then, as *Auld Lang Syne* blared from the television sets, he gathered her up for a long, deep kiss.

They were still kissing when almost everyone else had finished, and after several seconds, Rachel pushed him away.

“Please ... you’re embarrassing me.”

“What’s to be embarrassed about? We’re engaged, aren’t we?”

“Still ... Preston ... time and place.”

“Yeah ... okay,” he drawled without conviction.

to be continued

“Sunday Dinner”

February 2015

“Can I interest either of you in a piece of pie?”

Natalie Sampson held out a pair of dessert plates, each holding a generous slab of apple pie.

Craig and Chris each nodded, in spite of the fact that they'd both wolfed down two full plates of baked chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, and green beans.

It was Sunday afternoon. Craig and Chris were guests at the home of George and Natalie Sampson, whom they had met a couple of months previously, as part of the church's hospitality ministry to college students who'd remained in town during the Thanksgiving holidays.

“Thank you. Everything's delicious,” Craig gushed in appreciation.

Natalie blushed slightly at the compliment.

“Better than the cafeteria, I bet,” Rachel observed.

“Much,” Craig agreed.

Rachel, a high school senior, was the youngest of the Sampson's three girls. Her actual last name was “Miller”, as was the case for her two older sisters.

Sarah was a freshman at Davidson, and was, therefore, sequestered just north of Charlotte.

Erin, however, was a senior at State, and shared an apartment with two friends, just off campus, but came home often on weekends.

“So, are you going to the Super Bowl party?” Erin inquired.

“Wouldn't miss it,” Chris replied.

“I'd love to,” Craig sighed, “but, that's a huge day at the restaurant. All hands on deck. So, no party for me, I'm afraid.”

Erin's cell phone buzzed, and Erin, after checking to see who it was, had excused herself to take the call.

Several minutes of casual conversation ensued, about school, the weather, the upcoming game, and the news.

“Something wrong?” George asked, as Erin returned from the table.

“Not sure.”

“Well, who was it?” Rachel asked.

“Your namesake, if you must know.”

“Huh?”

“Rachel ... you know?”

Erin was referring to Rachel James, the pastor's daughter, a senior at Princeton. To avoid confusion, Rachel Miller, Erin's sister, was sometimes called “Rachel the Younger”.

“Was she your friend from the party on New Year's Eve?” Craig asked.

“Yes.”

“Seemed like she was okay that night.”

“Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving.”

“Erin ... ” Natalie shot her daughter a look.

“I know. ‘It's not polite to talk about people's private business.’ It's just so frustrating, that's all.”

“Frustrated you may be ... it's still not your place to talk about her, without her permission, with people who have no reason to hear it, and can't help things even if they did.”

“I know, Mom. It's just ... what am I supposed to do? Watch my best friend make the biggest mistake of her life?”

“Another time and place, Erin.”

Erin sighed, and fingered her cellphone, checking for incoming texts that weren't incoming.

Craig felt the awkwardness in the room, and judged it was time to leave.

“Mrs. Sampson, it was delicious, and I'm very appreciative. Thank you so much for lunch. Rachel's right ... it's lots better than the cafeteria.”

Chris nodded his head in agreement as the boys stood up from the table.

“Thank you.”

“But, if you'll excuse us, I've got a couple of hours of studying to do before the college group meets tonight, so I think I need to find the library.”

“Of course.”

“Can I help you clear the table before you leave?”

“Don't you get enough of that at work?” Natalie objected. “We'll take care of it. Thanks for offering, though.”

“Wait a sec, will you?” Erin interrupted. “No sense walking to the bus stop. I've got to go to the apartment. Let me take you back to campus.”

“Well, sure ... thanks.”

Erin dug into her purse, found her keys. Chris helped her into her coat. The three students bundled up against the winter wind.

“Bye, Mom ... Dad.”

After the three collegians had left, Rachel went to her room, and George and Natalie cleared the table.

“Nice kid.” George noted, for his wife's benefit.

“Hmmpf,” was her only response.

“Is that ‘hmmpf, I agree’, or ‘hmmpf, you're crazy’?”

“Really? Can't you tell by now?”

George kissed his wife playfully on the cheek.

“Not yet. I guess I'll have to stick around a little longer and figure it out.”

“Hmmpf.”

to be continued

“Remembering”

March 2015

“Are you going home for spring break?”

The question, posed by fast-becoming best friend, Chris, was one that Craig could scarcely hear above the animated buzz of conversation in the college room at Central Baptist.

It was about fifteen minutes before starting time. The band was tuning its instruments, and going through its sound checks. Students filed in, picked up their nametags, and made their way to tables near the far wall, where an impressive array of soft drinks and snacks was going fast.

“Huh?” Craig grunted. “What’d you say?”

“I said,” Chris replied, louder this time, “Are you going home for spring break?”

“Oh ... no, duty calls. Bills to pay, you know.”

Craig was referring to his job at a local restaurant, Stateside, a popular hang-out for college students and locals. He worked three or four shifts a week to pay for his books, tuition, meal ticket, and dorm fee.

“Good ... I’m staying, too. Maybe we can find something fun to do.”

“You mean, besides working on my term papers and, well ... work.”

“Nose to the grindstone ... that’s my man.”

“Yeah, well, when college is on your own dime, getting done on time matters. And getting the degree to pay off student loans matters, too.”

“Fair enough ... hey, look, there’s Erin.”

Erin Miller had just entered the room with her boyfriend, and the two of them were making their way to the refreshment table.

It had been a month since that dinner on Sunday afternoon at Erin’s home, and, more importantly, a month since Erin had given Craig and Chris a ride back to their dorms.

“You want to talk about it?” Craig had asked her once they got in the car.

“I shouldn’t,” Erin had replied.

“Yeah, probably not ... none of my business.”

“It’s just ... when you see someone you really care about, and she’s about to ruin her life, and you can’t get her to see it, and can’t do anything about it ... ”

“We talking about Rachel here?”

“Yeah.”

“Rachel the Elder?”

Erin smiled.

“There is no ‘Rachel the Elder’. My little sister is ‘Rachel the Younger’, but Rachel is just ‘Rachel’. Understand?”

“Got it.”

“Mom says I should just let it play out, but that’s going to end badly ... anyone can see that?”

“What’s going to end badly?”

“Rachel and Preston.”

“Preston?”

“Yeah, Preston. Preston C. McGuire. The Fourth. Though if the first three are anything like him, it’s a crime they should have been allowed to reproduce!”

“I take it you’re not very high on Preston.”

“He’s a jerk ... and a lot of other things that a Christian lacks the vocabulary to describe.”

“And yet, he gave her that ring, I’m guessing.”

Erin sighed.

“Yes ... he gave her that ring, though I don’t think he has a clue as to what it’s really supposed to mean.”

“And, she doesn’t see it your way?”

“It’s not my way ... it’s the way it is. Anyone with eyes in their head can see that he’s into himself, and Rachel is just an other accomplishment.”

“Evidently, Rachel has lost her eyes.”

Erin chuckled, “You have a funny way of putting things, but yes, along with the rest of her head.”

“Sounds like you care about her a whole lot.”

“I do. I love her like a sister, and I owe her, big-time.”

“Owe her?”

“Yeah, I transferred to Centerville High School my senior year. Not the ideal point in time to enter an established social scene.

“I made the mistake of going out with the biggest player in the senior class, and after he started a rumor about things I didn’t do, Rachel helped organize a school-wide boycott of the guy. He didn’t get a date for four months.

“So, yeah, I owe her.”

“Funny story.”

“Funnier still ... he’s my fiancé.”

“Really!?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to marry me.”

“Why’re you telling me all this?”

“‘Cause I think I can trust you, I guess. ‘Cause I need someone to talk to who won’t just roll their eyes and pat me on the head, and tell me it’s going to be alright.”

Craig was jolted from his memory by his friend shouting in his ear.

“Hey, Craig, you okay?”

“Yeah, just remembering something.”

to be continued

“Spring Break”

April 2015

“He went without you?!?” Erin shouted into the phone.

Erin was standing outside the restaurant, talking to on her cell phone.

She and Eric had been enjoying a private Friday night out to celebrate their fourth anniversary of “going together”.

The conversation had just begun to edge toward the future, and what it might mean for the two of them, when Erin’s phone rattled in her purse.

Instinctively, she’d looked at the screen.

“It’s Rachel,” she’d said. “I can call her back later.”

“You sure about that?” Eric replied.

Erin paused for a moment, and then nodded.

“Hi, Rachel,” she spoke into the phone. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Rachel’s voice responded. “Got a minute to talk.”

“Something wrong?”

“No, not really. ... Am I interrupting something?”

“No ... it’s okay. Eric and I were just talking, that’s all.”

“You’re on a date, aren’t you? I’m sorry. I am interrupting. I’ll call back later.”

“No ... don’t ... I’ve got time.”

Erin stood up, and motioned to Eric that she would be stepping outside for a moment.

“So, what are you up to?”

“Nothing much.”

“I figured that you and Preston would be out somewhere.”

“Nope. All by my lonesome.”

“That’s sad. Where’s your man?”

“Not sure exactly.”

“What do you mean, ‘not sure ... exactly?’”

“Well ... he’s somewhere in Florida, I think.”

“You think?”

“Yeah ... he’s been going to Florida for spring break with the same group of guys every year since high school.”

“And he didn’t take you?”

“He said it was a guys thing.”

“So ... you did talk about it.”

“Yeah ... we talked. He said he wanted to go with the guys one last time. One last fling.”

“He used those words? ‘One last fling?’”

“Yeah ... It’s not that big a deal, Erin. Really.”

“Not that big a deal!?!?”

“No ... really ... I’m cool with it.”

Erin lapsed into stunned silence.

“You still there?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah ... I’m still here.”

“I thought I’d lost you there for a minute.”

“No ... I just don’t know what to say, that’s all.”

“What to say?”

“Yeah, I mean, your fiancé goes to Florida for spring break, and he doesn’t take you, and ... you’re cool with it. I mean, what am I supposed to say?”

“You’re not supposed to *say* anything. I just called to talk, that’s all.”

“Rachel, what do you think is going to happen on this ‘one last thing?’”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think Preston and his guys are going to do for ... how long they going to be down there?”

“A week.”

“So, what do you think is going to happen down there?”

“Nothing’s going to happen. He’s gonna go to the beach, and surf, and you know, just have some fun with his friends.”

“Uh huh.”

“Erin, you make it sound like he’s gonna, you know, do something. He wouldn’t. He loves me.”

Erin sighed silently.

“Yeah, well, Rach, all I know is that there’s a guy who loves me, and he’s waiting patiently right inside this restaurant.”

The phone was silent.

“Look, Rach, I gotta go. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay. Love ya. Bye.”

“You, too. Bye.”

Back inside, the salads had been delivered, and Eric was waiting for Erin to return.

“What was that all about?”

Erin quickly recounted the conversation, while Eric devoured his salad. When she finished, Eric pulled out his phone, and began pushing icons.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking Facebook. You were right.”

He handed his phone across the table, and Erin began scrolling through a series of pictures ... pictures she knew would be there.

“Great ... what do I do now?”

(to be continued)

“Spring Break”

May 2015

“So ... why'd you come home?”

Erin and Rachel had excused themselves, leaving their boyfriends, Eric and Preston, at the table waiting for their dinners to be served.

It was Saturday night, and the restaurant was rocking with college students blowing off the accumulated steam of studying for finals.

“No reason,” Rachel replied. “Just wanted to see everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“Yeah ... everyone. Mom, Dad, you guys ... everyone.”

“Does ‘everyone’ include Preston?”

“Sure. I mean, of course. Why wouldn't it? We're engaged, aren't we?”

“Yep. That's right.”

Rachel turned to face her friend.

“Why don't you like Preston?”

“I never said I didn't.”

“I just get this, I don't know, vibe ... that you really don't care for him.”

Erin faced Rachel, and gulped. The moment of truth for them had arrived.

“I don't trust him, Rach. And, I don't want to see you get hurt.”

“Well, you're not trusting him is hurtful. Hurtful to me. I expected that, when I found someone to love, that my best friend would be happy for me.”

“Nothing would make me happier than to see you in love with someone who deserved you. I'm just not sure Preston is that guy.”

“You're just jealous, that's all. You're jealous that Preston proposed to me, and that Eric doesn't have the courage to propose to you!”

The accusation hung in the air between them. Erin felt the fury well up inside her, and exhaled slowly.

“You have no idea what's going on between Eric and me. This isn't about the two of us. It's about the two of you.”

“Well, the two of us are doing just fine, thank you.”

“You sure couldn't tell that from the pictures.”

It was a low blow, and Erin winced the moment the words escaped her lips. Rachel stood silently before her, and, for a moment, Erin thought they might come to blows, right there in the restroom.

“Those pictures were nothing. Preston told me that nothing happened. Those girls photo-bombed him. That's all.”

“Rachel ... are you sure?”

“Of course, I'm sure. I love him. Why would I think that Preston would lie to me?”

“I just want you to be happy, Rach.”

“Well, you have a fine way of showing it!”

Rachel turned, flung her paper towel into the trash can, and strode out the door, back into the restaurant.

Erin, shaken, felt the tears form in her eyes, and watched herself in the mirror, helplessly, as they cascaded down her cheeks.

It was several minutes later before she was able to compose herself, wash her face, and make herself presentable to the public.

When she returned, Eric was sitting at the table, by himself, nursing a glass of tea.

“Rachel said she wasn't feeling well ... Hey, are you all right?”

Erin felt the tears again, hot and angry behind her eyeballs, and she knew she was one kind comment from a total meltdown.

“I'm fine. We'll talk later.”

The next night, after the college fellowship meeting, Erin found the strength to tell the story to Craig and Chris and Eric.

The three listened intently as Erin recounted the conversation, word for word.

“I don't know what to do. I feel like she's making a terrible mistake, but every time I try to talk to her about it, there's this huge wall that comes up between us.”

“She's afraid,” Eric said. “Afraid you're right.”

“What?”

“She loves him, but she's suspicious. Why else come home for the weekend five days before exams? At Princeton, for crying out loud.”

“But, she defends him.”

“To you.” Craig interjected. “Probably not to herself.”

“Huh?”

“She's not ready to admit she's wrong. At least, not publicly. It's embarrassing. But, she's sniffing around, trying to figure out who Preston really is.”

“So ... you think it's gonna be alright? In the end?”

“Can't say. She loves him, or at least she loves who she hopes he is. What she's trying to figure out is whether he loves her, or whether he just loves himself, and wants her. But, she may do something stupid, just to avoid admitting she's made a mistake.”

Erin stared at the the three of them for a moment.

“And they say guys aren't insightful.”

“We have our moments,” Chris replied, to laughter around the table.

(to be continued)

The Memorial Day weekend crowd at the restaurant was sparse, with most of the college students already gone for the summer, and those remaining gravitating toward the beach and backyard cookouts.

So, there were lots of tables available when Rachel and Preston arrived, and Craig escorted them to a booth on the far wall, where Chris had just finished clearing the dishes from the previous guests.

Rachel caught a glimpse of Eric and Erin, seated at a table on the other side of the restaurant. Erin waved, and Rachel nodded back.

A cute brunette appeared a moment later. “Hi, I’m Makenzie, and I’ll be taking care of you this evening.”

“Hi, Makenzie,” Preston responded with a smile.

“What would you like to drink, and, can I suggest an appetizer?”

“Ice water with lemon,” Rachel replied.

“I’ll have a Michelob,” Preston said. “And, the nachos.”

“Anything else for you, ma’am?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“Great, then, I’ll be right back with your drinks and your appetizer, and give you a little time to look over the menu.”

Preston watched her walk away, intently. Rachel stared into the menu, nervously fingering the ring on her finger.

“She’s cute,” he said.

“Hmmp.”

Preston frowned. “What’s the matter? You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Awfully quiet.”

“Yeah ... well.”

Makenzie returned with the drinks and chips, and Preston’s face lit up as she asked them for their order.

When she left again, with the menus in hand, it was Rachel who spoke first.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“About what, sweetheart.”

“I’m thinking that I want to postpone the wedding.”

“You what!?”

“I want to postpone the wedding. I ... I ... don’t think I’m ready.”

Preston sat back, a look of bewilderment and confusion on his face.

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s not you, Preston. Really, it’s me. Cold feet, I guess.”

Preston’s face reddened.

“But, the wedding’s in three weeks. The invitations are already out. We’ve rented the tuxes, the club. We’ve bought the cake, and you’ve bought the dress. We’ve got the tickets to the Bahamas for the honeymoon. Do you have any idea how much money we’ve spent already? And, you want to postpone?”

Rachel hung her head, and a tear formed in the corner of her left eye.

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re just nervous, that’s all. It’ll be fine.”

Rachel took a deep breath.

“Preston, it won’t be fine. I won’t be fine.”

Preston fumed.

“Rachel, how can you do this to me? Do you have any idea how this makes me look?”

“How it makes you “look”???”

Rachel’s voice, and Preston’s too, were now loud enough to attract curious glances from adjacent tables.

“I’m sorry ... that came out wrong.”

“No, I think it came out just the way you intended.”

Rachel slipped the ring from her finger, and pushed it across the table.

“I can’t do this, Preston.”

“Rachel”

“I don’t love you, Preston. I thought I did, but it turned out, you aren’t the man I fell in love with.”

“Rachel, you’re just scared. It’ll be fine.”

Rachel shook her head.

“Put the ring back on,” Preston said, in low and even tones. “Put it on, and we’ll go someplace private and talk this out.”

“No.”

Preston grabbed the ring, and Rachel’s hand, “Put it on.”

Craig appeared from nowhere, and put his hand gently on Preston’s shoulder. Eric and Chris appeared as well, opposite him, at Rachel’s side.

“I think the lady has made herself clear.”

Preston looked at the three young men, and then at Rachel, and then, released her hand and stood up.

“Fine ... you can go to”

Craig cut him off. “No, sir. That’s not likely to happen. But you can go, now, anywhere you please, so long as it’s not here.”

Preston considered the odds, put the ring in his pocket, and left. Rachel sat stone-faced in the booth, as the three men watched him leave the restaurant. When the door slammed behind him, Rachel sighed deeply.

“You okay.” Craig asked.

“I will be, I think.”

They lingered around the table for an awkward moment.

“So, what are you guys ... the Three Musketeers or something?”

“Yeah ... well ... you could do worse.”

“Well, go on now. I’m fine.”

The young men dispersed, and Rachel stared at the empty place across from her.

Then, and only then, did she dissolve into tears, and Erin, her friend, came running across the restaurant toward her.

(to be continued)

“Wedding Day”

Rachel knew that this was going to be an awful day. She'd known it for weeks, and now, finally, it was here.

In the weeks since her confrontation with Preston, she'd spent a good deal of her time unwinding the plans for her wedding day.

There were contracts to cancel for catering, photography, the cake, and the reception venue. Naturally, these cancellations came at a price.

More than once, Rachel wondered whether she had done the right thing, especially when it came time to ask her parents to pay to get out of obligations.

“Mom, Dad, I'll pay you back.”

“You'll do no such thing,” her father told her. “Your happiness is worth every penny.”

“But ...”

“Besides,” her dad cut her off, “it's cheaper this way.”

Pastor Matthew James had stayed out of the drama between Preston and her daughter. But to say he was relieved that the wedding had been canceled was a major understatement.

“I don't know about Preston,” he'd told his wife one night as they lay in bed together. “There's something off about him. I can't put my finger on it. He's polite enough to the two of us, but I get the sense that he's putting up a front for my benefit.”

“We can't make this sort of decision for her,” his wife had replied. “I'm sure she sees him as he really is. We just have to trust her good judgment.”

“I hope you're right.”

In the days immediately after the breakup, Preston had called Rachel's phone incessantly. After four days of constant texting and voice messages, Rachel “accidentally” dropped the phone in the toilet.

“Fitting,” was all Erin said when she heard about it.

Armed with a new phone, and a new number, Rachel had set about the task of rescinding invitations and returning the gifts that she had received in advance of the bridal shower.

She'd also written a check to each of her bridesmaids to compensate them for the dress and shoes that each had bought to participate in the wedding.

These expenditures had exhausted her savings, so she went back downtown and asked for her old job back at the Chick-fil-A on Market Street.

She found the work, and the structure it provided, helpful and healing. And the money she earned helped her feel like she was not a total mooch.

And, eventually, the day arrived, the second Saturday in July, the day that the church would be full, and she'd hear the organ swell, and her father would escort her down the aisle to start a new life.

July 2015

Rachel rolled over and punched the alarm clock before it rattled.

She lay there a few minutes, contemplating. She knew, now, that marrying Preston would have been a disaster, and that she was fortunate to discover this ahead of the wedding.

But Preston had been right about one thing: it *was* embarrassing.

A tear formed in her eye, and rolled down her cheek. Before she dissolved into a full-blown sob, she sat up in bed, sighed, and headed to the shower.

As it happened, she wasn't scheduled for work, and had the whole day to mope.

It was almost ten when hunger drove her out of her bedroom, and down the stairs to the kitchen. Her parents had finished their own breakfasts a couple of hours earlier, but there were Danish under the glass cake tray on the counter, and the coffee was still hot.

The newspaper was piled on the table in an unceremonious heap, and Rachel rifled through its pages aimlessly as she ate, skipping over the society pages with great care.

The door bell rang.

Rachel wondered who it could be, and waited for one of her parents to answer the door.

The door bell rang again.

Rachel sighed, heaved herself up, and walked through the living room to the front door.

“Hi.”

It was Erin, dressed in a two-piece swimsuit, wearing a white lacy coverup over the top.

“We're going to the beach,” she announced.

Rachel looked over Erin's shoulder to the curb, where the “Three Musketeers” were standing around a jeep, talking with several other college students from church. A large cooler was packed into the back of the jeep, and two other cars were parked behind it.

“I'm not up to it.” Rachel replied.

“It wasn't a question. We're going to the beach. Here, get dressed.”

She handed her a bag from the local surf shop.

“What's this?”

“New wardrobe. Get dressed. We leave in ten minutes.”

Five minutes later, Rachel checked herself in the mirror, and smiled. She left a note for her parents, packed a quick bag of sunscreen and other essentials, and emerged from her front door, to the delightful, mock applause of her friends.

(to be continued)

“Coffee Talk”

“So ... back to Princeton?”

Erin leaned into her strawberry smoothie while Rachel considered the question.

“One last time” Rachel sighed.

She took a big gulp of her cappuccino, and then, wiped her mouth.

“You know,” she continued, “I should be done by now. I would’ve graduated in May if I hadn’t been so wrapped up in ...”

She let the conclusion of her sentence trail off as she took another swig of her drink. A tear formed in her eye, which she wiped away as inconspicuously as she could.

“You aren’t ... you know ... thinking about going back to Preston, are you?”

“Who’s Preston?”

Erin grinned, relieved. She took another long draw from her smoothie.

“Could have been worse, I guess,” Rachel continued.

“Yeah, could have found out what a jerk he was after the wedding.”

“Could have slept with him, too.”

Erin was quiet, aware that she was being admitted to a sacred place. They’d been friends for years, and had talked about almost everything. The wall, erected over the six months of Rachel’s engagement, was crumbling.

“You probably thought we were.”

“No ... I know you better than that.”

“Really?” Rachel eyed her friend evenly.

“Well ... to be honest ... I kind of wondered. ...”

“I mean, we’re 22, and ...”

“So, you and Eric ... ”

“No ... not that I don’t want to sometimes, but ... no, we’re not.”

“Good . Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“I hope not. I’m tired of being a one-woman ‘cartel of the virtuous’.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a phrase our youth minister had for girls sticking together and supporting one another against temptation.”

“Not sure I was all that supportive. I feel like a let you down.”

“Let me down?!? Please I knew you had reservations about ... him. But you didn’t try to argue with me, which, I am ashamed to say, would only have made me dig my heels in deeper.

“And, then, when it all came crashing to the ground, you didn’t hold it against me, even though I’d ignored you, my very best friend, for months.”

August 2015

Erin took another sip of her smoothie, and then asked the next question tentatively.

“Why didn’t you? I mean, you were engaged. ...”

“You think ‘he who must not be named’ is the kind of man who’d stick around once he got what he wanted?”

“No, I guess not.”

“But that’s not the real reason. Actually, it goes back to a conversation I had with my mom, seven years ago.

“We were shopping for a prom dress, my first prom. I had a boyfriend who’d dropped a couple of hints about what he expected afterwards.

“So we’re having lunch, and I screw up my courage and ask my mom, for a “friend”, why it was that boys were always pressuring girls to do more.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked me if I wanted to go shopping for my prom dress at Wal-Mart?”

“Huh?”

“Yeah ... and, of course, I said, ‘no’. And she asked ‘why, nobody would know,’ and I said that I would know, and that I’d feel cheap.

“Then she started listing all the things my dad does for our family ... cutting the grass, taking care of the cars, saving his money when he’d rather spend it, not running around on her. ‘That’s the price he pays for being married to me,’ she said.

“I remember saying something like ‘that didn’t sound very romantic’, and she said, ‘well, it goes both ways’.

“And, then she said something I’ve never forgotten. She said, ‘Rachel, some guys, not all of them, but some of them, are bargain-hunters. They want the privileges of being married without the obligations. They don’t want to pay full price.’”

“Word ...”

“And, then she told me that every girl decides whether she’s a Tiffany’s girl or a Wal-Mart girl. Every girls sets her price.

“Even when I was out of my mind with ... him ..., I never forgot that.”

“You have a really cool mother.”

“Yeah, I do.”

She took another sip of her coffee.

“You know something ... I doubt she even remembers that day. I’ll bet you she has no idea what a difference that one, out-of-the-blue conversation made in my life.”

“She was there for you, when you needed her.”

“Yeah ... a lot of that going around these days.”

(to be continued)

“Work Day”

“Welcome.”

It was Saturday morning. The college group from church had assembled at 7:00 a.m. In the church parking lot, meeting a group of the church’s men, and traveling, caravan-style to an African-American neighborhood, where youth and adults from several churches had gathered.

The pastor’s booming voice echoed off the cinder block walls and tile floors. Fluorescent light fixtures, hanging from the exposed rafters on chains, hummed and flickered.

A wide bulletin board on the north end of the building advertised job openings, support groups, community events, and social services information.

Craig, Chris, and the rest of the group balanced warm Danish and hot coffee on their laps, as the pastor began to speak.

“Thank you so much for coming.”

The pastor, Hezekiah Brown, was in his forties, tall, grey hair beginning to show, an engaging smile that attracted people of all ages and races.

“This day has been a long time coming, and we thank God that it is finally here. Let me tell you the story of how all this got started, and why you are here.

“Sixty-one years ago, a small wooden sanctuary, home of Zion Baptist Church, stood on this property. It had been here since 1877. My grandmother and my mother grew up in that church.

“The church was active in the civil rights movement, and the pastor at the time, helped organize marches and boycotts that eventually led to the integration of the city schools.

“One night, well after midnight, the pastor received a phone call from a member, telling him that the church was on fire.

“Well, what are you calling me for?” the pastor said. ‘Call the fire department.’

“I’ve already done that,’ his member assured him.

“The pastor dressed in a hurry, and came here, where the building stood. And he waited for the fire department to arrive.

“The fire station was three blocks away, but it took forty-five minutes for the trucks to arrive, and, by that time, the fire had consumed the entire building, and all the members could do was watch it burn.

“No one ever figured out what caused the fire, and no one ever explained why it took so long for the fire department to respond, but ... well ... those were dark days.

“The church people cleared the land, but, eventually, they decided to rebuild on a larger lot, about four blocks from here.

September 2015

“This building was built in 1977. At the time, it was a real treasure, and we think it’s still a treasure. But, the church had a tough time in the last twenty years or so, and well ... lots of things have been left undone.

“I came to the church last spring, and Pastor James invited me to breakfast with the other pastors in the community. When I told them the story of this place, and of all the things that needed doing ... well ... today is the result.

“Thank you, again, for coming, for answering God’s call to minister today with your time and talents. Let us pray.”

After the prayer, Pastor James introduced Tony Armstrong, who in turn, gave some instructions for the day, after which the crowd broke up into small groups and got to work.

One crew worked outside, mowing the grass, removing weeds from the flower beds, planting new flowers.

Another scraped and painted the front entrance. Still another crew folded up all the chairs in the large meeting room, and stripped and waxed the floor.

Another group painted the hallways, and still another installed new backboards and rims in the gymnasium.

Craig, Chris, and Eric were shown into a tiny classroom.

“This room, and the one beside it, are too small to be much use,” Tony explained. “What we’d like to do is make one big room out of the two, so, what we need you guys to do is knock this wall out. Let’s try to salvage the studs, but the drywall and other debris needs to be taken to the dumpster.

“We’ve cut the power, but this light switch and this outlet need to be preserved intact. We’ve got an electrician coming this afternoon to disconnect them properly. There’s sledge hammers and trash bags and safety gear over in the corner. Be careful and have fun.”

The boys set to work with a vengeance, challenging each other as only young men of a certain age can do.

Two hours later, the wall was history. Reverend Brown stuck his head in the door.

“This looks great. Thank you for your work.”

“What are you going to do with the room, once it’s finished, of course.?”

“This is going to be our tutoring center. We’re going to help kids who are struggling in school. Eventually, we’ll have computers and desks and ... well, we think this room will change lives. You have no idea what a blessing you’ve been today.”

“Ah, all we did was knock down a wall, Pastor.”

“Isn’t that how all great things get started?”

“Homecoming”

The aluminum bleachers were just as cold and unforgiving as Rachel had remembered.

It was Friday night, Homecoming night, and the Centerville Crabs engaged in an epic struggle to defend the honor of their school from the evil intentions of the visiting WestSide Marlins.

Something like that, anyway.

Rachel sat in the stands, alone, waiting for Erin and Eric to return with hot chocolate and popcorn. The game was close, and, thus, attracting the attention of a large fraction of the fans in attendance, mostly the parents and other adults.

The high school students, and especially the middle school students, were milling about in the courtyard, talking, playing, throwing around plastic footballs, flirting. They believed firmly that the football game was the least interesting part of going to the football game.

After the game, everyone would file into the gym for the Dance, sort of an after-party. Unlike most high schools, where the Homecoming Dance was strictly a student affair, or else, had vanished into oblivion altogether, the Centerville Dance was still a true “homecoming”, a reunion of sorts, with alumni mingling with current students on the dance floor.

Rachel watched the spectacle with amusement, shaking her head at the thought that, six or seven years earlier, she’d been part of that whole adolescent mosh pit. It all seemed so silly, and yet, after what she’d been through with her aborted engagement, and subsequent breakup, she allowed to herself that she had no right to judge.

Preston had made one last, desperate attempt to repair the relationship, or rather, to repair the damage done to his ego by the demise of the relationship.

He’d called earlier that week ... how he got her new number was a mystery that Rachel had spent a couple of days investigating, with no result.

He invited her for drinks ... just drinks, he’s said. Just a chance to clear the air.

No word of apology passed his lips, nor did Rachel expect any. She listened to three sentences, and then interrupted.

“Preston, I’m not interested. We’re done. Have a good life.”

As Preston was beginning to reply, Rachel disconnected the call.

The voicemail she received five minutes later was vile, full of hostility and recrimination for how unfairly Rachel had treated him.

He was an infant, Rachel concluded. A full-grown, 24-year-old infant.

How she fell for his act was the thing that worried her.

Rachel’s friends clambered up the bleachers and plopped down beside her. Erin handed her a cup of hot chocolate, steam rising from its surface to match her breath condensing in the cold air like a personal cloud.

October 2015

“Thanks,” she said, upon taking a sip of the hot liquid.

“No problem,” Eric replied. “Anything interesting happen?”

“I think we scored again. There was a lot of cheering a few minutes ago.”

“The score’s still the same. Must have been a fumble or something.”

“Whatever.”

“So ...” Erin interrupted. “Are you going to the dance?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? We always go.”

“Not this year. Just not into it.”

“Don’t be silly. Come with us ... see your friends.”

Rachel sighed. She didn’t really want to go, and she knew that resisting Erin was like holding back the tide.

“Fine,” she muttered.

Two hours and three hot chocolates later, the game came to a merciful conclusion. The Crabs rallied in the fourth quarter to win, 21-17, and thus, the mood in the gym was joyous.

Rachel wandered around the perimeter of the dance floor, speaking to old acquaintances, friends, and teachers who remembered her from high school.

Erin and Eric were dancing, and it was clear to anyone who watched that they were very much in love.

It pained Rachel to watch, and yet, she chastised herself for being envious of her friend’s happiness.

She wandered over to the refreshment stand.

“Well, hi!”

Rachel looked up to find, behind the table, filling punch cups and refilling the trays, Craig.

“Oh, hi, Craig. Didn’t expect to find you here.”

“Our restaurant is catering the refreshments, and it’s my night to work, so, here I am. Having fun?”

“Not really. Marking time. Two more months at Princeton, and then, well, find a job, I guess.”

“I meant ... tonight. Are you having tonight?”

Rachel paused, and tears welled in her eyes.

Craig called over his shoulder, “Hey, Chris, I’m on break. Cover the table, will ya?”

Craig untied his apron and pitched it behind him.

Coming around the table, he bowed formally.

“My lady, may I have the honor of this dance.”

He extended his hand, and smiled.

Rachel began to object, to shake her head.

“Please . . .” Craig added.

It was all so ridiculous, that Rachel began to giggle. She took his hand, and Craig led her onto the dance floor.

(To be continued)

“Halloween Party”

The restaurant was loud, raucous, and risqué.

Rachel sat in a corner booth, nursing her diet coke, waiting for her meal.

She'd come, as she had in the past, with several of her sorority sisters and friends, to see the annual Halloween costume contest.

The establishment offered a \$1,000 first prize ... real money even in the rarefied air of Princeton students.

Nor was this the only such contest in town. Several other bars and restaurants offered similar prizes. It was rumored that an engineering student had earned enough money to pay for a semester's tuition by trolling the contests in a fully-functional Transformer's outfit that he'd spent six weeks building in college workshops.

Rachel doubted the story ... not enough time to get from place to place in a single night, and Princeton was an expensive school.

But the part about the costume itself might well be true ... she'd seen cleverly inventive and involved outfits all evening.

Her current favorite was a guy in an Iron Man outfit, with real miniature rockets in the hands and the feet, just like in the movie. He didn't fly, of course, but he did clear the dance floor when he demonstrated.

There were others ... one couple dressed as Bunsen and Beaker from Sesame Street was especially well done.

Rachel's friends were milling about the restaurant, talking eagerly with boys and girls alike, drinking a little more than wisdom would encourage, taking turns on the makeshift dance floor, pulsing under the strobe lights and ear-splitting music.

Rachel herself was content to sit and observe. She herself was not entered in the contest ... her outfit was too simple and conventional to be competitive ... two fake hairbuns on her ears, and a white drapy dress/gown ... Princess Leia from Star Wars.

She'd passed on the bikini that Carrie Fisher made famous in *Return of the Jedi*.

Not that there weren't girls in the crowd wearing a lot less than their mothers would have approved of. Rachel recalled shopping, where all the costumes she could find for women were naughty.

Pirate, fireman, police officer, princess, superhero ... all with that “edge”.

I must be getting old, Rachel thought to herself. *I didn't used to notice this stuff.*

A tall, would-be zombie plopped himself down across the table from her. He held a beer in one hand, and he reeked of alcohol.

A little glassy-eyed, he tried to act cool.

“Uh ... who are you supposed to be?”

November 2015

“Can't you tell?”

“Wait a second ... I'll figure it out.”

He looked her over.

“I know,” he slurred, “you're that girl from *Frozen*, aren't you? What's her name? Uh ... Elsie ... that's it. You're Elsie.”

“Elsie's a cow.”

“You sure ... 'cause you sure look like that girl in the cartoon. My little sister is all over that stuff.”

Rachel waited for him to leave, or pass out, which, at the moment seemed more likely, but he did neither. After a long silence, he spoke again.

“Are you having a good time?”

Rachel stared back at him blankly, willing him to leave.

“You don't look like you're having a good time. You wanta go someplace else.”

Rachel started to laugh, and then realized that, drunk as he was, this guy was serious.

“I'd have to die first., Wouldn't I?”

“Die?”

“You know ... zombie ... the whole 'undead' thing.”

“Oh ... yeah.”

“So ... since I kinda like being alive, I think I'll pass. But ... you go on.”

“You sure?”

Rachel nodded. “Pretty sure. Have a nice life, or whatever you zombies call it.”

He didn't get the joke, but he did, with effort, get himself up on his feet and amble off toward a girl in a lacy black dress intended to be Morticia from the Addams Family.

Rachel sat alone in the booth for a few minutes more. She stared at the finger, the bare ring finger on her right hand. She could still see the slight indentation that Preston's diamond ring had made on her finger in the months they had been engaged.

She wanted nothing to do with Preston now, of course. Marrying him would have been a disaster.

She ought to feel relieved, and lucky, she told herself. But, she didn't feel that way at all.

Being “disengaged” felt like taking a step backward.

In two months, she'd be graduating, and then, what?

A job? Graduate school? Move back home?

She took another sip of her diet coke, and stared into the sea of college students mingling in the restaurant.

“No,” she told herself, almost out loud. “No, I am not having a good time.”

(To be continued)

“Thanksgiving Dinner”

The doorbell rang precisely at five o'clock.

Pastor Matthew James rose to answer the door, muting the football game on the television in the den as he did so.

Standing outside, three young men in casual attire, but not as casual as everyday college t-shirt and jeans. They wore polo shirts and khakis, or dress shirts with open collar and a sports jacket. Each had a coat to protect him from the brisk north wind which had invaded Centerville over the past several days.

Chris and Craig were now regulars at the James household. They'd reached the point where it was more necessary to communicate when they would not be coming for dinner after church than when they would be.

Eric, the third member of the “three musketeers”, was at the Sampson home, eating with Erin's family.

Today, the third member of their party was new, a freshman. The pastor and his family had drawn Steve's name in the church's annual “adopt-a-student” ministry for the holidays.

Steve lived in Oklahoma, and the trip home was too time-consuming and expensive to contemplate. He'd landed a part-time job at the same restaurant that Chris and Craig worked at, and they invited him to the college group, and he just kept coming back.

Steve had worn a tie, but Chris and Craig had convinced him to take it off on the ride over from the dorm.

“It'll be fine, really,” they assured him.

He'd been a little taken aback when he found out that he'd be eating Thanksgiving dinner at the pastor's home.

“What do I bring?” he had asked Craig one night.

“Nothing,” Craig had replied. “It's part of the deal. The church doesn't want anyone feeling obligated to buy something they can't afford, and they don't want to set up a competition, either. So ... come, enjoy, be gracious, and say ‘thank you’ at the end.”

“You sure? Back home, people always bring stuff.”

“Well, back home, there's Mama's to do the cooking, too.”

“Yeah, well, right. I guess there's a Thanksgiving recipe for Ramen noodles, but I'd have to Google it.”

So, there they stood, the three of them, empty-handed, but full-hearted, waiting to be admitted to the feast.

Pastor James opened the door, and welcomed the trio warmly.

“Hey, guys, welcome. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“You, too, sir. Thank you for inviting us,” Steve replied.

“None of that ‘sir’ business, please. It makes me feel old. You must be Steve. I've been looking forward to meeting you.”

“Yes, sir ... uh, yes, Steve Clark. Glad to meet you.”

He extended his hand, which the Pastor shook enthusiastically.

December 2015

“Well, come on,” he spoke to all three, “get in out of the cold.”

Inside, the warm of the fire crackling in the fireplace, and the aroma of baking turkey and warm rolls almost knocked them over.

Pastor James took their coats, hung them up in the foyer closet, and led them into the den.

A few minutes of small talk over the silent television was interrupted by a knock at the hallway door.

“Permission to enter the man suite?” a feminine voice inquired.

“Like you've ever needed it,” the pastor replied.

A young, twenty-something girl stuck her head into the doorway. It was Rachel.

“Didn't want to interrupt the solving of all the world's problems, or even worse ... *the football game!*”

“Not to worry,” her father retorted. “We left a couple of problems for you to resolve before bedtime. Climate change and ... uh, oh yes ... peace in our time. Think you can handle that?”

“I'll work on it. Shouldn't be a problem if you men haven't messed things up too bad in the last fifteen minutes or so.”

Rachel's eyes sparkled, as they always did when she and her father engaged in this light-hearted banter.

“Mom says that dinner will be ready in about five minutes,” Rachel continued. “Oh, I'm being rude, my name's Rachel,” she said, directing her attention to Steve.

“Uh ... Hi ... uh ... nice to meet you.”

“This is where you tell me your name.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. Steve. Steve Clark.”

“Well, Steve Clark, welcome to our house and happy Thanksgiving. Hope you like turkey, cause it's all we got except peanut butter and jelly.”

She disappeared back around the corner before Steve respond, weakly, “Uh I like turkey. Just fine, thank you.”

“Good thing,” she called from hallway.

“And that,” Pastor James said with emphasis, “is my daughter, a matriarch in training if there ever was one.”

“I heard that!” Rachel shouted from the kitchen.

Five minutes later, dinner was, indeed, ready, and the men were called to the table.

“I didn't think she was coming home this weekend,” Chris whispered to Craig as they made their way to the dining room.

Craig simply shrugged his shoulders.

At the table, the six of them held hands and Pastor James voiced a prayer of thanks for all the blessings of the year, and for those less fortunate than themselves.

And, then, he took the carving knife, and slid it into the breast of the turkey, and the feast began in earnest.

(To be continued)

"New Year's Eve"

"Don't get too attached to that," Rachel told her father, Pastor Matthew James, as she collected her things from the family room.

Pastor James had just finished hanging Rachel's newly minted Princeton diploma over the mantle.

"I know ... when you leave, it goes with you."

"Got that right."

"Thanks for letting me hang it ... if only for now."

Rachel paused, standing by her father, admiring the frame document.

"Thanks for making it possible, Dad."

"I didn't do anything."

"Except write really big checks ..."

"Yeah ... well ... I'm hoping you'll take good care of me in my old age."

"Best nursing home Medicaid can provide."

"Thanks ... good to know I'm covered."

Rachel hugged her father, kissed him on the cheek, and headed up the steps, eyes glistening.

The phone rang, and somewhere in the house, Rachel's mother, Sarah, answered it.

"Rachel ..." she called.

"Up here."

"Phone call."

"Who from ..."

"It's Steve."

Rachel rolled her eyes, and let out a short, exasperated breath.

"Mom, can you just tell him I'm not home."

"Too late."

"Great ..." Rachel muttered under her breath.

Sarah handed the receiver to her daughter.

"Hi, Steve," she said unenthusiastically.

She listened for a few moments.

"I'm sorry ... sounds like a great party, but, I've already made other plans."

She listened some more.

"We'll see. Thanks for thinking about me ... Yeah, see you at church. ... Bye, now."

She handed the phone back to her mother.

"Plans?" her mother asked.

"Yes ... plans. I've planned to not go out with Steve."

"Oh ..."

"He's not a bad kid, best I can tell. It's just, well, he's a puppy. He just ... can't ... take ... a hint."

"You're expecting a man to be subtle?"

"Well, I mean, you and Dad seem to ..."

January 2016

Sarah cut her off with genuine laughter.

"Mom ..."

"Sorry ... you know, for a Princeton graduate, you ... oh, never mind, you'll figure it out for yourself."

"Figure what out?"

"Men ... now, what are you doing tonight, if you're not going to Steve's party."

"I thought I'd go over to the restaurant with the guys from church."

"Sounds like fun."

"I'll be home after the ball drops."

The restaurant was full and grew more and more boisterous as the night wore on.

Erin, Eric, Chris, and bunch of other college kids from the church were assembled around two tables pushed together in the back section of the restaurant.

Craig made an appearance every now and then, but the crowd kept him busy. He'd just returned from Christmas at his family's home, and needed the tips to replenish his checking account.

For the evening, the management had hired a local deejay, and cleared a very small space near the bar for dancing. And, of course, the ubiquitous TV screens displayed the dancing images of the college bowl games.

The event had the double significance of observing the advent of the new year and celebrating the Christmas Eve engagement of Erin and Eric.

Erin received excited hugs from her girlfriends, and showed off her ring to everyone who wanted to see it.

About fifteen minutes before midnight, Craig came by with a tray of champagne glasses.

"These are 'regular'," he announced, "and these," pointed to several with pink ribbons tied to their stems, "are unleaded."

Rachel selected one of those, as did a few, but not all, of her table-mates.

Craig left for another table, and Rachel's eyes followed him across the room.

At five minutes to midnight, most of the televisions shifted to the New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square. CNN's Anderson Cooper and Kathy Griffin appeared on the screen, but the banter between them was inaudible in the loud and crowded dining room.

The ball appeared on the screens, and a clock counted down the seconds to midnight. The crowd took up the count at ten seconds, and at zero, the crowd erupted.

Rachel sipped her drink, averting her eyes from Eric and Erin, among many others, kissing in the New Year.

(To be continued)

"Forsaking All Others"

"What about this one?" Rachel asked.

She held the dress up to her neck, and let it fall in front of her.

"Too ... I don't know ... too frilly, I guess."

Rachel and Erin were shopping for bridesmaids' dresses for Erin's upcoming wedding. The shop, *Formal Occasions*, was an elegant establishment in a small shopping center adjacent to the newly construction mall near the interstate.

The mall itself was called Centerville Crossing, but the locals, at least the long-time locals, just called it "that mall", with just a hint of exasperation in the voice.

The racks were stuffed with dresses of every color and style imaginable. Erin was busy going through the "spring" rack, finding nothing to suit her tastes.

"How about this?" Rachel held another candidate up for inspection.

Erin shook her head, and Rachel put the dress back on the rack.

"Okay, how about" Rachel whirled around with a dark purple and yellow polka-dotted and sequined monstrosity "this one!"

"You cannot be serious."

"What?" Rachel replied with mock surprise. "You don't like it?"

"I cannot imagine anyone ... anywhere ... liking that dress."

"Hence ... it is still here." Rachel hung the dress back on the rack. "Does it ever concern you that, when you're shopping, you're always looking at stuff that no one else has bought yet.?"

"Don't do the economics thing on me, right now. I don't have time for it. I gotta find a dress that matches the color scheme, and that four very different women will all look wonderful in."

"And which they will never wear again."

"That, too."

Rachel watched as Erin piled through the rack with ever-increasing urgency and and frustration.

"Why don't we get some lunch, and give this another shot this afternoon.?"

"I can't. I've got to meet with the cake lady at two, and the photographer at four, and I just don't know how I'm going to get it all done."

Erin turned away as her eyes began to water and the cheeks reddened.

"It'll be okay, Erin. It'll all work out."

Erin didn't respond, and after a moment, began piling through the dress rack again. Rachel did, too,

February 2016

though, she wondered if she was really helping, given that her tastes, and Erin's might differ, and a dress she would reject might be the one that Erin would find perfect.

"Tell me again ... why Easter? Why did you think you could plan a wedding in three months?"

"I've been planning for a lot longer than that."

"Still ... why so soon?"

Erin replied, quietly, without meeting Rachel's eyes.

"Eric and I need to get married."

Rachel let the words hang in the air before asking the next question.

"You're not ..." she whispered.

"Pregnant?" Erin looked up at her friend and smiled. "No ... don't be silly."

"So ... you and Eric ..."

"Still hanging in there. I figure, we've waited this long, may as well do things right all the way to the end. There's something really satisfying about doing things right, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Besides, I'm thinking it'll be more romantic if we ... you know, wait for the day."

"So ... "

"We need to get married. It's time."

"Oh ..."

Rachel pulled another dress from the rack.

"How about this?"

Erin stepped back and took it in.

"That's not half-bad."

"Gee, thanks." Rachel turn to put the dress back on the rack.

"No, really. It's ... pretty, and cute, and the colors are right. Would you mind trying it on for me.?"

Rachel emerged from the dressing room a few moments later, and modeled the dress in three dimensions. They looked it over in the mirror, and talked about how it might fit each of the bridesmaids.

Erin called a sales clerk over, and they discussed price, and fittings, and tailoring, and delivery dates.

"Well, what do you think?" Rachel asked.

"I think it's a winner."

"Is that your final answer? You want to look some more, just in case you find something better?"

"No ... one winner is all I need."

(To be continued)

"Bridesmaid"

Rachel licked another envelope, sealed it, applied the stamp, and tossed it in the basket.

"I never realized, when I was on the receiving end, how much work this is," she said.

"It does give you another perspective, doesn't it?" her mother, Sarah James, replied.

Rachel stared at the pile of invitations yet to be addressed.

"There's got to be a better way to do this ... Facebook or Twitter. Or email, even."

"A bridal shower invitation isn't something you tweet," her mother replied. "Where's the romance in that?"

"I know ... I know," Rachel sighed.

She picked up another invitation, and began addressing the envelope carefully.

"Any news on the job front?" her mother asked

"Nope. Nothing I'm interested in, at least."

"So ... what are you not interested in?"

"A job in Florida with a big development firm. There's a bank in Charlotte that wants to talk to me. And, there's that government job in D.C. with the Commerce Department."

"Those all sound interesting."

"Eh ..."

Rachel tossed another completed invitation in the pile.

"You know that you're welcome here as long as you want to stay ..."

"But ..."

"No 'but'. Stay as long as you like. I am concerned about you, though."

"'Though' is the same thing as 'but'."

"Yeah, it is, I guess."

"Actually, I've been thinking about graduate school."

"Graduate school? Where?"

"State. I was looking online at the Public Finance program. There's still time to enroll for the fall semester, and there's some graduate assistant positions available to help with the cost."

"I thought you were tired of school."

"Well, I was. But, I've had a few months off, and I think I could get a much better job with a master's degree."

"Is that all there is?"

Rachel kept her eyes on the envelope, trying to focus, as her vision blurred from the tears forming in her eyes.

"That's pretty much it."

Sarah let the moment pass in silence, waiting for her daughter to continue.

"You see, the thing is, if I move to Texas, or Florida, or any of those other places, I'd have to go by myself."

"But, you went to Princeton by yourself."

March 2016

"Yeah, I did. But there were lots of other kids just like me, doing the same thing. We were all thrown in together, and the school had stuff for us to do, and a routine, and a place to stay.

"But, when you're out there, you got nothing. Just a job to do during the day, and an empty apartment to come home to at night."

"But, you'd make friends. At work. At church. You wouldn't be alone, not for long."

"I thought we agreed on no 'buts'."

"Sorry."

Sarah and Rachel each addressed and sealed another envelope before Rachel continued the conversation.

"Looking back, one of the things that made "he who shall not be named" a little attractive was that, when I graduated, and moved on, I'd be doing it with someone."

"Not the best reason to get married."

"Agreed. At least, not a good enough reason to marry a jerk."

Rachel tossed another completed envelope in the pile.

"I love Erin ... She's the sister I never had ... I'm sorry, I didn't mean that ugly."

Sarah swallowed hard as she formed her reply.

"I know."

"It's just that, even though I love her, and I'm happy for her, I envy her. Does that make me a bad person?"

"No, I think that's a pretty normal reaction, given the circumstances. And, here you are, doing the right thing, in spite of how you feel."

The back door opened, and Pastor Matthew James entered the kitchen.

"Honey, I'm home ..." he announced.

"We're in here," Sarah called. "And the fifties are over, you know."

Rachel was laughing by the time that Matthew entered the dining room.

"Ah ... shower invitations. They're pretty."

"Yes, well, we've got about fifty left to do. Wanna help?" Rachel asked.

"Can't. Just here to grab some lunch and head to the hospital."

"Besides, your hand-writing is atrocious," Sarah teased.

"Didn't bother you before now," Matthew replied as he bent down and kissed his wife gently.

"Remember me? I'm still here." Rachel said, mocking her parents by shielding her eyes.

Sarah blushed slightly, and pushed Matthew away. He returned to the kitchen to warm a bowl of soup.

"See what I mean?" Rachel said.

"Yes, I do." her mother replied.

(To be continued)

“Wedding Day”

April 2016

The church had been full; they'd even opened the balcony.

Erin was gloriously beautiful in her wedding dress, and her step-father, George Sampson, was tall and dignified as he walked her down the aisle.

Pastor Matthew James broke out his formal robe for the occasion, the one he used for big weddings and joint services with the Presbyterians down the street.

Erin's sisters, Sarah and Rachel the Younger were among the bridesmaids, along with Cindy Collins, a close friend from high school. Rachel James bravely served as the maid of honor.

On Eric's side stood his father as the best man, and Craig and Chris, his fellow musketeers, along with an older brother from Georgia.

Erin's mother, Natalie, sat in the first pew, a puddle of joy. And, when the moment came for George to relinquish Erin's hand, and take his seat at Natalie's side, the single tear running down his cheek could be seen by anyone in the first eight rows.

It had been a lovely, solemn service, and now, in the Marriott ballroom downtown, a raucous party was well underway, in accordance with proper Southern tradition.

A deejay, having played the restrained “first dance” numbers, filled the room with progressively more energetic dance music, and the young people gradually took over the dance floor.

Craig watched from his table, at the edge of the dance floor, watching his more accomplished friends move and gyrate to the rhythm of the music.

Craig had danced with his friends for half an hour before begging off. He was finishing off a plate of shrimp and prime rib, when the bride, flushed from exertion on the dance floor, plopped down in the chair across from him.

“Where's Eric?” Craig asked her as she caught her breath.

“Bathroom ... then getting me something to drink.”

“I can do that,” Craig replied, starting to stand up. “What do you want?”

“Sit down ... Eric's got it.”

“Oh ... okay ... sure.”

“You having fun?”

“Sure ... though it's kinda strange to be on this side of the party.” He pointed to the buffet line, and the hotel staff replenishing the chafing dishes.

“I'm glad you're here, and I'm glad you were in our wedding. Thank you.”

“Well ... of course. I mean, I wouldn't have missed it.”

A silence ensued, before Erin asked the question she'd come to ask.

“When are you going to ask Rachel out?”

“Rachel?”

“Yeah, you know, Rachel, brown hair, about five-five, Kinda cute, though I'm not really the one to judge.”

“Oh, that Rachel ...” Craig played along.

“Yeah ... when are you going to ask her out?”

“Playing matchmaker?”

“Humor me ... no, seriously, why haven't you asked her out?”

“I don't know. Never thought she'd be interested, I guess.”

“Why'd you think that?”

“Well, I mean, she's the pastor's daughter, and Princeton, and, I'm just a kid from the sticks working my way through State.”

“And you think that means something?”

“Doesn't it?”

“Why do you think Rachel's decided to do her graduate school here, at State?”

“I don't know . Never really thought about it.”

“Well, think about it. She's a Princeton grad. She could get in anywhere.”

“Are you saying she came home for me? Why would she do that?”

“Oh, maybe leading the musketeers the night she broke up with what's-his-name had something to do with it.

“Or, maybe that stunt you pulled at the Homecoming Dance last fall had something to do with it, too.

“Or, maybe last June, word got back to her how involved you were organizing the beach party on what was supposed to be her wedding day.”

“Do you tell her?”

“Not a syllable. But she's not an idiot.”

“Why would she want to go out with me?”

“Can't answer that. I don't know why any girl wants to go out with any guy ... except, of course, for that barbarian I just married. But, you might consider the possibility.”

“What possibility?” Eric said, appearing with two drinks in hand.

“Oh ... thanks,” she said, reaching for her drink. She downed the punch in a series of long gulps.

“You didn't answer my question.”

“I think it's time to cut the cake.”

“Not gonna answer, are you?”

“Answer what, dear?”

“See what I've gotten myself into,” Eric grinned at Craig. “She's impossible.”

“Of course, I am,” Erin replied playfully. “And that's just the way you like it.”

Eric leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Erin felt the tingle all the way down her spine, and Craig, when he realized what was transpiring, averted his eyes as she blushed.

“Come on, let's cut that cake,” Eric said, pulling her gently up from her seat.

“At your command.”

“Oh, please ...” Eric replied, rolling his eyes.

Craig watched them walk across the room toward the cake table. Years later, he would remember that moment as the first time in his life he felt genuine envy.

(To be continued)

Craig stood in line at Chick-Fil-A, waiting patiently, watching the brown-haired cashier take care of the customers ahead of him.

She was intent, serious, yet pleasant, greeting each customer with the opening line of the company spiel, a line which, from someone else might come across as false or patronizing, but from her, accompanied by sparkling eyes and a ready smile, came across as genuine and welcoming, just as the company’s consultants had assured their client it would.

Of course, it wasn’t the words; it was the quality of the person speaking. She could have been talking in Sanskrit, or reciting definitions from a dictionary, and people would have had the same positive reaction.

After taking an order, and processing the payment, she proceeded to fill it with speed, but not with haste.

Craig reminded himself that he was here to order a chicken sandwich, a late supper to be sure, but nothing more. When he let the woman behind him, the one with the two small children, step ahead of him in line, he was only being kind. He wasn’t trying to end up at the station of the brown-haired cashier. Not really.

After a few minutes, Craig found himself at the front of the line, and stepped to the station attended by the brown-haired cashier he had been watching.

Recognition flashed across the girl’s face, and perhaps, the smile was slightly warmer than usual, for a moment, and then she caught herself, and found that professional demeanor that hid her true emotions.

“Welcome to Chick-Fil-A. How may I be of service?”

“I’m not sure ... let’s see ... ”

Rachel ... it was Rachel, of course ... waited him out. Like two Samauri posed for battle, knowing that he who moved first would lose the fight, they waited.

Craig had been thinking about this moment ever since his unsettling conversation with Erin at her wedding, three weeks earlier. He’d rehearsed several variations of what he wanted to say, sometimes smart and sincere, sometimes a little sassy and impertinent.

All versions, however, evaporated in the silence.

“I’ll have the classic chicken sandwich,” Craig said.

“Just the sandwich, or shall we make it a combo?” Rachel asked politely.

“A combo?”

“Fries and a drink, plus the sandwich. You can substitute a salad or fruit for the potatoes, if you’d like.”

“The fries will be fine.”

Rachel punched a few buttons, and announced, “That’s six seventy-seven.”

Craig slid his debit card down the side of the reader, and Rachel retrieved the receipt she appeared, as if by magic, from the printer in her cash register.

“Can I have a name for the order?” she asked innocently, betrayed only by the slightly impish smile that crossed her face for an instant only.

“Craig.”

Rachel punched a few more buttons, retrieved his drink, and stuck the receipt and a straw into a tall purple inverted pyramid.

“Just put this on the table where you’re sitting, and I’ll bring your food out to you in just a moment.”

She smiled, and handed him the purple pyramid.

“Uh ... thank you.”

Sure enough, about ninety seconds after Craig sat down, hardly time enough for him to check his phone, Rachel appeared with his tray of food.

“Personal service?” Craig asked.

“A Chick-Fil-A specialty.”

“Oh ... of course.”

Rachel lingered for an awkward moment.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

Rachel turned to leave.

“Does it ever bother you?”

“Does what bother me?”

“This ... I mean, ... you’re a Princeton graduate. You must be the most over-qualified fast-food clerk in the country.”

“Well, the teaching assistant gig at State doesn’t start till August, and a girl’s gotta eat. Besides, the work’s not so hard, and the people are pretty nice. So ... no, it’s not what I want to do with my life, but, for now, it’s okay.”

“That’s kind of how I feel about the restaurant.”

“I’ll bet.”

Rachel waited.

“You better eat before it gets cold.”

“Rach, what time do you get off?”

“Oh, so this is how you spend your Friday nights, picking up girls in fast-food joints.”

“Are you the kind of girl who wants to get picked up?”

Rachel stuck her tongue out at him.

“Did they teach you that in orientation?”

“No, elementary school,” she laughed. “Lots of impudent boys in elementary school.”

“But ... I wasn’t trying to be ... really.”

Rachel laughed again, tossed her head such that her curls bounced just a little, and turned to walk away.

“Nine-thirty,” she said as she walked away without looking back.

“What?” Craig asked aloud.

Rachel kept walking, but announced unmistakably, at a volume such that no customer could miss what she said.

“Nine-thirty ... Sharp.”

“Permission”

Craig felt the kick under the table, and startled. He looked up, across the table, at Rachel, who was nonchalantly eating her salad, eyes fixed on her father, mother, and Chris, all engaged in an animated conversation about the latest political news.

The whole Sunday lunch gang was present, encircling the big dining room table at the home of Pastor Matthew James. What had begun, over a year earlier, as a holiday mission project, providing a home-cooked meal over the Thanksgiving holidays for college students unable to travel home, had become a regular and anticipated gathering on a weekly basis.

Chris and Pastor James were rehashing Tuesday night’s primary results, and the implications for the fall. Sarah James, the pastor’s wife of more than thirty years, listened patiently, interjecting a much-needed dose of common sense every now and then.

Erin and Eric were seated, side-by-side, too pre-occupied with each other to care much about the conversation taking place at the far end of the table.

At first, Craig thought the bump under the table had been an accident. Rachel’s face betrayed no trace of intent.

And then, as he was forking another piece of roast beef, it happened again.

He glanced back across the table, more surreptitiously this time, but could not catch a hint of mischief in Rachel’s face. She ignored him completely.

Craig felt the blood rise in his cheeks, and pulled his feet back under his chair. If Rachel noticed this maneuver, she did not let on.

Craig finished his meal, thinking back to the two-hour conversation he and Rachel had had the previous Friday, over pancakes at IHOP.

“I think I’ve heard enough politics,” Sarah James announced definitively. “Who wants some strawberry shortcake?”

No one objected. Sarah and Rachel left for the kitchen to prepare the desserts, while Chris and Craig gathered up plates and glasses and silverware to take to the sink.

“This will take a minute,” Sarah called from the kitchen.

After desserts were served and consumed, Erin and Eric excused themselves and left for their apartment across town.

“Studying ...” Erin explained, to which Sarah simply replied, “Hmmp,” which, caused Rachel to stifle a laugh.

Craig and Chris finished clearing the table, and Chris helped load the dishwasher. There wasn’t room in the kitchen for four, so Craig wandered into the family room, where he found the pastor, sitting in his recliner, leafing through the newspaper.

“Pastor, I think I owe you an apology.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Rachel and I had a late dinner at IHOP Friday night.”

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“Really?” The pastor replied, suppressing a smile.

“Yes, I picked her up after work, and, well, time kind of got away from us. I’m sure it was after one before she got home.”

Then, the pastor really did laugh.

“I don’t understand, sir. What’s funny?”

“Craig, just how old do you think Rachel is?”

“Uh, 21?”

“Twenty-two actually, with a birthday coming up in September.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Might be wise, but I digress. In what universe do you think I still get a say in where my daughter goes, who she goes with, and when she returns?”

“Uh ...”

The pastor pointed to a framed Princeton diploma above the fireplace mantle.

“Craig, do you see that?”

“Yes, sir. It’s rather intimidating, to tell the truth.”

“Well, perhaps, though I imagine you’ll get over that. The point is, when I drove Rachel up to New Jersey, I pretty much reconciled myself to the fact that she was her own woman, and she would make her own decisions, and that my record, as her father, was ... how to say this ... ‘in the books’.”

“So, you don’t care?”

“Of course, I care. It’s just that my job, as it pertains to monitoring her movements and vetting her relationships is pretty much over. She may make some mistakes ... has made some, in fact, as the regrettable season of infatuation with Preston demonstrates.

“The point is, it’s her decision, because it’s her life.”

“So, you’re not mad at me?”

The pastor laughed again.

“She spent two hours talking to you, and hasn’t stopped smiling since. What’s to be mad about?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I think I’d like to date your daughter, if that’s okay with you.”

“Like I said ... not my call. You’ll have to ask her.”

“Ask her what?” Rachel, coming into the room, interrupted.

“Uh ...”

“This young man was just asking if I would allow him to date my daughter.”

“Oh, yeah, well, you’re right. This isn’t Afghanistan. He’ll have to ask her.”

Rachel’s face betrayed nothing as she turned on her heel and left the room.

(To be continued)

"One Flesh"

"So, what's it like?" Rachel asked as she forked another bite of her salad.

Rachel and her friend, Erin, were eating lunch at Panera on a rare day off for both of them.

"What's what like?" Erin replied, being purposefully dense.

"You know ... "

"Can't describe it. Not with words. You'll have to experience it for yourself."

Rachel blushed, and cut her off quickly.

"Over-sharing ... I wasn't asking about, well, that."

Erin smiled slyly, and ate another bite of her salad. Rachel watched her chew, impatiently.

"I meant, what what's it like ... being married."

Erin paused for a moment, reflecting on the first month of her marriage to Eric, her high school and college boyfriend.

"Different."

"Well, yeah, I could have guessed that."

Erin continued eating, and Rachel waited.

"Okay, I'll bite. 'Different' how?"

"That's what I was just thinking about. Actually, you're the first person to ask me about it, so this is the first time I've really thought it through."

"And ..."

"I think the biggest difference is that he's always there."

"Wasn't that the point of getting married?"

"Yeah, well, sure, but, I really didn't think about how that would affect me. I mean, I miss my privacy."

"Huh?"

"Yeah ... before we were married, I had this ... this space ... that was all mine. Eric and I spent a lot of time together, don't get me wrong. But, when I came home, I was home, and if I wanted to sit around on Saturday morning in my pajamas and read a book till noon, I didn't have to explain it, or justify it, to anyone. I didn't have someone looking at me, asking what we were doing next.

"But now, well, like I said, he's always there."

"But, that's a good thing, right?"

"It can be. And lots of the time, it is. But, sometimes, I just want some 'me' time. And, it's hard to come by."

"I wouldn't have expected that."

"I didn't either. I mean, the whole time we were engaged, there was just this overwhelming urge to be together, to spend time together. And now that we're married, and can spend all the time together we want, it seems like all I want him to do is leave me alone."

July 2016

"Are you happy?"

"Absolutely. I've never been happier. It's just been a month, and already, I can't imagine a life without him."

"Except for when you want him to go away."

Erin laughed.

"Yeah, except for that. Weird, isn't it?"

"Yeah, weird," Rachel nodded.

Erin ate another couple bites of her salad before continuing.

"It's not just physical presence, either. Take food, for instance. When you and I said we'd have lunch together, we both understood that we could eat whatever we wanted. You got the Fuji apple salad, and I got the Caesar. But, we both got what we wanted, as individuals.

"But, at home, it doesn't work like that. We fix one meal, and share it. If we're having pork chops, it doesn't matter if one of us doesn't want pork chops that evening. We're having pork chops.

"Even little things, like how do you like your eggs, or what seasonings you put in a pot of baked beans. You don't get to 'have it your way'."

"Surely, you'll work it out. You can compromise, can't you?"

"Of course. But, that's the point. I have to compromise. It's not just me any more. He's always there. His stuff is always there, ... even when he's got it picked up.

"Shoot, even when he's not around, I can still smell him," Erin giggled. "The very air in our house reminds me that I'm married, that I have to take him into account in everything I do."

"And, all this surprised you?"

"Yeah, it did. I mean, I think you're dad tried to prepare us. He talked to us about what that phrase in the Bible means ... 'one flesh' ... two different people living a single, shared life.

"I thought I understood it. But, I hadn't experienced it. There's a difference."

"You think Eric feels the same way?"

"Probably, but, who knows? He's a guy, and, as such, he's an utter mystery to me. What goes on inside that thick skull of his, I haven't a clue.

"It's really weird, Rach. I'm living with this man, who's both the love of my life, and an absolute stranger. Someone I know better than anyone else, and who surprises me every day. You're right, Rach. It's weird. Really weird."

"Would you do it again?... if you had the chance to go back in time, I mean."

"Are you crazy? Of course."

(To be continued)

"Bills to Pay"

Craig wandered through the college bookstore, looking for the textbooks he would be required to purchase for the upcoming semester.

"I can't believe it," he muttered to himself.

"Can't believe what?" his friend, Chris, replied.

"I can't believe how much this stuff costs."

"It's the same as last year."

"No, it's not. Look at this. 'Principles of Advanced Website Design'. A hundred forty-eight bucks."

"Cost of doing business, man. At least you can sell it back at the end of the semester."

"For a third of what I'm going to pay for it new. If it's not obsolete by then."

"Bummer."

Craig took the book off the shelf and placed it in his shopping cart. He turned the corner, into the English section.

"For crying out loud," he exclaimed.

"What now?"

"Look at all this stuff I need for my senior seminar. One, two, three, four books. What's that ... forty-three and eighteen is sixty-one, and thirty six is ... uh ... ninety-seven, and twenty-nine is ... let's see ... one hundred twenty-six. A hundred and twenty-six dollars for a course that meets once a week!"

"Three hours ... once a week."

"That's helpful."

Craig pulled each book off the shelf and dropped it carefully into the cart, fuming.

Twenty minutes later, after collecting a used Advanced Calculus book, and a brand-new sixth edition of History of the Middle East, he pushed the cart to the checkout stand, and paid his bill with his debit card. More than five hundred dollars.

Craig was quiet as he loaded the books into Chris' car.

"You okay, man?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just frustrating, that's all. I just spent about everything I've saved all summer long."

"Payday's on Friday."

"Yeah, and rent on Tuesday, and, I'm kind of fond of eating."

"Never seen you this uptight about money. Something going on."

"No ... nothing bad. Just ... well, I've been spending a lot of time with Rachel, and I kinda knew I was spending more than I could afford, but, I guess it didn't really hit me until today. Always had enough to pay for books with some left over. Not this time, though."

"What're you gonna do?"

August 2016

"I guess I'll ask for more hours at the restaurant, at least for a while. Maybe cut back on the social life some, too. Gonna eat a lot of beans, I guess."

"How's Rachel gonna feel about that?"

"The beans?" Craig asked innocently.

"No, the 'cutting back on the social life' thing."

"Don't know. I think she'll be okay with it, but I really don't want to have to explain why. It's embarrassing."

"If you don't explain, she's gonna think you're losing interest."

Craig was silent for a moment.

"You know, you could just ask her to move in."

"What?!?"

"You know, live together, share the bills."

"You're joking, right?"

"It's not as crazy as it sounds. You love her, and I think she loves you. Why not?"

"Well ... leaving aside the fact that she would never agree to that because it's contrary to everything she believes in ... "

"Fair point."

"There's the fact that I could never face her father, ever again."

"And, I'd be robbing her of the whole point of a wedding, sucking the excitement and anticipation out of what ought to be the best day of her life."

"You could still have a wedding."

"But it wouldn't be the same. I mean, after it was over, we'd just go home and do the same stuff we'd been doing before. There wouldn't be a difference. The wedding wouldn't make any difference."

"Never thought about it like that."

"And, besides, it's a really romantic conversation when you tell your girlfriend 'Honey, I really love you, and want you to move in with me, and oh, by the way, your half of the rent is due on the first Tuesday of every month.'"

"Yeah, but ..."

"And," Craig continued. "There's the fact that I've only been dating Rachel for about three months."

"So, you don't love her, after all."

"Yes, I do. Never put the word to it, until you forced me to, just now. I do love her. I can't take my eyes off of her when we're together, and can't get my mind off of her when we're apart, but that doesn't mean we're ready to marry each other."

"How long you gonna wait, man?"

"I don't know. Not forever. Maybe not even very long. I hope I don't screw it up ... wait too long, or ask too soon. I just want to do it when we're ready, and not just because I got bills to pay."

(To be continued)

“Scared to Death”

“I heard this was your last day,” Cheryl said as she wiped down the counter.

Rachel was refilling the tea machine, struggling with the over-sized bucket used to ferry tea from the tea-maker in the back to the dispenser behind the counter.

“Yeah, ‘fraid so,” Rachel replied.

“Gonna miss you.”

“Well, I’m going to miss you, too, Cheryl.”

“Bet you’re not going to miss the job, though.”

“You know, it’s odd,” Rachel replied. “When I first got the job, in high school, I thought it was wonderful. And, then, it became, well, a job.”

“And then,” Rachel continued, “after ‘He who must not be named’, it was a necessity, and I was really grateful for it. And now, even though I know that I’m moving on to the things I’ve studied for, it’s kind of sad, like a chapter closing in your life. So, yeah, weird as it sounds, I am going to miss it, kind of.”

“Come back and see us every now and then.”

“I will. And, you won’t be here forever, either. You’ll get your degree and move on to bigger, better things.”

“I hope so. Like you say, this is okay for a while, but, well, it’s not what I want to do my whole life.”

Rachel finished her shift at 7:00 p.m., and took twenty minutes saying good-bye to her co-workers and managers. When she emerged from the restaurant, Craig was waiting for her.

“Hi.”

“Sorry I’m later than I said. It took a while to say good-bye.”

“Not a problem. Gave me time to do some of my seminar reading. Want to get something to eat?”

“I really do, but I need to stop by OfficeMax and get a couple of things for school tomorrow.”

“Sure. Then ... IHOP?”

“That sounds wonderful.”

At OfficeMax, Rachel collected a variety of filing supplies, notebooks, and three-ring binders. While she shopped, Craig wandered through the electronics aisle, looking idly at gadgets and accessories that he could not afford.

“Are you excited?” Craig said, looking across the table at IHOP, after they’d been seated and placed their order.

“About what?”

“Tomorrow ... teaching your first class.”

“‘Terrified’ is the word I’d use.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“That’s what my mother says.”

“Well, she’s right. If anyone was ever cut out to be a teacher, it’s you.”

“Yeah, but some of these students are older than I am. Older than my parents, even. It’s intimidating.”

September 2016

“A bachelor’s in economics from Princeton, summa cum laude, is intimidating.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Yeah, well ...”

Rachel paused, realizing that something important was passing between them.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Craig didn’t answer immediately. The moment was interrupted by the waitress bringing their dinners.

“Who had the waffles?” she asked.

“Uh ... that’s mine,” Rachel answered.

“And the breakfast sampler must be yours.”

She set the plates down between them.

“Do you need anything else?”

“A refill on the waters, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly, I’ll be right back.”

They ate in silence, more or less, and when they finished, argued about the bill for a few moments before Craig seized it and paid.

They were almost to Rachel’s house before Craig found the courage to speak.

“Rach, I think you’re the greatest, and frankly, I don’t know what you see in me, but, well, I want you to know, that ...”

“That what? Are you breaking up with me?”

“Breaking up with you? Geez, no. Absolutely not. What I’m trying to say is ...

“I love you, too.”

“You do? Really?”

“Yes, I do.”

Craig guided the car to the curb in front of Rachel’s house. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, and then, she waited.

“What?”

“I need to hear you say it.”

“Oh, yeah ... Rach, I love you.”

She kissed him again. After what seemed a very long time, Craig disengaged.

“Rach, I need to stop now.”

“Yeah, I think I do, too.”

“You scare me, but I do love you.”

“Good. Stay scared, just a little.”

He watched her walk up the sidewalk to her house, and, once he saw her safely inside, he drove slowly away.

Inside, Rachel set the packages on the floor, and leaned back against the doorframe. She sighed heavily, and the tears began to flow.

(To be continued)

"First Day of School"

Her laptop case slung over one shoulder, and a leather satchel in her other hand, Rachel pushed the door to the lecture hall open with her hip.

She fumbled in the dark with the the dimmers until she found the ones which operated the house lights, and then surveyed the hall.

It was 7:30 a.m., thirty minutes before her first college teaching assignment was to begin. The hall sloped gently upward from the lectern, row upon row of teal theatre-style seating.

She'd been told that the room held over five hundred people, but that there were only three hundred and fifty registered for her class.

"Only?" she had asked, instinctively, and regretting it instantly.

"Yes, it's an 8 o'clock class. They're not very popular."

She set her bags down on the table beside the lectern, opened up her computer case, and began connecting her laptop to the hall's projection system. She'd been given instructions on how to turn the system on, and had intended to visit the hall and test it, but hadn't found the time.

She held her breath, and punched the button on the wall, and gave a sigh of relief when she heard the projector fan start, and saw the logo appear, and grow slowly brighter.

And, against all odds, her laptop and the projector made nice, and her PowerPoint presentation appeared on big screen behind her.

She tested the microphone, which also worked, to her amazement.

So far, so good, she thought.

The first students arrived about ten minutes later, winding their way down the aisles, taking seats several rows from the front. The hall filled rapidly in the next few minutes, though students were still entering when the digital clock on the back wall of the read "8:00".

"Good morning. My name is Rachel James, and this is Econ 101 ... Introduction to Economics. If that's not what you think you're supposed to be taking, you're in the wrong room."

Two students in the tenth row immediately stood up and headed for the exits, to muted laughter from those who remained.

"No worries," Rachel called out to them. "Give 'em credit for having the courage to get up in front of everyone and go find where they're supposed to be."

As they left, a group of young men in their mid-twenties entered through the entrance at the front, to Rachel's right.

"Gentlemen ... welcome ... let me explain something. I'm not your momma. If you're late, that's your business. But ... the entrance for tardy students is at the rear of the auditorium, and I'll thank you for being quiet as you enter, because we start on time. Capishe?"

October 2016

A couple of them nodded, and a couple smirked, but they took their seats. Rachel turned her attention back to the sea of students in front of her.

"One more thing ... like I said, I'm not your momma. I don't care how much sleep you get, and I can't really prevent you from sleeping while you're here. But, the house rule here is 'no pajamas'. I won't wear mine, and I don't want to see yours. Got it?"

The reaction was mixed, with some nodding and others shaking their heads at the idealistic newby who was their instructor.

"The syllabus, class assignments, and all the other information you'll need are posted on the class website. There's a message board there if you need to ask me a question, or want to form a study group. I will moderate the message board. No trolls, please."

Rachel punched a button on her remote, and the image on the screen changed.

"I keep office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as you can see. If you need help, don't hesitate to come and see me.

"But, send me a message and make an appointment. That way, you won't waste your time in the waiting room.

"Last thing, there's a lot of freshmen here, and some of you are taking your very first college class. So, let me tell you something really important.

"In high school ... you remember high school, right?"

A few of the students let out a quiet giggle.

In high school, there were a lot of people whose jobs depended on your passing. They cared about students succeeding, sometimes more than the students themselves did. That's because of the way high schools are evaluated based on their graduation and drop-out rates.

"This is college, and it's different. I want you to know that I do care about whether you succeed. I'm a teacher, and a teacher wants her students to learn.

"But, if you don't care, I don't, either."

The hall had grown silent, and Rachel had almost every eye and ear in the room trained upon her next sentence.

"So, here's the deal. If you want to learn about economics, I will knock myself out helping you. But, I don't care what the drop-out rate is, or what the failure rate is, so long as it's composed completely of people who just don't try, because they just don't care.

"This is Econ 101, and here's your first economics lesson. If you're here on your Daddy's money, and your biggest worry whether you're going to miss the biggest frat party of the weekend ... don't worry, Burger King is hiring."

Laughter drifted down the hall.

"Any questions?"

"Good ... and again, for those of you were weren't here when we started, my name is Rachel James, and this is Intro to Economics."

(To be continued)

"That Which is Rare"

November 2016

At 8:00 a.m., precisely, Rachel called the class to order.

She was halfway through her first sentence when two girls, each dressed in flannel pajama bottoms and a t-shirt, entered through the rear doors and sauntered down the aisle to take seats near the front.

"Excuse me, ladies."

The girls, oblivious, continued down the aisle.

"Ladies, I was speaking to you."

The girls, realizing that their instructor was speaking to them personally, stopped in mid-aisle. The hall grew quiet as the remaining students anticipated what was coming next.

"Were you here on Monday?" Rachel asked.

The girls nodded.

"Then you heard me say that pajamas were inappropriate attire for our classroom, did you not?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And yet, here you are."

"I ... uh ... we thought you were kidding."

Rachel sighed.

"Alas ... no. So, run along, back to the dorm. You can rejoin us when you're dressed for the day."

"Really? You're going to kick us out for this?"

"Yes, really. Now, run along."

The girls turned on their heels, and trudged back up the aisle and out the door.

"Now, then, as I was saying, the basic principle of all economics is the concept of the market, which is any place, physical or otherwise, where a buyer and a seller interact for the transfer of goods or service.

"The basic principle of any market is the known as the 'law of supply and ...'"

The voice interrupting her was male, and it came from one of the upper rows of the auditorium.

"I wonder what kind of pajamas you wear."

Rachel didn't miss a beat.

"That, sir, is one of a great many things you will never know."

Laughter, and a spattering of applause, filled the hall.

"Probably not very pretty under all those clothes."

Rachel located the voice, and caught the boy's eye.

"Charming. How is it you're still single?"

The room exploded in laughter and applause, which Rachel coolly ignored. She looked down at her computer screen, fighting to control her emotions.

"The basic principle of any market is the 'law of supply and demand'. When lots of people want a product, they bid the price up. When there are only a few buyers, the price falls.

"These changes in price affect the supply. When the price is high, more people try to manufacture and sell the product. As the price falls, some suppliers drop out, figuring that it's not worth the effort.

"When a product is optional, and there are readily available replacements, then demand is very sensitive to

changes in price. Think about soft drinks. Pepsi can't double its price, because they'd lose customers to Coke, and because, no one really needs a soft drink at all.

"But, when a product is necessary, and when there are no ready replacements, then demand doesn't fall off as fast when the price increases. Consider gasoline. When the price spikes, people complain, but they keep buying, because there's no real alternative, and people have to get around.

"The basic rule is this: what is common and easily obtained is cheap, and what is rare is precious."

Rachel concluded her lecture in about thirty minutes, and took questions for another ten minutes, before dismissing the class for the day.

As the room cleared, Rachel shut down her computer, and gathered her notes. When she looked up, she was startled to find a young woman standing in front of her lectern, waiting patiently. She was dressed in a bright t-shirt and a pair of jeans, and a small cross pendant dangled from a tiny gold chain at her throat.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, my name is Donna Mitchell. I just wanted to say that you did a good job."

"Thank you. First time ... wasn't sure how it would go."

"No ... well, I enjoyed the class, don't get me wrong, but, I was talking about how you handled that jerk."

"Oh, that. ... well, thanks, I guess."

"Mind if I walk with you."

"Not at all."

Rachel slung her laptop bag over her shoulder, and the two emerged into the bright morning sun.

"You were at Princeton, right?"

"Yes."

"Were the guys the same there as they are here?"

"In what way?"

"I've been here two weeks, and I've had four different guys try to get me to sleep with them."

"I'm really sorry that's happened to you. But, to answer your question, a lot of the guys at Princeton were just like that. One in particular, who shall not be named. But, not all of them, here or there."

"How'd you manage?"

"Not well, at times, I'm afraid. But, well, friends helped, and, oddly, economics did, too."

"Huh?"

"That which is rare is precious."

After a moment's reflection, a smile dawned on Donna's face..

"Yeah, I get that. I heard your Dad's a pastor.

"That's right"

"Is your Dad's church anywhere close by?"

"Central Baptist. Five blocks down Centerville. Worship at 10:30 a.m., College group meets at 6:00 p.m.

"Thanks. I'll be there."

(To be continued)

I'm Going to Share As Long As I Have"

The grocery cart strained under its own weight as George Sampson pushed it up the last aisle and toward the checkout lane.

The store was packed, as one would expect on the Tuesday afternoon prior to Thanksgiving. George had volunteered to do the family shopping while his wife, Natalie, worked on her master's thesis at the kitchen table.

The whole Sampson clan would be home for Thanksgiving dinner ... George's two daughters, their husbands, and his first grandchild, along with Natalie's three girls. Erin and her new husband, Eric, Sarah, home from Davidson, and Rachel, a high school senior known as "Rachel the Younger" to distinguish her from the pastor's daughter of the same name.

Needless to say, the shopping cart was piled high with the largest turkey available, and all the fixings of a royal feast.

George guided the cart into a checkout lane, and found himself fourth in line, immediately behind a young woman in her mid-twenties. Two red-headed twin boys tugged on her pants leg, and an infant girl rode precariously on her hip, drooling on a teething ring.

In her cart, the woman had a small turkey nestled in amongst several cans of vegetables, a dozen jars of baby food, some powdered baby formula, two big packages of diapers, a box of laundry detergent, some pre-packaged rolls, and a can of cranberry sauce.

"Put that back, right this minute," she scolded one of her boys, who was clutching a Hershey's bar he taken from the candy rack.

The boy sullenly returned the item to its place.

George caught her eye and smiled, and the woman returned a sheepish grin.

"She's cute."

"Thank you."

"How old is she?" he asked.

"Six months."

She settled her daughter into the seat of her shopping car and began to load her groceries onto the conveyor belt, and the cashier began to scan the items, one by one.

"Are you going somewhere for Thanksgiving?"

"I wish. Mom lives in Arkansas, may as well be Mars. Besides, I have to work on Friday. Saturday, too."

George placed the plastic divider behind her groceries on the belt, and began to place his own items on the conveyor.

"Where do you work?"

"Walmart. It'll be crazy. Black Friday, you know."

"Yeah ... nuts."

The cashier finished scanning the woman's groceries, and announced the total.

December 2016

"\$88.42" the cashier, a high school student from the looks of her, intoned.

The woman dug into her purse and pulled out a plastic card, and swiped it on the reader. Nothing happened. She tried it again, and again, and then, handed it to the cashier, who swiped it down the side of the register itself.

"Hmmpf," the cashier said to herself, and then began to punch the numbers in manually. The machine beeped, and then, the cashier handed the card back.

"I'm sorry, it's been declined."

"Are you sure?" the woman replied, her voice beginning to crack.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sure. I'm sorry."

As she put the card back in her purse, trying desperately to maintain her composure, the woman muttered, to herself as much as to the cashier, "I don't understand. Todd said he'd put the child support in the bank today."

She picked her infant up out of the cart, grabbed on of her sons by the hand, and shepherded the other in front of her.

"I'm sorry. Somebody'll have to put all this stuff back. I ... I just can't."

She turned to leave. George pulled a card from his wallet, and swiped it on the card reader.

"Miss ... I think you forgot your groceries."

The woman turned, and took in what George had done in an instant.

"You don't have to do that, mister."

"I know. I did it anyway. Have a great Thanksgiving."

Tears began to fall down her cheeks.

"Thanks ... I ... we will. If you'll give me your name and number, I'll pay you back when I get paid."

"I didn't do this to get paid back. One day, you'll be in better shape, and somebody else will need something, and you'll remember, won't you?"

"Yes, ... I will. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Go, enjoy Thanksgiving with your kids."

She dropped her infant back into the cart, and pushed it out the door.

The cashier started scanning his groceries. "That was really nice of you."

"It's nothing."

"Not to her. A lot of people would have just let her leave."

"Yes, well, ... I'm going to share as long as I have."

"That sounds like a Jesus thing."

"Yeah ... I guess it is."

(To be continued)

“New Year”

Rachel’s phone told her it was 9:32 p.m. Rachel was allegedly reading one of the several books she had received for Christmas.

She was sitting in the recliner in the family room, sipping on a diet coke, with the book propped in her lap and her phone leaning against the lamp on the end table beside her.

The book was open to pages 16 and 17, even though she had been in this exact position since finishing supper.

Craig was home, visiting his mother for Christmas, and would not return until New Year’s Eve. He’d wanted to stay in Centerville for Christmas; and, in fact, he and Rachel had argued about it.

“But, Rach,” he’d said, “I want to stay here with you.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you here, but, she’s your mother for cryin’ out loud. You need to go home and see her for Christmas.”

“But”

“No ‘but’s’. You know I’m right.”

They’d compromised. Craig stayed for the early candlelight communion service at church, and left from there for the five-hour trip home. He’d arrive late, but he’d be home for Christmas morning.

He’d be back on New Year’s Eve, and they’d celebrate Christmas then. She’d reminded him that she still had a week of vacation before she had to start her college teaching gig again.

He’d kissed her before getting in the car, but, it was pretty clear that he wasn’t happy about leaving.

It was their first real argument, and the sound of it, the taste of it, had lingered in his absence. Even given all the time they’d spent together over the past year, Rachel didn’t really know how he would react to being crossed, not getting his way.

They’d talked each night over the course of the week, but there’s only so much you can read in a person’s voice over the phone.

She hadn’t made it off page 17 when the phone did ring. It was Erin.

“Hey!”

“Hey, Rach. I hope it’s not too late.”

“No, just sitting here in the house by myself, trying to be interested in a book.”

“He hasn’t called yet?”

“Not tonight ... not yet. But, he’s called every night this week, so, I’m guessing he’ll call soon. Maybe his mom took him out to eat or something. Last night before coming back home.”

“I thought he was home.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. ... You miss him, don’t you?”

“Duh.”

January 2017

There was a few moments of silence, which gathered themselves up in discomfort, before Rachel continued.

“So, what’s up with you?”

“Well ...”

“Well what?”

“Well ... I think I may be pregnant.”

“What? When? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. Three tests. Three blue dots.”

“That’s pretty certain, I guess. Congratulations! I am so happy for you both.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen, you can’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t. At least, not until you say I can. ... Say, wait a minute, you did tell Eric, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Last night.”

“How’d he react?”

“Like a deer in the headlights.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry. It just surprised him. I mean, we’ve only been married eight months. We both figured we had a little more time for just us before we had a baby.”

“So ... this isn’t something you guys planned?”

“Not really. And, no, I didn’t stop taking my pills on purpose.”

“I never thought you did. So ... this ... just ... happened?”

“Yeah.”

“And, we’re happy about it, right?”

“Oh, yeah ... yeah ... happy. And a little scared. I mean, I’m only 23. I hardly know how to be a wife. What do I know about being a mother?”

“You’ll be a great mom, Erin.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I hope so. Anyway, I wanted you to know first.”

“Thank you, Erin. I’m honored. Let me know when the news is public.”

“I will. ... Listen, I gotta go.”

Rachel disconnected the call and propped her phone back up against the lamp.

She looked around her parents’ family room, taking in the pictures of her and her parents, from various seasons of their lives, which adorned the walls and sat upon the mantle over the fireplace.

I’m only 23, she thought.

Rachel tried to resume her reading, but found the text obscured by a large tear drop which had fallen into the middle of page 17.

(To be continued)

“Wondering”

“Again?!?”

Rachel tried to keep the exasperation out of her voice, and failed.

“Afraid so,” Craig replied.

He could hear the disappointment in her voice, or rather, in the silence, even over the phone.

“I’m sorry. The restaurant is short-handed. A couple of people quit after the holidays, and Sunday is the Super Bowl, and you know how that is.”

“Still,” Rachel protested, “that’s what, nine, ten nights in a row. It’s not fair.”

“It can’t be helped. It’s my job, and well, I need it.”

Rachel sighed.

“All right ... I get it.”

“I’ll see you at church.”

“Are you coming for dinner?”

“Can’t. Super Bowl, remember? The place will be rocking all afternoon. I have to come in right after church, and won’t get off until midnight.”

Rachel sighed again, and the silence lasted a little longer.

“Okay ... see you Sunday.”

“I love you, Rach.”

“You, too. Bye.”

Craig disconnected the phone. He was skating close to the edge, and he knew it, but there was no alternative. He had a couple of hours before he had to get dressed and leave for the restaurant, and time was precious. He turned the phone off completely, and immersed himself in the history text before him.

On Sunday, Craig emerged from the church office suite, and entered the sanctuary just as Rachel was arriving. He kissed her gently on the cheek, and during the service, he draped his arm across her shoulder.

Rachel, for her part, was conflicted: glad to see him, to feel him close. Even his smell was comforting.

But, she was also angry. As hard as she tried to understand Craig’s situation, she felt neglected, and she didn’t like it.

I have no claim on him, she told herself.

After worship, Craig kissed her again, and left for the restaurant.

“I’ll call,” he’d said.

Rachel just nodded.

She was moody all through dinner, and the rest of the afternoon as well.

Erin and Eric were there, and they announced their pregnancy to the family and friends, and there were congratulations all around, but Rachel found it hard to be festive.

February 2017

Erin cornered her as they were getting ready to leave.

“Listen, a bunch of us are planning to go over to the restaurant this evening for the game. Wanna come?”

“Nah ... I’m good. I’m not into football, and, I’ve got stuff to do for class tomorrow.”

“Oh, please ... if I know you, you’ve got your lectures written all the way to spring break.”

“No, really, I’m not in the mood. I don’t want to be a third wheel.”

Her lip trembled just a bit as she said it.

“Rach ... you okay?”

“Yes ... no ... not really.”

Erin eyed her carefully.

“Everything okay with you and Craig?”

“How would I know? We haven’t had fifteen minutes to ourselves in the last three weeks. Every time I’m free, he’s working. I know he’s paying his own way, and he’s got rent and tuition and all that, but still ... if ...

“If what?”

“If he loves me, if he really did, and wasn’t just saying so, wouldn’t he find a way to spend some time with me?”

“Maybe it’s just a temporary thing.”

“That’s what he keeps saying.”

“And you don’t believe him?”

“Sure ... I guess. It’s just that ... it feels like he’s pulling away, and that work is just the excuse. What if he doesn’t love me, Erin?”

Erin waited.

“Erin, you don’t think he’s backing off because we haven’t done it yet, do you?”

“Well, he’s a guy, and I’m guessing he’s got the same hormones as all guys do, but ... he doesn’t impress me as that kind of guy. He’s not Preston, Rach.”

“Then, why?”

“Maybe he’s telling you the truth.”

“Maybe so. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Tired of what?”

“Tired of waiting, I guess. I see you and Eric, and I envy you. I want what you have. I can’t even get myself excited about your baby. Isn’t that awful?”

“Rach, let me ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to marry Craig, or do you just want to get married?”

Rachel thought for a moment before replying.

“You ought to be a counselor. You ask really great questions.”

(To be continued)

"The Question"

March 2017

"It's beautiful."

Craig shut the box, and stuck it back in his pocket.

"So, you can get her there?"

"Yeah, I think so. What time?"

"Seven, if that works for you."

"I'll call you if it's not going to work, but, if you don't here from me, it's on."

"Thanks, Erin. I appreciate it."

Erin and Craig returned to the dining room, where Rachel was helping her mother serve dessert while her father and the rest of the guys were clearing the table.

Rachel had been quiet most of the the afternoon. She'd attended church, and sat with Craig during the service, but, had said little.

At dinner, she'd answered questions when addressed directly, but, for the most part, she stayed out of the raucous political conversation that dominated the meal.

"You okay?" Her mother asked her as they cut the cake and laid the slices on the dessert plates.

"Sure ... why?"

"It's just ... you've been kind of quiet."

"I'm fine, Mom. Thanks for asking though."

She picked up two plates and carried them back into the dining room.

After dessert, the men cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher, as was the custom.

"Sir, just wanted you to know, tonight's the night. With your permission, of course."

"We've been over that, Craig, a month ago, in my office. I appreciate the gesture, and I approve, but I don't really have a vote."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just make it memorable."

"I'll try, sir."

Craig found Rachel in the family room after they'd finished with the dishes.

"Rach, I gotta go. I'll be in touch."

She hardly reacted when he kissed her on the cheek as he left.

At seven o'clock that evening, Rachel and Erin were sitting in a booth at the back of the restaurant. Rachel was fuming. She didn't really want to be there, but Erin had insisted.

"I'll be right back," Erin said, patting her belly. "Buster here is doing pushups on my bladder."

Rachel smiled, and watched her get up and leave, noticing the slight change that being five months pregnant had made in the way she walked.

She was checking email on her phone when Craig slipped into the booth, on the bench opposite her.

"Hi."

He was dressed in a Navy blue blazer, with a dark tie tightly knotted at his collar.

"Well, hi. They give you a different job?"

"I'm not working tonight."

"You're not? Why didn't you ... you're not here with someone else, are you?"

"No ... why would you think that?"

"Uh, well ... we haven't been seeing each other all that much lately ... you know, never mind. Forget I said that."

"I told you I'd been working a lot."

"Yes, I know. I don't want to talk about it."

"I know it's been hard on you, and I'm sorry. But I want you to know, I've had a very good reason."

"So you've said. Rent, groceries, tuition ..."

"Not exactly ... do you remember this place?"

"The restaurant? Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"No, I mean, this place. This very table."

The memory came roaring back to Rachel, the night she'd ended her engagement to Preston, the night Craig, Chris, and Eric had appeared out of nowhere, like the Three Musketeers, to defend her honor and insist that he leave. She nodded, ashen-faced.

"Rach, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Would you marry me?"

"What?"

"Would you marry me?"

"You ignore me for three months, and then, just like that, you ask me to marry you?"

"I told you I had a really good reason."

He fished the black velvet box from his pocket, slipped off his bench, down on one knee, and held the box out to her in the palm of his hand.

"Rachel James, I love you. Marry me, please."

Rachel stared at the box for a long moment.

"You really love me?"

"I really do."

She looked from the box to Craig, and back to the box. Slowly, she reached out, and flipped the lid open. She saw the diamond atop its circle of gold, just before her eyes misted over completely.

"When?" she whispered.

"Soon."

"Yes."

He slipped the ring on her finger, and then, took her face in his hands and kissed her gently, for what seemed like a very long time.

Somewhere across the restaurant, Erin squealed in delight, but Rachel didn't hear it.

(To be continued)

“Wedding Date”

“You want to get married when?” Rachel practically shouted into the phone.

She was sitting at the dining room table, with her calendar and a notepad arrayed in front of her.

“The Saturday after Mother’s Day,” Craig said. “Graduation is the weekend before, so that’s out, and before that, we’re still in school and I’m prepping for exams.”

“I really wasn’t arguing for an *earlier* date.”

“I said ‘soon’.”

“Yeah, but, when you said ‘soon’, I didn’t think you meant ... well ... that soon.”

“I don’t understand ... what’s the problem?”

“What’s the problem? It’s seven weeks away, that’s the problem.”

“Okay ...”

“Seven weeks, Craig, is not nearly enough time to plan a wedding.”

“Why not?”

“Craig, do you have any idea how much work goes into to planning a wedding?”

“Reserve the church, get a preacher, show up.”

Rachel rolled her eyes.

“I’ll assume you were trying to be funny.”

“Yeah, a little. But, seriously, what’s the problem?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

Rachel took a deep breath.

“First, we’ve got to decide on who’s going to be in the wedding party, and ask them. Then, who’s going to be invited ... there’s invitations to print and mail, dresses to buy. You and the guys need to rent tuxes, and that’s prom season. We need to arrange for a caterer and a deejay for the reception. We’ve got to ask the musicians at church if they’re free, and someone to do the service itself.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“You think!”

“I still think we can get it done.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“So, when did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking something more like the end of the summer.”

“I don’t want to wait that long. When I said ‘soon’, I really meant ‘soon’.”

Rachel sighed.

“It can’t be done that fast, Craig. Believe me when I say this, I wish it could be, but it just can’t.”

Craig was silent at the other end of the phone.

April 2017

“Listen, Craig, I’ll think about it. Let me talk with my folks, and I’ll call you back.”

“Fine. I love you.”

“I know. Talk to you soon.”

Rachel ended the call, and went straight to the family room, where her parents were sitting on the sofa, watching a movie.

“Can I talk with you guys for a second?”

“Sure,” her father said, pausing the movie with the remote.

“Craig wants the wedding to be on the Saturday after Mother’s Day.”

“Okay,” her mother said.

“Okay? I just spent the last ten minutes explaining why that was impossible, that there was simply too much to do, and that seven weeks wasn’t nearly enough time to plan a wedding.”

“And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and’? I’m right, aren’t I? I mean, it’s just impossible.”

“If you say so.”

“Dad?! You’re no help.”

Pastor James shrugged. “Your mother’s been saying that for several years now.”

Mom, you agree with me, don’t you?”

“Yes and no. It’s a tight schedule, yes. But, if that’s when you and Craig want to get married, we’ll move heaven and earth to make it happen, and it will be lovely.”

Rachel sighed.

“I don’t understand. Why is he in such a rush?”

Sarah said nothing. She simply turned to her husband and kissed him.

Rachel blushed. “Oh. Really? That?”

Rachel waited for an answer, which did not come.

“Okay, now you’re being gross.”

Sarah and her husband ignored her as she left the room, grousing.

“When did my parents become teenagers?” She asked loud enough for her parents to hear.

Matthew and Sarah were still laughing when Rachel returned to the kitchen, and punched Craig’s phone number into her phone.

“Hey,” he answered.

“First Saturday in June.”

“Final offer?”

“Final offer.”

“Done.”

(To be continued)

Craig carefully backed the U-Haul truck into the parking space nearest the apartment complex staircase.

Apartment 307 was at the top of the staircase, three stories up.

Rachel and Craig had invested the entire week after finals looking for an apartment. As in all such decisions, the tradeoff was between location, space, and amenities on the one hand, and checkbook on the other.

"I don't think I can afford this," Craig had said when they first toured the complex.

"You can't," Rachel had replied. "But, we can."

"It ... makes me feel weird ... depending on your money."

"There is no 'my' money," Rachel had said. "There is 'our' money."

"But ..."

"No 'buts'. You think 'one flesh' doesn't include checkbooks?"

"Well, no, but, still ..."

"Still ... what?"

"I watched my mom struggle financially, and I swore that wouldn't happen in my family. That, you know, I'd provide."

"Oh, please. That happened because your dad died,. It's not like he ran off. But, if you want to take out a million dollar life insurance policy, I'm okay with that."

"I might."

To drive home her point, Rachel had insisted that they visit the bank on Jefferson on the way home, where she opened a joint checking account, deposited every dime she owned in it, and closed her personal account.

Craig did the same, except for the two checks he had written that were yet to clear, and the one check he still needed to write.

"You see ... no more 'yours' and 'mine' ... 'ours'. Rachel and Craig, Incorporated."

The first check they had written was the security deposit and first month's rent on the apartment.

Craig climbed out of the truck, went around to the back, and slid the ramp out of its housing and onto the ground. Then, he walked up the ramp, unlocked the lock, and lifted the rear door up, revealing all the worldly possessions of the soon-to-be bride and groom.

Well, almost all. Both Craig and Rachel had left enough clothes and personal items at their respective homes to function for the next three weeks.

Rachel, of course, continued living with her parents, and Craig had negotiated with the campus housing office to stay an extra three weeks in his dorm room.

It hadn't looked like a lot, until the prospect of carrying it up three flights of stairs made itself plain.

Craig shouldered the first load, a couple of boxes of small appliances, given by members at Central Baptist, at

the big wedding shower the college group had thrown in their honor the previous weekend.

Just then, a horn honked. Craig looked around the rear of the truck to see a Jeep Cherokee parking, and several college students piling out of it.

"Heard you needed some help," Erin called out.

"You don't have to ... really."

"I won't ... doctor's orders. But I did recruit your best man and a couple of other apes. Isn't that what a best man is for ... heavy lifting?"

Craig looked back into the truck, at the bedroom dresser, the sofa, and the washer and dryer, before replying.

"Well, thanks. I guess I really could use the help."

"Where's Rach?"

"Upstairs. She beat me here."

Erin, just showing her fifth month of pregnancy, smiled.

"Okay, guys," she barked, "get to work."

In the space of about an hour, the truck was emptied, and the apartment was stacked with boxes and furniture.

Over the course of the next two hours, the guys helped Craig arrange the sofa and chairs, set up the television, hook up the modem and router, and put the bed together.

The girls helped arrange the kitchen and bathroom, and put together a bookcase, while Rachel bounced back and forth, answering questions about where things were supposed to go.

The pizza arrived about 5:00 p.m., just as the group was wrapping up.

Two hours later, the apartment was empty, save for Rachel and Craig, who took one last tour of the place, making a list of things that still needed to be done.

Rachel got to the bedroom door first, and then, Craig was behind her. The bed was made, and the pillows, all eight of them, were tastefully arranged on top of the quilted comforter.

"It's beautiful, don't you think?" she said.

Craig nodded.

"You know ... " she began.

"I should go," Craig said, cutting her off.

"It's okay."

"I know, but ... I really need to go. The truck ... it has to be back by nine."

"Yeah, probably right."

"You know I am."

"Yes, I do."

He kissed her on the cheek, grabbed his jacket, and left.

Rachel watched him go from the living room window.

Three more weeks, she thought, as she saw the truck pull away.

Three more weeks.

(To be continued)

Craig

Craig Stevenson sat on the first pew, in the empty sanctuary of Central Baptist Church, on the first Thursday of June, two days before his wedding.

He fingered an envelope in his hands, and tried to pray.

“Am I disturbing you?”

It was the custodian, Paul Meyers, pushing his service cart into the sanctuary to clean up from the Wednesday night activities of the night before.

“No, no, I’m just waiting. Need to see Pastor James.”

“Not sure when he’ll be in today. He’s kind of busy. His daughter is getting married in two days, you know.”

Craig grinned.

“Yeah, I know.”

“What’s that ... that envelope?”

“Honorarium, thank you note. Didn’t want to forget. And the girls will be here in an hour or so to start decorating.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m doing the sanctuary first.”

Craig sighed, hung his head.

“You okay?” Paul asked.

“Yes ... I mean I should be.”

“Scared, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, a little bit. Don’t get me wrong, I’m excited, thrilled, even. But, yeah, a little scared, too.”

“Well, you oughta be, son. ‘Tis a big thing you’re doing.”

“Yeah, it’s gotten kinda real the last week or so.”

“You love her, right?”

“So much it hurts.”

“You’ll be fine. She’s a great girl. I’ve watched her grow up. Like the Irish say, marry a girl like Rachel and you won’t get a moment’s peace ... and you won’t be bored a day of your life!”

“But, what if I let her down? What if ... I’m not really ready?”

“You aren’t. Nobody is. You figure it out as you go along. You’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“I wish Dad were here.”

Paul looked away for a moment, as if peering into the distance.

“Yeah, me too, son. He was a good man. Died way too soon. He would have loved to see this weekend.”

Paul paused for a moment.

“I see a lot of him in you, though.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Know this, Craig. He’d be proud of the man you’ve become.”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. Trust me.”

Rachel

Rachel and Erin were sitting at the dining room table, putting the finishing touches on the bows that would adorn the ends of each pew.

“I just can’t get this to lay flat,” Rachel spat, exasperated.

“Sure you can,” Erin. “Like this.”

She reached over the table, and adjusted the ribbon.

Rachel watched as the bow fell into shape.

“There”, Erin said. “Just like ...”

She stopped because Rachel was crying.

“It’s just a bow,” Erin said as she hugged her friend. “I can take care of it.”

“It’s not that.”

Rachel reached for a tissue, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Erin let her friend compose herself.

“I must look awful.”

“No, not really.”

“I’m scared, Erin.”

“Of course.”

“What do you mean, ‘of course’? Were you?”

“Terrified.”

“It didn’t show.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve always been told I’m a good actress.”

Rachel laughed, remembering how, a decade earlier, she’d invited the new girl at middle school to come be part of the youth Christmas play.

“Yeah, you were,” she said, sniffing.

“You gonna tell me, or do I have to beat it out of you?”

Rachel smiled.

“I’m afraid he ... he doesn’t find me attractive. That maybe he’s having second thoughts, that he doesn’t really want to do this, and just doesn’t know how to say so.”

“What gives you that idea?”

“Well, we’ve had the apartment three whole weeks. Any other guy would have wanted to ... you know. But, not Craig. I don’t think we’ve been alone for a month.”

“Do you know how lucky you are?”

“Huh.”

“My extensive experience has taught me there are two types of human males. One type proves its manhood by conquest. That’s most of them. They’re mostly overgrown boys, like ‘he who shall not be named.’”

“But you have found one of the other type, the type that proves its manhood by practicing restraint, by demonstrating self-control. These guys are rare, but they are men, not boys. You are one lucky girl.”

“So, when the time comes, you think ...”

Erin patted her tummy, where her daughter, five months along, was growing.

“I know so. Trust me.”

“Wedding Day”

The last of the bridesmaids disappeared around the corner, into the church, to the strains of *Canon in D*.

Pastor Matthew James patted his daughter’s hand, cradled in the crook of his right elbow. Rachel glanced toward her father, a tight smile on her face.

“You know,” he whispered to her, “we can still make a run for it.”

Rachel’s smile softened, and Pastor James felt his daughter relax just a bit.

“A little late for that, don’t you think?”

“Never too late. Besides, I’m not sure I’m ready for this ‘giving away’ stuff. Might be doing us both a favor.”

Rachel giggled.

“Mom would never let you back in the house.”

“Well, there is that.”

“I’m good. Really. Just a little nervous. All these people.

“Ah, just a few friends from the bowling team, and a couple of guys from work.”

“Dad ...”

“What? You think I don’t have friends?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Not sure what that means, and your mother took my phone, so I can’t look it up.”

Rachel rolled her eyes.

The music stopped, and then, the familiar opening flourish of the *wedding March* began. Pastor James guided his daughter behind the closed doors of the sanctuary.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I know ... now, let’s go get you married.”

The doors swung open, revealing a full sanctuary, everyone standing, looking back toward the vestibule, where Matthew and Rachel stood, framed in the doorway. The love and joy of the congregation hit them like a wave.

The rest of the service was a blur. Matthew walked Rachel down the aisle, and at the appropriate moment, placed her hand in Craig’s and took his seat beside Sarah.

He watched the “I do’s”, and the vows, and the exchange of rings, and the first kiss. He tried not to cry, and failed.

When it was over, he stepped out into the aisle, offered Sarah his arm, and walked her out of the sanctuary.

Pictures took longer than the ceremony, as they always seem to do. The reception, in the ballroom at the Marriott downtown, lasted even longer.

It was ten o’clock before Rachel and Craig left the party. The car was festooned with balloons and streamers and shaving cream, with a couple of bawdy signs, courtesy of their college friends.

“So, where exactly are you taking me?”

“Someplace special.”

“Hmmp.”

They drove for fifteen minutes or so, out of the business and commercial district, and into a familiar residential neighborhood, to the third-floor apartment they had furnished, with the help of friends, a month earlier.

July 2017

Craig parked the car, climbed out, and went round to the other side to open the door. Rachel stepped out, and in one quick movement, Craig picked her up.

“Really?” she said. “We live on the third floor, you know.”

“I’ve been working out. Just hold the keys.”

He carried her up the forty-four stairs, and while he stood, puffing just a little, at the threshold, she leaned over and unlocked the doors.

He carried her inside, through the living room to their bedroom, and set her down, gently, on the bed. The unity candle, from their wedding earlier that day, was already burning on the dresser.

“Who did that?”

“A minion. You didn’t know I had minions.”

“I need my bags, you know.”

“Yes, your highness.”

“I could get used to this.”

“I hope so.”

Craig trotted down the stairs to retrieve her luggage. When he returned, he found Rachel in the kitchen, crying.

“What’s the matter?”

She handed him the card she’d just opened, from the pile of mail on the kitchen counter. It was from Preston.

“How’d he get the address?”

“I don’t know. Facebook?”

Craig read the card, a note filled with vile language and awful, false insinuations.

“What a piece of work!” he said softly when he’d finished reading.

“I’m sorry, Craig. I should have waited for you in the bedroom. I just wanted a glass of water, and I saw the mail on the counter, and I didn’t recognize the handwriting, and I just opened it ... I’ve ruined ...”

Craig put his finger to her lips. He took her hand, guided her to the bedroom, and then, taking the burning candle, he walked with Rachel back through the living room and out onto the balcony.

He held the candle, and Rachel, understanding, lit the corner of the card and watched, solemnly, as the flames licked up the sides. She dropped it on the concrete floor just before the flames reached her fingers.

Craig and Rachel watched the card turn to ash, and then, they stamped out the remaining embers.

“Done?” Craig asked.

Rachel nodded silently.

“I love you,” Rachel whispered.

“And I you”, Craig responded.

They went back inside, to the bedroom, and placed the candle back on the dresser, turning off the lights as they went.

Rachel grabbed her bag, and disappeared into the bathroom.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

“I sure hope so.”

To be continued. To read previous episodes, visit www.moyockbaptist.org.

