In Love with Eleanor Rigby

Stacey Cochran
IN LOVE WITH ELEANOR RIGBY

THE MEETING

This young lady seems pretty concerned about how she looks so I say she has "very pretty eyes." She told me her name is Tabitha Merriweather. I saw her here in this bookstore for the first time, beautiful, and felt alone and driven by underpinnings perhaps only understood by me. Perhaps, this is why I am alone. Perhaps, it's why I've met her. Only I realize what is real to me. Some fortune. Some gift. It's what makes me who I am. It's what makes my mind click like a metronome in perfect rhythm with this awareness and yet isolated forever in the zone. She hovers like God, like an angel, like imagination when one sees only clear skies and endless blue, and I often float there alone in this euphoria. It all begins in a bookstore.

I am searching for the latest Salinger novel or a response from God, whichever comes first, and am beginning to have an anxiety attack because this new Salinger novel is nowhere to be found and a response from God isn't exactly forthcoming either and my pulse feels like it's doing 140 and I may be sweating and people might be looking at me funny like and I could be drooling and it's possible that I might very well be speaking in tongues. It seems like I might be. Salinger has that affect on me. So does Updike. And those Taco Bell commercials with the Chihuahua. And Heidegger's Being and Time. And the beer section at Winn Dixie. And drive-thru speakers. And exercise. And tying my shoes sometimes, when it's really, really hot.

The lady in charge of my substance abuse treatment class, Pam, says it's because I over-intellectualize, which she says is a form of denial and so I admitted that I was so far in denial that I was in Sudan, which she said was just another form of denial and then sort of stared at me like I was an idiot and/or a reprobate, which I'm not necessarily convinced I'm not but like this roofer named Demetrius said, "That's funny, man. Sudan. Funny, man."
And so here I am, alone, without a response from God and a Salinger novel circa 1951 in hand, in this bookstore, when I see her. Imagine. She is hovering over copies of The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and Harper’s reading the same story told three different ways by three different writers from three different Ivy League programs.

“How do you do,” I say to her.

“Hi,” she says.

She wears a green, felt hat with a round brim, and it has a big, sunny flower on it. Her eyes are as blue as the center of the ocean. She wears a cheerful yellow sundress with blue paisley prints on it. She smells fresh and sweet like fruit, like papaya and mangoes.

“Harper’s,” I say motioning toward her magazine. “That’s good stuff. Do you like it?”

“Oh, this story is very good.”

“Yes.”

“It’s about this guy and this girl,” she says.

“Pretty original then.”

She smiles. “Well, yes, it’s about this guy and this girl and they meet in this bookstore and the guy, see, is sort of this metaphor for the contemporary writer and the girl, she’s sort of this angelic kind of metaphor for God. She hovers, see. And she like changes form and they go to this beach place where she changes form and becomes the beach or the sand or maybe the dunes, and I think the author was implying that the narrator was a fish or maybe the water and that the two were different and yet connected. He makes the beginning the end of it all—sort of like life, you know.”

I laugh. She smiles.

“He was changing form, too, with her,” she says. “And content.”

I look at her. There’s a genuine sparkle of wit in her eyes.

“Form and content,” I say. “I like that.”

She looks at me for a moment, and smiles.


“Yes, well, this story’s different, though. It’s got its own style.”

“How so?”
"Well, it's about this guy and this girl that meet at a café overlooking the Rhône in Arles, you know. The guy is a writer, an American sort of Hunter S. Thompson type, and he meets this Arlesienne waitress twenty-years his junior and she speaks like several languages, which the author weaves as a sort of metaphor that the one language this Hunter S. Thompson-esque American writer and this Arlesienne waitress connect with is the language of desire and passion, but the waitress ultimately leaves him though the author is really, really subtle about this and never actually says she leaves him. She becomes words in this letter the author writes to a former lover."

"I see," I say. "Language as metaphor—that's pretty smart stuff. And original, too."

She looks at me for a moment. "So what do you like?"

I say, "I'm a big Dr. Seuss fan myself."

"Oh, yes."

"Yes, if I'd the money required for a college education I'd do something really important like write a thesis on the metaphysics elementary to *Horton Hears a Who*. Something to get the intellectual community really thinking. There's more worthwhile philosophy in that book than the complete oeuvres of Camus and Sartre combined. And the semantics—the atomic parallels—it's like Wittgenstein on ecstasy."

She laughs. And I smile. She gladly admits she doesn't know who or what "Wittgenstein" is. I say he and Dr. Seuss were best friends. "They used to share a cab to AA meetings," I say. I tell her my name is Joe Smith.

"My name is Joe Smith," I say.

"Colorful," she says. "Unique."

"Well, in my more rebellious days I thought about changing it to something radical and far-out like John Smith," I say. "But I've got three aunts named John, so I decided I'd live with what my parents gave me."

She laughs again and tells me she likes coming to this place. She says she likes meeting "unusual" people. She is a milliner, she tells me, a hat maker—and she owns a boutique, Blue Grass, in the uptown area. She tells me her name is Tabitha Merriweather.

And so I say "if you'd like to join me for a cup of coffee, Tabitha Merriweather, I'd love to have you."

She says, "Okay." And comes with me to the coffee counter.
We ask for two coffees and then take a table together. We talk for quite a while about things I say I don’t understand. She says I am “very coy.” I say she is “very intelligent.” She laughs with me. And I smile more than a few times. She says she thoroughly enjoys my company. And I say, “I like who you are.”

DIALING

I realize, calling her three evenings later, that three evenings is the absolute perfect number of evenings to wait before calling someone who’s given you their phone number outside a bookstore after you’ve talked with them for like several hours about everything from ice-cream to metaphysics, and that three evenings is the perfect balance between too eager and too nonchalant for calling someone who said “Yes” to the question of whether they’d like you to call them and actually wrote their number on a napkin from the coffee counter of said bookstore’s Coffee Kiosque. I realize anything less than three evenings might be received as too anxious—desperate even—and but anything more than three evenings might be received as too indifferent—reserved even. I realize how systematic this love thing is; it’s like clockwork or a mathematic equation, I realize, and three nights is the Pythagorean Theorem of dating. It’s like coolness squared.

“How could you wait three nights to call me,” Tabitha says. “That’s so deliberate. So self-conscious. Do you have low self-esteem?”

“Low self-esteem?” I say.

“I’ve long since learned that any guy that waits three days—exactly three days,” she says, “to call me back—must have low self-esteem.”

“I didn’t want to seem desperate,” I say. “Or too nonchalant.”

“And but so you did consciously wait exactly three days,” Tabitha says, “like that would be cool or something. Do you know how phony you seem?”

“I don’t mean to seem phony,” I say.

“You don’t mean to seem phony,” she says. “Do you know how phony that sounds?”

Bewilderment would best describe my feelings at this moment. The phone line is silent for a while. I am speechless, I realize.

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“What is love to you,” she says. “A game?”

“No,” I say.

“A mathematical equation or something,” she says. “Plug the right numbers in and ka-ching you get what you want.”

“I don’t think that at all,” I say. “Mathematics is the farthest thing from my mind when I think of love.”

“You probably lie about your true feelings, too,” she says. “What is honesty to you?”

I am bewildered, I say. That is honest.

So your ignorance is honesty, she says.

I know that I don’t know a lot of things.


We are silent for some time. I am thinking of exactly what I want to say. It’s as though my life depends upon it. Because I realize eloquence is the ticket to the show in this town and if you ain’t eloquent you ain’t getting into the show.

“I’d like to share some chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream with you,” I say.

“Some what?” She asks.

“Chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream,” I say. “You said at the bookstore it was your favorite flavor. I would like to share some chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream with you.”

“And just what is that supposed to mean,” she says.

SLOW MOTION

Her lips are moist and warm and come together with mine like a pair of lonely bumper cars bumping head-on into one another—it’s quite romantic. I’m sure sparks fly. It’s been three weeks since we met at the bookstore. Up close Tabitha’s her hair smells like papaya-scented shampoo and is soft and smooth like silk or satin or like well shampooed hair that’s been shampooed with papaya-scented shampoo. If I were eloquent I’d say something like it was “redolent of those summers on Glen Cove when we were young and knew we were so much older.” Our noses collide—I may be in love.

We’re on this sidewalk, see, in twinkling midtown Charlotte. The night is peaceful. And it is the first time we’ve been together like this: i.e., it’s the first time I’ve opted for physical contact. I enjoy listening to her—her voice is calm and soothing on any subject. It is pleasant but not without spine. She has dimples.
She is lively. She is quite possibly the most extraordinary woman I will ever meet.

We’ve come together here like six or seven times in the three weeks since we met at the bookstore—pretty good for two people who prior to meeting one another had not been on a date in a combined fourteen months. There are these sidewalk cafés that serve fresh coffee until like ten or eleven o’clock, and we’ve spent the evening tonight under the stars and the clear sky amidst the shiny glass buildings of midtown, listening and talking with one another. The sidewalk lamplights here along Market Street gleam in the night, and traffic moves along casually.

Tabitha wears this aqua velour hat, which tapers back like a fin. “It’s Ohrbach’s Oval,” she says. I don’t know what that means, I say, but I tell her that I like it. It’s a pretty hat, I say. I’d like to see more of your hats. They’re very nice, I say. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a hat quite like that one, I say. It’s pretty unique. If I were a head, I say, I’d be happy with that hat. She laughs at me. We stand there for a moment in the lambent light coming from the main floor lobby of Sharon Tower. The night is peaceful and clear and warm and I see the traffic light at the corner turn from red to green. And I say, I like you, Tabitha Mernweather. I feel completely comfortable with you, you know. And she looks at me for a moment. And I look at her. And then suddenly I lean forward, sort of off-balance, and she watches me. And her lips come together and her dimples rise and she smiles the absolute most incredibly, pretty smile I have ever seen in my entire life and but I’m standing there sort of leaning, right, my lips aiming to kiss her lips and she realizes I must feel pretty awkward in this particular position and I realize this is why she is smiling at me. And then she sort of leans forward kind of off-balance, too, and she whispers that she really likes me, too. And I sort of whisper, “No kidding—yeah?” And she says, yeah. And we do this thing. We kiss.

A THIRST

We’ve come together here for lunch some fourteen days and ten street blocks from where Tabitha and I first kissed. Midtown Charlotte. We’re at a sidewalk table in front of the joint and the sky is clear blue. A breeze blows coolly, ruffling the tablecloth. Traffic passes casually along up the street.

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She seems to enjoy this joint, Kildaire’s, an Irish tavern and eatery, where we’re having lunch for what I’d bet is the seventh time in seven days. She enjoys the gourmet beers, she says, and I must confess I’ve maybe glanced a time or two at the tall, cylindrical, crystalline glass filled lushly with a deep, rich, amber malt, a beautiful wisp of white foam looking somewhat like freshly driven snow atop what I’m sure is the thickest, purest blend of barley and hops ever brewed in the history of Irish beer manufacturing.

I’m managing through an unsweetened iced tea. And some sort of sandwich. I count the bubbles, rising inside her beer, which Tabitha uses to wash down a toasted, crisp, vegetable pita overflowing with juicy tomatoes, green peppers, sauerkraut, and melted Swiss, Colby, and Monterey Jack cheeses. My sandwich looks cold, white, and flat. I watch her raise the glass to her perfect, round lips and gracefully, sensuously sips the McGentry’s freshly tapped, aged and malted beer. I read here on the menu that they roast the barley and hops over a cedar smoked fire, and the kegs are made of hickory “In Ye Olde Irish Style,” in which the secret McGentry family recipe ferments for no less than seven months before being broken open by a swivel, steel tap as it has been done by “generation after generation of McGentries for over eight hundred years.” My hand twitches as I reach for the bitter ice tea. It is cold.

There is a green awning over the front door, and there are trees and plants here along the sidewalk. There are a dozen round tables like ours here in front of the joint. It’s noon, and the owner is sweeping up in front of the place. He wipes his hands on a white apron and looks in our direction. He has a shock of red hair, green eyes, and an aged and amiable face. His eyes crinkle when he smiles. He smiles. Tabitha waves to him. He waves and then goes inside. Tabitha is so cool, I realize, precisely because she doesn’t try to be cool. She knows people. And her boutique is a few blocks over at the corner of 7th and Trade.

“How’s your sandwich,” she says.

“It’s cold, white, and flat,” I say.

The tables are shaded by large green umbrellas that match the awning. A few buildings rise over sixty stories towards the sky along Market and Main. Traffic moves steadily here on Parkwood amidst the tall buildings. It is shaded and cool. Two
ladies sit at a nearby table speaking French or German. Tabitha looks at me.

"I thought it was a good idea," Tabitha says. "But I wanted to ask you first."

"Beer," I say.

"Well, it's no rush, but I thought maybe the week of the twelfth."

"Barley," I say. "Hops."

"Yes, I told her you did carpentry. And she'd let us have the place free for the week. You'd just have to assemble this furniture. No problem, right. It's right on the beach, Joe."

"Delicious."

"And this lady has money. She owns like major stock in Anheuser-Busch. I'm sure the place is fantastic. It's probably stocked with-

I let out a groan from deep within my belly.

"Yes," she says. "The beer company. How's your tea?"

I look at the yellow lemon on the rim of the glass frowning, taunting me. And I try not to grimace.

HONESTLY!

I should tell her. We've dated for over two months, and I've kept this alcohol thing from her. I've managed to keep the treatment program from her, too, though she's begun asking rather casually the past week or two where it is I go every Tuesday and Thursday night from 6:00 PM until 8:00 PM. I tell her I've work to do or errands to run. And thus far I think she's at most mildly suspicious. She's giving me my space, I realize, but I don't know how long I can continue not telling her. Most important, though, I realize it's not fair to her. It's better to be up front with people. My concern is that she'll think I'm an alcoholic. And while I may very well be—by not telling her, it's not an outright lie. It's a sort of omission of the facts. Yes, that's what it is.

THREE YEARS

"Tonight I'd like to talk about the various forms of lying," Pam says. "First though, I should say that any form of lying about an alcohol or substance problem is the worst form of denial."

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I look around the room wishing to be anywhere other than here. There's a confrontation with truth stirring in the air tonight. A dozen of us are here this evening, including Pam. The room is well lighted, and the air conditioner is on. It is cool. We sit on the sofas and chairs and have formed a horseshoe shape with Pam and her easel before us. Pam is dressed in a pretty, blue, ankle-length dress and a white button-up blouse. She pushes her oval lensed glasses up on her nose, but they keep slipping back down. Her hair is shoulder-length and curly brown. I'd guess she's in her early thirties.

We meet twice weekly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for two hours in the recreation room at the brick-walled, well-windowed mental health building at Mecklenburg County Hospital. There's a skylight ceiling in the main lobby. Here, in the recreation room there's a kitchenette which gives onto the session area with sofas and lounge chairs for us. There are green plants spaced evenly around the room, and there's a magazine rack against one wall, and the session area opens onto a backdoor patio where the smokers smoke during break. I've a serious preoccupation with death and dying and as such don't smoke, but I like to stand out there on the patio and listen to the conversation.

There's a fellow who joins us on the patio: Cochran. He's been in the program as long as any of us and is good at putting us at ease and/or making us laugh. He's one of those rare people whose personality is an odd mixture of a wholesome good-natured quality, blended with a warped sense of reality. I.e., his very personality is ironic. And he can make people laugh just by the way in which he walks into a room. One can only imagine how different his parents must be. There's this genuine sincerity about him which is touching and affecting, but when the invisible line that marks the boundary between sincerity and sentimentality is breached, he is capable of towing in with innocence and wit. He has a way with people. He gets us to talk.

We'd this one fellow who never said anything in group and during the break he'd just sit in there by himself tapping his foot nervously pretending to read a magazine. One night, we were all hanging out there on the patio talking about him sitting in there alone, and Cochran stands up real casual like and goes in there and sits right next to the guy. We watched him stretch out his legs.
and lean back in the chair and saw him exhale a deep sigh, looking totally at ease. And then we saw him start up talking with this guy, and though we couldn’t hear what they were saying, we could see they were talking. And after a couple minutes, we saw this guy laugh at something Cochran said. I’d never seen this guy so much as smile in the four weeks prior to that night.

They sat in there for the remainder of the break and I don’t know what Cochran said to the guy, but about ten minutes into the second half of session that night this guy opens up and says he hadn’t planned on saying anything the entire time he was there. His name is Dave, he says. And he says that he wanted to tell us that though he didn’t say much, he always listened to what we all said. He appreciated it, he said. Then, he looks around at all of us—Dave, this guy who hasn’t said a word in four weeks, who never joined us during break, and who always left silently at the end of the evening without saying a word to anyone—and he looks at us, Dave does, and he says he was hooked on heroin for eight years. And we’re all like “damn, man,” and we’re all also listening to Dave more thoughtfully, more attentively, perhaps than any other moment of listening that I’ve ever witnessed because this guy is being like crystalline sincere and honest. Dave said he almost died—he “wanted to die,” he said—but something kept him from doing it. Some part of his mind refused to let him end his own life. And he quit the heroin, he said, cold turkey—no methadone, no hospitalization—and that quitting it was the most agonizing thing he’d ever done but that he knew it was what he had to do. “It was painful like no other pain imaginable,” Dave said. And we’re all like listening to him in a way like no other moment I’ve ever witnessed, right, and he sensed how involved we were. Dave did. And he said, “but it was either live or die, man. I realized that. And that’s what it all comes down to ultimately.” It was then that I realized how much it helps to talk.

“How many of us can admit to lying,” Pam says raising her hand.

“I raise my hand. There are a few others raised around the room.

“Would you like to elaborate, Joe,” she says.

“Well, I lie about everything,” I say. “Even this confession is a lie. I lie about lying. And even when I try to place myself outside of it honestly, with sincerity, I realize that my honesty is
exactly that—my honesty—and as such is subjective. What is true to me could very well be false to you. And what I realize is so frightening is that there really is no right or wrong other than what we choose for ourselves.”

“Wouldn’t you say driving with a point-two-four blood alcohol level is wrong,” she says.

“It depends on your definition of wrong,” I say. “I know the consequence is that I am here.”

“What is your definition of wrong, Joe,” she says.

“There is no universal, concrete definition of wrong. Moral absolutes are like talking about what is God. And even if we agree on what is right or wrong—even if every human being in this room could point at something and say ‘that is right’—is it then truly ‘right’? Do we humans have the authority to designate right and wrong?”

“Over-intellectualizing,” Pam says pointing to the chart on the easel beside her, “was form eight of denial, Joe. You’re evading the truth.”

“Tell me how to look the truth square on and I’ll do it,” I say. “I want nothing more than to tell the truth. Is love truth? Is death? Is there any truth to my being here speaking these words? It’s all a bunch of fucking fictional words strung together.”

“I sense avoidance,” she says.

I look around the room and several of the guys roll their eyes at me. Cochran sits on the sofa taking all this in. He is listening.

“I can relate, man,” he says. “Truth. Love. Men and women—well, those are the riddles that’ve puzzled us all for ages aren’t they.”

“What do you mean,” I say.

He looks around the room at each of the guys individually. He connects with his eyes, and then he looks directly at me and makes me feel as though I’m there—that I matter.

“I’ve been with this woman for three years now. She is beautiful, man. Though for the past eight months we’ve been broken up. My mistake—the mistake that got me in this program is what made her move to Richmond. And up there, she met a Marine and she began a relationship with this kid. Only, like a month later he gets shipped off to Japan—no shit. And within a week she calls me and says she needs to come back to Charlotte. And so I let her have the bed and I sleep on the sofa because she has
like several things she needs to do in town to complete her move to Richmond. Only, we've shared like three years of our lives together. And though she loves me and I love her. She doesn't want to love me. This is what she told me, man. After we'd turned the lights out and she's in there on the bed talking to me through the doorway to the living room—to the sofa I'm on. And the house is silent except for our two voices talking to each other in separate rooms—this woman and I—we've shared three years of our lives together. She doesn't want to love me, she tells me through the silence of the house. The house where we shared the better part of two years of our lives together, where we slept in the same bed together every night. Where we cooked each other meals and respected each other's space and shared a television—talk about compatibility. She put up with me watching The Andy Griffith Show. Now, that's love, man. A Northerner that puts up with Andy Griffith. It was love. And that's the thing—we both love each other. There's no way to erase the three years we had. And she's seen me commit to sobriety now for nine months, while most guys my age are still out there having a good time, doing the bar scene, playing the field. She realizes I've matured."

No one says anything for a moment. I can hear the rattle of the central AC, muffled voices outside in the hallway, the shuffle of a foot on the carpet, someone lightly clearing his throat. I look at him: Cochran. He is staring at the carpet, deep in thought.

"So what happened," I find myself saying. "You and her?"

He looks up at me for a moment, catches my line of vision. He realizes I'm listening, that I'm interested.

"I don't know, man," he says. "I don't know. I'd give everything I have to be with her. I'd like to think that I'm earning her love. I'd like to believe that is true."

There's a pause where I think everyone wants to say something reassuring but it's the kind of thing that really can't be reassured—at least not with words. And that's what the moment calls for: a silence that means the world. It sounds absurd. But it is appropriate, I realize. This silence.

"She can't trust me," he says after several moments. "I broke a trust with her that I'll probably never earn back, no matter how honest I am from here forward... She doesn't want to love me, this is what she says. And I've no right to blame her."

We are all silent.
A REASON

There’s an understated quality to Tabitha’s boutique here among these other shops and salons with names like Vidoré and Augustes. The sign above the place reads BLUE GRASS MILLINERY and there are two windows on either side of the single, front door. I didn’t sleep well last night. It was what Cochran said: his words stayed with me. So I resolved at like 5:00 AM that, today, I would tell Tabitha the truth.

A bell jingles as I enter. There are a few customers browsing over various styles, looking at themselves in mirrors. A college girl works the counter, and Tabitha stands with a customer before a mirror. The lady she is helping is gray-haired and pleasant looking. She looks from the hat in her hand to Tabitha, to the mirror, then places the hat on her head and regards it closely.

“Oh, I like this,” the elderly lady says.

She has a soft, clear voice. She wears an olive colored dress with white flower prints on it and a matching white shawl. A white handbag rests neatly at her side.

“This is our woven straw topper,” Tabitha says.

She looks and sees me, smiles, and concentrates on the elderly lady. All I can think is: I’m an alcoholic. I’m an alcoholic. Tabitha, I have something I need to tell you: I’m a stinking drunk.

“This is such a nice hat,” the elderly lady says.

I’ve been in a treatment program since before I met you. I’ve kept this from you the entire time we’ve dated.

“Oh, dear,” the elderly lady says. “Do you think it a bit much for a church hat?”

Tabitha looks at her.

“Why, I think it’d be perfect for church,” she says. “It looks very lovely.”

Tabitha smiles politely, sincerely.

“You don’t think it’s too risqué,” the elderly woman says. “I mean is it proper for church?”

I’m a drunkard and a louse, as was my father and his father, and his father before him. I come from a long line of drunks and louses. We’ve a distinction for being wonderful louses.

“It makes a statement,” Tabitha says; she smiles at the lady. “But, Miss Pauline, it’s a statement that’s very becoming for you.”
Miss Pauline looks at me standing there ten feet away. I am browsing over several really cool looking hats. "Excuse me, young man."

"Me," I say.

"Yes, may I have your opinion on this hat," she asks. "Do you think it proper?"

"Proper?"

"Yes, appropriate for church, you know?"

"Well, I'm no expert on that subject," I say.

"Well, do you like it?"

I look at the hat. It's a nice looking hat.

"Sure, I like it," I say. "It's a nice looking hat."

Miss Pauline walks over toward me. She regards me circumspectly, her eyes sizing me up. They're a very light shade of green, her pupils are narrowed. I feel as though I'm being judged. It is odd, I know, but I feel as though she's looking me over for flaws.

"Very nice," I say.

"Do you think so," she says. "Really?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "And it matches the green of your eyes beautifully."

She looks at Tabitha, then back to me, amused.

"Now, this is a charming young man," she says. "So thoughtful and sincere."

I'm an alcoholic. I've lied for two months. I'm evil. I'm a male.

"Yes, I'm quite sure of it," Miss Pauline says turning her eyes back to me. "You've eyes that would never lie. I'm sure some young lady must be quite lucky."

"That's one word for it," I say.

"Yes, I'm sure some young lady must be," Tabitha says.

At this moment, I believe Miss Pauline realizes Tabitha and I know each other, but if she does she gives no hint of it. She returns to the mirror and checks the hat. Tabitha gives me a pretty smile.

"I'll take it," Miss Pauline says. "Much in part to the honest opinion of this young man."

Miss Pauline gives me a keen, confidential glance. She's very perceptive, I realize. She knows.

"Well, the management of Blue Grass Millinery certainly thank
him.” Tabitha smiles at me. And walks with Miss Pauline to the counter.

Tabitha comes to me a few moments later. She wears a silk blouse and the fabric rises like crests and waves shimmering with her movement. Her deep blue eyes look pleasantly surprised to see me. And her sandy blonde hair is soft and tousled. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And I am compelled to speak beyond my own will. It’s hard to breathe.

“Tabitha, I’ve something I need to tell you.”

She looks at me as though a cold wind just blew over her face.

“What is it, Joe?”

I look around the store at the other customers. They stand in pretty frock coats or sweaters. They carry handbags and drift around the store like timber atop a sea.

“Do you have somewhere we can go,” I say. “This is important.”

“Sure, Joe.” She looks at me, her brow furrowing, and then calls to the college girl behind the register that she’ll be stepping out for a few minutes.

Outside on the sidewalk along Trade Street, the air has turned cool and crisp. The sun is shining. Leaves have begun turning red and orange and yellow in the trees that line the sidewalk. The sky is blue. A breeze stirs Tabitha’s hair. She is beautiful, and for a moment sunlight glances off her and I realize time has shifted into a lower gear, and she turns her head as though in slow motion to look one way up the street then the other. Her face is soft and there are light freckles on her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes are eyes that I could look at the day I die, and I’d feel as though life was worth living. They’re as close to looking at the ocean as anything else I’ve ever seen.

We step inside a joint several blocks up: The Station Pier, a trendy joint with upscale midtown Charlotte professionals. The lighting is turned low. There’s a bar stretching along the right side of the place and a large mirror behind the bar. There are tables to our left. It’s the kind of place where one could easily blend into the coral walls at one of the tables or booths. There are a good number of folks here and true blues music plays softly over the speakers.
I look up and a woman bumps into me. She has a bottle of beer in her hand.

"Excuse me," she says.

I manage a smile. And turn and bump into another person—a large fellow in a silk suit. He has a tumbler of bourbon and ice in his hand and a shiny gold wristwatch on his wrist.

"Excuse me there, buddy," he says.

"Excuse me," I say.

I turn and see Tabitha has gained a few feet on me and is at a table. A group of ladies on their lunch break suddenly come from nowhere and I am caught amidst them. One has a margarita, another a Heineken, and another a German import.

"Pardon me, excuse me, pardon me," I say.

"Watch it, buddy," one of them says.

I look across at Tabitha who has reached a table.

"Look out!" This guy shouts at me. "Coming through!"

He nearly runs me down with a large silver keg of beer on a dolly cart. He's moving at a good clip. I dive out of the way and bump into a waitress floating along with a tray of drinks.

"Watch where you're going, pal," she says.

She adjusts the tray, and I stand there for a moment drifting and then I realize I'm in her way. "If you don't mind," she says, motioning for me to get the hell out of her way.

I swirl out of her way adrift on the current, and I see Tabitha waving at me from the table. I return the wave, and she motions me to get her a drink. And so I make my way to the bar. There's a suited crowd around the bar and I swim through them and reach the bar.


The bartender nods. I look one way up the bar and then the other. Everyone seems to be having a good time. I look up at the mirror behind the bar and I see a beach and me lying there alone in the sand looking up at the clear blue sky, an occasional wave reaching me. The water feels warm over my feet and legs. I might just die there. I might.

"Five bucks," the bartender says.

I hand him a ten and swim back through the crowd. Tabitha's over there like a beacon, like a buoy. And she waves me in.

She says, "Thank you."
I look into her deep, blue eyes and realize I'd give everything that I am to have this moment captured in words.

"I almost died twice last year," I say.

Her eyebrows furrow with concern.

"It's something I've been keeping from you," I say. "Both times I was drinking—so much I don't even remember what happened. I woke in the hospital—the first time—my neck in a brace, my body in traction, alone. I'd been dating a girl for three years, Tabitha, and this was finally it. She'd finally had enough of a boy saying he loved her and yet trying to kill himself. She was a good woman. A fine, fine woman. And I hurt her. I broke a trust. I was supposed to be her security, and I was so goddamned insecure it nearly killed me. It's the most precious gift on all this earth—this trust between two people. I've hurt so many people, my entire life, partly out of fear, partly out of ignorance, mostly because I was young and didn't know any better... I drew into a shell for seven months because I was tired—tired of hurting other people, tired of hurting myself, tired of all of this, goddammit. I just want to do the right thing from here forward, the rest of my life, and I swear to God I'll try my goddamndest to be the best person I can be. I'll walk that line. And if I don't— if I can't—then I will be utterly lost. And all this will be done."

She looks at me. And I realize she understands.

"People make mistakes," she says.

"When you're completely alone you realize how meaningless life is," I say. "I need someone else to the point that it means a reason for living."

Tabitha tries smiling, but it's an awkward, uncomfortable smile. And I realize why people spend their lives avoiding the truth.

"What happened," she asks.

"I became sober," I say. "And I began to hope."

She looks at me. We are silent for some time.

"It's tough," I say. "Life. But we do it. We're here. We do what we do. Sometimes we laugh. Sometimes we hurt like there isn't a hurt that could hurt any worse."

We look at each other. And I realize just how terrifying this liberation is.

"It's like a ship," I say. "It's like a ship on the sea. You're forever moving forward—moving ahead, you know? And you're
forever asking yourself if all this feels right. Is it the right direction—you know? And yet you’re forever moving forward, forever moving away from the only places you’ve ever known. The places you think feel safe.”

I look into her eyes.

“Do you feel this way,” she says. “That all this is right? Do you see it that way?”

I look at her as naked as a man can be. “It’s the only way I know how to feel. Right or wrong. I am here. And I make decisions. I swear to God, I hope they’re the right decisions.”

We are at this place for some time. People move by us. There is noise: conversations, orders being taken, laughter. We look at each other.

TOTAL

She came by my workshop today. It’s been three days since I told her the truth. I’ve put myself completely into my work so as not to think about how all of this makes me feel. I was working on a chiffonier. It was very hot because the air conditioner had gone out, and summer has been stealing days back from fall. I had not expected to see her.

She said, “Hi.”

We stood there for a while. Sweat was beaded on my forehead. She looked at me. I felt awkward. I realized she was either thinking about a) how she could let me go without hurting me any worse than I’d already hurt myself; b) whether I was maybe worth further effort; and/or c) the ramifications of what my telling her something as crucial as I had meant about my general trustworthiness skills and my capabilities for behaving responsibly in terms of any sort of long term commitment with her.

“Tabitha, I’m not perfect,” I said.

“Nobody’s asking you to be,” she said. “Joe, you take life way too seriously.”

“I do,” I said. “But I am happy when I know I can believe in someone. When they can believe in me. When we trust one another. I enjoy life more than anyone else alive, when I’ve someone I can share this with. It just seems like every time I put myself on the line, I say to hell with it, I’m gonna put myself out there anyway, even though rejection is always part of the equa-
tion—a major part of life—pretty much all my life consists of—and I don’t let the possibility of rejection stop me from getting involved with people, with being true to myself. You know? It just seems like I have to keep going to the plate even though every woman I’ve met like in the past seven years of my life is so much more skilled at this, life, than me. You know?"

She just stared at me the way so many people stare at me; it’s as if they’re asking themselves “Is this guy for real?” Then she looked at what I was working on.

“Nice looking chiffonier,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. You like it?”

“What do people need a chiffonier for anyway?”

“Well, they keep stuff in it.”

“They keep stuff in it.”

“And I’m putting a mirror on here.”

“But wouldn’t a dresser be better? I mean a chiffonier is so narrow.”

“It’s taller.”

“But you could store more stuff in a dresser.”

“This one is going to come with a dresser,” I said. “They wanted both, the couple that’s paying me to build it for them. And they wanted two night stands, too. But what the hell does anyone need a night stand for, right?”

“No, a night stand I can see. You need a night stand. You gotta have someplace to put your barrettes and your glasses and earrings and stuff before you go to sleep. But a chiffonier seems superfluous. Extra. Overconfident even.”

I said, “Well, they must have superfluous, extra, overconfident money, then.”

I stood there for quite a long while. She looked at me.

“Listen,” she finally said. “I don’t know about all of this. I mean I’ve been really trying. I want to love you, Joe. I just don’t know if all this feels right.”

“I’m willing to earn your love,” I said. “You’re the only person I’ve ever known that it does feel right. When we’re alone. When it’s you and me, when we decide on one another, you know it feels like the most right thing you’ve ever felt in your entire life. That’s the cosmic. That’s the mystical. That’s the only part of this existence that I can truly say I have some kind of spiritual
faith in—you and I. The moments that come together with complete and total perfection. You know it. You feel it.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just don’t know.”

She looked at me for a while. I felt she was judging me. I felt she was deciding my fate. I realized, standing there before her, that I must have looked strange. I realized that I loved her.

“Alone,” she said after some time. “I feel that way—that kind of perfection—when I’m alone. It’s kind of ironic, I realize. You and I.”

We stood together for some time. We looked into each other’s eyes. Eventually, she said she had to go. She told me that it wasn’t over. She told me that she needed time to think. She told me that she would call: “I’ll call you.” Those were her words.

And I’ve been turning over the things that I said to her, this evening, and wondering if maybe I should have done things differently. I did it as I did it. Knowing this, realizing my ignorance, makes me feel sort of empty and like nauseous, too. I change through the channels on the TV and avoid looking at the telephone. There’s not much on the TV that interests me except for an advertisement for New and Improved Total, a beautiful young woman deciding the fate of a cereal.

SEARS

Tabitha doesn’t call me for five days. My phone only rings twice during this period and both times I answer it before like the first ring is even done and but both times it’s somebody trying to sell me long distance phone service with another phone company. Only a few times in my life have I struggled with self-control the way I have these past five days. But she said she would call me; that was the way she would prefer it. That is what she said: “I’ll call you.” Only, it seems like every time I turn my head, there’s a telephone staring at me. And I’m like all I have to do is call her and tell her how much I love her and how much I think we’re meant for one another and how in this life we don’t get many chances at happiness with another person but I think she is the one person with whom I’ve felt completely right and that there have been moments of total perfection shared between us that can only be a consequence of something beyond words or thought or anything that is knowable by our rational senses.
I was in Sears buying a new shirt yesterday and this guy was browsing the tie rack with a cellular phone in his hand. And I’m like staring at that phone thinking I should call Tabitha. And then I like turn around and there’s this other guy with a cellular phone talking to someone and then I go over to the checkout clerk and he’s on the phone at the check-out station and I have to stand there waiting for him to finish his phone call with what must be his girlfriend before he can ring up my shirt. And but he doesn’t even bother. He just goes on talking with her and sort of tucks the phone down a little bit and mouths “Cash or Credit?” and so I show him the twenty I plan to buy my Quality Hane’s Sport Shirt with and he keeps right on talking with her in this low, soft nice voice and pushes a button on the register and rings me up and takes my money and doesn’t break stride with his conversation there on the phone.

And so like I turn around and there’s this woman pushing a shopping cart up the isle and she’s talking with someone on a cellular phone. And she’s got a little girl in the shopping cart who has a plastic toy phone and is apparently talking with someone herself. And like I have the incredible urge to run to the nearest phone and/or get the hell out of this Sears, and so I start hurrying out of there, and I turn the corner there inside Sears, and there’s like fifty phones staring up at me from the electronics department and they’re all shiny and clean and brand new, and then all of a sudden they all ring and I just about faint, but I look up and see that the associates are working on a display, and so I focus on the door of Sears because I gotta get out of there, and this guy walks in with a briefcase and is talking away on his phone. And at the doorway of Sears there’s a row of pay phones staring at me and by the time I’m in the parking lot I’m like in full stride and three or four more people have passed me with cellular phones all gabbing away having great conversations.

And so I’m fumbling with the keys to unlock my ’74 Chevy Nova and go, and I was almost in my car when I hear another phone ring in the car parked beside me and I look in there and this phone is sitting there ringing away in some guy’s car who gets so many phone calls he leaves his damn cellular phone in the car.
Tabitha comes by my place seven days later. It is dusky outside, and traffic moves along Independence Blvd. at the head of my apartment complex. I stand there in the doorway looking at her. Her eyes are like the ocean and as endless as a shoreline. She looks at me earnestly for a moment and then for some reason she smiles. I see the lights around the clubhouse and pool have come on and are twinkling, and the grass looks fresh and green and wet. The sky is clear, and the colors of sunset blend smoothly into those of evening.

"Come inside," I say.

It's been twelve days since she said she'd call and she never called, but I know she was doing what was right. I put my faith in her.

I was writing this story, when she knocked on the door. I'd gotten the idea for writing this story the first time I met her at the bookstore and she said she'd been reading a story in The New Yorker about this Hunter S. Thompson-esque guy who falls in love with this Arlesienne waitress but ultimately she ends up leaving him though the author is really, really subtle about this fact, and never actually says she leaves him but that she becomes words in a letter that he's writing to a former lover.

Well, that's the idea. See, this story is kind of like a letter I'm writing to a past love, telling her how much I love her and how she is the only woman with whom I've ever felt completely comfortable and that I'd give everything that I have just to have her back because loneliness is like death, and I really, really don't want to die just yet.

She has a kit of shiny, fishing lures with her. And I notice the contours of her breasts through the thin fabric of her dress.

"They're for surf fishing," she says.

"Surf fishing?"

"Yes, the guy in the sporting goods department told me mackerel really love these things."

"Mackerel?" I say.

She moves around my place like a ripple on top of water, and so I pour her a glass there in the kitchen watching the graceful crests of her body beneath the cotton fabric of her dress as it sways gently back and forth. It's an ocean blue sundress. I hand her the water and she takes it rather casually and says "thank
you" and I'm standing there looking at her present and I think I'm mesmerized and sort of under a spell, and I realize by her gift she's telling me either: a) that she'd like me to come with her to the beach as she'd originally asked; or b) there are other fish in the sea and that I should get over her and move on; or c) neither of these, which would mean 1) I read far too much into everything; or d) maybe both, which would mean 2) I read perfectly fine but she would like me to earn her love and realize that her not only wanting to love me but that needing to love me may very well be about the most frightening thing she's ever done. It is the various possibilities that concern me.

"They're supposed to be spawning this time of year," she says.

"Spawning?" I say.

"The mackerel."

"Yes?"

"And these came with a lifetime guarantee," she says. "See, here."

She points to something on the package, but my eyes haven't left hers since I gave her the water. She hands me the kit.

"I bought them for you," she says.

I take them.

"They're beautiful," I say without once losing sight of her.

I stand there looking at her. She looks at me with eyes that I absolutely realize I could look at for the rest of my life. It is a kind of horizon, like the ocean meeting the sky. And then in a moment of time I will never forget, she looks at me with those eyes and I feel her smile. I feel her smile inside.

"What do you think," she says.

"What do I think," I say.

"About the surf," she says. "About you and I together at the surf."

There's a moment where I think her name, "Tabitha," and I think the word "heaven," and I think the word "life," and she's looking at me and I'm looking at her and I think we both realize this connection together. I think we both realize that we have the most profound gift ever given. I feel her realize that it is right, and the moment comes together with complete and total perfection. She leans forward as to place her arms around me, and we look into each other's eyes.