

BYRON TIMOTHY

Young Love, Old Lore Sample
Chapter

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Crash Course

Paul Masters set his orange juice down on the kitchen table and grabbed his coat. This time not getting it caught on the top of the chair which always frustrated him to no end whenever it happened. He looked at his watch: twenty minutes till first class, dammit! Now the big question, where were the keys? Counter! Wallet, books, homework?—hurry! He threw his books over his shoulder and raced outside. What about the dirty dishes? Ewwwwwwww...he climbed in the hormone-driven hot rod, reversed out of the driveway (squealing the tires of course) but not before banging his elbow on the emergency brake again. He frowned. Why's life such a pill all the time? The wheels screeched past one stop sign, then another, and through one stoplight without much traffic that left him feeling pretty good about himself. This strategy seemed to be working; he was actually proud of the time he was saving. Inside it smelled of polished leather, side doors carrying all the latest fit and finish with his firm hand on the steering wheel. This beauty made him stand out from the crowd. He was unique! He came to halt at a major intersection as the new tires grabbed the road in a

commanding fashion. There was power in this awesome beast and the engine pulsed with the rhythm of life in front of him. At first glance it didn't appear there was anybody coming from either direction. Look again? Ah, don't be chicken—the brave don't think twice! He saw his opportunity and sprang forth like a young buck in spring. At the same moment, Mrs. Jean Halston was inching out of her driveway in a pathetic excuse of an econobox car compared to the beast approaching without a care. The serene look on her face completely out of sync with what was about to happen.

She adjusted the rear view mirror to see behind more clearly. Slam! Oh my god! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

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Masters felt the impact and at first it was exhilarating—the sound striking him like a big budget action

Mrs. Halston stopped spinning. She looked at her hands, bloody and trembling, heart beating like no

Paul leaped out of the car and, seeing what he saw, wondered if his initial idea hadn't been wrong. T

high fives...really?). No movement could be seen in the car either and the old woman's position struck him as odd for somebody her age. He jumped out of his now creaking machine, eyes wider than planets, and dashed over to have a closer look. A sense of dread growing in his chest as the image became clearer and reality set in.

Masters stopped to catch his breath: blood was splattered copiously on her pink, flowered dress, below the neck and all down her left arm. Her head lay sickly to one side and her eyes were frozen in unimaginable pain. She looked dead, or so it seemed to the shocked boy standing there in awe of the fact. He was in some deep shit! Feeling like he wanted to scream, cry out or throw up! (Maybe all of the above?). Oh, god, let me turn back the clock a few minutes and undo what I did! There was no way he could reverse the damage, just one brief second and....

“Help! Help! Somebody help me...help her...help us!” But as he looked around there were already people gathering around the scene. They heard the loud crash and were just breaking out of the haze of everyday existence.

“Oh, my God!” an old man shouted, “It’s old Mrs. Halston, quick dear call an ambulance...,” directed at his wife who dashed into the house while looking back with a frantic expression on her face. “What on earth happened?” directed at the boy standing next to the car and peering inside in terror and disgust. “We better not move her since we don’t know what’s wrong yet.” He couldn’t tell what Paul was thinking but it looked like he wanted to do something, something perhaps unwise under the circumstances to rectify the situation in any way he could. “This is a dangerous corner...they should put a light there...I’ve been telling ‘em for years,” the old man confided in him before calling out her name numerous times to revive her. “Mrs. Halston? Mrs. Halston, can you hear me? Say something, will ya? Mrs. Halston?” Paul Masters glanced through the glass to glimpse the surreal world of injury and blood—how could something like this happen so fast? Wasn’t he someone who tried to do more good than bad in the world? (and wondered privately if he succeeded). Was he paying for something he’d done in his life—a form of cosmic justice perhaps? He wanted to say something in his own defense but the old man didn’t seem like the right person for the job. One thing was sure though: this was serious. He took a long breath, but the red hot poker in his brain wouldn’t disappear.

The old man kept making casual conversation with him but he didn’t hear any of it, his life was simply a blur at the moment. There was no way out of this mess and the more he thought about ways to soften the blow for himself, the more he realized

how impossible that would be. The old man said to him, “Look, her arm’s twitching a bit. Christ, she might make it! Mrs. Halston? Mrs. Halston? How’re you doing? Everything’s gonna be alright now...you just hang on...” She of course didn’t answer but it made him feel better to hear something positive.

Masters glanced at her hopefully, maybe it wasn’t so bad after all. Maybe things would be OK...Oh! Please God! The police arrived seconds later and began cordoning off the area as an ambulance whizzed onto the scene and began employing their medical devices. The extremity of the noise brought into Masters’ head a new idea: the consequences were real and beyond even his present understanding. He choked hard and steeled himself against a not-to-bright future...

“Son, I think she might be OK. By the way, why were you driving so fast down the street?” the old man admonished him while assessing what kind of man he was in a charming, old-time way. Masters mumbled offhandedly, “I was late for school...,” and realizing the way it must’ve sounded, “...and I didn’t see her...”

Just then a policeman approached and asked if he were the owner of the car that caused the accident. Caused? Did that really happen and was it wise to admit it to an officer? An act, if he consented, that could land him in dire consequences and even jail time in the worst case scenario. Might incriminate him on the spot and that’d be very bad to say the least, but was he guilty and was it prudent to admit it if he was? Doing the right thing now could land him in some serious hot water under the circumstances. So there he stood with the dilemma before him: admit he wasn’t paying attention to his driving and was only concerned with getting to school on time or lie and conceal as much as possible to save his skin.

“Son, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Yes, sir, I was driving the other car...” staring at the old woman being removed from the driver’s seat..., “I didn’t see her when pulling out....she came out of nowhere...” he choked off. She looked like a rag doll and visions of squashed cats on the road came to mind. He desperately wanted to scream and run away but felt that might be bad move under the circumstances. The overall impression might not be a favorable one. He killed someone, or might’ve, but at the same time understood his protection against self-incrimination under law.

“The old lady’s going to hospital with multiple injuries, she may die as a result and several witnesses fingered you as the cause of it. They claim you were really moving down this tiny little street...” to emphasize the point, the officer turned to glance up and down the road at the trail of broken parts then looked at him sharply. “You’ll have to come with us for booking and questioning to get to the bottom of this...” and with that another officer pinned his hands behind his back, not roughly in any way, and lead him to the police cruiser.

Masters protested, “I didn’t try to hit her...I was simply trying to get to school.” The officer smirked cynically before turning around and driving in the direction of the station. His expressionless partner beside him didn’t turn around at all sending a chill down Masters’ spine. He fell back in the seat and turned to look out the rear window where the old woman’s car was twisted and smashed against the curb, flipped over on its side and pitiful-looking. The image of the old woman being fussed over by the EMTs and whisked away in an ambulance moments before stuck in his head with a burning sensation. Something was trembling on his lips, “I didn’t mean it...I’m so sorry...” but couldn’t utter the words as they’d somehow lost

the power to persuade even himself. When they arrived at the station, Masters was yanked from the car in a stumbling and catatonic state with eyes wide from the situation as he gazed upon the ominous barred windows of the county building: gray, rusty, peeling and decrepit like an old coat in the street, deepening his sense of fear and loathing of the situation. He wondered what his friends were doing at school now and envied them—probably half asleep in class, oblivious and unaware of the bad things that happen to people sometimes—lucky bastards! He knew he'd have to call one of them sooner or later to get him out of here...but which one of those knuckleheads?

A sour-looking officer with a blank expression greeted him on the other side of a locked door, taking him by the arm and handling him like an object. The arresting officer remarked, “book this one for reckless driving and possible manslaughter... an old lady’s at the hospital and four witnesses on the scene fingered him as the cause. He’ll probably be released in the morning but let’s do our duty anyway.”

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“Drunk, drugs?” droned the receiving officer.

“Don’t think so...” the other replied, “...don’t suppose he was trying to be negligent either, just not paying attention—in too much of a hurry I suppose—but the smash up was real bad! You should’ve seen it!”

The long booking procedure, including fingerprinting and photo modeling, seemed endless and in the end found him in a grimy cell the size of a small bedroom. Three other companions were there to keep him company: one a teenager, busted for drunk driving who wouldn’t stop talking; another, a middle-aged married man nailed for prostitution who acted like a ladies man and tried to enforce a humorous angle to his own

situation; another seemed to be a career criminal from his obvious reluctance to talk about himself or change his scowling expression. After a few hours he'd learned all their names: Jonah, Clarence and Tanzania (the career criminal, presumably a made-up "street" name).

Tanzania informed them, "Dese pigs round here ain't nothing compared to upstate..." in a low, conspiring voice; as if the politics of correctional facilities were of major importance in life. "Betta' not let 'em send you up there or they'll frag your ass everyday!" Masters listened without particular interest to him; it sounded like the ravings of a downtrodden man. Still he was willing to admit fragging didn't sound very good whatever the hell it was. The "John" who solicited the prostitute browbeat them all with levity toward everything they said and talked the most out of anyone it seemed—understandably embarrassed and perhaps so averse to anyone talking behind his back he did all the talking himself. Masters noted that anyone who slept with hookers was not only a degenerate but took incredible chances with his life: primarily with STDs like AIDS (though, truth be told, he might've taken greater ones with random pickups in Boston).

The kid busted for drunk driving slurred a lot and cursed abundantly throughout the morning. His buzz was wearing off and the unpleasantness of his situation—in addition to what he'd already been through—increased his irritation. He was genuinely terrified of what his parents would say and what the courts might do to him; feeling that his days of "getting away with things" were over for a little while at least. He wasn't sure which one was worse as he kept cursing his friends for not being there to help him.

Masters was soon brought before another officer who ques-

tioned him for an hour about the accident. The officer bombarded him with questions but Paul stated he wouldn't say anything until his lawyer arrived because he was leery of incriminating himself. He sat staring at an old, beat-up table in front of him and wondered what this experience might make him look like in the end...like that table? He appealed to the officer, "Am I in a lot of trouble?"

The officer stared at him blankly, "I don't know..." loo King down at his work again without skipping a beat, "...that's up to the courts." The officer went on flipping through a stack of forms in front of him then went about his work again, "So you won't talk? I thought you might make this difficult...I can always tell about people." Then cryptically winked at Paul, as if to say, "It's not so bad kid, cheer up!" Not giving him the third degree which allowed Paul a much-needed deep breath.

It occurred to him that it might all just be formality and perhaps he wasn't in as much trouble as he thought. He looked at his watch: four hours since the accident and even now he was beginning to feel a strong sense of relief. He'd already passed through the worst of the shock of what seemed like a life-changing event. Guilt hadn't left him entirely and he was still worried the old lady might die, but the whole experience seemed more manageable now. Something about the way he'd dealt with the interrogating officer and the way the officer buckled so easily changed his entire outlook. He might survive if he stayed strong and silent. He examined the battered walls and faded gray paint around him and it felt part of him now and him, it. He'd never killed anyone from just being careless before and he began really shuffling through various scenarios about what might happen to him in the long run.

"What if she died?" he said to himself, "He'd be a murderer..."

albeit an unintentional one, but still a murderer...he'd been foolish, not paying attention, something he couldn't undo now no matter what he did or how sorry he was. The silence of the room weighed heavily on him. He wanted something to happen even if it were bad just to distract his wild and uncontrollable thoughts. Waiting around not knowing what was going to happen next was the hardest part and filled his head with all sorts of unpleasant ideas.

The interrogating officer came back after awhile and said his lawyer was ready to talk to him now. "Follow me," he belted out. Masters didn't smile as he followed the man because he was too absorbed in thought.

The lawyer was seated in a small and slightly less depressing room with a comparatively polished appearance. The lawyer was blond, handsome and rich judging from the expensive-looking watch, fine leather briefcase and "metro-sexual" appearance. The man gazed at him casually as someone who'd listened to millions of the world's most shocking confessions without becoming shocked or losing composure. He was too casual of manner for Paul's taste and he felt himself being sized up as he entered the room. The briefcase Paul saw next to the lawyer's chair seemed in perfect alignment with his sterile professionalism.

"Good afternoon, Paul, would you prefer to take this to another room? This one's a bit disgusting and not at all conducive to having a pleasant chat. A police escort's waiting for us outside if you promise not to cause any trouble..." The lawyer's meek and appeasing voice was contrary to initial appearances.

"Of course...I won't do anything," Masters chuckled in an easy manner while following on his heels. His spirits lifted by a

renewed sense that the old lady might live. If not, why would everyone act so chummy and familiar toward him? Another side of him wondered if that favorable notion were true or just a product of wishful thinking—dismissing that thought on principle alone seconds later because it scared him. When they arrived at the new room, Masters found it much cheerier and figured he'd been brought there out of consideration for the lawyer's comfort more than his own.

The lawyer looked at his watch somberly because apparently time itself had placed restrictions upon their activities and fates, "OK, how did it happen? Were you speeding at the time? Looking the other way, perhaps?" He got quickly down to business after formalities were out of the way. The lawyer put on his glasses with a blank evaluative look and removed a group of papers from his briefcase. "What we need to do now is work out how to approach your case," he said, covering his chin with his hand and casting his glance down at the paper stream before him."

"I didn't expect to see anyone coming down the street...I was in a hurry and well, she happened to be there..." The lawyer glanced up and locked his gaze with Masters who took it was an accusation; he went back on the defensive, "...It was completely unintentional, I was trying to get to school and wasn't paying attention..." He felt he'd given too much of a confession at the start and the lawyer's gaze was merciless.

He admitted, "That's not very promising on your behalf, but a lot depends on what happens to the old lady, whether she survives or not..." The lawyer flipped through some papers in front of him, trying to soften the remark with destructive actions. Something in the lawyer's tone made Masters shudder, like a warning too serious to be ignored. He wasn't sure what

attitude to strike, how to mount his charge, his defense, in a way that would appease everyone and get him out of trouble. What defense would sound plausible to a jury of his peers in court?

“I’ll give it some thought, it’s gonna take some time to put the right spin to it,” the lawyer said soothingly, making Masters distinctly uncomfortable.

To which Paul replied point-blank: “Sir, do you think there’s any chance of me getting into *serious* trouble over this?” “serious” being a kind of code word directed at his expertise. The lawyer stopped what he was doing and sighed softly without loo King up; visibly weary at being asked the same question over and over again.

“Let’s go through it all first. See what we got. We’ll go do our best in any case...,” the lawyer assured him, “Go on about the accident, what street were you on? Where’d you hit her and so on? Facts. How fast were you going and did you look before pulling out?”

Masters began to arrange and formulate his thoughts into coherent streams, something he’d been reluctant to do before. Though, he had wondered previously whether the best course of action would be to lie to protect himself or whether doing so might actually make things worse. “I was heading up Fosterville Street, that’s where I live, to school....late as usual, of course, and wasn’t thinking so clearly...well, she just came out of nowhere, didn’t even see her, not even sure she saw me...” (that was it, he stumbled upon something, it was her fault or partly so!). “She’s old and maybe she didn’t see me,” he repeated irrelevantly. It was her fault or both of theirs, why didn’t he think of it before? Brilliant, she was old, and perhaps a little careless herself!

The lawyer kept scribbling without pause, leaving Paul not knowing what to expect from him—some dramatic battle of wills or skepticism (?) but there was nothing to match his newfound valor and it annoyed him beyond belief. This was different than those criminal dramas he'd seen on TV, less “sudden”, “impactful” and “high-pitched” he said to himself.

“Did you notice whether she was loo King or not?” A light turned brighter and brighter in Master's head: an opportunity to protect himself. It seemed reasonable to do whatever one could to avoid trouble—even fudging the truth in some cases—wasn't life a struggle for survival? In all honesty to himself, *had* he seen her at all? He searched his memory hoping he could draw some sort of life-saver out of it.

“I didn't see her when I pulled out...,” feeling a bit foolish making such an honest confession but lying could be harder to justify in the long run if witnesses or facts ultimately contradicted what he was saying; a problem he thought might arise if he fudged his story too much. If caught lying, everything he said from then on would be suspect (a fact, he was smart enough to realize, that could be dangerous in legal situations). Might even cause him to suffer public disgrace in addition to having more trouble with the law. After the bottomless pit he seemed to have fallen into this morning, being honest felt like the only possible way out.

“All things considered, I think we might be able to get you off on a judgment of mutual negligence or fault as long as there isn't an overabundance of witnesses claiming you were speeding or driving carelessly. That could pose a problem for us...other than that we might be alright (Masters reluctantly felt the “we” comforting)...provided she doesn't die.”

“God, I hope not...,” Masters said breathlessly.

Masters found himself out and on the street that evening after an infusion of cash from his dad to the lawyer and a remarkably peaceful slumber in a cell. The lawyer did just what he said he'd do. What a guy! The first thing he did was head to Burger King to get some "real food" (though calling Burger King real food was a stretch even for his overactive imagination). Oh well...another lost day of youth in which he'd have to catch up in school!

He thought about the old lady as he was chomping on a French fry and a pang of guilt struck him while wearing the odd ketchup blot on his face. He licked it off and prayed the old woman wouldn't die; slurping his drink slowly and carefully. What if she simply ended up paralyzed or something like that? Could he be sued for a lot of money or sent to jail for a very long time? He marveled how split-second occurrences could be irreversible in life and spread out as far as the future could see. He shuddered, "My god, I practically killed an old lady by not paying attention...rushing to get to school like I did! Now I'm in deep, *deep* shit..." Marveling at his own stupidity and realizing his conscience wouldn't let go of that for a long while.

His phone rang, "Hey, man, you alright? How the hell are you? I thought dey was gonna hang you, man! Can't believe it—an old lady—shit! That's crazy! What *were* you thinking, dude?" Alex was a fast talker who said too many things or asked many questions in single rapid bursts. It usually annoyed Paul to no end but now the pace of it was distracting and invigorating, drawing him out of himself.

"I'm fine, but I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. It sucked a lot."

"Dude, what did she look like after you hit her? Was she all fucked up or what? Was it *super gross*?"

Alex's "way" with words (or lack thereof) and bluntness of speech always surprised Paul and made him laugh; the casual way he'd say the crudest of things as if it were completely natural to do so. It was "guyishly" outrageous in his opinion he guessed. With his slick and casual manner about everything, Alex was entertaining in a constantly funny and embarrassing way: on the topics of women, grades, drinking and now...personal tragedy.

"She didn't look good, Alex...might die, though I pray she doesn't or they'll throw me in prison."

"The right place for you, I've always said that! It's where you belong. You ruffian!" with obvious humor that wasn't entirely well-received on Paul's part.

Paul laughed out loud without fully knowing whether it was strictly from discomfort and embarrassment on his part. His friend's cockiness always made him feel awkward and the only way he knew how to respond was by laughing emphatically. He often thought about hanging up on Alex when he acted this way at inopportune moments—pretending there was a bad connection or something—but, so far, never dared it. He knew he'd catch hell at some point in the future for it. He imagined Alex's face, the strong jaw, the wavy and too long Zeppelin hair, athletic frame, the mocking smile with the permanent sneer and asked himself (again) why he remained friends with such a person.

"You too!" Paul replied in his usual appeasing tone.

"Good thing she was just an old lady with one foot in the grave. No one'll care much about her..." Alex—the worldly-wise twenty-two year old party animal—assured him.

Masters frowned; that was too much but he chuckled anyway to keep his old friend happy. "What's wrong with you exactly?"

I can't believe you'd say that about an old lady...I don't know about you, sometimes...you're an idiot!"

"I don't know either..." was the giggling and unconcerned response, "...so what'd she look like? Bloody and gross? Woooooooooah, lighten up there, buddy! Just trying to cheer you up!" Alex had a way of always interpreting his actions in a selfless way as he spoke profanely about serious matters in their lives...but, again, he was a "friend". "It's not your fault there's too many old fossils on the road!" he added.

"Alright, but it was probably my fault, I wasn't paying attention at the time."

"Yeah? That's nothing new!" Alex laughed at him; giving him a verbal nudge. "You never pay attention to anything in normal life! Certainly not in class!" Paul didn't react for several seconds making Alex burst out laughing. Paul chuckled along halfheartedly while hoping to get rid of Alex as quickly as possible because this particular interaction was just getting annoying. He actually felt a vague sense of hate growing in his gut toward his friend. Meanwhile, the idea he'd entertained in the past about cutting off all relations with his "old pal" was becoming harder and harder to keep in the back of his mind.

Alex was a friend but way too many times Paul was forced to ask himself what sort of privileges that title afforded. "You're right, I don't do that most of the time but I definitely should've on this occasion!" And to feed his friend's overactive imagination he went into greater detail, "Her head flopped over in a really grotesque way like her neck was broken or something and her dress was absolutely covered in blood. It was super, *super* gross, man!" Hoping to evoke a serious and sincere reaction in his friend.

"Indeed! Indeed! You're a one-man wrecking crew, dude! It

must've been an effin' hideous sight though! Too bad you didn't have your camera with you..." he chuckled and verbally nudged him again, "...but, seriously, I hope you don't get in trouble over this—be a major inconvenience to visit you in jail."

"They wouldn't let you out if you visited jail! They'd know a future felon when they saw one!" Paul saw an opportunity to go on the offensive banter-wise. "Anyway, who'd want you to come? You'd only depress me further. I don't like seeing your ugly mug now...I sure as hell wouldn't want to then. The only bright spot about going to jail would be getting a vacation from your sorry ass..." placing the last nail in Alex's wise ass coffin.

"Well, I'm glad that's all settled and there's a silver lining to it all," both laughing and basking in each other's cleverness. "Well, let me know what happens as it happens, will you bud? Keep me posted. Talk to you later..." hanging up abruptly on Paul. He finished his drink and vacated the bright yellow and plastic-coated table, preparing to walk the mile-and-a-half home. First thing he needed was to secure some new wheels but how was he going to do that? Borrow his mom's car? Rent one? He certainly didn't want to have to walk everywhere from now on, that was *too* embarrassing.

At home he switched on the TV and grabbed a beer to take his mind off things for awhile; ten minutes later falling asleep on the sofa and not waking til one of those chatty and giggly variety shows invaded his mental space. The ones that seem to pop up all over TV stations like rabid weeds in a cornfield. He lifted his head and rubbed the side of his face, squinting at the source of his distress: a group of sideshow freaks keeping up a feverishly yapping pace to avoid being exposed for what they were—jackasses and circus performers—bread and circuses to be exact. At least that's how it seemed before full-blown

conscious awareness, cultural customs and socialization set in. He grabbed the remote and switched it off; turning on the radio instead. He was in luck! His go-to music station was playing a great song by *Defcon One* about killing your lover when she tried to leave you for someone else—so cool! At first he got excited remembering how he loved the unique guitar bits and the singer’s powerful and alluring voice. He even returned to the living room with the coffee pot still in hand to turn it up. Then images of the old lady drifted into his thoughts without warning, his hand still on the knob...he stopped...could this be a bad omen? Listening to a song about death and destruction now? Wasn’t it tempting fate a bit to be too casual about such matters when he himself might be guilty of them?

The line..., “She caused me pain, now it’s her turn to feel the same—BITCH!” rang in his head as the old lady’s battered and bruised face mingled with the singer’s voice in a sickening way; blood on that old lacy print dress of hers (imagining himself as the killer with knife standing over her). He switched the radio off and let his hand remain on the dial for a few seconds—thinking, exhaling and loo King out the bay window with heavy eyes.

He went into the kitchen to finish making his coffee—extra strong ‘cause he needed it he told himself. Then switching on the TV and checking his phone messages, his “on-again-off-again” girlfriend Sandy had called and said to call her as soon as possible—it was apparently on-again from the fullness of her tone. Ahhhhhhh...his queen was there to comfort him in his time of need! He should be so unlucky! First reaction was to call her right away and obtain some comfort from the cool waters of her sympathy and varying levels of soothing, tender care. But something made him stop: was that a fair description

of his “love”? She was after all “on-again-off-again” by his own description of her; and why was he wasting his time with her if that were the case? Especially if she couldn’t offer any real female consolation at times like this. Oh, Lord! Is life truly meaningless (he asked Zeus in the clouds)? Too many questions for the time being; too much thought, just call the bimbo back already.

“Hello?” said a charming (and strangely purring) voice over the phone; thrilling him and making him nervous at the same time, “Paul?”

“Hey baby...how are you? I’m out—I’m free!”

“Yes, I know...” she said too casually for his own taste; damping his enthusiasm. “What happened?”

“Oh! It was crazy...thought they were going to put me away for good, honey. Treated me like a friggin’ criminal and everything...”

“Poor thing,” she said in her best “princess-sympathizing-with-the-unfortunates-in-the-kingdom” manner, “What about the woman you got in the accident with? What happened to her?”

“I was gonna call the hospital later to see how she’s doing but I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. A lot depends on that...whether she makes it or not...” gloomily.

“What in god’s name did it look like when they took her away?”

“Awful! Absolutely like nothing like you’ve ever seen before—hope I never have to see it again either—grossest thing imaginable...”

“Crazy! Sorry to hear that, Paul...,” coming off sincere for a change; her fortress of majesty penetrated if only for the moment, “...are you very upset over this?”

"I'll be okay when I find out she's still alive...I mean even if she's just paralyzed or something, could be rough going for awhile in legal terms..."

"Could they lock you up for something like that? I mean after all,

she's old and probably senile or something like that, isn't she?" said in unwavering support of her man of the moment.

"I suppose that might be true, though I don't think all of 'em are senile per se..." thinking of his own grandmother; and uncertain about taking full comfort in Sandy's dubious "support" or the implications of what she was saying. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

"Nothing, just eating a snack and fixing my hair...you wanna get together later?"

"Certainly!" said Paul a little too eagerly; he was always too eager with her and sensed it might become a problem later in their relationship. "What'cha have in mind, babe...?" cringing and thinking he sounded as if he were trying too hard to be slick (relieved he couldn't be seen).

"Hmmm.....I don't know—haven't made up my mind yet. Can I call ya later?"

He felt a sudden need to take charge in the relationship and show some backbone for a change or risk losing her respect—and perhaps even a little of his own—sensing he was being taken too lightly. "Is there some reason you can't make up your mind now? What about dinner tonight?"

"OK," she sighed in feigned reluctance, "Where to...?" realizing he was being played to get the best deal. Now he had to come up with an impressive offer to lure the princess out from behind her boudoir. It bothered him, at times, being set-up this way by her as well as some of their mutual friends (if they

were friends at all). He felt like he wanted to explode at them sometimes but hadn't done it yet.

"I don't know, some place not overly expensive, this thing's bound to set us back a bit—we had to hire a lawyer," throwing himself on her mercy at this point.

"Well, you can't expect me to go through all the trouble of making myself up if it isn't worth my time, dear...", she protested gently but firmly; making it seem self-evident. "You understand how I feel...I hope that doesn't sound uncaring or selfish!" With Paul thinking, 'No, it sounds like "the usual" where you're concerned.'

"Of course, I want you to be happy above all else," he groaned softly ("and not too demandingly," to himself), "Where would you like to go?"

"Hmmm...there's a thought...", she said as if taking it under serious consideration and becoming a child of wonder on cue. "What about the new restaurant on Juniper Street? The Italian place—you know the one!" with admirable enthusiasm under trying circumstances.

Yeah, I know the one, I've passed it once or twice," casually; thinking only about how expensive it looked from the outside. "OK, what time?"

"7:30? Sound good? You can pick me up here."

"Uh...honey pie, I just cracked up my car, remember?...but if you don't mind I can drop by and pick you up on my skateboard..."

"Oh, you're so funny...", she giggled like a pre-teen, "...that's what I love about you. So, I guess I'll have to go pick you up around 8:00 then? Sound good?" Then she had a thought (a rare one): "What are you going to do in the future about getting around?"

“I don’t know, I thought I’d just rely on you for a while, depends on whether my mom lets me use hers or not. If she doesn’t I suppose I’ll get a rental car or something and try to make the insurance company pay for it...”

“Will they if the accident’s your fault? I’m assuming because they arrested you, uh...”

“And you’re right...the cops seem to think I caused it and I hope the insurance company *will* pay for it. I know they’re gonna raise my rates to the moon!”

“Of course they will—they always do—I hate insurance companies!”

“My mom and dad’ll give me the bawling out of my life, too. Can’t wait for that one! It’s no secret how careless I am. “Same old Paul...” they’ll say, “...he’s done it again! That stupid kid!”

“They’re always so hard on you...though my parents are just as bad in a different way. All parents are that way to a certain extent or they wouldn’t be real parents I guess.”

“Either they’re too hard on me or I’m just an incredible screw-up—one or the other or both—the jury’s still out on that. But I’ll work it out in some way, I always do...” said in order to end the conversation quickly (he hated long phone conversations especially with Sandy who could, without warning, enter into a sudden and never-ending ramble).

“8:00 then?”

“Alright, so what should I wear tonight on this special occasion?” she asked before he could escape; making him cringe as he thought he was free from further interrogation. He always hated that question—placed in an uncomfortable position and subject to harsh criticism if the answer were judged to be inadequate. She looked good in anything according to him but he couldn’t say that to her. Sandy was a knockout!

Yes, and he was lucky to have her—others reminded him of it on a daily basis usually with a nudge and wink—his friends, who also asked embarrassing questions in private (usually drunk and lacking any verbal filter) about how she was in the sack or what she looked like without any clothes on. He reflected on this along with their whirlwind six-month relationship which, at first, was wonderful: they were in love, blindly, stupidly and completely. They went everywhere and saw everything together—it didn't matter what—and lost themselves in each other's steamy, dreamy companionship. Everyday was fresh and exciting and full of possibilities. Then all of a sudden (and without warning) life became rigid and routine. Everything changed. They felt compelled to play roles in what was popularly termed, "commitment"; in part due to socially suggestive influences and messages interpreted independently and without collaboration (perhaps part of the problem) in society's gender expectations. She began to view him as an entirely different person: a stranger who needed to change his behavior in every conceivable way to fit her image of a boyfriend. Dress differently to be acceptable to girls on the street and random restaurant hostesses. Meanwhile, he started to view her as elusive, distant, brooding at times... spacey, demanding and withdrawn. Defensive and critical, too. Sometimes she peered at him sideways, strangely and suspiciously, or stared at him out of the corner of her eye, making him uncomfortable.

They also began arguing much more than before, certainly more than in the first few months which stressed Paul to no end. He sensed their relationship was on the rocks but feared bringing up the subject because it might precipitate a break-up. In any case, he better say something quickly now:

“Everything looks good on you...,” he assured her, settling on the safe bet. To which she instantly replied (patronizingly), “Oh, I don’t know why I put up with you, you’re no help at all!” He noted her gentle chiding of him had become more frequent too—and more needling of his personality; something he couldn’t defend himself against without appearing overly sensitive or “emotionally unavailable”.

“Well, I don’t wanna tell you what to wear, hon...you know I don’t know anything about women’s clothes...” he whined to his own surprise; hoping to appear lenient and liberal and realizing his status as a boyfriend was at stake over a damn fashion choice!

“You have so little good taste...,” she sighed all too dramatically for his money (an indictment Paul was distinctly proud of), “...pick you up later...*caveman*...” she bristled unseriously.

“Sure thing, princess...” doing his best Bogart. He laid the phone down and tried consciously *not* to explore the implications of their most recent conversation. Having a vague sense of too many doors opening up in his mind and pondering where they might lead if he allowed himself to be carried away on that train of thought. He had a sudden terror of the unknown and, being young and concerned in pleasure for its own sake, refused to take the initiative to find out what that meant. His mother came home an hour later and caught him sitting on the sofa in the same position waiting to be picked up. Before he noticed her, she had the chance to examine her troublesome offspring without his awareness and caught a glimpse of a boy who was certain to be a continued source of pain in her life. The dead giveaway was his supreme contentment at the entertainment value offered by a snickering and tittering teenage video/ variety show.

“So, I see you’re out...” with a cold and scrutinizing eye cast distastefully over her shoulder—carrying a couple bags and dropping them on the counter with a thud. “What’ve you been doing all day?”

“Nothing...just thinking...I’m still in shock.”

She emptied the bags into the cupboards with incredible difficulty as he inquired with hope, “Got any cookies for me?”

“No, I forgot...” she said without turning around and revealing a look of immense sorrow on her face. “I had more important things on my mind like what happened to you...”

“Yeah, I know...” he said shamefully, “...I was about to call the hospital to see how the old woman was doing but I was concerned how I might look, how to go about it, and what to say. I figured it might be better to wait...”

“Afraid you might make things worse?”

This forced him to reflect on what he’d done along with a lot of other things that led up to it, “You know me too well. I’m sure that sounds irresponsible to you...” glaring at the TV as if it were the source of his problem or salvation.

“Well maybe you can do that tomorrow. In fact, you should do it—first thing!—your future depends on what happens to that old woman. Let’s hope you haven’t killed her for god’s sake—what were you thinking by the way?” unable to contain a fit of sobbing on the counter in fear and frustration (her feelings had become rapidly shifting of late). A couple of food items fell on the floor with a jarring crash.

“Damn it!” covering her mouth.

“Mom, lemme help you...” running over and kneeling down to pick the things up for her, “...I know how idiotic I am at times and how much pain I’ve caused you—stupid, that’s what I am...hopeless...”

She gazed back at him with nothing but hope, “I love you no matter what you do or what happens to you...,” touching his face tenderly while he was up close, “...I just wish my faith wasn’t tested so often. I’m not a young woman anymore, you know, this stuff takes its toll on me. Grow up—please!—for everyone’s sake—including your own. OK, I’ve said my peace...now, tell me what happened...”

“Nothing out of the ordinary as far as my life goes Mom...,” with his back turned to her while placing a bunch of cans on the shelves with effort, “...rushing to get to class on time and not paying attention to oncoming traffic as I should’ve been. I’d be the first to admit it, otherwise it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Well, obviously it did. Unfortunately it might turn out to be a mistake that you’ll have to pay for ten times over my son—the fatal flaw that unravels the entire machinery if you will...,” recalling and paraphrasing a quote from somewhere. “You’ll smarten up one of these days I hope.”

“I’m so impatient I simply can’t control my erratic impulses at times...they’re always going in opposite directions at once! I’m totally scatterbrained and because of it I didn’t see her,” with his chin nearly on the floor by now.

“Well, maybe it wasn’t entirely your fault—I mean the only reason they arrested you is because she got injured more than you did, right? Might be a case of both parties being at fault at the same time. The only thing to do now is think positively about it when you’re uncertain of the outcome. Naturally they had to haul you in, in case she died or became crippled or something like that. They couldn’t have you skipping town to avoid prosecution if it came to that. It’s just too bad you’re stuck in this situation on this, such an otherwise uneventful day...”

“No shit!—*sorry*—how do I get out of it? I could be in for some deep shit!”

“Well, that may not be up to you,” she suggested.

“What do you mean?”

“The old lady, remember? Your future depends on whether she survives or not. If something happens to her, well...it could be an enormous tragedy for all of us.”

He couldn't say anything as a series of undesirable thoughts ran riot through his head. “I'm definitely gonna call tomorrow and find out whether she's OK to see when and *if* I can start breathing again...feel like I'm suffocating in a noose.”

“I know and I'm sorry. You must feel awful about this but I'm glad you're going to see her...,” as if she'd been waiting to hear that. “You know we'll get through this as we always do, as we've gotten through everything else...” (alluding to the problems they'd gone through in the past with poor grades and frequent fighting at school—a pregnant girlfriend complete with a lot of shabby, gut-wrenching scenes over that—along with the occasional foray into drugs and alcohol and consequent brushes with the law. Some “brushes” being more like backbreaking massages from Sumo wrestlers than others. This latest, however, was the worst).

“I don't know how you put up with me sometimes, mom,” he said hugging and kissing her tearfully. “I'm such a bad son...a complete disappointment to you.”

“No...,” becoming defiant (and mad) all of a sudden, “...you're a tortured and sensitive spirit squirming within the confines of a cold and merciless world—that's all! It's all a terrible dilemma for your generation to face and especially for someone like you. I get it!”

“Well, mom, I wouldn't place all the blame on my generation

or even me for that matter—what do you mean by all that?—I’ve certainly done enough to bury myself three times over in this life, you know that...” feeling even more ashamed when she felt the need to make excuses for him.

She didn’t respond right away...then, “Ultimately, if you learn from this experience we’ll call it a deal, aw’right?—I still love you and I know your father does in spite of the way he acts sometimes—”

He gazed at her lovingly and longingly as she kissed him. “I know he’s been hard on you, but that’s the way he is, the way a lot of men are toward their sons...” she explained solidly. “I sincerely hope you don’t become like him someday...” with an oddly worried smile.

“That isn’t very high praise of dad’s virtues,” he laughed.

“Maybe not, but he’s still your father...try not to forget that.”

“Have you told him about the accident?”

“He’s not happy as you might imagine...wants to send you off to a military school or force you into the army somehow. You know how he is. He was furious!” displaying a resigned little twist of her mouth.

“God! He’s so old-fashioned...” Paul laughed nervously, “...as long as he doesn’t kick me out of the house—which I know he wants to do!”

“I’ll talk to him to try to get him to ease up on you as much as I can but I can’t guarantee anything. Are you going out tonight?”

“Yes.”

“With *her*?”

“Yes, *mom*—with *her*!—why do you always talk about Sandy like she’s some kind of disease or something? You know how much I care about her and it seems like you’ve made no attempt to like her or even get to know her...” marveling at being placed

in the position of defending someone who, only hours ago, he entertained similar doubts about.

“I know her well enough, *her kind* I guess you could say, and I think I’ve made it plain enough how I feel about her. Let’s leave it at that for now...”

“As long as you don’t say anything mean to her when she comes over tonight...”

“She’s coming *here?*” unable to stop herself before the outburst came right out.

“Mom, that’s exactly what I’m talking about!”

“I won’t say anything...have I ever said anything mean to her before?”

“No! Thank god! And I’d like it to keep it that way if you don’t mind—we have enough problems without anything else adding to them. I just wish you’d try to get along with her is all.”

“I have a feeling that’s just the beginning of your problems where she’s concerned,” very cynically. “If you want my opinion she’s gonna break your heart into a thousand pieces. She’s just playing with you like she plays with everyone—*with all men*—she doesn’t care a wick about you or anyone else...”

“How do you like that? My mother, the clairvoyant! Maybe we should break out the Tarot cards and find out what else is in my *predetermined* future according to the stars!...you ought to take this show on the road—*really*—or at least around the tearful circus of “*mea culpa*” New Age shows like “Umprah” gracing our TV screens these days! What gets me most is my own mother doesn’t think I’m good enough to date a beautiful woman!”

“Oh, you’re always so dramatic! A princess is what she is I tell you—,” she scoffed, “—and a parasite, not a girl, loo King

for a free ride in life. She'll get it too at anyone and everyone's expense! But it won't be what she expects because nothing comes without a price and she's too young to understand that. She'll do her best to avoid the pitfalls or, at least, she thinks she'll be able to. I'm a woman and I know her kind all too well because the same types have existed in every generation, believe me, and nothing changes down through the years. Certainly not the universal and eternal aspects of human behavior. I can already envision her as a bitter old woman who's been burned too many times from an overwhelming desire to get everything in life for free..."

Fortunately..." he protested blindly, "...she's not yet old or bitter and I still think you're wrong!" with too much acrimony in his voice. She gazed into his eyes long and searchingly: for understanding, recognition, strength of will perhaps, but saw only one thing: wishful thinking. "Hope springs eternal," she reminded herself; realizing her son was in too deep and doomed to suffer this time...that much was "written in the stars". However, romantic heartbreak wasn't the worst thing that could happen to him she reasoned.

"You can think whatever you want but I still say she's gonna break your heart someday. Of course, I hope it doesn't happen but that's how I envision things playing out for you two..."

"I still say you don't know her and you haven't even attempted to do so; though I certainly appreciate where you're coming from. I'm not blind to her faults, she's flighty and unpredictable, irresponsible and shallow, but that's part of her character, her charm, her style to me now..." said as if still trying to convince himself.

"Some charm and personality..." his mother said with a faint hissing sound, "...and that's exactly what I'm afraid of—her

charm! Good for charming the pants off a beggar or a wise man out of his wits!” He gaped at her speechless a moment, realizing she was right (and relentless!); wanting to offer some sort of resistance to change the reality of the situation or at least win the argument, but failing miserably on both counts.

“Then for my own sake I hope you’re wrong because I’m crazy about this stupid girl in ways I don’t fully understand and in spite of the fact I don’t like or respect her all the time...”

“I guess that’s another problem your generation has to face with so many shallow, narcissistic people in it...,” she explained with a certainty Paul didn’t fully grasp the significance of, “...I mean even the way you described her to me says it all, doesn’t it? Hey, listen, I don’t mean to upset you in any way, you’ll be alright no matter what happens...” squeezing his shoulder and embracing him. “Don’t want to give you the impression you won’t. Believe me...,” kissing his forehead and loo King into his eyes sympathetically. She was tempted to impart the added wisdom that girls of *Sandy’s* sort tended to exploit their beauty and sex appeal to get what they want from men while leaving them high and dry in the end, or broke, bitter and unhappy with life, but thought it best to wait on that one.

At dinner with Sandy that night, his mother’s warnings returned with a vengeance and began playing over and over in his head like a tasteful video montage. He was unable to prevent the loop tape from whispering subversive messages to his brain. In fact, the persistent buzz kept going through dinner allowing him to drift away from Sandy’s endless banter and into deep self-reflection unnoticed. It was too much of a strain listening to her without some sort of “firewall” protecting his brain anyway...and she could keep it up all night! He was equally dumbfounded by all the things men go through in order

to satisfy their carnal urges. I mean did he really need this mindless chatterbox in his life to feel joy?

A brief example of what Paul had been listening to over the past few hours could be found in the whiney, “Can you believe what she said to me?” (to which he correctly assumed she expected no answer) and “Oh my god, I honestly don’t know what’s wrong with her! She’s such a bitch and her new boyfriend is such a jerk that it makes me wonder what she’s thinking sometimes (Paul meanwhile was wondering what Sandy was thinking if anything at all)...have they gone insane or is it just me? They need a reality check if you ask me!” said with all the acute and naive certainty of early 20s armchair psychotherapy. Occasionally an odd (and unsuspecting) male became the subject of her surgical dissections of life and catty misadventures, in which everything was placed into classes and categories of understanding that hovered around the central importance of proper social manners and letting people know precisely where “they” and “you” stood on all the crucial matters of life. She then proceeded to explain—expecting sympathy of course—that her classes were suffering at school because of an unfortunate conflict with her various social activities; said in the same breath, mind you, as everything else without segue or her loyal listener getting a word in edgewise.

“Stop drinking!” he suggested plainly and without thinking about what he was saying. She responded by loo King at him as if she didn’t know who he was.

“Huh? What did you say? Stop drinking? What would be the fun in that?”

“Well, maybe it wouldn’t be *fun* exactly but it might mean you wouldn’t be having so much trouble at school or be caught up in an endless cycle of running around trying to have a good time

and never having one...and you might not look so burned out like you do now or be complaining about it either. Maybe you simply need to change your definition of fun..." it came out like a busted dam. She squinted at him through dark and probing eyes, making him uneasy and sensing he was treading on shaky ground with her. The danger, from his perspective, was of being classified as a man who was "no fun" in her frequent description of the type (and which he'd heard about on so many occasions) that characterized the utter villainy of all her former boyfriends. They'd all committed the unpardonable sin while having been in her good graces and in good standing with her (the swine!). The implication of it all being he should avoid this fate at all costs (it was, after all, a not-so-subtle warning) as he felt himself getting close to that point now. She laughed smugly and knowingly, "Don't be ridiculous, what would I do on the weekends if I didn't party like a rock star? Besides I love to drink, it makes me feel good and nobody gets hurt!"

"Except you!" he challenged her. "Oh, Sandy, when are you ever gonna grow up?" realizing the irony of what he was now saying after his mom had essentially just said the same to him.

"Never—if I can avoid it!—I swear sometimes, Paul, you remind me of my father," giggling like he was the silliest thing possible; then smiling in a way that was truly mocking. "So, tell me about your first experience in jail! Was it as bad as people say?" shifting seamlessly into her best gossip girl mode.

"Lemme tell ya, you'll find out soon enough if you keep drinking and driving the way you do. It's pretty bad!"

"So, tell me, what did it look like?"

"Forget what it looked like...what did it feel and smell like? Piss and shit is what—grime, stench and filth!—and it looked even worse than that." Then after some consideration about

whether to bring it up or not, admitted, “Some pretty seedy people in there, too, beyond anything you can freakin’ imagine!”

“Keep your voice down and watch your language please dear, remember where we are,” clearing her throat and glancing around in worry.

“The lawyer says I’ve got a good chance as long as nothing happens to her and he can present the possibility that it was at least partly her fault.”

“Was it?” completely unaware of the impact on him.

“Well, that’s a matter of opinion I suppose. Everything’s relative when all’s said and done, isn’t it, depending on who you ask?” he replied too quickly; and the issue of lying to protect himself sprung up again—even against his own girlfriend.

She glanced at him with a curious look (something in his voice made her do it). “That sounds funny coming from you. I mean logically speaking you’re probably correct but...” pausing mid-sentence with a rapidly emerging understanding of the situation.

“Of course I’m not suggesting it couldn’t have been partly my fault...”

“Of course not...,” staring straight into his eyes now, “...not the way you drive,” kidding him while at the same time oblivious to the effect it was having on him. His feelings were less important than her own and she believed it all quite natural that her needs and whims should be of primary concern in their relationship (the princess’s prerogative so to speak).

“You know, sometimes I think you say things just to irritate me...or you simply don’t care how it affects me.”

“Lighten up—it was only a joke, and you’re impossible to deal with sometimes!” laughing even even harder.

“Some joke—I mean it’s only my future you’re talking about!”

“Yeah, but somehow you’ll get out of it just like you get out of everything else in life with that innocent guy charm of yours,” she smiled and winked at him with a certain odd complicity that made him uneasy; implying he (or anyone else) wasn’t as innocent as they let on. “You’ve got a good lawyer so why don’t you just sit back and let him do his job? No one cares about an old lady in the end. You’ll see...,” she seemed so sure which was even more appalling.

“Why does everybody keep saying that?—she’s just an old lady! she’s just an old lady!”—she’s a goddamned human being for chrissakes—can’t you get that through your head? Does a person suddenly become less of a person when they get old?” said so loud the other guests were beginning to stare.

“The real question is why do *you* care so much about her? You might get in trouble because of her and even thrown in jail...I’d despise someone with that much power over me...” Shushing him and loo King around with a displeased gaze at the public outburst.

“Why? Just because you’ve been pitted against someone by unforeseen circumstances? That sounds pretty selfish if you ask me, but the thing that makes me the sickest about the whole thing is coming that close to killing another human being—anyone for that matter—merely because of my own negligence and stupidity, because you don’t really know how that feels unless it’s happened to you personally,” hastening to add: “That’s a huge weight on a person’s shoulders!” dropping his gaze on the plate in front of him a moment and thinking, perversely, it looked just like that.

“Well, you just need to be strong, that’s all...life is filled with tragic events. I’ve been through some of my own in fact, hasn’t everyone?” she explained in a way that wasn’t convincing and

too dismissive of the point. “You can’t let it affect you, that’s all...,” in a strange dreamy way, “...that’s the secret.” It came across like a philosophy she’d read once in a popular woman’s magazine.

“Yeah, but if everyone stopped caring about everyone else what kind of world would that be to live? A nightmare dystopia? Be a dangerous place for everyone, wouldn’t it be?”

“Relax. You’re being too dramatic again, Paul! You need to be more open to other people’s views is all I’m saying. Don’t get upset!”

Then she latched onto another course of inquiry: “What did she look like, by the way?”

“Blood all over her face, her eyes, her neck, and her old white stocking legs. All over one of those old people flowery print dresses your grandmother probably used to wear...” grinding his teeth a bit.

“Sounds almost silly the way you describe it....,” she giggled.

“It wasn’t—and I’m still not laughing now—was like killing your grandmother or something and it nearly made me wretch at the scene.”

“Oh, I don’t understand you sometimes, Paul...why you’re so worried about an old lady who’s probably got one foot in the grave anyway, hasn’t she? It’s not like she’s one of our generation with all the latest enlightened ideas about things.”

“*Our generation?* That’s just ignorant—what are you saying? The closer you get to death the less you matter in the world? Old people are just worthless? Would you want to be responsible for your own grandmother’s death? She’s still a human being—isn’t she?—just like you or anyone else’s family. Whether she’s old or not is irrelevant. Don’t you have any compassion for anyone? The poor, the weak, the sick, the unfortunate...anyone?”

“Sometimes I do wish my old grandmother was dead as bad as that sounds. She’s nothing but a bitter old woman that drives everyone crazy around her. Hey! Paul, what’s got into you, anyway? I’m on your side, remember? This thing’s gotten under your skin like nothing I’ve ever seen before! All I’m doing is encouraging you to take things as they come and stop worrying so much about all the things that can go wrong in life.”

Unexpected thoughts about shaky ground seeped into his thoughts again, “Well, unfortunately for me, I’m way beyond the “can happen” stage at this point and into the “did happen” one. This is a matter to be taken seriously at least by me because hitting an old lady’s not exactly something I want to either get used to or blow off as unimportant...how would you feel if this happened to you?”

“Not good, of course, but things like that do happen in life and you have to be willing to accept it. I’m trying to help you deal with it in the best way possible. You gotta be strong and try not to think about it so

much or it’ll drive you crazy. Just sit back and hope for the best because you can’t do anything about it now...” She was being unusually lucid and reasonable tonight and it annoyed him more than anything else; like their roles were suddenly reversed or something.

“Yeah, nothing to do but try to figure out what went wrong and avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future as well as recognizing my role in making them happen. It’s called reflection—a forgotten art in my life, perhaps. Besides, things like this do happen for a reason so people like me can learn from them I believe and I can’t just brush it all aside like some irrelevant event in a vacuum. Specifically, because I was careless—I am careless—and it makes me wonder how much

misery in the world is caused by simple carelessness alone...”

“A lot I’ll bet, but dear old Paul don’t be mad at me—you’re such a feisty old man sometimes, you know that? There are days you remind me of my father.”

Oh my god—her father! It was the worst of all possible sins! Next she was gonna call him Hitler...or even worse: *no fun!* He was actually in danger of being put in the same class as her own *father!* The devil himself; the much-maligned father figure. Verily lumped in with the older generation too, which made him cringe inwardly in absolute horror at the death knell of youthful relationships (every TV psychologist and movie on earth had supported this view).

“That’s an awful thing to say to me...” he replied; pouting.

“Well, it is the truth whether you like it or not so let’s drop the subject and talk about something else. It’s just too depressing to keep going on about this all night. By the way, what are we gonna do tonight?”

“The usual gang is getting together at the usual spot and they’ll be going out for the usual drinks of course. What else is new?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re down on them now, are you planning to be this way all night? We might as well take the baby home if you are...” growing utterly impatient with him now.

“No, I’ll be alright, just a bad day, hon...” leaning over to give her a kiss and her only half pulling away this time—after all, it was such an abrupt and unanticipated gesture on his part (the prerogative of the princess being exercised again).

“Well, try to forget everything for awhile, will ya? Having a few with your friends will surely make you feel better! Always does me...” ginning devilishly. “Let’s be happy and have some fun tonight!”

“Sounds like a plan,” dutifully rendered; though admittedly he

was a bit hesitant over the idea of evading his problems when they required nothing less than his focused attention.

After dinner, they drove to “the club”—a place many of their college friends frequented (i.e. every night) to discuss the highlights of their rather ordinary lives from an alcoholic-infused perspective. It was a gentrified place called “Benny’s” in the middle of a modern strip mall filled with the standard run of banks, coffee shops, delis and convenience stores. Very much like any main street in America but with a subtle colonial twist. While inside were the standard lacquered wood, brass and copper accents of any good sports bar alongside big screen TVs scattered here and there—with the volume turned down—broadcasting every sport imaginable. Paul often wondered why they were there in the first place given that nobody paid attention unless there was something important on like the Super Bowl. Meanwhile, the walls were decked out in dull green with an extensive collection of sports luminaries in old black-and-white photos, banners and jerseys from “name” and “not-so-name” colleges and pro teams. The windows looking out to the street were thickly obscured by stained glass, lending an asynchronous church-like atmosphere to the place or alluding to such.

Myra was sitting there as he strode in confidently with his trophy girlfriend at his side, making her own grand entrance in the general Hollywood style, and was the first thing he locked eyes on in the room. He often wondered why he never had the courage to ask her out instead of wild, unpredictable, bird-brained Sandy. She was much smarter than him, that was part of it, a perfect student in school in fact who wasn’t as pretty as Sandy perhaps, but something else prevented him even more than that; a thing he refused to identify: his friends wouldn’t

look up to him as much and he wouldn't be the object of general envy. Basically, there wasn't as much social status attached to her because she was not an easily categorizable woman he said to himself. Some guys went so far as to deny that she was even pretty at all and simply ignored her; but to Paul this was heresy and patently untrue; believing she simply wasn't slutty enough for their taste. And, to be honest, they were probably a little afraid of feeling awkward in her presence because she wasn't a stupid girl. The fact was, she didn't fulfill their image of the "sexy girl" according to music videos, teen movies and car show queens.

Paul saw her plight as a failure of the men in this world and not of her own. She was a victim of collective ignorance in his view and

was seen sitting by herself when Paul separated from Sandy as they usually did, preparing to freelance circulate about the room (without the trappings of a married couple) whenever entering "the usual haunts". They had to demonstrate to the tribe that they were still young and single and ready to mingle. Sometimes failing to reconvene for the rest of the evening until it was time to go home or relocate the party to another place. Myra's look was overly serious as he approached (as usual) and it intimidated him as much as it fascinated him. It was, however, a refreshing change from the constant and fake good cheer, non-stop snickering and moronic giggling of his other friends (which Sandy couldn't get enough of). Prone, as they were, to titter at any moment just to prove they were young, carefree and, above all, still crazy after not so many years.

She looked pretty down on herself—vulnerable as well—which was especially appealing to Paul in combination with her other traits (Sandy never looked vulnerable or even "human" to

him—she was more like a gorgeous wax figure). Myra’s former relationship with one of her classmates had ended badly and she was still reeling from the break up and, as usual, it had been unpleasant and gut-wrenching. Her boyfriend accused her of being hard to get along with and she’d accused him of being insensitive and cheap—both of which were at least partly true since he knew the gentlemen in question.

“Typical dumb jock!” she confided in Paul after he inquired what was wrong; slurring a bit from over-consumption.

“What’s wrong with you Myra? You did it again?”

“What?”

“Attempted the impossible with someone completely incompatible with you?”

“What else is new?”

“Myra, *why, why, why?*—why do you hook up with these jerks?” he said as delicately as possible.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with me!” she said angrily.

“...Or at least your hormones—you of all people should be able to find a decent guy. You’ve got so much to offer!”

“One would think so—do you have anyone in mind I should take a look at by the way?” he felt the urge to blurt out a clever reply but stopped short of the effort.

“There’re a lot of decent guys around, you just need to find one.”

“Show me—tell me—where?” grabbing ahold of the front of his shirt melodramatically...Please, I beg of you!”

It was good to see she hadn’t lost her sense of humor at least! Sandy then magically appeared before them loo King more than her usual flamboyant self; portraying melodramatic jealousy and outrage whenever she saw them having fun together. Paul wondered if she were, really, or just entertaining herself with a

little comic relief.

“What are you two little conspirators doing over here?” she grinned devilishly. “Hiding in the corner where I can’t see you?”

“Myra’s had another break up, Sandy...”

“Oh, Myra...dear...,” she fluttered over, very female, caring and a bit too tenderly; giving her a girly hug, “...I’m sorry to hear that. You’ve had such bad luck with men. They’re simply awful, aren’t they? Always break your heart in one way or another,” smirking at Paul. She leaned over to kiss her on the cheek but did it all too quickly, mechanically even, making everyone uncomfortable with the false spectacle. Sandy was feeling like the disenchanted and insufficiently amused princess tonight. “I’m just not happy,” she often said at times like these in spite of anything else going on around her.

“Thanks, Sandy,” Myra said without looking into her eyes; focusing instead on Paul.

“So, she’s available...,” Sandy kidded, looking at Paul, but trying to keep her attention on Myra, “...guess I’ll have to keep an eye on both of you now.” And to Myra, “Watch out for Pauly, he’s a smoothie alright—the dangerous type in fact.”

“Yeah—literally—I almost killed an old woman today...,” dryly, “...guess I’d call that dangerous.”

“Paul! What happened!” shrieked Myra.

“You know the usual, being careless and not paying attention and the woman pulled out of nowhere and things got ugly really fast forthwith! The normal shit that happens in my life...”

“Oh my god! Paul...” studying the pain in his eyes; at the same time laying her hands on his and holding them a moment without knowing fully the extent of the problem; always seeming to know how to make him feel better without trying, “...you must feel awful.”

Sandy frowned. She couldn't be that charming under the best of circumstances. Only Myra made *HER* feel inadequate.

"I do...of course..." their gazes met briefly on neutral (but common) ground and a sense of understanding developed between them.

"Thanks, Myra..." Sandy's disapproval of their impromptu and totally innocent intimacy intensified. She couldn't believe what she was hearing and, besides, how could anyone pay so much attention to Myra when she was in the room? Was Myra really a challenge to her? Another unfamiliar feeling struck her without warning: jealousy—but not based on her looks, her ability to comfort and support a man and make him feel better. A major part of a woman's job in a relationship she sensed and of which Sandy was utterly inept because she didn't feel it necessary to try.

"No, I'm serious, what a horrible thing to have happen...how are you holding up?"

"I'll be alright as long as the victim survives..." completely able to focus on the real problem under her tender influence.

"An old lady, that's an absolute shame..." squeezing his arm reassuringly. Sandy noted its effect on Paul and became acutely aware of an uncontrollable fury growing in her chest. Myra made her feel that way sometimes which was why she always treated her like an inferior person. Myra, on the other hand, never paid much attention to Sandy—she was just a foolish, weak and harmless "spotlight-seeker" to her and Sandy's feeble claws of disdain could never penetrate Myra's tough skin. She was too smart and hard-headed for that.

"I admit I feel pretty bad about it..." he felt it safe to say around her; with Sandy frowning and thinking, 'Not again!...what kind of man whines so much about a simple accident (wondering if

her boyfriend were, in fact, a wimp)? What sort of person is this man o' mine?' As Sandy entertained serious doubts about her boyfriend's masculine nature, for being unconventionally male (and, by association, her own femininity being called into question), Myra said:

"Of course you do! Who wouldn't? That's a terrible thing to harm an innocent old lady and would absolutely tear my heart to pieces..." They looked at each other for a long time and it didn't dawn on them for a bit that they weren't alone. Sandy was still lurking over them like a large vulture: dissatisfied, irritated and bored all at the same time. Presumably waiting to be thrown a bone and not leaving until she got it. Unfortunately for her, the group pickings were slim at the moment.

"Thanks for listening..." giving her a long hug, "...but really it's nothing and I'll eventually get over it..." then remembering Sandy's presence and how she felt while, at the same time, sensing her disapproval like an offending glare from a bright lamp. He always had to prove something around her; that he was strong-willed and tough and could treat the world with a sense of manly indifference. She liked that in a man and made it clear in dozens of ways—many of which were sexual in nature. Men who cared about other people, or anything else but money and success, were weak and unappealing in her view.

"Get over it?! Paul, don't be silly, you've just had a major traumatic experience! Reality check too! It's gonna take some time to get over it...and don't be too hasty to switch in and out of your moods like that...might not be too healthy for your psyche in the long run." explained the always insightful Myra.

Paul's eyes widened a moment because the girl in front of him seemed to understand him, and other things, all too well—a rarefied experience for him. Someone he wasn't certain he

was in love with but there was no doubt he respected and took comfort in her presence. On the other hand, it was also possible his feelings were squelched under the close scrutiny of Sandy.

“You’re right it won’t be...but I can’t understand why I care so much about a single person’s life. And it’s not just because I might get into trouble over this.”

“Well, *everybody’s* life’s important—including old people! If we forget how to care about other people—especially concerning their pain and suffering—we forget how to be human and that’s what’s wrong with the entire world in my opinion!” she said it so plainly that Paul had to study her face a minute to see if she was kidding.

Sandy saw an opportunity and pounced, “What are you guys talking about? You’re getting so serious about all this I’m beginning to think I’m in a courtroom—lighten up you two,” scoffing and mocking them.

Paul cringed—did she have to mention court? He ignored her however; whatever existed between Myra and him was too strong to be

denied at the moment. Myra smiled just for him, “You understand, Paul, I know you do...” loo King into his eyes, “...despite what others may think. You’ve always understood things like that.”

“Pfffft! Listen to you two...,” groaned Sandy, “...you’re talking about a complete stranger like it matters or something! The most important thing is that Paul doesn’t get into trouble over this!” doing her best to appear more practical and altruistic than them.

“That’s true, of course, and I definitely hope he doesn’t get into trouble over this because it’d certainly be a tragedy for all of us. But you can’t deny it’s also a tragedy in someone else’s

life. If you attempt to ignore how situations affect other people by living in vacuum, you forget how they affect you in some way—suspending your objectivity and making you oblivious to everything that's of value to any and *all* concerned in situations.”

“We must resolutely struggle against the creeping effects of apathy in our lives...” Paul paraphrased some poetry verse he'd read somewhere in school.

“Exactly, Paul—that's right—very insightful of you by the way...”

“Yeah...” said Sandy, “..he's quite a guy, isn't he?” with a cynical twist of her lips and a steely gaze at Myra.

“Clever is as clever does...” replied Paul irrelevantly as if to dispel any malevolent spirits in the air, “..but I wouldn't consider my actions lately all that clever. I mean look at all the trouble I'm in now!”

“Trouble now—yes—that's true but trouble later perhaps not—depends on who you ask as well as whose fault it was I guess. You should be OK as long as you didn't do it intentionally and weren't overly negligent concerning the cause.” Sandy didn't appear too comfortable with Myra's tireless practical head that came across better than most men's.

“Myra you sound like a lawyer...what the hell are you talking about?”

“I'm only speculating of course and I may be talking out of turn from the limits of my knowledge on the subject. However, speaking from what little I do know about the law it's true.”

“Well, all of our understanding on the subject is limited so why

talk about it?” replied Sandy with a smirk (attempting to trump Myra's logic from the limits of her resources).

“Because Paul’s our friend and we should give him our trust and support, Sandy. It’s our duty to reassure him he won’t get in too much trouble in this situation.”

“Why—if he will?” Sandy confronted her; feeling now she had some basis for confrontation which is what she’d been seeking all along.

“Sandy, stop it already, she’s trying to make me feel better... what’s wrong with that?” jumping to Myra’s defense without hesitation.

“Oh, *Paul*, now *you’re* turning against me when I’m having such an awful time tonight?” she was truly hurt by this “tremendous betrayal” and her face showed it through ritual pouting. Her frivolous personality had landed her into trouble again with their friends and she didn’t see any easy way out that would please everyone and, at the same time, make everything turn out as it was before she spoiled things.

“Paul, I want you to feel better, I really do...,” pleading with him now (as Paul was thinking, “That’s why you always make scenes like this, right?”), “...but I want us *all* to feel better, right now, *tonight*, so don’t be so droopy and serious like you always are! I realize you’ve had a terrible shock but please lighten up a bit!” (“Us” meaning “her” from Paul’s experience).

Neither Paul nor Myra knew what to do with that one and simply let it go at that. They knew what it meant—it was Sandy after all—yet there was no easy way to oppose her point of view without offending or deeply wounding her fragile pride. She was the colorful butterfly in the field that bobbed and flitted here and there, flower to flower, loo King ever so splendid and knowing no earthly ground. Occasionally, however, dark clouds formed on her horizon and wreaked utter havoc on her emotional state.

“Well, let’s get going, the party’s moving to my house...,” said a confident and belligerent presence appearing suddenly before them. It was none other than Alex, the unofficial “ambassador of party protocol”, coming to ensure this process took place with maximum efficiency and seriousness. He was grinning from ear to ear as he belted out drunkenly: “All right you mutts, let’s step it up a bit and move this shindig to the next level! The bar’s closing in another forty minutes and we’ll be driving through Judge Dredd’s copland if we wait much longer...”

“Too late, Alex! It’s already “copland” out there...starts around 11 o’ clock now, remember?”

“Well, be that as it may, we better get outta here pronto...” in his usual evasive manner, “...you game?”

“Sure!—Sandy?—what’d’ya say?”

She giggled mischievously, “OK, but you’d better drive, Paul, I’ve had too many and...” grinning without finishing (with Paul thinking there was nothing unusual about that). He was sober and the role of designated driver would naturally fall on his shoulders (as it always did), causing him to worry that he was an invaluable asset to the group on that basis alone.

“Paul,” Sandy ventured tenderly along the way after clumsily placing her head on his shoulder, “You’re not upset with me, are you? I don’t want anything to happen to you, you know, but I have to speak my mind *sometime*...”

“Of course you do, dear, it’s just the way you are...” he replied vaguely; making excuses for her as usual.

“Oh, be nice to me, I know you’re upset, but don’t be sarcastic!”

He had actually responded without sarcasm because he truly wasn’t upset; on the contrary it was the normal course of things in their relationship and he didn’t expect much better. He

accepted it for what it was. The same problems, the same conversations night after night, the same unsteady truces in the end (where nothing ever got settled). Ending in early morning with spastic, and often perverse, sexual episodes with bewildering consequences.

“Sandy, it’s not you, it’s me...,” trying to calm her down and help her to relax. “I’ve had a very bad day and it’ll take some time to get over it.”

“Well, forget about it and let’s have some fun tonight.”

“I intend to...,” he said, sliding rapidly into the swing of things, “...so let’s drop the subject for tonight.”

When they arrived at Alex’s house everyone instantly raided the refrigerator for beers and vodka. The two reigning choices of the evening. Meanwhile, Alex took Paul aside and offered him a bit of 15-year-old scotch in a locked cabinet in order to “make him feel better...or feel nothing at all whichever came first,” as he so eloquently put it while snickering at his own apparent wit.

“Thanks,” replied Paul; genuinely touched.

Meanwhile Foster Graves, the high IQ member of the bunch, studied Paul from afar—the sofa in this case—deciding on how to approach him in order to say what he needed to say. Also to figure out whether his friend understood the magnitude of the legal mess he was in. Foster was a short boy with a slender build and a perky, penetrating stare that had the power to unnerve everyone around him. He was presently using that unique ability on Paul, unnoticed. After a few minutes of studying him and divining his state of mind he finally came over: “Paul, good to see you—I heard about your little brush with death today!”

“Foster, that’s exactly what it was, good description, but I survived...just hope the same can be said for the victim...”

Foster's college major was chemistry though he didn't strike people instantly as the "intellectual type" despite having enviable grades and a lofty IQ. He looked more like the small but ruthless type (with a permanent chip on his shoulder) often seen at the right hand of gangsters of the previous century. The brains behind a successful criminal operation in other words. His beady, jet black eyes always held a lot more back than they revealed.

"The victim? You need to worry a bit more about yourself if they nail you on a reckless driving charge, man, or even worse: reckless endangerment or manslaughter, then your ass is cooked!"

"Really?" said Sandy, not frankly knowing what any of it meant but deferring to Foster's status as the intelligent member of the group.

"Yes," Myra confirmed, "And there could be jail time involved no matter what happens to her simply because of the accident's severity...the state itself has the power to assume control of the case if they want to!"

"My parents hired the best lawyer for the money and he thinks he can lay at least part of the blame on her," coming to his own defense because he felt he had to.

"Certainly possible..." Foster reflected, "...were there any witnesses? Depends a lot on what they say about your driving—their own opinions might matter a lot in this situation."

"You're screwed then..." Sandy kidded him, leading the charge in her own direction and coming off witty for a change, "...because your driving stinks. The best you can hope for is to kill the witnesses off one by one." It definitely wasn't bad for Sandy and they all laughed.

“I might just do that...,” said Paul with a secretive and downcast gaze, “...can I count on you as an accomplice?”

“Sure!—we’ll be the Bonnie and Clyde of the future!” while doing her best to reenact the sultry pose of that depression-era vixen complete with cigar and gun in hand. They had another good laugh thanks to Sandy’s alcohol-enhanced charisma. She had managed to seize the moment (and her audience’s attention) with peculiar irreverence and mesmerizing good looks.

Later, as the evening progressed as well as the alcoholic level of the persons present, the truth of wine or whatever odd things they were consuming began to take hold in the room. Arguments broke out over the simplest—and pettiest—details of their lives or matters of personal foible and idiosyncrasy; until Alex’s small but cozy living room turned into the Olympic grand championships of professional narcissism. Oddly enough without fair warning.

They were sitting on the red sofa set (normally reserved for seducing reluctant females into acts they’d later come to regret) along with groups of easy chairs that didn’t match up so well, slumping and slurring their words and making bold pronouncements about nothing whatsoever memorable. During a pause in the midst of the passionate pointlessness, the conversation turned to what happened to Paul and something of substance and breadth for once. Uncharted territory as it happened for this tight little group under these conditions.

Paul’s eyes widened significantly as he sensed things were taking an unfortunate turn and not in his favor; not if gin-soaked escapism were the goal anyway. Dealing with reality was emergent on the horizon. All other “party” topics had been exhausted by now and everyone was ready

to puke or pass out. Fresh entertainment (or meat for that

matter) was needed to keep the herd moving in a straightforward direction.

“Hey! Paul-i-o, tell us the truth...are you really upset about possibly offing an ol’ lady or what? What’s wrong with you, bro? Fucken bitch is half in the hole anyway...,” Alex slurred drunkenly and ungraciously but still inline with the general hip attitudes of the day while allowing his usual calculated charm to slide a bit, “...after all you didn’t mean to hit her, did you? C’mere man...,” coming closer in an awkward display of sloppy sentimentalism and falling on Paul as he attempted to hug him, “Trust me bro, it ain’t your fault—I know you,” flashing his warmest smile that only manifested itself on occasions like this. But Alex, in his own way, was trying to make him feel better and that was at least something.

“I feel guilty because I was acting stupid and I endangered the life of another human being,” presuming (incorrectly) that he was having a conversation with a thoughtful individual.

Alex let out the most skeptical chuckle, “Listen to the Catholic saint over here...,” causing everyone to burst out in laughter.

“No, I mean it you cretins!” in his own defense. “Every person’s life has value, I realize that now—even old people. That old lady’s a human being and counts for something in the world as our own lives matter to us. This experience has helped me see that...”

“Ah! he’s soft touch, Sandy, what’d’ya think?” Paul didn’t know what it meant but was uneasy with this negative characterization of himself. The tone alone alarmed him as he’d merely considered himself to be “making sense” for the first time in his life.

“Bleeding heart! Mama’s boy!” she giggled with the eyes of drunken abandon.

“That’s not funny. You shouldn’t dehumanize other people like

that, especially ones weaker than yourself. That’s part of the problem in the world today: we’re no longer human because we have no concern for the weak and vulnerable...we’re lost...just *lost*.”

“No—we’re happy!” snickered Alex causing another round of canned laughter among the disaffected members of the group.

“I don’t believe you’ll ever be happy that way, Alex. You’ll end up destroying yourself and others around you when you cease to care about the sanctity of life. You’ll become disillusioned because that’s part of what makes us sentient human beings!” which created another rumbling chuckle though less spastic than the first; and with the revelers perhaps unaware what made it so funny (but a discernible pattern had already emerged—a reversal of natural laws—everything profound was made silly).

“Sometimes I can’t tell whether you’re serious or joking,” Alex confessed to him, “You’re such a deep thinker it spooks me at times.”

“That’s not a bad thing in this group!” he declared, “Someone has to do it since we can’t all be reckless, irresponsible screw-ups!”

“Screw-ups?” Alex replied with a comical smile and gaze at Sandy in mock surprise; she giggled. Yes, it was turning into amateur night at the moron’s comedy club.

“He’s right...,” explained Foster, “...Alex is a premier screw-up.”

“And proud of it!” in his own inimitable style.

“Oh, Alex, what the hell are we gonna do with you?”

“When pig’s fly or sail—whichever comes first!” beaming from ear to ear and defiant. “Hey, by the way, why are we going

on about me? This is Paul's moment in the sun, isn't it? Not mine!"

"His problem's most likely a one-time occurrence while yours is incurable!" replied Foster with his own particular, more incisive sense of humor and Alex laughed along with the others although his eyes didn't follow his lips.

"Myra are you going along with this, too! Turning on me?" pouting in the standard, consciously sexy male form. He directed his "irresistible" charm toward the "inferior" female of the group to elicit support from someone. He needed constant support from others and they had to update their pledge on a regular basis.

"I guess so, but Paul's right on this one. He's dead on, Alex! We do need to care about other people when bad things are done by us even if it's unintended. We're no better than animals if we don't..."

"I'm an animal and proud of it—a party animal!" raising his glass and both arms in the air while sneering.

"He's hopeless, Myra, just forget about him, he hasn't evolved beyond the schoolyard mentality. It still drives every part of his being like a drunk driver..." Alex didn't respond to this accusation because the euphoria of alcohol was beginning to wear off and he could only manage a glazed, faraway look at this point.

"Will you guys quit picking on poor Alex? He's the only free spirit among us," explained Sandy with the utmost seriousness. Even Alex had to glance up in surprise at this.

Paul looked at her sharply, "Are you for real? He's a confirmed hopeless cause!"

"You only *wish* you could be more like him—you're too scared is what it is. At least he knows how to enjoy life rather

than trembling like a mouse in the corner all the time, letting everything get to him and doing what's expected of you..." it was a low blow and everyone felt it as such. In fact, the words rippled through the room making everyone uncomfortable and wanting to escape somewhere and hide. So much for getting support from your "life partner" in times of need.

"Thanks for being on my side Sandy...almost killing a person's not an everyday occurrence in my life or something I'm able to cheer up from on cue as you'd like. Is it time to take the baby home now? Has Joan Crawford had enough dramatic episodes for one night?"

"I'm serious, Paul, you ought to be more concerned about your own future rather than what happens to some random person you hit. It isn't normal! It's called an "accident" for a reason." And for another reason this point was absolutely crucial to her and couldn't be dropped or kept to herself. She had to prove that general nonchalance was not only natural in a person's character but necessary for survival.

"Granted, but the issue's much bigger than you and me. It affects other people and if I refuse to look at it that way I cease to look at things realistically, which is a form of cheating myself out of my own consciousness."

"I give up," she said finally, pursing her lips. She looked at Alex for support, but by now he looked totally detached from the conversation and disinterested in life in general.

"Paul's making a lot of sense..." Foster explained gently to her, "...you should give him some credit."

"I know you're clever, Foster, but stay out of this. This is between him and me!"

Later, on the way home, the mood was more than subdued inside the car to say the least and potentially explosive; but not

an altogether atypical night for Paul and Sandy.

“Take me home. I’m not going to your place tonight,” she said coldly.

“You don’t wanna make up?”

“Make up? No. What for?”

You know, I don’t understand you sometimes. You make me wonder who you are. You’re a complete mystery!”

“Maybe you’ll never know...or you don’t try hard enough,” in the tone of someone laying bait.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means...dear...in all honesty, you’re too uptight!”

“Well, if we’re analyzing each other’s faults tonight...you don’t dig beneath the surface of anything—people included! You look at everything superficially—as roles and persons whose only value in life is how they function at a party while drunk. This is what you call “charm” or “style” or whatever—how sarcastic or attention-grabbing they can be while they’re stumbling over chairs. Do you ever stop to think about anyone’s individual merits as a human being?”

“Of course I do...,” she reeled it in a bit, “...I look at you that way, don’t I?” He didn’t reply right away because he was stumped by the question; at the same time her gaze burrowed into his thoughts attempting to measure their quantity.

“Well, dear, I know you care about me in your own special way and all but sometimes I question whether you treat people with any respect—if you recognize others as having any integrity or intelligence?”

“Who’s intelligent?—Foster? That mousey little runt with his nose always stuck in a book!”

“Sandy!! That’s exactly what I’m talking about! He’s a friend of ours you only pretend to like. Someone with the brightest

future of any of us!”

“I’m a brilliant actress,” praising herself lavishly.

“He’ll be a great scientist someday. He’s a person of ability, substance and genuine character, can’t you give him some credit for that?”

“He’s no good around girls...,” her main complaint mightily conveyed.

“Is that all you can say? Maybe that says more about the girls we hang out with than being any sort of indictment of his character! Did’ya ever stop and think about that?” She didn’t say anything but after getting out of the car gave him an inscrutable look before fading into the shadows without even a smile of concession; chilling him to the bone. Clearly he screwed up in some profound way by calling her to task on matters where she was clearly and exceeding wrong in his view. Whatever else had happened, one message was clear: one simply didn’t talk that way to a reigning princess.

The ride home was long and depressing. He glanced out the window at the halos surrounding the street lamps and wondered why

things looked more ominous at night, especially when one’s plans for the night fell through. Did it really matter whether the world was lit up or not—ever? Seemed more fitting that everything should be left in perpetual darkness all the time since it sometimes felt that way in an underlying sense anyway.

He sensed the inevitable was coming: the break-up. At the same time it occurred to him that tragedy in life ought to naturally bring people together or used to in the past, or something like that, if people were truly bonded in what he viewed as a “natural way”. But he guessed that age had already passed in civilization and also that times change inevitably with

the ages. In his case, however, it probably didn't bode well for him and it seemed ironic that the accident had the possible additional effect of breaking up his relationship because Sandy wasn't inclined to follow him on this voyage of self-discovery and soul-searching—it just wasn't “*in*” her to do so.

When he got home the house looked somewhat gloomier than he remembered. Dimly lit spaces and shadows in corners and crevices of the room crowded in from all directions, conspiring to throw him into a downward spiral of hopelessness... especially while drunk. He heard someone moving around in the other room while re-hydrating himself in the kitchen and his stomach sank.

“Paul...is that you?” his father called from the other room. He could hear him rustling around getting ready to come out and have a late-night heart-to-heart with his son in order to set him on the right path again. Paul groaned. Just what he needed now when sleep was uppermost in his mind...worst timing ever!

“Yes, dad, I'm here. Please go to sleep, we'll talk in the morning,” trying to put him off; but by this time his father'd already opened the door and Paul knew his momentum was unstoppable once he latched onto a notion.

“Paul, I believe it's important we talk a bit now. What's going on with you?”

“Well, dad, I screwed up again obviously...same thing that's always going on in my life. You know that ...”

“Paul, don't play the victim here...you're not, *we are*. When are you gonna act like an adult and stop playing the persecuted child whenever you screw up?”

“I didn't realize I was...but if you say so, dad,” he relented.

“I *do* say so as a matter of fact and don't get smart with me when I'm trying to help you out.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see her and she came out of nowhere!”

“Well, lucky for you she’s gonna be all right...”

Paul’s eyes lit up, “What? What the hell are you saying?”

“I called the hospital a few hours ago like a certain someone should’ve done in my place. She’s going to live no thanks to you—not that you give a shit!” Paul looked at his father like one of the angels of promise while ignoring the brutality of the final indictment.

“Are you sure?” inquired Paul. His father didn’t respond right away but gazed at him without a sliver of fatherly pride. “That’s incredible and a tremendous weight off my shoulders!”

“Don’t think for a minute you’re off the hook, Paul! You still have

to deal with the police, the courts and *ME!*” looming over him and casting a formidable shadow—a naturally burly man with an uncomplicated look of aggression as a social policy. He had the ability to intimidate others with even the slightest change of posture and often employed this technique, in a calculated fashion, to his own advantage. “I thought we discussed this before and agreed you were gonna act more like an adult...?”

“I was...I am...,” he stammered with downcast eyes. “I was just late and in a hurry and...,” unfortunately his dad wasn’t buying any of it.

“I don’t want to come down on you like the military or anything but sometimes I feel I have to! You’re young and naturally want to have a bit of fun sometimes—that’s to be expected—go ahead and get wild every now and then, but at least take responsibility for your own behavior! Learn to place limits on yourself.”

Paul only half-listened while drifting off into images of parents portrayed in movies and television giving their children

the third degree and viewed it all as something of a tired old scene without being aware of it. It seemed fair to him (according to the mainstream imagery of parents he'd digested) that parents should leave their children alone regardless of what they did, trusting them blindly to make their own decisions and endure their own pain without lectures.

"Paul, are you listening to me?!" his father demanded; catching the faraway look in his eyes and becoming furious.

"Course, dad," he stiffened up.

"Listen you...!" jabbing his finger in Paul's face, "...don't patronize me with that *"Course, dad," shit!* I know you're only pretending to listen and not really doing it...I know *exactly* how you are!" with a smirk and a certainty that unnerved him.

He was guilty, of course, but didn't want his father to know that and believed he'd given no indication of the fact; therefore it was unfair to accuse him of something that couldn't be proven. He did manage an

impressive look of innocence though as he said, "Dad, I don't know

why you always accuse me of doing things I've never done! You're so suspicious that I don't think you'll ever trust me...," trying to deflect his progenitor from the truth. It was *beautiful* and *convincing*—the great actors of Hollywood's golden age would've been jealous but there was one slight flaw: he grimaced (ever so briefly) under the strain of lying and the risk of punishment and possible exposure. The slip-up was instantly corrected and he resumed the look of profound innocence without being certain whether he'd succeeded.

His father gazed at him a long time in silence which made him thoroughly nervous and fearing his dad might bust through the wall of independence Paul had carefully constructed between

them. His father was a merciless taskmaster at times and backed him into a corner on a constant basis with respect to Paul's opinions on things. The norm in his life was to lie and pretend in order to survive his childhood. It offered his only defense against the constant bullying and psychological intimidation of the patriarch, otherwise he'd be punished and yelled at all the time.

"Paul what am I gonna do with you? Is there some way we can put our heads together and figure out a way to solve this problem? I don't know if you realize how close you've come to a world of pain," Paul fully realized when his father said "we" he meant "he" (oddly enough like Sandy) and that he would be put through some sort of grueling test of endurance to prove himself worthy of his father's love.

"I can do a lot better. This has given me a wake up call—truly!—I see the error of my ways..." trying to get off easy with a warning and get some sleep.

"I wonder..." his dad replied with certain smugness while making a lip-smacking sound, "...and I only wish I could believe you."

"It is—you can trust me on this one. I've been doing a lot of soul searching lately since nearly killing someone has given me reason enough to question everything I've done so far in my life."

"Like there wasn't enough reason before?"

"Dad, I admit I've made my share of mistakes in this world but this experience has changed my attitude completely. Trust me. I feel it and I know it on the inside." His dad looked at him long and hard for a moment; believing stubbornly that the truth was hard to unearth in others. "Alright let's sleep on this and see what can be done in the morning."

“Good idea,” smiled Paul; the interrogation was over and the customary wave of relief (after the fact) washed over him. The meeting hadn’t gone as badly as expected and, in fact, seemed rather uneventful

now that it was over. There were times when his fears about his father appeared justified and others when they didn’t.

“See you in the morning,” his father concluded in a tone of surprising kindness as Paul shuffled off to bed without loo King back. Whenever they had one of their little discussions his dad always let him go to bed first then hung around the living room for a while to “mark out his territory” as Paul said to himself. Loud noises outside the bedroom door could be heard hours after he climbed into bed, making him anxious. What was the old man plotting behind his back?

