

Chaim Rosenblum

Good Bye

Over
your head rises
the soft, rumpled night shirt
with its slept-in indentations.
Topless, you pose for me,
anticipation.
The room
squeezes to a phone-booth.
We are brought together.
Warm, elliptical breasts pile up
on the cotton sand bags
of my torso,
"Goodbye."
Hands make contact,
charge into tissue.
My mouth tastes a sweetened nipple.
Your current flows through me.
Insufficient
resistance
to break contact.
Respiration shallows.
Heartbeat quickens.
Awkward because
we've plans
to do nothing.
"Goodbye," you whisper.
My beloved turns away, slipping
into her accoutrement.

Single Beds

Our berths
drift side by side
in the river that's our bedroom
pushed along by the slow
rotating blades
of the
old ceiling fan.
Sometimes you invite me
and sometimes I invite you.
Space restrictions pressure
the visitor
to leap
overboard and swim
alone to their single bed.
We've talked about vacationing
in rooms with a bed containing
a queen-sized mattress.
Flotsam
sufficient for
an air flow between us
but doesn't stop your foot finding mine,
my hand on your breast,
rear ends rubbing
together,
after turning
to our separate sides,
as a pleasant reminder
that we are a couple.

Chaim Rosenblum has published poetry in Lotus Bloom Journal, Poetry Superhighway, Saucy Vox, and Mimaamakim. He lives with his wife and six children in a small, alternative community in Israel.

Sex Before Breakfast

By
Stoyan Valev

Translated from Bulgarian by: Ivailo Dagnev

The magazines now are full of so much crap, Todor thought indignantly, while Gerry was reading the article aloud. It claimed that scientists established infallibly and conclusively that the best prescription for one's longevity and good health was sex before breakfast.

He mumbled discontentedly while putting his shoes on and the angry rumble of his Ford was soon heard.

Gerry started laughing loudly. This is the laughter of women whose eyes can see something good looming somewhere; it has no name yet, and though invisible, it is bound to come. And it does, only to those who believe it will.

"I'm going jogging in the morning," Gerry announced in their bedroom in the evening.

"Go on your hands, if you like!" Todor blabbered, exhausted with the maddening work at the big company of whom he was in charge, and he turned to the wall only to start snoring in a flash.

At five sharp the following morning, Gerry opened her eyes. She slipped into the tracksuit she had already prepared, put on her brand new trainers and ran outside. There was not a single soul in sight on the street. She ran towards the park.

"Hey, soldier, where are you going?" she heard a male voice quite unexpectedly. It was the newspaperman.

"Come with me!" Running, she cried out to him provokingly.

"Another time..." he muttered, staring at her.

She sprinted along the alley and was soon panting, then she slowed down, and it felt like running behind the tram. When she was on her way back, sweating all over, she provokingly started jogging quickly again, but stopped at the kiosk to buy a newspaper. She took one, and then realized that she had forgotten to take money with her. She was about to give it back when:

"Take it. You'll pay for it next time," the man stopped her.

She propped herself on the board and looked the man over – in his late thirties, with a hard, weather-



beaten face.

"How about making friends, ah?" he suggested in a friendly way. "I am Kosyo Boev, captain of the reserve. They kicked my ass from the army. We kept thinking how to beat NATO, but NATO, instead of going to war with us, simply wrote us off the list of personnel. They took over the Ministry of the Defense instead of the country. Are the tactics clear, soldier?"

She nodded in agreement – the army of unemployed had its regiments of former military men, which NATO dispensed with without a shot.

He was shaking his head – whether a salute or disagreement, she could not understand.

One morning, though, he started running after her, and to her amazement, he was wearing a tracksuit and a T-shirt.

"On the run, soldier!" the captain of the reserve ordered sternly.

He set up an unbearable pace, but she clenched her teeth and ran until she dropped, bushed, onto the grass next to the wooden children's house in the park. He plunged next to her and his hands grabbed her, she tried to defend herself, they rolled over – panting, surprised, and smiling... The game unnoticeably turned into a short sexual skirmish, not to the army standards. There was no winner, as both of them were happy from the unexpected adventure.

"That's the way to wage a war, captain!" Gerry caressed his face.

"Yes, Mr. General, Sir!" he saluted.

They were jogging together every morning and their final destination was always the wooden house, where she in a theatrical manner would drop to the grass, while he plunged next to her – to save her, with kisses and caresses. Next, they would find themselves in the house, then a short skirmish would ensue, and there was no winner, according to the military standards. Each time, both armies withdrew from

the battlefield with the feeling of success. Kosyo went to work at his kiosk and skillfully passed the papers to the hurrying passers-by.

Gerry came back home breathless, happy, and would take a cool shower. She made breakfast after that and then it was Todor's turn to drop heavily onto chair in the small kitchen. As usual, accurately folded on the table, was waiting the newspaper.

"It's good that you jog every morning," he grinned.

"Why?"

"Because you buy me a newspaper."

"What about sex before breakfast?"

"Cut the crap, they write all sorts of shit in the magazines," Todor would reply with a full mouth and would eagerly spread out the pages.

"I'm gonna die with my eyes wide open," she would sadly shake her head, her fingers propped on the table. "And without having sex before breakfast..."

Immersed in his newspaper and the food, he could hear neither her voice, nor the jubilant signals coming out like a peal of bells from the body of the happy woman.

Stojan Valev was born and live in Bulgaria, Eastern Europe. He is specialist in Bulgarian language and literature. He graduated Paisii Hilendarski University in Plovdiv in 1982 and taught there 5 years as an assistant in Russian literature of XX century. He used to work as a journalist in radios, weekly papers and daily papers. He used to be chief editor of the weekly "Freedom", the daily press "Maritza" and "Twenty-four-hour news maker".

In 1999 Hermes Publishing House published his first book "When God Was On Leave" – about the drama of the Bulgarian village in the time of socialism and after 1989.

In 2000 two Bulgarian theatres put on scene his play for teenagers "An United Class".

His second book is "The Bulgarian Dekameron", in two volumes published in 2002 and 2003 by Golden Apple Publishing House. The two volumes include 30 stories about the love life of the Bulgarian in the past. Now that the two books of "The Bulgarian Dekameron" are here, we Bulgarians now have our own encyclopedia of the art of love.

In 2003 Golden Apple Publishing House published a story collection of 40 stories named "Time for Infidelities".

Some of his stories have been published in many issues in USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, India, Italy, Poland, Kingdom of Nepal, Ireland, Canada, Switzerland and some are going to be published soon. In Russia, Moscow, was published a book "Book about love", which includes some of his stories and stories of a russian writer - Igor Kuznetzov.



Apple Eater

Photography © Durlabh Singh

Chaim Rosenblum

Ruby Apple

The skirt pushed up
above your knees,
curled on the animal carpet,
you let him kiss you,
while making feeble efforts
begging him not to.
Wet strings of resistance
spilled out,
marking foot trails
on the plains of your cheeks.
I heard your moans,
robbing me of my voice,
making me inarticulate.
Their resonance,
flashing lights
of memory cut up.
I felt your fingers
dig into his back.
Your cries of hunger,
sinking teeth
into the ruby apple
stuck to his lips.
I watched you die.

The Jeweler's Rifle

By

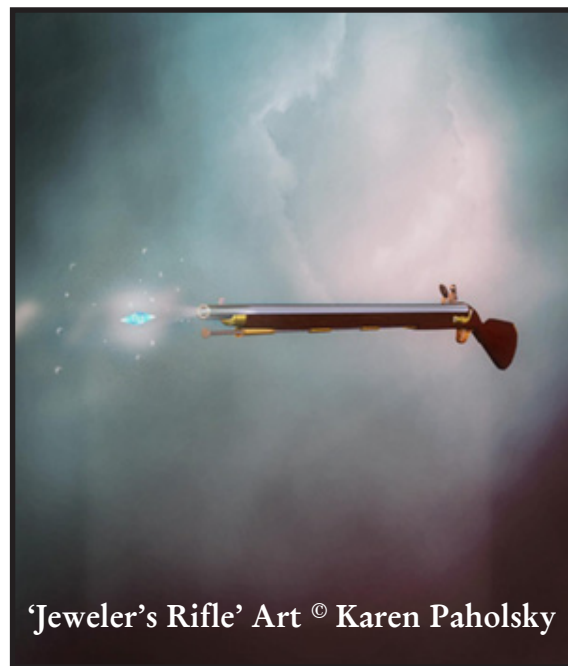
Richard Vaughn

Three things stick about Mr. Heimer's killing. The first is that the weapon, a Winchester Model 92 .25-20 caliber lever action rifle, was more suitable for collecting than self-defense. Second, when I was sixteen that summer of 1949 in Ojai, I longed for that gun with a passion. Last, if he had not been stubborn and contrary, it might've gone different. The first time I saw it in his jewelry store display case by bracelets and necklaces, I became faint. It was irresistible with its oiled walnut stock and forearm, the steel frame and barrel glistening brighter than silver or gold.

I worked in Mrs. Brach's family restaurant as a dishwasher to earn money for school clothes and a car when I could drive. But at fifty cents an hour it took mighty discipline to save anything since I liked ice cream sodas, movies and gun magazines. I saw the rifle while passing Heimer's Jewelry late one Saturday night in June. It was fate beckoning me. I'd passed the store many times before. Why it caught my eye through the front window, I don't know. It was a talisman of every movie hero—John Wayne, Randolph Scott, and Gary Cooper.

Thinking back, my sense is that I was just at an age when tools of power and manhood were alluring. I'd sat through many westerns where a gun, most often a Colt revolver or Winchester rifle, defeated villains and brought frontier justice. It was obvious: owning and using a gun meant the difference between winning and losing. The elegance of the rifle and skill needed to aim, shoot, and lever a shiny cartridge into the chamber captivated my imagination beyond reason. I fantasized traipsing the hills behind town with such a lethal weapon.

The jewelry store was closed when I went to work on Sunday, but I lingered in front, pressing my nose against the plate glass window for a better look. The rifle seemed so close, yet beyond my reach. I wanted to rush inside and ask about it. The few times I had seen the modern version of the gun in sporting goods stores, it was not only costly but also came in a large caliber. I could never afford .30-30 cartridges. Besides, the older rifle was more authentic of the West. When I saw that it was in a smaller .25-20 caliber — I had to have it.



I left for my job early Monday to visit the store. Mr. Heimer was talking with a lady about her wristwatch when I entered. I idled in jeans and T-shirt, trying to act casual gazing at watches, rings and items I'd never seen before. I spent most of my time at the display case staring at the Winchester. When the lady left, Mr. Heimer turned my way, his thin, wrinkled face inquisitive but cordial. He had tiny, pinched eyes typical of a man who spent lots of time staring at the insides of watches with a special lens attached to his round silver-framed glasses.

"Vell, young man, vat for you?"

"Just looking," I muttered.

"Ya, dat's okay," he said, waiting.

"I was on my way to work, at the restaurant."

Mrs. Brach's was only five storefronts away on the same side of the street, so he knew what I meant. Still, he gazed at me with a questioning look until I recalled that he sometimes sat at the lunch counter drinking coffee.

"You're da boy vorks for Mrs. Brach?"

"Sure, that's a good-looking gun there."

He examined me with his mouth pursed into a slight oval, which made his gray moustache perch on his upper lip like a wire brush. His eyes were the darkest brown I'd ever seen, and so sunken it was as if he was spying on the world from far inside his head. He wiped the glass display top with a blue velvet cloth as I stalled in front of the other two cases, trying not to show how nervous I was and agitated

with desire being so close to the rifle. Finally I worked back and squatted down to study it with what I hoped conveyed curiosity rather than obsession.

"Ya, you like to see it?"

"Sure, if it's no trouble."

He unlocked the case, brought the Winchester out, and before putting it on the counter top, spread a green pad to protect the glass. It was more of a treasure in the open, and I took in the aroma of linseed oil from the polished stock, along with the delirious aroma of bore solvent and gun oil.

"Belong in family long time, ven ve live Missouri."

"Uh huh. Do you shoot it, go hunting?"

"Chust heirloom I show for beauty."

"Can I handle it? Is it loaded?"

He picked it up, levered five cartridges out, the brass casings flicking onto the green pad. Then he checked the bore, snapped the action shut, and passed it over. It was a carbine — light, classic, deadly. He beamed with pride.

My heart surged. "Would you ever sell it?"

"Never did tink such a ting."

"I've been hoping for one like it."

"Ya, a good gun. But ... I don't sell."

"If you ever did, for how much?"

"Vell, maybe fifty dollars."

That stunned me. More than twice the cost of a brand new Winchester at the sporting goods store downtown. It made the rifle in my hands vibrate with greater worth. I handed it back, He wiped it with a rag, reloaded, and put it back into the display case. I left feeling defeated and deprived. Work was hard that day, and the rest of the week. I dreaded the summer dragging on without relief or hope. Later I learned Mr. Heimer wasn't doing well in his business. The store was off the main street, so few buyers walked past. Then, too, people found him strange, his accent putting off easy talk. I anguished over whether I should ask about the rifle again. My stash was only twenty-three dollars, most meant for school clothes. Longing for the gun was unrealistic unless I could get the price down and talk my folks into it. But I went to the store. Mr. Heimer passed me the Winchester. I'd rehearsed my spiel.

"I like it, but I could get one new for twenty five."

"Ya," he muttered, "dat must be true."

"Would you sell it cheaper?"

"Maybe ... if you want."

"I do, sir. It's just right for me."

"Dat's for sure," he said, his eyes moist.

"I have some money already saved up."

He hesitated as if trying to decide. I couldn't help wondering if in fact rumors about his business situation were true. He had a wife, a fat woman who didn't speak much English and stayed in the living quarters behind. He wiped the rifle and put it back in the display. He didn't come right out and say what was on his mind. I placed both hands on the display case after he locked it.

"Mr. Heimer, would you take thirty five dollars?"

"Thirty five," he mumbled. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir. I have thirty and could raise the rest."

"Better forty dollars," he offered like a whisper.

"I don't know if I can get that much," I said, and then did something stupid when I thought about it afterwards. "I'll have to talk to my folks first."

I got a cold look and he started wiping the counter in such a way that he made me feel I had not only been wasting his time but had somehow insulted him. With a mumble about thinking it over and coming back soon, I hurried out. That night I pleaded like a poor lawyer with my folks. I promised to work harder than ever and save even more during the school year if they'd let me buy the rifle. After they gave in, I lay awake all night. Then ran to the jewelry store to close the deal. Mr. Heimer was fumbling papers by the display case as he eyed me like a stern preacher.

"Good morning, sir. I'm all set for our deal."

"Our deal?" he said, looking at his papers.

My gut churned. "You know, the rifle?"

"Vat about da rifle?"

"Forty dollars."

A cold gaze. "Forty dollars?"

"Yeah, sure." I went hollow.

"Never. Must be fifty dollars."

"You said forty dollars yesterday."

"Vell, fifty dollars today, or not sell."

I couldn't keep my hands from shaking and thrust them deep into my Levis. I'd been misled, duped, and felt like a damned fool. Had he committed to the forty-dollar sale or not? Yes — he had. And now he was changing his mind. It was a first time for what seemed to me to be bad dealing by someone trying to take advantage of my youth. I was angry beyond words, and so frustrated that I wanted to shout at him. Instead, I placed both hands on the case, striving to sound reasonable.

"Mr. Heimer — sir — you said forty dollars. I went home to think about it and discuss the matter with my folks. It's all agreed. We agreed."

"Ve did not agree. It was offer. Now fifty dollars."

"Unbelievable!"

His hands shook. I noticed his wife, a reddish-pink cheek and one eye visible through a crack in the open door leading to their living quarters. They had talked it over. I understood that she was the one who insisted on fifty dollars. I stared down at the rifle on the lower shelf while calculating whether I could raise the money. It galled me that I'd have to, but I wanted that rifle so bad, and it was so tantalizing. If only a deal could be reached. I tried to calm myself and move ahead.

"Okay, if that's the way it is — fifty dollars."

"Ya?" he said, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Thirty dollars now, and five dollars a week."

"Only thirty dollars you have?"

"Yeah, to start with. The rest each week until it's paid off." He looked hard, so in defense of honesty and good intentions, much as I dreaded waiting over a month for the rifle, I added, "Of course, you keep the gun till then."

"No," he said, shaking his head.

"What do you mean — no?"

"Money first or ve don't sell."

"My god!" I yelled. "That's nuts."

"Dat's it," he said, as red as his wife, whose face was just visible through the crack in the door. I felt her dominance. Mr. Heimer watched me. "Anyting else?"

"Goodbye!"

I couldn't slam the door as I left because it had one of those gadgets that eased it shut. If I'd been able to, I'm sure it would have broken the glass and all my money would have gone to repair it. As it was I was so damned mad that I walked around for over

an hour, cursing and kicking an oak or elm hard enough to induce pain in my tennis-shoed foot. Between bouts of gut-wrenching anger and calculating how I might still come up with the extra twenty dollars fast so I could walk into the shop and slap the bills on the glass counter in defiance, I was impossible and petulant. It was the lousiest week of my life, and I don't recall ever feeling sorrier for myself.

It was mid-August when calamity struck. The jewelry store was robbed. Mr. Heimer became incensed that anyone would even consider robbing him. He went berserk — screaming and refusing to cooperate. After the register was cleaned of its meager cash, the robber began scooping display case items into a burlap onion bag while Mr. Heimer bellowed. His fat wife, overcome with outrage, shouted for him to do something. Mr. Heimer rushed at the man, shoved him to one side, grabbed for the Winchester, and attempted to shoot. They struggled over the rifle until the robber wrenched it away and fired. Mr. Heimer went down. His wife fainted. This was the story told for weeks after the police came in black and white Ford sedans, lights flashing, sirens wailing. It was sad to see Mr. Heimer taken out covered up, his wife escorted to another ambulance. A policeman took the rifle to a squad car and drove its deadly desire out of my life.

We moved to Los Angeles that fall, and despite a lapse now and then, I forgot my disappointment. It returned years later on a trip to nearby Ventura. I came across one friend from high school. After civilities, I learned that he worked in the District Attorney's office. Imagining I might dispose of that unworthy memory, I related the failed purchase. He listened with polite interest. The intended catharsis reopened a wound without relieving my adolescent guilt, and I confessed "what if" thoughts. Could I have behaved otherwise to thwart the fatal outcome? If I had accepted Mr. Heimer's forty-dollar offer before he discussed it with his wife, would the killing have been averted? Could my adolescent self have changed destiny?

My friend told me the robber was tried, sentenced, and executed. We had two more vodkas in thoughtful silence. One week later he phoned. He had something I should want to see. I went to his office. He gave me an oily brown paper-wrapped package. I got short of breath opening it. The walnut stock was dry, the steel barrel and frame pitted. But its grandeur was unsullied by history or homicide. I levered the action and aimed toward the foothills. A perfervid desire suffused me for a few precious moments. Then allure waned as the gun turned cold, lifeless in my hands. He'd found the case file. The weapon was scheduled for disposal in a fiery furnace. It wouldn't be missed. Did I still want it? I tried to caress love into the alien metal. Then gave it back to the past. We had lunch. I returned home, my spirit slow healing.

Richard Vaughn writes short stories and novels, and lives in California.

Tell Me Your Secrets



"I love you," he'd whisper hoarsely, gripped by emotion. At which time she would strain closer to him softly moaning, "Oh Ben make love to me...right here...right now," and she'd begin searing the softness of his neck.

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<http://mysticfantasies.com/>

<http://www.renderosity.comgallery.ez?ByArtist=Yes&Artist=RNKarener>

Reality Check

by

Victoria Valentine

She was so tired she could barely breathe, much less eat; yet sleep was something she had not enjoyed in months. Her mind had occupied itself with the same thoughts for four years and now with this revelation, her brain was painfully numb—and she wished it would once again whirl with unanswered questions—*anything* would be better than empty....

I feel so unsure as I take your hand and lead you to the dance floor. As the music dies, something in your eyes calls to mind the silver screen and all its sad good byes...

**Careless Whisper echoed against the darkened corners of her room.*

They had worked in the same office for the past four years, not side by side, but in close proximity; her tidy reception desk faced the wide-door elevators; his crowded terminal sat in a far corner of the massive suite, an arm's reach from a window view of Madison and 5th in NYC.

From the first day he walked into Macees Communications, quietly disappearing behind his computer, she felt an attraction. He did not seem to notice anything or anyone in the room, including her. She knew his name was Benicio Sonaros, by the nameplate on his desk. That's *all* she knew, other than the strong draw pulling her close to him.

Days dragged on, *her* interest growing—he entirely indifferent—until one day they literally bumped into one another in the elevator—she gazing up into the softest brown eyes alive—he finding himself gripped by the sweetest blue eyes he'd ever seen in a 5-foot-tall woman.

"Sorry," he stammered, flustered. "You ok?" He realized he had slammed into her shoulder with his quarterback frame.

She was seductively silent, but nodded shyly in exchange for words that would not come. His soft accent almost stopped her heart.

She didn't seem to intimidate him, as other women did. He liked that. He also enjoyed the floral scent his senses caught as her long blonde hair swirled around her face, cascading down her back when she quickly turned her head. He thought she was tiny, elegant and very pretty.

"You first," he guided her out of the elevator as the doors opened.

Always On My Mind



"Thank you," she replied, too politely she thought, nearly cringing as they walked

toward the garage exit of the large office complex. "Hope it stopped raining," she added lightly.

"I like the rain," he responded with a smile, breaking pace with her to head down another aisle of parked cars toward his small compact. "Good bye."

"Bye..." she called out, watching his long strides, wishing they were driving off together instead of facing a lonely ride and empty apartment.

That was their first meeting 'outside' of the office. After several months of brief "hello's" and smiling nods, they started eating lunch together and relaxing in one another's company until finally he suggested they have dinner together. That started 7 months of the so-called *dating game*.

When they were together they would laugh and talk about general and somewhat intimate subjects, but never entered risky personal areas of conversation. She learned he was 29, had 2 sisters and a brother in another state and that his parents were divorced, and realized that she had more or less to pry information out of him. During the first month he learned that she was almost 25, the only child of an Iowa farm couple, had lived on her own in the city since graduating college at the age of 21. This was her first job after school, and that she was loving, warm, cute, funny, very approachable and could be a danger to him. Other than that, they seemed a well-matched couple who thoroughly enjoyed each other's company on a daily basis. When they were not together exploring NY restaurants and shops, they'd be at work glancing across the room at each other, or talking on the phone.

They would go to breakfast—go to lunch—go to dinner, go shopping, go to the zoo—go to amusement parks—talk on the phone for long periods of time—and the latest was she would invite him over to her apartment to watch TV or DVD's, hoping to stir some

emotion, perhaps catch him in a 'compromising situation'.

One night they came close to consummating their relationship on her living room sofa. They sat side by side in the dimness, and she instinctively rested her hand on his arm, then pulled him toward her and began kissing his cheek. He suddenly responded by wrapping his arms around her, tenderly returning her kisses. *Her* passion grew, but *he* pulled back as he felt her hand reach for the zipper of his jeans.

"I should go," he stated nervously, clearing his throat.

"Go?" she controlled a whimper, counting breaths as she tried to calm herself.

"Early morning," he attempted a joke, "I'm a old man who needs his rest."

"Ok then..." she moved quickly to the other side of the sofa, smoothing her blouse. "What's wrong?" She managed, wondering if it was her fault. Had she done something wrong?

"Nothing," he replied moodily as he stood, picked up his jacket and headed for the door. "See you at work, ok?" And the apartment door quietly closed.

Stunned, she overcame the initial feeling of rejection; mutely explaining away that sometimes men have these things happen to them. Next time it would be different. But he didn't visit her apartment again and worse yet, he seemed to be less accessible in the days to follow. They didn't see each other every night after work anymore and the phone calls were quickies now separated by days and nights that were desperately lonely for her.

A few weeks later at work, she strode to his desk to see if she could find out what was troubling him—what the hell was going on that had changed him. He'd been distant since their last evening together in her apartment. She had a feeling he was still uncomfortable, maybe embarrassed and she wanted to smooth things over.

He was busy punching at his keyboard as she began her approach. Her hands trembled slightly as she neared his chair, and the pen she carried with her for security slipped from her fingers, falling to the floor near his feet. As she bent down to pick it up, she noticed a green duffle bag half hidden beneath his desk, and a sexy black silk teddy, peeking from the side of the half-zippered bag. Her heart sank as she envisioned the other woman in his arms. No wonder he was scarce these days...and somewhat aloof! She didn't think he noticed her stooping to pick up her pen, so she quickly diverted her silent steps back to her desk where she would ponder, sulk, worry, and obsess over his secrets and the other woman. But from the corner of his eye he had caught a glimpse of her as she walked away. He also enjoyed the

fragrance of honeysuckle sweetness that wafted in her wake.

An hour later, he appeared at her side as they headed toward the elevator, work ending for the day.

"Hi Lilly. How about a movie tonight?" He asked lightly.

Relieved at the prospect of life returning to *normal*, she happily accepted. "I'd love to. What would you like to see?"

"Hot Chick," he laughed. "I heard it's very funny."

"Sure," she agreed. Anything was fine with her, just as long as they were together. Although she was happy they would be going out again, his casual, cool attitude troubled her. She wanted more—a lot more. He was now acting like a 'casual friend'. She could not understand why. She didn't need any *more* casual friends. She loved him!

The thought of snuggling beside him in a darkened theater set her heart to thumping, This also started the wheels of erotic fantasy turning in her little brain as she soaked in a soothing bath to relax before he was to pick her up for their date. She would be so irresistible that he would surely confess his love for her and life would be wonderful again.

The summer air would be sweet and ruffle through their hair. Actually she'd like them naked, but of course they would be walking down 42nd street, so they needed to be dressed. But the thought of walking naked with him with a brisk breeze caressing their bodies was exciting, especially if they could be walking on a beach with ocean waves inviting them to the shoreline for hours of animal lovemaking.

Back to *realistic* erotic fantasy, she advised herself. She'd be scantily dressed when he picked her up. He would be tall and strong and as they walked from his car, to the theater, she would clutch his arm possessively, lean into his side and as lovers they would stride together in time. He would guide her toward the door where he would gaze down at her contentedly—hold the door protectively—select just the right seats where they could share intimacy.

They would sit in the back row of the near-empty theater balcony section, she against the wall and he close beside her. She would of course, wear a slinky short skirt and no undies. He'd smell her perfume and feel her heat, anticipating the start of the sexiest evening of his life. His head would swim with tantalizing positions he would pose her in as he readied her for his lovemaking. He would reach over for some popcorn and 'accidentally' brush against her inviting braless breasts, and her hardened nipples bursting thru the thin fabric of her summer blouse would grab his attention and he would not be able to resist fondling her in the darkness as he gently kissed

the side of her face, moving toward her lips. "I love you," he'd whisper hoarsely, gripped by emotion. At which time she would strain closer to him softly moaning, "Oh Ben make love to me...right here...right now," and she'd begin searing the softness of his neck. Her panting mouth would long to take him inside it and suck the hell out of him as if he were a peppermint stick that she'd lick deliciously and greedily devour until he'd just about burst. He'd have no choice but to slip a hand under her skirt—as she guided him of course, since he'd never do anything so brazen on his own—he wasn't that kind of man. By then he'd be heart-pounding, foaming-at-the-mouth needing her this instant, as she urged his willing fingers into her welcoming virginity. As he worked her to an intense orgasm he would be kissing her passionately, she in turn massaging and stroking him to an extraordinary climax as she slid him around in her hands. Oh yes! He would be so handsome, eager and so damn hot! And of course, she would be totally, sensually irresistible and would no longer carry the stigma of virgin!



life...this was even better! She noticed that *he* noticed her alluring outfit and wondered if he guessed what had occurred during her bath. At the thought, she blushed. He felt her electricity.

In the movie theater, sitting close, her mind replayed the fantasy she hoped would turn into reality, and as she started to cuddle closer to him, she thought she smelled one of her favorite perfume fragrances, *Passion* by Elizabeth Taylor. She inconspicuously slipped her nose onto the fabric of his shirt and almost had heart failure. She was certain the sensual scent emanated from his clothing. "Now what?" she thought as she felt the excitement of the evening begin to drain. Is he married? Did he just leave his wife to meet her? Or his girlfriend? She began to slip into panic and disbelief.

How many more things did she need before she woke up? First the teddy—then the absence—now this! What the hell was this guy about, anyway? The rest of the evening was strained for her, as she struggled to smile, joke and pretend to enjoy

herself. All the while she wondered where he had come from and where he would go after he kissed her a light good bye at her door, since she knew he wouldn't step inside.

He arrived promptly at 7 with a soft tap at the door.

"Hello," he leaned against the doorframe. "How are you tonight?"

"I'm great, Ben. How about you?"

"I'm good. So you're ready then for some Hot Chick?" he smiled that familiar smile that tore her heart.

She was more than ready...

He was breathtakingly gorgeous in relaxed-fitting jeans and sports shirt that displayed one fabulous body. She loved the way his chest hair peeked out from the unbuttoned top and how he rolled up his shirtsleeves to expose a pair of embraceable forearms with sensitive hands that could work her easily into a frenzy. She appeared to him as she had envisioned herself in her bathtub fantasy. Tonight would be the night, she almost moaned aloud, and found herself becoming moist between the thighs. This was *real*

After the movie ended she asked, "Are you hungry? Would you like to stop off and get something to eat?" She had to know more about what was going on in his life.

"I'm not hungry," he replied with a yawn. "Are you?"

"I guess not—but maybe you can come upstairs for a while—for a drink?"

"Can we make it another time?" he tactfully refused. "I'm really tired."

"I know. You're an old man who needs his rest," she laughed with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Ah...yes," he agreed with one of his disarming smiles and soft accent, "I need my rest," he laughed, planted a friendly kiss on her cheek and was gone.

So much for the sexy evening, she murmured to herself as she let herself into her apartment...alone. She had to know where she stood, so she decided to call his cell phone number.

"Hi Ben..."

"Lily—what's wrong?"

"Why would something be wrong?" She felt herself becoming adversarial.

"It's late—that's all—and I just left..." his voice trailed off curiously.

"We need to talk Ben," she blurted out.

"I felt this coming," he replied dully, not wanting to face any issues.

"Then why didn't you say something to *me* if you felt something was up?"

"What is it Lily? What's bothering you?"

"We were getting close Ben. And now you're so distant...different than when we first met."

"What do you want from this relationship?" He asked flatly.

"More than this," she replied, her heart skipping beats. She couldn't believe she was actually confronting him this way! So why not go all the way. "I think I'm falling in love with you Ben..."

"You know I like you Lily," was not the response she longed to hear. "This is awkward. We should talk in person, ok? It's late, and I'm just pulling into my driveway..."

"Wait Ben," she blurted out, thinking *it's now or never*. "Call me from your apartment, please..."

How could he say no? The phone rang and Lily answered on the first ring. "Hi Ben." She recalled another evening long ago when they had been talking on the phone and she asked, "Hold on a minute ok? I have to run into the kitchen."

"Sure," he had replied, his voice patient and tender.

Lily wanted so much to hear him say those words: *I'll never leave you Lily*, so she added, half playfully, "Don't leave me, ok?"

"Never," he assured, gently but firmly.

In her heart she believed him. Had he forgotten his promise and was he now leaving her? Why? Was it her? Was it something she had done? Was it the other woman - another love? Why Why Why! Her mind obsessed.

"Hello," he sounded reserved, forcing her back to reality - to the conversation they must have.

"Ben," Lily's heart was about to break, "I feel I'm losing you... We were so close... Don't you remember?" She wanted to plead: *I love you-Don't leave me!* But she was a proud and confident woman. How could she beg for love? *Pride goeth before the fall...* her heart told her but her mind screamed STOP. "Give me a reason to be here Ben."

Ben wanted to tell her, "*I don't love you... How can I make myself feel something I don't feel? How can I give you a reason when I don't have one...*" But after a moment said flatly, "It's just life, Lily," he seemed pathetically resigned. "Things happen...people change. We're just a series of events. Like bars on a graph--life goes up and down and we react."

To an outsider, it would have been obvious that Ben no longer valued Lily. He did not love her--they were merely friends. And now Lily had to face what she had denied all these past months of silence and hiding.

"Did you ever love me?"

"What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference to me."

"Yes."

"Why then? Why did you stop?" Lily hammered, knowing there would be silence on the other end. She wanted to scream at him, "*You'll never find anyone better! Anyone who loves you more! Loves you the way I do! What's WRONG with you!*" But she knew she couldn't say those words; it would be the old cliché of someone desperate--someone who knew they were losing their life...grasping onto that last hope. When you are fighting for your life--your love... *pride goes out the window and confidence is an unknown word*. She couldn't take anymore pain and was about to say, "I better go," when Ben said stiffly, "I should let you go Lily. It's late."

Lily hung up the phone, in tears, confused, still in denial, feeling no wiser than she had been before that phonecall.

The following week was a blur of her imagining all sorts of mysterious things about him, continuing to brush everything off as a coincidence as she fought the most emotional battle of her life. When he finally phoned her, things were casual. Neither one brought up that conversation or its continuance, so she'd assure herself it was all in her mind, there were logical explanations for the way he was behaving; that Ben was just not as outgoing as she and he was really falling for her. Things would work out; she prayed for the best. But whenever they were out of contact for a few days, her brain started the mind games

again. She would scold herself *be strong!* Convince herself *she didn't need him!* And try like all hell to NOT think of him! But she'd end up crying herself to sleep every night, as she assured herself *it was OK to miss him...* *It was OK to want someone who might not want you back...* She *could* think of him and miss him even if things were not meant to work out. *It was ok.*

It wasn't until she took a trip downtown for an evening with her friends, to Greenwich Village to catch a play, that she learned the horrifying truth.

The four girls were waiting for a cab on the corner of 45th street when, as she struggled to find some singles in her purse for cab fare, her pen slid out of her checkbook and fell to the ground, the same pen she had dropped that day in the office when she noticed the peek-a-boo black teddy poking out of his duffle bag. But this time it wasn't a teddy that she saw when she stooped to her knees; it was a pair of bright-red 6-inch heels, coming around the corner, headfirst into her. Nice shoes, she thought for a fleeting moment as she quickly dodged an accidental kick by a pointed toe—great long legs, she admired with a flush of envy—a bit thick however... But when she stood up to face the owner of the shoes, there *HE* stood in full drag! It was Ben! The ponytail she had always seen him wearing was unleashed into chestnut colored waves streaming to his shoulders, and he was stuffed into a semi-fitted black dress accented by red-hot accessories. She was horrified! *He* almost died of shock and shame, his face turning redder than his shoes and lipstick.

They both froze—unable to speak. A lifesaving cab screeched to a halt at the curb, her girlfriends grabbed her arm and dragged her in, oblivious to what was happening around them, thus sparing Ben the expense of trying to explain away his feminine attire and presence in the village. He had told Lily he'd be going to Yankee Stadium that night with the guys, for the opening season of the World Series.

*We could have been so good together—*George Michael pleaded.

We could have lived this dance forever.....

Michael sang the sadness *Lily* felt deep in her heart.

Now who's gonna dance with me?

I'm never gonna dance again the way I danced with you...

*Should have known better than to cheat a friend
And waste the chance that I'd been given...
Now who's gonna dance with me...*

Now that you're gone

Now that you're gone

Was what I did so wrong that you had to leave me alone?

Yes it was! He lied to her; well, not telling her the truth was just as bad as lying to her, and now she

could never go back! She fought urges stronger than heroine addiction to try to stop thinking of him again but she was torn in two. She didn't care if he cross-dressed! For heaven's sake: she used mechanical toys on herself! So what? Nothing should have stood in the way of their life together. She loved him! *As Is.*

During the jumbled days that followed, Lily fought her way out of the depths of hell trying to retain her sanity. Ben never phoned her. He didn't show up at work ever again. She didn't try to contact him either. It had all ended abruptly as a cruel joke constructed by a sadistic playwright, and she was left with the bitterest taste in her mouth that she knew would haunt her forever. He had hurt her so deeply that she wanted to die. She wondered if he was ok and where he had disappeared, but would never know.

She knew he had read her thoughts that night by the look on her face.

She had come to terms with him when she learned the truth. Now she had to come to terms with herself as she fought to accept their fate.

I feel so unsure ... Michael started to moan the song again, from the beginning.

But now she knew ... *she was sure*

Guilty—he was guilty of deception—and she had been a fool.

The projection screen turned to bright white and credits began to roll.

"Get the lights!" the director yelled out. "Great work kids! I think we have an academy award here. Let's wrap this baby up and get the hell out of this preview room. We have a MOVIE! Who's up for Chinese? What a surprise ending huh?" He laughed out loud, thrilled with the manuscript he and his co-writer had transformed into film: the one that would net them millions and a Cannes Film Festival Award!!!

The screening room door opened and closed as the cast and crew left the studio, smiling and joking, feeling satisfied, confident and rich!

"Ya know," the director commented as they walked to the parking lot, "if this flick gets the recognition I think it'll get—we can be looking at a sequel next year. I can see it now..." *He* retreats to his Mediterranean homeland hideaway to lose himself, and *she* heads back to Iowa, to nurse her wounds. But—she hits lotto and takes a trip—tooooooo—guess where?" He laughs and they drive away.

*Careless whisper: George Michael

Victoria Valentine is the founder and publisher of Skyline Publications zines and web sites. In her spare time she daydreams, writes stories, poetry, and strives to complete those traditional 'unfinished' novels. **Skyline Publications**

"a tear does not a memory melt"