

Sitting on the Horny Wall

One very interesting thing about Abigail Vinell was that after two beers in a parked car on a dark road, the only thing she would have on would be her bikini panties and her engagement ring. She wouldn't take either of them off, although the fact that she was engaged to an older guy about to graduate from the university didn't seem to bother her. The university was almost three hundred miles away. In the meantime, I was right there.

It was a fairly warm March night, and the last night I was going to see Abigail before Easter break. I wanted to make the most of it. The arm rest of the passenger door of Ollie's Chevrolet was making a painful dent in my kidney, but I didn't say anything. Abigail, naked except for the panties and engagement ring, was stretched out on top of me, so I figured what was in front of me was so much more important than what was behind me that I could deal with it. I shifted a little so that the arm rest could make a dent in another part of my back, and my hand left her breast and strayed to the edge of her panties. She pulled it back up.

"Why not?" I said. My voice was a little muffled because we were in the middle of a kiss, her lower lips gnawing against mine as if she were eating corn on the cob.

She pulled her face away from mine and looked me in the eye.

"Just because," she said. "And don't beg, Joey. It's a turn-off."

Then she kissed me again, and I ran my fingers down the satiny smooth skin of her back.

Then she said, "Time to go," and began to put her clothes back on. With Abigail, it was all foreplay.

What I said about the very interesting thing about Abigail wasn't really complete except when my supposedly developing brain cells were drowned in hormones. In the months that we'd been dating, it hadn't been all groping and heavy breathing.

That wasn't necessarily by choice. There were nearly three thousand students at Ferncliff, and the dean of women as the wife of the Baptist preacher. So we had to find things we could do in public, like walking to the cafeteria and to classes together, or sitting close together on the rock wall — known to students and probably some faculty as the "horny wall" — that ran along the sidewalk up the hill to the girls' dorm.

I don't guess anyone really knew why it was called the "horny wall," but the explanation passed down to us freshmen was that, given the campus rules and the fact most of us didn't have cars, all we could do was sit on the wall, watch the girls walk by, and fantasize. The good thing was that fantasy was always available, cheap, and without fear of rejection. The bad thing was it made the wall live up to its name.

A lot of afternoons Abigail and I would study in the library, listening to jazz while we worked. I always thought it was cool the way she could combine Milton and Miles. Abigail was probably the only girl — and one of the three or four people on campus — who could name the tuba player on "Birth of the Cool." She also wrote haikus and sonnets. And she could make boys do pretty much anything she wanted.

That's how I started going out with her.

I was walking down the hall in the classroom building when suddenly a girl was standing in front of me. I had to stop, dodge or run over her. I knew her name was Abigail, and I knew she was a freshman. We'd been in the freshman week orientation together.

She looked up at me with her wide eyes and said, "There's a dance at the Student Union Saturday night."

I wasn't sure what to do with that information. I'd been on campus for most of a quarter and hadn't been to any of the Saturday night dances.

"I think you're going to take me," she said.

Her eyes were wide, and I got the feeling that if I didn't say yes, they would start leaking tears, and she'd look at me like I'd just drowned her pet kitty.

"Okay," I said.

"Good," she said, "Come to the dorm at 7:30."

Then she smiled, patted me on the arm, and left.

I just stood there. Having a girl ask me — no, tell me — that I was going out with her wasn't something I'd had to deal with. I wasn't the sort that girls usually chased.

For eighteen years I'd been the anti-stud. I played the flute in the band. I took art lessons. I didn't like to shoot things. Most of the teachers thought I was just the nicest boy. All the things that can destroy any boy's reputation.

It was embarrassing when somebody started the rumor that I had lost my boys' bathroom privileges, but it was humiliating when so many people believed it.

When I came to Ferncliff College, I was assigned a room with Ollie Rasmussen. I don't know if it was coincidence or design, but my roommate and I looked a lot alike — tall, skinny, with glasses and without much to recommend us physically. We'd evidently endured about the same kind of thing in high school, and we hoped — but didn't expect — it would be better in college. Ollie was a chemistry nerd. I don't know if there's any such thing as an art nerd but if there is, that's what I was. All in all, it didn't make for a great social life for either of us. I was hoping — but not expecting — that my encounter with Abigail would change that.

I told myself several times that there was room for hope. Anything was possible. President Kennedy had just said that we were going to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Finding a girl who wanted to go out with me couldn't be a lot harder than that.

So, on Saturday night, I made my way to Russell Hall, one of the two girls' dormitories on campus. To get there from the Commons or from the boys' dorm, you had to walk a curving sidewalk up a steep hill, past the guys sitting on the horny wall. Russell sat on top of the hill like a fortress. So far as I knew there may have been a moat around it.

I got there at exactly 7:30, one drop in a stream of college boys and men trudging up the hill. Moving against the tide going in was a stream of couples coming out. I flashed a mental image of a huge machine that poured all of the male droplets into a beaker, added a bunch of female droplets, and poured out the couples that came dribbling down the walkway. I've had strange images like that since I was a little boy. Often.

I gave Abigail's name to the girl behind the desk. She picked up a microphone and Abigail's name went all over the dorm. The girl behind the desk looked too young to be in college. She was wrapped in a soft baby fat that essentially eliminated her figure, created a second chin, and made her eyes squinty. She saw me looking at her and turned away. I could almost hear my mother scolding me for even noticing that the girl was pudgy.

"She's a beautiful girl, just a little heavy," mother would say with that irritating tolerance of someone who had never topped 120 pounds, even after two children.

Abigail came bouncing down the steps. She was wearing a dark grey skirt and a lighter grey sweater set and looked just like a college girl. When she reached out to take my hand, I noticed a sparkle.

"Nice ring." I said.

She shrugged. "George gave it to me. We're supposed to get married."

We joined the stream of couples heading down the walk to the Student Center.

"When?"

"When what?"

"When are you going to get married?"

I don't know. We haven't decided. He just gave me the ring this summer," she said. "Don't worry about. It's not this weekend."

It only took about two dances for us to look like the other couples on the floor, in the dim light a single irregularly shaped column swaying very slightly to the very slow beat, sort of like Easter Island in motion, parts of her thin body finding corresponding places in mine.

When I came to Ferncliff, I only had one objective: to make my grades high enough to keep my scholarship. After about three dances, I had two: to keep my scholarship and to get into Abigail's pants.

I don't know if I was absolutely unique in coming to college as a male virgin. Sometimes boys lie about things like that. But it's fairly certain that I was in a very small minority, and even I didn't admit it out loud.

"If a girl is good enough to date, Joey," my mother would say, "she's certainly good enough to be respected. And you know what I mean when I say respected."

Mother said that a lot. Often enough that at least two girls quit dating me because, as they told friends who gleefully told me, "I was boring." Another one stood me up, leaving me standing on her porch holding the birthday present I had bought her. I left the present on the porch. It took me a long time to figure out that respect, like a lot of other things, was best proffered in moderation.

Dancing with Abigail awakened possibilities, or at least I thought they did. And I had all evening to think about them – and her.

Abigail Vinell was pretty, but not gorgeous. She had long brown hair that swayed when she walked. Her waist was small, but so was the rest of her. Her mouth was a little wider than I would have drawn it, and her eyes perhaps a little larger. But, I thought as we swayed slowly on the floor, she was a lot more than a collection of parts.

We held hands on the way back to the dorm, and as we got to spot in the walkway where the big evergreens cast deep, dark shadows across the walk, we stopped and I kissed her. Or she kissed me. I don't know who started it, but I know that it made me want to do it again. So I started thinking about ways to ask her out again.

As we were getting to the dorm, she said, "You're an art major, aren't you?"

I admitted I was, not sure whether it was a good thing or bad.

She pirouetted into the pool of light beside the steps and struck a pose, something like a ballet dancer, looking at her extended foot. Then she looked up and grinned.

"Would you draw me?"

"Sure. I'm not too good with people yet, but I'd like to try."

"Great. Why don't we do get together next Saturday. If I don't like it, you can do it again."

I'd been taking art lessons since I was in grade school, but mostly I had drawn apples and pears. Once I had drawn a railroad trestle. Then there were a couple of drawings of our dog; you could recognize that it was a dog. But the only drawings that I had done of people had been from pictures.

I spent most of my spare time that week practicing faces and hands. I figured I wouldn't get a chance to draw a body anyway. But this was giving me my first chance to get something I really wanted from my art. Mostly my mother fussed over it, and my dad would look at it and walk away

shaking his head. I was thinking that there might be something useful to this art thing after all.

That Saturday morning I got to the studio in the art department almost an hour early. I was not surprised that there wasn't anybody else there. Art majors aren't noted for being up early on Saturday. In fact, it was, I think, the only time I had ever been there alone.

The room looked appropriately arty. There were a dozen easels scattered around the room. The morning sun streamed through one of the big windows. On the corkboard wall there were sketches of works in progress, and at the end of the room a small platform. This was where — so I was told — the life study models stood. But you didn't get to take the life study class until your junior year, and I'd heard the model this year was a guy.

I had brought my pencil case and sketch pad. I put them on the table and began to try to visualize how I would draw Abigail. Certainly seated. If I tried to pose her standing, she would get tired, and it'd be a short session. So I grabbed a chair and pulled it into the patch of sunlight. I stood for a few minutes, my chin resting on my hand staring at the chair, trying to look artistic, but it didn't matter. There was nobody there to see it. Then I waited.

She was right on time. Under her heavy black coat, she was wearing jeans and a white oxford cloth shirt with the shirttail hanging almost to her knees. I positioned her in the chair, didn't like it, then posed her again. Finally, I had her sit on the back of the chair, her chin resting on her hands, looking a little bit away from me. I turned her shoulder a little bit, not so much because it needed turning as because it gave me an excuse to touch her.

Then I started drawing. A quick outline of the face and hair, her long neck and the collar of the shirt.

"Pull the collar down a little," I said. "Your chin's hiding in it."

She pulled the collar down and lifted her chin a little.

"That better?"

"Some."

"Would it help if I took the shirt off?"

I wasn't sure what it would do for the picture, but I thought it would help me. My libido jumped up and down inside me.

"Maybe. If you want to try it."

She unbuttoned her shirt. There was nothing really sexy about it. It was more like she was in her dorm room changing clothes. She just unbuttoned it, shrugged out of it and threw it on a chair. She was wearing a plain white cotton bra, but I could imagine that it was black and lacy. She resumed her position.

"That better?"

"Uh-huh." I didn't want to say much afraid my voice would tremble or give away my heavy breathing. I don't think I'd ever been given permission to stare at a girl in her bra, and the fact that it revealed no more than the average bathing suit didn't matter. It was intimate.

"What are you doing? Here...in school, I mean."

She didn't move her head. "I'm an English major, French minor."

"Going to teach?"

"I don't know. I hope not. I'd like to do something a little more exciting than that. I'm a writer. I write poems and short stories, and after I've lived long enough, I want to write a novel. How about you. How're you going to use this very valuable degree you're working on?"

I looked at her. I'm sure she didn't know how much I heard about the "value" of an art degree from my dad. I just let it pass.

"I want to be an illustrator. I'd like to be Norman Rockwell, but there's already one of those, so I'd settle for just being able to make a good living drawing. Even if it's in somebody's art studio."

We talked about our classes and how college was different from what we'd come from. I kept drawing, and about an hour later I had what I thought was a solid sketch, so we took a break and I showed it to her.

"I like it," she said. "You've made me prettier than I am, and I like that."

We were standing shoulder to shoulder, looking at the picture on the pad. She still wasn't wearing a shirt, and I was afraid to take a step.

Very carefully I ripped the page from the pad and handed it to her.

"I think I can do better," I said, "if you'll let me try again."

She turned toward me, looked at the picture, then back at me. Then she pulled by head down and kissed me.

"Sure," she said. "Any time."

There was this thing about Abigail that was always a promise, and that day I turned that promise into a dozen different things: a promise of glorious art, of delightful company, and – most of all – sex.

"She's got you trained like a puppy," Ollie said. He was stretched out on his bed, tossing pieces of three-week-old popcorn in the air and trying to catch them in his mouth. The part of the bed around his pillow was littered with pieces of old popcorn.

Our room looked like the cell of two very messy monks. The desks were stacked with books and papers. There were clothes hanging from the doorknobs. And, of course, there was Ollie on a bed half covered with popcorn.

For the first time in my life, I was the neatest person in my living accommodations.

"Uh-huh," I replied. I really didn't want to talk to Ollie about Abigail any more. He kept pressing me for details of our dates. At first it had been interesting; it hadn't taken but a couple of dates and a borrowed car to get to second base, but then it stalled.

It probably wasn't chivalrous for me to kiss and tell, or get my hand under her bra and tell, but I rationalized it by telling myself that since Ollie was a chemistry nerd, the guy who knew more about chemistry and less about everything else than anybody in the school, this was probably as close to actual sex as he was ever going to get. He did get a few dates because he had a car, but he never got a second date with a girl. With Ollie once was enough.

Since it was embarrassing for the story to stop at the same place every time, I quit telling it. But I had kept going out with Abigail. There was still that promise, and I intended to pursue it.

Ollie threw another piece of popcorn into the air. It hit him under the eye and rolled down to the bed. "Why don't you just find you another girl?"

"Why would I want to do that? Abigail's fun. She's cute. And we have a lot in common. Other than George, of course."

"Well, as your roommate, I'm glad that you're not also engaged to George."

"The whole George thing is sort of weird. She's engaged to him. She has his ring. But she never talks about getting married unless I bring it up, and then all she says is 'don't worry about it.'"

"Maybe she's saving herself for George."

I thought about it for a minute. "I don't think so. I'm not sure she even thinks about George. I asked her if she wrote him. She said she did sometimes. I asked her if George was dating girls at the university, and she said, 'I guess so. Can't imagine him just sitting around the dorm.' I think George is sort of like the Easter bunny to her, real enough to deliver the engagement ring and a nice myth the rest of the time."

"Yeah, that's weird," Ollie said and tried to catch another piece of popcorn.

There was an enjoyable silence for a moment while Ollie tried to catch popcorn, and I relived my

date with Abigail. We'd had fun, both before and after the heavy breathing session. She was telling me about living in a dorm with a couple of hundred girls and only one communal shower room per floor. There were several girls who waited until the middle of the night to go shower just so nobody would be there. Then there were a few who figured that they had a body worth flaunting and walked down the hall to the shower wearing next to nothing. I asked her where she was on the spectrum, and she said, "I'm about the middle. I always wear a robe to the shower, but I don't wait until 2 a.m. to do it." I bragged a little about only having to shower a bathroom and shower with three more guys since I lived in the newest dorm. We agreed that college life was very different from living at home.

That's the part I was thinking about when Ollie broke the silence.

"You know what your problem is?" he said.

I did a quick inventory. Five ten and built like a pick-up stick. Trying to convince my dad that I wouldn't go directly from college to a homeless shelter. Having to take sex education in a class taught by the dean of women, who was the wife of the Baptist Minister. Being in a PE class with a bunch of jocks. I didn't know which problem he was talking about. So he told me.

"Your problem is that you're a wuss. You're settling."

I looked at him with what I thought was a "what the hell are you talking about" expression.

"She asked you out. She sets the limits, and she keeps you and probably George just dangling. If you want her, why don't you do something about it?"

"Says the man who's last serious relationship was with a magazine delivered in a plain brown wrapper."

"Yeah, but at least I ordered the magazine. I did something. You, sir, are a wuss."

Then he went back trying to throw popcorn into his mouth.

I didn't look to Ollie for advice on much of anything, but I began to wonder if I was a wuss. All my life other people had been making decisions for me — my mother, my teachers, and now Abigail. On the plus side those decisions had worked pretty well. I was growing up in a reasonably normal manner, I had a couple of friends, although normal isn't a word that I usually associated with Ollie. I was pretty happy most of the time. If I was a wuss, at least I was dealing with wusshood in a positive fashion.

What would I change if I wasn't a wuss? Certainly not my major. I loved art. My friends. I didn't even know how to go about that, even if I wanted to. Abigail? She was still the most fun I had, and I couldn't force her to go further. I think they call that rape.

I went to sleep that night thinking that if I couldn't be Washington directing the boat across the Delaware, at least I could be a contented passenger.

When I went home for Thanksgiving I was a changed man. I had a girlfriend, even if she was engaged to somebody else, and we had made out sufficiently to get my heart rate up to an aerobic level. I was, as my high school counselor would say, doing "college level work," and for the most part doing it successfully. And nobody, at least in the art department, considered me particularly weird.

That was a long way from high school.

I had changed, but not a lot had changed at home. My mother still made too much over my drawings, and my dad didn't make anything at all. He and I did have one serious conversation about whether I might find engineering more rewarding than art. It wasn't so much a conversation as Dad's monologue. He kept saying that I could have art as a hobby, but I had to be able to make a living.

Making a living was a big thing with dad. He had grown up during the Great Depression, and although he made pretty good money managing a heavy equipment dealership, he was still mentally

in the Great Depression. Economically, not psychologically. Get a job. Make a living. Enjoy your hobby in your spare time. That was his prescription for a secure life, although he really didn't have any hobbies, and I'm not sure he really enjoyed much of anything.

I had the feeling that my life had been a string of either mysteries or disappointments for him. He took me to Little League baseball, but that lasted just a year. Then I joined the band and played the flute. I could hear him and mother muttering late at night. I knew it was about me, because the last thing said was always, "Just leave him alone. He'll be fine." I'm sure that Dad thought that the Gypsies had swapped me for his real son.

I saw a few of my high school friends, mostly other band geeks, but we didn't have a lot to talk about any more; so I quit going out. Mostly I missed Abigail, and I would lie in bed at night thinking about her, not just holding her, but talking to her. I wondered if it was strange that I thought as much about just being with her, talking and having a cup of coffee, as I did in my constant quest to break down her barriers.

When we got back to Ferncliff, for the two weeks between Thanksgiving break and Christmas break, it took about a minute for Abigail and me to drop back into a comfortable routine. We had lunch together, we studied for finals together, and whenever we could we found a quiet, deserted spot and made out. I hated to see the Christmas break come. But it did, and for two weeks I went back to my previous existence.

Mother kept asking me if something was wrong.

"No, nothing's wrong. Why do you think something's wrong?"

"You don't talk much. You seem to be brooding. Are you brooding about something?"

I was just glad to get back to school after Christmas.

One clear January day about a week after we got back, Abigail and I were sitting on the wall outside the Student Center, enjoying the sun and sipping really bad coffee. I asked her if she had seen George.

"Sure. We went out. Several times."

We just sat there for a few minutes, watching people go into and come out of the Student Center. I was thinking about her and George. I wondered what she was thinking about.

"Tell me about George," I said.

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Right now he's sort of a shadow figure who happens to be engaged to the girl I spend almost every free minute with and miss terribly when I'm not with her?"

Abigail's eyes widened, and she looked at me. I thought maybe she was going to melt into my arms right in front of the student center. But she didn't. She just put her hand on my arm.

"That's sweet, Joey."

I noticed that she didn't say that she missed me too. So I just sat there, letting the heavy silence pull more out of her.

She looked down at her hands. She was twisting the engagement ring round and round.

"I don't know what to tell you. He's a nice guy, sort of good looking, and we've been going together a long time. He was pretty much the only boy I dated in high school. The only serious one, I mean. His dad is principal at the high school where my dad teaches. He's dad's boss."

While she was talking I was busy tallying the score. He was her long-time boyfriend. He was good looking. He was a nice guy. That's three for him. But I was here, and he wasn't. I win.

We talked some more, mostly about her writing and my drawing; then she took my hand, and we walked back to her dorm.

I saw a movie one time where the characters were talking about how you know when you're in

love, and after chewing on that for about half the movie, one of the characters stopped the conversation by saying, "You just know." I saw the movie two or three years ago, and I had just learned what that line meant. Walking back I had this vision of us walking through a huge field of green grass, hand in hand, toward a bright light. There was nobody else in the field. I liked that.

Abigail had brought me some poems, poems that she had written over the Christmas break. I was happy to see that none of them were to George, and none of them were love poems. I read them, commenting on some of the lines. I guess I knew as much about poetry as the average art major.

When I looked at her she was staring down at the sidewalk, and I thought I saw a tear. I put my hand to her chin and pulled her face toward me. There was a tear, and both eyes were brimming as if they were about to flood.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "It's silly," she said. "I was just thinking that you may be the only person to read what I write. I don't know if this is just some fantasy I have, whether I'll ever really write anything except little scribbles that die in a dresser drawer. I'm afraid that I might be like Emily Dickenson. She wrote and wrote, and almost all of her poems were found after she was dead. Or worse, I'll write and write, and my poems will be found and thrown away."

I started to tell her that I knew how she felt, but I really didn't. I had always thought I could do something in art to make a living. I might find myself in some sweat shop drawing schematic diagrams for electric toasters, but I could do something. Instead, I put my hand on her hands and just sat beside her.

When we started back to the dorm, more or less oblivious to all the people streaming up the hill and down the hill, she told me to keep the poems. She had made copies of them for me. I was accumulating quite a body of Abigail Vinell's work.

We reached the final frontier in February. I'd borrowed Ollie's car for the night and scored a six-pack from Mobile Parkinson. I don't know why "Mobile" was called "Mobile," since he was from New York, but it was probably the best known secret on campus that he was the source for all things mind altering. Beer was among the mildest of those things. I picked up the beer and Abigail, and we drove to one of the clearings on Dirt Dam Road, driving by other cars whose windows were already steamed up.

Abigail looked at the six pack on the floor, then back at me.

"I didn't know you drank beer," she said.

I didn't. It was another one of those things, like respect for the opposite sex that had been hammered into my head at home.

"I don't care if all the other boys drink beer. It's against the law for you to drink beer at your age. We don't break the law." That was sort of an all-purpose philosophy that both my parents preached, whether it had to do with beer, smoking, speeding, gambling, knocking over gas stations or anything else that upright people weren't supposed to do because it was against the law.

"Just a little," I said, trying to stay within stretching distance of the truth. "I thought tonight would be a little special; so I brought us some."

"Special?"

I had thought long and hard about what could be special about tonight. The truth was it would be special because if I could get some beer in her, I'd probably finally get beyond second base. But I didn't think the truth would be my best option.

"I turned in my portfolio last week, and I got it back today with an A. A lot of the pictures were of you."

That was also the truth, and it was obviously a better option. Her eyes sparkled and she scooted across the seat to wrap her arms around me. It was a long minute before she turned me loose.

"Maybe I can be your muse," she said.

There was more to this than just a remark. Abigail was unhappy with her writing. She was unhappy with her future prospects. She was afraid that she wouldn't find a place for herself in what she considered art. Maybe I had just found her a place.

"You are my muse," I said. "I had probably a dozen pictures of you in my portfolio, and Mayer knew right away who they were. He said that I had captured something in you."

I guess maybe I had. In some of the pictures she looked thoughtful; in a few of them, she just looked sad. But she didn't look that way when she looked at me. Maybe she only looked that way when she forgot I was there.

I popped the tops on two of the cans and handed her one. She raised her can.

"To the artist," she said.

"And his muse," I said and almost choked on my first swallow of beer.

"And his muse," she repeated. She drank her beer with a good deal more skill than I did. It tasted bad. It smelled bad. And I figured if I drank much my brain would stop working. So I barely sipped mine, while Abigail leaned back against the door and drank hers in a lady-like way. Finally, she emptied the first can.

"We should celebrate more often," she said.

I agreed and opened her another can of beer. She didn't hesitate.

Things got a little bleary after that, for her because two cans of beer evidently exceeded her sobriety threshold, me because I was breathing so hard that I was about to hyperventilate. Halfway into her second can of beer, Abigail was suddenly all over me, banging my hip bone on the steering wheel and pushing my glasses halfway around my head.

Her hands were rubbing my neck and my back and my legs, and she was kissing me like she wanted to swallow me. I tried to respond appropriately, but I really didn't know what to do except go along. Suddenly she stopped, looked me in the eye, and pulled her sweater over her head. After a few more kisses, she leaned back and unhooked her bra. She had small breasts, but for somebody with my experience, that was not a problem. They were breasts; they were attached to a woman, and my hands went straight to them.

It was cold outside; so the windows on Ollie's car were steamed up. Just like the other cars parked on Dirt Dam Road.

For the first time since I'd known Abigail, she seemed fully committed, rather than just leading me up to a door and closing it in my face. The breathing became heavier, and our hands created paths of friction heat as they moved from one place to another.

Then Abigail stopped. She wriggled back against the door. I wondered what I had done wrong. Then she unbuttoned her jeans and slid out of them.

Actually, slid probably isn't the right word. Removing tight jeans in a car is not so much a matter of sliding as pushing and bumping. I didn't know whether to try to help her or not. I just leaned back and caught my breath.

She was wearing black bikini panties, and even in the dark there was a wonderful contrast between the black panties and the white of her skin above and below them. I just stared at her. Then I reached for her, and we were kissing again. There were a whole baskets of new sensations: the smooth skin on her back just over her panties, the feel of her breasts against my chest, her hands seeming to want me as much as I wanted her.

My fingertips trailed down her back to the edge of her panties. She shook her head, still kissing me and pulled my hand back up. The boundaries had been defined.

And they stayed defined that way for the next month, until we returned to our respective corners

for spring break. It was routine and exciting. When I could borrow Ollie's car I would pick up some beer — usually just three because there was no way I could drink a whole one — and we'd go to Dirt Dam Road. The only change was that it took less and less time to get Abigail down to her panties and engagement ring.

Ollie wasn't sympathetic. When I would come limping in, he'd just look at me and laugh.

"Why don't you just give up?" he'd say between gasps. "You're never going to get any further."

I'd just throw myself on my bed, trying to find a position where the aching parts of my body didn't ache so much. But one night I actually said something back.

"That's not the point," I said.

"It's not?" Ollie was genuinely mystified. He thought it was the point.

"Abigail's a person. She's not just a collection of body parts. She gets to choose what she wants to do."

"How about you? Don't you get to choose?"

"Not about her body. And there aren't a lot of choices to be made about mine."

Ollie looked at me, shook his head, and went back to his chemistry book, something he could understand.

And that's how we ended up on a the night before Easter break in a little clearing on Dirt Dam Road, Abigail putting her clothes back on and me trying to get my heart rate to almost normal.

"I'm going to miss you," I said.

"You can't miss me a lot," she said. "We'll be back Tuesday. That's just four days from now."

"Are you going to see George?"

"I imagine. He hasn't said whether he was going to come home for Easter or not."

I tried not to show the wave of resentment that I was feeling. It seemed like the way she talked about George was some kind of measure of how she felt about me.

I created another scene in my mind, me sitting there, and Abigail looking embarrassed, staring at her hands, worrying about whether I would accept that she was going to see George when really she belonged to me. But that was only in my mind; Abigail was really just making conversation without any idea that every word was a barb that struck painfully and wouldn't come out.

All I could do was hope that George wouldn't go home for Easter.

It wasn't an option for me. Part of the deal with my parents was that I didn't have to come home on weekends, although home was only about sixty miles away, but I had to go home on holidays. Usually I didn't mind that. I got my clothes washed, had good meals, and generally slept most of the day. The only problem was that every time I went home it was like a step back in time. To mom I was still a kid who needed to be told to put on his coat when he went out in the snow, and to dad I was studying for a job that might still have me living with him when I was fifty.

Most of the weekend I just stayed in my room building elaborate fantasies about how George would disappear.

It was a dark and rainy night, and George walked shivering through the rain as ankle deep water poured down the street. Suddenly he disappeared, sucked into an open manhole that took him tortuously to the storm drain and out to sea, never to be seen again. The image of George was a little blurry since I'd never seen him.

Or George driving recklessly around the mountain turn in an old truck. The tires were bald, and the brakes none too good. He hits the turn, skids and goes careening into a canyon, the sharp rocks first ripping pieces of the truck away, then pieces of George.

Or getting caught up in a tornado. As he was flying round and round, screaming in terror, he'd see

Abigail and me riding a bicycle across the sky. George would never be heard from again.

I thought of dozens of ways that George could disappear, but I knew none of them were likely to happen, and I knew that Abigail was probably with him at that very moment. It occurred to me that Ollie was probably right. In every scenario, George did himself in; I didn't have anything to do with it. I tried to an image of my walking up to him and telling him to leave Abigail alone. When he refused, I slugged him. But that one didn't work. I'd always believed in peaceful coexistence, probably because I was never a very successful fighter. So I just laid in my room, wishing George into seventeen kinds of Hell. At the end of it though, I had decided that Abigail was a prize worth fighting for. I would go back to school and woo her — woo? — to be mine alone. I came out of my room and faced my parents with a renewed dedication. I just couldn't tell them what I was dedicated to.

"Tell me about your friends," Mom said.

"Oh, they're nothing special. Nice guys."

When I got back to Ferncliff I had a plan. I had given it a lot of thought, right down to the color of the single rose I would bring her and the restaurant where we would eat and I would declare my love. Okay, so it wasn't a very original one, but it didn't matter. I never got a chance to use it. It didn't take all that long for the whole thing to fall apart.

I was waiting for outside the door to her last period class, rehearsing how I would invite her to dinner, seeing her smile and the brightness of her eyes as she accepted, knowing immediately that I was about to campaign for her total affection. The bell rang and a herd of students came pouring out the door, Abigail right in the middle of them. She saw me and split herself from the herd. When she got to me, she gave me a hug. We walked outside into the sunshine.

"How was Easter break?" she said.

"Ok. How was yours?"

"It was alright."

I figured that this was enough chit-chat and was about to deliver the speech I'd been practicing, but she spoke first.

"We need to talk, Joey," she said. She spoke almost in a whisper, looking down at her feet. This wasn't exactly the mood I was looking for.

"About what?"

She looked at me, then took my hand and pulled me over to the wall. We sat down. It was a long minute before she answered.

"While I was home this weekend, George and I went to dinner and talked about getting married. He said that since we're engaged, we shouldn't be going out with anybody else."

I assumed "anybody else" included me. I felt my heart drop to down around my stomach.

"And what do you think?" I asked.

"I guess I agree with him. If we're engaged and going to get married, we probably shouldn't see anybody else."

"So, when are you going to get married? This summer?"

"I don't think so. George has to get a job, and we have to save some money. Probably in a year."

So George hadn't disappeared in any of the dozen ways I had imagined. Not only had he not gone away, but he'd taken away the only part of Abigail that I had. I just sat there, thinking what a jerk George was and what a jerk I was. I should have said something a long time before now. I should have done something. But I hadn't.

Abigail was still holding my hand. She squeezed it gently.

"Please don't be mad, Joey. We're still friends. Right?"

I nodded, hoping that the tears in my eyes wouldn't leak over my eyelashes and run down my face. I just nodded.

"I did think about you while I was home," she said. "In fact, I wrote something for you."

She pulled her massive purse up into her lap, fishing around in it. It took a while because Abigail carried more in her purse than most of the girls. It was as big as a small suitcase and as heavy as a box of books. And it, like the engagement ring, was with her all the time.

Finally, she pulled out a yellow sheet of paper.

"For Joey," she read. Then I realized that it was a poem she had written for me. I didn't catch all of it, but it had something to do with our connection being made through paper, something about the connection that we had being deeper than the two dimensions of the paper.

I also caught something about seeing further than skin deep into each other, looking at what was deep inside. I don't know anything about poetry, but I thought it was good. At least to me it was.

I realized that this was her going away present. It was something, but not nearly what I wanted.

"Can I have a copy of that?" I said. I'd never had a poem written for, to, or about me.

"Sure, but not this one. I'll make you a copy." She put it back in her purse. We didn't talk much as we walked the rest of the way back to her dorm.

Abigail meant what she said. She didn't go out with me or with anybody else. We'd have coffee, or I'd walk her to her dorm after class. We'd sit on the wall and talk. But I didn't draw her, and we didn't date. She was trying to live up to her idea of "still being friends." I just wanted to be with her.

We made it through April like that. We didn't talk about George, and we didn't talk about her wedding. We didn't talk about us. We didn't talk about dozens of things that implied that we had a relationship. And every time I left her, I felt even emptier than the time before, as if I'd deposited another part of me with her and would never get it back. I spent a lot of time in the art department and in my room, going out to class and to the cafeteria. Nobody in school noticed that I was becoming a hermit.

Ollie was philosophical about it.

"Look, you knew she was engaged. You knew you weren't going to get any further with her anyway. Think about this as a good thing. Now you're free to go find somebody who's not already engaged to somebody else."

He didn't understand why that didn't cheer me up.

Finally, I had had all I could take. We'd run into each other in the coffee shop and had a cup of coffee together, trying to think of enough banal things to say to fill the time without upsetting the equilibrium. Her classes. My classes. Her dorm mates. My dorm mates. Nothing either of us were passionate about. Then we started walking up the hill toward her dorm, and with every step I felt more strongly that I couldn't continue leaving, not having some part of her. So I stopped in the middle of the side walk.

"I can't do this anymore," I said.

"Do what."

"Pretend that we're just good friends and that's all there is to it. If you're going to be George's wife, I just have to accept that and move on, but I can't be some sort of eunuch that simply attends you from the classroom building to the dorm. I love you, Abigail, but if that's all there is to this relationship, I'd be better off just stopping it now."

Twice she opened her mouth and shut it without saying anything. Then she said, "I'm sorry, Joey."

We looked at each other for a long minute, and I tried to see the laughter in her eyes when we were kidding around, or the passion when she was explaining her world to me, or the dark limpidness when we were wrapped up in each other. But none of that was there. Her eyes were blank. I

turned around and went back down the hill.

But because I didn't see her didn't mean I didn't think about her. Ollie chided me for being so morose, although he didn't say morose. He spent as much time as he could in the chemistry lab, hoping I'd be asleep when he got back in. He told me that I'd filled up the room with my depression to the point he was having trouble breathing. For the first time in our year together, Ollie didn't make jokes about me anymore.

This went on for about three weeks before I got as sick of me as Ollie was. I was mooning over a girl I couldn't have. Which didn't do me any good and certainly didn't do her any good. I'm sure that there was a glint of guilt that she felt every time we passed each other in the classroom building. We spoke but didn't stop.

I didn't stop thinking about her, but I tried to quit thinking about her as something I had lost. She was going on with her life; probably I would too. She had helped me grow up a little bit by being my friend and almost lover. I decided that, despite her choosing the good looking boy from home over me, I still owed her something, something to say that even while we were going our separate ways, there was a point back there that we were together. Then I started wonder what that could be. Simply a nice, civilized "thank you?" Maybe a drawing of her contributed to the school? A thank you note. All of those things seemed pale, the kind of things I would have done before Abigail. I wanted to do something that was strikingly post-Abigail. Something she would always remember me for. It took me almost two days before I came up with a plan, but then I threw myself into it.

It was, as they say, a cleansing experience. And it cost me a whole day's worth of class cuts.

First, I went to the library and checked out a stack of books on calligraphy and to the art department for a stack of poster board. That night I studied the books, looking at the different styles and the illuminated capitals. I hadn't realized that calligraphy was such an art in itself; I'd always thought of those semi-baldheaded monks bent over big books as copyists, but they were really artists, creating work that lasted for centuries.

I tried out different styles. Some were too complicated; they hid the words. A couple were just ugly; some medieval monk's written version of a zoot suit. Finally I found one that looked right – readable, graceful, and something I could learn in a hurry. I worked on it for about two hours before the lines started blurring in front of my eyes.

When I went to bed, I had visions of thin strokes and broad strokes, ornate capitals, and beautiful lines running around in my head. A lot of them were still there the next morning.

In two and a half quarters of college I had never cut an entire day's classes, but I thought this was worth it. I studied Abigail's poems, marking what I thought were the best lines, then I went to work, turning the lines into works of art – broad strokes, thin strokes, colorful initial capitals. The lines from her poems looked almost timeless, like excerpts from a medieval Bible.

When Ollie came in from the chemistry lab that night I was still working. Stacked against the wall were a dozen sheets of poster board, each with a line of Abigail's poetry done in illuminated calligraphy. In the bottom right hand corner of each one was a loose line drawing of Abigail, with just enough detail to tell that it was her. Ollie picked up the poster boards and read them. Then he leaned them against the wall. I was just finishing the last one.

"Well, I guess if you're going to live like a monk, you should act like a monk," he said. It was the first thing he'd said in more than a week that attempted to be a joke. I chuckled.

"Want to help me put these up?"

"Why not?" he said.

The next morning, the usual smooth flowing river of students heading into the classroom building had turned into a stretch of rapids, with some trying to make it around the clumps of students standing in front of posters taped to the front glass and the walls of the building. In each of the clumps

there was a murmuring, either because they were talking about the posters or because some of them couldn't read without moving their lips. I figured of the baker's dozen posters we'd put up, several hundred students had stopped and read at least one, and I saw several people going from poster to poster.

I stood in a corner by the front glass, watching and feeling some satisfaction. It was worth four cuts and more than twenty hours work.

Just before the eight o'clock bell, Abigail came in with a group of girls. They got stopped by a clump of people and looked around to see what the problem was. Then Abigail saw the poster. She went to another one. Then another. In just a couple of minutes she had found and read all of them. When she came back to the lobby, her eyes were darting from one side to the other. Several people stopped her, gestured to a poster, and Abigail smiled and nodded. She kept looking until she found me.

When she got to me, I saw that her wide eyes were full to the brim. She put her books on the floor and threw her arms around me.

"Thank you, Joey," she said, her face pressed into my neck. I could feel her tears.

"You're welcome. I didn't want you to ever have to worry again about not having readers. I've been standing here for a while, and I can tell you that you're the best read student poet here."

She laughed and turned me loose. We walked around, looking at each of the posters.

"Why did you do this?"

"I felt like I owed you something. Win or lose, I'm better now than I was when we met. I wanted you to have something to remember me by."

"This'll do it," she said. "Can I have these?"

"Sure, meet me here after your two o'clock, and we'll take them down."

She hugged me again and went to class.

That afternoon we took the posters down and put them in a big envelope that I brought from the art department. As we were pulling the posters from the wall I asked her what George thought of her poetry. For some reason, I thought I could talk about George now.

"I don't know. I don't think he's ever read any of it."

I was surprised. But I didn't say anything. I wasn't here to make her feel bad; I was trying to make her feel good.

On the way back to the dorm, with me carrying the envelope and her carrying her books and her ever-present purse, she told me about some of the people who had stopped and talked to her about the lines. Some of them had asked to see the poem that the line had come from. Enough of them had asked that she was going to get mimeographed copies made. She chattered excitedly about people actually liking what she wrote.

We were about half way to the dorm when she stopped and turned to me.

"Joey, I want you to know that this is one of the happiest days of my life. Maybe the happiest day. And I'll always remember it. And I'll always remember you."

She put her purse and books down, wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a long hug. I knew that I had done what I had set out to do. Wherever she went, I'd always have a place there. It wasn't all that I wanted, but it was what I had set out to do.

We stood there a moment, for me creating a memory that I would probably have to hold for a long time. Then she untangled herself from me, picked up her books, and her purse. I looked at her and decided that this was the time to make the break, when she was looking at me like I was some sort of hero. It wasn't a time for long goodbyes.

I picked up the envelope and tucked it under her arm.

"If you can handle this, I'm going to stop here," I said.

She looked surprised, then I think she understood that we'd said and done everything that we had to say or do, and it was time. She nodded, kissed me quickly on the cheek, and turned to walk up the hill.

I sat down on the horny wall and watched her walk away, a slim figure in a straight skirt, laden with books, a big envelope, and her massive bag, but even with all that, she walked with her back straight, her hips swaying, and her eyes looking at whatever was in front of her.

"There's an awful lot to like about you, Abigail Vinell," I thought. I didn't even see the other girls walking to or from the dorm.

--The End--