

A Question of Privacy

Tom popped the trunk of his Honda Accord and wedged a shabby carton of old comics between an outdated computer screen and an antique coffee grinder. A letter slipped out of an old Perry Mason novel as he shoved a handful of books into an open corner. He tossed it in with the comics and closed the trunk.

The next yard sale on his list was six blocks west and one north. He drove slowly by the dilapidated row home, perusing the piles of kid's outgrown clothing and mismatched coffee mugs. No point in stopping. Besides, he had hit six addresses and had more than enough to keep him busy all week, photographing and describing his new finds for his e-bay site.

Tom headed home, stopping for a quart of half-and-half cream and more bananas. They'd gone up twenty cents a pound in five days. Funny, he'd never noticed the price of food before. Never had to.

As he lugged his new purchases into the den, he glanced over at his answering machine. No one called. She probably never would. He reminded himself he didn't care.

The books would have to wait. His priority was the Civil War photo. What a find! Would bring at least fifty bucks. He laid it next to his digital camera and started a pot of coffee. Switching on the television to his favorite news channel, he got more dismal projections about the economy.

Unemployment has reached double digits for the first time in two decades. Forecasters are pessimistic about the job market...

"No kidding," he said aloud as he added the water to the tank. He turned to ESPN and checked out the basketball scores. No job – no girl – no hope. And only six months before he had it all together. He'd even been promoted to manager at the garden center and was stashing a hundred bucks away every payday for a ring. Felicia was everything a guy could want—gorgeous, intelligent, sexy—and now she was gone.

As he drank his coffee, he sorted the old comics by date and publishing house. Then he spotted the unopened letter, which had slid down the side. It was addressed to some guy in Portland, Oregon. The envelope was quality linen, but it looked like it had been caught in the rain—the address slightly smeared. The postage was current and he laid it aside to stick in the mail. His curiosity made him pick it up again and he checked out the return address—some little town in PA. Maybe it was intentionally left un-mailed. Maybe he could remember where the house was where he had gotten it, or maybe it didn't matter what he did.

His cell-phone rang and it was an unidentified caller. He answered anyway. After all, it could be Felicia calling from someone else's phone. It wasn't. Just a reminder to make a dental appointment. After his second cup of java, he went to the classified section of the local paper and reached for his red pen. The usual job openings stared back at him. Yeah, he could work in the local diner for minimum wage or even stock shelves at Walmart, but he was hoping for something better. He'd even been toying with the idea of going back to school for a Master's in business, but it took money to do that. Of course,

there was the ring money, which was rather sizable at this point, but spending that would mean he'd totally written her off, and he wasn't quite ready for that.

His mother called then and he was tempted not to answer, but he'd been raised too properly to avoid her.

"Yeah, Ma. What's hot?"

"Honey, your father and I were just sitting here talking about you. Have you found a new job yet? We've been so worried."

"Not yet, but things are lookin' good. You don't have to worry. I have money and my rent's paid till July."

"Are you eating properly? You looked thin the last time we saw you."

"I'm trying to stay thin, Ma. Yeah, I eat great. I have hamburgers every night."

"Now you know beef isn't that good for you," her voice and lecture continued and he nodded into the phone, half listening. His other hand picked up the envelope addressed to someone else and he sniffed it. No perfume. Too bad.

"Okay, Ma. Gotta go. Say 'hi' to Dad."

He figured he could steam the envelope open and then re-seal it. Heading for the kitchen to get the tea kettle going, he heard heels clattering on the concrete steps outside his apartment, and then a harsh triple knock.

"Hold on! Don't knock the door down." And there she was—just as beautiful and enticing as ever, only no radiant smile or dancing eyes.

"I left my old CD's."

Tom's heart and brain seemed to collide. "Come on in. I just made coffee. Want some?" He wanted to grab her and crush her to him, but all he could do was reach for his favorite mug—a black 'over the 30's' cup—a silly gift he'd received from her last February for his birthday. She looked about to refuse, but then flopped her large designer bag to the floor and reached in the refrigerator for the cream.

"Do you know where they are?"

"Where you left them. In the closet, I guess. I don't want them, anyway."

"No. We never did like the same music." She sat on her chair, took a sip of coffee, and stared across the table at him.

"How's your mother?" Tom's brain was on vacation.

"Fine."

"So's mine."

"Good. Well, I'd better go." She began to get up from the chair, but Tom reached across the table and placed his hand over hers.

"Felicia, let's talk...please."

"We are talking, and besides, I don't have anything more to say to you. You're a first-class jerk and I'm not going to waste anymore of my life waiting for you to grow up."

"Sounds pretty definite. You know I wasn't really mad at you when you didn't show up that Saturday night—like you promised."

Felicia pulled her hand away and released a long tired breath. "Okay. Hear this. Last time. I didn't show up, because I had a chance to take a client out to look at a

million-dollar home.” Her voice had that wavy sound like she was reading a kid’s nursery rhyme. “He was only available for a couple hours. I thought he’d buy the dumb house. I was wrong. It wasn’t a big deal. You and I were just going out for dinner like we’ve done a hundred times before.”

“But you didn’t even call!”

“I explained my cell-phone died on me and I didn’t think you’d be that upset! It wasn’t just the way you exploded; you accused me of cheating!”

“I didn’t really mean it.”

“OOoooh, yes you did! You acted like a spoiled child! No wonder you lost your job.”

“Give me a break! What’s that got to do with my job? It’s the economy, stupid!”

“There you go again! Get my CD’s! I’m outta here!” She jumped up, grabbed her bag, and headed towards the door, with Tom following behind her. He jumped in front of her path.

“Not until I get this out! You are spoiled, selfish, and immature! I’m glad we broke up and I hope I never see you again!” He ranted off a few other adjectives as he reached into the closet next to the door and grabbed a handful of CD’s. “Here, you can have mine, too. Maybe your taste in music will improve!”

After he slammed the door behind her, he picked up a stack of comics and threw them across the room. Catching his reflection on the silent TV screen, he pictured himself as a five-year-old throwing a tantrum over bedtime. Embarrassed at his own behavior, he dropped to the floor and forced himself to do thirty push-ups. Just like the military.

It was three weeks later that things broke for Tom and he got a job working for a local lawn maintenance service that paid slightly better than minimum. Rent was due in a week and his prospects weren’t improving. His rampage with Felicia had cut off any hopes of renewing their relationship and he spent more time with his bowling buddies. His best friend, Darrel was missing two Fridays in a row and no one could explain his absence.

On the way home from work Monday, Tom ran into Darrel at the town’s cheapest gas station where they were filling their tanks two aisles apart. He had the distinct impression that Darrel was trying to avoid him, but he wasn’t about to let that happen. After paying at the pump, he pulled over next to his friend’s car.

“Hey, where’ve you been hiding out? Been sick?”

“Uh, no, not really. Just busy.” Tom looked through the front visor of Darrel’s car and discovered Felicia sitting in the passenger seat, glaring out at him.

“What the?”

“I...we...well, we’re seeing each other now, once in a while,” Darrel blurted out. “I mean...it’s over with you two guys, right?”

“Yeah. That’s fine. Hope you’ll be happy. You deserve each other.” Tom felt doubly betrayed. Not Darrel. How could she? She always said he was too tall. Tom drove off with a screeching of tires and somehow made it back to his apartment. He picked up the carton of comics, which he had re-organized, and threw it—again.

Maybe it was childish, but it sure felt good!

July was hot—stinking hot. Tom was glad he'd taken an apartment with a pool. He put on a bathing suit and grabbed a towel. As he passed the carton with comics for the umpteenth time, he picked up the un-mailed letter and took it with him, along with the latest best-selling mystery. After diving into the deep end and swimming the length of the pool five times, he got out and laid down on a chaise next to an attractive red-head without a ring on her left hand. Pretending not to be aware of her, he reached for his book and held his stomach in. He'd forgotten that he'd stuck the letter in the book and it fell out and blew over to the girl's chair.

"Here, this is yours," she said sweetly, handing him the letter. "Looks important."

He grinned and took it from her tapered manicured hand and tried to look taller than he was. "Thanks. Don't think I know you. I'm Tom Hudson, apartment 17B."

"I'm Jody Emerson. Same building." She closed her eyes and the conversation was over—before it began. Tom took the envelope and opened it. No steam, just ripped away. It was too late to mail it now. Whoever it was intended for, would probably have forgotten who the heck it was who wrote it anyway. The writing was floral—no other way to put it. It looked like it was written by someone who signed the Declaration of Independence. Probably a hundred-year-old damsel, Tom surmised. But curiosity pushed him further. He read: "Dear Nick,

"Your call last night came as such a shock that I'm afraid I didn't respond as I should have. Of course, I have no hold on you. Just because we were together for a year and I refused any other offers to date, doesn't obligate you in any way to remain faithful to me. I only want your happiness and if that means another woman in your life, then I accept that. I'm sure one day I will meet someone who will appreciate me for who I am. The fact that you will never provide Allie with material things like she's used to, should not present a problem. After all, when her parents die, she'll be rich. Of course, they're only in their 50's and in good health, but you can always hope.

"I was surprised that you fell for Allie, since you always said she was too short to be attractive. I guess when you're sitting down...

"The only thing I want back from you is my Robert Goulet CD. You never liked him anyway, and it was a present from my sister years ago. Oh, and my Midsummer Night's Dream. It was my dad's and I doubt you would understand it.

"Funny, I thought I'd be devastated if this ever happened, but instead I feel relieved. Maybe because I knew down deep that you were a nut-case."

Tom broke out laughing. He looked self-consciously around, hoping no one heard him. The red-head stirred, but returned to her comatose position. He read on:

"Do me a favor and stay in Seattle. I've decided to find a little place here in West Chester and make a life for myself—without a man, or a woman, or a dog, for that matter. Then I can get fat and stay up until 2AM and watch my favorite Humphrey Bogart movie, if that's what I want. Yes, there are definitely rewards for being single.

"Best regards,

"Caitlin (Sellers – in case you had more than one Caitlin)"

He had to meet her. Just had to. He always tried to get Felicia to listen to his Goulet tape. Too much! He knew this girl, Caitlin whatever, he knew just what she was

like. Problem was, West Chester was small, but she'd be new here. Not even in the phone book yet. How would he find her? Sell Girl Scout cookies for an invisible niece? He picked up the letter again looking for clues. Maybe she lived in the house where he bought the comics, but that was weeks ago and he had no idea what house it was. He guessed it was High Street or was it Market? He'd have to figure a better way to find her. In the meantime, there was the redhead, Jody. She didn't appear too fascinated in him but he hadn't put on all his charm yet.

He 'accidentally' bumped the side of her chaise as he headed back to the pool for another dip. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

She sat up and he took a quick admiring glance at her curvaceous size 4 figure. Good thing for sunglasses, he thought as he continued. "Hot, isn't it?" Gosh, that was clever.

"Yeah. It is July, of course." She lifted the back of the chaise lounge and sat up, putting her own sunglasses on.

"Wanna take a dip?" *How original.*

"In a minute. I am getting sweaty." Tom liked the thought, but quickly averted his eyes and headed for the deep end. He attempted a smooth deep dive, but didn't quite make it. A large splash and a painful sting to the stomach later, he rose to the surface and finished swimming the length of the pool, afraid to look up. Before he turned, a golden brown red-head in a white one-piece bathing suit, skimmed to the surface next to him. Jody was even prettier wet. Her eye lashes glistened in the sun and her moist red mouth contrasted with her Colgate white teeth. To heck with Felicia. This was looking good.

After a few minutes swimming together, they got out of the pool and sat on the edge. Jody pointed her painted toes and splashed gently one leg at a time. Tom tried to look away, but her slim tan legs intrigued him.

"How about going out for pizza," he blurted, much to his own surprise.

"Why not?" She smiled at him and pulled her legs around facing him, with her arms surrounding them. "I'll have to change first."

After a few minutes they headed back to the apartment building. He stuffed the letter into his book and changed into shorts and a t-shirt. The evening ended too quickly and he was surprised at how easily he was able to forget Felicia.

The next three weeks, Tom and Jody spent every evening and week-end together. They got along so well that he figured he was in love—again. This time it was for real. The only problem was, he didn't know her. Oh, he knew what she looked like all right, and the sound of her voice, and what made her laugh, but he didn't know one single thing about her past or her passions. What books did she read? Did she read? What turned her on in the music line? Who did she vote for? Did she even vote? Then he wondered if any of that mattered. Something deep inside said it did, but he tried to ignore that voice.

One Saturday in September, Jody suggested they go out to dinner with friends of hers. Tom wasn't eager to oblige, preferring to skip dinner and just spend time in her apartment, but he figured it wouldn't hurt anything and maybe it would be nice to have a real conversation for once.

“And this is Jack and Caty.” Tom reached across the table as Jody’s friends sat down. Jack looked like he spent too much time in the gym. A strange choice for the petite blond girl, who looked like a character out of a BBC 19th century special. No make-up for this one and yet she had a fragile beauty with skin designed for pearls. Not the cheap kind, but the kind you dive for. Her blond hair curled loosely down her back. All the girls Tom knew spent hours straightening their hair and complained if the wind put a bend in it.

Jody and Jack ordered chili, Jody giggling over the amazing ‘coincidence’ in their choice, and Tom ordered a half-pound cheeseburger with fries. Caty ordered salad with a side of cottage cheese and looked wistfully around the room, commenting under her breath, that it was too noisy. No one paid any attention. The conversation went from baseball to college wrestling to sailing. The girls looked bored and had a side discussion on beading. Then Caty mentioned missing the whole season at the Academy of Music, practically crying as she spoke. Jody’s jaw dropped and she rolled her eyes at Jack, who snickered into his beer.

“Hey, I like that kind of music, too,” Tom said defensively. Caty looked over, seeing him for the first time—really seeing him.

“Do you go to symphonic concerts,” she asked, her hazel eyes widening.

“Yeah. And I like Shakespeare, too,” he said, looking deeply into her eyes.

“Wow.”

“You two are weird,” Jack remarked kindly, shaking his head. “Why don’t we go for a walk, Jody, and let these two high-brows discuss Bach and stuff.”

Jody looked over at Tom with lifted brows. “You don’t mind, do you, Tom?”

Before he could answer, Caty reached across the table and laid her hand on his. “Do you read?”

“Oh, he does,” Jody answered for him. “Too much, if you ask me.” Turning to Jack, she asked where he worked out. “I’ll bet you have marvelous abs,” she added, giving her sensual smile. Tom felt his hair bristle. Was he jealous or just mad?

“We’ll catch up with you later. We’ll have a second cup of coffee,” Tom said, stiffly.

“I’d rather have green tea, Tom, if that’s okay with you.”

“You’re kidding! I like tea, too, but I never order it out. Yeah. Waitress, a pot of green tea, please. No hurry.”

They never did catch up to Jack and Jody. And as they walked around the town, Tom asked Caty for her phone number. She reached in her bag and took out a business card. She worked for a decorator in town. He looked at her name. It was Caitlin Sellers. He smiled and took hold of her hand. “When we’re done walking, we can go back to my place and watch ‘Casablanca,’ if you’d like to.”

She stopped and stared at him for a full twenty seconds and then nodded and they walked on.