

2000

## Twelfth Street

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### Recommended Citation

Rohrer, Dan (2000) "Twelfth Street," *Exile*: Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol47/iss1/7>

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## Twelfth Street, Canton

### One

Along part of Twelfth Street in Canton, Ohio, a stone retaining wall supports the earth of a graveyard. Stands of trees obscure the view of rain-smoothed tombstones and crumbling vaults. Greatest of the tombs is William McKinley's; hundreds of steps lead to a soaring, gray rotunda. It makes into dominoes the markers that lie downhill, like that of Martin and Jessica Shell.

Through the graveyard's scattered hillocks William Shell walked the path leading to his parents' plot. During his first visits to their grave he had gotten turned around and frustrated, taking ten minutes to remember where it was situated. Now he liked that they were relatively hidden from the rest of the cemetery. He could imagine them sleeping side-by-side as they had in their bedroom, undisturbed, Dad on the left and Mom on the right.

In one of William's first memories he listened to his parents preparing for bed. Dad was trying to talk Mom into calling the school to let the boys out of class.

"Jon and William shouldn't be missing school this early in the year," William heard her say. He watched the two of them through the crack where the door hinged to the wall. Gently, she pulled back the covers on her side of the bed and sat down, facing away from Dad. "Besides, Will is having enough trouble fitting in. The kids already think he's stupid because he doesn't talk. We don't need them to make up reasons for why Will wasn't in school. You know how kids are."

"It's not that bad, Jess. Will's a smart boy. When I was at his school for that teachers' conference I saw him at recess. The kids don't make fun of him like they do everyone else. They treat him with... reverence, I guess."

A sigh leaked from her lips as she reached for the hairbrush on her bedside table. Jessica picked up the brush and turned on the soft light of the reading lamp, then began to attend to her hair. "If we're able to save enough for the Florida trip this year, we'll want to take the kids out of school for a week - that's more than enough time off."

Dad kicked off his slippers. "It'll be fine, Jess. Remember how thrilled you were when your parents would take you out of school?" He slipped out of his gray robe, throwing it on his nightstand. "I want the boys to know what that feels like."

"My parents never did that, Martin. Come on. You know them."

"Yeah, I guess so." He watched her hair shift in the golden light of the lamp, the brush working the locks into clean rows. "But don't you wish they had?" She turned around to regard him. With a feigned innocence, he smiled at her.

"They're only in grade school. We need to show them that we care about their attendance. If we don't care, they won't care. It's simple as that."

"We're talking one time, hon. It'll be special." Martin crawled up behind Jessica on the bed. He wrapped his arms around her neck and shoulders; she stopped brushing her hair, placing her fingers on his forearms. As he touched his cheek to hers, he could feel her smiling. He slipped his knees to either side of her, then coaxed the hairbrush out of her hand. She let him take it and begin to work through the remaining knots.

"You're just trying to be the cool dad. The hero."

"Maybe I am. But Jon's studying the presidents in class. This will be like homework. I talked about this with some of the other history teachers at our conference. They say kids learn better when they visit historical sites. We'll let them sleep in, take them to the monument, and go to the park. Then we can grab lunch afterwards."

"You're still a little kid, Martin. You just want to take a day and play."

"Sure. But the boys will get to see a historic landmark, too."

"Martin..." She rubbed her hands on the flannel of his pajama pants. His legs were still warm from their evening shower.

"Which is more important? school or family?" He squeezed her playfully.

"Neither."

"In twenty years, they'll look back on this and smile. They won't remember a damn thing from school tomorrow, probably."

"You make things so hard." She patted his knees. "All right. I'll think about it."

"Great." Dad leaned in to kiss Mom on the cheek. "Good night, Jess."

She worked free of his arms, turned to him, and put her lips to his. William watched them kiss for what seemed like many minutes. Then Mom pulled away slowly and said, "Good night." They got under the covers – Dad on the left, Mom on the right – and turned off their bedside lamps.

William walked across the hardwood floor of the hall to his bedroom. Jonathan was under his covers on the top bunk reading a comic book. When he heard William come in, he sat up and asked, "Are they going to take us to the park tomorrow?"

William nodded.

"All right! No stupid math quiz for me!"

William crawled into the bottom bunk, got under the covers, and closed his eyes. He could hear Jonathan chuckle at the characters in his comic book every now and again. Even with the bedroom light on William fell asleep quickly.

\* \* \*

"You're going to love this place, guys," Dad called to them from the driver's seat. "You'll get to see the tomb of President William McKinley. They built him a huge dome with a great big stairway. It's really neat."

The kids weren't listening to Dad this early in the morning. William was transfixed by the passing scenery, and Jonathan was poking at Will's ribs.

When Jon had been quiet for too long, Martin glanced back at the boys. He didn't want Jon to get Will crying again. "If you're good, we might go to the park afterwards," he said, a promise and a warning.

Dad was looking pretty stern in the rearview mirror, so Jon decided to switch tactics. "Hey, Will. I'll race you up the stairs. Bet I'll win."

William didn't respond. He'd said all of three words in his life: mom, dad, and car. A little bullying from his brother elicited barely a sound.

When they got out of the Impala at the monument, the boys did race up the stairs. Will gave up at the halfway point – when Jon had reached the top. William didn't

seem too distraught about his loss. He waited for Mom and Dad to catch up to him and walked with them. They each took a hand, lifting William up the steps and making *zoom* noises.

Once they joined Jonathan at the top, the family looked around the monument for twenty minutes. There wasn't much more to the place than the stone rotunda and the tomb inside. When the kids started to get impatient, Martin began to talk about President McKinley. "Hey, guys. Did you know that William McKinley was from Ohio?"

The kids had their normal reactions to the start of Dad's historical questions: Jon stared at him blankly, and Will fidgeted with his hands. Eventually, Will shook his head at Dad.

"He was from Stark County, just like you. Before he was Ohio's governor or the President of the United States, he was a lawyer in Canton. He loved this place so much that he wanted to be buried here."

They started to walk out of the rotunda. "How did he die?" Jon asked.

Martin paused, looking at Jessica. She gave him a little nod, giving her consent to the explanation. "A bad man killed him, Jon."

"Is that like with Abraham Lincoln?" Jon asked.

"Yes, a lot like that. A pretty smart observation, Jon." The boy smiled at his dad, who reached down to rub his stringy hair.

"If you speak up in class like that, you'll be sure to improve your history grade," Jessica said. Jon gave her a sour look, as if he were trying to touch his eyebrows to his chin.

They grew closer and closer to Monument Park. "I hope you're ready for some fun," Martin said. "This is one of the best parks around here."

"Just like I thought," Jessica said. "A few minutes of history and the rest of the day to play."

Martin beamed. "Can you blame me?"

The boys' eagerness to reach the park was apparent; they kept picking up the pace, hurrying the family to the swings and climbing equipment. Before they reached the park, Jonathan caught glimpse of a few tombstones peeking out from the trees.

"Hey Dad! Can we go over there?" he asked, pointing to the graveyard.

Jessica interjected before Martin could say yes. "No, Jon. Places like that will give you nightmares."

"Aw, please?" Looking at the twisted trees and stone-studded hillocks, Jon was filled with fascination.

"Listen to your mother, Jon."

Jessica took him by the hand, leading him away from the cemetery. Though they pressed onward, Jon's gaze remained fixed on the creeping trees and looming tombs.

Two

William walked the path through that quiet, deserted place. He thought about the day that they'd come to the monument and the park. He'd been glad for the day off of school; the monument and the park had been beautiful; afterwards they'd gone to Heggy's for chocolates and Taggart's for lunch and ice cream. To six-year-old William, that was



heaven.

The place didn't appear to be changed since the family's trip to the Monument, or since William's visit to the graveyard a week ago. Buds came late to the plants that year; he preferred the cemetery when leaves decorated the trees. They took away from the bleak grayness of the scene.

At least the carnation he'd brought was more colorful than the flowers that grew in sparse patches around the trees. He rolled its stem between his thumb and middle finger, admiring its healthy whiteness. Mom had always loved white carnations.

Approaching a wide tombstone, William knelt on one knee. He placed the flower before the dark blue marble marker. *Here, Mom*, he said to her in his head. *I picked out the prettiest carnation in Bailey's just for you. You need something to look at other than the dying grass and ugly trees.*

*I've got something for you, too, Dad.* Out of his jacket pocket he pulled a pack of Beeman's gum. *The drug store didn't have any of the black licorice kind, so I just got the plain. Hope that's all right.*

After closing his eyes for a few seconds, he reached out to the wide, deeply chiseled letters on the stone:

Martin Shell

Jessica Shell

1998-1999

1950-1998

Loving parents of Jonathan and William

Something about looking at those letters always helped him remember their faces. He tried to think about them and talk to them back at the apartment, but his roommates were always breaking his concentration. He could see them clearly at their grave. *Graduation's coming up*, he thought, imagining them as they had looked in the park that day. *I'm going to have to settle for salutatorian, but that's all right. I've already been accepted at the University of Pennsylvania for graduate school. And that's what I wanted, and I know you'd be proud of me anyway I graduated.*

He ran his fingers along his parents' names and closed his eyes. *God, I wish Jon could be there. It would be nice to have someone there. Do you think he'll make it?*

William opened his eyes. No one was visiting on that Saturday, leaving the wind as the only noise. Maybe if that wind would quiet down, he could hear his parents speak.

He looked back down at the stone. *Try to help him get in his car and drive here. He doesn't even have to visit the graveyard. I just want him to see the college and my friends and all. And I want him to visit your grave.*

He sat for a moment and breathed the cool air, then stood up. As he walked back toward his car, he thought he might grab a burger before driving back to Wooster, and maybe stop off at Heggy's.

Three

Jane West finished her hamburger. She crumpled the foil wrapper and threw it into one of the trash cans on Oakwood Street. All day she'd been craving a burger; she'd

missed breakfast because she'd hit the snooze bar too many times, and she only had enough time at lunch to go to the pizza shop next door. Once she'd gotten out of the bookstore she headed straight to the nearest burger joint.

She found that eating on the way home made the walk more pleasurable. She'd tried reading for a few days, but was too interested in watching the pedestrians to focus on a book. She liked eating a little something and guessing at what the pedestrians' lives were like.

Today she'd watched a businessman who had walked in front of her for about five blocks. He was her age, maybe a little older. His briefcase and clothes were fairly expensive, but he didn't carry himself like a CEO. And he was walking, after all. She thought that perhaps he was just a few years out of college trying to make it in the business world. So many of her friends from Kent State had tried their hands at business. Not many of them succeeded. They'd had dreams of striking it rich quickly, but all of them were still making little more than she did at the bookstore.

The men and women from local firms frequented Moira's Books; being downtown, it was a popular lunchtime hangout for the professionals of Anderson. They were just like her business friends from school: very lucid in discussing money, but quite unintelligible in anything else. She and Moira liked to make fun of the conversations that the men would have over their coffee. They were always discussing stocks, bonds, and this or that article in the Wall Street Journal – as seriously as ministers discussing the Bible.

"You should ask one of these fine gentlemen to dinner this Friday," Moira suggested earlier that day, shelving some new books. "You've been too long without a boyfriend."

"If I want to hear about soy bean futures or the NASDAQ, I'll watch CNN," Jane replied.

"All businessmen don't just talk about money. Bill and I have a friend, Jonathan, who's a businessman. We went out to dinner with him last Friday. He talked about everything *but* business."

"Really. How come I haven't met this charming prince? What, are you keeping him all to yourself?"

"He's not around most of the time. He lives in Bill's building, and they just hang out there. They go out drinking, mostly. You don't want a boyfriend who goes out drinking with his buddies. Trust me. I know."

"So what did you and this wonderful businessman talk about?"

"Amongst other things, philosophy and literature. He loves Camus. Isn't that wonderful? Goodness knows that I've been dying for someone to discuss Camus with."

Moira gave Jane a look from under her eyebrows.

"He must be an idiot if he likes that kind of thing."

"Well, he likes movies, too. We had a nice discussion of how they used Whitman in *Dead Poets Society*."

Jane stopped putting books on the shelves and knitted her eyebrows. "Really. Hmm."

"What?"

"Oh – I just had a boyfriend in college named Jonathan. He was into philoso-

phy, and wrote a term paper on the poetry in *Dead Poets Society*."

"His named wasn't Jonathan Shell, was it?"

"You're kidding me."

"You know him, huh? Small world."

"I guess so." She started to shelve books again.

"He works for CircaSoft now. Maybe you should get reacquainted with him. Shake loose some of those big bucks he's got in the bank."

"Maybe I should." She knelt down to get some books out of a box on the floor.

"Lives in Bill's building, huh? Which apartment is his?"

"That's what I like to see – a young thing like you taking the initiative. I think it's 302. The first one on the left on the third floor."

At the end of work she grabbed her food and headed toward the Apartments at Oakwood Drive. *I can't believe he's living in Anderson*, she repeated to herself as she stood in front of his building. *That bastard*. She walked up the stairs to the front door and found a trashcan for her hamburger wrapper. An old woman walked out of the place, and Jane caught the door before it closed again.

#### Four

Standing at the door of 302, Jane took a deep breath. *How many times have I thought about this? Must have been every couple of weeks. And he's living in my city. All this time.* She knocked on the door.

After a while she heard footfalls approaching. The knob made a clicking noise, but the door's hinges were silent as it opened. A man's face peeked out. She could see his head and half of his body. Several days' growth of beard darkened his face; black hair, looking in need of a trim, stuck to his head, probably after a shower. Had he not appeared so sleepy, Jon might have betrayed his surprise at seeing her. Each looked at the other without saying anything.

After just a few seconds too long, Jane broke the silence. "Hi, Jon. How you doing?"

His mouth opened, but he didn't say anything. He looked at her, standing outside the doorway with her weight thrown onto one leg. From head to toe and back again his eyes swept over her. He managed to say, "Fine. Fine." Then, rather more bluntly than he'd hoped, he muttered, "What are you doing here?"

"I heard you were living in Anderson now, so I thought I'd look you up." Her voice held pleasantness, overcompensating for a note of anxiety.

His face softened. "I thought I'd never see you again, babe. You look great. Come on in."

"Seems like you're getting ready for bed, though. I don't want to intrude." She put up her arms and stepped back a bit.

"Don't be silly. I was just planning to relax for the evening. Come in. Have a seat." He opened the door all the way.

"All right. But I'm on my way home from work, so I won't bother you for too long."

The open door allowed a view of the kitchen to the right and the sitting area to



the left. They were separate sections of one room. She stepped into the apartment, trying to gather details through the dimness. The place's only light came from the setting sun over Oakwood Street and a little nightlight next to the couch.

She wondered why the apartment looked so strange to her, then she realized that it seemed empty. There wasn't much in the way of furniture or appliances, and the walls were all but bare. As she sat on the couch to which Jon motioned, she noticed his single poster: Shania Twain wearing tight clothing, holding her hair above her head:

"Shania Twain, eh?"

"Yes," Jon replied, taking a seat in his worn recliner. "I'm saving myself for her." He looked at Jane and raised one eyebrow.

"So you've decided that you're a virgin again?" She had a seat on the couch.

"Oh, right." Though he tried to joke, Jonathan betrayed discomfort in his voice. "That was *you*, wasn't it." He bit his lip, thinking of a way to shift the subject. "Still, I can see a guy like me and a woman like her getting married."

"Well, not if you believe the tabloids. Last week one said she joined a no-sex cult."

"Damn. Just my luck. She couldn't become a Mormon, or something like that."

Jane let out a weak laugh. "You two would make a cute couple. You could sit around the apartment in your robes, just like this. God, I can't believe you still have that ugly robe."

"Yeah. It was Dad's. You don't throw away a good piece of clothing like this. Y'know, I should write to her, or call her agent or something. She'd have to marry me once she found out about my wonderful robe." He looked at the poster. "I'll bet she's the kind of woman who appreciates fine clothing." He rubbed at a dark stain on the collar.

"The trouble is getting her to see you in it. She's probably busy being famous and doing concert tours."

"I like to think it's fate. We're bound to end up together. Out of nowhere this mysterious woman will show up at my door." He smiled.

"Aren't I enough for one day?"

The smile widened. "I suppose so. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I told you. I heard you were in town and I wanted to drop by. My boss dates Brian in 316. She was telling me about dinner last Friday, so your name came up."

"Oh, you work at her bookstore?"

"Yeah, since we graduated, so two years now. I hear you've been working for CircaSoft. Nice."

"Yeah. Upper management."

"So my communist friend has finally embraced capitalism, eh? If I hadn't seen your apartment I would have said you were doing well. The stock is still rising at record rates. Must be a great place to work."

"Well, not really. I quit that job." He looked down at the recliner's arm, drumming his fingers on the leather.

"What, did you make enough to retire on already, or did they fire you for your chronic tardiness?"

"No, I quit. I got sick of the computer business. It was almost like I was



making too much money for doing nothing at all. So I'm taking some time off from working."

As they talked, Jane's eyes wandered around the room. "How much are you sitting on? I see you don't put a whole lot of it into this place."

"I've got a lot of stock and enough cash for the rest of my life, I guess. I'm just not much of a decorator."

"You'd think a man in 'upper management' would have, I don't know, marble nudes and oil paintings all over. And a place on Park." She got up to look around the sitting area. As she walked over by Jon in his recliner she peered out onto Oakwood Street. Men were already congregating outside the Express Liquor store with bottles in their hands.

"It's not too big a place, but it's comfortable. And it's not too noisy like some of the places in the heart of downtown. Plus I've got the open air market right up the block."

"Yeah, because you're such a gourmet." He took her words as humorous, smiling at her. She was glad for that. Jane was proud that she'd not yet let her anger show through too much in her words. She guessed it was because Jon seemed different than he was just two years ago. Maybe he'd changed. When the dull cityscape out the window grew boring, she turned to her left, where she saw Jon's entertainment center: a plain table supporting a VCR, a small television, and three videocassettes.

"I see you've got the same movies, still." She ran her fingers along the tapes' worn cases.

Jon was quiet as she perused his copies of *Casablanca*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, and *Dead Poets Society*.

"You can get by with classics like these, I guess. Of course I've only seen the first part of *An Officer and A Gentleman*."

"Yeah," Jonathan said, shifting in his recliner. He looked over at her, but her back was turned. "Of course."

Picking up the cassette in its battered case, she turned it over in her hands. *What a bastard*, she thought. *What a total jerk*. And I'm talking to him like we're old friends.

"I wish you'd told me in person, Jon. That would've been nice." Looking over her shoulder, she could see that Jon didn't intend to meet her eyes. He waited for the silence to pass, rubbing his palms up and down the arms of the recliner. He hoped she might drop the subject. She pressed him further, though. "What, did you think you'd never see me again?"

Yes, he thought. Realizing that she wouldn't gloss over the matter, he gritted his teeth. "I'm sorry, Jane."

She kept her back turned to him and looked away. Her eyes found the tape case again. Not really looking at it she let her mind wander back to Kent State, a messy apartment, the arms of a good friend – and the glow of that movie on a small TV.

"I'm really sorry," he restated. "Things just got weird for me then."

"That's still no reason to leave a breakup note *taped to my door* after commencement," she said, turning her heavy stare at him. "I'm glad most of the apartment had moved out by then – that way, only seven people knew about it before I did. God, I

can't believe you left the note *open* on the door. Two, three years of dating, and I was only worth a scribbled note and some tape."

He got out of the recliner and stepped toward her. "Jane, I'm sorry for what I did. I know you probably think I'm an ass, but... I'm still working it all out – still trying."

She turned to him slowly. When she spoke her voice struggled for control. "Seems to me there's nothing to be worked out. You dumped me. I just want to know *why*. You told me you loved me three times in as many years," Jane half whispered, "And *I believed you*."

Her words did not prompt the response she'd expected; Jon just looked at her. For a moment, he parted his lips as if to say something, but closed them as quickly.

Jane looked back down at the movie, then up at Jon. "Now that I think about it, I should've watched the last hour of this. The end of the movie is probably a lot better than the sex was."

She tossed the tape on the TV and found the door. Near the bottom of the three flights of stairs she found that her right hand was covering her right eye and forehead. Unconsciously, she'd started rubbing between her eyebrows with her middle and ring fingers. On top of the dirt of a day's work sat a fine coating of sweat. In that moment she felt exactly as she had after pulling the breakup note off of her door.

\* \* \*

Jon sat back down in his recliner. The last minutes seemed unreal to him. He hadn't thought about Jane in – what, months? a year? He'd tried to bury her next to Kent State, Ohio, his parents. All of those things rested in another age. Jonathan Shell had been a different person then. He hadn't had the security of a lifetime's earnings in the bank, but he'd been surrounded by people. He'd had classes to look forward to, although he didn't go every day. Living with roommates had been nice. And having a girlfriend had been great. Now all of those things were gone. He didn't like to think about those things he missed.

He was sitting in the recliner again. His neck and underarms felt sweaty. *So even here I can't leave you behind. Where do I have to go? Ecuador? Antarctica? New Zealand, for God's sake? You couldn't just let me be, could you? I'd gotten away. I'd gotten away. You had to come to Anderson.*

He stared unwaveringly at the apartment door. From the recliner, his view was dominated by the entertainment stand: the VCR, the television, and on top of it all, that old copy of *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

*I was going to shave. A knock on the door. Brian, I thought. Brian wants me to be his designated driver again. Or Moira with her Camus. But I open the door, and there's this ghost.*

God. I should have told her that I haven't rewound the movie since that night.

Nah – she wouldn't have cared. I couldn't have said it, anyway. I was never good at telling her things.

Five

"I'm glad it's done with, Moira," Jane sighed.

"I never thought that my Jonathan was the type with a sordid past," she mused, twisting her fingers around in the phone cord. "He always seemed like such a nice boy."

"He was. He was. I don't know what happened. I always hoped we'd stay together after college, you know. I would've married him."

"That might still be in the cards, honey. Forgiveness works wonders. That's what Mother always told me."

"Ooh. I've never heard you sound so compassionate, Moira."

"Don't be silly. It's not compassion; it's just being practical. You forgive him and you don't have to have all this anger all the time. Simple."

"Sounds good, but I don't know. Could you forgive a guy who did that to you?"

"Sure. You're too concerned about things that happened years ago. You're obsessing. Work past it. I've known Jonathan for about a year now, which isn't really that long, but I feel like he could've been my son. I know that he's a good man. It usually happens that something outside the relationship is the problem. Trust me. You should go to him and try to find out what the real problem was."

"I'll think about it, Moira."

"Do that. When you get to be my age you realize that anger doesn't matter so much. You'll wish you could've kept all your friends, especially the ones you fought with. You'll miss them the most."

\* \* \*

Jonathan hadn't eaten anything for dinner, nor did he feel like he could. A shower and a shave were likewise unappealing. He just wanted to sit. So he sat for hours. As the mesmerizing sounds of traffic on Oakwood softened into the evening, he thought about just turning the TV on and falling asleep. It would be another night of watching the God Channel, nodding off to the evangelists' humble supplications for money. The recliner had started to feel sweaty, though, so he got up.

He took a look at Oakwood Street. *Still a nice view*, he told himself. *Like Canton. Except without all the one-way streets.* He smiled, running his hand along the thick stubble on his chin. *I guess I just miss Twelfth Street.* His smile softened as he pulled the old curtains over the window.

In walking to the bedroom door, he stuck out his left hand to touch the poster of Shania Twain. His fingers ran over the glossy paper, then onto the flaking paint of the wall. Pulling his fingers toward his face, he returned his hand to his chin. *I'll shave tomorrow.* His bedroom door squeaked but sounded less in need of oil than it usually did. Light from the moon and surrounding buildings shone through the Venetian blinds, stripping the mounded covers of his bed. He was seeing bright specks in front of his eyes. *Another migraine*, he thought, watching the little lights dance and weave. *Third one this week.*

He touched his chest as he sat down on the bed. His heartbeat felt irregular, weak. Instead of an insistent pulse beneath the ribs, he felt a throb in his head. The veins



on his temples tensed and relaxed.

*That's all right – maybe the throbbing will take my mind away from Jane. Sure.*

I did right. I know I did – it was the only way. I knew it even as my thumb slid over the Scotch tape onto the lacquer of her door. Even as my throat tightened.

That tightness returned to him in the darkened bedroom on Oakwood Street. He wondered, *Why did she come here after what I did? Why is it always the one you don't want?*

Just like losing my virginity. Couldn't have been Jill, could it?

The longer he sat in the dark, the less he needed to hope for sleep; it came slowly and steadily. He turned his thoughts from Jane to Jill.

As his breathing grew lax and his eyes closed, he whispered, "Love you, babe."

## Six

When he awoke, sunlight was trying to find Jonathan Shell where he lay. Thirteen hours of sleep left him feeling sleepy nonetheless. He was filled with the sense that he'd had nightmares. He couldn't remember any of them.

Looking at the clock, he saw that the time was already 12:30 in the afternoon; he'd slept later than he had since college.

After dragging himself out of bed, he walked to the bathroom. This was where he'd been yesterday when he'd heard the knock on his door, he remembered, finding his bottle of Barbasol. He felt the four days' worth of beard on his chin, then rubbed a generous amount of the foam onto his face. His razor was rusty and a bit dull, but it made quick work of the facial hair.

In taking off his clothes for the shower, he realized that four days could make a man stink. Never again, he told himself. Never again will I go for four days without showering. Retired though I may be, I shall keep up with my personal hygiene. He rubbed himself with antibacterial soap and worked dandruff shampoo into his scalp. His mind wandered.

Maybe I should ask for my job back. This is no way to live life. All I needed was a vacation, really. They wouldn't take me back, though, after the scene I made. But I'm already sick of the apartment, and it hasn't been two weeks yet since I quit.

I don't need to work for the rest of my life. I've got plenty of assets. I could just travel, or something. I could finally go to Greece, or anywhere else I want. I'd be like that guy who just walks around the world. I'll buy twenty pairs of boots, and no one will ever see me again.

Nah. I hate walking, and I couldn't handle eating some of the weird things they serve in other countries. Hell, I'd die without macaroni and cheese.

The stink of his body gave way to the smells of soap. *I should do something, I suppose. Before I know it, I'll be one of those guys that can't leave his apartment because he won't fit through the door. The drinking doesn't help, either. No more of this going out to the bar with Brian. At least more than once a week.*

He started to wash the shampoo out of his hair. It took longer than it should have. The building's water seemed to be getting softer every day.

Jon turned off the water and pulled back the mildewed curtain. The towel on



the rack wasn't yet too ripe. He dried himself and put on his Dad's robe, then stepped in front of the mirror. With a few quick flicks of his comb, he arranged his scruffy hair in a semblance of order.

Now more or less awake, his stomach begged for the food it had missed the previous night. Some macaroni and cheese sounded good.

He made his way to the kitchen. Opening one of the cupboards to the left of the sink, he pulled out one of the dozen blue macaroni boxes. He set it on the counter and pulled his saucepan out of a drawer.

*What is it, milk and butter?* he thought, reaching for the box again. It called for a fourth of a cup of milk and eight tablespoons of margarine. *I think I have that.*

He walked past the sink to the fridge and opened it. Next to a jug of fruit punch and a carton that held three eggs sat milk and margarine. He pulled them out, leaving the punch and eggs to inhabit the otherwise empty fridge.

He traded the milk and margarine for the saucepan. Without measuring, he filled it with tap water and put it on the stove.

*Measuring cup. I need a measuring cup.*

There was a knock at the door.

For a moment he thought about putting some pants on. He decided to just open the door in his robe. It couldn't be anyone who would care that he was underdressed.

Jane stood in the hall.

"Hi," he said flatly.

"Hi Jon." She was wearing the same work clothes from the day before. "May I come in?"

"Sure, if you don't mind my attire." He ran his hand along the collar of his robe.

"No. Not at all." Jon walked back to the kitchen area, allowing Jane to enter the apartment. She closed the door quietly and walked over beside him as he continued to prepare lunch. "I see that you shaved. You look nice."

"Thanks. I was starting to feel pretty dirty. Hope I didn't smell too bad yesterday."

"No, not too bad."

He fumbled in the cupboard for a measuring cup. "I'm kind of glad you came by, Jane. I'd hate to go for another two years after yesterday."

"Yeah; I'm sorry, Jon. I didn't want to blow up at you like that."

"No, that's okay. I'm surprised you were as calm as you were." He sliced off eight tablespoons from the stick of butter, put the rest back in the fridge, and turned to Jane.

She looked tired. "I thought about you all last night and today at work. The more I thought about what happened, the more upset I got about yesterday. I want us to be able to talk like we used to."

Jon poured milk from the half-gallon container into the measuring cup. "Do you think I'm all right to use milk that expired four days ago?"

"Probably."

He nodded. "Let's talk. We'd both feel better if we got some things off of our chests." He motioned toward the sitting area.

They resumed the positions they'd occupied the day before: Jon in the recliner and Jane beneath the poster of Shania Twain.

"Why did you leave me like that, Jon? Were we going too fast at the end?"

"No. Nothing like that. I was just trying to move forward with my life. You know. I had the job in Buffalo, and I was eager to build a career. I just didn't think I could keep you happy anymore. So I wrote you that note."

"And taped it to my door, open."

"Yeah. I thought you might want to come after me unless I acted like a bastard."

"Well, you succeeded at being a bastard. But I did come after you. It's just taken me two years to find you."

"I'm glad you did, too. It gives me a chance to apologize."

"I thought you didn't want to make amends," she said.

"Hmm?"

Jane pulled a piece of paper from her breast pocket and read:

*Jane,*

*For two years we've dated. You've been wonderful to me. Last night was one of the best nights of my life.*

*I just don't love you. I don't see how our relationship can survive when I only feel lust for you. Your body is wonderful, but I don't have a single shred of affection for you as a person.*

*So I must leave you. I hope to find someone better in New York. I wish you the best.*

*Please understand. I am sorry for lying to you for these three years, but I haven't the time to make amends now.*

*Jonathan*

She folded it back up and put it into her pocket. "Pretty heartless words, Jon."

He looked at his knees. His robe was hanging open a little too wide, so he closed it up tighter. "Yeah."

"You know what's funny, though?"

"What's that?"

"Even when I first read that note – and I was hurt – I didn't believe that you meant it. Those didn't sound like your words."

"Well, they were. Honest and true."

"There's something you're not telling me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He stood up and paced in front of the couch, hands behind his back. He twisted his face into a thoughtful expression, then stopped pacing. "Actually, there is something else, Jane."

"What's that?"

He was silent.

She stood up, bringing her face close to his. "What was it?"

He looked to the poster, then back at Jane. "It was Jill."

Her eyebrows fell. "Jill?"

"I don't think you knew her; she was two classes behind us."

"Did you two..."

"No, nothing like that. It's stupid, really. Not even that important." He waved his hand dismissively.

"You've started telling me now. Finish."

"Nothing happened, babe. That's the strange thing. I had this thing for her. I'd see her around campus, but I'd never talk to her. She probably didn't even know my name. But she was gorgeous – she looked like Debra Winger, from *An Officer and a Gentleman*. And she was nice. Witty. I was attracted to her. How was I supposed to stay with you when I wanted her?"

"That's all? You left me, didn't say goodbye, because you had fantasies about another woman?"

"Yeah."

She looked into his eyes, her face a tangle of disbelief. "That's really stupid, Jon."

"I know."

"I wish you would have told me then. We could have worked it out. Taken some time away from each other, or at least ended the thing as friends."

"I was confused. I would have done things differently, looking back."

*Two years, she thought. Two years I've wondered. And that was all that came between us – a fantasy, just like the ones everybody has...*

"I thought about you all the time, Jane."

"I thought about you, too. Your water is boiling."

He turned from her and went into the kitchen. She watched him pour the pasta into the pan, the water bubbling and steaming.

Jane cleared her throat. "Hey. I've got to grab some food and get back to the bookstore. Could I call you tonight?"

"I don't have a phone. Sorry. But you can drop by anytime. Why don't you stick around and have lunch with me? It's not like I have anything else to do."

"No. I wouldn't eat anything with that milk in it." She walked over and hugged him, then stepped away again. "I'll come by after work tomorrow."

"Great."

The door closed quietly behind Jane as she left.

Jon took the cap off of the milk and smelled it.

Seven

"Remember that girl Jane I dated in college?" John asked.

William thought for a second. "Sure. The brunette with great legs. I'll never understand why you dumped her. An intelligent girl with a body like that..."

"It was just about the time I graduated."

"Oh. So Mom and Dad, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Why do you bring her up?"

"Well, she came by the apartment yesterday and today. I hadn't seen her since I left a breakup note at her apartment."

"Ouch. You always had a way with women, didn't you, Big Brother?"

"Yep. She was pretty mad; when she came by today we made up, I guess."

"So you got a little action, huh?"

"Now, Will."

"That's okay. Your time will come."

"You'd better take advantage while you're still in college. Girls put out a lot right before graduation. Then you get into the real world where people don't have sex."

"I'll keep that in mind. So, what did you decide about my graduation?"

"I can't hear you, Will. Those damn cell phones are so unreliable."

"I just went under an overpass, but we should be fine now. Maybe it's your phone. You calling from the Hawk and Dove again?"

"Yeah."

"That's it. It ain't my phone. Hey – don't get yourself inebriated down there."

"I won't. I've just had a few and it's last call. What were we talking about?"

"Graduation. Are you coming?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm looking for a job, so I don't think I should leave Anderson."

"Why don't you just come home? You can see my graduation and stay at my apartment, and then you can look for a job by the University of Pennsylvania."

"You got in, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Mom and Dad would be real proud of you. You're doing really well."

"I know. I was just visiting them."

"I bet they would give anything to see you this Sunday."

"They'll be watching, Jon. But I'd still like to have my wonderful brother there – you know, a living relative."

Jon paused. "No. I wouldn't even make it out of the state. You know that. I get behind the wheel and it's like a panic attack. After the near-breakdown I had driving here after graduation I swore off long car trips."

"Why don't you fly?"

"I'd still have to drive to the airport. I'm not about to *walk*."

"You've got to get past it, Jon. I know how tough it is. It took me a while to be able to drive again, too, but you'll just have to force yourself."

"I'll think about it, Will. Really. But I don't know that I'll make it."

"Fine. Call me after the ceremony."

"Okay. You need anything, Will?"

"No."

"I'll be sending you some graduation money. Okay?"

"Yeah. Bye."

"Goodbye."



Eight

The macaroni and cheese tasted fine, even leftover; the milk could have gone another day or two before it started to smell really rancid. Jon enjoyed the macaroni with a can of generic soda he'd picked up on the way back from the bar the night before.

He sat on the couch beneath the poster, his legs wrapped in a crocheted afghan. The last minutes of *Dead Poets Society* glowed on the little TV set across from him.

*I wish that I could be poetic*, Jon thought to himself. *I should have kept studying English and art, not business. Maybe that was Jill's problem with me: I wasn't interesting enough. The truly beautiful women can only be won through poetry. That's why I'll never have the dream girl. Women like that want guys to be... romantic. Interesting. Deep. And I'm none of those things. I live in a one-bedroom apartment and eat leftovers most every meal.*

I guess if all else fails I'm a rich bastard. I could ditch the Pontiac for a Ferrari and pick up blondes. Or mail-order a bride from Russia.

He scraped up the last of the macaroni with his fork. The fake cheese sauce left a spider-web coating in the bowl.

There were three knocks at the base of door. "Hey Jon. It's me," Jane shouted from the hall.

He got up and opened the door. She had changed out of her work clothes, and held a brown paper bag in her arms.

"Sorry about kicking the door. This bag's heavy."

"That's okay. Come on in. I was just finishing *Dead Poets Society*."

"Ooh. Nice choice."

"Indeed."

She stepped into the apartment and handed him her grocery bag. "Here. I brought you a present."

"What is it?"

"I thought you could use a few things," she smiled, handing him the bag.

Jon set it down on the counter and opened it, the brown paper making crinkling noises as he reached in. He pulled out a container of milk.

"For your macaroni."

"Thanks," he chuckled. "I guess I can throw out the old stuff now."

"That's disgusting. It's five days past the expiration date, Jon."

"Well, I'm really sentimental about my groceries."

Jane walked over beside him and reached into the bag. "I got a few other things, too. I thought that I could make us dinner." She produced a head of lettuce, a tomato, carrots, and a cucumber.

"You haven't gone vegetarian on me, have you?" Jon asked.

"You could use a few servings of vegetables." Emptying the bag, she withdrew a bottle of ranch dressing and two pieces of fish wrapped in paper. "And I hope you like cod. Nothing fancy, but it tastes good."

"Sounds great. Do you need a hand with this stuff?"

"No. I hate sharing a kitchen. And after seeing you with your macaroni I can't trust you."

Jon went to turn off the TV and VCR, then sat down at the little kitchen table behind Jane.

She was looking around. "Where's your salad bowl?"

"Um... There's a popcorn bowl in the cupboard above your head. The cutting board should be up there, too."

"You have the strangest apartment, Jon. I swear. Why don't you spend some of your money on yourself?"

"I tried for a while. I could wear the clothes and eat at the fancy restaurants, but it didn't matter; I was still the son of a history teacher and a housewife from Canton. So I gave the fancy clothes to Goodwill and started eating in."

Jane rinsed the vegetables, then searched the drawers for a knife. "That makes sense, I suppose. As long as you're happy."

"I don't know that I am."

She found a knife and began to slice the tomato. "No, you really don't seem to be."

"I'll be honest with you, Jane. I haven't been happy since the night I lost my virginity to you."

The lettuce made crunching noises as she separated it. "Then why did you just leave me?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't leave because of some lame desire for an underclassman. I know you – you wouldn't have done anything unless you were sure about her." She started tossing the salad with her hands in the popcorn bowl, then placed it on the table in front of Jon. Looking through the cupboards, she found plates and cups, which she put on the table. "Go ahead and start on the salad," she said, handing him the bottle of dressing.

"Do we have to keep talking about the breakup?" he asked, opening the bottle. "Let's talk about something happier."

"As long as I'm cooking for you, we'll talk about whatever I want. And you brought it up, not me."

"So maybe it wasn't Jill." He served himself a generous portion of the salad. "Maybe I was just scared about where our relationship was going. I couldn't let things continue as they were when I knew I didn't love you."

"You know what? I think you're lying."

"Hmm?"

"I think you did love me – probably still do." She turned to him as she reached for the drawer below the oven. Rummaging through the pots and pans, she withdrew a skillet.

"What makes you say that?"

"I was thinking about graduation." She unwrapped the pieces of fish. "And I remembered something. A couple things, actually."

"What's that?" Jane put the salmon into the skillet.

"After commencement, we were supposed to meet your parents and your brother for dinner. Instead of doing that, you drove fifteen minutes to my apartment to leave the breakup note. Why would you dump me right after graduation, especially if your parents were taking us out afterwards? That would be a bit of a mess to explain to them. It would

have been easier to dump me the day after."

Jon concentrated on eating the salad.

"Do you have anything I could put on this fish?" she asked.

"No, not really. All I've got is salt and pepper."

"That will have to do, I suppose."

Before too long, the smell of cod filled the room. "Then I got to thinking about Jill. And I think you're lying about her, too. I remember seeing you with her once before we were really dating. She kept talking about how her apartment would be empty for the weekend. Said you should stop by. You changed the subject every time – rather rudely, as I remember."

Jon didn't say anything.

"What about Shania Twain, Jon?"

He looked up from his plate. "I need *some* interior decoration." He finished up the last bites of the salad.

"Her parents died in a car accident, didn't they?"

Jon looked away from her toward the poster. He nodded.

The fish was done. She took a fork and put the pieces on their plates, then sat down across from him at the table. "I don't see how she sings some of those love songs. If I were her, I wouldn't want to fall in love with anyone. I'd always be afraid of losing them like I lost my parents." She began to eat the fish, but Jon didn't touch it.

He stared at the poster. When he spoke, his voice was flat and monotone. "Yeah. I see what you mean."

"I want to be your friend, Jon. I want you to feel like you can tell me things." He looked at her, his eyes open and searching. He would seem to be looking at her, then through her, and then at her again.

"I wondered where they were. After the ceremony, I got back to my place, and Adrian looked like he'd seen a ghost. And he told me that they'd been in a car accident, and they were dead, but Will would be fine. I don't remember much after that. I can see myself putting the note on your door. Then I drove to Buffalo, but that's pretty foggy in my mind."

"You didn't go to their funeral?"

"No. I haven't even been back to Canton yet."

"God, Jon. Don't you think that you should?"

"I've tried not to think about them." He started to eat the fish. "You know, you're starting to sound like my brother. He wants me to come back, too."

"I can see why."

"His commencement is this Sunday. I'd like to go see it."

"If you want, I could go with you. I could drive you back to Ohio. Or we could catch a plane."

"Thanks. But I don't think I'll go. I might just meet Will when he moves out to the University of Pennsylvania. Only a forty-five-minute drive."

"No. You need to go back to see your parents. You need to be there at Will's graduation, too."

Jon started to pick up the dishes and put them in the sink. Jane helped him.

"Yeah. That's what I keep telling myself. But there are so many things in my life that need fixing – I don't feel like I can even begin." They walked over to the sink and piled the dishes beside it.

Jane leaned her hip against the counter. "Get out of Anderson. Go home." He rinsed the dishes, then reached for the soap. When he squeezed the bottle, none came out.

"Maybe I'll leave in the morning."

"You should."

He picked up a washcloth and dried his hands with it, then looked at Jane. "Would you stick around tonight?"

"Sure."

Nine

Jane awoke in a set of Jon's flannel pajamas. His bed had been very comfortable for sleeping. The light that peeked through the Venetian blind was bright on her sleepy eyes. From the bathroom, she heard Jon humming in the shower, a faint scent of soap wafting under the door.

Jane reached for her clothes and started changing out of the flannels. *I think we needed last night to happen. It's been a long time coming.* She slipped back into her black skirt and light blouse.

She sat up, throwing the covers back. *That was a great ending for a movie. I wish that Richard Gere would carry me away, just like that. I can't believe that Jon hadn't rewind the tape.*

The sound of water from the bathroom stopped. Jane stretched, listening to Jon rustle around in there. He emerged after not too long, wearing his Dad's robe and a pair of flannel pants.

"Hey. How did you sleep last night?" he asked.

"Probably better than you did. That couch didn't look too comfortable."

"I get left out there in my own apartment. Geez."

"That's what you get for falling asleep during the movie."

"I still think that we should have kept with tradition and had sex."

She stood up. "You were always the witty one, weren't you?" She patted his cheeks.

"Yeah. Tell me one thing, though. You were just kidding about the sex being bad, right?"

"You'll never know, will you?"

"Come on. You'll help some poor girl out by educating me."

"You did all right, Jon, for the first time. I can't complain. Too much. You find that woman and give her the best sex you can." They both smiled.

"Well, I guess we're saying goodbye, huh?"

"Guess so. Let me leave you my number." She scribbled on a pad beside Jon's bed. "Let me know how things turn out. You'll start feeling better once you get back on the road. And see your parents."

"I hope so."

"Do you need any help packing before I go off to work?"



"No, I don't think so. It's not like I've got a lot of stuff. I'll be fine."

"Say hi to Moira for me." They started walking toward the front door.

"Okay." When they got to the door, she wrapped her arms around him tightly.

After they let go, Jane looked into Jon's eyes. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek. "Take care of yourself, Jon. And sorry about the morning breath."

"That's okay. It would take more than that to ruin one of your kisses."

"Bye."

"Bye."

She walked out the door slowly, smiling.

Ten

Jon knocked on the door to William's apartment. For a moment, there seemed to be no one there. *That's what I get for not calling ahead*, he thought. *I'll have to break down and get a phone in my new place.*

There were some noises inside the apartment, and the doorknob turned. He saw his brother's face for the first time in months.

"Jon!" William shouted, a grin spreading his cheeks.

"Hey, Will." Jon threw his arms around his brother. "Long time no see."

"Oh, it's good to see you, Jon. I thought you weren't going to come."

"Well, I had some sense talked into me."

Will stepped back to look at him. "Come in. Come in. You can finally meet Ed and Terry when they get back. They just went out to get some necessities: popcorn, potato chips... Do you need a hand bringing anything in?"

"No. I've just got my clothes, my books, and my TV stuff. That can all sit in the car until later."

"Your TV? What, did you move out of your place?"

"Yeah. We're moving to Philadelphia, aren't we?"

Will's smiled broadened. "Sure. I didn't think you really would, but I'm glad to have a good roommate lined up already." He winked at Jon. "Well, don't linger in the hall. Come in. Try one of these recliners."

"Leather. Nice. You will be bringing these to our new place, won't you? Mine came with the apartment, so I had to leave it."

"You bet. And this big screen, too." The brothers sat in the two chairs facing the TV.

"I'll have to furnish us with some other fun entertainment stuff. Surround sound and DVD. We'll have the best apartment in town."

"You'll have to be nicer to me than you were the last time we lived together. None of this keeping the lights on reading comics all the time."

"Come on, Will. That was when we had pajamas with feet."

"Still."

"All right. I promise not to short-sheet your bed, either."

"I don't understand how Mom and Dad never caught you doing that."

"Yeah." Jonathan looked thoughtful. "After graduation will you take me to

them?"

He nodded. "Of course."

"That's really all I want to do between graduation and getting to Philly."

"Yeah, I can't wait myself. Our apartment will be great."

"Especially where I decorate it," Jon said.

"Sure, sure. Just one thing, though. You can't bring that God-awful Shania Twain poster. I can't stand the sight of her."

"Don't worry." Jonathan smiled. "I left it back in Anderson."

—Dan Rohrer '03