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What's Keeping Us Together

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What's Keeping Us Together

I hate these people, the kinds who don't have the balls to do anything without someone else's permission. The obese woman sitting on the couch opposite me looks at the books in front of her and tries to decide if her husband will be mad if she makes this decision on her own. Her face is frozen in indecisive contortion and her huge, bald forehead reflects just enough light into my eyes to distract me from my purpose. While she's reading the fine print, I'm trying to fix my hair in her forehead mirror while maintaining a 'happy salesman' smile. When she looks up at me with those enormous pouty eyes, I am reminded of my girlfriend, Katie, and, with a sinking feeling of dread, I remember that I am late for a lunch date.

I look down at my watch and make sure that the woman sees me doing this. She doesn't seem to be phased, so I try one of my favorite lines on her.

"Mrs. Jones, where do you think the best place to put these books would be? Right here on the coffee table, or maybe over there on the bookcase?" I use hand gestures, pointing to the shelves across the room and watch with fascination as the reflection off her forehead changes.

"Well, I'd probably just let the kids put them right in their rooms, that way they could get at them when they're working on their homework."

Manipulation ceased to bother me a long time ago and it has worked to my advantage this time. Now for the close.

"You know, Mrs. Jones, I heard somebody say just the other day that when you are using your money on something like this, it's really not like you are spending it at all. It's more like you'd be investing in your children and their education. When you stop and think about it, you really can't go wrong investing in your children's education, can you? (Mrs. Jones and I shake heads together) I guess that's why so many people have been excited about what I am doing. In fact, Mrs. Pearson said that she really couldn't afford to get them, but the more she thought about it, she couldn't afford not to."

I pause for a second and let everything sink in, I'm trying not to rush her, pressure is the fastest way to a 'no.' "And you know, Mrs. Jones, after thinking about what she said, that really makes a lot of sense."

Eight minutes later, I walk out of Mrs. Jones' house with a check for \$318.18 and climb into my old van to go meet Katie.

Katie climbs out of her father's Pontiac LeMans and I see her graceful walk out of the corner of my eye. She looks unbelievable in that tight black skirt, but it's been a long morning and right now I just want to be alone. Alone. The idea has become more and more attractive to me lately.

"Hey, sweetie, how's your day going?" she asks.

"Slow, one sale, six books. I'm not sure I can support us like this for much lon..."

"Oh, will you stop that," she says, "I do have a job, you know."

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing, George. Can we just enjoy this half hour and not talk about money?"

Easy for her to say, her father owns the company that she works for.

"Of course, dear," I say.

"Besides, I don't think they can deny me a promotion for much longer," she says, though she knows not to look at me. She knows that I would have preferred that she had done something on her own. We've had this fight, though, so I avoid that subject.

We eat our lunch in silence, watching the tides of people coming in and out of Village Pizza and knowing that each and every one of them has a simpler life than we do. Somewhere along the line, we became so close that we started to grow apart, but how do I tell her that? Why is this so damn difficult for me? I mean, this woman in front of me knows everything about me, my most intimate secrets. We've been together seven years now, so much time that we usually know exactly what is on the other's mind. There is a lot of humor in that, I think to myself as I sip the ice water in front of me and wonder if she can read my mind right now.

"I was thinkin' maybe you'd like to come over tonight and I'd make you dinner," Katie offers over coffee.

"Yeah, all right sweetie, that sounds super." I get up to leave.

"Good, can you be there at eight? Julie's working late so we'll be alone."

"Sure."

She gives me a kiss on the cheek and walks away. God, she has a great ass! That's why I was attracted to her in the first place, her ass. She was a sophomore at Providence College, and I was a freshman searching for true love. I had a painting class with Katie in the Polten Art Center, and would always find some excuse to leave the class right after she did so I could follow her to lunch. I would watch her every move and even let her know that I was doing it, my own way of flirting, and she told me later that she loved it. But I was scared to approach her, I maintained an undeniable insecurity in my youth. We would never even have met had drinking not been one of my favorite pastimes. We were finally introduced at a bar months later, and, in a drunken haze, spent the first of what now seemed to be a million nights together.

I decide to take the rest of the day off and spend it in the park, though I know I can't afford to. I realize that I must look pretty pathetic, walking around, wearing a coat and tie and looking all depressed. I can't believe I'm going over there tonight. This is the first time since we met that I'm nervous about seeing her. I want to tell her what's on my mind, but I'm not sure that I can. I wouldn't, I'd just let it go, but I feel like I owe it to her to be completely honest, even if it means the end of our relationship. I spend the rest of my day walking or sitting around next to a picturesque little pond in my favorite park, trying to make myself believe that everything is going to be just fine. But all the time, this feeling that I might be making the kind of mistake that I am going to regret for the rest of my life lingers in the back of my mind. I should be working, money is tight and I certainly can't afford to be doing this, but I convince myself that my relationship is more important.

Back in my apartment, I watch "Jeopardy!" on the border of sleep, then remember to check my watch. It's already 7:30. Shit. I put on a starched white Polo shirt and a pair of blue jeans without taking a shower. I splash some Woods on my unshaven neck and turn off the television, then grab the keys to my van and run out the door.

On the drive over, it's my subconscious that controls the vehicle; my thoughts are elsewhere. I find it rather depressing that there are several extremely expensive homes between my run-down community and her modest, middle-income townhouse. I know that, if we moved in together, we could probably afford something nicer, but then I would be relying too much on her income. Suddenly, I realize that I'm only two blocks away from her house and I contemplate turning around. For some strange reason, I have this fear that it will be Mrs. Jones, the woman who bought books from me this morning, that answers the door instead of Katie. She will have a cigarette in her mouth and a bald head, and she will yell at me for not bringing her ice cream and new Yahtzee score cards. I could call Katie and tell her that I'm sick, tell her that I have some paperwork to do, but the car keeps moving forward.

I pull into the driveway. Julie's car is gone and I remember that she is working late. I fear that this night will result in a fight, and with Julie gone, there is no way to stop it once it starts. But the strange thing is that, if it does turn out that way, I'm not so much afraid of losing Katie as I am afraid that I will never love anyone again. I get out of the car and walk, sullenly, up the rough-cut pathway, wondering why all the lights are off inside. Maybe she forgot I was coming over or maybe she fell asleep. I feel relief as I ring the doorbell, but, as I turn to leave, I hear the door open behind me.

"Were you planning on leaving so soon?"

I turn around again and she's standing there completely naked. I pause, just for a brief moment while the truth of this visit escapes me, then go inside. I push hesitation aside and give in to what's keeping us together.

A door opening later that night awakens me. My first instinct tells me that it is a burglar and I wonder if maybe we'll be the next victims of some crazy rapist or killer. I hold my breath and listen. No such luck. Hushed giggling tells me that Julie has come home with another 'friend.' It sounds like they are having a great time together.

I lie there pondering whether I should get up and talk to Julie, but decide not to. Julie is the only friend Katie has that I can stand, and I've known her almost as long as I have Katie. I haven't relayed my concerns about my relationship to her yet, though.

Sometime later, I fall into a deep sleep. Katie does that for me. Her presence is somehow soothing. On those days when I make no sales despite twelve hours of hard work, I know that I can come home to her and just hold her, and it leaves me completely refreshed in the morning. I have a hard time falling asleep when she's not there.

The sun shining through the plate glass window wakes me up, and I notice right away that Katie's gone. I jump out of my bed and begin my ritual, push-ups and positive affirmations, when she walks into the room holding a glass of orange juice, and I remember that today is Sunday. She sits down on the bed next to me and offers the juice, but I wave it off.

"Did you forget what day it is? (I nod) Well, enjoy it, I've got to get going soon." She leans down and kisses me lightly on the lips. I keep my eyes open and watch as she does this, and I can tell she has no idea that I want out of this relationship. Maybe we've grown so far apart so that she doesn't know what's on my mind anymore.

"Sunday," I say, not really knowing if I am answering a question or making a statement.

It is my one day off, so I take my time in the shower, enjoying the hot water. Normally, I wake up to a cold shower, but on Sunday, I stay until my skin wrinkles. Later, looking in the mirror, I decide not to shave, thinking that maybe all I really need in my life is a new look, perhaps a beard. I notice that Katie has left a note on the mirror. It says, 'I love you!' but it does not make me smile today. When I finally make it to the kitchen, breakfast is waiting for me, but Katie seems to have left for work, and Julie is still sleeping. Sitting, eating my scrambled eggs and toast, I recall the image of Katie as Mrs. Jones. She is fat, she smokes cigarettes and she watches talk shows while I fulfill the life of Willie Loman. For a minute, the image serves to amuse me, but I soon become disgusted and lose my appetite.

I decide to go visit my friend Stevo, mostly because he knows about my Katie situation, but also because he has cigarettes. Stevo and I were roommates our senior year at PC, which, I think, was a step for the worse as far as our friendship was concerned. Stevo is the kind of guy you might think is gay because he never has a steady girlfriend, but really isn't. I can be sure of this because he and Katie dated for three months before I got together with her. I don't let them talk about that, though.

When I pull into his four-story parking garage I see a red Pontiac LeMans like Katie's off in the far corner, but remember she is still at work. Stevo works for the city as an engineer, and he gets paid well for it, one of the reasons I hate to visit him. My grade point average was close to twice his in college, but because he knew the governor, he got the break. "Fucking story of my life," I mutter to myself as I walk toward the elevator.

Stevo's apartment reminds me of my mother's house; it's full of useless things you can't touch. None of his furniture belongs in the home of a twenty-five-year-old bachelor. The door is unlocked, as always, so I walk in and retrieve a Marlboro Light from above the refrigerator. Curiously, I hear a female voice stirring from the bedroom and a minute later, Stevo is standing in the doorway, watching me smoke my cigarette on the couch. He's wearing sunglasses and a pair of boxer shorts that are more expensive than my watch and my shoes put together.

"Hey, George, can it wait, I've got a guest," he says, sounding a bit tense.

I give him a questioning look and he knows that it can't wait, so he closes the bedroom door and comes over to sit in the chair opposite me. God, he looks like crap this morning. He must have had a long night; probably out at the 'nice' bars drinking sophisticated cocktails with his buddies from work. He pulls a cigarette from behind his ear and lights it, taking a long drag.

"Well, what's so important that can't wait 'til after morning sex?" he asks.

"Who you got in there? You didn't pay for her did you?"

"Yeah, funny, she...look, George, what is it?"

"You know what it is." I take a quick drag and blow the smoke hard and flick the ashes into the marble tray on the table. "I think I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna leave her."

"Well, it's a lot like Norm once said, 'Can't live with 'em, pass the beer nuts.'" For the first time ever, Stevo's reference to the 'Cheers' character does not elicit a laugh from me. He sits upright and looks at me, though I can't see his eyes, and analyzes my face as if this were the first time that I was being serious with him about my relationship. Then he sits back again and takes another drag before extinguishing his cigarette. "No, no you're not gonna leave her."

"Come on, this is getting stupid, I'm not happy anymore, it isn't the same."

"George, we've known each other since high school and in all that time you have only ever had one woman in your life. Do you remember how you used to bitch about not having anyone?"

"I never bitched. Besides, I could always have anyone I wanted."

He stops for a second and looks at me from a different angle. "Oh, hell, you haven't even looked at a woman in seven years so there can't be another person."

"No, I couldn't ever do that to her."

"Think about what you're sayin,' man. You need her, and you know she loves you. You can't let yourself lose her, Katie is the best girl I know. You know I'm jealous, don't you?"

Even though he is smiling, this makes me feel better, because he probably is.

"George, ole bud, I think that we both know this conversation is over. Go home and wait for Katie, when she gets there, take her in your arms and tell her you love her, then make love to her like you never have before. Trust me, it's the best remedy with her."

I force a grin and leave his apartment, though my thoughts are far from settled. Shit. Now I can't even think straight. I know that Stevo is right, and I want my heart to go along with it, but I still feel obligated to talk to her about it. Maybe she's thinking the same kind of thoughts. No, she thinks we're gonna get married, for Christ's sake.

Even though it is Sunday, I go back to work, but can't keep my head clear. As I run from door to door through this low-income community, I forget the positive affirmations that used to keep me going. My customers sense this. After a few hours of unsuccessful attempts, I knock on an apartment door and an elderly woman answers.

"Hi, my name is George, and I'm the one who's been talking to all the families here in Federal Way with the real small ones all the way up through Decatur High, just showing everyone those Student Handbooks. I was just talking to the Franklins and the Bensons, and I wanted to make sure that I stopped by here, too. Now let me see, do you folks have the little ones, or are yours a bit older?"

"Oh, that's very flattering, but my children are probably older than you," she says with a smile.

"Well, just so you don't think I'm robbing houses, let me show you what I've been doing. I've been showing everyone these books, they help out with kids' school work."

"Oh! That's nice."

"Well, I've also been showing everyone this cookbook, it's called the Olympic Cookbook and it was specially made for this year's Olympic Games. Would you like me to sign you up for one?"

She looks at it for a minute, then asks, "How much?" Cool! A sale.

"Just twenty-three ninety-nine, ma'am. Would you like one?"

"Oh, why not!"

Even though she doesn't really know what she is getting, I accept her check and call it a day.

When I get back to my house, I do some tidying up to settle my mind. Standing in the middle of the room vacuuming, I see Katie ten years from now, cleaning this very room with a bottle of whiskey in her hand and a huge black hair protruding from her chin. Startled, I shake the thought away and go to turn on the stereo, but find that my hand is shaking so badly that I can't control the volume very well. I'm nervous because I know it's going to come out tonight. I pull out an old bottle of Jameson's Irish Whiskey that has been in the cabinet for almost a year, and pour it over ice. The drink helps to stop the shaking, but I still feel very tense.

I pick up the phone and dial Katie's house, but put my finger on the reset button before it rings. A few minutes later, after another glass of whiskey, I do the same thing again. Finally, after fifteen minutes of contemplation, I go through with it. She should be home from work by now.

"Hello," she says with a shaky voice. It sounds as if she has been crying, but I don't even want to know what about, so I ignore it. I decide that this is not the right time to engage in an argument with her.

"It's me."

"Hey! How was work?"

"Same shit, different day."

"You're not in one of those moods, are you?"

"I'm fine, I guess."

"Can I come over? I have something that might cheer you up."

"Sure. I was just going to ask if you wanted to," I lie.

"I'll be right there."

We both hang up. It strikes me as odd, and I wonder exactly when the last time was that I told her I loved her before I hung up the phone. I finish another drink while I sit waiting for her. The alcohol has made me tired and I don't feel like fighting, but I know that when she walks through that door in ten minutes, I won't be able to stop myself. Aw, shit. Maybe I should forget it. I love that girl, I really do. But at the same time I don't feel like I can afford the mistake that will change my life forever, if it is a mistake. Best to just get it out on the table, though.

A knock on the door brings me out of the battle I'm fighting in my head. I walk slowly to the door, and it opens just before I get there. She is smiling, and she throws her arms around me.

"Guess who called today?" she says.

I think I'll wait a little longer before I tell her.

"Who called, sweetie?"

"My father. He said the company is doing very well this month..."

I feel a cold sweat creeping up all over my body.

"That's great! He's a good man, he deserves to do well."

"He also told me that he can spare a little money if we are ready!"

Last chance. I want to throw her away from me and run out the door. But instead I hesitate, and it is too late.

"We can do it, George! We can get married, just like we always wanted to!" she bursts out.

She throws herself around me and I feel like I am going to cry. My body is numb, every inch of it, and I am standing there speechless with my future clutching onto me so tightly that I have to gasp for air. The vision pops into my head. Katie is big and fat, she has a bottle in one hand and a cigarette hanging from her lip as she watches Ricki Lake or Montel Williams on the television. Eight screaming children are running around our trailer home, crying because they are hungry, and I sit, locked in the bathroom, gun in hand, about to end my own life.

Katie pulls back a little. "Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

"I, uh..." I stop, and I feel the tears welling in my eyes. Then I smile and pull her close, so close that she cannot see my face.

"I can't believe it, sweetie. I just can't believe it," I say as I stare at the closed door, the smile gone from my face.

Monday morning, I wake up to Shania Twain screaming something about love from my radio-alarm clock. Katie is lying next to me, but the music does no more than cause her to pull a pillow over her head. I jump up and my ritual begins instantly.

"It's a great day, it's a great day, it's a great day, and it just keeps getting better!" I say aloud as I do twenty-five quick push-ups. I check my watch, 6:06, right on schedule, and run up to the bathroom. In the shower, the icy cold water removes all remaining hints of sleep as the soap bar races across my body. Forgetting my thoughts about a 'new image,' I stand in front of the mirror and shave while positive affirmations fly out of my mouth. I wonder if I should leave a note for her on the mirror.

"George, you good lookin' thing, don't you ever die! I can't wait to knock on that first door, everybody's gettin' 'em!" But as hard as I try to erase everything that happened yesterday, I just can't seem to stop the grotesque images of my future with Katie. I stop and take a good long look at myself in the mirror. For the first time in my life, the value of a positive mental attitude fails me, and my shoulders slump down. I realize, standing there in the bathroom half-naked, half unshaven, that I am not what I want to be or where I want to be. Financially, I am going nowhere; my production has decreased dramatically over the past three years, and I won't let myself rely on Katie's paycheck. And I don't even want to think about what would happen if we had children. I wonder if a career change would be possible, but this is the only trade I know. I could work with Katie, for her father, but to me that is the worst solution.

I finish up in the bathroom and hurry through breakfast, then return to the bedroom for my keys. As I stand in the doorway, searching the room with my eyes, my gaze falls on Katie, and I remember a time when I would have made all sorts of excuses not to go work so that I could spend my time with her. Our lives have grown apart, I don't even know where she is most of the time, but there's something there I just don't want to let go of.

The alarm on my watch sounds, telling me that I need to be in my car by now, and I run out the door.

I knock on the door of the Price residence and take a few steps back. When Mrs. Price answers the door, I am smiling, but she is not; it's early.

"Hi, is it Mrs. Price?" I ask.

"Yes," replies the woman. She is still wearing a bathrobe, but I can hear a vacuum running in the background.

"My name is George, and I'm the one who's been talking to all the families here in Federal Way with the real small ones all the way up through Decatur High, just showing everyone those Student Handbooks. I talked to the Jones' and the Wilsons' just yesterday, and I wanted to make sure that I stopped by here, too. Now let me see, do you folks have the little ones, or are yours a bit older?"

"I'm sorry, are you selling something?"

"Why, are you buying?" I reply with a smile. But my cute look is not going to get me into this house, and, as I walk away, the sound of the slamming door resounds in my head. Rejection doesn't really bother me anymore because I know there are plenty of other people who will want to buy my product.

"Everybody's gettin' 'em! Everybody's gettin' 'em! Everybody's gettin' 'em!" I say to myself as I sprint to the next door. I am working in a rather economically-depressed community, which suits my mood, but at the same time makes me feel better. I like to know that it could be worse.

Again, I knock, though I don't know the name of the person who will be answering the door this time. When it does open, a young child is standing in front of me, holding the frame with one hand and rubbing her eye with the other. "Run and get your mom," I say, and the child disappears, crying.

When her mother arrives, she looks pissed off. "How dare you talk to my child. What on Earth are you doing knocking on my door at this hour?"

"Ma'am, I'm giving away peanut butter!" I am smiling, almost laughing to myself. When she realizes she is being made fun of, she slams the door. I keep running. Maybe I can run away from all of this.

I knock on another door, and I know that I will be speaking to Mrs. Christie. She has four children, two, six, ten and fifteen. She is a member of the PTA and they are relatively well off. The door opens, I smile.

"Hi, is it Mrs. Christie?" I say.

"Yes," she says. She is the kind of mom who is up with the sun and making breakfast for the family. She really has it together, I can tell. Plus, she is smiling at me; the salesman's dream is standing before me, and I am wondering why my recurrent images of Katie aren't more like this.

"My name is George, and I'm the one who's been talking to all the families here in Federal Way with the real small ones all the way up through Decatur High, just showing everyone those Student Handbooks. I talked to the Jones' and the Wilsons' just yesterday, and Mrs. Price this morning, and I wanted to make sure that I stopped by here, too. Now let me see, do you folks have the little ones, or are yours a bit older?"

"Ooooooh! Did you say Student Handbooks?" she says. I am getting a bit skep-

tical now, something has to go wrong. "I have those!"

"Oh, you do. Great, great. How do you like them?" My forced smile must be obvious to her. She tells me all about how her kids use the books every night and promises to tell all her friends about them but I'm not listening.

I give up on the morning and spend my time listening to some of my favorite motivational tapes and searching the want ads for a new job. After Mort Utley's "Principles of Success," Bob Richards' "Address to the 1984 Olympic Team," a chapter of Og Mandino's "The Greatest Salesman in the World," and a quick lunch, I go back to work. I spend a few hours driving around the richer neighborhoods, and my thoughts return to Katie. We're going to get married! I can't seem to accept this; I'm not ready. We may save a few dollars here and there if we move in together, but we'll never be able to afford homes like these. I can't get rid of this image, an unkept house of poverty and children who don't love us. I need to talk to her, to at least explain my worries.

I look down at my watch: 7:15. So much for working today. I know I can't afford this, but I'm useless knocking on doors in this mood anyway. I find myself driving toward Stevo's apartment. I have resolved nothing today, and something tells me he knows something I don't know.

In the garage, I consciously look for a red LeMans, but don't see one. When I walk into his apartment, Stevo is sitting on his couch eating Chinese food and watching the Discovery Channel. I grab a cigarette and ask for a light.

"Here," replies Stevo without taking his eyes off the television. I wonder what the hell is wrong with him. "Grab a seat, I'm watching this cool show about predators in the African Plains. Those lions are about to pounce that wimpy little antelope and make him dinner." I sit and stare at the set for a few minutes, then look over at him. He doesn't budge, I wonder if he is sick of listening to my problems. I want some real advice from him, some truth. I take a drag from my cigarette and toss it into the ashtray.

A commercial for men's deodorant comes on. "How'd last night go?" asks Stevo, still looking at the television, "did my remedy cure the ailment?"

"She asked me to marry her. Can you fucking believe it, we're engaged!"

"What? Are you serious?"

He still hasn't looked at me. I look at him and he turns, just for a second, then swings his head back toward the television. "You all right?"

"I don't know." I look down at my watch, "Shit, I gotta run, I'm supposed to meet a family in a little bit," then get up to leave. I hope he won't say anything else, just let me leave, but as I open the door, he looks over his shoulder.

"Look, if you don't want to do it, don't."

I fake a smile and thank him for the cigarette before leaving.

Katie's car isn't there when I arrive at her house, though she should be home. I didn't come to see her, though; I need to talk to Julie, even if she goes straight to Katie

with what I say. When I walk through the door, I hear the shower running, so I sit down on the couch to watch the show 'Friends.' I hate these sitcoms, they can solve their life's problems in thirty minutes while the rest of us face them non-stop until we die. I hear the shower go off.

"Somebody there?" yells Julie from the bathroom.

"It's just me," I say.

Julie comes walking out wearing one towel around her body and another around her head.

"Katie called a little while ago and told me that she was working late."

"That's all right, I was actually hoping I could talk to you for a little bit."

She raises one eyebrow at me, "Is this about last night? (I nod affirmation) I had a feeling it was. Let me just throw something on and I'll be right out."

I watch her retreat to the bedroom, and for the first time in seven years, I think I am attracted to another woman. This is all very strange to me, Julie and I are good friends, and there is no way I could ever cheat on Katie with her, but I can't help thinking it. I wonder if Katie looks at other men and thinks about what it would be like to be with them instead of me. I wonder if she still thinks about Stevo.

After a few minutes, Julie returns wearing tight jeans and holding two glasses of wine. She sits down next to me, and together we drink. I empty my glass with a loud gulp, then go to the kitchen and retrieve the bottle. When I sit down again, her glass is also empty so I refill both.

"So, what's on your mind, you don't exactly look like the most excited man in the world?"

"I don't know. Maybe I've just been thinking too much." I take another long drink.

"What have you been thinking?"

"I don't know," I say. "Has she said anything about this?"

"She's happy, George. There's nothing she wants more than to spend her life with you."

"Why?"

"Because, after seven years, she's attached to you. Women need security."

I finish my second glass before I say anything else.

"Do you think it's going to be all right... I mean, do you think we'll get along all right?"

"Well, you've made it this far."

"Yeah, but this means forever."

The last remark stands, uncontested, and I know I have made a point. I stop gulping the wine and take leisurely, contemplative sips.

"George, what exactly do you want?"

"I just want to be happy. I don't want to have to worry about everything all the time."

"But you do with her?"

"Well, I just don't want to do anything for the wrong reason."

Julie takes a long drink from her glass and asks, "Does it bother you that she makes more than you do?"

I drink to avoid the question, but I know I have to answer.

"Not really." The answer surprises me because, in that moment, I am fairly sure that it is true.

"Do you think she loves you?"

"Of course she does. And I love her, too." God! I feel like I'm being sold on something. She's a bad salesman, though; pressure is the fastest way to a no.

"Aren't you afraid of being alone?"

"I fear that more than anything else in the world," I say, but I'm still wondering if Katie is the right person. "I always believed that it would be so much easier than this."

Julie stands up and says, "I don't think it is supposed to be easy."

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"I have something for you, hang on a sec."

When Julie comes back, she is holding a picture, and she hands it to me. In the picture, Katie and I are sitting together on a bed in a dormitory room. I can remember the night like it was yesterday. It was our first formal together, a sorority function, and we were so much in love, we knew there could never be anything to destroy what we had. In the photograph, Katie dressed in a sleek red dress and myself in a coat and tie, we appear as though we could conquer the world.

"Look at you two! You were made for each other."

"I will always have a love for her, you know?"

She pauses for a moment and looks into my eyes, making sure she knows what I am saying. "Yes, I know." She gives me an understanding smile, then stands up. "You know, she's had the money for a long time, but she was scared to tell you. She was afraid that you didn't love her anymore."

We remain in thoughtful silence for a few minutes. When she sees that I am done, that I have nothing else to say, Julie says, "You know, you have to tell her."

I think about what that means, having to tell her. I picture the conversation, wondering how she is going to react. Wondering if there is any other possibility I haven't thought through that could divert it from happening.

Julie goes to her room while I continue to stare at the picture. I finish my wine and, a few minutes later, Julie quietly leaves the house. I sit there, by myself, and stare at the picture until it begins to blur. I want to go back, to be in love again, but it's too late. As much as I want to believe, I cannot. I've been living on my memories for far too long now. But, just to be sure, I relax my body, and just as I expected, the image of Mrs. Jones returns. I put the picture down, tearing it into a hundred pieces in my mind, and leave them on the couch as I walk out the door.

—Seth Ireland '99