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Michael John Cesaro

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A CHANCE OF LOVE

By

Michael John Cesaro

A THESIS

Submitted to

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in partial fulfillment of the

requirements

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ABSTRACT

A CHANCE OF LOVE

By

Michael John Cesaro

The following short stories may seem to differ from the norm. Some readers will detect an apparent lack of closure to them. This is due to the concentration of each story on a specific time period, rather than on a certain problem or issue. For example, "Al Kaline Must Be Wary Of Love" deals with the time of the brother's visit, instead of the resolution of the characters' conflicts. The purpose of such fiction is to avoid a manipulation of the audience by the storytelling and to trust the reader to find his or her own merit in the piece. As the author, I prefer to think of the work not as simply experimental, but, to a much greater degree, as a an incorporation of personal style.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Al Kaline Must Be Wary Of Love	1
The Baps	13
Pool Business	37
Recreation In Elizabeth. New Jersey	48
Lucky Binger	56
Basketball, N.A.S.A., The Alamo And Dubuque Eats	65

AL KALINE MUST BE WARY OF LOVE

FRIDAY, APRIL 2

My younger brother, Carson, isn't a very witty person. Don't get me wrong, there is nothing dour or unfriendly about him. In fact, he can be quite charming and intelligent. An extremely likeable young man, people say. But humorous, no, I'm afraid not. Once in a great while he'll make up a joke, and almost always, it'll be corny and dumb, not really funny at all. I will laugh, you see, but that's different. He's my brother and a brother tends to enjoy his brother, no matter what. For example, let me tell you what he had said a couple of months before he left last year to live in Florida:

On a table in our house he had a bright red alarm clock. The color had been so bright that I remarked on it, having said something like, "That clock is red."

He had glanced first at the tabletop, then turning to me said, "That clock has a doctorate in English Literature. Not only is it red," he told me, "it's well-read."

I miss Carson. He is twenty-seven years old while I

am thirty. We've always been close, having shared an apartment for a while. Eight years ago our parents had both been killed in an automobile accident. Since he had been living with them, he needed another place to stay. I had asked him to move in with me. I had just graduated from college then and Carson was driving a truck all over the midwest. He hadn't been around that much because of his job, but I enjoyed it tremendously whenever he was home. Then, after three truck-driving years, when he was twenty-one, he too had gone away to college.

He had gotten his degree and moved back in with me again but he never found any employment that truly pleased him. In school his major had been horticulture and he wanted to be a landscaper. A year ago he decided to try his luck in Lakeland, Florida.

Carson called last week. "Bradley, I want you to meet my fiance'," he told me.

"You're getting married?" I asked.

"I've got next week off," he said. "Can we stay with you in Minneapolis for a few days?"

So my brother and his soon-to-be-wife, Rita, will be visiting tomorrow. And I have someone new, too. I'll introduce them to June, my lover, whom I'm going to marry, should she ever leave her son-of-a-bitch of a husband.

I met June five months ago at a Minnesota Vikings football game. I suppose you have seen the cheerleaders in their brief purple and silver leotards dancing and yelling and lifting their legs? June is one of them. She is truly beautiful.

I work as a sound man for Channel Four Sports. I had been positioning some microphones for my station's pre-game show and she was on the sidelines, standing alone weeping. Usually I'm not attracted to crying women, but she was gorgeous so I talked to her.

"Excuse me. are you all right?" I asked.

"Please leave me alone," she said.

It may be hard to understand but she had been perfectly appealing to me. All my life, my ideal woman has been, as she was and is, short and dark-haired. I later found out from my friends who worked with her at the Metrodome that her husband was an alcoholic and probably had done something to make her cry.

SATURDAY, APRIL 3

I am not one to greet airplanes. When Carson and Rita's jet arrived this morning, I wasn't at the airport, though I did stay home from work waiting for them. They got here about ten-thirty.

Carson was deeply tanned and looked very healthy, very robust. "Florida is wonderful, man," he said to me.

Smiling, he wrapped his arm around the skinny woman at his side. "Bradley, this is Rita."

I feel awful for telling you this, but she was not very pretty. Besides being sickishly thin, her light-brown hair was oily and straight, combed around into two stumpy pigtails. In contrast to Carson's even sepia, her complexion was splotchy with traces of freckles here and there. She was slightly knock-kneed. Her nose had bumps.

I remember two years ago when Carson had graduated from college. He started living at my place in Minneapolis again. He was a newly-degreed horticulturist then, and believed strongly in himself and his craft. Still, he had only been able to land a job tending suburban yards at a local nursery. The meager employment opportunities here had led directly to his accepting work in Florida.

"Minneapolis is no place for horticulture. My yebrs of study don't mean anything," he had complained. "In the summer I mow lawns. In the winter I shovel snow from driveways. I'm a goddamn caretaker."

Then a friend of his told him about a job opening as a groundskeeper for the Lakeland Tigers, a baseball team in the Florida Instructional League. His duties would also include, during February and March, working spring training for their parent club, the major-league

Detroit Tigers. He had applied and in a few days, was hired. He was excited, leaving Minnesota for Lakeland as quickly as possible.

"You know, I met Al Kaline a few weeks ago," Carson told me today. "He said that artificial turf was innately false. He said that since baseball was invented to be played on grass, baseball on anything else was nothing but a lie." Carson shook his head. "No matter how true a carpet allows a baseball to bounce, it remains just an imitation. "In fact," Carson said, "He thinks that the more realistic something artificial is, the more deceptive, the more duplicitous it is. 'Because by its very definition,' Kaline said, 'the realistic can only pretend to be real.'"

SUNDAY, APRIL 4

I'm sure there are many nice truck drivers. The next thing I will say is derogatory about truck drivers. It is stereotypical and a vast generalization. It's not meant to be truly accurate. Descriptively, though, it does quite well; it sets the proper image. What it is is this: There are times when Carson can be very stupid and very insensitive. Right away you figure that at one time he probably drove a truck.

Take today, for instance. June and I and Carson and

Rita were sitting in my kitchen having lunch. We were all talking, being friendly, getting to know each other, and then, loudly, booming, Carson said to Rita, "Hey, honey. Tell Bradley and June how you used to be a slut."

Rita didn't seem to be bothered. June, sensing that Rita remained comfortable, didn't react noticeably and rested her chin in her hand to listen. I was embararassed for her, but stayed silent. Rita had a soft accent like a shy southern belle who says 'buttah'

I lost my virginity," Rita began, "when I was eleven."

"Before Rita told me that," Carson said, "I thought it was physically impossible to do it that early."

"No, no." June remarked, "In Guinness, it says that the youngest mother on record was five."

"Wow," Carson said.

"They were brought up as sisters," June explained.

"You don't have to tell us this if you don't want to," I told Rita.

"I don't mind," she said.

"She doesn't mind," Carson said.

"From eleven until I was almost eighteen," Rita told us, "I was a slut. I went to bed with whatever guy wanted me to. All kinds, ugly, handsome, short, tall, rich, poor, white, black, brown, yellow, it didn't matter." She rotated her watch with its loose wristband, around the end of her arm a few times. "When I was

seventeen, my father read a note next to a pay telephone in town that said 'For a good time, call Rita.' and written underneath was our home phone number. He came into the house after that real mad and asked me if it was true or not. I got scared and told him that I was a virgin and lots of times, boys wrote things like that about virgins because they think we're all goody-goodies. They get mad at us and try to teach us a lesson." She smiled a mischievous smile. "He believed me, but I could tell by how mad he got, that I better not screw around anymore. Honest to God, he was close to killing me." She shrugged. "I was going to graduate high school pretty soon anyway and because boys wouldn't be around as much, socially, it wasn't very important to keep on doing it. It was easy to quit."

June spoke up, "I bet you respected yourself a lot more afterwards."

"I don't know," Rita said. "Here I was, this homely girl, and I went out a lot to dances and movies and proms. I was very popular." She raised her eyebrows. "I enjoyed being a slut."

Carson spoke up, "I think it's funny. I mean, a girl sleeps all over and then saves herself by aligning with virgins."

"Yes," Rita said. "Me and my fellow nice ladies."

June and I forced smiles, as if we thought it was funny, too. Of course, Carson can do whatever he wants.

I won't say a word. But I couldn't help wondering if he knows what he's getting into.

MONDAY, APRIL 5

Carson didn't like the idea of my seeing a married woman.

"You're out of your mind, Bradley," he said. "Tell her you'll get back to her after she gets a divorce."

"I can't. I love her," I said.

"She'll hurt you someday, Bradley," he told me.

"She can't be trusted."

I shook my head.

"Look," he continued. "She still makes love with her husband, right?"

I answered yes.

"Can't you see, man?" he asked. "She does it with you--she does it with him--" Carson lowered his voice.

"Don't let Rita know about this. I want her to think you're okay."

The first time he met June, two days ago, they had a talk about their futures.

"Ballfields are fine," Carson said to her, "but I don't want to spend my whole life working in one."

I smiled at her. "Is my brother dreaming again?"

June put her finger to her lips, motioning for me to be quiet.

"I want to be in charge of Central Park in New York City," he said. "All that area to grow whatever I want. I could choose the prettiest flowers, what kinds of trees to put in, the types of grass, the color and texture of the soils. It would be wonderful." Carson nodded. "What are your goals, June?" he asked her.

"I know it's been said a million times," she started, "but all I want is to be happy." June exhaled. "I haven't got a real career, so I don't think careerwise like you." She stopped for a bit. "I'm a cheerleader. And I hope I can still be one next season."

I thought she was being honest. Later, Carson told me he thought she was being flighty.

TUESDAY, APRIL 6

Earlier tonight, we all went out dancing. For everything Rita knew, June was just a date. I asked June not to mention anything about her husband, and the four of us got along fine for a while.

After the two were out on the dance floor some time, Carson got mad at Rita. I couldn't really tell what happened, just that Carson appeared to be yelling at her. She was talking quietly and surely. They were across the room, the lighting was dim, the music was loud. I just couldn't discern anything exactly. Carson's face red with anger, he came back to the table where

June and I sat. "I'm going back to Florida," he told us, before stomping off.

"What about Rita?" I asked but he was headed for the door and didn't turn to answer me.

Next, Rita, looking very sheepish, returned to the table. "I guess this was the wrong time to say anything," she said

"What happened?" I asked her.

She didn't answer and just looked embarrassed. She began to pick up her purse from the tabletop and lifted her coat from the back of her chair. "I'll get a cab," she said. "I'll get a motel room." She was trying hard to be dignified, to do the right thing. "It's all my fault. I'll leave you alone."

I was trying to figure it out. "What's your fault, Rita?"

"I should have waited until we got back home. It's just that he was talking about how it would be when we got married and I told him I didn't want to get married anymore."

Rita finally decided to fly home to Florida. I knew that, even though Carson had said he was going back too, he spoke in anger and it would not be true. He would remain in Minneapolis overnight. And he did. He was standing in my driveway at three this morning as I was returning from dropping off Rita at the airport. June was with me, her husband being away on business for a

few days.

Carson thought that Rita would be there and was quite disappointed that was not the case. "I wanted to talk with her, man. Try to straighten this out."

I shrugged. "She wanted to go to the airport, so I took her. What else could I do?"

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7

This afternoon, June and I saw Carson off as he boarded a jet back to Lakeland.

"I'm sorry the way things turned out, Carson," I said.

"Yeah, well," he told me, "I'll fix it. Once I can talk to Rita, everything will be okay again."

Myself, I doubted it but wished him good luck and hoped he'd have a smooth flight home.

I told you earlier that I didn't greet airplanes. Watching one come in is terrifically boring. All you do is wait, wait for the jet to appear, wait for it to land, wait for the passengers to disembark. Nothing is immediate. However, I love seeing planes leave. Everything occurs in one shot. The person going away disappears down the tubed terminal gate, the jet starts up, taxis down the runway, and vanishes among the clouds.

The last thing Carson said before going home, was

to June, "Take care of Bradley,"

Carson thought he had a love, but today he went home by himself. He didn't want June to hurt me like Rita, just a few hours earlier, had hurt him.

I don't expect that June will ever leave me. I think her feelings for me are real. Sometime soon, she'll undoubtedly say goodbye to her drunken husband. She'll stay with me and together we'll be happy. But right now, with things up in the air, the only thing I'm sure of is that I love my brother, and that he loves me.

THE BAPS

Whenever I start for work in the morning, I see my next-door neighbor. She stands inside her house staring out her picture window. She is a young woman (in her mid-twenties). She and her husband moved into our neighborhood a year ago. I have not met either of them yet. I am not being unfriendly (I do not think) it is just that I am not home often. I am usually out from very early in the day until well into the evening. Also there is the matter of ages. I am nearly sixty. Probably the last thing that a young couple wants is an old geezer (I do not consider myself an old geezer, I am speaking here in respective terms) to come to their door at midnight in order to say hello.

Plus, they are a couple and I am a single man. My wife died a few years ago. If she were alive, we would know them. My wife came home from her job at four-thirty in the afternoon. She would be tending to her tomato plants which bordered the fence that separates our backyards. Sooner or later one, or perhaps both, of the young couple would be out. Amenities would be exchanged. My wife would ask their names. They might talk about

tomatoes or the weather or where to shop or something. Gradually they would become friends. But that is the way it goes. My wife is dead, I am never home, and I hate tomatoes. I do not know them.

All that I am aware of is that the young woman is by her window every morning. She is very pretty and sits there in a dark blue robe. I have not seen her husband lately but that is not unusual for me. I waved to her this morning. She saw me. She waved back

* * *

Today was the first Saturday that I had been home for a long time. I am the manager of a large department store downtown. I am usually there. Home is where I sleep and drink coffee for breakfast. I did not go to work because I had an appointment at my dentist's. The appointment was for two o'clock in the afternoon (my dentist does not believe in getting up early on Saturdays). I did not do any store managing today. My day was pretty much halved. (I think it was also my dentist's fault the last time I was not at the store).

After getting my teeth examined, I went home. I was sitting on a metal chair that upon unfolding I had placed on my porch. I looked around at my neighborhood (of which I know very little) and at my lawn (which is

perfect due to the fine efforts of a landscaping company I hire). To me, being outside is boring. Not much happens. It is not exciting. It is not like a department store. I wanted to sleep.

"Hi," I heard a friendly female voice call. I saw that it was the young woman from next-door.

"Hello," I returned.

She stepped up onto my small porch and stood next to me. "I saw you this morning." She was smiling. She clutched her hands together behind her back. She wore bluejeans.

"Yes, I said. "I was backing out of my driveway."

"I figured it was about time that we met," she told me. "So I came over."

I nodded. "Yes, it is about time." It was a casual meeting. I did not get up from my chair. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Cairn Wrather," she answered. "What's yours?"

"George Shently."

Cairn knelt on the cement ground of the porch. "When you waved this morning I said to myself, 'That looks like a sweet man. I bet he's a good person. He's probably very nice.'"

"I'm glad I made a good impression," I told her.

"You seemed like someone that I should get to know," Cairn said, pushing her long, blondish hair back

from her face. "I see you every morning."

"I see you as well." I responded. "At your front window."

"I like to look out the window." Cairn covered her eyes as if she was embarrassed.

We talked for upwards of an hour. I told her that I worked at Kerns'.

"I'd like to meet your husband," I said.

"He took off a few days ago." She spoke easily and was still smiling. "You might have to wait a while."

"Gone on a trip?" I asked.

"I guess you could say that," she answered. "But it beats me where." She did not seem angry. She did not appear worried.

"You're rather calm," I said.

"It's happened before," she explained. "He gets mad and leaves. He always comes back in a week or two."

"He must not stay mad long," I ventured.

Cairn softly tugged her lower lip. "Maybe not." Her voiced sounded mildly puzzled. "I don't know."

I did not know either. The gap in our ages was wide.

"You know what I do on Thursdays?" Cairn asked.

"No," I answered. "What do you do?"

She giggled. "I bowl."

Since our first meeting several days ago, Cairn and I greet each other every day as I start off for work. Cairn is still at her window. I wave through my windshield. She does more than I do. She stands and slightly jumps up and down twice. By reading her lips (I cannot hear her of course) I am able to see her say 'Hi, George'. She looks quite happy. Her husband has not returned yet.

I had not been home last Sunday (the day after I met Cairn). All this week I had been working until approximately eleven-thirty at night. I had not again been in direct contact with her. Tonight (Thursday), I decided to leave (early) at six o'clock. I had barely enough time to take off my coat and tie before she knocked on my side door.

"Hi, George," Cairn greeted me from outside.

"Where've you been the last few days?"

"At the store." I let her in. "At my job."

Cairn entered (The side door opens into my kitchen) and sat on a chair. "Do you spend a lot of time there?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"Boy," she said. "You must really like working."

It is true. I enjoy my career. "I'm fond of my store."

"I almost worked at a Sears once," she told me. "I filled out an application, but they never called."

"If you ever need a job," I offered, "I can get you one."

"Because you're a big wheel," she said.

"In a manner of speaking."

"Thanks, but I don't think so." She wrapped her index fingers together and pulled. "Not right now."

Cairn's clothes looked clean and new. Her hair was combed impeccably, not a strand out of place. She smelled of soap. She wore a ring on each hand. "I've never known a big wheel before," she said.

I did not respond.

"So tell me," Cairn began. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing in particular," I said.

"My brother's coming over in a few minutes to take me to the bowling alley," she explained. "You want to come?"

"I don't bowl," I told her.

Cairn opened her eyes more widely. "Steel doesn't either," she said.

"Steel?"

"My brother." Cairn wrinkled her forehead. "That's his name." She emphasized it, "Steel."

I accepted her invitation and we waited for her

brother. I told her that his name made me think he would be big and strong. "He isn't," she said. He sounded (by that name) like a brute of some sort. "He's lovable," she told me. I was curious. I had never met a Steel before.

Cairn told me she had left a note on her door telling her brother that she was at my house. Cairn bowled on a team in a women's league. "Tough ladies," she said. I asked her if any of them were named Steel. "They're probably all tougher than him," she told me.

Cairn informed me that Steel came to see them bowl every week. "He's going with one of my teammates." Usually he did not pick Cairn up to take her to the bowling alley, but tonight she needed a ride (her runaway husband had run away in the young couple's only car). It was about fifteen minutes before her brother arrived. In the meantime I made myself a cup of coffee. I offered some to Cairn but she turned it down.

Steel drove noisily up my driveway. Actually, I could hear him coming from a point well down my sidestreet. His car badly needed a new muffler. At the first detection of the banging of his motor (he must have been more than five hundred feet away) Cairn said, "Here comes Steel."

The two of us heard the car stop next-door and then (presumably Steel read Cairn's note) start up again

(bang-bang, clang-bang). Steel soon was at my door. He peered in through the screen. "Cairn? Cairn?" he yelled.

"In here." Cairn called back.

I saw that he was not what I was expecting. He seemed to be what Cairn had described, not very Steel-like. He was short and skinny, with scraggly, long hair, and a smooth face that was too virginal to need shaving. A floppy, plain white (grey) t-shirt covered his chest. His pants were a faded, olive green canvas material: like something a military man had thrown away. He was barely twenty. He was rather homely also. He wasn't like Cairn at all.

Cairn introduced us. "George is going with us," she said.

"Great, great." Steel told her while looking at me.

"Is Florina with you?" Cairn asked Steel.

"She's in the car," he answered.

Cairn turned to me. "She's the girl I told you about. You know, my teammate and Steel's girlfriend."

The three of us walked out to Steel's car. It was old, and small, and rusty. Half of the grill had been torn off. Dents abounded. It was filthy. It looked like it was held together with frayed rope. The car appeared as sad as it had sounded. Through the streaky windshield I could see the head and shoulders of a young woman. She was sitting on the passenger side of the front seat.

"That's Florina," Steel said and half-heartedly pointed.

Cairn shook her head a little. "Wait until you meet Florina," she told me.

I had never before met anyone like Florina. It was not pleasant.

"Florina, this is my friend, George," Cairn began. "George," she motioned to the young woman, "Florina."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

Florina did not say anything, but grumbled a bit. She turned quickly to Steel who had positioned himself behind the steering wheel. "Can we go to the bowling alley now?" she asked sharply.

"Right now," Steel answered while starting his engine (a long grinding followed by pows and pounds).

"Your car sounds like it's dying," Cairn shouted.

"Nothing this loud dies," Steel said.

Cairn and I were sitting in back. Florina turned around and glared at me. "I don't like to wait in a car," she stated.

"You should have come into my house with Steel," I said.

Florina shook her head no. "Strange houses smell." She moved and again faced forward. "I can't stand it."

"Be nice, Florina," Steel said.

"Please don't talk snippy to George," Cairn told

her.

Florina shrugged. "I don't get along too well with people, George," she said.

"Florina's a little shy," Steel explained

"She's tough," Cairn whispered to me.

Florina made a slashing stroke with her hand in the air. "Let's just all shut up and get going," she told no one in particular.

Cairn rolled her eyes heavenward and we drove silently (except for the cacophony of Steel's car) away to the alley.

* * *

When we got out at the bowling establishment (Fishgrand Lanes), I noticed that Florina was wearing a bowling shirt and carrying a black-and-blue bowling ball case. The shirt was hot pink and muddy brown. On the back it said 'The Baps'. I presumed that a ball was in Florina's case.

"Why don't you have a bowling ball?" I asked Cairn.

"I don't want to be bothered with one," she answered. "I just use whatever they have inside."

"How about a shirt like Florina's?"

"I've got one in my purse." Her handbag was on a strap hanging around her shoulder. "I put it on in the

ladies' room."

I nodded. It was still daylight. It was seven o'clock. There was yet to be a trace of dusk, but even so the sun was not that far from the horizon. Florina walked beside Steel, well ahead of me and Cairn. She did not appear to be happy with him for some reason. (Whether or not I was the reason for her seeming anger I did not know). "What does 'The Baps' mean?" I inquired.

"It stands for 'Bowling Alley Patrons'," Cairn replied.

I thought it a rather poor name.

"That's me," she said. "I'm a Bap." Then she lowered her voice a little so that no one could hear her. "Florina picked out the colors."

"I'm afraid they're not my favorites," I said.

"Now you know why I wait until I'm in the building to put the shirt on." Cairn told me. "You can wear anything in there and no one will pay any attention." Cairn's face quickly took on a serious expression as if she were about to make a grand pronouncement. "People in bowling alleys are weird," she said.

We left the parking lot and walked into Fishgrand Lanes (Steel and Florina had been walking fast and had entered already). "Come on, George," Cairn said. "I want you to meet my teammates."

I took a deep breath. I surmised that they were

weird also.

* * *

There was a total of five women on the Baps. Of course, two of the team members were Cairn and Florina. The three others were somewhat older than those two. The other Baps had nicknames.

One was a forty-five year old woman (I am guessing at her exact age). She was the oldest of the group and very overweight. She wore plastic-framed (Bap-brown) eyeglasses. I believe she was the team's leader because all of the others called her 'Boss' and she looked and sounded authoritative. She was the scorekeeper, sitting at the plastic desk a few feet behind the start of the lane, holding a small, wooden pencil in her hand (even though there would be no bowling for fifteen minutes). Her other hand grasped a lit cigarette. She exhaled a huge cloud of smoke and greeted me with a warm smile. "Hi George," she said to me. We shook hands (after she put down her pencil).

"Hello, Boss."

The next woman was 'Dancer'. Dancer wore thick makeup that made her look older than she probably wanted to. I figured that she was approximately thirty-seven. She looked forty. She may have been thirty-four.

"Hello, Dancer."

The third and final Bap was called 'Bouncer'. Her demeanor tended to be, for want of a better description, ethereal. "I love you, George," was the first thing that she said to me.

"Hello, Bouncer."

"Bowling is my art," Bouncer told me.

"I'm an excellent bowler," Dancer said.

"Change your shirt, Cairn," Boss ordered. "Hurry up."

Why Boss was in a rush I could not say. The opposing team had not arrived yet, however, all of the other Baps had their team shirts on and were ready to begin.

Cairn immediately traveled to the nearest ladies' room.

* * *

The other team (The Jerry's Lounge Jemstones) never showed. The Baps talked it over and decided to bowl anyway.

"I'll bowl whenever I get the opportunity," Boss said.

"It's a night out and it helps me maintain my figure," Dancer said.

"Art is art," Bouncer said.

Steel and I sat in the pew-like seats to the rear of the Baps and their alley. Boss bowled first. She rolled her ball speedily and powerfully. All of the pins went down. After her release, she scampered back to record her score. By observing Dancer and Bouncer as each took her turn, I was able to tell how they got their respective names. Dancer (who was after Boss) took ten or fifteen steps (instead of the usual four) before letting go of her bowling ball. During a night she must have run a great distance. She did have a nice figure, no doubt due to such exercise, such dancing. Bouncer threw her ball down the lane. She tended to release it a bit late. It took off on an upward arc from her hand and hit hard, bouncing down about two-thirds of the way from the pins. Even though each of the first three Baps had their own, unique style, none of them could be faulted. They were all very good bowlers.

Florina and Cairn, in that order, followed. They were good too, but slightly below the caliber of the others.

As Florina got up to take her turn, Steel told me, "Florina's pretty good."

Florina yelled back to us, "Quiet, you're ruining my concentration."

When Cairn bowled, her ball advanced slowly,

extremely so, down the lane looking as if it would take forever to reach the pins.

"Cairn doesn't have a lot of strength in her forearm." Steel explained. "I tell her that all a bowling ball has to do is go where you want it to. Speed doesn't mean anything."

Cairn called, "For me, George, this game requires a lot of waiting."

Soon after Cairn started off her second roll, I heard Florina say, "Naptime, everyone."

* * *

I liked Steel. He was friendly. He was compassionate. He was intelligent. I judged him incorrectly upon initially seeing him.

After the Baps had each finished bowling their first frame, Steel started to get up and leave. "Come on, George," he said to me.

I rose too. "Why are we going?" I asked.

"We have to," he explained. "The Baps don't like an audience."

We both talked softly, so as not to ruin Florina's concentration. Boss smiled her warm smile at us as we left. Dancer ignored us. Bouncer blew us a kiss. Cairn waved a dainty, little wave. Florina mumbled, "Good

riddance."

I did not understand why Cairn had invited me to come there if I was not to watch her bowl.

Steel and I went to the grill. Steel had ordered french fries and a chocolate milkshake. "Do you like Florina?" he asked me.

"I really can't say, Steel," I told him.

Steel ate a piece of potato and unwrapped a drinking straw, standing it upright in the center of his shake. "You're being nice, George," he said. "No one likes Florina. Even I don't care for her that much."

"Why do you go out with her then?" I had chosen not to eat anything.

"My parents say the same thing," he told me. "They want me to dump her."

"It sounds logical," I said.

"My parents are both really good-looking. They've been that way all their lives," he explained. "Good-looking people don't understand ugly people." As if to give an example, Steel followed with, "My parents don't understand me."

Let me state that Steel was telling me this very matter-of-factly. It was not an exercise in self-pity. To him, his homeliness was well understood.

"I go out with Florina because no one else will go out with me. She's all I can get right now," he



explained. "Good-looking people stay away from her because she hates everyone and that's awful, that's repulsive," he said. "What the good-lookers don't understand is that we uglies can't think like that. I look at Florina and I have to say, 'She hates everyone? Well isn't that a cute, little quirk.'" He sipped at his milkshake through his straw. "The beautiful get what they want. The ugly get what they can. I realize that and I'm not bitter about it." Steel bit off half a french fry. "I like having a girlfriend, any girlfriend. I'm not about to dump Florina."

I stared down at the countertop. I wished I had ordered something.

"Does any of that make sense, George?"

I thought a time. "It makes sense," I said. "I'm just not sure I agree."

"Of course not." Steel was finishing his pseudo-meal. "You're too good-looking to agree with me."

* * *

After Steel and I left the grill, he played a video game.

"You want to play this with me?" he offered. "We can set it for two players."

"No thanks." I peered to the other side of the

bowling alley where the Baps were. It was Cairn's turn and I could at least see her send one ball toward the pins.

"What about Cairn's husband?" I asked Steel.

Steel was vigorously pushing some large, green buttons but he abruptly stopped when he heard my question. "He's a son-of-a-bitch," was all he said.

"How long has he been gone?"

Steel started playing the game again, but this time he was sharp and rough with the machine. "Almost a month." His voice was surprisingly calm (for one who was, by the look of his movements, very angry). "This isn't the first time he's left, you know."

"Cairn told me he'd left before," I said.

Steel left the front of the game. We sat on some empty chairs nearby. We both moved our eyes over to where the Baps bowled. I could make out the side of Cairn's face (I imagine that Steel could, too). "My sister's a sweetie," Steel stated softly. "She doesn't deserve this."

"Do you think he'll come back this time?" I asked him.

Steel spoke slowly and quietly. "Cairn thinks so," he said. "He's never been gone this long, though." Steel turned and looked straight at me. He pointed his thumb at his chest. "I hope he never comes back." He swiveled



his head back to watch his sister. "I hope he's dead."

* * *

We both saw Florina walking over to us from the Bap territory. "We're taking a break," she told Steel. "Your sister wants to borrow some change from you to make a phone call."

Steel rifled through his pants' pockets and brought out a handful of silver coins. He counted some out and began to hand it to Florina.

But Florina would not take the money. "She said she wants it from you."

Steel raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Okay," he consented. The two of them started moving away from me, towards Cairn. "No, no Florina," Steel said. "You stay here and keep George company."

"That's all right," I protested. "I'll be fine." I motioned to Florina with my chin and a fluff of my hand. "Go with him."

"See? He doesn't even want me to stay," Florina argued to Steel.

"Be nice, Florina." Steel had stopped. "Please. For me." He rubbed her shoulder, and left by himself.

"Jesus, he's only going across the room." Florina looked disgusted as she stepped beside me.



"I guess he felt that he had to be polite," I offered.

"Steel is always telling me to be nice," Florina complained. "I'm nice a lot."

I nodded.

Florina spent the next twenty or thirty seconds composing herself before at last talking to me. "Cairn says that you're a pretty good guy."

"I think well of Cairn also." I told her.

Florina seemed pleased. "I'll tell her you said that."

"Fine."

"That should make her happy." Florina was about the same age as Steel, maybe a little younger (one or two years). In any case, I thought, too young to hate the world. She stated something then that surprised me. "I'm Cairn's best friend."

The two young women were most assuredly opposites. "I didn't know that," I answered.

"You don't know much, do you?"

In a way, she was correct. I did not know much about Cairn, and I knew even less about Florina herself. It had been many years since I had been around women their age. I barely remembered how my wife was in her twenties, but that was some thirty-five years ago. I tend to remember my wife as a fifty year old woman, as I

knew her last. She may have been twenty, but in my mind she was a fiftyish twenty. I loved my wife. "I work in a store, Florina," I said. "I probably miss a good deal."

* * *

Steel returned and Florina went again to bowl with the Baps.

"You needn't have asked her to stay with me," I said.

"It doesn't kill her to act right sometimes. If she ever learns how to be nice, maybe someone will like her," Steel responded. "Besides Cairn wanted to talk to me alone."

I had already so figured (It had been very clear when Cairn wanted her brother and not Florina to give her the change she asked for). "There's nothing wrong I hope."

"My sister has a habit of mothering people." Steel grinned. "She wanted to know if you were having fun."

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

"I told her you said that you had never had such a fun time in your life." Steel looked tired.

"I didn't say that," I told him.

"Cairn believed me," he said. "It made her feel good." He yawned. "I like to make her feel good." Steel

took a seat beside me. "It's all right, George," he confided. "I don't like it here either."

He was correct in assessing my emotions, I was not especially enjoying myself. "Cairn said that you came every week."

"I do, but that doesn't mean I like it."

I was confused.

"Cairn loves this place. She wants me to come and I come. For her sake, I pretend I love it too," he explained. "They make good chocolate milkshakes at the grill and I get one every time I'm here," he said. "After that it's all uphill."

"Wouldn't you come here for Florina?" I asked.

Steel considered it. "No," he answered. "Florina thinks so, though, which works out for the best." He went on. "It makes it seem like I care for her and she likes that." Steel rubbed his chest through his sloppy t-shirt. "You know, the boyfriend-girlfriend thing."

"While you were gone Florina told me that she and Cairn are best friends," I said.

Steel gazed at the ceiling (for want of anything better to do). "Amazing isn't it?" he stated with amusement. "Cairn's so sweet and Florina's such a creep." Steel raised his eyebrows to the situation. "Cairn loves her. She thinks Florina is wrong about a lot of things but she loves her anyway."

Both Steel and I were tremendously bored waiting for the Baps to finish. Neither of us liked to bowl so we did not. We could only converse.

"Cairn got me and Florina together. I bet she'd like us to get married," Steel said. "They both met here almost a year and a half ago. They've been friends ever since." He stopped talking.

* * *

The Baps were finally done bowling. It was approximately ten-thirty. Steel and I (after hours of doing little) went over to where they all were. They had begun preparing to leave for the night (Boss, Dancer, and Florina were packing away their bowling balls while Bouncer and Cairn folded the team's scoresheets). "You wrapped it up early tonight," Steel said to the Baps.

"When you're not playing against another team, things go quicker," Cairn stated.

"Of course they do," Boss lightly scolded in warm omniscience.

"If there are only half as many playing," Dancer reasoned, "you only play half as long."

Bouncer entered the discussion by asking, "What is the meaning of time?"

"Sometimes," Florina told Steel disgustedly, "you're incredibly stupid."

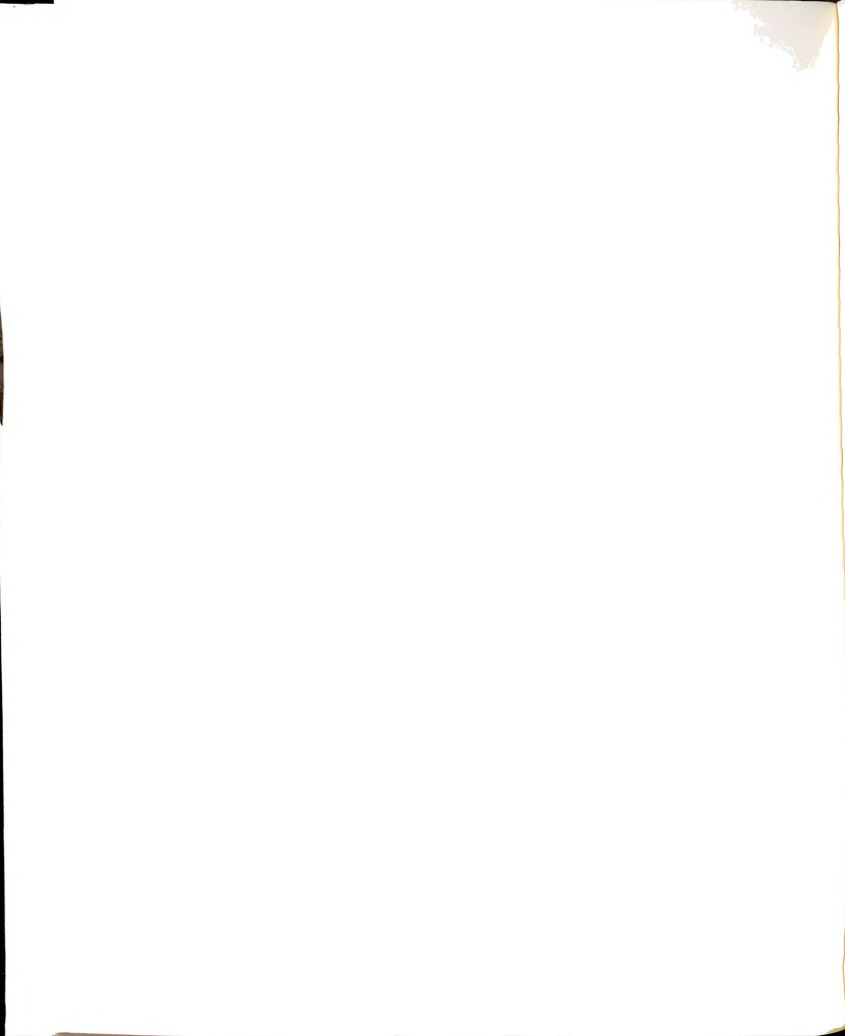
Before Boss, Dancer, and Bouncer split off to go to their respective cars (they had parked on the opposite side of the building and would be exiting through another door), Cairn hugged them tightly.

I'll see you three next week," she said.

Cairn was still wearing her 'Bap' bowling shirt. "I had a great time," she enthusiastically told us. She asked me gingerly (as if to obtain my approval), "How about you, George?"

"It was fun," I answered.

Steel smiled generously at me. He was quite ugly under the fluorescent lights of the Fishgrand parking lot. For him, another long night at the bowling alley had ended. It was quite obvious. He loved his sister dearly.

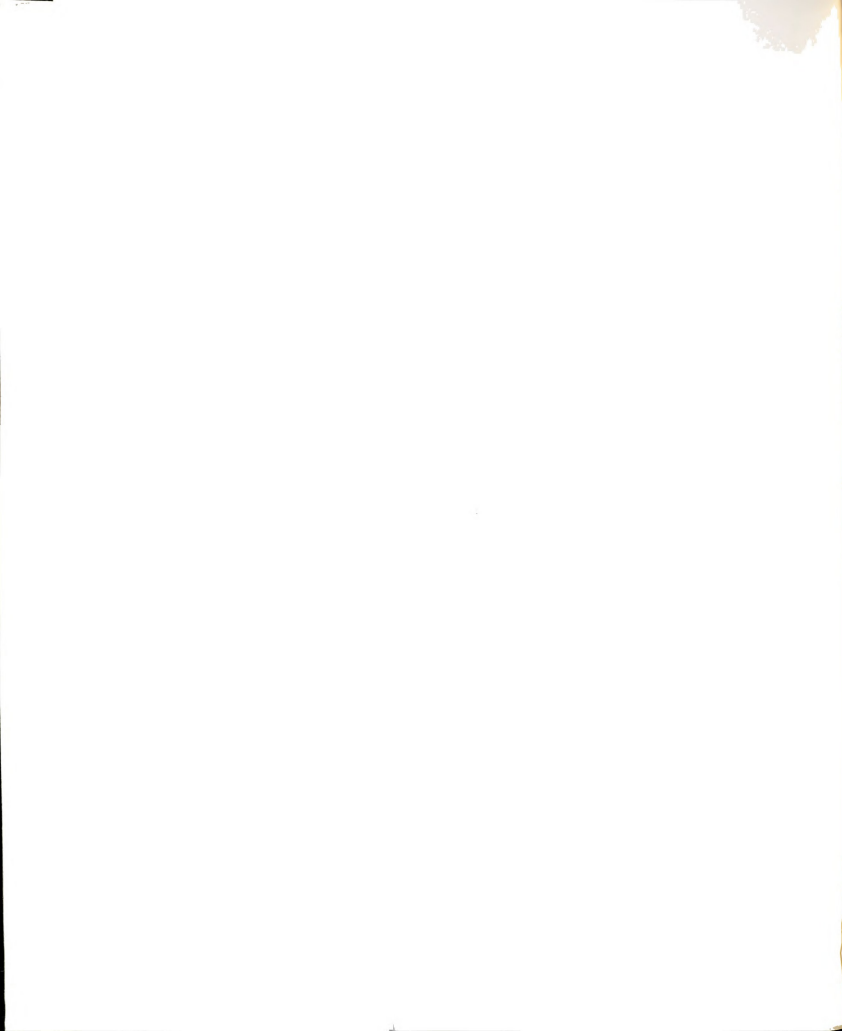


POOL BUSINESS

Something was happening with Keno's girlfriend, LeeAnne. She was faced with a dilemma that could drastically change their lives. Keno was worried. He loved LeeAnne, the young woman that he had been living with for three-and-a-half years. She and Keno had met while they were both seniors at the university. Keno had struggled to get his B. A., while LeeAnne had no trouble at all in school. She was even considering graduate studies, until a large firm in her hometown (Keno's hometown, too) offered her a very good position for a lot of money.

* * *

Keno's mother had decided to start swimming. She went out and purchased a big and deep swimming pool for her backyard and arranged with the store to have it installed. Keno, being a high school teacher, had the summer off, so when his mother asked him to come over and stay with her on the afternoons it was being put up (she was a widow and would otherwise have been alone) he



quickly agreed. They both waited for the poolmen to arrive.

"I don't know anything about swimming pools, Ma," he told her.

"I feel it's rather necessary for me to swim. It'll make me strong again," she said.

A year earlier, his mother had gotten into a bad car accident. Five of her ribs were crushed and there was associated damage to her heart and lungs. She was on the critical list for a few days. A good deal of reconstructive surgery was done on her upper body. She was in the hospital for over a month, and when released was instructed to exercise regularly in order to build up her chest muscles. She had done mild calisthenics without much conviction for about two weeks before tiring of the routine and giving it up.

The pool seemed to be a good idea, but Keno had his doubts. After the accident, his mother had suffered through a long depression during which she cared little for her physical well-being. She had not exercised for a year. Keno thought that her muscles were probably atrophied to hell anyway and she could swim ten hours a day forever without much of a positive effect. But, Keno also thought well of the pool business because his mother finally appeared to be showing some interest in her health.



It was an eighty-five degree day in the first week of June. The two poolmen arrived wearing thin, white t-shirts which soon became dirty and sweaty as they began working. They were clearing a large circular area in the backyard for the above-ground pool to rest in. Keno found it interesting to study what the two men were doing.

While Keno watched, he felt an uneasiness. LeeAnne had promised to give him her decision after she got back from work that evening. Two weeks earlier, she had been offered a promotion. The new job would require her to move to Minneapolis. Keno wouldn't join her if she did decide to go there.

"Please go with me," LeeAnne had said.

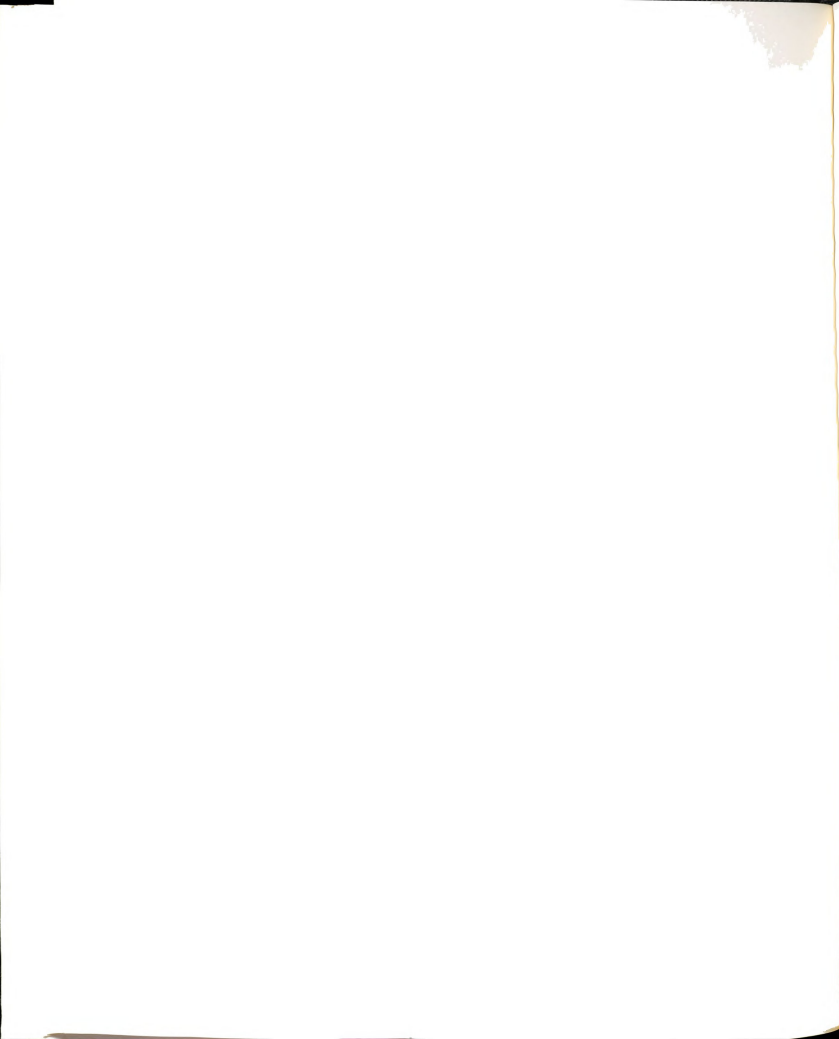
"I can't leave my family, my job, and my friends," Keno answered.

LeeAnne had put off her decision. She wanted to remain with Keno, but she wanted the higher position in the company, too. She had promised Keno that she would make up her mind and tell him that night. She didn't say anything about it during breakfast.

* * *

"I guess I'll go now." Keno said.

"I suppose you want to find out what LeeAnne's



going to do," his mother told him.

"She should be home from work." Keno reached into his pants' pockets and jingled for his keys.

Night was coming and the sky was grey, lavender and yellow. Keno and his mother were still together in her yard. The poolmen had poured the foundation and would resume in a few days when the cement hardened. His mother had been sitting but stood as Keno started to leave.

"Don't worry," she said, trying to reassure him.
"She won't leave you."

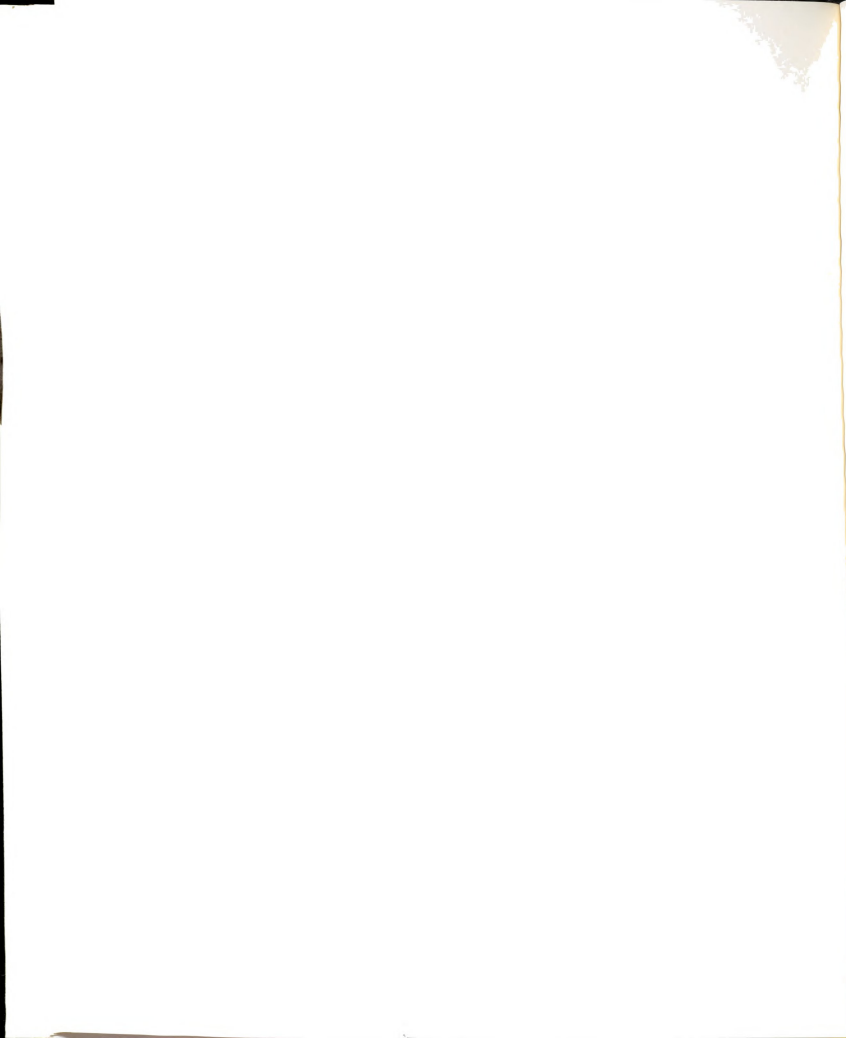
Keno didn't want to lose LeeAnne. But he surely had no clue as to whether or not she would take the promotion. It seemed to him that she was trying to make-believe that the situation didn't exist. She had avoided telling or showing Keno which way she was leaning, even though he had asked (sometimes demanded) many times.

"I have to know, LeeAnne," he said.

"I love you, Keno," was her reply.

The reason LeeAnne would tell him her decision when he got home was due to the fact that her bosses had set that day as a deadline. They needed to know too.

When he got to his building, Keno drove into the carport not far from his front door. He could see that LeeAnne was home because her car was already there. He



parked and, before walking to his apartment, brushed his palm slowly and gently over the smooth fender of LeeAnne's orange Camaro. He was nervous.

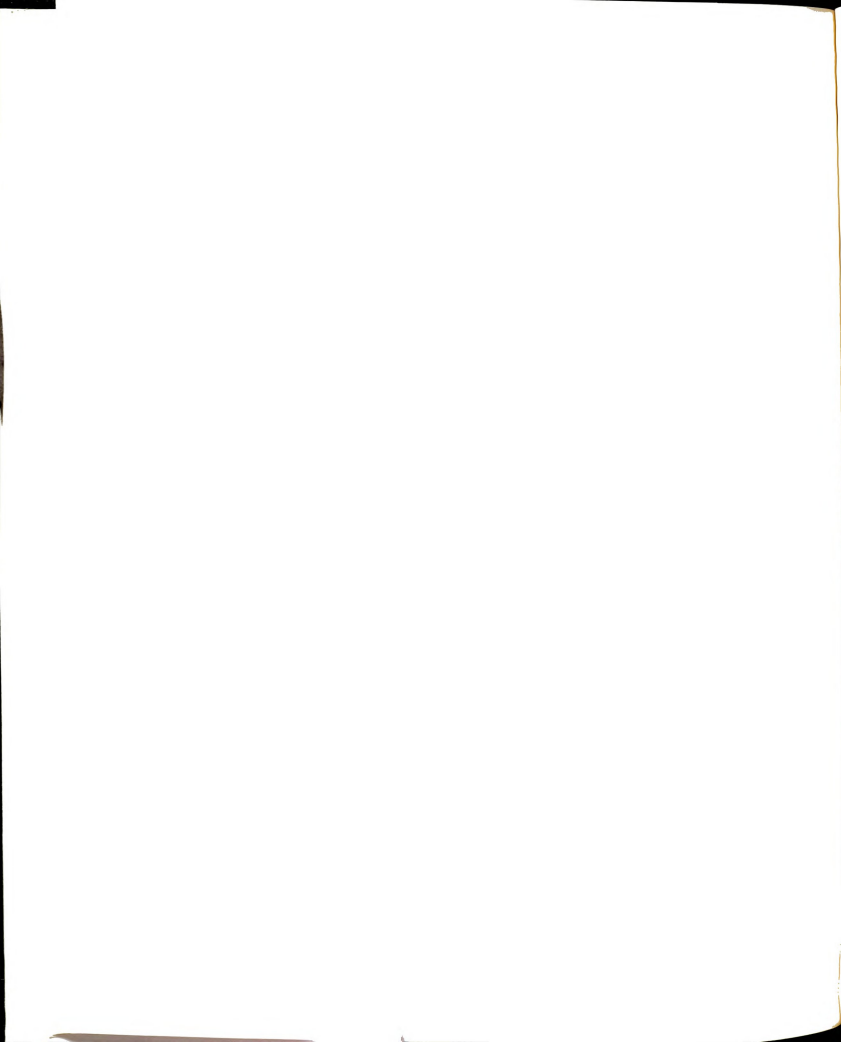
Keno breathed in deeply. He went inside and to the building's elevator. Waiting for it, he thought of LeeAnne. He tried to be confident. The elevator doors opened and he got in.

Keno got out on the third floor and stepped down the long, carpeted hallway to his place. He stood motionlessly outside his door for a moment. He remembered a similar situation. Three years before, LeeAnne had had to choose between Keno and something else she wanted to do with her life.

Keno shook himself out of his reverie, twisted open the doorknob, and walked into his living room. LeeAnne was sitting on the couch. By just looking at her face he could tell what she had decided.

* * *

Keno and LeeAnne were both graduating in a few months from the university with their respective B. A. degrees. There was a problem. Keno did not get very good grades in school, but LeeAnne had done very well. Keno had gone after and earned his teaching certificate in English. Through a series of interviews and some luck he



won a teaching position at a high school back home. He would be starting his new job soon after graduation. LeeAnne's future was not as well settled.

She didn't care for any (and there were many) of the employment offers she had received. Everything seemed to pay less than she expected to get. LeeAnne's degree was in business and her high G. P. A. qualified her to be one of the department's valedictorians. She felt she should be able to command a pretty good job somewhere. She held out. Still nothing better appeared.

"Keno," she said hesitantly, "my professors suggest that I go to graduate school."

Keno, of course, did not like the idea. He had known LeeAnne for only eight months but he was in love with her. "What school would you be going to?"

LeeAnne folded her hands together. "I haven't even thought about it yet," she said. "Probably nowhere nearby."

They both knew that if LeeAnne went on with her education, they'd break up. For two months, the young couple had been sharing an apartment. Keno was very happy and believed LeeAnne to be too.

She kept talking to different companies, hoping for a job that she would be pleased with. It was April and time was getting short. She sent in a lot of applications to various grad schools just in case.

One afternoon in the first week of May, after a literature class, Keno came home to find LeeAnne sitting in the kitchen staring sorrowfully at the yellow walls. "Did you find a job today?" he asked her.

She turned her head to him and stared into his eyes. "I don't want to leave you, Keno," she whispered, her voice cracking. "Honest to God, I feel so damn mercenary." She gazed back at the walls and started to softly cry.

Three weeks later, LeeAnne came home ecstatic. She had been hired that afternoon as an executive in a consulting firm with its main offices in the same city where Keno would be teaching. She and Keno went to an expensive restaurant to celebrate and ordered fresh lobsters and a bottle of fine white wine.

After the dinner, the two strolled through the university town. It wasn't completely dark out but the streetlights were on already. The sun had vanished beneath the horizon and only a light red glow remained. Fast music could be heard streaming out of many open car windows. The sidewalks were filled with other students. Keno felt that things had worked out well.

"I had decided not to leave you anyway," LeeAnne told him. "I love you too much to have gone away. I figured the hell with graduate school."

Keno kissed her. The early evening air was light



and cool. Girls laughed easily in the distance. The sky was clear. Stars began to shine. Keno and LeeAnne pressed their fingertips together and headed home.

* * *

The swimming pool was done. For the previous three days Keno had been coming to his mother's house while the poolmen were assembling it. He carefully observed every detail of the construction, from beginning (when the cement was being mixed), to the end (when the poolmen folded then unfolded, then stretched the plastic liner to a tight fit within the pool's metal walls). He noted the near silence with which a pool is built. There is little need for pounding hammers or for droning machinery, the few mild sounds being the ruffle of grass, the bending of fabric, and the swish of thin metal. The loudest noise is of the shovels scraping through hard soil and that's not much (there is very little digging done).

It seemed to Keno that the two poolmen loved their job. They didn't curse or strain or even hurry. They had concern for every measurement and fretted deeply over any wrinkle. The curve of the pool had to be perfect. Levels were used to achieve precise symmetry and balance. When they were done with their work, Keno was



extremely satisfied. The swimming pool would last a long time.

LeeAnne had moved to Minneapolis a couple of days before. She and Keno had parted amicably. They went hand-in-hand over to his mother's house. LeeAnne said goodbye to her as Keno stood stoically nearby. He helped as she packed all of her belongings into various cardboard boxes to be taken with her. They exchanged large photos of each other. Keno took her to the airport on her day of departure and they kissed just before she boarded her plane. But Keno was still quite bitter and sad. As he looked out the airport terminal's windows facing LeeAnne's jet as it taxied down the runway, he realized that he might never see her again.

The swimming pool was filled after water had poured into it for five days. It would have taken longer if a couple of neighbors hadn't offered their garden hoses to the task. Keno's mother had gone into the house to put on her swimsuit and was to have the first dip.

Keno wore cut-off jeans and a green t-shirt as he sat by the pool in a folding metal chair. His mother came out of the house wearing an old one-piece bathing suit. Her skin was milky and pudgy. Scars from her injuries appeared light brown and shiny. She climbed the aluminum ladder to a small redwood platform atop the rim of the pool.

She immersed herself slowly, delicately patting handfuls of water on her arms and legs. "It's cold," she said. But it was a hot day and it didn't take long for her to get used to it. She waded the circumference of the pool a few times and then pulled herself back onto the platform.

"Are you getting tired, Ma?" Keno asked.

She shook her head. "Why don't you join me?"

Keno nodded. "Okay," he told her. "I'll go get my trunks on." He got up and stood by the pool.

His mother closed her eyes and dangled her feet in the water, kicking them with loud splashes. He missed LeeAnne. He started for the back door of the house. Romance would be thought of some other time. Keno wanted, for the time being, to swim with his mother.

After a few minutes he returned. Nearby, on the lawn, was a black, rubber inner tube. He threw it into the pool, and then, after getting himself into the water, climbed on top of it. His rear poking through the middle of the ring, his legs hanging down at the knees over one side, his shoulders bent back easily over the other with his neck pointing his face to the sky, he floated and tried to relax.

"You're thinking about LeeAnne, aren't you, Keno?" his mother asked him.

He didn't close his eyes, instead he stared up at

the blue air. He didn't answer.

"Maybe she'll come back," she said.

He still didn't say anything. The water was, indeed, cold. It felt good though, on such a warm afternoon. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better, Ma," Keno finally said. He thought that he might really enjoy the swimming pool over the hot summer. But, gazing up from inside the tube, what he made a strong effort not to think of was airplanes going far away, and taking love with them.

RECREATION IN ELIZABETH, N. J.

WARREN AND ELLEN

Jim wasn't doing much when his new neighbors arrived. It was late on a summer Saturday afternoon and a moving van was pulling out from across the street where it had been parked since that morning. Jim could see a man and woman, both about thirty, busying themselves lifting various cardboard boxes into their garage.

Jim walked out to the couple. "Need some help?" he offered.

The man's name was Warren. He was fair-skinned and pudgy. His wife, Ellen, pretty as can be, rubbed her arms like they were tired, and smiled. After the boxes had all been put away, the three sat on Warren and Ellen's porch.

"Where'd you live before coming here?" Jim asked them.

"Chesterton, Indiana," Ellen answered.

Warren stood. "Would you like a Seven-Up, Jim?" he

said.

"No thanks," he answered. "Where's that?" Jim asked Ellen.

"Near Chicago."

"Great softball around there," Warren put in.

"Warren loves to play softball," Ellen said.

Jim did too even though he didn't say anything just then.

"Are you married?" Ellen asked him.

"My wife's name is Molly. Right now she's at work," Jim told them. "I'll introduce you to her later."

Jim would explain how much he liked softball but some things he kept to himself. He knew he wouldn't tell them about what had happened a couple of months earlier, when Molly had hurt him so badly.

TWO MONTHS BEFORE WARREN AND ELLEN

Molly flew airplanes. She worked at a small airport in New Jersey giving tourists aerial tours of New York City. She'd fly a Cessna containing herself and three or four sightseers over the Statue of Liberty. "Isn't she beautiful?" Molly would ask and all onboard would agree. It was a very corny, boring, uneventful job she had told Jim.

It had happened on the day that Jim was hired at Porth Paper Corporation, on Manhattan. Up until then Jim had been a shoe salesman at a Sears, Roebuck in Elizabeth, and wanted terribly to work elsewhere. He went for an interview at the paper factory on his lunch hour, got the new job, quit the old one, and drove home at two-thirty that afternoon. Molly's car was in the driveway, though she wasn't supposed to be there. She should have been floating agog midwesterners over Times Square.

When Jim entered the side door of his house no one was around. He looked in the kitchen, in the living room, and in the family room--all were empty. Hearing noises from the bedroom, he checked in there. Molly was amorously bouncing up and down on the bed with a man he had never seen before.

"Jesus, Molly," Jim blurted out in amazement as he stood in the doorway.

Jim ran back to the kitchen, grabbed a butcher knife, and ran again to the bedroom.

Molly's partner was calm until he saw the knife. Neither he nor Molly knew what Jim would do.

Jim advanced slowly, knife in hand, toward the bed where the lovers still remained lying.

"Don't kill me, man," the naked guy pleaded.

In a panic, Molly screamed, "Jim! He's just one of

my passengers, Jim!"

Jim leapt onto the bed, in between the two, and stabbed repeatedly, wildly at the mattress. It was a waterbed and liquid gushed out from under him. The strange man with the unobscured penis hurriedly put on his pants and rushed off.

Molly was sobbing. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she kept saying.

Jim stayed facedown on the almost deflated bed and didn't look at anything. His grip alternately tightened and relaxed on the knife handle. The escaping water trickled as it streamed away in tiny rivers across the hardwood floor. Everything was so wet, it was hard to tell there were tears dripping from his eyes.

AFTER TWO MONTHS OF WARREN AND ELLEN

Jim's job had been going very well. He had quickly been promoted to personnel manager at Porth. Besides the added prestige of the new job, he was making a lot more money.

Jim got along extremely well with Warren. Molly and Ellen weren't quite as close as their husbands, but were good friends too. One afternoon when Jim and Ellen were lying naked and entangled in bed together Ellen said, "I really like your wife. We should stop this, you know."



Jim hugged her tighter.

Ellen smiled a little smile. "Forgive me, Molly," she said before kissing Jim again.

In the beginning when Jim and Ellen had just met each other, nothing had happened between them. Jim had naturally been attracted to Ellen (she was gorgeous, after all), but he had had no realistic sexual thoughts about her. He hadn't believed in the least that he would ever become her lover.

Yet, the thing between Jim and Ellen had come about easily. Jim's car was had been in need of repair and he wanted a ride back from the gas station. Neither Molly nor Warren had been around. Ellen offered to drive and Jim agreed.

"Warren is a very good softball player," Jim said.

"Molly's dynamic. She's got such an active life," Ellen observed.

Jim paused. "I wish I had a more active life. Maybe I should fly."

Ellen laughed. "Maybe I should play softball."

Ellen and Jim got along well. Things developed and they made love soon afterward. During their first rubbings of one another, Jim tried to believe that his making love to Ellen would pay Molly back for her unfaithfulness. But after he and Ellen had done it a couple of times, he realized that it wasn't a valid

excuse, the situation was just confusing. Molly had wronged him, he liked Warren a lot, he was cheating on everyone, and nothing meant anything. Besides, he was getting pretty damn crazy about Ellen, too.

WORKING AT PORTH

Sometimes, if there was a slow period or break in his business schedule, Jim would leave his office and watch the new sheets being cut. He stared as the huge rolls of paper were brought near the long, heavy blade. The untouched whiteness would unwrap easily from the metal bolts and advance steadily to the cutter. The paper was sliced with a nearly undetectable whistle as each page was created. It was all done so precisely, so efficiently, so orderly. Where there used to be a bulging, undefined winding of paper, there would right away be a crisp straight stack. Precise lines emerged from what was circular. Jim liked the smell of freshly cut paper.

HAPHAZARD SOFTBALL

The goings-on of Jim and Ellen ended. The concept of love had nothing to do with it. An accident was the primary cause. Jim got hurt playing softball and things

weren't the same.

Jim was at shortstop for the 'Elizabeth Tigers' when, Falls Kretch, the brawny leftfielder of the 'Summit Giants' came to the plate. Jim wasn't thinking of Ellen at the time, or of Molly, either. He was concentrating, as is the wont of all good softball players, on getting the next out. Falls slammed a hard, grounder that took a bad bounce into Jim's kneecap. Jim vibrated on his back with pain.

It probably would have been more just, Jim later thought, had Warren, the cuckolded husband, hit the ball. Instead Warren, the Tiger third baseman, was the first player at Jim's side. "Jim, buddy," Warren told him. "You'll feel better if you vomit."

An ambulance was summoned and took Jim to the hospital. Over the next few days, he learned how totally encompassing a knee injury was. His knee hurt if he shifted in bed, if he bent his arm, even if he spoke too forcefully. The knee, he figured, is connected to everything. Making love to a friend's wife, though it didn't need to be stated, was most definitely out.

HEALING

Jim had spent the night in the hospital. His kneecap was shattered. After coming home the next day,

he was relaxing on a lounge and watching out his front window. He saw Warren walking briskly up to his porch. Jim let him in.

"Ellen told me you got back this morning," Warren said.

Jim was on crutches. A thick, white-plaster cast completely covered his left leg from hip to heel. He was not very steady when he stood.

"You shouldn't be getting up," Warren scolded Jim as he answered the door. "Why didn't Molly get it?"

"Molly's flying." Jim struggled back to his lounge. Warren followed. Jim wasn't happy that he had company. His leg hurt, and he was heartbroken because of Ellen. She had just been over talking to him about an hour before.

"Will you get back full use of your leg?" Ellen asked.

"No one knows yet," Jim answered. "I might never be able to bend it again. I might limp for the rest of my life."

"No more softball, I guess," Ellen said.

Jim shook his head. "No more a lot of things."

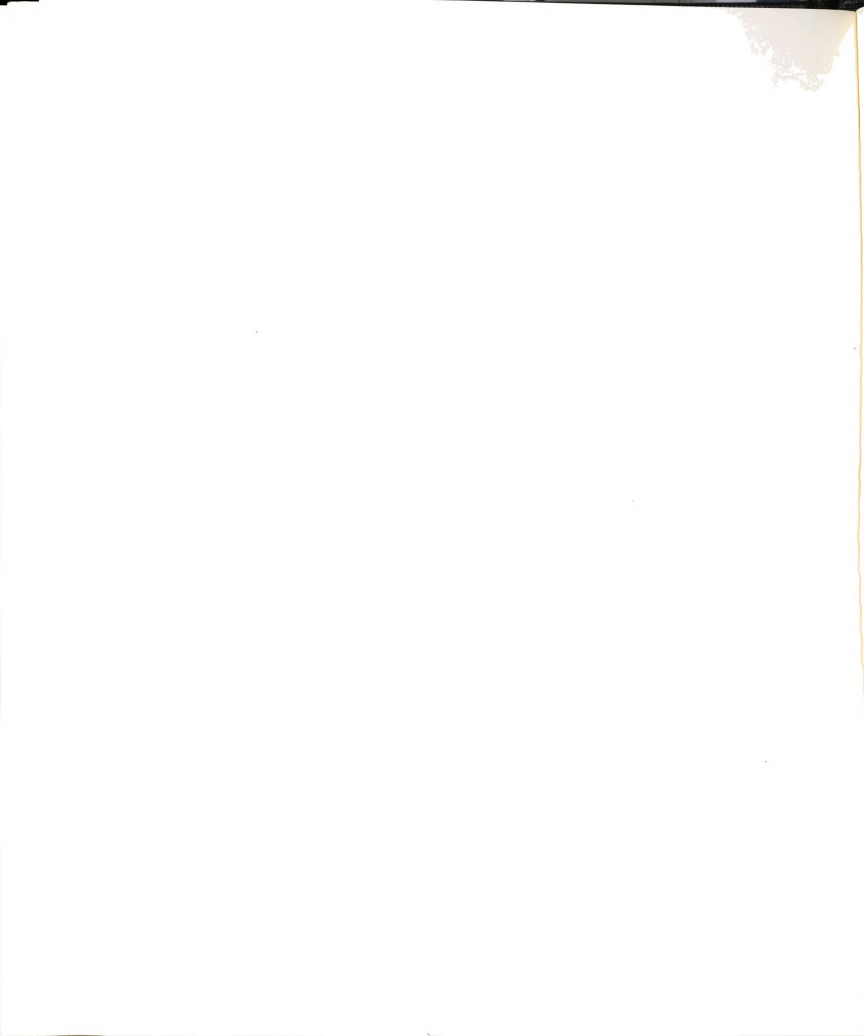
Jim was well aware of chance. The affairs, the discoveries, the happiness, the pain had all occurred simply and quickly; like the crack of a bat, like a softball speeding, calamitously, imperceptibly, his way.

LUCKY BINGER

By now, most everyone has heard of Michael Binger. He is now famous internationally as well as here in his native America. Fame comes naturally when one wins, as he did, four state lotteries and over fifty million dollars within three months. However, not that much is known about Binger's life prior to his incredible string of fantastically good luck.

Michael Binger was born thirty-one years ago to loving, albeit rather ordinary, parents. His mother, Nancy Binger, gave birth to him on Wednesday, June 30, 1955. His father, Sam, was overjoyed when, in the hospital's waiting room, he was told of his new son's arrival. He handed out cigars that said in huge pink letters, "IT'S A GIRL!". A couple of days later, when Sam was informed that he had apparently misunderstood about his child's gender, he was still very happy.

Michael, unfortunately, was not an exceptionally good baby. He never slept well, crying all night much to the displeasure of his parents. Nancy took to wearing earplugs. Sam slept on a cot inside of their garage. In



fact, Nancy liked the plugs so well that she began wearing them constantly, while Sam, extremely pleased with his sleeping arrangements, spent almost all his time in the garage. Those two facts explain the following. Michael, after winning the lottery for the third time bought a huge mansion. After taking his parents on a tour of the new place, he asked how they liked it.

"Very nice, son, very nice," Sam answered. "I think you could park a car in here."

And Nancy asked, "Whose house did you say this was, honey?"

During his schooling, Michael proved to be rather precocious. Every day he would attend his kindergarten class hoping for a lecture on twentieth-century poets. He was always disappointed. "I crave intellectual stimulation," he stated once, "and all I get are crayons." He tried to reconcile such playtime schooling with his inner feelings by drawing a picture of Wallace Stevens on manila paper, but he could never get the nose quite right. He finally gave up in despair, expressionistically melting his Crayolas into a multi-colored candle without a wick.

At the age of seven he started a wild affair with his second-grade teacher. It didn't last very long. Everything was going along fine until she started



converting her young students from the use of printing to cursive handwriting. "This has got to end, Elaine," he told her. "Your husband is many years into post-pubescence, I haven't even started shaving, and I prefer block letters."

Adolescence was somewhat cruel to Michael. When he was thirteen he fell in love with a young girl in his class named Constance Imbrunoni. She was pretty, popular, and overly fearful of someday eating tainted seafood.

"I love you, Constance," he said.

"I can't deal with love right now, Michael," she explained. "Not while there are so many canned anchovies in existence."

Throughout high school, Michael loved Constance. He was always amorously after her. Constance, however, grew to dread the sight of him. If she was in the school's cafeteria eating lunch, Michael would soon sidle up next to her. If she went to a football game, he would take a nearby seat in the bleachers. Even when she would date another boy, he would spy on the couple through binoculars. Constance began to wear disguises everywhere in an effort to keep her identity secret from him. Michael finally became disgusted with her when she dressed up as Gene Krupa. "You're making me sick, Constance. Get out of my life," he ordered, "and take

your damn drums with you."

Then came high school graduation. Michael very nearly died from a gunshot wound when he was eighteen. Many observers say that he was asking for it by hopping around in a forest clearing during deer hunting season, wearing a tan colored trench coat, and sporting elk horns atop his head. His response to questions about the incident was sketchy at best. "I don't know," he said while recovering in the hospital. "I like the wilderness. I like antlers."

Intelligent as Michael was, he refused to go to college after high school. Instead, he traveled. He says he went on a safari through the African jungles when he was twenty-one, but his story is widely suspected. There are no photos to back him up. He maintained that he forgot his camera and stubbornly shone a lamp on a blank wall to create shadow-hand puppets detailing his excursion. "See there! See there!" he exclaimed, wiggling his upraised arm back and forth in the light. "It's a python!"

Whether or not one believes his Africa tale, it most assuredly cannot be denied that Michael traveled extensively in the United States. It was in Eau Claire, Wisconsin in 1979 that he met Mamie McMickman. Michael fell hard for her and it wasn't long before he and Mamie were married. But the marriage had a rocky start.

Michael didn't realize that Mamie had personified her footwear until afterwards on their honeymoon in Atlantic City.

"Where do you want to go today, Mamie?" Michael asked.

"Well, she said. "my left shoe: John, wants to go to the beach, but Jim: my right shoe, wants to check out the casinos. I could put on my gym shoes," she offered. "How do you feel about a game of racquetball?"

Michael struggled to keep his marriage together, despite his wife's problems. Mamie, however, took to naming other leather items such as belts, wallets, and eyeglass cases.

"Believe me Mamie," Michael pleaded, "Cowhide has no feelings."

The couple broke up. Surprisingly, it wasn't Michael who asked for the divorce. It was Mamie.

"Staying with you would be an ongoing insult to suede," she said as she walked out the door.

The marriage lasted little more than a year. Michael was alone again. Mamie went to live with a cat-o-nine-tails on a cattle ranch somewhere in Texas. Today, she says she is happy.

As a means of forgetting Mamie, Michael started to frequent carnivals. "I need to be around crowds of people having fun and smiling," he said. "I enjoy corn



dogs too, but that means nothing." It was on a midway in Maine where he first met 'Sonar Sue'.

Sonar Sue had the ability to detect various conditions underwater. She had set up a canvas sideshow tent and would perform in front of small audiences of perhaps ten to twenty. One afternoon, Michael bought a one dollar ticket and stepped inside.

Sue was thirty-four years of age. She stood on a tiny stage wearing a sparkling blue robe and, atop her head, a white silk turban. Her eyes were closed. "Something large...very large...yes! it's a whale," she divined. "A whale is swimming in Penobscot Bay... It has eczema."

I was impressed," Michael told her after her show.

"Thank you so much," Sonar Sue said. unbeknownst to Michael, Sue was very generous. "Would you like my turban?" she offered.

Michael was touched. "No, no, no, no, no." He told her "That's not necessary at all."

"My tent then," she said. "Take my tent."

"No, no, no, no, no," he repeated.

"Let me give you a twenty-dollar bill."

"No, no, no, no, no."

"How about a corn dog?"

"No, no, no, no, n...well..."

Michael and Sue developed a great friendship. Day

after day he visited her carnival. At the start of their relationship, he spoke sorrowfully to her of Mamie. "I'm so lonely, Sue," he told her. "But she used to go on and on about the tanning process. Of course I was bored."

"Poor Michael," Sue replied. "Would you like a Barc-O-Lounger?"

Sue was enormously kind and compassionate and Michael's depression over his failed marriage gradually disappeared. He was grateful for knowing her because of that, but he realized something else about her.

Sonar Sue was lucky. She would rarely lose at games of chance. Michael first noticed that she was an extremely fine "Yahtzee" player. He played strip poker with her and modestly quit when down to his underwear. Then as a test, he flipped a coin repeatedly and Sue guessed the correct heads-or-tails outcome eighty-nine out of a hundred times. Ecstatic, Michael planned a trip for her to Las Vegas.

Michael couldn't believe it when she refused to go. "You'll be rich," he told her.

Her explanation was that she didn't receive things comfortably. "I'm a giver," she said, "not a taker."

Angry words were exchanged. Sue stormed off to do her show. but she was so upset, her performance was considerably lacking in its usual quality. "I see a lot of water," she stated to her audience. "There's some

fish." The booing was intense.

Michael got into his car to leave for a while. The problem was that he didn't know where to go. He sat behind the steering wheel thinking for two hours, going nowhere, not realizing that it wasn't his car. The auto's female owner saw a strange man in her front seat and phoned the police.

"I thought it was mine, Officer," Michael tried to explain. "It's the same make. It's the same model. It's the same year. It's the same color. It's got the same 'Honk if you love Francis Ford Coppola' bumper sticker."

Michael wasn't released for twelve hours, an awful time for him. He became aware that he loved Sonar Sue and, while locked in his cell, missed her tremendously. He moaned. He cried. He learned to play the harmonica.

When he got out of jail, he hurried home to tell Sue that he was sorry and if she didn't want to exploit her luckiness by gambling, it was fine with him. They would marry and be poor as hell. He even thought of a color TV as nice but certainly not necessary. He didn't care.

Sue was not in her carnival tent. She left Michael a note saying that she loved him but could not bring herself to compromise her values. She would not be back, she wrote. In keeping with her generous nature however, she left him a final gift: a three-month subscription to

the state lottery.

Everyone knows the rest. Except that Michael Binger still waits and hopes for the return of his love. Michael is a wealthy man, but he is not above returning daily to the ocean's shoreline and wading into the water. Dipping his head beneath the surface, he calls out, "Come back, Sue!" But, so far she has not reappeared. So far, his words remain just gurgles.



BASKETBALL, N.A.S.A., THE ALAMO AND
DUBUQUE EATS

Gordon always knew his wife, Burna, would get fat. When they had met in college a few years before, she had been slim and gorgeous. "But everything pointed to her becoming overweight," he told Chante', the center on his basketball team. "Her hips were too broad, she was overly fond of eating, and everyone in her family is obese." The two players were roommates when the team was on the road. They talked a little before seven o'clock that night in Dubuque, Gordon stretched out on the bed, while Chante' sat backwards on a flimsy metal chair, in their hotel room.

"I don't know much about fat people," Chante' said. "My wife, my mom and dad, and my brothers and sisters are all tall and skinny."

"It doesn't matter to me. I still love her." Gordon shook his head. "I hate what she did last November, but I still love her."

Gordon was on a basketball team in the lowly United States Basketball League (U.S.B.L.). All of the players



there had usually been cut during pre-season tryouts with teams in the quality National Basketball Association (N.B.A.). There was a lot of talent in the U.S.B.L. but it was still a very minor league.

In college Gordon had been the star of his university's basketball team. He had planned on playing in the N.B.A. and making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. But the Seattle Supersonics had released him just two weeks into their training camp and he was left instead to cling to a pro career on the Baton Rouge Reds of the U.S.B.L.

Gordon was twenty-six and had accepted the fact that basketball would never make him rich. What he wanted was enough experience to coach at a school someday. So he stayed in the minors and the Reds liked him enough to keep him on their roster for four years. He had recently told Chante' "Four years is a long time to be told that you're not that good."

Chante' didn't have a lot of basketball ability. "He's okay, but he's certainly not much." Gordon had explained to Burna. "He's seven feet tall. It's hard to be terrible when you're seven feet tall." Gordon was six-four. The Baton Rouge newspaper said he was the best Red there had ever been.

Gordon would practice a lot. Late at night, when the rest of the team was gone, Gordon and Chante' would

do layups in the three-thousand seat Baton Rouge arena. Their tennis shoes would squeak as they ran and stopped and swiveled atop the wooden floor of the court. Gordon would often think of Burna.

Burna was an electrical engineer for N.A.S.A., having been for four years. She loved her job. It had been an ecstatic time for her when one of her designs was first utilized in an earth satellite. With several promotions already, her future at N.A.S.A. appeared extremely promising.

Over the past four winters, Gordon and Burna rarely saw each other. Gordon had been away from their Texas home playing ball while Burna worked at the N.A.S.A. Space Center in Houston. They missed one another but nothing else could be arranged. They'd sometimes get together the weekends the Reds were home in Baton Rouge. Gordon was never truly satisfied and Burna didn't seem to be either. He had never worried, though, about his wife having an affair. He believed highly in marriage, especially his marriage, and knew that she didn't have to be worried about him with others, either. Chante', too, wouldn't cheat on his wife and Gordon thought maybe that was the reason the two of them got along so well. Neither womanized, yet all of their other teammates, married and not, did.

Fred Fenway was the cause of all the trouble. Fred was another electrical engineer at the Space Center who worked with Burna. He and Burna had started for N.A.S.A. at about the same time four years before, and because they both were new at their jobs then, quite naturally a friendship developed between them. Four years before, they had been lost, insecure, frightened, shy and overwhelmed together. Before anything had happened between Burna and Fred, Gordon would jokingly say, "Terror makes strange bedfellows." But ever since he had found out the story he didn't say it anymore.

As time went by, Burna and Fred got more and more adjusted to N.A.S.A. and the bond between them grew. The two went to movies, to restaurants, to musical concerts and the like. During Gordon's off-season, he would join them and they all had made a spirited threesome. When Gordon played in Baton Rouge from October until April, Burna and Fred still went out. "Maybe I was too unsuspecting," Gordon later told Burna.

Gordon used to like Fred. When Gordon had to spend time away from home, it had pleased him to know that Burna wouldn't be lonely. Fred would be there to keep her company whenever she wanted. Fred, unfortunately, was very homely and found it terribly difficult to get dates. At least, that's what he had told Burna. It

wasn't that hard for Gordon to believe. Fred's ears were huge and stuck out. His eyes were too circular and seemed to gape at everything. His nose was hooked and bulbous, his lips thin and squashed-looking. Topping it all off, his dark-brown hair had loads of trouble with static electricity and was always frizzy and unkempt. Burna, in contrast to Gordon, was the one who couldn't understand Fred's ineptness with the ladies. "He's not the best-looking man around," she said to Gordon the previous summer, "But women don't really care about that. He's charming, he's intelligent, and he's got a good job. He should be able to get someone." She was right, but at that time, neither she nor Gordon suspected that the someone whom Fred would finally 'get' would be Burna, herself.

Burna was very self-confident. She was cool. When she and Gordon met in college their senior year, Burna said she intended to work for N.A.S.A.. "And sure enough, Chante'," he said to his roommate, "she got a job at N.A.S.A.."

Chante' was putting his dirty clothes into a large white duffle bag.

Near seven-thirty that evening in Dubuque, Gordon rolled over in bed and fell asleep for a half an hour. When he woke up, he sensed, as he often did before fully awakening, a basketball coming to and departing from his

hands, bouncing up and down, with all its smooth, heavy leatherness. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "Chante'," he called out but then remembered that Chante' had said something earlier about going to the laundromat.

In the second week of the previous October, when Burna had told him that Fred Fenway wanted to take her down to San Antonio over one of the approaching weekends, Gordon was excited for her. "I've always wanted to see the Alamo," he said. Gordon and Burna had spent almost all of their lives in the midwest and had yet to travel more than a bit through Texas. "I wish I could go with you," The Baton Rouge Reds were to open their training sessions in a few days. Gordon would be leaving for Louisiana soon, the regular season beginning in November.

"When are you going?" he asked.

"Three weeks," Burna answered. "You don't mind?"

Gordon thought of his long, upcoming basketball schedule. "No," he shook his head, "of course not. I'll be playing ball anyway. It's great of Fred to take you." Gordon wrinkled his forehead some, "Don't you want to go?"

"Yes," Burna said, "but I'd rather go with you."



The nationally-syndicated newspaper columnist, Bob Greene, wrote a piece about his first time at the Alamo. He stated how he had, throughout his life, planned on going there someday. Then, in looking for an idea to base an article on, decided, at long last, to visit. It didn't turn out the way he thought it would. His long-held impression was that the Alamo would be way out on a parched, desolate landscape with lots of sun and dust and tumbleweeds. Just after checking into his very-modern-architecture, downtown hotel, he asked at the desk for a cab to take him out to the Alamo. At first the hotel clerk didn't know what Greene meant, but then said a ride to the Alamo wasn't necessary. Greene asked how else does one get there. The clerk said to go left out the hotel's front entrance, walk down a block and the Alamo was on the opposite side of the street, "right across from the Woolworth's." True enough, there, in the middle of a hustle-bustle urban area, in the center of San Antonio, was the Alamo. Bob Greene was shocked, but he wasn't the only one to be shocked by what went on at the Alamo.

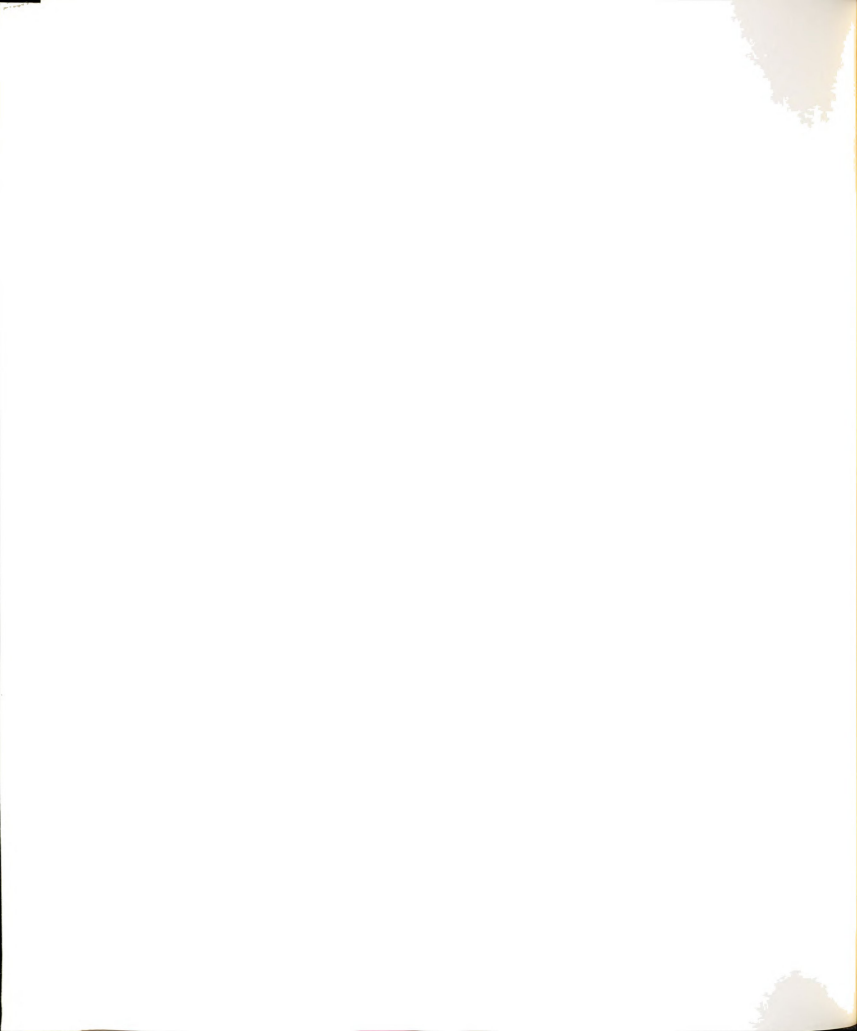
Gordon had always thought that he could trust Burna. He didn't really know if he was the jealous type or not, but he was aware of a relaxation that had come to him as his wife got fat. When they had been



newlyweds, Burna was an extremely good-looking woman. Though it hadn't bothered him tremendously, he had always felt somewhat uncomfortable whenever they went out and Burna was stared at lustily by other men. When she got fat, the gawking pretty well stopped. Burna was still a good-looking woman, but nonetheless, a good-looking fat woman. Generally men weren't interested.

Apparently, however, Fred Fenway was interested. He had done much more than just look at Burna. He had used sadness and farewells as his allies. Fred was leaving N.A.S.A. and had chosen the San Antonio weekend to break it to her. He had given her the news outside the Alamo near the spot where, "as legend has it," Burna explained, Davy Crockett died.

On the Monday after that November weekend Burna had spent with Fred was over and she had returned home to Houston, Gordon phoned her from Baton Rouge. "It was fine, Gordon," Burna said. "Listen. Can I come up to see you at your apartment Friday night? I want to tell you what happened there." Arriving in Louisiana the following Friday evening, without delaying a minute, she told Gordon everything. Gordon had no idea of what had really occurred. Burna hadn't indicated anything on the phone. He had expected happy talk and bragging from her about the trip. He had expected to see slides. But right



away it sounded like it would be bad news. "I love you, Gordon," Burna began, "but if you want a divorce, I'll understand."

She said that Fred revealed to her that he had quit his job. He had quietly given his notice the week before he asked Burna to San Antonio. He hoped for some privacy with her and a weekend trip was the only way he could think of to get it. "They say remember the Alamo," Burna said to Gordon. "Boy, do I remember the Alamo." Fred told her that he had accepted a job in New York City working for the ABC television network. He couldn't refuse he said. "I've wanted to work in television ever since I was a kid," he explained to her. "This spaceman stuff at N.A.S.A. is okay, but it can't compare." He said that they had known each other for three and a half years and for much of that time he had been in love with her. While Burna spoke to Gordon, she constantly folded and unfolded her hands.

Burna eventually got around to a direct statement confessing that she had slept with Fred. "I feel awful. I wanted to tell you the truth right away," Burna, with tears in her eyes, said. "Don't worry, there's nothing between me and Fred anymore. Fred's gone to New York. But, for that very short time, I was vulnerable."

"I missed you," she told him. "It's the beginning of your basketball season and I was lonely." Burna

clenched her fist. "The beginning is the worst. It means you were in Baton Rouge, you are in Baton Rouge, and, for a long time, you're going to be in Baton Rouge. Every year it's horrible. Every year you're gone forever.

"And don't forget Fred," she added. "He meant a lot to me. Aside from you, he was closer to me than anybody. So when he tells me he's leaving, too--" Burna left it up in the air and just shook her head. "I felt all alone, and you do stupid things when you feel all alone."

Gordon didn't take it well, but he didn't fly into a maniacal rage, either. He didn't hurt Burna physically or verbally. He didn't get a gun, shoot up the walls to scare the hell out of her, and at the end, blown his brains to kingdom come. Gordon wasn't one for hyperbole. All he did was take off for a while. He had listened to Burna's entire story, didn't say a word, and then left.

Gordon didn't know what else to do. He just didn't want to hear anymore from Burna about her and Fred in San Antonio. He exited his building, stomped around the parking lot, got into his Buick Regal, and started driving.

Gordon stopped his car and got out at the basketball arena. It was actually the old Baton Rouge

Masonic Auditorium. At one time, the auditorium was where all the big Baton Rouge events were held. The arena floor, now covered by the basketball court, had been filled with one-thousand velour-upholstered seats that faced a large stage. All the famous acts that had come to Baton Rouge, played the Masonic Auditorium. Tommy Dorsey had appeared there in the forties with Frank Sinatra. Then there was Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Patti Page, Elvis Presley, and The Rolling Stones. In 1965, the new Civic Theatre had opened downtown and few went anymore to the Masonic Auditorium. After ten years of being empty and unused very much of the time, the Reds of the U.S.B.L. purchased the old building. They had renovated it extensively. The grandiose, art-deco lobby was removed, the five-hundred seat balcony was torn down, the many velour seats were all ripped out, and the stage area was totally knocked away. A varnished, wooden court had been laid down on ground level and bleachers were constructed in an oval surrounding it. The transformation from auditorium to sports arena had been very well done, except for the outside of the place. The facade hadn't changed much. The structure still looked to be, to any passers-by, ancient and crumbling.

When Gordon entered, a blue-uniformed guard who had been standing watch at the players' entrance, recognized



him and let him by. Inside, he turned left into a doorway leading to the locker room. No one else was around because the Reds were not playing that night. Gordon flicked on the lights and picked up a basketball from a group of five on the cement floor in the corner. He sat in front of his locker and twirled the ball on the tip of his finger.

He was unable to work up much anger toward Burna. She wasn't the type to screw indiscriminately. It appeared to him that she was a victim of bad timing. A lot of things had happened all at once, a proposition came out of nowhere and she accepted it because she hadn't been thinking clearly. He liked the idea of it as a kind of temporary insanity. He loved his wife and didn't want to blame her, anyway.

So, Gordon tried blaming himself. He had been a witness to the relationship developing between Burna and Fred. Maybe he should have done something. But, then again, Gordon realized, he hadn't done anything because there was no reason to. Nothing appeared awry. He had liked Fred. Fred seemed to have liked him. There was no indication of any romantic love of Fred for Burna. They, all three, had been buddies. That had been why he had seen nothing wrong with their San Antonio trip. Buddies go to the Alamo, don't they? he thought.

The one person Gordon was able to blame,



unreservedly, was Fred. Gordon hated Fred so gloriously, so overwhelmingly, that one might wonder why he didn't ejaculate. Gordon took the basketball he had previously been spinning in his hand, threw it hard, and with a loud bam!, it dented in a metal, locker door across from him. He grabbed it as it rebounded. He threw the ball again and, with another bam!, a second door was dented. He pretended the basketball was Fred's head and bam! bam! bam! bam!, more dents were in more doors. Eventually, he ran out of undented doors. He had gotten them all. Still, he wasn't satisfied. The room was illuminated by a dense, circular bank of fluorescent lights. Gordon looked at the fixture on the ceiling, aimed the ball and, with all his might, let it fly. The smash and tinkle of broken glass provided a wonderful completeness to his destruction. Too dark then to trash the room any more, Gordon went back to talk to Burna again.

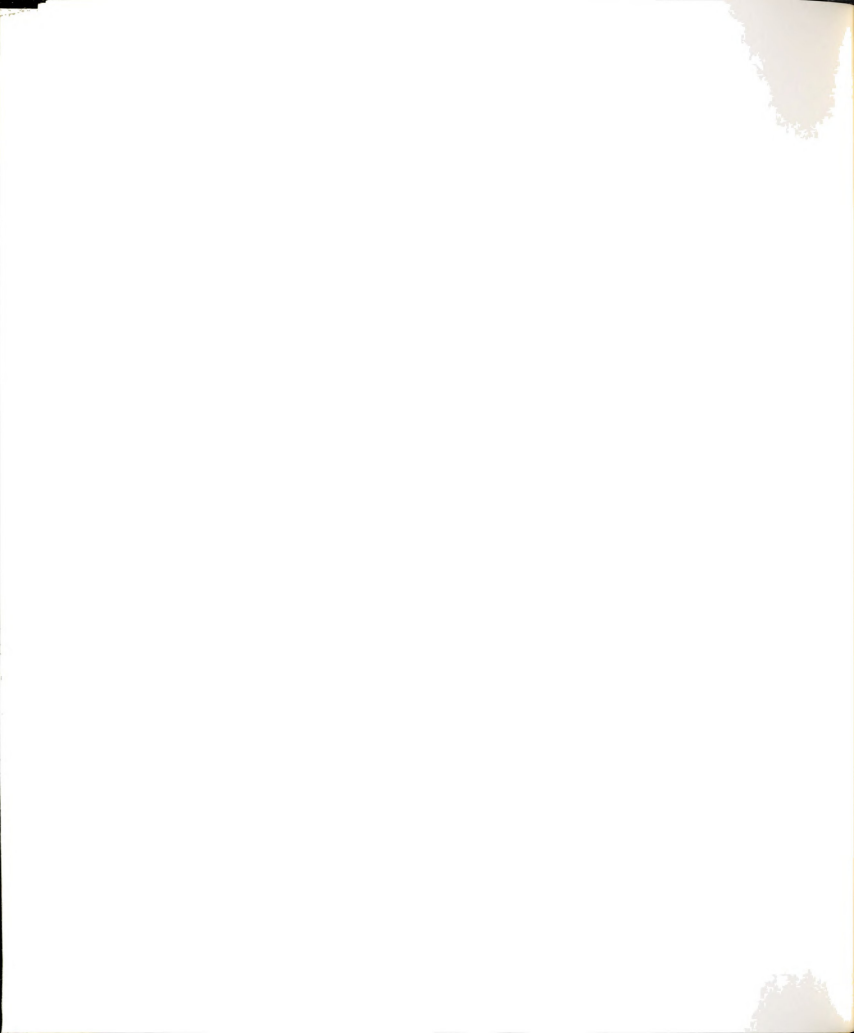
If Gordon hadn't wanted to remain faithful to Burna, he could easily have gone to bed with someone else. He was a handsome man and many women had been and still were interested in him. In Baton Rouge, pretty teen-age girls surrounded him before every game, calling out his name. Women in their twenties, thirties, and forties smiled blatantly or whistled crudely at him.

If he went to a bar afterwards, various females slipped him small, handwritten notes with names like Karen or Brigitte scrolled atop and phone numbers printed beneath. Somewhere on such a note, there would be an exclamation point, usually a number of exclamation points, for decoration. It was as if much of the opposite sex was waiting exclamation-pointedly for Gordon's say-so to spread its collective legs for him.

Gordon never took any woman up on an offer. He liked the attention women gave him, but liked marriage more. "Man," Chante' had said the week before, "every chick in Louisiana is after you." When Burna visited Baton Rouge, everyone was shocked by the strong good-looking basketball player with his arm around the fat woman. The sweet young girls and the gorgeous women who were attracted to Gordon couldn't figure the couple out. they hated Burna. They felt, and quite correctly so, that they had lost out.

Dubuque bored Gordon. He woke from his short nap on the hotel bed, looked at his watch and saw that it was not even eight o'clock. He was hungry. He decided to eat at a little restaurant down the street. They served catfish and he liked catfish.

Gordon normally would ask a teammate to join him, but except for Chante', they were all out with their



Dubuque girlfriends. The Reds had played the Dubuque Stingers the night before and were spending an extra night, an off night, in Dubuque before taking a long bus ride into Madison, Wisconsin the next morning. Tomorrow night, they would play the Madison Lakers, Gordon's teammates would screw their Madison girlfriends, and the following day the team would fly home to Baton Rouge. Gordon once had remarked to Chante', "Basketball players tend to have eclectic love-lives."

Chante' grinned. "Don't look at me, man," he had been reading a magazine and looked back down into it. "I'm married. I don't even try to screw around." Gordon nodded.

He took the elevator down from his room on the second floor to the hotel's lobby at street level. Gordon detested eating alone.

The hotel the Reds stayed at in Dubuque was The Marquette. The Marquette was located downtown, two blocks from the Mississippi River, and a bit away from the better parts of the city. The neighborhood was one of those sections where nothing was new enough to be up-to-date, yet nothing was ancient enough to have class. The buildings all needed a good sandblasting. The restaurant that Gordon liked was quite typical of the area in that it was decidedly urban and common; an unspectacular, rundown storefront. The front window was



bordered on the inside by mouse-brown drapes which looked fine if you were sitting in the dining room, but from the sidewalk their linings and stichings and hemwork showed. The impression given was that the place was not neat in an inside-outish kind of way.

The restaurant didn't really have a name. There was a neon sign in the window. In red letters it said: "Jumpin' Jiminy! HOT FRIED CATFISH!" and had an orange, ugly, mustachioed fish jumping out of blue-lit lines of water. The closest the establishment came to having a title was printed on the cinder-block side of the building, where it read: "DUBUQUE EATS". So that is what Gordon called it. and whenever he was in Dubuque, he would have at least one dinner at Dubuque Eats.

When Gordon entered, the restaurant had just a few people in it. It was after the normal dinner time, that period of evening when not much eating is done. He sat at a table in the middle of the room. Soon a waitress brought him a menu, which he didn't open because he already knew what he wanted. The cover had a reproduction on it of the same, ugly fish as in the front window. Next to it again were the words, "Jumpin' Jiminy!" A year before, Gordon had invited Chante' to have dinner at Dubuque Eats with him.

"I don't get it, Chante'," Gordon had said.
"Jumpin' Jiminy isn't a river term. It isn't southern.



It isn't cajun. It doesn't have anything to do with catfish." Gordon had been sitting across from his friend as they both stared at the front of the menu. "I really don't know why they use it."

"It's just a nice little saying, man," Chante' had offered. "It's like the Disney cricket."

"Jiminy Cricket?" Gordon had asked.

Chante' had nodded. "Everything nice in the world has to do with goddam Walt Disney."

When the waitress returned, Gordon handed her the menu and just ordered a catfish dinner and a Coke. As he glanced around, his eyes stopped at the door of the restaurant. A truly (truly, truly, Gordon thought) gorgeous young woman of around twenty-five entered. Gordon may never have cheated on Burna, but he was still attracted to superb-appearing women.

She caught a little when she first saw Gordon and then seemed somewhat taken by him. She walked over to him. "I know you," she told him. "You play with the Baton Rouge Reds."

Gordon was pleased. "You know about basketball," he said.

She smiled.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

She gently rubbed the tip of her nose and he was impressed with the beauty of such a small nose. "Lani,"



she said. A small nose is the only beautiful nose, Gordon thought. She wore an orange, jersey-knit top that held tightly and made her upper body appear terrifically soft and round. She wore tight bluejeans. Her legs were not too fat and not too thin. Her legs, Gordon believed, were perfect.

There were some females who were so attractive, there figures so wonderful, their movements so sublime and exactly feminine that when Gordon saw them, he could feel the surrounding air vibrate with their beauty. Such was this Lani. Burna used to look like that when she and Gordon were dating. But soon after their marriage she had widened and widenened and her appearance wasn't much to brag about anymore. A few weeks before, after he had been making love to her, she said, "Gordon, I'm sorry I got so fat so quickly. And he told her, "It was wonderful the way you got fat." He meant it too. "You expanded so steadily. Like Lake Meade after the Hoover Dam."

Gordon saw the wedding ring on Lani's left hand at the same time as she said, "I want you to meet my husband." This had happened before, however, where Gordon had gotten very attracted to a female and later found out she was married. Even though he had known beforehand that he wouldn't allow himself to do



anything, he'd still feel somewhat disappointed at her unavailability. It was physical, it was weird. As Chante' had said about many such things, "The cock ain't got no brains. Sometimes, the cock is from another planet."

Lani's husband's name was Burke. He had been parking their car and entered Dubuque Eats a couple of minutes after her. He was a strong-looking man, perhaps somewhat overweight. His face was red as if from an eternal strain. His features might have looked fierce to some, but actually he seemed quite friendly. Lani started to introduce Gordon, but Burke already knew who he was.

"Both me and Lani are big followers of the U.S.B.L.," Burke said. "We both love basketball." Then he put an arm around his wife and squeezed. "We've got a marriage made in heaven."

Gordon invited the couple to join him.

"Why, thank you," Burke told him. "That'd be fantastic."

"Uhm hmm." Lani was pleased, as well.

They seated themselves at Gordon's table and stayed for over two hours. Gordon really enjoyed them. Lani was so good-looking that she needn't have been anything more to be a pleasant dinner companion. But, in addition, she was intelligent, down-to-earth, and had a good sense of



humor. Everything considered, she was a very personable woman. She said that she wanted to meet Burna someday.

Burke used to play basketball. He said that in high school, he was a guard and his forte' was defense. "I never made a lot of points, so the colleges never noticed me."

"I sure noticed him. I was one of the cheerleaders," Lani said. "We were high school sweethearts."

Burke was still ruminating about his playing days. "I wouldn't have been good in college, anyway." Gordon always felt closer to another basketball player, even if that player didn't play anymore. He sensed a brotherhood among them. He had told Burna, "There's a special camaraderie shared by dribblers."

Presently, Burke and Lani owned a large farm fifty miles to the west. "After high school," Burke said, "Lani and I got married and bought a little place. Every year for the past seven years we've added more and more land, and now it's not so little anymore." He was proud of his farm. He grew corn and soybeans, he told Gordon.

He and Lani had come into town the night before to see the Stingers-Reds game. The couple was going to stay until the following night to watch the Stingers play the Mobile 'Bamas. "I'm a city girl at heart," Lani said. "I love Dubuque."



It was ten-thirty at Dubuque Eats. Burke looked at his watch and said, "Oh my gosh!" At eleven, he was expecting a phone call back in his hotel room and had to leave. He and Lani had not meant to stay so long. Gordon had had a nice evening, and was glad for their company.

After they had paid they're bills and left, Burke stood next to Gordon outside, "Where're you staying? Do you want a ride?"

"No thanks. I'm just a block and a half down," Gordon told him, "At the Marquette."

"That's a beautiful old building," Lani said. "We've driven by it a lot."

"It's pretty nice," Gordon told her. The carpets were thick, the furniture was heavily padded, and its upholstery was of subdued shades of brand-new fabrics. The lobby had a huge reception desk of hand-carved, aged, solid oak. Wherever one went inside the hotel, lighting was provided by big, cut-glass chandeliers. It was a ritzy place, even though its location wasn't the best. "You two should see the inside sometime," Gordon said.

Instantly, Lani responded with, "Do you think you could show us tonight?"

Gordon remembered that Burke had to leave, but, to be polite, said yes anyway.



Burke said, "I've got that call to wait for so I can't make it." He shook his head. "If you want to though, Lani, I don't mind if you go with Gordon."

The quickness in which it was decided that he and Lani leave bothered Gordon. The situation turned out so neatly that it seemed to him like a bad, kinky movie that has the husband, for some reason or other, let his gorgeous wife go off with another man. But he figured that Burke was only being friendly. Even so, Gordon felt a little odd taking Lani from her husband, and away to his hotel.

Gordon took Lani throughout the Marquette and she was, quite properly, impressed. She said she had a deep affection for classic architecture and design. Gordon showed her the public areas of the old hotel and she was delighted by it all. Then, being friendly and with nothing appearing amiss, he took her up to his room. As Gordon and she walked in, Chante' had been in the adjoining room watching television.

"Chante'," Gordon called to him. "I want to introduce you to someone."

Chante' smiled broadly at Lani and they both shook hands.

"You're my favorite player," Lani told him, which must have really pleased Chante' since he had never



played basketball well enough for many, if any, to ever single him out before.

"She follows the U.S.B.L.," Gordon explained. "She was at the game last night."

Chante' acted strangely around Lani. Gordon didn't know why. Chante' was very friendly to everyone and he was to Lani as well but he seemed to want to leave. She didn't catch on to his aloofness, but Gordon did. Not long afterwards Chante', in fact, left.

"Your roommate's very good-looking," Lani said to Gordon. He nodded but he had never actually thought that way of Chante'. Chante' though, like Gordon, was constantly sought out by women. "I ain't an ugly basketball player, man," Gordon remembered him as saying. "I'm an ugly performer, and there ain't no such thing as an ugly performer. Everybody's crazy about performers."

Lani continued telling Gordon how much she liked Chante'. Two years before, when Chante' had been a rookie Red, Burke had taken her to see Baton Rouge play Dubuque. "I thought he was great," she said. "That's when he became my favorite." Then she surprised Gordon by asking, "Do you think he'd like to get to know me better?"

Jumpin Jiminy! Gordon thought.

Lani took a pen and a piece of paper from her purse



and wrote:

LANI!!!

885-3484

"Will you give this to him?" she asked, putting the note in Gordon's shirt. "Tell him that if he's interested, I'm interested."

Shortly, Gordon escorted Lani down to the lobby. "Don't forget, now," she told him. He waved goodbye at her as she left. He felt sorry for her nice ex-basketball playing husband.

Right after she disappeared from view, Chante' came up behind him. "Pretty lady," he said.

"Yes," answered Gordon.

Gordon asked Chante' why he hadn't stayed when Lani was in their room and he replied that he thought it best not to stick around. "I didn't know what you were gonna do with her."

"You know I don't fool around on Burna," Gordon told him.

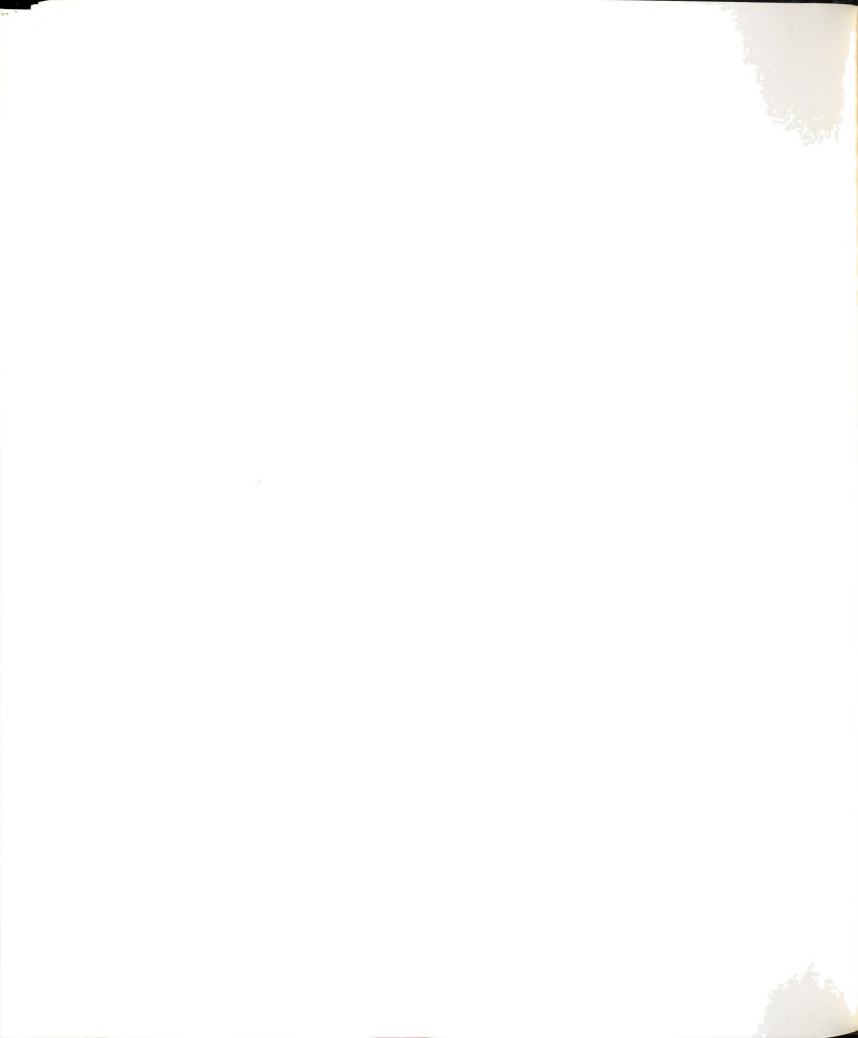
"I just mind my own business, man," Chante' said.

"Besides, she wasn't after me," Gordon stated, "She was after you."

"No shit?" Chante' asked.

"None whatsoever," Gordon answered.

Chante' was quiet for a while. He exhaled and then he inhaled. "Yeah, well," he said. "The hell with her. I



like to stay out of trouble."

Gordon pulled Lani's note out of his pocket and gave it to Chante'. Chante' glanced at what she had written on it, crumpled it up and dropped it to the floor. Gordon was pleased. He liked to think that if he and Chante' said the hell with it to enough things, maybe they could stay out of trouble forever.



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