

## Micro Fiction

### The Girl Wore Barrettes

Lucy was 7 and wore a head of blue barrettes. It was the end of the school day, and her first grade teacher has sent her to my office because she was concerned about what she was saying to other classmates. On her referral slip, she wrote, "Lucy is scaring other children. She keeps insisting that her barrettes are keeping her brain from falling out of her head."

Lucy sat quietly on a hard plastic chair outside my office. It was early in the school year, and I had yet to meet Lucy. Her parents had used the district's newly enacted open enrollment policy to drive her over twenty miles to and from school each day so that she "could get a better education." Her blue barrettes were clipped to long cornrows that hung below her ears. She looked up at me when I asked her to come into my office, her eyes bright with curiosity and a smile that said "happy to meet you."

"Hi, Lucy, how are you?"

"I'm fine, but my teacher says I'm bothering other kids."

"Tell me about your blue barrettes."

"Oh, they keep my brains from falling out. I have green ones that keep my imagination inside, and pink to keep my feelings inside, and red I wear just for fun."

"It sounds like you have magical barrettes."

Lucy's eyes grew wide and her smile broader, and she said, "That's what my mommy and daddy say. They say that I'm so smart that I need barrettes to keep my thoughts and feelings from falling all over the place."

I looked at Lucy with warmth and admiration. "Your teacher says that some of the other children are afraid that your brains will fall out."

"Oh, I can fix that," said Lucy. "I'll wear my green ones tomorrow."

No doubt she would. I sat quietly for a while, maintaining eye contact and a friendly smile. I could never match hers. I thought about the youngest children who often came to school skipping off to class. And I thought about the older elementary students who no longer skipped, and many who seemed to trudge along with heavy shoulders and infrequent smiles. I

wondered how we could keep the skip longer and avoid the drudgery. “I think I’ll introduce you to my pet whale tomorrow. We can walk to class together, and you and your classmates will get to meet Whaley Whale. But instead of wearing your green ones tomorrow and keeping your imagination inside, would you please wear your red ones so that we can just have some fun. We’ll talk to your class about imagination.”

The next day I met Lucy and her parents at the front gate. I had spoken to her parents the night before. I took Lucy in one hand, and, holding the whale from my young son’s stuffed animal collection in the other, we went off to her first grade classroom. She skipped and I walked with a newfound lightness.

## An Impractical Romance

"It might be impractical to seek out a new romance," were words written by my best friend, a writer whose syndicated column "Mary's Advice for Romantics" appeared in over 100 newspapers. "She's been a relatively good woman for you. And that's probably the best you can expect in any relationship." It was difficult for me to read Mary's words while sipping my morning coffee. How could she suggest that 'practicality' and 'relativity' were the best lovers could achieve?

Mary and I had been close friends since middle school. She was like the sister I never had as an only child growing up with parents who were overly affectionate in public. I spent far too much time feeling adolescent embarrassment when out with mom and dad. My parents were hand-holders, huggers, and frequent kissers who used a wide variety of what I thought were intimate nicknames: 'sweetie pie', 'honey', 'kissy-poo', 'lambchop', 'squeezy-wheezy', and others I really don't care to remember. They continue to behave that way in their approaching Golden Years. Mary would tell me it was normal, and I'd understand when I had my own girlfriend. She was right. All through high school and college, I relied on Mary's counsel as I went through a string of romantic disasters. Now, both of us are thirty-three, single, not in any committed relationship, and I'm reading her advice that suggests settling is a good thing. I pulled out my cell phone and called her.

"Mary, I'm reading your column. How can you suggest such a mundane existence to someone seeking answers to an unfulfilling relationship?" Mary didn't immediately respond. She never did. Unlike me, she was not an impulsive person. She was a contemplator. She was also the most beautiful woman I had ever known. I couldn't take my eyes off her when I saw her for the first time in eighth grade English. And I still can't.

"Henry," she said evenly. Others called me Hank, but it was always Henry with Mary. "Have you ever considered settling? You're a serial monogamist who doesn't know what you really want. You can be the loneliest man while surrounded by a horde of friends. How can you expect perfection when you are so socially flawed. And despite all that, we are still the best of friends because we don't hold back anything from each other. In our own way we are perfect

for each other. The person that wrote for advice was in a similar situation. That's why I advised that it would be impractical to seek a new romance."

"I'm stunned. And I'm missing something. You say I'm flawed, but that we are perfect for one another. What are you suggesting?" Another long pause before Mary replied.

"What do you think, honeybunch?"

I blushed.

## Where Do Bad Folks Go When They Die

"Where do bad folks go when they die?" Not having a father in my life, it was something I had asked my Uncle Hersh several times. He was my own personal philosopher, and often spoke with contempt and distrust for others while calling himself a "happy cynic." When I would ask him about death, he would reply with one of his invented Yiddish proverbs like, "The meek shall inherit the earth, but only after they are in the ground. And then the powerful will dig them up and scatter their souls to the wind." At least that's the way Uncle Hersh figured the world worked. He enjoyed putting his own twist on established orthodoxy, which he believed was simply a religious ploy to goad others into how the wretched might live meaningful lives.

It was a return phone call to a message I had left over twenty years ago that caught me off-guard. I listened several times before calling Uncle Hersh, and telling him I need his help. He wasted no time getting over to my apartment. Dressed in black trousers, shirt, sport coat and silver New Balance running shoes, he sat at my kitchen counter fingering his gray beard and said, "Let's hear that message from my long, lost despicable brother again." *This is your father getting back to you. Give me a call when you have a chance to chat. My number hasn't changed. As our people once said, 'Life is too short to hold a grudge.'*

"After twenty years, my brother...your schlemiel of a father...suddenly finds it convenient to return your phone call. And the putz even felt the need to confirm his parentage with *this is your father*." I looked into Uncle Hersh's droopy eyes, became a bit teary and asked, "Should I call back?"

My father had abandoned my mother and me just before my Bar Mitzvah. Uncle Hersh took us in until my mother was able to establish her own career. In spite of his own anti-religious views, he encouraged and helped me complete my Bar Mitzvah, standing by my side, chanting an Aliyah, and giving me five, crisp twenty dollar bills at the Oneg Shabbat reception. Now I sat, a single, thirty-three year old man wondering how to respond to my father's voice mail to the message I had left him the day after my Bar Mitzvah: *Dad, I need to talk to you. Please, call.*

"Boychik, there's little you can do to resurrect an abandoned relationship. As a wise man once said, 'If you are fortunate, bad folks go away until they die; however, good people don't abandon those who abandoned them."

## Short Stories

### Ben

As he pulled off the freeway, he thought about what his mother had said as she hugged him goodbye. Whenever he left after a pleasant or unpleasant visit, Ben's mother always had some sort of sticky cryptic message that haunted him on the ride home. She was, after all, a self-appointed "omenist", a word she had coined to describe her "powers of knowing the future before the future revealed itself." When Ben suggested that the correct word was "seer" or "fortuneteller" or, better yet, "con artist", his mother's placid rebuttal was that she was different from those who professed special powers, and that omenist would prove to be the better term. His mother made no claims to know everything about the future. She merely claimed to know that every once in awhile something good or bad might be happening soon. Fortunately, he had become unconsciously competent at downshifting through the Triumph's gears and stopping at the bottom of the exit ramp. Otherwise, being lost in thought would have resulted in multiple disasters.

This visit had been pleasant, unlike the previous one when his mother told him his life was too comfortable. He dropped by unannounced to bring his mother a bag of lemons and limes. After drinking iced tea with some lemon juice and freshly baked oatmeal raisin cookies, his mother hugged him and said, "Ben, just remember that being a man means more than being a man." At thirty-nine, his mother was the only parent he had known. She was three months pregnant when his father was killed by Maoist terrorists while trekking in Nepal, after being warned by his mother that no good could come of hiking in foreign lands. Growing up meant a seemingly endless stream of caregivers while his mother worked two or three jobs to provide him with private schools, guitar lessons, summer camps, the most up-to-date computers, "with-it" clothes, and a diet of mostly organic foods. His mother never took advantage of knowing the future; rather, as she often reminded Ben, she elected to live in the "here and future." She

often reminded Ben that it would be unfair to take advantage of one's special gifts to indulge in unnecessary frills or self-indulgencies. After graduation from law school at the top of his class and securing a job with one of the most prestigious San Francisco law firms, he bought his mother a condominium near the Giants new ballpark along with season tickets with his first of many extravagant annual bonuses. His mother loved baseball, but could never afford to attend a game.

Ben pulled into his Pacific Heights flat's driveway, pushed the button of the garage door remote control, and quietly thought about all he had accomplished before forty: an Ivy League law education and an exceptionally high seven figure salary. He spurned the offer of partnership, since it would mean too much responsibility for shared oversight of the firm's business, and he already made more money than he could ever spend. He invested well, had all the adult toys he wanted, and was recently named by San Francisco Magazine as one of the Ten Most Eligible Bachelors in the Bay Area. He felt very much like a man on top of the world. His mother, however, always reminded him that the future was not what he made of it; it was what the future made of him that mattered.

As he sat in his sports car, he fixated on a red azalea in full bloom. Ben wasn't a gardener. In fact he had no interest in gardening. He felt it was important, for the sake of a good image, to have a professional gardener install and maintain the planting beds in front and behind his home. He had spent an inordinate amount of time and money for something he rarely noticed. This particular plant struck him as being perfectly beautiful. The red flowers reminded him of the lipstick his mother wore. They glistened with dusk's moisture. Something to his left broke his rare hypnotic state. He couldn't be sure, but it appeared that it might have been someone running silently across the intersection at the end of the block. He turned and saw another runner carrying what appeared to be a baseball bat. He thought nothing of it, and pulled into his garage. Before getting out of his classic sports car, he scanned his mostly empty garage. There were no tools, gardening implements, or any other typical items found in garages showing evidence of home ownership. In one corner stood a folded ping-pong table shrouded

in a blue tarpaulin that had been used once for a housewarming party given by one of Ben's law firm colleagues. A dart board randomly stung with six darts hung on the wall to his left.

His garage was a flight of stairs below his two-story home. He entered through the kitchen, threw his keys into the basket that served to catch miscellaneous items for which there were no clear organizational constructs. His home, as were his routines, was organized like an old-fashioned postmaster's desk. Everything had its own specific cubbyhole. The first floor was a large open space that included the kitchen, dining area, living room, and a small powder room. A professional designer had not only furnished it in Ben's post-modern taste, but had also equipped it with every essential and non-essential gadget she for which she could justify the retail plus consultation fee. Ben did not know that he owned five different types of vegetable peelers, nor did he care to know. It was more important that visitors knew that his Williams-Sonoma furnished kitchen, which included All-clad cookware, six-burner Viking stove, and a Sub-zero refrigerator, stood ready for preparing any dish requiring a state-of-the-art blender, mixer, or cookie sheet. Ben didn't cook, but he had acquaintances and a mother who did. Upstairs were three bedrooms, the smallest of which served as a home office. The master bedroom and bath, along with the living room, had sweeping views of City lights at night and the Golden Gate during the day.

Before shedding his work clothes, he plugged his iPod into the central music system and selected Mozart's Fantasia in C Minor for piano, played masterfully by Glenn Gould. He loved the mixture of serious and playful music and the intensity of Gould's rendering. Ben listened to all music genres except Chinese opera, which he found to be atonal and unnatural. Other than a good wine, music was the only sensory stimulant Ben used to enhance his ritualized life style.

After changing into jeans, sweatshirt, and running shoes, Ben intended to walk down to the bottom of the hill to pick up a newspaper and some gourmet take-out from one of the popular boutique neighborhood restaurants. Intentions change when confronted outside your bedroom door by tall, blond, hallow-cheeked woman dressed in a tan topcoat, flowing red

scarf, red watch cap, and large black sunglasses holding what initially looked like a cannon of a handgun.

"Good music choice, now sit down, Ben. You won't be going anywhere for awhile."

Ben stood not knowing what to do. The woman again told him in a measured tone to sit down against the wall with his hands behind his back "Close your eyes, Ben. You don't know me, and it would be best if you never do. Close your eyes, Ben." After following her instructions, Ben felt two large patches being placed over his eyes followed by the sound of tape being pulled off a roll. "I'm going to secure the eye patches with duct tape, Ben. After I do, I want you to roll onto your belly while I wrap your hands with tape. If you try to resist, remember I have a weapon and the ability to use it." Ben did as instructed and was assisted to a standing position. "We're going to go downstairs, now." The lady with the topcoat and gun led Ben down to his living room with the panoramic view of the City lights and seated him in the yellow leather chair he rarely used. She instructed him to sit quietly, ask no questions, and wait for further instructions. He wasn't sure if those instructions would be meant for him or her.

For several minutes, Ben's mind remained blank. He didn't know how or what to think. Slowly he began to meticulously take stock of his situation and try to give it some meaning. He practiced mostly anonymous law. He did research for large class-action law suits. He rarely met the individual clients who benefited from his investigatory gifts. The firm's partners understood that Ben's strengths resulted in large corporate profits, and they paid him royally for his efforts. Ben's first thoughts were that no single person could possibly be seeking revenge against him, because he worked for the benefit of large faceless groups. He also had an astonishing track record: he had never been on the losing side. The losers were always, like Ben, anonymous entities – deep-pocket corporations with deep-pocket insurance companies paying damages. He concluded that his circumstance could not be about his work.

He could not imagine any personal relationship to be the source of any violent behavior towards him. He had few close friends and no current romantic relationship. It seemed that being named one of San Francisco's most eligible bachelors was more of a curse than a gift. The notoriety more often than not was a reason for women to shy away from being seen with him. He surmised that celebrity must be the reason for his sudden victimization. Clearly, this criminal act would turn out to be nothing more than crime for profit. He thought that what he needed to do was keep calm, be patient, listen carefully, follow instructions, and gather available information so that he could effectively negotiate a win-win settlement.

His captor had not physically harmed him, and so far appeared to behave in a direct and business-like manner. Her instructions were clear, direct, and not spoken with vile temperament. Ben thought this must be a professional crime, not some amateurish whimsy. He heard three short, followed by two short, knocks at the front door. "Come in boys," said the woman. "Put the baseball bat in the corner. He's secured. Remember, I'm the only voice he hears. Have a seat on the sofa." Ben now knew that she had colleagues in crime. He didn't know that the two men had been a diversion while he sat in his driveway. They ran across the intersection to pull his attention away from the open garage allowing the woman to enter and hide behind the folded ping-pong table. "We'll wait for the call."

"May I ask what's happening?" Ben said with all the politeness he could fathom.

The woman replied, "You need to sit quietly and wait."

Ben obeyed. A cell phone rang and he heard the woman answer. "Yes, I understand. Don't you think it may be a bit early for that? Okay, then we'll proceed." He heard the phone click shut. "Ben, I've been instructed to shoot off the small toe on your left foot. I'll be removing your shoe now." This marked the first of what would prove to be several feelings of panic for Ben. Suddenly any thought of rationale disappeared. He felt a shudder spike from the base of his spine up through his shoulders and skull. When his left New Balance cross-trainer was

slipped off his left foot and sock pulled off, he discharged a small amount of urine and felt cold perspiration ooze around the collar of his shirt.

"Wait, please," he trembled. "Can't we talk about this? What is it you want? Money? Legal advice? What is it?"

"Ben, I'm sympathetic to your situation, but I've been instructed. We'll talk about what we want after we get your attention and compliance. You have a reputation for believing you can solve anything through reason and negotiation. We'll need to make sure you understand in advance that there will be no negotiation, no compromise, no reasoning. This isn't about being rational; it's about performance on our terms."

Ben heard a mechanical sound that he couldn't identify. "What are you doing?"

"Turning the silencer onto the pistol," was the cool, surgical reply. Then he heard a pop and his entire body stiffened. "That was a test shot. The only real noise from the next shot will be your scream. Most likely you'll pass out. We'll have you treated with an anesthetic and bandage before you awake. We also have pain medication for you."

Ben began to feel cold and nauseous. "Please, can't we talk first? Let's think about future consequences. Let's think about the future," he pleaded.

"We are your only future, Ben. You need to know that."

"I do. I promise. I do." Silence in the room ensued. Ben felt colder and began to shiver. A metallic taste pushed up through his throat and the back of his head began to tighten and ache. "Please," he whispered.

Finally, the woman spoke. She said that while she had been given specific instructions, she did have some discretionary power. She assured Ben that unnecessary pain and suffering could be avoided if he followed all demands. He felt his breathing slow and he consciously took a deep breath filling himself to his diaphragm and gaining some measure of calm. He assured the woman that he would do all as she requested.

"I need you to call your mother, Ben. You must instruct her to come here. The business we have involves her. Once you fulfill this demand, you'll be freed from all other obligations."

"How is my mother involved in this?" The tightening ache pulsating across the back of Ben's skull began to surge down the nape of my neck and spread across his shoulders. "You mustn't hurt her."

"Ben, you have a choice to make. Get your mother over here or suffer painful consequences for not obeying orders. I'm going to hold a phone to your ear and dial her number. It's your choice how you handle this. If you tell her something is wrong her, the toe is gone and there will be other serious consequences."

The phone was put to Ben's ear and during the six rings that it took before his mother answered, he thought about options. He could make an outrageous request that might alert her to something being very wrong and subsequently prompt her to seek help. However, he couldn't think of any invented story wild enough to prod his mother to take such action. Of course, he could also simply blurt the truth of the matter and suffer whatever consequence might ensue. He chose instead to engage in conversation while trying to buy time to figure out another solution.

"Mom, you said something when I left this evening that I've been wondering about. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Ben. I told you that being a man was more than being a man. Is that why you've called?"

"It's just that from time to time you say things that leave me wondering. Like being an omenist and knowing what the future brings."

"But, Ben, I don't know what specifics the future holds. I only know if the future might sustain promise or hold potential doom. What's bothering, Ben? You sound down."

"I still want to know what you meant about being a man." The phone was removed from Ben's ear and he heard it being hung up. The woman told Ben to stop stalling and get to the point. Ben explained he had never spontaneously asked his mother over to his house and that he needed to find a way to do so without raising suspicion. The woman agreed and explained that she would redial his mother. She instructed Ben to say he accidentally disconnected the phone. Once back on line, Ben again asked what his mother meant about being a man.

"Ben, I felt a presence about the future that would require you to make an extremely difficult decision. I simply wanted you to know that being a man sometimes requires action that benefits others while resulting in undesirable conditions for the one taking action." His mother's response seemed rehearsed. It appeared to Ben that his mother was trying to teach him a life lesson. The tightness in his shoulders increased, perspiration soaked the collar of his sweatshirt, his right eyelid began to twitch, and he felt a shiver and fainted. His captor, while holding the phone in her left hand, used her right hand to push Ben against the back of the yellow, leather chair and keep him from tumbling forward. Her accomplices moved to hold Ben back by the shoulders. The woman took the phone and matter-of-factly told Ben's mother that Ben would be calling back soon.

When Ben regained consciousness, the woman offered him a sip of room temperature water. Ben sensed perspiration dripping down his spine and soaking through his sweatshirt. The

woman observed color returning to his cheeks. What she couldn't see was that Ben awoke with a new sense of self and resolve. "Ben, you must call your mother again. You'll need to explain that a friend suddenly dropped in and apologize for hanging up so abruptly. Do you understand?"

Ben replied, "I need more information. You can do whatever you want to me. I don't really care. But you need to tell me how my mother is involved before I decide what I'll do next. Go ahead: shoot off my toe."

The next time Ben came to was in an ambulance. His left leg was elevated and he felt a throbbing pain from where his toe had been. "You're lucky," remarked the EMT. "Whoever shot you had some medical expertise."

The policewoman riding with the EMT informed Ben that an anonymous caller made a 911 call from his house to report the incident. She explained that he was found on his back, eyes patched, and his leg elevated on the leather chair. "Whoever did this to you was careful to minimize physical damage."

Ben asked the policewoman to call his mother and tell her what had happened. "We've already contacted her. She'll meet us at the hospital."

## Max

Max lived a simple life. The small closet in his one bedroom apartment reflected his minimalist beliefs. Long-and short-sleeve blue and white cotton dress shirts, tan pants, two blue and three black blazers, one navy blue suit, seven red ties, and three pair of dress shoes made up his entire work wardrobe. For weekend wear, there hung two pair of Levis, four T-shirts, one V-neck black sweater, one red cardigan sweater, a yellow and green Hawaiian shirt given to him by his mother on his thirty-third birthday, a pair of all-white New Balance sneakers and a pair of flip flops. At six foot four and exactly two hundred pounds, Max's clothes hung loose and straight, and, to his colleagues at the small college at which he taught English literature, seemed perfectly in keeping with his personality.

Every morning at precisely 5:30 AM, National Public Radio woke Max. He would remain in bed through the news update, then rise, slip into his jogging clothes, and run the same three mile loop he had run for the past five years. After shaving and showering, a breakfast of rye toast, vanilla yoghurt, three stewed prunes, black tea, and a multi-vitamin, Max would read the New York Times and five poems from the frayed Norton Anthologies he had first used as an undergraduate at the same college where he was now a tenured full professor. At thirty-five, he was the youngest tenured professor at this Midwestern, ivy-covered college.

Students enjoyed Max's classes. They found his lectures interesting and the questions he posed intriguing. The serious students imagined Max to have a casual and uncluttered academic life. Less serious students fantasized a romantic relationship with him. After all, Max was a handsome man bordering on prettiness. His blonde hair stylishly a bit out of place, bluish eyes that always seemed actively engaged, an easy smile filled with genuine sincerity, and a relaxed gait that made it easy to keep up with him on walks across campus. Acquaintances were never sure if Max's bent was towards men or women. This was a part of his life that Max kept completely private. It might have surprised some to know that he was heterosexual.

Although he was not currently involved, there had been five women in his life. And each relationship, with the first being in graduate school, was kept mutually discreet to ensure respect for his lover and privacy for Max.

After completing his daily college duties, Max would stop at the University Diner for dinner. He always sat at the same window booth, which had become known as Max's Booth. Karen Allensworth served him every day except when she had a commitment with her school-aged son. Max ordered one of three meals. His first choice, if it was fish, was the daily special. Otherwise, it was sirloin tips over egg noodles with a green salad and bleu cheese dressing on the side, or a chicken cutlet without gravy and a cup of the soup-of-the day, unless it was a creamed soup, and then he would have a green salad with Thousand Island dressing on the side. With his meal, he drank two glasses of unsweetened ice tea with lemon and had one cup of black coffee and apple pie for dessert. After dinner, Max walked to the college library, where he wrote in his journal, read obscure poems, and chatted with the serious students until 9:00 PM, when he walked home and retired for the evening. The only exception to Max's weekday routine occurred on the third Wednesday evening of each month, when he would hold court with interested students at the Village Pub. Over beers, pickled eggs, and pretzels, Max and the serious students would engage in debate over some unresolved issue that had come up in class. On weekends, Max cooked for himself.

It was on one of those Wednesdays when Jill Templeton walked through the pub's front door, purposefully approached Max, pulled a small caliber pistol from her purse, and shot him in the head. Max fell to the floor. Jill Templeton turned and walked out the door to the nearby police station, where she reported her crime and was arrested. In the meantime, an ambulance responded and whisked Max off to the hospital where he lay with tubes and breathing devices keeping him alive. Medical tests determined that he was not brain dead. Apparently the bullet was not powerful enough to obliterate brain functioning, but it was lodged in a place where it could not be removed.

While Max remained in the hospital, Jill Templeton's trial was speedy one. She pled guilty and explained that she was one of the few students who had failed one of Max's English literature classes. She told how she had offered sexual favors in exchange for a passing grade, but had been spurned. Her attorney convinced the judge that she was clearly a deeply disturbed young woman and ought to be committed to a psychiatric facility.

Thinness was a genetic trait that ran in Max's family. Every day of his hospital stay, his thin, sixty-year-old mother visited from 11:00 AM until 3:00 PM. His thin father had died in a fiery accident as an amateur sports car racer when Max was ten years old. He had no siblings and his mother never remarried. His mother always brought a bag lunch, usually egg or tuna salad on white bread, an orange or apple, and two Oreo cookies. The nurses would bring her apple juice or water, which she drank out of the serving container.

Max did not inherit his imagination. His mother and father led ordinary, plain lives. His father owned a gas station and purchased an extravagant amount of life insurance that served his mother well. His mother never held a job outside their tidy, cottage-style home. She dutifully cared for Max through his undergraduate schooling and she belonged to the same women's service club for almost forty years. Max's imagination emerged in early adolescence when he began writing poetry. With his father gone, his mother would sit at the dinner table and listen as Max read his daily poems. She would silently affirm his efforts with nods and smiles. His mother never fully understood his obscure metaphors and references. When Max left for graduate school, he and his mother kept in touch with weekly letters, hers mailed on Friday and received by Monday; his sent on Tuesday and received on Thursday. Only visits home on observed holidays broke the routine. Well-crafted words defined this mother-son relationship better than promises and feelings.

While Max lay in his coma, Jill Templeton sat incarcerated in a ten-by-ten foot room in a psychiatric hospital surrounded by lush woods and a twenty-foot security fence. She was awakened each morning, had breakfast among fifty other criminally insane patients with whom

she had no ongoing relationships, attended a one-hour group therapy session, walked the grounds when the weather cooperated, ate lunch with the same fifty criminally insane patients, and retired to her room to spend two hours writing letters to Max. At 3:00 PM she had a one-hour private therapy session with a staff psychologist, at which time she delivered her daily letter to Max hoping it would be mailed. The psychologist dutifully made note of each letter and turned it over to the staff psychiatrist for analysis and feedback. The letters were never mailed.

Jill Templeton could best be described as cute and bouncy. She was twenty-eight, red haired, with a perfect complexion and a slender, well-proportioned body. In high school she was a cheerleader who never dated. She learned early on to sit at the front of the classroom, smile, raise her hand, and reply to questions even if she didn't know the answers. She always stayed after class to ask a question or two. She was what teachers would describe as a polite and ideal student. Although she didn't do well on tests, she turned in all her homework and excelled at participation. In return, she received grades good enough to gain entry into college even though her college entrance exams were below the norm. Jill's parents, neighbors, and friends could not understand why she would shoot a college professor. They collectively believed that Max must have done something to incite Jill to such gruesome action.

In his coma, Max began to dream. All of the dreams involved Jill. The first was a replaying of Jill walking into the pub. At that moment, Max hadn't recognized Jill, even when he saw her pull the pistol from her purse, aim, and shoot. In his dream, he saw Jill enter in slow motion wearing a pink cashmere sweater, blue jeans, clogs, and carrying a black tote-style purse. He watched her walk towards him, reach into her purse, pull out the pistol, and fire. He saw the bullet leave the barrel and strike him in the forehead. He felt nothing, but watched as the serious students screamed; their mouths wide open, and saw Jill turn to walk out the door after dropping the pistol on the black-and-white linoleum floor. Max played this dream like a video loop for months.

Doctors would tell his mother that his brain was still very much alive and that there was evidence from both brain wave activity and rapid eye movements that he was dreaming. They encouraged his mother to talk to Max as much as she was comfortable. She began writing letters to Max and reading them to him later. She would three-hole punch the letters and place them in a binder. She believed that, should he recover from his coma, the letters would serve to fill in the history of his long sleep.

In the meantime, Jill's letters, which had begun as long apologies, were turning into love letters. They began as a simple wooing gesture. She wrote about flirting with Max in class, and how she would answer a question from the lesson's literature assignment by doing what romance novels had instructed: look up from her book with come-hither eyes, moisten her lips with a swirl of her tongue, and softly say that she couldn't remember. She wrote long descriptions of how she dressed to seduce Max. She described a life that they might have together in a romanticized future, and slowly her letters evolved into highly erotic descriptions of an on-going honeymoon. The more Jill wrote, the more connected she felt to Max. She thought of the ink flowing from her pen into Max's veins as a life-sustaining plasma.

Max's dreams about Jill began to change. At first he heard Jill's apologies as whispers. With each new apology and description of her own condition, her voice became louder and clearer. Max found himself seeing Jill in her own deep sleep – unable to be free of her own circumstances. Max imagined his own letters in reply to Jill's long narratives. He would ask for Jill to clarify her motivation for injuring him. He would describe his own disconnected state and inform – and later remind – her that she was his only link to the outside world. Each new response from Jill brought him comfort. Max grew increasingly sympathetic to Jill's isolation.

As Jill's letters became more sexually explicit, a new video loop in Max's brain took on highly-charged romantic overtones. He vividly saw himself and Jill meeting for sexual trysts at fancy hotels and weekend stays at country inns. Evidence of these new dreams showed as

increased brain wave activity and visible erections. The dreams grew in intensity for most of the second year of his coma.

Jill wrote ninety-nine letters. Her last letter to Max was a suicide note. In it she apologized again for the pain she had caused. She described her longing for him and the belief that they would one day meet in heaven. On the day Jill hung herself, Max awoke.

Several months later, after undergoing extensive voice and physical therapy, Max was back at the college teaching serious and less serious students. He resumed his regular rituals. One day, he sat at his usual booth at the diner. Only this time he was joined by his mother. She was sharing the binder filled with the letters she had written during Max's hospital stay. Max had ordered chicken noodle soup and salmon patties. His mother chose an egg salad sandwich and an iced tea. As Max flipped through his Mother's letters, he was approached by one of his less serious students. She politely leaned over and whispered into Max' ear. He considered her request and decided to meet with her later in the week.

When Max's mother inquired about the young women, Max informed her that she was the friend of a very dear, departed friend.