

CHRISTOPHER G. GREEN



*Love You Still*

A l w a y s



*Love You  
Still*

*...Always*

Christopher G. Green

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# *Table of Contents*

<i>Dedication</i>	5
<i>Prologue</i>	7
<i>Part One: Love</i>	9
<i>Part Two: You</i>	41
<i>Part Three: Still</i>	63
<i>Epilogue</i>	85
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	87
<i>About the Author</i>	89



# *Dedication*

To broken hearts and homes everywhere...

And to those who have never experienced the power of  
forgiveness.



# *Prologue*

Before Facebook, Twitter, mobile devices and the ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere and at any time, couples had to fight a little harder to get connected.

The story you are about to read, unfolds in an era (the 1990's) when the world was taking baby steps into the world of instant connectivity.

That mean the dynamics between men and women were affected by time and distance. Therefore, time and distance made a relationship a little tougher to pursue, but time and distance also made some relationships worth fighting for.

An ancient writer of wisdom left the world with the following:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Love never ends.



## *Part One: Love*

(Present Day – Late Evening)

“Say Daddy,” I urged, but the fidgety infant just burst into a toothless grin and squealed as his little dark eyes widened. It was his mother’s image that I saw in his face. Those shining ebony pearls that attracted me to her, haunted me in him. He laughed as he beat his tiny brown hands together in a clap of sorts. His smooth, honey toned skin was like hers and that thought triggered a sharp pain from somewhere unknown. It was a pain I could not handle. My mind dismissed it quickly as I gathered him up carefully.

“You’ll learn to say it one day.”

My thoughts shifted to the remaining chores for the evening as I prepared him for bed. With his bath and laundry complete, strategies for the next day were in order. I rummaged through the pile of clothes dumped hurriedly in the crib. What was I looking for? I called to my wife...

Suddenly I woke up to the music floating from my mp3 player in the living room. I had been dreaming, but what a strange fantasy. My wife and I had never had a kid. That was a blessing now that we were separated. I was not feeling sorry for myself, though. Life had brought about some tough changes, but for a second time bachelor of just four months, I figured I was doing very well.

My quaint one bedroom apartment was the first physical sign of my proud adaptation. A sofa, the mp3 player with high definition stereo speakers, a table and a lamp occupied the living room patiently, always ready for my sporadic moments of relaxation and escape. The music soothed, the sofa comforted and the lamp radiated obediently for my reading sessions. It was then that I could leave behind my present world and fly away to distant planets of the future through my love for science fiction books.

I rarely watched television, mainly because I just never had the time between business and rehearsals. The last thing I wanted to do, when I got home each day, was to sit staring at a tube. That being said, I did spend a lot time playing video games. Madden Football was my passion. I was also hooked on the internet. From emails to surfing, and from music downloads to movie reviews, I was addicted. I guess I had become a typical bachelor. Beer in the fridge, video game connected to the TV, and a computer logged on at all times, was all I needed.

I had lucked out, getting a nice gig at one of the local multi-media production studios, recording commercials and background vocals for various television theme songs and talk shows. I had been working there steadily for three months. My friend/ business manager had fought tenaciously to get me the job. Though it meant being in the studio at seven o' clock in the morning three times a week, it also meant getting off early each afternoon. More difficult for me, it meant going to bed early, but it was only for a few weeks more.

I stretched as I stood up and the book I had fallen asleep to, dropped to the floor. I pitched it back on to the sofa and moped into the bedroom. My bed and an old crate were positioned to one side of the window with a nightstand between. The room was a strange mixture of sporting gear, pop entertainer posters and my wide range of clothes from sporty to formal. My instruments and video games were cluttered under the bed.

In the closet, which I never closed for some unknown reason, resided more clothes, a teetering stack of CD's, piles of sheet music, and my collection of vintage vinyl albums. The dresser top was sprinkled with my toiletries and a confusing assortment of DVDs; ancient audiotapes, guitar picks and a wide assortment of cables and wires. It was a corporate combination that I always accurately titled 'a mess'. Oh well, it was mine.

The crate was the sleeping chamber of my new best friend, Petey. My little companion was almost all that remained from my marriage. He was a white West Highland terrier. He was an active little dog, but not as loud as a puppy could be. It seemed he made more noise running and knocking over things, than barking, and it was a constant battle to keep him from damaging my belongings. He noticed me looking at him and stared back at me; his eyes seemingly matching my saddened expression. He climbed clumsily out of the crate and trotted out of the room, his feet pitter-pattering on the hardwood floor.

My cell phone chimed and I glanced at the clock...eight fifteen. It was my sister calling, right on time. She always checked on me because of the neighborhood I found myself living in. It was a strange combination of eclectics, eccentrics and hoodlums.

"Hi Paula," I answered the phone; my caller ID revealing that it was her. "How's my guy tonight?" I asked, figuring she would be holding my youngest nephew or at least he would be close by.

"He's fine," she answered and I heard her turning the phone toward her son for the usual response of a ten month old,

“How are ya Joey?” I used my best parental tone.

“He blew a spit bubble and popped it,” Paula yelled in the background. “He’s pretty proud of himself right now.”

“He’s fine,” I mumbled through a smile, hearing his sudden chirp. Then I heard my sister take the phone from Joey and waited for her to talk.

“Can you drop Petey off earlier than usual, Gerry?” She asked. No one called me Gerald, except my wife.

“Sure Sis,” I asserted, “but why? What’s wrong?”

She did not know I had sensed her uneasy tone, but it was there. She hesitated. Joey babbled in the background and I could hear him playing. I could even hear her sit down and scoop him up, knowing she was taking her predictable posture of holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder.

“What’s the matter Paula?”

“Nothing really,” she breathed out slowly. “It’s just that I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow and I have to get off to an early start.”

I did not answer. She was lying. I let her fumble for another defense. Being as close as we were, I knew she could not air any plea that could penetrate the wall of my silent treatment except the truth, but she tried again.

“I got things to do really early so that I’ll have enough time to get back to clean the house and then cook for Bruce and the kids.”

“Okay Paula,” I stopped her. “Now tell me what’s really wrong.” Just then, Joey whimpered in the background.

“I don’t want you to get upset,” she whined and my mind instantly ran through the file of things that could have gone wrong since yesterday. “I’d really rather not discuss it right now.”

“I won’t get upset,” I said calmly.

I heard Joey let out a scream and she dropped the phone. He bawled and I listened closely to the familiar rustlings of her doing whatever was necessary to get her baby boy to quiet down. Suddenly, she picked up the phone again.

“Sorry,” she griped. “He’s wet.”

“I figured as much.”

“We can talk about it tomorrow,” she injected quickly. “Just come over early and we can talk about it then, okay?” She had me beaten. Joey was letting it all out and she did not have time to talk.

“Alright,” I conceded, “but I want answers.”

She agreed. She said good-bye quickly and hung up. Petey yelped from the living room. I went in to check on him.

He stood watching, barking and wagging his tail so hard his whole body shook; aggravated at this human being who was not attending to his immediate need.

“Okay,” I responded under his griping. “I hear you, I hear you.” I worried that my midget monster would get me kicked out of the apartment for sure. The landlord had been very lenient when I moved in. That was another favor I considered a debt. It was a shared debt between us. She was breaking her own apartment rules, letting me move in with a pet.

After taking Petey out into the brisk autumn night to complete his doggy business and run around a bit, I returned quickly to the warmth of the apartment to finish my preparations for the evening; feed the dog, feed myself, and get ready for work.

An hour later, I cleared the bed and dumped my laundry on the floor, promising myself I would file everything away later. Petey’s dark clear eyes looked up at me intensely, yet innocently. His hunger had subsided and sleep was settling over him. I gave him a thoughtful rub, put him in the crate and turned the light off.

“I must be crazy for keeping you,” I thought to myself. “You’re not even mine.” I stroked his back, remembering the day my wife bought him, saying he would keep her company while I was on my weekend road trips.

I sat on the bed and heard the antique pendulum clock, our first wedding gift, ticking with endless loneliness. The apartment was awfully quiet. Outside, a car rushed down the alley, leaving a wave of trash and leaves sweeping in its wake. The vibration shook the window. Petey stirred for a moment, but he did not move, probably used to it all.

I eased down; lying on my back trying to settle my thoughts, but my mind was rushing through re-runs of the day. My sister’s phone call replayed.

Instantly, my mental computer was set into motion, deductively concluding possible answers to her distress. It could not be her

husband or her kids or she would have come over to my place to talk about it. It could not be our parents, sisters, or brothers because she could have talked about it right over the phone. So it must have had something to do with me. That usually meant it had something to do with my wife.

Something was set off inside me and the knot, that always gripped my gut from thoughts of her, began to tighten in me again. I realized I had been staring into darkness as I closed my eyes. I saw her face. The pain of the memory flooded inside, pushing the hurt boiling in my chest. Hot tears erupted in my eyes and I sat up quickly, wiping them away. It was stupid of me to still feel hurt and guilt. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat with my hands clasped tightly between my legs.

Dim lighting from the street below found its way through the window and silhouetted Petey's form. His gentle breathing eased my sudden storm; reminding me that I still had the present and could look forward to the future. Nothing would ever take that away from me.

"I remember when..." I wanted to hum to myself, but that was a song from my past, bringing with it a memory of pain. Man, I used to write a lot of songs, but that was something that I seemed to have lost, too. I could only dig up the old tunes because there was an empty well when I tried to draw out something new and fresh.

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Poetry and songwriting had filled my life since I was ten years old. I was quite an unusual black kid in my urban neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri. In the sixth grade I was given a used and worn out acoustic guitar by one of my parents' friends. I liked it well enough to actually teach myself to play. Sore fingers and cramping hands were the only things that slowed me down.

I would run home from school and practice all evening. By the time my parents started to regret their friend's gesture, coupled with my sister's routine complaining, I was able to play a couple of popular melodies from start to finish.

My parents boosted my efforts, providing lessons, and it wasn't too long before I started working out my own tunes. Lyrics came later as I entered high school. It was my little secret, though. There was no way I was going to let my friends know that I liked the acoustic guitar. They were all in to Tupac. My sister and her friends loved Boyz II Men.

However, I did go public, practically forced by my English teacher, in my junior term. I accidentally let it slip that I played guitar so she asked me to recite a poem with a soft musical background.

I practiced to the point of obsession because I was not going to embarrass myself. At sixteen, embarrassment was not an option. The moment was terrifying as I stood in front of 30 of my peers. When I finished, the classroom actually erupted in applause.

From that moment, I was struck by something I could not explain. I just knew that it felt good to be accepted and cheered. From there I began playing in school sponsored talent shows and events. Teachers loved it, but I received mixed reviews among my peers. In a time when Mariah Carey, Keith Sweat, and Toni Braxton were exploding all over the commercial music scene, I recited poetry while I played my guitar in a style that was to later be known as spoken word. However, at that time, it was just interesting enough for my peers to listen to it, but nothing more than that.

Most of my closest friends thought that what I was doing was cool. It was the mid 90's and Tupac Shakur, at least in my youthful opinion, was THE major driving force in the school and the community. I could relate to him in many ways.

I wrote about the same things that he rapped about: injustice, pain, racism and life in my 'hood'. My family was not ghetto poor. We were in the category of families that could do well enough to get by. So I wrote about what I knew.

I wrote about the times when cops stopped me while walking to or from school, for no reason. I wrote about the women who always clutched their purses and crossed the street when I was coming in their direction. I wrote about the evil looks and hate filled stares when my family drove into certain neighborhoods or shopped in certain stores. I wrote how I could recognize the security codes that were announced over department store public address systems, always indicating the section of the store I happened to be in at the time. I wrote about the melancholy cloud that hung over us, as people of color, and how we fought to overcome it by our pride and stubborn will to succeed. To take it closer to home, I wrote about my parents and how they were my heroes because they stayed together while so many families were falling apart all around us.

However, my most heart wrenching writing was always about girls and my search for the one who would love me for who I was inside:

*Love will come to me after a very long drought  
So when it does come, I will pour myself out*

*I don't love often, but I do love deep  
So I must be told if there is one to truly love me*

*I'm filled with much doubt; my heart aches with each thought  
One must honestly say if they love me, and tell me if they don't*

*The day I find true love might be the day I lose myself  
There has been infatuation, but true love I've never felt*

*So to sum this poem up, just tell me the truth  
Is there one to love me? I will be deeply in love with you.*

Sometimes I had the same kind of lyrics as the popular artist of that time. It's just that my style wasn't the same. I simply spoke the words and played that guitar. People who did not know me thought I was trying to be 'old school.' Some even told me I was too 'white.' I was caught in the middle, between music cultures.

Still, it was nice to find something that made me feel I had a place within the school, even if I wasn't sure where it was. I was known as the black guy who recites poetry and plays the guitar.

Eventually, I did gain a girlfriend. We got together in my final year of high school. She was a pretty, fair skinned, petite girl, named Myra. She was black, but she looked white and even though it didn't matter inside the school building, sometimes when we were out at a shopping mall or a restaurant, we would get that certain look from people trying to figure us out.

Our school was about 10 years into the desegregation experiment and our generation was moving past the interracial and skin color issues, but for many parents, administrators, teachers, and in certain parts of the city, it was still a major obstacle to overcome.

Guys would give me the 'how did you get a girl like that?' look. However, girls, no matter what ethnicity, took it to another level. It was the 'what is he doing with that white girl?' look. I figured it was a female thing, because I did not get it. To us guys, a girl is pretty, shapely, sexy, attractive, beautiful; or she was okay, plain, or ugly, and nothing else mattered.

I hated the hypocrisy of the 1990's. Everyone pretended that racism was behind us, but as a young black man, I saw it everywhere; like in job interviews and constant highway patrol pullovers.

Back in those days, before 'racial profiling' was made public, I was at the brunt of it everywhere I went. I would stand at the corner of a bus stop, on my way to a basketball game, and cops would drive by slowly, turn around and drive past me again.

Other than Will Smith and a few others, most of the rap videos depicted the pressure young teenagers, like me, faced. They featured our fantasies as well. People focused on our fantasies with all the girls and the money, but that was just the escape from our reality.

When I first started driving, my dad told me to keep my student I.D. and my driver's license on me at all times. I thought it was just his 1970's paranoia, but his reality became mine even twenty five years removed from his horror stories.

So I wrote about it and recited it, but it was clear that the message and the method weren't getting through. Like most angry young men in that time, I was accused of playing the 'race card' which never made sense to me. It was the hand I was dealt, so what other card could I play?

Myra was a junior and she liked being seen with me for the image and I knew it. When I tried to talk to her about my deepest feelings, she would drift off into conversations about how her friends were jealous of her for being with me. Yet, I played along with the game of the popular, guitar-playing poet, being seen with the cute girl.

Our relationship was based on the physical from public appearance to secret sex. Myra was my first and I was lucky she did not get pregnant. I almost got serious enough to think about living together after graduation, but my mind was set on making a life well past Millan High School and becoming a success through my writing. I just could not settle for someone who really didn't know or understand me.

I made the decision to attend a college nearly four hours away from home. Canton University was situated just outside of Kansas City. They had the creative writing curriculum I was looking for and it was still close enough to St. Louis to not make me feel so homesick. I qualified for a couple of grants, but student loans paved most of the way. I hated the idea of acquiring such a large debt, but I was told to see it as an investment in myself; in my future.

As high school graduation gave way to college orientation, I set out to major in English Literature so that I could become the best I could in some kind of writing career. I did not go for music as a major because I did not plan to have a career in entertainment. I enjoyed writing and playing, but not necessarily performing. Besides, I was always told to choose something that will help you get a job as well as help you pursue your dream, so I considered Education as a minor.

My first year at Canton University was given a whole new meaning with the timely arrival of Danita Ware. She instantly made me glad I decided to attend this school. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I was proud to be a black man when I saw her. Dark brown, curly hair surrounded a bronze oval face. Her large ebony eyes grabbed my heart and guided my eyes to small, pouting lips that made me daydream of walking right up to her and kissing her boldly.

Her body, slender with full rounded breasts and all the right curves sent me into fantasies of passion. I found out as much as I could about her. She was a freshman and she hadn't hooked up with anybody, so far. My investigation depended heavily upon two of my new female friends gathering facts for me.

After a couple of weeks, both of them eventually asked me why I didn't just talk to her myself. I just didn't have the courage to approach her. I did not know why I couldn't. I guess I was not ready to take a chance on being rejected. I was still stuck in a high school mentality. I was still a teenager inside, looking at a woman for the first time.

My high school girlfriend had stiff competition now that I was in college beholding another level of womanhood. No one had told me about the smorgasbord of college girls. The seventeen-year old girl, back home, could not compare to what this young man encountered in this new league.

My relationship with Myra eventually faded away, as she was pursued by another senior in Millan High. I did not care because I was finished with the prep scene and all of its games. I was tired of pretending I was in love. I was captivated with the new level of possibilities. In the theme of R. Kelly's hit in those days, 'I Believed I Could Fly!'

It was a wonderful first year. I took the courses. I grew in my writing skills. I made new friends. Then I started down the path of learning a new way to play the game and there were a few girls who were willing to play along. Oddly enough, that was how a reputation as 'a player' began to be tagged to my name.

At my friends' urgings, I did some of my poetry at one of the campus hot spots called, the Koffee Klub. It was a weekend nightclub that gave students the opportunity to showcase their talents. There was always an 'open mic' night on Saturdays, so one weekend my dorm mates literally pushed me up on the stage. I stood up and quoted from my high school verses.

*I've never had a love that was free  
I've never had a love; where it was just her and me*

*I've never had a love that was secure  
With my mind at rest, No doubt to intrude*

*It's always been tight, like being fettered with a chain  
With only icy stares, cold hearts and rain*

*I've never had love, strong, like steel  
Where I knew where I stood, and the feeling was real*

I got good applause that first time and even more the second and third time. A fan base, of sorts, was suddenly initiated. That's when those new games began.

There was always some pretty young lady willing to express her feelings for a sensitive, young, black man, who was articulate in revealing such sincere thoughts.

However, momma's teachings were strong in my head. I had a lot of old fashioned stuff stuck in me. There was always a fight inside, in the heat of passion. I did not trust a condom. I did not want a disease. I did not want a baby. But, I loved the pleasure. I loved the attention. I had found acceptance.

As beautiful as these girls were, I was always asking myself if any one of them was worth taking a chance on blowing my future. Yet, I would sleep with them anyway and convince myself that since they came after me, I was not to blame for any broken hearts.

One girl called me arrogant. Another called me proud and egotistical. I didn't know what to call myself. I was just enjoying the new experience of being pursued. The girls were flirting and flattery was flowing, so I was obliging their advances.

It was funny how a guy can be in love with one girl and then sleep with another girl simply because the girl he had sex with, made 'first contact' through flirtation. It was at that point in life that I realized

women would never understand how a guy can respond to flattery with sex, but not with love.

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When most of the students departed for summer break, Danita left, too. I learned she was from Atlanta, Georgia through the school's directory. Of course, there was no way I was going to write her, so knowing how far away she was, only made me long to see her even more. I had a lot of time to think of her. I was constantly wondering if she was going to return to Canton.

During my summer break, I could only land a part-time job, so I spent a lot of my torrid St. Louis summer days and warm moonlit nights, in my parent's basement with my guitar, strumming heart sore melodies and writing poems about her.

I still felt out of sorts, sometimes, because music artist like Brandy, Monica, Destiny's Child, Puff Daddy and Usher were the sounds of the community. I related to their lyrics and their beats, but something different always came out of me when I played and sang in the privacy of my basement. I especially liked Lauryn Hill, though. She was doing her own thing and paving a way for those of us who had a different expression, too.

As the sophomore year rolled in, Danita did return and I finally mustered the courage to approach her. One big problem, though. Whenever I saw her, she was always with some upper classman, prancing and laughing, seemingly enjoying every second of his companionship. There was no way I could get close to her. We had nothing in common. We were not in the same circle of friends, curricula, activities, or anything else.

Academically, I was barely hanging on that year. Professors and friends helped and encouraged me through some tough courses, but the most significant part of my encouragement was from my roommates who kept pushing me to perform at the Koffee Klub.

One Saturday night they finally got me to sing. They had heard me in my room and complimented me many times. So, for the first time, I sang with my guitar and nervously made it through one of my summer time tunes.

*Every time I see her, I wonder if she knows  
Can she see it my eyes; Do my feelings start to show?*

*Every time I see her, my heart begins to melt.  
I wish that she was mine; Dreams of tender love are felt*

*Every time I see her, this song I want to sing  
I become like the snow under the first sun rays of spring*

*Every time I see her, I get a little faster heartbeat  
Will we ever be together, or be apart for eternity?*

*Every time I see her, I can only wonder why  
Is this the way of love? Is this the way of life?*

Again, there was a huge round of applause, which really surprised me because I did not have the big soulful voice associated with African American singing. I was more of a pop/smooth jazz type singer, so having that kind of voice coming out of this kind of face seemed to work for the audience.

And again, there were those young ladies who wanted to show their appreciation in a more personal way and I let them. However, my inner boundary and conflict was beginning to work on me even stronger, to keep me from going all the way. I still caved in a couple of times, though. By then, my 'playing around' reputation was well known. I didn't like it so I started trying to change that.

The singing bit seemed to work and the more I did it, the better I got. That's when some of my friends, who happened to be musicians and singers, and I got together to collaborate. They had music, I had lyrics, and we clicked.

Chris played drums and his girlfriend, Carol, had a great voice. JP played bass guitar and Ricky was our all-around keyboard guru. Carol knew a girl in her dorm, Jessie (short for Jessica), who played keyboard and had a really nice voice, too.

Most of our songs were about love and relationships. The tunes were soft and melodious. We didn't know it at that time, but we had found our niche.

After playing through two or three songs, we were sounding pretty good, at least to ourselves, so we said, 'What the heck, let's give it a try at one of the 'open mic' nights.'

After a couple of additional weeks of rehearsing, we made our debut at the Koffee Klub and we were a hit; a huge hit. For our first performance, we went with one of my tunes called 'Every Man Aint A Dog'.

Even though I knew there would be young ladies in the club who would see me as a hypocrite, because of the lyrics that conflicted with their personal experience with me, the song still revealed the kind of guy I truly wanted to be:

*I'm not the one who left you feeling empty  
I'm not the one who came and broke your heart*

*I just want you to give me a chance to prove in your life  
Every man aint a dog*

*I know you've heard a thousand promises  
And you need nothing else to make life hard*

*I just want you to give me a chance to prove it's no lie  
Every man aint a dog*

The place went wild. The applause was loud and long.

Afterwards, several people suggested that we record some of this stuff and consider doing this for real. I didn't want to get my hopes and expectations running too high so I had one answer for everyone:

"It's not that good."

As far as I could tell, people who go into the entertainment world are not some group of friends throwing together music and lyrics taken from tattered pages of worn out notebooks. Besides, we weren't even a real band. We just happened to share one similar interest and that was music. Only two of us studied music as a major. For the rest of us, this was just something fun to do between books and exams.

I pushed the idea to the back of my mind as I muddled through the rest of the school year. Somehow, I made it through with passing grades in academics and, as far as I knew, in life since I started trying to change my ways with the ladies.

That year was so grueling and busy that it wasn't until the summer that I really paid attention to the outside world again. I stocked up on music CD's with as much as my little temporary jobs would allow. The music scene was becoming more and more diverse which encouraged me to become more comfortable with myself.

All kinds of groups and acts were being seen and heard everywhere. The lines between genres were beginning to thin. I bought CD's by Christina Aguilera, TLC, Whitney Houston, N' Sync, Garth

Brooks and Cheryl Crow because all had appeared in the top ratings. I liked something about each of them.

Things were definitely different from how they had been just a few short years ago when I was in high school. I listened and I took notes. One common theme among the artists was their ability to just be themselves. It was another important revelation for me that summer.

I still wasn't thinking about becoming a professional performer. It was just important for me to accept what I was actually gifted to do and to stop worrying about it not being the style my friends, family, neighborhood or ethnicity would accept.

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My third year began and autumn settled back on us. I was stunned when I saw Danita with the football team's star running back. I was heartbroken. She was looking better than ever, aglow with energy and sex appeal. My only consolation, as I waded through another year of making library treks to download class notes, researching on-line for reading assignments, and writing papers, was that the football star was a senior. Next year he would not be there. That did not solve the biggest issue, though: where would her heart be?

"He's going to get drafted into pro football" my newest roommate, Bill Bolton, told me "and he'll come back and marry her!"

Bill was a freckled, spectacled red head, thin as a compact disc. He delighted in ruining my day by dashing my hopes for Danita. Other than his annoying pessimism, we had a lot in common and that's how we became friends.

"Dang," Bill whined in his familiar slang. "You don't even know anything about their relationship. She might not come back ever again."

That is when it dawned on me that it was not so much about the other guys in and out of her life, as it was the fact that I just wanted her to feel towards me the way I felt about her.

However, I lived in a state of mixed emotions that school year. I tried to be indifferent when it came to Danita, but I faltered in my attempts to block her out of my thoughts. I tried to 'officially' date other girls. Unlike I had done in my first two years, I didn't just let girls pursue me. I tried to be the initiator, but every time I saw Danita, I became jittery and nervous. Every time I saw her with *him*, I cringed with jealousy.

It was funny how it turned out to be a great year for me academically as well as performing. That year I became sort of a 'big man on campus' because of my stage act. For the first time I was forced to consider the possibility that I might be on to something special if I pursued entertainment as part of a writing career.

We tried to assemble the band to do 'open mic' again, but somebody was always studying for an exam or involved in something else, so we could never get together. We kept promising, but it never happened. Ricky and JP gave me tips and helped me with my playing, so I did a couple of solo spots during the year. My songs were taking on a new maturity, and dare I admit it... professionalism.

As summer sent me back to St. Louis again, I finally yielded to my emotions on two fronts. First, I decided to seriously pursue a career as a performer. Secondly, I decided that I needed to have Danita in my life. I did not know how either could happen, so again, I spent those summer nights, foolishly writing songs and poems to a girl who did not even know I existed; to a girl from another state who did not give a... Oh' well, stupid me.

*She has a special attraction, Like that of a delicate dove  
That's why my very feelings  
Stem from the tenderness of love*

*Through the softness of her eyes, I can see a new spring dawn  
I hope they'll one day call for feelings  
Toward me, for us, for love*

*Even her voice reveals her love, Like the gentle flowing stream  
It slowly sweeps away the doubt  
To a far and distant sea*

*She's an angel on earth, A lady of true love  
She's all that and more  
She's a gift from heaven above*

*These are mere descriptions of one I love so dear  
I'll never cease to love her  
Even if fate won't draw us near.*

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Things were running smoothly as the first week of my senior year began. I hadn't crossed paths with Danita and was seriously beginning to believe that she had not returned to Canton.

It was a Wednesday afternoon and I confidently sauntered to my *Expressions in Urban Writing* class. With my English Literature degree almost complete, I was at liberty to take this course as an elective. It was scheduled on Wednesday and Friday afternoons, which was perfect for me. I could get credit for some course hours and improve my writing skills, all in one shot.

I sat in the midst of chattering students awaiting the arrival of the instructor when Danita Ware paraded into the room.

"O my God!" I groaned silently and closed my eyes. I had to be dreaming. She warmly addressed a few people that she recognized and sat down beside me. I thought I would fall out of my seat. The professor came in, but I did not hear anything she said.

As the first session came to a close, my emotions were spinning in a tornado of anxiousness. Everyone started leaving. I swallowed hard. It was now or never. I stood up with her and began to clear my desk.

"So what does this class have to do with your major?" I asked as she dumped her books into a messy pile in her backpack. I looked away from her eyes, fighting the urge to absorb her presence.

"Not much," she said. She twisted her lips, while rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. "My major is Business Law."

"This must be a course to fill the electives," I ventured to conclude, surprised at my easiness. She nodded as her eyes smiled at me for my accurate deduction.

"Business Law," I echoed her disclosure, picking up my pack. We fell in line behind the remaining flow out of the chamber (as we called the classrooms).

"It's rough," she complained, shifting in stride beside me as we eased into the slow motion stampede of the corridor. My ego bloated to the point of explosion, but I played it cool and smooth, telling myself to act like she was just another person, nothing special. I was going to walk right out of the building and across the campus and be seen with the best looking black woman in the school.

"What's your major?" She asked suddenly.

"Who me?" I blurted, caught roaming in my daydream. My mind faded like the end of a movie and I suddenly heard loud

chatter. A maze of faces swarmed around me as I dropped back into reality. "I'm in -uh- I'm majoring in writing, I mean English Literature!" Why was I shouting? A group of girls spun around, startled by my outburst, and snickered. Danita smiled. I groaned inside. I had blown it.

We leisurely walked out of the building, awkward with silence. We were flooded with bright warm sunshine, but the chilled September breeze swept over us to cancel the glowing potential of the moment. A car roared out of the parking lot and laughter rang out of a dorm across the street. People scurried frantically around us in the perpetual hustle and bustle of college life. Danita laughed to herself; eyes squinted from the sunlight and the sweeping breeze.

"What's funny?" I asked, struggling for words to spark a conversation.

"Here I am standing with a tall, attractive, caramel eyed stranger," she giggled, shielding her eyes to see me. "I don't even know who you are."

I smiled down at her. A compliment from Danita. Wow!

She looked up at me puzzled by my response. I read her eyes. No special emotion. No special thoughts for me.

"I'm Gerald Hanley," I announced formally and politely offered my hand. She took it. Her hand was soft.

"I'm Danita Ware," she said proudly.

I bit my lower lip to keep from spilling, 'I already know.'

"It's nice to meet you, Gerald."

That sounded funny. No one called me Gerald. Everyone, including my mother and sister, referred to me as Gerry, but she had just made it special.

"Well," she said quickly releasing my hand and backing away. "I guess I'll see you later," I nodded, smiling calmly.

She pranced away leaving me flustered. I watched her melt into the traffic of people, hips swinging and head held high with the wind chopping her hair. I leaned against the street lamppost that, until that moment, I had not realized was there.

"God," I mumbled. "If this isn't the girl for me, somebody up there hates me."

Seeing her in class twice a week only fed my infatuation. I got to know her better. She was really sharp and quick with a child-like air

that made me stare deep into her expressions. Her writings were often long and wordy, but well organized for perfect placement of her thoughts.

I always found myself fighting a possessive urge when she dove into intense conversation with others, particularly other guys. Even the white guys in the class liked her. She was just overflowing with magnetic life and charisma. It was hard to think of her as just another black woman. She was a warm and beautiful human being.

Over the next couple of months I would catch the site of her from a dorm or classroom window as she eased across the campus, playfully dodging the advances of students, jocks and even a professor or two. It was like watching a music video. Some approached her like perfect gentlemen, trying to charm and win a glimpse of acknowledged acceptance from her, but she gracefully took it all in stride. A perfect lady, she granted them polite audience and elegant gratitude for the compliments, but gave no indication of any serious impression.

Other times howls, whistles and repulsive invitations were hurled at her, but she would just smile, even laugh, and keep striding across the campus. No one could touch her.

\*\*\*

When the Koffee Klub lost its feature entertainment one weekend, I was given a phone call and asked to fill in the idle hours. First, I solicited the same gang, desperately hoping we could get together this time. Chris, Carol, JP, Jessie and Ricky were all available and leapt at the opportunity to strut their stuff, again, in the school's most popular setting.

Unlike last time, this was more than just one song to perform. We had three or four hours to fill. We were back together again and with each of us contributing one or two songs we, put together sizeable repot ire of original material. Even Chris and JP had some songs, so along with a few custom arrangements of top popular music video hits, we had enough music to last through the evening. The only question was; could we learn it all in such a short time.

We rehearsed almost every night, for two weeks, in quick preparation, knowing we had to be tight vocally just to get the crowd to listen. We had to be awesome to get their approval. I wasn't sure we could pull off what we did last time. That was two years ago when we set aside two weeks of rehearsal to perform one song. Now we were talking about several songs for an entire evening.

It was at that time that everyone decided to go with the laid back style that had become my signature. Instead of the heart pounding, heavy beats that most acts presented at the Klub, the group wanted to stick with my strengths; flowing rhythms and smooth harmonies, supporting simple melodies and easy love song lyrics.

Secretly, I assessed that we were on our way to getting booted out of the place, but that worry did not compare with my anxiety over another plan that I had in mind.

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Finally THE Friday arrived. The day dragged by. I hoped she would be in class that day or my whole plot would be spoiled. After what seemed to be an eternity, I went to my last class of the day, *Creative Urban Expressions in Writing*.

She came to class. Yes! The instructor dragged on and on. Finally, the class ended. My plan was ready. There she was. I made my move.

I collected my notes and drifted behind her as everyone filed out of the chamber.

“Hi,” I said casually. She looked up and smiled.

“Hi Gerald,” she sang. “Thank God it’s Friday, huh?”

I shrugged, scrambling for the right words.

“I love weekends,” I agreed nervously. “I can get some time for myself.” She quickened her pace as we cut into the corridor traffic.

“Time for self,” she complained, “is something no one ever has around here.” Then she laughed.

“I was thinking about catching the new act at the Koffee Klub tonight,” I threw out for bait. “It may not be great, but it’ll be different.”

“Really,” she brightened. “I’ve never gone there, but that sounds like fun. Who is it?”

“Let’s go see,” I interjected trying to reel her in, but she suddenly slowed her steps. I turned to face a grimace of intense thought on her forehead.

“Too fast, Gerry,” I thought. “Too much; too soon!” Then a smile splashed across her face.

“Okay,” she yielded. “That sounds like a nice change.”

“Alright,” I uttered calmly, though leaping inside. “How about meeting there at eight?”

“Inside or outside?” She asked, sweeping back a stream of braids that the wind had tossed across her face.

“Inside,” I finished my strategy. “I’ll meet you at the tables to the left of the stage.” She nodded, looking right into my eyes. I dropped my gaze and pretended to check the strap on my backpack. “I’ll see you tonight, then?”

“Okay, Gerald,” she chimed, waving and shifting into her familiar stride into the bustling flow of humanity. I did not watch her walk very long this time because I could hardly wait to tell Bill that I had finally gotten a date with Danita Ware.

I tried to call him from my bulky cell phone that I had back in those days, but I was too excited. When the call went directly to voicemail, I broke into a jog. I thought I was going to burst, so I ran, full stride, to the dorm.

By-passing the elevator, I bolted up the steps to the third floor and dashed down the hall to our room. I was so excited I could hardly find my key. Bill was shaking the walls from within, blasting 1980’s Classic Rock on his CD music system. He had the old style rack of separate components with the towered speakers. He really loved old stuff, and he usually rocked when I was gone.

I opened the door quickly, panting from my run and my excitement. Perspiration trickled down my back and my shirt clung coldly to my skin. Bill, freckles and dark spectacles, was on his hands and knees; his long red hair pulled back in a ponytail. Wearing nothing but his tattered jean shorts, he was picking up our weekly accumulation of clothes and paper. He was digging out clutter from behind his music rack and wailing to the lyrics and cries of the music. His dark glasses added to his weird private performance, but it was my time to steal the show.

I walked in, slammed the door, and screamed. He jumped up and whacked his hand against the rack, knocking the power out. I fell to my knees and rolled over on the floor kicking. His glasses fell off.

“Dang!” he yelled. “You scared the hell out of me!”

“I did it!” I screamed as a roaring laugh suddenly exploded out of me. “I got her! I got Danita!”

“You got who?” he blurted, probing his audio equipment for damage. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I got THE date!” I railed, falling and rolling on the floor again.

“With who?” Bill barked as he began to piece the story together. “You don’t mean Danita Ware?”

“Yes I do!” I crooned, staggering over to his bed and then collapsing onto mine. “I’m going out with Danita.... tonight!”

“No way!” he belted back at me. I sat up and grinned, then fell back on the bed again, exhausted from my theatrics.

“The kid’s finally going to get Danita after dreaming about her for three years,” he said incredulously.

“And,” I mused sitting up on my elbows, “you never thought it could happen.” Bill was stunned. He stopped cleaning, sat on the floor and shook his head in disbelief. He took the rubber band off his ponytail and reset his hairstyle again.

“Wait one minute,” he said deliberately pronouncing each word while pointing a menacing finger at me. “You’re lying...”

“I’m not kiddin’ you,” I cut in.

“Nice joke,” he said with a mocking grin. “You had me goin’ for a second.”

He got up and turned on the music again. Huey Lewis and the News kicked on with *Power of Love*. My mind was spinning with childish anticipation as though it was the night before Christmas. I did not care if Bill believed me or not.

“You got to play at the club tonight,” he reasoned, “so how could you have a date and perform at the same time?”

I lay back on the bed letting my eyes roam around the poster clad walls and laughed out loud.

“That’s exactly the idea!”

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The show started at seven thirty. The Koffee Klub was filling up with people and conversation as our band climbed into position. I hooked up my guitar and Chris, with light taps on the cymbals, counted off the first tune. We made havoc of each other’s songs; wringing out misplaced notes, jumbling accents and skipping breaks and solos. The ladies sounded great vocally, but then, they always did.

From our perspective, we cremated one another's personal masterpieces, but like most weekend audiences, this one did not know and did not care. We could tell, that from their point of view, we were pulling off a good show. They cheered after every number, sending a shower of popcorn and peanut shells (*a Koffee Klub sign of approval*) from out of the darkness behind the glaring lights.

After an hour, each one had taken their turn as lead vocal or poet. We still had the top music video hits to work through (which we had adapted to our new style) and more original music to slaughter, but I was ready to execute my plan with Danita.

Knowing she was out there somewhere, imagining she was gaping at me in sweet surprise, I took a stool and my acoustic guitar and set up at center stage for the next song . . . my song. I adjusted the microphones and turned to my puzzled partners and whispered,

*"Love You Still..."*

Chris shrugged, gave me his signal of approval and counted down with his drumsticks. Everyone floated in softly with the drums as JP's bass laid a smooth, steady pulse. I fingered the melody and Ricky's keyboard cushioned us with even chords. I stared out into the darkness and could only see orange glowing lanterns at each table spraying radiant light on the blurred facial images surrounding them. I knew she was out there somewhere and I sang to her;

*"I watched you for three long years  
Never told my feelings or fears  
Then I met you face to face  
No one like you in the human race"*

Then the ladies joined me on the chorus. They were smooth, yet strong;

*"If I could never touch you, If you, I could not feel  
If I could never hold you, I would love you still"*

We dwindled to a soulful keyboard solo. I smiled, letting my gaze fall to the wires and lights on the stage floor, sure that she was getting my message; hoping she was, anyway.

*"Let's meet in a certain place  
So I can tell you how I feel  
But if you don't show  
It won't change my heart, oh no"*

Finally, we let go with full harmonies on a steady rhythm, but I kept my message crisp and clear;

*“If I could never touch you, If you, I could not feel*

*If I could never hold you, I would love you still.”*

I had to repeat it and I had to sing it from my heart. The music was flowing and the beat was tight. The feeling was like magic. Everything was going perfectly. The moment was right.

We eased out of the last notes and the crowd roared. I smiled, surprised by their response. I had not thought about their approval. I had only concentrated and worked for Danita's.

We took a break and I ventured out into the audience, inching through a swarm of handshakes and compliments. I tried to be calm, but I was anxiously preoccupied with my search for Danita. With nothing but the stage lights and the flickering lantern flames to guide me, I tried to pick out the female faces in my attempt to simplify the hunt.

“Gerald!” It could only have been her. “Over here!” I tried to radar in on the direction of her call and located her in a booth to the left of the stage, exactly where I told her to meet me.

However, my high dissipated like morning mist at sunrise as she turned and began talking to two other girls who were with her. I groaned with the thought that this was supposed to be a date for the two of us. But, I smiled anyway, shifting to their direction.

The other two girls were quite pretty. One was Hispanic with olive toned skin and eyes whose color I could not tell right away. She reminded me of Myra, my high school girlfriend. The other had a dark, glowing complexion, but she was too flashy for my taste with her beauty buried under make-up and jewelry. I had seen them around campus a lot, but had never really tried to meet them. They each said something to Danita and they all laughed, sending a flush of embarrassment into my eyes.

Danita shifted to make room for me as the other two followed my every move with wide-eyed curiosity. I was suddenly very uncomfortable, as well as disappointed.

The room was alive with clamor and laughter as waitresses darted about juggling entrees and drinks. Glasses sparkled as bubbling beverages gurgled out of sighing bottles, filling the festive air. It only made me much more aware that my plan was starting to crumble.

I looked across the room, surprised at all of the friends who had shown up for our gig. I spotted Bill in the back in a huddle of our buddies. I barely heard Danita introduce me.

“Girls,” she crooned, “this is Gerald Hanley.”

It brought my gaze back to the excited young ladies sitting across the table from me. I nodded with a forced smile.

“I’m Nicias Lopez,” said the olive toned girl. “We’ve known Danita a long time, but we’ve never met you.”

Her full emphasis was on ‘you’. I squirmed, not used to being the target of a woman’s compliment.

“Joann Cole,” announced the other girl. “Everyone calls me Jo.”

I nodded politely, acknowledging their introductions.

“We were just interrogating Danita,” Nicia mused in a flirting voice, “because everywhere we go, she always seems to know the star attraction.”

“Oh really,” I said, flatly glancing over at Danita, but she just shrugged. Something went cold in my chest.

“If it’s not some athlete,” blurted Jo, “it’s like wow, we walk into this place and it’s the star of the show.”

“I’m no star,” I threw out, slipping into humility mode. “They asked me only because there wasn’t anybody else.”

“Come on Gerald,” moaned Danita, uncharacteristic of every impression I had of her. “You were great!” She nudged me...hard. Her eyes were aflame with the lantern’s glow, but the hard reflection made her somehow look menacing. I sent my stare to my hands and watched my fingers wipe away imaginary dust on the table.

“He surprised me, too.” She told the other two and the coldness inside me warmed up to resentment. This whole thing was supposed to be between the two of us. Obviously she did not think so.

“I had no idea he was the entertainment,” she continued. Her companions squealed with girlish pleasure as though they were as much a part of the scheme as Danita. My resentment escalated to a cynical air. I did not care if she liked it or not.

“I meant to surprise, Danita,” I mumbled without looking up. “I solicited her to guarantee at least one person would be in the audience.”

“Oh Gerald,” Danita chided, “You knew I wasn’t going to be the only one here.”

“Well,” I returned sarcastically, “you certainly made sure that wouldn’t happen.” The other two gasped. Danita laughed lightly, her eyes roaming throughout the club. She was not even really listening to my verbal dart. I could not tell if she was ignoring me, pretending she could not read my anger, or was just so naïve that she did not understand.

“And since I’ve got an audience,” I griped as my disappointment gave way to irritation. “I’d better get back up there with the band.”

Instantly her wandering attention switched back to me. I just glared at her, tight lipped, straining to keep my expression even and pleasant. She looked back at me, disappointed, but it was my turn to show no emotion. I got up, nodding slightly to the other girls and backed away. I stormed angrily, returning to the stage.

“Who the hell does she think she is?” my internal storm erupted. “I don’t believe she did this!” I sat down and picked at my guitar strings while the rest of the band migrated through the crowd to regroup on stage. “It must be a game to her,” I continued my private tirade. “I don’t have time for this crap.”

My band was ready to go again and we knocked off more tunes, but the night was changed for me. Time was dragging by and I only wanted the whole thing to be over. I wanted to kick myself.

“I waited three years for this,” I grumbled. “I even stopped screwing around with other girls.” Suddenly all the time and my noble effort was a waste. She was just like everybody else; no angel, no goddess.

The club dwindled to a few scattered couples. The usual pattern was to leave this setting and began hitting the off-campus clubs. As eleven o’ clock came and went, we wrapped up our show to their soft applause. Each table and booth was again engulfed in conversation among the occupants as the multi-mix automated music system was instantly cranked up to fill the dimly lit romantic air with an undercurrent of tunes from the early 90’s.

I turned to begin dismantling our equipment. I was jumbled up inside with anger and confusion. I had to get out, so I gathered my gear, thanked my supporting cast, and marched toward the exit with my guitar in one hand and my feelings knotted in the clench of the other.

I put my fist against the door to push my way out into the real world again.

“I thought we had a date.”

It was Danita behind me. I stopped. I did not want to see her. I wanted to walk out anyway, but I knew I would only feel worse. I might even be sorry. I smirked at myself and turned to her. She stood looking up at me with apologetic eyes. Her hands were clasped together and she shrugged her shoulders as if to say, ‘I’m sorry.’

I did not realize my expression was so harsh until the wrinkles in my forehead fell and a smile pushed out of the tight frown. Without thinking I opened my fist and reached out for her hand.

“Okay,” I whispered.

All of my anger drained away as she took my hand and wrapped her arm around my waist. She held me close, laying her head on my chest with a gentle ‘I’m sorry’ hug. Her body was warm against mine and I wanted to drop my guitar to hold her even closer though she already was seemingly adhered to me. I relaxed.

She slipped on a jacket with a matching white cap, and we left the club. We strolled across the campus without a word. Except for an occasional frosty whisper from the wind, the roar of cars in the distance, or the chatter of people who moved along past us, there was only the crunching of our footsteps on the light dusting of snow. She hesitated and shivered under my arm, but we did not waste the moment with idle talk about the cold weather. It was the perfect pause for our first kiss.

Without thinking about it, we walked to her dormitory. We eased into the lobby and found a vacant spot in the lounge, situated with gigantic windows nearly the size of the entire wall. It was really warm, almost hot inside, so we tossed our wintery outer protection onto my guitar case and sat facing the window with its open view of the deserted streets.

She went first, asking me how long I had been singing and playing. From there the conversation took a natural course to our high school days and progressed to the early days in college. She told me she chose this school because her father graduated from Canton. I told her my reasons and we drifted to silence again.

The natural course of the conversation would have taken us to the next question: How had we been attending the school for three years without ever meeting? I did not initiate anything and did not know if she

wanted to. We sat quietly watching the vacant street and she suddenly clasped my arm.

“You wrote that song to me,” she said. I did not know if it was a question or an accusation. “No one ever wrote a song for me.” I did not look at her. I just nodded, pushing my tongue into my cheek thinking about the scores of material I had written about her. I turned. Her eyes glistened.

“You’re really different,” she said. Her sigh seemed to cause a single trickling tear to melt down her glowing face. Guilt spilled all over me again for getting so angry with her.

“I was really upset with you tonight,” I confessed.

“I know,” she said dropping her head. “I don’t know why I do things like that.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “You’re human. I guess I had to realize that, too.” She forced a smile. She turned away and stared out the window for an endless eternity of minutes. She did not look at me as she muttered,

“You’ve watched me for three years.”

I closed my eyes slowly to hide my embarrassment. I opened them and she was looking directly into me, her face, a mixture of several emotions at once.

“You heard my song,” I partially asked and declared. Then I knew she had gotten my full message and understood the whole scenario. Maybe that was why she had reacted so strangely. I put my hand over hers and breathed. “I meant what I was singing, Danita. You’re special.”

She snatched away from my touch and stood up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, surprised. “Did I say someth...” She picked up her jacket as tears dropped silently to the floor. She looked at me once more and closed her eyes tightly. I jumped up to stop her, but then she pushed my hands away and ran to the elevator.

The other couple in the lobby sat motionless watching our drama. I felt their eyes on me as I watched the elevator doors close behind her. Numbly I stood, staring at the closed doors. They went back to their conversation.

“Just a lover’s quarrel,” I heard the guy explain to his companion. Confusion pushed me out of the lobby in a rush as I gathered my gear and stepped out into the snow flurried night.

Ignoring the urge to go back to see her, I listened to my footsteps echoing in the cold November night. I walked around aimlessly for a few minutes, losing track of the time as my thoughts scattered.

What did I say? She had looked at me so strangely. What was she holding back? My mind played the scene back all over again. I saw her walk into the elevator again. Her head was bowed. Did I say too much? The elevator door began to close behind her. I was not trying to pressure her. The door closed and she did not even turn to face me again. Why had I stood there, paralyzed, letting her walk away from me?

“What the hell,” I groaned releasing the only phrase that could express the war in my head. I conceded, spun around and marched back to her dormitory. Having already discovered her room number in the school’s directory, I trooped past the puzzled glances on my trek through the nearly vacant lobby, and took the elevator.

When the elevator released me, I ambled through the darkened corridor searching out her room. I tiptoed up to her door because of the late hour. There was quiet conversation from other rooms. As I stood before her door I instantly came out of my trance to ask myself what I was doing there. I knocked lightly on the door, before I changed my mind.

“Who’s there?” She demanded from inside. ‘Too late,’ my brain flashed at me. I could not back out of it. I wanted to, but if I did, she would hear me. The guitar and the case’s weight were pulling my arm out of its socket like a ton of bricks. Moisture beaded on my head and it was suddenly hard to breathe. I had to go through with it.

“It’s me,” I croaked. I cleared my throat. “It’s Gerald.” There was a pause and I imagined she was calmly walking over to her closet, selecting a baseball bat or a gun and easing back over to the door. I chuckled at my hopeful absurdity as the locks unraveled and the door swung open.

There she stood in wide-eyed surprise in a bright pink bathrobe. Its belt was wrapped lightly around her waist as the robe clung sensuously to her skin. A small streak of water slowly teased her neck and disappeared under her robe to my envious wonder, but she wiped it away with her towel and walked away with a depressed,

“Come in if you want.”

“Look,” I hesitated. “I just came back to talk.”

“I’m okay!” She called back, apparently from her bathroom. “I was just washing my face and getting ready for bed. Thanks for your concern, but...”

A sudden spray of water drowned her last words.

I entered the room and was engulfed by sweet fragrances, feminine décor, and seductive warmth. A single low light radiated, flickering like the Koffee Klub lanterns. Her CD player was idle in a corner. I wondered if she ever turned it on.

A lonely darkened desk sat displaying hours of occupation with a desktop computer, piles of books and stacks of paper cluttering it. I turned around in a complete circle. Moving uneasily to the middle of the room, I set my stuff down and rubbed my aching arm. Not wanting to assume or infringe upon any liberties, I sat on my belongings, fighting the thoughts that looking at her bed conjured up. It looked comfortably inviting.

In my awe of just being in her room, I almost forgot why I had returned, but reality was back with the sound of her turning off the faucet. I could hear the water scurrying down the drain. My imagination was already painting the full scene for me. God, I could not believe I was listening to her in her bathroom.

“You really didn’t have to come up Gerald,” she called out. “I’ve been acting like a queen B all night.” I did not answer. I did not want my silence to say she was right, but it did. And she was right. She giggled the now familiar giggle.

“You had every right to leave and never come back,” she said as she suddenly appeared out the bathroom pulling her robe’s belt slowly around her body. Seeing her startled me, but hopefully I did not show it.

“I thought we should talk about it,” I offered. “I don’t really like departures like that.” She plopped down on her bed and pulled the towel from around her neck as she continued to pat her face dry. She read the question in my mind, which must have been on my face.

“I know I’m crazy,” she explained, “but I always wash my face before I go to bed, no matter how late.” She stopped and looked at me. Her face, beautiful even without make up, asked many silent questions.

“Mr. Hanley,” she announced. “I’m not who or what you think I am.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’m not trying to make you be anything.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“What do you mean?”

“You think I’m some special fairy tale girl or something.”

“Where did you get that idea?”

“From your song.”

“My song?”

“Not just the song . . . it’s everything!”

I did not answer. She read my bewilderment.

“You look at me...you talk to me...you...”

“I love you.”

Silence. We just looked at each other.

“Danita”

“Don’t say anything.”

She lay over on her side and curled up on the bed. I wanted to go to her, but she stopped me with,

“Where were you when I was a lowly freshman walking around here scared of the world?”

“Walking around scared of you,” I declared with a nervous laugh.

She giggled and then sobbed.

“Damn, Gerald, everything you say makes me cry.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Well, you make me cry anyway.”

“I make you sad?”

“Yes . . . and no.” She wiped her face and sat up on her elbows. I could almost see her breast. I did not know if she wanted me to or even cared.

“You’ve followed my life all this time?”

I nodded.

“You’re the special one Gerald, not me.”

That floored me. I could not respond.

She got up, crossed the room, kissed me gently on my lips and sat on the floor in front of me. Her dark eyes stared up at me caressing my heart.

“Who are you, Mr. Hanley,” she coaxed “and why do you think you love me?”

I settled back in my seat and let my eyes search the room as though I were seeking out an answer. She looked at me, eyes set on mine. I placed my hand behind her head, allowing her hair to fill in between my fingers. She shuddered and shrunk back from me.

“I’m only a girl who has made many mistakes.”

“But a special girl to me,” I insisted. She took my hand and held it tightly between hers. She stared at the floor.

“Remember Al Spearman?”

“The football player you dated last year,” I said as evenly as I could.

“He said I was special, too,” she stated bitterly.

Insult stabbed me. Did she think I was just another black man on the prowl?

“I thought I was in love with him,” she continued in the same breath.

I was angry that he had hurt her and I did not want to hear the details.

“He got my roommate pregnant,” she hissed, squeezing my hand. “I was so stupid to trust him.”

She stared at nothing in particular as she spoke to me quietly. She hesitated before revealing. “I slept with him, but afterwards I found out about my roommate.”

We did not say anything for a minute. I thought back to the days of seeing him with her and hated him all over again. How could I convince her that I was not counterfeit too? After all, I had been the same as him. I had been with girls that I did not really love, too.

She cleared her throat and spoke evenly.

“I was so mad,” she continued, “I stayed away from every man on this campus after that.”

“I know.”

Her lips quivered as another emotional wave swept over her.

“What did I say that time?” I asked softly, bewildered again by her reaction.

“You waited for me,” she said quietly, “You didn’t give up.”

“That makes you cry?”

“It makes me happy.”

I was dumbfounded.

“I guess it means you really love me.”

I could not help it as a sudden burst of relief sprang out of me in a jovial laugh. I got down on the floor with her and drew her to me.

“Of course I love you,” I whispered. “Now I know why you brought your friends to the club. It was for protection.”

She climbed to her knees letting her robe drift open and pulled me to her. We kissed...tenderly...longingly. This felt so right, ignoring my mother’s precautions was easy. This was the one worth taking the risk.

Afterwards, we held each other until the violet light of morning silently invaded our world. I lay very still as she gently breathed on my shoulder. Her hand rested softly, in loving satisfaction, on my chest. The shadows of the room formed into furniture and assorted room decorations as the morning sky brightened.

Finally, I could see her face. She was like a little girl sleeping in perfect security. Her eyes were closed peacefully and her lips slightly parted, as if ready for a kiss.

“Somebody up there likes me after all,” I thought. “I finally got her; I got the girl of my dreams.”

## *Part Two: YOU*

(Present Day – Early Morning)

The morning air had the sting of winter, yet it was bearable, until a car rushed by sending a biting rush sweeping over me. I hurriedly tossed Petey onto the backseat as he stared in wide-eyed curiosity, seemingly unaffected by it all. I scurried around to the driver's side to jump into the shelter with him and cut off the freezing torrent.

“Have a nice day!” Trill words sifted through my car's frosted windows. I turned and saw my landlord, Sandy, parading out of the building, her face paled by the Midwest autumn chill. A few strands of her blonde hair wavered over dancing blue eyes as she squinted behind a smothering layer of coat and scarf.

Even though she was not a super attractive girl, I sensed a certain warmth towards her. There was awkwardness between us, though. I had told myself, ever since I first met her in high school, that I had no romantic interest outside of my ethnicity. I wasn't prejudiced. I just had no interest.

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I was a junior at Millan high school when I met the skinny blonde girl with very dark blue eyes, who was always energetic, talkative and expressive. To describe her as outgoing was an understatement. Sandy Lawson was part of our group of friends that hung out after class, in the cafeteria, or at sporting events.

She was one of only a few white female friends that I had in those days because, even though our school was integrated, most of society was still crawling through racial stress. Within the school, Blacks, Whites, Hispanics and Asians got along okay most times, but I watched several interracial love affairs crumble under parental pressures. I had no inclination to get to know Sandy or any other girl outside of my ethnicity, beyond friendship.

After graduation, I rarely saw most of the high school crew again until ten years later, at our class reunion. Even with all my summer visits from college, I wasn't able to locate anyone from the inner circle. We had truly scattered to chase our dreams. Memory lane was brought alive with the quick thought of that class reunion. Now even that was haunting history.

I started the car. It juggled air and gas for a second before roaring in full power. Petey barked loudly. I waved at Sandy and pulled off,

glancing in my rear view mirror at her again. She stood with a puzzled stare behind a thin cloud of her breath. It was the same look she had given me at the class reunion when I told her I was married. Her eyes questioned and judged even more when she saw Danita, but in her familiar tone, she chimed out a polite 'O really?' in surprise of my accomplishment and moved on to greet other classmates.

Danita grumbled a lot about attending the reunion. I practically dragged her to the event and that really insulted me because she no longer seemed interested in the band anymore. It seemed, during those days, that every aspect of my life was a torturing bore to her.

It hadn't always been like that. After college the group stuck together and decided to try to make this music thing work as a professional career. It took a few months, but we all moved to St. Louis.

While making the transition, Danita and I got married. Her folks were against it and mine weren't all that happy either. They were right, in that we were broke and the idea of launching into the entertainment world was a huge gamble.

Sure, we had been popular on a college campus, but that was no indication that the success would follow us beyond that world. So, the in-laws had found common ground and it made them instant friends in a weird way. Yet, they saw that we were really determined, so we ended up with a fairly nice wedding in Atlanta.

Once Danita and I got settled in St. Louis, our degrees granted us entry level positions in the workforce. I worked in the publications department of a school district and she worked in the legal department of a marketing firm. Our combined income helped us get off to a good start as we launched into our dream.

We called the band *Mystery* and Danita became our business manager. We recorded a CD, and began to get weekend gigs in local bars. The real fight was to get work on enough weekends to make a living. Just as importantly, our sound was getting out and we were on a direct trip to major entertainment exposure.

Months and years went by in a flash because we were always on the go. We bought a van and a small trailer to haul our equipment. We worked hard and somehow we were surviving. We overcame several setbacks and eventually walked away from the 'day jobs' once a full year of weekend bookings were lined up. We landed great gigs from massive outdoor venues to local television spots. However, the most meaningful gig we were ever asked to perform, six years after college, was my high school class reunion.

It was no secret that Danita was totally uncomfortable with going to the reunion. It was as if though she hated the thought of being in a place where she did not know anyone and no one knew her, except as 'Mrs. Hanley'. I watched her cringe as an agonized frown slipped through her calm camouflage each time she was addressed as Gerry's wife.

The best thing about the night was that I was given the chance to present the band. I found myself standing on a stage facing the people who once knew me as the kid who started out reciting poetry and playing the guitar in an English class. They applauded me and the band for a long time before we finally started the show.

We worked through a few of our best songs from the past couple of years and heads were bobbing and people were dancing to our smooth flowing style. I got caught up in the hype of the night and lost track of Danita. I found myself refreshed and revived, just being surrounded by people who were part of a forgotten place inside of me. I vaguely spotted her sitting in the midst of the audience, but I could not tell who else was sitting at our table.

We took a much needed break, to the reunion crowd's roaring disapproval, but I laughed and told them we would be back in a few minutes. The reunion's D.J. began his mix of hits from the 90's as we came off the stage.

Before I could get to my table with Danita, I got an 'old school' greeting from my closest friends; the inner circle. They pulled me over to their table and we hugged as we hollered at each other. It was great to see them all: Mike, Sandy, Reggie, Ronnie, Curtis, Al, Oscar and Pat. Some had spouses or friends with them.

They raved over me, saying they were not surprised when they first heard about this new band called Mystery, that I was the lead singer and writer. They kept predicting that one day they will be watching me on television at the Grammy awards. I pushed off their compliments and steered the conversation from dreaming about my future to reminiscing about the old days. We instantly dug up some long forgotten memories. Those memories led to recalling the songs we once listened to in high school.

Suddenly I had a fantastically wild idea. I invited them all on stage to relive those tunes. They laughed at me, signaling with both hands that there was no way they were going up in front of the reunion crowd, but I was already in motion pulling them all onto the stage.

The crowd caught my plan instantly and began cheering. My friends reluctantly got on the microphones as I ordered the first song. The resident D.J. caught the plan, too and as the first song, straight from LL Cool J, was launched, the place blew up. Immediately, everything was just as wild, uncut and uncensored as in high school.

My friends belted out the lyrics and screeched out the melodies, but nobody cared. The class leaped, almost in unison, and began dancing the ancient steps, screaming with laughter at one another for remembering. The D.J. pumped out artist after artist and hit after hit, so we lost track of time and the night's agenda.

I was hot and sweaty as I bounced across the stage. I took a sweeping glance across the people swarmed dance floor, suddenly thinking about Danita. I saw her sitting at our table; her eyes fixed in curious fascination on Jackie Johnson, one of the many football star athletes we had on our state championship football team. He was sitting at our table with a couple other people that I didn't recognize.

For some reason, I just smirked and went on without giving the scene another thought. Even though Jackie was an absolute physical masterpiece with the nice build, big muscles, trim waist, perfect hair and expensive apparel; seeing him talking to Danita did not threaten me in that moment.

After all, I remembered him very well. He was never one to make a play for anyone's girl. He always had plenty of his own. He still seemed to be the same soft-spoken, even-tempered guy he had always been even though he had a highly acclaimed college career, which led to a pro contract. He was in his fifth season with the St. Louis Stallions and still squelching any mention of his personal success.

As far as I was concerned, Danita and I were secure in our marriage and on our way to success in the music business. We had our conflicts, like any other couple, but there was no need to make silly problems with a jealousy trip.

Finally, the D.J. gave way to *Mystery* and we resumed our show with some of my latest songs. Everyone seemed to like them, further encouraging me that I was still on the right track with the music's appeal.

The evening slowly waltzed toward midnight and the crowd began to disperse, trying to savor the last few moments to linger in the 1990's. We drug out the show as long as we could for the stragglers and finally ended the evening with a number called 'One Last Slow Dance'. There

were a few scattered handclaps and we began the routine of break down. My old friends joined us as we gratefully consented to their help.

We had played so long that we outlasted the catering company with its huge stock pile of food and drinks. The class reunion committee had booked the banquet hall until midnight, so we had to do the Cinderella thing and hurry up and get out of there.

“I’m hungry,” growled Chris.

“I could use a beer,” JP joined in.

“The Knight Life restaurant is still open,” yelled my high school buddies.

“Let’s hit it then,” I said and we quickly packed up our van.

In between loads, I ventured away to find my long lost wife. There were still a few pockets of classmates mingling in the banquet hall as the staff worked around them to clear tables and remove the stage.

I found Danita still under the charm of Jackie Johnson. This time there was a flash of jealousy, but I pushed it aside as I shook hands with him when I reached the table.

“You’re really good,” he complimented. “I remember you back in high school. I had no idea you’d make it this far.” I waved off his praise.

“I’ve been lucky,” I said. “I’ve got a good band.”

“You also have a nice lady,” he said smiling.

“That you seem to have stolen from me tonight,” I responded with a laugh to ease any perceived tension.

“Watch this guy,” I playfully cautioned Danita. “He was a teen idol in his time.” She just smiled.

Jackie laughed it off and stood up to make a formal departing speech. He shook my hand and bowed to Danita. He was charming to the max. On his way out he was flocked by another bunch of folks who recognized him for the sports celebrity that he had become. They followed him right out the door, like groupies surrounding a rock star.

“We’re ready to go,” I said turning to my wife. “The band and the guys are going to the ‘Knight Life’ for a bite to eat.” She frowned.

“I’m tired, Gerald,” she moaned. “That’s way out in the west side suburbs. I just want to go home.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” I apologized, though disappointed she did not share my enthusiasm. “I wasn’t trying to force you...”

“I don’t care if you want to go out with your boys,” she cut in. “You haven’t seen them in ten years and besides you’re hungry and ready to party a bit more.” She looked me straight in my eyes. I stepped back.

“You don’t mind?” I mused at her.

“Of course not,” she whispered. “I’ll just take the car, pick up my puppy from your sister and go home while you continue your reunion.”

She winked...sexy. I kissed her on the cheek, amazed at her sudden understanding and acceptance of my world. I hugged her and joined my old friends.

Our reunion continued at a restaurant I hadn’t seen since I was in high school. Once we were seated, we were quite laid back and relaxed. Conversation came easily as we opened up a bit about our trials and triumphs since the naive days of Millan High.

With a couple of the guys working in a manufacturing plant, one in a bank corporate office, and three in various retail jobs, I was the only one with a real chance at reaching any of our teenage dreams.

I informed them of the plans, in progress, for Mystery’s next project because it had serious commercial potential. A local record producer was ready to sign us and connect us to a national agent, so we were sitting on the brink of our explosion. We were even scheduled for auditions with a major recording company. For the next six months we would be on the road promoting our latest CD.

Everyone sat quietly listening in envious admiration. However, I could not let them think everything had been perfect for us, so I began painting the whole picture.

I set the tone by disclosing that we were part of the first graduating class of the new millennium, from Canton University, and we left with big dreams. I told them how, after graduation, Danita and I moved to St. Louis where she organized the band’s finances. She had great business savvy. She was the true force and stability behind our success. She made contacts and connections as she learned the industry quickly. She lined up an attorney and watched over the accounting like a pro.

I tried to convey how the music business is brutal, like life on the African savannah. Only the strong survive. The slightest weakness

could mean the death of your act. I told them the music business will take you in, chew you up, and spit you out. There are no apologies, no condolences and no get well cards.

Thanks to Danita, Mystery was making decent money. By the time a well-respected producer came along to help us with our second CD, she was managing everything.

As a result, we did not have much of a home life. I was gone most of the time, either in rehearsals or on the road; so show business had a lot of setbacks.

The first major setback was September 11<sup>th</sup>. The entertainment business came to a brake screeching halt. Business was hurting all over the country. We almost quit as we held on to our day jobs and worked in places we hated while we waited for things to pick up again.

Some of our engagements, when we first started up again, were not even income generators, but they provided exposure. With the nation going into war, we worked on a possible USO tour and Danita and I had battled about whether she should go or stay behind. We postponed the idea when a couple of strong, big money gigs, opened up for us.

We were granted music spots for the local major league sports teams and exposure was at an all-time high. By then, we were buying a home, paying for two cars, making those God-forsaken student loan payments, and we had lots of business related bills. With that final disclosure, I had brought everyone up to speed on the past ten years since high school.

From there, the conversation moved to our families: spouses, girlfriends, kids, jobs and life. The air became quiet with a low hum of neo soul music looming in the background. We had burgers and beers as we settled into the nostalgic familiarity of days long gone by.

My old friends hung on to every word. Sandy was leaning anxiously against me, her elbow digging into my thigh. I was really getting tired of talking about the band and me, but everybody seemed so eager to hear just what it takes to be successful in the entertainment world.

“I hear the women are great on the road,” mused Mike “I wish I were you.” His friend, Karla, elbowed him in his ribs.

“They always go after the lead singers,” growled JP jealously. I nodded in reluctant agreement.

“But,” Sandy added, “He’s a married lead singer.”

“So?” swooned Mike, “that never stopped most women.”

“It never stopped most singers either,” spouted Ricky and everyone laughed.

I could feel Sandy trembling with mirth against me. I tensed for a moment realizing the scene we were making - a black man and a white woman sitting at a table together in this part of town. No one in the restaurant seemed to notice. Only the waitress and a few other patrons did a double take at us, but it didn't seem to matter to them either.

Maybe it was all just me; flashing back to how things were ten years ago. This section of St. Louis had been predominantly white, back then, and I had never actually been inside this place even after we moved back after graduation. It just felt weird to be there; seeing everything was so different from years past.

Our food arrived and we broke up into smaller groupings. Mike and Karla were sectioned off with Sandy and me. Our conversation took a safer route as we tried to remember names and faces of teachers, students, administrators, geeks, athletes and even parents.

“Tell us about your wife,” Sandy blurted.

“I still can't believe this guy,” razzed Mike. “You were the last person I expected to see with a wife.” I shook my head, staring at the floor with a blank smile trying to piece together words to describe Danita.

“Uh oh, he's going into deep thought,” Mike mimicked as though describing a sporting event. “He lifts an eyebrow – stops – no he can't use that phrase – now he's ready – wait – okay, now he's got just the word...” The ladies were doubled over snickering and trying not to explode with laughter.

Finally with tears in her eyes, Sandy came up for air.

“Never mind,” she gasped. “At this point Mike has taken away any sincerity you might have put into it.”

“Actually,” Mike boasted. “I thought he would marry somebody white.” The ladies buckled under again. “Everybody else was into Notorious B.I.G. and Puff Daddy and you was playing that guitar and reciting poems.”

“What's that got to do with marrying somebody white?” I snickered trying to hold back a smile.

“You could have married me,” Sandy cracked between laughter and trying to breathe and then I laughed, too.

“Yeah,” I joked. “I can see your father now on the part, ‘speak now or forever hold your peace’. That’s when the piece would have fired.”

“You wouldn’t have made it that far,” Mike said as the humor slowly faded out of the moment. “I wish things could have been different during those days.”

“Not just back then,” his girlfriend joined in. “We’ve still got some of it now, but it’s more on the down low.”

“I was kind of thinking about that,” I added. “It really feels strange being in this part of town and no one looking at me funny because I’m sitting here with Sandy.”

“You musicians are all alike,” she griped. “You’re always finding a new way to hit on a girl.” We laughed again, a little glad that someone had steered the conversation away from such a sore subject.

The time was slipping away and by three a.m. I shook hands and hugged the last of my high school inner circle. Only the band and their friends remained.

I, however, still had Sandy listening intensely, to my weary ramblings about business, paperwork and booking arrangements. She seemed so close and intimate that I wanted to run out, but the presence of interest and concern were so welcoming that I stayed.

Since high school, she had experienced a lot. She was still friendly and peppy, but life had instilled some wisdom and street smarts. Nobody was going to take advantage or abuse her again. She had married and divorced. Her ex got the car and the cash. She got the house, or rather a very nice apartment building which he had owned. He let her have it so he could go on to other business endeavors.

As the conversation got more honest, he had actually stuck her with it. She could hardly keep up with tenant damages, taxes and bills. It was, at the time, the worst thing that he could have done to her. As time went by, the one thing that kept it going was the ideal location, close to the downtown business section.

I looked at her, wondering how any man could treat such a nice person that way. Already she was aging, slightly, under her eyes and a few gray strands sprinkled through her hair, but her deep blue eyes

seemed so full of care above a narrow petite nose and thin, soft pink lips.

Guilt overwhelmed me for seeing her that way, so forbidding, yet so inviting. I wondered how she saw me and if she could feel what I was sensing.

Sometimes, during high school and college I wondered about 'Jungle Fever'. Spike Lee's movie came out while I was still in elementary school, so I didn't understand it until I reached Millan High. It was alive and well by the time I made it to Canton. However, it had never really hit me until right then.

Now this girl, a longtime friend; one who I joked with, confided in, shared lunch with, once cheated in class with and even tried out new poems on; sat before me. Her eyes were fixed on my every expression. The sleepiness lifted with a sudden rush of erotic emotions.

"Let's get out of here Gerry," J.P. insisted and I shifted my attention to my band members who, stumbling out of their seats, were headed out of the restaurant. I turned to Sandy. Disappointment weighed on her brow. I shrugged my shoulders with no options.

"You can ride with me," she suggested. The dangerous possibilities blared in my head, but I would not accept what I was concluding. Not me. Not Sandy. It would just be two good friends, who enjoy the company of one another, to share memories of the 90's, riding in a car.

"That sounds like a good idea," I babbled robotically. "I'll just go with you."

The guys did not care. They hardly noticed. Chris, Carol and Jessie had long departed. It had been a long night. JP and Ricky were all that remained. In a flash, they were roaring off into the night, lights flashing behind the van. They disappeared behind a semi, rumbling along the freeway, and we were left standing in the quiet of the restaurant parking lot. Sandy stuffed her hands in her jacket pockets and broke into a comfortable stride.

"I'm parked over here," she said in a near whisper. I followed immediately, automatically sizing her up as though looking at her for the first time. She had lost her girlish slender figure for a more mature one. Oddly enough her hair was now sandy blonde to fit her name. She was dressing a lot better than high school days and seemed a lot more serious about her surroundings.

I followed her through the parking lot, again becoming aware of my skin color and being seen with a white woman. I tried to convince myself that we should both be proud to have accomplished a long term, interracial friendship in spite of society's views and strains. Yet, the memories of how this neighborhood used to be had me convinced that if a couple of white guys saw me with her right then, I would be in immediate trouble.

Finally, she stepped up to a tiny, two-door compact, gleaming red from the parking lot lights. She took out her key chain and pressed the button to unlock the car and it happily 'doink doinked'. Sandy eased in as I ducked into the car and closed the door. The silence was awkward. Cars sped in lonely sequence along the freeway in the distance and someone laughed coming out of the restaurant. I stared into the darkness unable to make out the patterns of my shoes.

"You know Gerry," Sandy started to say. I looked over at her waiting for her to finish her sentence. She smiled behind the silhouette of her face. I could not see her complete expression, but I sensed something. "This night has brought back so much."

"Yeah," I huffed, lying back, resting my head. I was quite a bit buzzed from a little too much beer.

"I bet you never knew I liked you in high school," she announced. I went blank. Then she laughed. "God," and she swore, "You really didn't."

"How could I have known?" I protested. "You never acted like that towards me."

"That was impossible because of my family," she complained. "I barely had any friends just for hanging around black kids."

"It was the same for a lot of us, too!" I groaned, keeping my eyes closed, which did not stop the dizziness. "I know we didn't have any race riots, but we weren't all the best of friends, either."

"Didn't you feel anything for me back then?" she asked. I groaned. Time has a way of erasing memories as well as feelings and I just could not bring up anything romantic toward Sandy from that time and place.

"For some of us," I confessed, "the issue was still too sensitive. For me, I just never let my emotions go there." She was silent. She started up the car and leaned back in her seat running her hands through her hair.

"What if..." She mumbled and stopped.

“But,” I cut in “that was the world we grew up in. We can’t change the past. Sometimes the present is hard enough to deal with.”

I let my words sink into my own thoughts. Suddenly her lips were on mine as her arms pulling me to her. I wanted to fight it, but I didn’t. In that moment, she was not a white woman. I was not a black man. It was just a woman and a man embraced in a kiss. We held each other. Long. We parted and I blinked in disbelief. She pulled out of the parking lot quickly and we drove to her place for the night.

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(Present Day – Still Morning)

I hurried up the steps of my sister’s house carrying Petey and humming the tune I had written after that reunion. It was the last song I had written. Every time I went to work, my sister and her kids looked after Petey. He squirmed as I rang the doorbell. The door swung open immediately.

“Good morning Paula,” I greeted my sister as she burst into a smile. She was a deceptively frail looking girl. Dark skinned, like me, with thick shoulder length braided hair. Her hazel eyes and perfectly even teeth were our father’s traits. However, her wide mouth and nose with high cheekbones were definitely from mom. I carried Petey into the haven of his daily hangout.

Her kids came out of nowhere to greet him. Paula was almost as tall as me and still did not look her age despite having three children. She had earned a degree in Sociology, but she decided to be a stay-home mother. She showed no regrets for her decision. She loved her kids, her husband and her lifestyle. Danita called her crazy and I secretly resented my wife for saying that about my sister.

Joey crawled out of the children’s room.

“Here’s my boy,” I cheered as I picked him up and followed my sister through her sophisticated maze of organized clutter toward the kitchen. I really liked her youngest child. Something about him reminded me of myself. If I had a kid, I wanted him to be like Joey.

“You’re earlier than I expected,” complained Paula “Have some hot cocoa.” She offered it as she redirected her steps to the children’s room. I went to the kitchen and sat at the table, anticipating drinking the steamy brown liquid in one of the cups before me. I let Joey go and he scooted out of the kitchen babbling and squealing something to the other children.

“You guys be quiet!” Paula shouted as she bolted into the kitchen a few seconds later.

“But Mama!”

“Be quiet and get your clothes on,” she answered.

“Is Joey going with us?”

“Yes,” she looked at me shrugging helplessly.

“Can I carry him?”

“He’s too big for you to carry him,” another child jibed.

“Shut up, you’re too little to carry him.”

“You, shut up, you’re too little to carry him too!”

“No I’m not!”

“I said for everybody to be quiet!” Paula yelled.

“They’re trying to drive you crazy,” I insisted jokingly.

“I know,” she groaned as she twirled one of her braids. We both laughed. Silence invaded quickly; at least for a couple of seconds.

“Okay Paula,” I initiated, picking up the closest cup to sample it. “What was last night all about? She trudged over to her stove and stood with her back to me.

“Danita is back,” she announced. “She called me yesterday looking for you.” I sipped the hot drink slowly, depressing the anxiety in my chest. Suddenly everything was cloudy and confusing.

“Did you give her my cell phone number?” I asked, fighting the tremor in my tone.

“No, because she wants to talk face to face.”

“Did she mention anything about getting a divorce?”

“No!” Paula said emphatically as she seemed to realize in that moment that the subject was not part of their conversation. I sat back with a smug grin.

“She just wants to see you,” my sister tried to settle me as she sat down at the table and pleaded with deeply troubled eyes. “Please Gerry!”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her, “she won’t get anything beyond her part of the house sell.” Paula put her head down and folded her arms.

“You mean to tell me,” she huffed, “you believe that’s all she wants to talk about?”

“It’s obvious!” I said with full assurance. My sister could not be that naïve. “Can’t you see that?”

She just shook her head.

“I’m sorry I brought it all up,” she lamented bitterly.

“You can’t mean that you feel anything like sorry for **her**?” I complained.

“I’m not on anyone’s side,” she moaned, looking right into my eyes. I could not take it when she did that. It felt like she could read my thoughts. I stirred the cocoa around in the cup to avoid her investigation.

“Gerry,” she urged. I grimaced and waved her off as I turned away from her. “Gerry, listen to me.”

“I already know what you’re going to say,” I threw out. “I’ll work this out so Danita won’t have to come over and bother you and the kids. She looked at me, wide eyed, as her mouth fell open.

“God help me,” she sobbed and I knew she really meant it. Instantly I was aware that I had hurt her. I still had the habit of firing off bullets at the wrong target and hitting the most vulnerable spots. I was hoping to spare my sister any conflicts with Danita like they had had when we first got married. She knew that was what I was referring to. Tears glistened in her eyes as her voice cracked.

“The past has nothing to do with it Gerry,” she choked. “Why don’t you listen to somebody for a change, instead of trying to figure out where everybody is coming from, so you can have all your defenses ready?”

“I’m sorry Sis,” I said. “I didn’t mean anything against you.”

“Then just listen, will you?” she stressed with a sudden authority in her voice. I nodded. I sat back in my seat and surrendered to hear her out.

“My dear brother,” she began, struggling to find words to get her message across to me. “Danita has changed now and I can’t make you believe that, so you guys need to talk.”

“Why?” I demanded. “She walked out of this.”

“Yes I know,” Paula griped. “You’ve told everybody two million times. We all know that Danita left you.” Hearing her say it transformed me back to the morning after the class reunion.

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(Reunion Night)

When Sandy dropped me off, I walked into the house and it was 6:22 a.m. Danita was not there. First I was relieved and then I nearly panicked, thinking she might have been in an accident or worse. I sat on the bed and checked my cell phone. It was off. I turned it on and checked the messages. There were two calls from Danita, but no message. I hated it when she did that. I was always nagging her to leave a message when she calls, but she was one of those people who would hang up if they heard a voicemail greeting.

I pushed the button to call her back. It rang endlessly. Her voice mail greeting came on and I began to wonder who to call next - the police, the hospitals, or her friends. Maybe she was still at Paula’s. I really didn’t want to call my sister, looking for my wife.

Meanwhile, my pessimism started rolling a horror film. I saw myself at the morgue and tried to imagine how I would respond to seeing her rigid, lifeless form. A tune from long ago seeped into my mind.

*“If I could never hold you...I’d love you still.”*

“Oh God,” I mumbled. “Where is she?”

The front door opened. I closed the cell phone.

“Gerry?” She questioned searchingly. “Are you home?”

I laughed at myself for getting so worried.

“Yes, love,” I forced out calmly. The emotional rollercoaster had me trembling and I got up to get a drink. Suddenly a flash of jealousy flared in me.

“I’m sorry,” she said as she came in the bedroom kicking off her shoes throwing her purse on the bed. I turned and she darted into the bathroom, her hair tangled wildly down her back.

“What happened?” I asked as calmly as I could, but my voice was a pitch or two higher than usual. “I just got home and I was going crazy.”

“Oh Gerald,” She groaned. “You have such an improbable imagination.”

“Well, what was I supposed to think?” I asked trying to control the urgency in my tone. “I thought you’d be home asleep by now. I just tried to call and you didn’t answer your cell phone...”

“Now Gerald,” she protested as the shower roared in the bathroom. “I just left later than I expected.” Then she systematically gave me a recount of her night.

“The car wouldn’t start, so Jackie tried to fix it. He put in a call to his emergency road service membership. They tried to get it going for a long time and I fell asleep in the lobby. Finally, he just brought me home. By the way, I called you twice, and then I reached your sister to let her know.”

My mental computer went into motion. Knowing what happened between Sandy and me, pushed my jealousy to a whole new level and I erupted because of the guilt I was engulfed in.

“You’ve been out with Jackie Johnson all night?” The words spilled out of my mouth and they implied more than I meant to say. I was the guilty one, yet I was implying the crime against her.

Danita turned the shower off and slowly walked out to face me. Her eyes were afire and her cheeks reddened with the fury of insult.

“Excuse me,” she snapped, neck rolling and both hands on her hips, “What the hell do you mean by that?”

I tried to respond, but I had made one of those mistakes no man should make with a black woman.

“I know you don’t think something happened between Jackie and me because it didn’t!” She was rising fast from the launch pad and building momentum. “Now, you can act crazy if you want to, but you will be crazy all by yourself!”

“What was I supposed to think?” I served back weakly like a one sided tennis match. “Just look at you! Your clothes are wrinkled and your hair is all messed up!”

“Go...to...hell!” She hissed deliberately through angrily curled lips, her teeth clenched tightly. I had never seen her this way and she had never spoken to me so viciously.

“D-Danita,” I stuttered, “That’s not what I meant...” She turned and slammed the door behind her. I heard single drops of water from the shower head counting the seconds of our silence. I heard her sobbing. I sat on the bed numb with devastating guilt. Just hours ago, we were a beautiful, first class, outstanding couple; two cars, nice clothes, great career, and the talk of the class reunion. I swore as I smashed my face into my guilt stained hands.

After that day, Danita became increasingly distant. We had times of silence before, but this was like death. This time it was really bad. I was not sure whether anything happened between Jackie and her, but I was sure loaded with guilt about Sandy and me. I would ask her to talk to me, but she would just shrug me off with an irritated shoulder.

One Sunday night I came home from a weekend road trip only to be greeted by a letter. It said something about needing to get away from me and no longer wanting to be my wife. I could not finish it. I knew she had left me. My sister called me minutes afterwards to ask when we were coming to pick up the puppy. She became the first to know about Danita and me.

I sat on the sofa crying waves of condemned tears. Things had turned out far worse than I could ever have expected. Against all odds we got married, struggled to start and keep the band going, and fought to make it to a solid level of success. Just when we could finally make it big, I had cheated on her and practically accused her of doing the same damnable thing. I knew I had blown it.

I could only assume that somehow, somehow she found out about Sandy and me. I just knew our life was over as husband and wife.

Having absolutely no desire to pursue pointless fantasies, I made plans to get out of the house, pay off some bills and get an apartment. I convinced our attorney that we were headed for divorce, so he suggested that I put the house up for sale and make plans to split our assets. She left with one of the cars, so it was pretty clear where this was headed. Unless I wanted to lose a whole lot more, it was best to get prepared for the battle ahead.

Since Danita usually handled the business stuff, I didn’t think I could wait for the house to sell, so I moved out as soon as I could. If she wanted to keep the house, she could make the payments while the house was on the market. I was not going to keep making mortgage payments in a lost cause. I was going to find a temporary place while the dust settled. Besides, I did not want her to know where I was living. I had to do whatever I could to protect my future.

Unfortunately, Sandy was the one and only person who had a place for me to stay while I was in such a tough financial bind. One thing about becoming popular, there was nowhere to hide when things went bad. Where could I go and not be recognized?

I approached Sandy with a lot of awkwardness and she must have felt just as guilty. She let me move into one of the apartments in her building with all my junk and Danita's puppy, even though it was against her 'no pets' rule. She knew my move meant Danita and I were separated. We did not speak about the class reunion until weeks later, and even then it was with a lot of regret. She said something about not intending to break up my marriage. I told her it was my fault. We did not talk about it again.

After that, Sandy and I were cordial and friendly toward one another. We were never hostile or indifferent, but we had a tough time looking at each other eye to eye, knowing what we knew and now living with the consequences.

In the meantime, there were concerts to perform and recording session deadlines to meet. I had to scramble to hire a new accountant and a manager. Danita had been both for us, but all of that was changed. I did not tell the band what was going on. I just fed them a lie that Danita was tired of doing all this stuff and these new people were going to help us get to the next level.

All of the running around kept me too busy to think. I had to do whatever it took to keep the income flowing. I gathered all that I was battling inside and tried to express it in the only way I knew. But I couldn't. There were no more songs. Danita was gone. The music was gone.

We still had enough songs, on file, to last us for a while. The public still thought things were great, but our manager did not. He sat me down to talk.

Big Bob, as we called him, wanted to know why I was not writing any new material. He said he could get a few warm up gigs for the band through some old contacts, but even those venues were going to be looking for new stuff from me. So the pressure was on. He wanted me to go see a therapist or something.

Finally, the heart-wrenching job of telling the band the truth became unavoidable. What was really odd was that I had been able to keep our separation away from them because it was not strange for them not to see Danita for weeks at a time. That was just the way it was. Even though their friends and spouses were around all the time,

I never realized that Danita had been absent most of the time, months before this turn of events.

Everyone was shocked by my news. We had dreamed, hoped and planned for so much, but this was not part of the trip to the top. I told them I might consider the idea for them to go on, for a while, without me. I was having writer's block any way.

However, they slapped me back into reality. Most of the music was mine. I was the lead singer. Most of the act was built on me, a black guitarist doing ballads and spoken word. With most black artist heavy into rap, R&B, neo soul or jazz, we would have a better chance with this style. The key was to be the first one to hit the major markets with a unique act.

Unlike when we first started, many others were now doing the same thing as us, but all were shooting for the one big break that makes you known as the FIRST.

All kinds of new entertainment strategies were appearing like nationally televised singing competitions and any one of the contestants could blow it for us if the styles were similar, or worse, if they won.

Competition was getting tougher every day and we had a serious decision to make regarding the future of our band. Now our name, 'Mystery' had a new meaning because our survival and future was a mystery.

Even though I was not writing songs, everyone agreed that I should still perform. I owed it to them. We were in it together.

After the announcement about Danita and me, things started to pick up a bit. Just as he promised, Big Bob landed some warm up spots with a couple of big time acts. He got me the production studio sessions for a little extra income for me. When he told us that the USO tour was back on the table, we told him to book it. Once again, we were on a roll.

Up until Danita's sudden reappearance, I never expected to see her again. I just thought we would settle this over long distance, through an attorney.

Somehow she must have known about the band's improving outlook and she was back to collect as much as she could. Maybe splitting the proceeds from the house sell was not going to be enough. She had waited for her spousal investment to grow.

There was no way she was coming back out of the goodness of her heart. This was a move for her personal survival and a move to get as much as she could get out of a divorce. After what I did, she would never let me walk away clean.

In the past four months, since she left, I had learned to survive, too. I had learned to watch out for my crew and neither she, or any two-bit lawyer was going to take us down. She walked out and that was that. I shook off the wave of thoughts by returning to the present.

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(Present Day – Same Morning)

“It doesn’t make any sense,” my sister pleaded. “Why are you doing this?” I could not answer her. “What are you proving? What are you accomplishing?”

“I’ve got to get to work,” I intruded on her oncoming speech. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Gerry!” she cried.

“I really can’t talk about it, Sis,” I insisted as I walked out of the kitchen and made my way to her front door. “I don’t have time to make you understand.

“At least talk to Danita,” she urged as I pushed the door open. “She wants to meet you here today.”

I paused, grimacing at the annoying cold air forcing its way into the house.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I said with a surge of insecurity.

I did not really want to see Danita, especially with Paula present. My sister stood, gripping her robe as the cold air swept around her. I closed the door again, cutting off the rush. The children giggled in their room and the washing machine rumbled in the basement as it kicked into spin mode.

“If she calls again,” I instructed, “tell her okay, I’ll see her.” My sister let out a long breath.

“Go to work,” she said and turned away.

I opened the door again as she trudged back into her kitchen. She did not say another word as I turned and hurried off to my

recording sessions. My mind played through several personal movies, all at the same time.

Somehow I had to get my sister out of this before Danita revealed my part of the conflict to her. The situation had become so unpredictable. Danita might try anything. What was she up to?

I twisted my lips with the passing of ironic thoughts. I realized this month was the anniversary of our first night together. We became friends and lovers in November. We graduated in May. We got married in August. Six years after that, came the fateful class reunion in June. We separated the very next month. It was supposed to mark the beginning of our big explosion of success, but instead it was the beginning of the destruction of our marriage.

Man, I had been so stupid. Why didn't I just push Sandy away that night? I had reverted back to the old Gerry from college. Once again, a girl had come on to me, and once again, I didn't turn her away. Only this time, I was a married man and I was married to the girl of my dreams. Why did I throw it all away?

Now four months after we split up, my sister was convinced that Danita had, somehow, changed. However, my sister didn't know Danita. This is the woman who stood toe to toe with producers and promoters. She was shrewd and very smart. Now I had made her my enemy. If she was out for revenge, I knew I was in deep trouble. That's why this return had to be a survival tactic. She's been on her own. She needs money. Where does she get the money? She gets it from a divorce settlement and nothing was going to stop her.



## *Part Three: STILL*

(Present Day – Mid Morning – Four Hours Later)

The morning was busy since I had to record music tracks for a community affairs program. That was followed by laying some vocals for a weekly local talk show's theme song. Afterwards, I took my ever-welcome lunch break. My mind was clouded with images of Danita, all morning, as I fought through conclusions of what she was likely to tell me.

*Maybe her parents had agreed to financially support her and she was back to make it a no-fault divorce.*

"Hi Gerald," her soft, loving voice pierced the silence of the tiny lunch room. I hated it when my emotions and my mind seemed to run in different directions. Part of me wanted to jump up and hug her. She was looking right into my face, her eyes aglow with warmth and love.

She was like a completely different woman. She was wearing a long brown coat with fur trimming the collar. She looked a little bit like she had gained some weight, but she was just as awesomely beautiful as ever. Her mouth was set firm and determined. I knew she was scared, so I refused to disclose my nervousness.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked low and evenly. "Who told you where I was working?" She backed up for a second as though my words had been a physical blow. Her eyes shimmered.

"I – I just came to-to see you," she stammered quietly. This was not like her, at all.

*"What is this," I pondered, "some new tactic to beat me down with pity?"*

"You've got a lot of nerve coming here," I stabbed at her as I looked toward the lunch room entrance to make sure no one was passing by.

"I got a lot of love for coming here," she parried right back at me. It was straight. It was Danita. Suddenly her initial approach was not a tactic of weakness, but of hesitation, trying to anticipate my response. I smiled. It was more of a smirk. She had not disappointed me. She was still as sharp as ever.

"Right," I lashed back and bowed to continue my meal. She sat down across from me, and her fragrance seemed to fill the room. Man, it was nice to feel her presence again, and the thought disturbed me.

She was so different though. I could sense her emotions, but I did not want to. I wondered if she was being real with me. I knew better than to be too hasty and assume that this was to be a story-book reconciliation. All I wanted to know was why she had come back.

“Can I just talk to you for a minute?” she asked with sincerity in her tone.

“Okay,” I heaved with an annoyed sigh. She paused. The vending machines hummed patiently. I could feel her eyes on me. The silence was unsettling. Her gaze drew my attention, but I turned my eyes to the doorway. She was studying my responses and caught me eye to eye again. My insides longed for her, but the pain of guilt flipped a switch, turning on ego driven, stubborn resistance. There was always that nagging guilt.

“You look well,” she said.

“Thanks,” I responded, trying hard to keep my voice low. “So do you.”

“How’s the band?” She uttered softly.

“They’re okay,” I forced out, snatching my stare away from her. “We’ve still been hustling since the separation. You left us with nobody to run the business.”

She flinched, an arching wrinkle creasing her forehead. I smiled within, congratulating the precision of my dart.

“I didn’t come to fight,” she wavered with closed eyes, desperately trying to keep her voice down. “I know this is a lost battle, but I came to talk about the future.”

I did not respond immediately. I was expecting this.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I laughed grimly as I wrapped up my remaining lunch. “You leave me with a note and four months later you show up on my job to talk about the future. What kind of future?”

“Our future,” she whispered as a tear dropped to the table. She politely took a napkin and wiped it off. I just waited impatiently, trying to resist being moved by her emotions. She cleared her eyes and seemed to right herself again.

“Our future?” I jumped in quickly, lowering my voice to keep anyone from being alerted to our intense conversation.

“...because I’m not the same person that left you four months ago,” she continued, undaunted by my reaction.

She stopped and waited for me to take it in. My mental computer was in motion again. I was right about this new approach. Obviously she had gone home and given it a lot of thought. I assumed she must have talked with her parents and a lawyer. Now she was trying to work the plan. So they all thought that if she crawled back to me she would get some kind of a confession from me. Then they could get some financial restitution. I knew this moment would come and I sneered, anticipating the conversation to unfold.

“My life is different now,” she explained calmly and I just glared at her to shake her thoughts for the predictable speech. “I just wanted to see you. I wanted to talk about that.”

I laughed mockingly.

“I know we can’t talk right now” her voice cracked on ‘now’. “But can we get together tonight and talk about us, our life, and our marriage?”

“Yes, we can talk,” I answered, “I told Paula we’d meet at her house tonight.

“Okay,” she conceded, “We’ll talk tonight.”

“Is that all?”

“Things have changed Gerald” she said and I could tell that there was still more that she wanted to say. “I’ve found out what love is really supposed to be about.”

“So what’s love all about, Danita?” I asked sarcastically. “Is it about a man and a woman getting married and staying together forever?” She seemed surprised at my verse and her eyes brightened.

“Wrong scenario,” I injected emphatically while straining to lower my voice. “Wrong marriage! Wrong life!”

“Please,” she groaned, almost trembling. “I didn’t come to fight over the past and dig up more bad memories.”

“Well,” I said as I tossed my package into the trash, “Why did you come? I don’t have any money to give you.” She just dropped her head. “You left me stuck with all the bills...”

“I’m not asking for money,” she hissed angrily, shaking her finger at me. She reddened as tears filled her eyes again. She wiped them again.

“I’ve got to get back to work,” I groaned, turning to leave.

“Look,” she blurted and caught herself again to lower her tone. “I just wanted to make sure you would meet me tonight.”

She stared at the table as she seemingly forced out each word. “I do hope you’ll drop this self-righteous act when we meet, because I knew about your road flings.”

“What road flings?” It was my turn to choke back the volume. “I didn’t have any road flings.”

“Oh, I know!” she laughed “That class reunion night was the first time you ever cheated!”

Her words told me that I was a bigger fool than I ever thought. I was the proverbial ‘deer in the headlights’. So, she knew about that night. The game was over. She just sat there reading the confession on my face.

“And nothing happened,” I asked meekly, “between you and Jackie that night?”

“Yes it did,” she said holding back her volume on the last word. “I kissed him, but it didn’t go any further.”

She let me absorb that one for a few seconds.

“I was wrong. I admit it. I wanted to be with him, but I just...” She was fighting some internal war to get the words out. She was speaking randomly, gathering thoughts and throwing them out.

“I do know that YOU slept with someone,” she continued. The room seemed to reverberate with her words. “Then you had the nerve to accuse me when you KNEW what you had done!” It seemed like the whole building could hear her.

“I couldn’t live with you anymore,” she said in finality. “When I saw you and the band playing, I would wonder if *she* was in the audience somewhere. I felt used . . . so I just left everything.”

I stared at the floor in silence. I could feel her gaze. I could not believe how it was all beginning to collapse like a building that implodes.

“You knew,” I concluded. I tried, but I could not walk away.

“I found out about you,” she cut in, “but that was not my only reason for leaving.”

More silence. A couple of people walked past the room talking. She let them pass before she continued.

“Your fling was just my moment of truth. I had already planned to leave **before** that night.”

I guess the expression on my face asked the questions because she kept supplying answers.

“Everything was about **YOU**, Gerald; **YOU**, the band and **YOUR** fans.” She straightened up and leaned forward in her seat.

“I used to be the most important thing in your life. I used to be the reason for your songs.”

She let the air hang onto those words for a few seconds.

“Do you realize that at the class reunion,” she added, again faltering and fighting to keep her voice down, “that you didn’t even introduce me to anyone? You introduced the whole band and you never even acknowledged that I was there.”

I was numb. I was down for the count. I was falling to the canvas, but I could not let her see it. She kept talking. It was obviously something she had wanted to say for a long time.

“I seriously considered never coming back,” she continued, “but we said for better or worse, so I came back to be real about it. This is the real confession: I would have left you anyway. It was just a matter of time.”

I was outdone.

Then she stood up and her chair scooted back almost tipping over.

“Just don’t stand there with that innocent, *‘I didn’t do anything to deserve this’* look, accusing me of being the only one to leave this marriage. I wasn’t the only one, Gerald Hanley! You left it, too!”

I blanked out. I was not ready for her words. I had no idea she had felt that way.

“I’m not making any excuses,” she offered, “but Jackie was the only one who noticed me. He was there for me. I had lost you. The only reason I didn’t sleep with him was because...”

“I can’t deal with this now,” I cut her off as I marched toward the door. “This is not the time or the place to hash this out!”

I stormed out, bolting blindly through the corridor, my mind whirling with random images of the past and present.

“You okay?” one of the studio’s technical directors asked me through a worried stare. I shook him off and wiped my head, surprised at the heavy perspiration.

“Yeah,” I tried to laugh it off. “I just need some air.”

“You look like it,” he retorted and scurried off, adjusting his headset.

I sat at the giant video console in the production booth and stared blankly at the various monitors. I saw her face and heard her voice. Images of us from happier times ran through my mind; her laughter, her expressions, her eyes.

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(Present Day – Afternoon – Three Hours Later)

After my recording session, I drove through traffic robotically, not really knowing how I got to Paula’s house to pick up Petey.

I made another set of mental plans as I drove. I would have to see Danita again to talk about this, but how the hell was I going to get out of this mess? I whispered profanities as I drove.

I could not believe how stupid I had been. She hadn’t approached me the way I expected. I could feel my defenses crumbling.

Minutes later I was at Paula’s house and I was gathering up Petey’s stuff and trying to get out without a lot of conversation. I had never gone in and out of her house without extended dialogue so I did not know why I thought this time would be any different.

“I thought you were supposed to stay and meet Danita,” Paula complained when I started collecting Petey’s toys as soon as I walked into her home. “I thought you...”

“I changed my mind,” I stated calmly. “I just came to pick up Petey.” Her face brightened with elation.

“You’re going to get back together!” she screamed, clapping her hands together almost in applause.

“No!” I said hurrying to the children’s room. All three were asleep on the floor, with Petey lying quietly between them, chewing ferociously on a shoe. I looked over at my sleeping nephew. My tense heart melted. The words came up without a thought as I looked at Joey.

“My boy...”

My sister moved up beside me in the doorway.

“No,” she whispered. “Not just yours.” I slumped against the wall. She eased into the room, stepping over children to retrieve Petey.

“Danita came to see me,” I informed her.

“I know,” she said without looking at me. “I told her where you were recording.”

“When?” I was instantly on edge. I was performing to keep her from knowing my thoughts.

“She came by this morning,” she said as a matter of fact. “We talked; she looked in on Petey and left.” My mouth was in motion, but no words came out. “She even apologized for dumping him on me when she moved away.”

I followed her into the kitchen and sat down at the table. She leaned against the counter, carefully shifting a small stack of dishes. I smothered my face in my hands. I heard Petey rustling on the floor.

“Let me tell you something,” she said. “I was trying to say this before, but I knew you couldn’t handle it.”

“Is she going to die or something?” I asked point blank. “Is she alright?”

Paula laughed, lightly derisive.

“No,” she insisted, “It’s nothing like that.” She sat across from me and reached down to stroke Petey.

“Danita,” she announced, “has found a new life with a relationship with God.”

Suddenly I felt foolish with embarrassment. I had just been on the verge of a meltdown.

“Is that all?” I blasted. “She got religion?”

“It’s a relationship,” Paula corrected me.

“It’s a relationship,” I mimicked my sister and she tossed up her hands in surrender to my sarcasm.

“Hallelujah!” I mocked. “Praise to Jesus! Now I really gotta go!”

She continued petting Petey without looking at me.

“I guess she’s got **something**,” I conceded. I always gave Danita credit where it was due. “It seems like she’s being real civil about this.”

“Why do you think she’s responding to you this way?” Paula asked. “She loves you because of *love*.”

“What?” I asked. “Run that by me again.”

“Remember Sunday school,” she continued. “God is *love*.” I shrugged. Well that certainly had nothing to do with anything. All I knew was that she must be after only one thing now; money.

“At one time,” Paula added, “you were so in love with Danita that you were going to give her the world.” I nodded in agreement. “But now she can take care of herself and she’ll never take from you the way you’re taking from her.”

“I’m not taking anything from her,” I defended as I coaxed Petey from my sister so I could leave.

“She’s part of God’s family now, and she wants that for you.”

“You’re joking, right?” I asked ignoring her religious pitch.

“Danita can support herself, now,” Paula continued as she returned to the kitchen counter. “After she left you, she went back to Atlanta. A couple of weeks later, she really started a whole new life. She came back here and landed a great job.” Then my sister laughed. “She’s been here for over a month and she works in the office of your band’s attorney.”

“Damn, you have got to be kidding,” I protested, but she just smiled and folded her arms.

“I have no reason to lie to you,” she answered, “and please don’t use that language in my house!”

“Oh yeah,” I griped, “The religion thing. God might hear, or the kids, or the dog, or the...”

“Gerry,” she warned, “Don’t be sacrilegious.” I connected Petey’s leash and led him out of the kitchen and toward the exit. I opened the door to the bitter, cold world outside.

“Thanks Sis,” I sassed. “You won’t have to be in between my fight with Danita anymore. Just tell her where I’m staying, now. Tell her to come and get her dog. I’m taking care of this once and for all!”

I went out quickly and Petey whined and squirmed at the sudden blast of cold. I drove home quickly while he howled and wailed from the back seat.

I least I had maneuvered enough to get my sister out of it. I had shifted the final showdown to my own turf, but how was I going to deal with this scheming woman who was now using religion to get to me? She held all the cards. I had nothing in my hand. Even her dog was starting to get on my nerves as he barked and wailed all the way home.

He was still going strong as I hustled him into the apartment building where his cries echoed up the stairwell. I hurriedly yanked the mail from my box and turned to face Sandy.

“Up until now,” she mused, “you’ve done a great job of keeping him a secret.” She took Petey from me and began whispering and cooing trying to settle his agitation, but he just squirmed and barked even more. We dashed up the steps and into my second floor apartment, cutting off his echoing yelps. She took the collar and leash off and held him to her chest.

“You’re just upset,” she cooed to him. “You’ll be okay; it’ll be alright now.”

I hung up my coat and tossed my briefcase into the bedroom as Sandy took him into the kitchen. Minutes later she came out holding him with one hand and a bowl in another and set them both down. He was chomping up whatever it was that she had found for him. I sat watching the scene, gathering my thoughts.

“He’s a good dog,” she said as she sat down beside me. She threw her long hair behind her neck.

“I hope no one complains about him being too noisy,” I said to her.

“No,” she assured me. “This is probably the first time anyone has heard any noise at all since you moved in.”

I rather doubted that.

“It doesn’t matter,” she laughed. “I made the rule of no pets so I can break it...for a little while.”

“I appreciate the help,” I offered. “When I moved here, I needed somebody to give me a break.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she said, smiling. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

“Back to work,” she announced as she jumped up and pranced out of the room, her hair sweeping back and forth. “I’ll see you a little later, if it’s okay...” She looked back and smiled. I nodded silently as she closed the door behind her.

I was dazed. With each attempt to draw a conclusion, I cut it off abruptly, not wanting to make any deductions based on mere assumptions. Yet, the mental mosaic tour began.

“Sandy really wants me; she wants us. I have missed her...in a way, but she’ll demand more of me if I return her affection. So I won’t. What will she think if I don’t? Do I really want to cut her off completely? Do I want to pursue her?”

The tapping on the door brought me back. The wind shook my windows and Petey growled lightly. Suddenly, I was anxious, not really prepared for Sandy to return so soon. I still needed time to get Petey’s stuff ready for Danita to pick him up. I still needed time to get ready to face my wife again.

“Just a second,” I said to the door and quickly, but carefully, put Petey in his crate. I kicked off my shoes and loosened up a bit to appear comfortable and relaxed. Touching up my hair, I opened up the door to Danita. She smiled, but my heart fell to my feet.

“Hi...” I said flatly. She had arrived a lot sooner than I had expected. “You must have come by Paula’s right after I left.”

“Can I come in?” she asked politely. I stepped back and she eased in cautiously, as though looking for a trap door or trick alarm. I closed the door behind her, following her slow stride to the sofa. She was so very beautiful to me, but it was for reasons that went far past physical. She took off her coat, revealing an oversized designer sweater that overlapped her jeans. She folded her coat across her lap as she sat down. She slowly looked around my apartment, nodding approvingly.

“It’s you,” she concluded and smiled at me.

“Now that I’ve met your approval,” I said, going for a chair in the kitchen, “let’s talk about whatever it is that you really want to talk about.”

I was not ready for this, but I figured that I might as well get it over with. I was busted. I was guilty. She had me. So let’s get to the divorce settlement: Who gets what and how much.

I set the chair directly in front of her, turning it backwards so I could straddle it and lean forward to face her. She stared at the floor

for a full minute, with only a slight twitch of a finger and quick flashes of a frown. Then she sighed.

“Gerald,” she began. Then she sat up straight. “A lot has happened to me since we split up.”

“So I’ve heard,” I teased. She dropped her head.

“Would you please just listen to me,” she insisted. “Just this once; and I promise you’ll never have to listen to me again.”

I backed off, nodding my head. I let my intensity come down to a nervous simmer. She shifted to the edge of the sofa.

“I can’t believe it either,” she started, “but something special has happened to me and you can’t deny that I’ve changed.” I agreed with a nod.

“When I went home,” she continued, “one of my childhood girlfriends was telling me how her life was changing, so I asked her what was her secret.” My wife broke into a quiet laugh. “Imagine how embarrassed I felt when she said she had started going to church.”

I shrugged. So it was true that she had become religious.

“So I went with her one weekend,” she said, “and they didn’t lay a bunch of rules and laws on me.” She paused. “And it wasn’t about ceremonies or money and all that TV evangelist stuff.”

To me, that just meant she had found a modern and up-to-date religious cult group.

“I was hurting,” she continued. “I even thought about...ending it all.”

That was frightening. Danita wanted to kill herself?

“All my life I’ve looked for love and when you, the one who proved that he once loved me, couldn’t give me what I needed, I just didn’t know where else to look.”

Unreadable emotions were in her eyes. My ego deflated slightly.

“Don’t you see, Gerald?” she asked as her voice broke with emotion. “We are all looking for the same thing and we hurt each other, step on each other...we even leave each other to get it. We ruin everything. But I found out that God really cared about my life.”

She read the frown on my face, even as tears ran down hers.

“I know that sounds far-fetched, even crazy,” she laughed through a sob. “I felt just like you do, now. If God cares, why is the world like it is?”

I nodded and pointed to her, exhaling out loud. “That’s right!”

“I don’t have all the answers,” she said. “I can only isolate one situation.”

“Okay,” I conceded again, “Go ahead and isolate.”

“**You** hurt me Gerald,” she said. “It wasn’t God who promised to love me and then leave me. God didn’t cheat on me. God didn’t make me think about killing myself...”

“Why would you want to do a stupid thing like that?”

“I didn’t say I was going to.” She bristled, seeming to shake off the very thought of doing such a thing. “I was just tired of feeling betrayed and used. The whole band took me for granted, you know.”

“You made your point,” I said restlessly. I really could not handle much more of this. I felt accused. I hated emotional, religious talk.

“God changed me,” she said and she lit up. “I can’t explain it. I don’t know what to call it. One day I went into a church sad and depressed, but when I left, I was different. I’m totally different. I mean I’m really happy. I feel like I’m in love for the first time in my life.”

“Come on!” I bellowed, “It’s not that simple, Danita. That’s really over simplified and naïve!” Then I diverted to the real subject at hand.

“Look,” I hurled at her, “forget all the religious bull! The fact is this: You can’t trust me because I committed adultery!”

Okay, I had said it. I had finally admitted it.

“And I can’t trust you!” I added. “Your coming back could be because you are in ‘angry black woman’ survival mode! You pretend you want to get back together. You get me off guard and one morning, I don’t wake up!”

She smiled, and then laughed.

“I can see why you would feel that way,” she said and her smile only made me more suspicious.

“If we get back together you can just wait for the right moment,” I concluded. “If Mystery makes it big, you’ll want to drop the divorce

bomb on me and collect a big payoff. No way, babe; I just can't let that happen."

"That's ridiculous," she insisted. "Did your sister tell you about my new job?"

I nodded.

"Did you know that I moved back into our house?" she announced. "I want to take it off the market. We don't have to sell it. I can afford it on my income alone; so believe me, I'm **not** after money!"

I was taken aback.

"Then what do you really want?" I asked. Suddenly a tidal wave started coming up from the inside. "If you divorce me, Danita, you'll win. You'll get the house. You'll get the cars. You'll get everything. What else do you want? Do you want an apology? I've been sorry from the moment I ..."

Someone knocked on the door. She looked at me flushed and frustrated. I cringed. It could only be Sandy.

"If--if you're expecting c-company..." she stuttered.

"Not really," I lied, going for the door. I opened it slowly and there stood Sandy smiling, dressed in jeans, a knitted sweater, holding a DVD and a deck of cards, ready for a nice entertaining evening. I tried to stand in the gap so neither woman could see the other, but I could not stop sound.

"I'm back!" she announced gleefully. "Let's...."

"I can't right now," I interrupted nervously. "You see I've..."

"She doesn't have to leave because of me," exclaimed Danita scuffling to gather her self and get out in a hurry. Sandy's face reddened as she recognized Danita.

"That's okay," Sandy insisted, backing away, several emotions clouding those deep blue eyes. She spun and started down the steps. I wanted to say I was sorry and explain, but no words came out. This was not the way I had planned to let her down. I did not want to hurt her, but it was too late. I closed the door.

"Don't close the door," Danita said. "I'm leaving, too!"

I backed away to allow her passage. She already had her coat on and was wrapping her scarf and putting her gloved hand on the knob.

“I wanted you to understand,” she said slowly, staring at the door. “I wanted everything to be different, so we could start over again, but I see...”

She paused. She looked at me. I knew she was drawing the conclusion to a long lingering question.

“I remember her from the reunion,” she said without the slightest emotion. “Is she the one?”

I dropped my head.

“Yes.”

Danita turned the door knob and purely by reflex I put my hand against the door to stop her.

“It’s not like that at all,” I insisted. She stopped. For the first time, I looked at my wife in her eyes the way I used to when I would pour out my heart and share my deepest thoughts and fears.

“I’m not making any excuses either,” I confessed. “I drank too much that night. She came on to me and I should have stopped her. I didn’t. That was the first time...and the only time I ever did that. I was never unfaithful before. There were no road flings.”

“Then why was she here?” Danita asked with anger and hurt in her voice.

“This is her building,” I answered as truthfully as I could. “It was committed to her by her ex-husband. After you left, she was the only person that I knew who would let me stay in an apartment while I was waiting for the house to sell.”

Danita studied my face, looking for any sign of deception. Her shoulders dropped. She believed me.

“So how could we possibly start over again?” I asked to divert the conversation away from Sandy. “Was I supposed to get religion and just get back together with you like nothing ever happened?”

Then regret swelled in my voice.

“It’s not that simple,” I was broken as the real pain of guilt erupted. “I’ve lost you! I’ve lost the music! I’ve lost everything and...” Suddenly I was the one fumbling for words.

“...and my heart reminds me of what I did every day.”

“This isn’t easy for me either,” she said taking deep breaths, “But I think I’m just trying to say that I forgive you.”

She put her hand right on the place on my chest where the pain was centered. I almost lost it completely. I stood with my mouth open, shocked.

“I want to believe that,” I said desperately fighting to hold back a torrent of tears.

“I want to believe it, myself,” she said gently. “Like I said, this is not easy for me, either, especially since I got back and found that you already moved out and moved on without ever considering any other possibility, but divorce.”

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“But I forgive you,” she urged. It seemed like she was trying to convince herself and me.

“Nobody loves like that Danita!” I answered dogmatically. “Nobody!”

She just looked at me. The expression was so sad that I knew its sincerity could only be for me. She closed the door, ever so slightly as she paused with one those looks she would get when a thought popped into her head.

“When we were in college,” she said, “you wrote a song to me and I don’t know if you remember it.”

“Yes, I remember it.”

“Well,” she continued, “I honestly feel that way about you, now.”

Something pierced through my shell and reached my heart. The tears dropped. I tried to wipe them, but she saw them and I was bare before her, my real feelings exposed.

“If I could never hold you again,” she whispered, “if you, I could never feel; if I could never touch you again, I would love you still.”

She made another probe into my eyes and I knew without any doubt that she meant it. I could feel her pouring love into my hurt and pain. My heart told me to give up my fight, but my head was gridlocked. I stumbled backward, trying to compose myself.

“I love you,” she said, and the moment was broken as Petey trotted into the living room and stopped right at her feet. She looked down at him and smiled.

“Hi, boy,” she greeted him, “I’m glad to see you, too.” She tried to kneel to pet him and then I noticed her stomach.

She looked up at me, catching my eyes on her midsection and her smile turned to a hope filled grimace.

She looked down, placing both hands on her slightly rounded abdomen which I had not noticed until that very moment. I was awed. I stared deep into her eyes for a long moment. She was so full of love that my heart began to heal.

The dream I had just had, came rushing back. This was crazy.

“We’re going to have a baby?” I asked. I did not know if I was confirming the obvious or questioning reality.

“We may have ruined our marriage,” she said with regret and resolution, “but we don’t have to ruin another life, too.”

Her tears were streaming from realizing that I was responding to her. She began shaking uncontrollably. She slid to her knees, and picked up her little writhing and twisting Terrier, as though he was a precious child. I dropped to the floor beside her and wiped my eyes. I did not know if it was okay to embrace her or not.

Remorse, guilt and shame washed over me. I just could not move past them, so I just remained still, watching her cradle her puppy as she sobbed over and over about so many things unspoken. I turned my head away.

“I had a dream that we had a baby,” I finally managed to say through my daze. She looked up at me, surprised that I was right beside her.

“I’m grateful,” she said looking up at me.

“Don’t you mean regretful?” I threw out.

“I’m thankful,” she said, as her voice broke again. “I’m going to have your baby.”

She let Petey go and he went darting back into the bedroom, barking and playing. She struggled while reaching for the door. Instinctively, I grabbed her arm to help her up. The touch of her hand connected my heart to a place I had not been for a long time. I let her hand go, ashamed to hold it.

“Is the baby the reason you came to see me?” I asked. I was finally letting my guard come all the way down. She had come back to me even after I abandoned her to follow my dream. She had come back to me even after I had proven to be unfaithful. How could this woman, who was carrying my child, love me anyway, after what I had done?

I imagined a jury marching into a courtroom with a verdict in the case of Gerald Hanley. I had always concluded that divorce could be the only results for me.

“I wanted you to know,” she whispered.

“You could have called and told me.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me,” she said between sniffs. She was right. “I found out I was pregnant the day of your class reunion.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that day?” I asked. “Why didn’t you tell me at my job this morning?”

“Both times,” she answered, “you walked away before I could say anything about it.”

I dropped my head. I had been so self-centered.

“So now I know,” I summarized.

“Now you know,” she said and we paused to take in the moment.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked, taking a step toward her. “What do you want me to do?”

She took one long final breath. It was obvious that it was the one question she wanted me to ask her all along. Her silly little dog came racing back out. He danced around her feet looking up at her, trying to get her to pick him up again. He whimpered pitifully and scampered back into the bedroom.

“Gerald,” she said with a tenderness I had never heard from her before, “I want you to forgive yourself.”

I broke. I just erupted. Suddenly I was in her arms crying like a baby. I could not help it. I could not stop it. Months of pain came pouring out in an instant. I pulled away from her slowly and blinked through the tears, with a stupid expression locked on my face.

“When you’re ready,” she offered as she held me at arms length, “the door is open and you can come home so we can begin to be a family. That’s what I want.”

I just looked into her eyes, those same eyes that drew me to her so many years ago. I looked into a face that loved me in spite of what I was - proud, stubborn, selfish, unfaithful...

I was torn inside. Was this real? Was this an act? Was I being duped?

“You know I want to believe you,” I offered. “But I’m not in a place to trust very much...especially myself.”

“God will help us with all of that,” she said, almost whispering, “Even if you can’t trust yourself, you can always trust Him.”

“I just can’t get into all that religious stuff,” I said, coughing in my effort to hold back my emotions. Warning flags signaled all through my insides. “I think religion and church is just a bunch of mind control.”

“I can’t stand religion, either,” she said, almost laughing. My eyes widened. That was a shocking statement.

“But I thought you’ve gotten into this ‘Jesus’ thing?”

“What I’ve gotten into has nothing to do with religion,” she said, still trying to get composed from our weepy breakdown. Her face was a mess; a beautiful mess.

“You and I started out with a special connection,” she explained. “After a while, **it became a religion** and it was just our **duty** to go through the motions and pretend we had something. Now I want a real relationship.”

“I get it,” I surrendered.

She smiled at me...the Danita, my wife, smile.

“I would not be here if I didn’t know that deep inside, you still love me,” she said. “I’ve watched too many of my friends get burned, for me to become a fool.”

She was right about that.

“I know you’re wondering if I’m for real or not,” she continued, “But this goes both ways. I have to learn to trust again, too.”

She was right on target. My shoulders sagged with one last surrender.

“I’m here because we both lost our way,” she concluded. “Before you were a performer, you just had your poetry. You lost your way. I lost my way. I’ve found my way home through God. I want you to find your way.”

She moved up close to me. Her smell, her presence, everything was new. She kissed me on the lips, short and sweet. She opened the apartment door and backed out, her eyes glistening with certainty. I wanted to call her to me, but something inside held me back. Petey darted out with her just as she closed the door.

I listened to her carefully descend the stairway, Petey barking all the way out of the building. I stood at the door for a long time. I turned and looked at the apartment and for the first time, it felt completely empty and small. It represented so much of my life in that moment.

I found myself sitting on the side of my bed, hands clasped between my knees. I pulled out my guitar. I fumbled with it to tune it up before fingering long buried melodies.

I imagined her driving home. I wondered about what she must be feeling. I wondered what was she was thinking. I could hardly believe it. Danita was pregnant. We were going to have a baby. I did not feel the tears running down my cheeks as I remembered the days of college, the fun times we had, and the early days of our marriage.

I did not realize I was playing a new song as I rehearsed all my vows to love her no matter what. I never knew that one day, I would break those vows. I never knew it would be so hard to believe that she could love me with the kind of love I once sang about, so long ago.

Suddenly, the tables were turned and I needed to believe in that kind of love for myself. I remembered an old phrase I used to hear my mom say when I was a kid: 'To err is human; to forgive is divine'. For the first time, I understood what it meant. I knew what my wife was trying to tell me about love, forgiveness, a new life, and even about God.

The words came easily as the music returned, gushing like a fresh spring of water:

*I remember your face, from a different place  
When I was in your embrace  
And for your love, I made my case*

*I remember when, I told you I'd love you forever, and then  
I remember when, I took you for granted, forgot the reasons, and then  
I remember when, I pushed you away, I made you run one day, and  
then, I remembered again, that I had promised my love.  
I trusted my heart in your hand.*

*I remember your face, when you returned to my space  
How I missed you and your embrace  
And for our love, you made your case*

*I remember when, I told you I'd love you forever, and then  
I remember when, I took you for granted, forgot the reasons, and then*

*I remember when, I pushed you away, I made you run one day, and then, I remembered again, that I had promised my love. So I'm placing my heart in God's hand.*

I could not quite figure it all out. I felt like I did that moment I almost walked out on her at the Koffee Klub, back in college. I was facing another decision to take a chance and gamble everything to believe. Just like that night, so many years ago, I had to be willing to take the risk.

I suddenly recalled Sandy was downstairs, probably, still bewildered about *the encounter*. I owed her an explanation.

It was pretty late. I did not know if she would still be awake, but I got up, slipped on my jacket and headed for her apartment, quietly making my way down the drafty stairwell. I descended the steps mumbling the lyrics from long ago.

*'If I could never hold you...'*

I walked toward her door.

*'If you, I could not feel...'*

I stood at her apartment and started to knock,

*'If I could never touch you...I would love you still.'*

I knew I had made the right choice, right then and there, about my life.

*"I would love you still."* I could hear Danita saying it to me.

I knocked on the door. After a few seconds it slowly creaked open and paused with the jerk of its security chain. Sandy peeked out and saw that it was me. Relief, sadness and surprise registered in those deep blue eyes as she closed the door to release the link. Then the door swung open. Her face was a critical mass of conflicting emotions. I reached out to her and she fell into my arms, crumbling in tears.

"I'm so sorry," she managed to say as she wept. "I didn't know your wife would be there..."

"I know you didn't," I assured her. I let her go and backed away. She saw my posture and her eyes fell, with the disappointment of realization coming into focus.

"You're going back," she concluded. I nodded. She began to nervously push her hair back behind her ears. She could not look at me. "I was always hoping that we would someday..."

“We were a mistake Sandy,” I said. “I should never have touched you.”

“I shouldn’t have chased you,” she said, looking down at the floor as she leaned against her open door, allowing it to swing slowly back and forth. It creaked on its hinges.

“I thought that when you moved in here that we would get together,” she continued as her voice trailed off into a mumble.

“I never meant to lead you on,” I replied. “I was just so messed up at that time. I honestly just needed a place to stay.”

“So, when are you moving out?”

“This is my official thirty-day notice,” I announced. I reasoned that I should still respect her business.

She looked up at me.

Sandy from high school days,

Sandy from the fateful class reunion,

Sandy my landlord,

Sandy, my long-lost friend, looked at me.

She suddenly leaped and grabbed me. She hugged me tightly, her whole body was trembling and convulsing with deep sobs.

“I’ll miss you,” she forced out between sorrowful spasms. “I still love you.”

I carefully un-wrapped her arms from around my neck, gently pulling her off me. She stepped back, hair sprayed across her face, covering her eyes in an unsightly array. She simply turned away and closed the door, not allowing the moment to linger any further. A final thud echoed through the stairwell and I stood for a few seconds in the silence.

I stuffed my hands in my jacket as I made my way back to my apartment. My cell phone was tucked in one pocket. As I trudged up the steps I took it out and flipped it open. The beeping digits echoed in the stairwell as I called my sister.

It rang a long time and I was hoping my *caller I.D.* would grant me safe passage, when I heard her voice.

“Hello,” she answered. There was sleep and irritation in her tone. “Gerry, why are you calling me this time of night?”

“Hi sis,” I spoke into the phone as I stepped inside my apartment. The coldness of the stairwell was left behind and warmth embraced me as I closed the door. “I’m sorry to call so late.”

“Is everything okay?” she asked as her voice suddenly turned to a nervous pitch. “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” I said to calm her down. “I just couldn’t wait until morning.”

“Wait ‘til morning for what?” she responded.

“I need Danita’s number,” I answered. “I want to call my wife. I want to go home.”

## *Epilogue*

I wrote this story in 1989, but it was too controversial at the time, so it sat on the shelf for almost 20 years. When I dusted it off and brought it back into the forefront, I had to bring it forward by two decades and update the text. The core content remained the same because of the message I was seeking to deliver. And this is the message:

The **face** of forgiveness may not always appear the same, but the **heart** of forgiveness is unmistakable.

My wife and I have shared our hearts and lives with many people for many years. Some were seeking our help. Some wanted advice. Some just wanted a listening ear. Countless issues were brought before us to deal with. There have been break-ups, separations and divorces. There has been some reconciliation, but due to the consequences of seeds sown, the results are not always the same. We know that every couple will not get back together. That is the ideal situation, but that does not always happen. It's not always possible.

One thing remains constant, though. When a person genuinely forgives another person, there is healing. What that healing looks like, we are not in a position of authority or expertise to say. We're not doctors, therapist, or formally trained counselors. We're just a husband and wife, a mom and a dad, who have been together for many, many years. From that point of view, we can make the following observation:

**Forgiveness does not make the violation okay, but it does start the process of making the violated person okay.**

This story was not written to bring condemnation upon women or men who could not welcome their spouses back into their lives. There are too many situations and circumstances like physical, substance and sexual abuse that must be dealt with in a professional and critical manner. Some situations prevent them from ever coming together again.

With HIV/ AIDS being spread at epidemic levels by unfaithful spouses who brought it home, this story is not a secret message to tell women (African American women, in particular) to welcome their unfaithful husbands back into their bed. Lives are on the line and life is not an 80+ page short story.

Actually, this story was not written to preach to anyone on moral, relational or marital issues at all. This was not about 'jungle fever',

white women, black men, adultery or the promotion of stereotypes. I used the backdrop of a hurting marriage to help you see **the love of God** in a different way.

Sometimes it's very difficult to fight through religious jargon and language in order to understand what people, who have a genuine relationship with God, are talking about. In the Bible, Jesus Christ told stories or used real life examples, to help people understand God's heart. That is what my intentions were in writing this story.

If you ever come to a place in your life where you know you have screwed up so badly that you cannot trust yourself, and it is impossible to believe that anyone can really love you just the way you are, then think about this story and consider the possibility that such **unconditional** acceptance and love, really does exist.

Consider the possibility that it not only exists, but **God already loves you that way**. Please don't be religious and just go through the motions of life, pretending that things are okay, when you know they are not.

For once in your life, stop being religious and be relational. Be real with yourself and get real with God. Your life will never be the same.

I have a personal definition of religion:

Religion is all the efforts that I make to earn and obtain something that has already been given to me.

Religion is all of my efforts to maintain and hold on to something that can never be taken away from me.

Religion is living my life, stuck in a routine and a pattern that is the same old thing, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. There is no real passion for what I do and no more reasons to keep doing it except the fear of the unknown, if I change.

Anybody living that way is into religion, not relationship. Religion is not just a church or cult practice. It can become a way of life.

I hope and pray that you will find your way out of the prison of religion. I hope and pray that you find the way to God in this journey of life. The best part is that **He has already provided the way**, so you don't have to search for that either. You don't have to go through religion to find Him.

And that, my friend, is the real reason for this story.

# *Acknowledgements*

Special, special thanks to my wife, Carol:

Her direct input and enhancements made this story a lot more realistic, a lot less male dominated, and lot more gender sensitive. She was my content editor, my advisor, my critic, my encourager and my best friend throughout the project.

*“I love you, babe. I love you still and I always will.”*

Much thanks to my editor, DeVata Davis:

From across the country, my dear little sister took the time to read and edit this story. Her input was invaluable. Her attention to details and her sensitivity to what I was trying to say were indispensable. Despite the personal trials and battles in her life, she took the time to invest in us in many ways that included this book.

*“Somehow, thank you is not enough. You are appreciated beyond words.”*

And finally, I must acknowledge my spiritual daughter, Tiffany McCreight:

When I sent the early drafts to her, I knew I could count on her to be brutally honest and also to be professional and objective.

*“I couldn’t love you more if you had been my flesh and blood. I want this book to inspire you to keep writing and don’t ever give up. I can’t wait to see and experience the wealth of talent that has yet to come forth from you.”*



## *About the Author*

Chris and Carol Green are a husband and wife team that was sent to south central Pennsylvania to help rebuild, restore and renew hearts and homes. They are certified master life coaches, urban marriage and family advisers, leadership and community outreach consultants, and ordained ministers.

They served in local church pastoral leadership in St. Louis, MO and Harrisburg, PA for a combined 27 years, before they launched a three-part initiative that would synergies their professional expertise with their ministry experience in a network of community services and leadership training.

Their community-supporting initiatives have included hosting monthly workshops in a state-funded unemployment center, on-call life coaching support for a women's transitional housing shelter, consultation and training for local outreach organizations, collaborating with various community outreach efforts, and maintaining an itinerant schedule of local and national speaking engagements and opportunities.

For their community service, they received a United Way 2017 Volunteer of the Year Nomination. They have also received Urban Leadership Awards (2016) and Community Ambassador Awards (2015) from iChange Nations™ and were appointed Goodwill Ambassadors of World Peace, as part of an interfaith peace-building initiative to the United Nations, by Golden Rule International.

Chris Green is a social media veteran and an award-winning producer of a local cable television broadcast (1999). Together, they have been international columnists/writers with a Global Journalism Award-winning social media news team, the authors of several inspirational life-building books, and the creators of numerous blogs and eNewsletters. They are also accomplished songwriters, having penned and produced over 150 songs since 1992.

Their travels have taken them from coast to coast in the United States, to Hawaii, the Bahamas, Trinidad, the United Kingdom, and West Africa.

They have been married since January 3, 1981 and have three adult sons, two daughters-in-law, one granddaughter, and a host of people throughout the world who call them 'mom and dad'.

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