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Beautiful Dreamer

-Melissa Bostrom '96

Jack eased his elbow into a leaning position on the ledge of Adrian's desk. He tried to keep control, but it was beyond his strength not to watch her every motion. Slyly, scanning first for other eyes aimed her way, she mailed a smile his way. Kind of a delayed delivery, like...well, like book rate. After all, he could turn the pages of that smile: *Last night's tremble hasn't left, the hungover angle of your hat brings out the blue in your eyes, what time can we try it for the first time all over again?* He hadn't found The End yet; he wouldn't for another week at least. Jack was smitten. He would return to his room to sink into his springless junkpile couch, contemplating everlasting love. Well, at least until Beavis and Butthead appeared as visions before him. Even then, some image would float up to devour his attention—the fragrance of her flowery shampoo, the gleam of Crimson Creme toenails, the addictive feel of her... (of her what? A blush brightened Lara's cheeks with the shame of inexperience.) Well, of her. And he would be seized with the animal urge to immortalize his indelible love in dot matrix format, stanza upon stanza of neatly uniform poetry: for Jack was a Casanova of the computer age.

"I'm sorry, Lara. I didn't hear your answer to the question."

"Well um could you repeat the question please? I'm not sure I understood it..."

Her blood-red cheeks verged on sunburn now. Darn! It was the second time this week, too. She peeled her glazed eyes away from Jack and quivered her attention forward. Dr. Archy would definitely want to talk to her after class. He would, of course, ask nicely: "Lara, do you have a minute?" But still... Even "damn" would not be such a bad word to use, considering the situation.

Lara hated these conferences. Although the profs always tried to make them informal, she itched through every one. She couldn't help it; she was allergic to this sort of thing. Really, if she could barely speak audibly to students like Adrian and Jack, how the heck was she supposed to sit through confrontations with authority figures?

She still had a leprous-looking scar behind her left ear from scratching the hives so hard that time in the third grade, when she'd stood daydreaming out in the hall so long that she had completely missed gym class. Maybe no one would have noticed if they hadn't played baseball with water balloons that day, but her conspicuous dryness had ensured her doom. At least she'd never been much of a troublemaker, so nobody really thought she was doing anything wrong. In fact, it was one of the few times anybody noticed she was gone. Teachers always forgot she was there.

"Lara, do you have a note from your mother?"

"Um what for? The field trip?" she would hazard.

"Weren't you absent yesterday?"

"No, I was here all day..." with as much protest as she could stir up.

Oh, dear. And now she was doing it again. She could feel the steely stare of Archy's icy eyeballs on her. She had to concentrate. Had to concentrate. Hadta concentrate.

Billy's baseball cap had slipped down just level with his eyelids. He had dried out a little now,

his socks no longer oozing into his shoes. One last remnant of a stubborn blue balloon fell from his damp jeans. But his eyelashes, Susie strained to see, were still charmingly dripping. Those black-brown eyes had seen it all. Had seen her all, last summer, playing doctor. But they'd been only children then. Now everything had been transformed. Susie could see the light of her destiny, beckoning, pulling her forward. Pulling her forward with Billy's arms wrapped securely around her waist, caught in an everlasting embrace. She could picture the faces of their families, glowing with joy as they watched her stately walk toward the altar—and Billy. The mothers would weep their mascara away, sending it streaming down over-rouged cheeks into bleeding lipstick. They'd wipe the painted faces away with Papas' hankies, while the men hugged and tried to hide tears of their own. And Susie could rejoice, for she wouldn't even have to sacrifice her name to the ceremony—her name, that uniting force that had brought them together through Thanksgivings and Easters for so long, would remain the same as always. Their children, she imagined, would be cherubs with chubby cheeks and plump little legs and tiny pink mouths to call out for their mama. Happy tears welled as she listened for their dainty cries.

The scrape of desk legs against the dingy formica returned Lara to the less magnificent present. Her stomach plunged as she looked out the door into the dark hallway which inevitably led to the dreaded lair. She plucked her bookbag from the floor and hoisted it to her shoulder halfheartedly. She ordered her jellied knees forward.

Cramped into a corner of the designated "student" chair in Archy's over-air-conditioned office, Lara couldn't help scratching. His comfortable stride into the room did nothing to soothe her.

"I hope you know, Lara, that you're not in trouble here."

"Oh I'm sure" escaped faintly, but she couldn't help feeling that she was being set up.

"I'm just a little concerned about your class participation. You know, twenty percent of your grade is determined by it. I just want to give you the benefit of the doubt since I get the impression you don't really feel, well, secure speaking in front of everybody. You're hardly alone, you know. My wife was a lot like you. Still is, in fact. I remember when she was young like you. She would just sit..."

But by now Lara had blended into the beige upholstery.

His wife—her name Mona, she imagined—would have waited all her life for a man like Archy. Dr. William Archy. Bill, maybe. Bill and Mona. Mona and Bill. Mona had carefully scripted that magical phrase across the top of every notebook page. She must have been a student in one of his classes, Lara decided. Back when he was young and smart and maybe even sexy, somewhere between the grind of grad school and the glory of his doctorate. Mona's eyes could barely focus on her notes for watching him strut across the room, back and forth, strong strides to match the confident bass of his brilliant—but barely heard—lectures. It was a miracle dreamy Mona learned a single name or date from that political science class. But she had never expected reality to fulfill her fantasy. That early summer afternoon the air was choked with the scent of freshly-mowed grass and the burning smell of sunning skin. The warmth of his tiny office enveloped them with a heat that couldn't be escaped with

open windows. Her fluttering heart said the meeting had meaning far beyond the excuse of celebrating her final exam grade. The magnetism of those soft grey eyes was something her spirit couldn't escape. When his powerful arms captured her pliant body, she knew with a knowledge that had no logic that this was the man who would be hers forever.

"...and now that all the kids are gone, she's got to get back out there. You know what I mean?"

Lara nodded, helplessly hoping it was the right gesture. She suspected it didn't really matter since Archy wasn't seeing her anyway.

"Well, I didn't mean to take up so much of your time with my boring history. I always want my students to participate in class, but I understand that some of them may need a smaller audience, so just make sure you come talk to me individually to keep your grade up. After all, it's hardly fair to penalize someone for their personality."

A weak "thank you" was all she could manage on the way out the door to freedom. She stumbled home for some Benadryl to stop the fiery rash on her knees. The itch overwhelmed all other sensation and blinded her to her path. She shuffled over the sidewalk she knew (thank God) by memory, weaving into grass when she sensed the approach of another person. But somehow her radar failed her as another body bruised hers.

"Omi...I'm sorry. I really am."

"No it's all um me. I should have been paying..."

"No it's just that I wasn't..."

Neither of them had yet looked up. Lara realized with a surge of panic that with eyes aimed downward he could see her flaming knees.

"What uh happened to you?"

"Well, um...just a, well, a rash, you know."

"Oh, well, um, that's too bad."

"Yeah, well, you know, thanks. For your um concern."

"No problem, you know..."

Lara was on the verge of vowing everlasting nundom if God would just release her from this Inquisition. She could see Sister Mary Poppins tripping merrily down the abbey steps right into the path of the shriveled Mother Superior. But Sister Mary, with her fresh-scrubbed face and restless feet hidden beneath crisp layers of black, would be undaunted in her mission. The ruggedly handsome priest who waited for her with a knowing smile would sweep her away into his castle deep in a wooded valley. Well, maybe not sweep her away. In her condition, she shouldn't be subjected to any jerky movements. But the baby would be their redemption, even as it had been their condemnation. Their little family would live on love alone.

Silence slapped her into reality. The torturous talking was over; the stranger was fumbling along his way. Lara could feel her body again—aflame. Now a Benadryl bath was the only thing that could help her: her entire body had been invaded by the rash—creeping under her fingernails, climbing down her throat, clawing into her ears. Yet in her agonized rush home, she was compelled to turn

around (just for an instant, she promised) to find a face to match the voice and shoes she could now identify anywhere. And her dancing heart leapt into a death-defying standstill: the swimming pools of his liquid blue eyes locked with hers for a moment so fleeting Lara couldn't be sure it hadn't been an illusion. As she pirouetted, she thrilled to the echo of his sneeze in time with hers. She flew towards home.

Ah, but surely a man like this already had a beloved, a betrothed. The two would spend endless hours in hushed harmony, interrupted only by the occasional snuffle or wheeze. The wind would swirl crunchy leaves over the hillside to compensate for the silent conversation, sprinkling dust wherever they flew. A picnic of sugar-free Kool-Aid, all-natural applesauce and tuna salad sans mayo was all their allergies would allow, but they devoured the meal as if it would be their last together: wanting to savor each delicate nibble, but afraid that they would somehow thwart the spell that allowed these hours of ecstasy. And as the afternoon drew to a close, they would share their remaining kleenex and watch the sunset through watery eyes, huddled with only the warmth of the converted tablecloth and the dripping heat of their bodies to keep them alive. Absentminded hands would finger the soil after rubbing runny noses, leaving them moist and sticky with dirt. As the sun dipped beyond their sight, his hands would clasp hers and their lips would brush for an enchanted moment until her head rested on his shoulder and she rasped into dreamland.

The movement on her digital clock face made Lara glance up toward her dresser. Her nap had left her only two hours to prepare for the magical sixty minutes that awaited, the hour when dreams could take shape on a screen for all to see. She swept through her closet for a suitable frock. The green one, she decided, with the hair bow to match. Emerald flats and Mama's prized pearls would complete the effect.

With the dress securely buttoned down the back and the sash knotted into the bow she'd given herself a headache checking in the mirror, Lara hoped she looked ready. If the brooklets of perspiration didn't drown her, that is. She had tried dousing herself with perfume, but her eyes puffed and her throat tickled so violently that she had no choice but to re-shower and start over.

Face powdered, teeth scoured, tissues securely stuck up her left sleeve, she slid down the stairs toward the lobby. Her clumsy shoes only tripped her once on the way, and a lurch for the railing saved her from headlong disaster. She could hear the announcer's deep voice bellow "Previously..." and her heart thumped so wildly she feared she would burst a button. There was something in the atmosphere, some taste in the air that told her tonight's would be a very special episode.

She dodged threatening eyes and slipped to the back of the room. Gracefully tucking her skirts beneath her, she sat on the very end of the four-cushion couch in the darkest corner of the lounge. Usually she had it to herself, but tonight she was destined to share it with a stranger. A furtive glance told her only that his pulled-down hat shaded his identity, so she returned her focus to the television. After a few commercials of sweaty anticipation, there they were.

Kelly and Brandon's arms wrapped around each other like leafy vines coiling trees. Kelly leaned back slightly, sunk her gaze deep into his eyes, and smiled from her soul upward. Her childhood had been so sad, so stressed, so adult. Now she could finally have a love all her own, one who'd carry

her away to crisp waves crashing the beach, sand castles crumbling to the tide, nights of passion contained only by a sleeping bag. Moonlight would gambol over their bodies like a blessing for the future.

But wait. The flashing screen showed them fighting. This couldn't be happening—Kelly and Brandon had to stay together, after Brenda and Dylan and Claire and all the rest. Their love was as perfect as their skin! The screen blazed white again and Lara suddenly sensed movement at the other end of the couch. In the brief glare, she recognized the face beneath the shadows: it was *him*! Her stomach pitched with the lurch of potential love in her very own life. And what was this? She could see his body scooting snakelike the length of the couch. Lara's palms groped for the dry comfort of the upholstery. With each commercial break he came a cushion closer until his hand threatened her own. She could sense without watching the coil and spring of the classic yawn-and-stretch going on beside her—too many hours endured with the television as her sole companion had taught her that. As Kelly and Dylan warmly embraced, pricks of frozen fingers crawled over Lara's neck. The creeping rash followed as her body quivered in fright. She could smell the strongly-Scoped breath far too close, and in the black flash between the fadeout and the obnoxious commercial, she had to taste it too. His tongue pierced her defenseless lips and she choked back the gag reflex with a desperate cough. As her face struggled to return to its original shape after a valiant battle with his suction, he loped out of the room, leaving her with only the suggestion of eyebrows raised and a stream of drool snaking down her face.

A cloud of tears blurred her way as she fumbled her way out of the lounge. She could hear the eyes turning her way, feel the shake of the laughter in the room, but she could survive this humiliation. They didn't know. They couldn't understand. They could never be like her. Lara gripped the handrails, white knuckles strained, and held on for dear life as she pulled herself upstairs.

For once she let the door slam like a slap. She ripped the dress away and wadded it onto the floor. The elegant shoes she hurled at the wall, but their force barely made an impression. Her angry fingers, still reaching, went for the pearls but came away crippled by her crying. She crawled her way into down and wound into fetal position. Hugging her long-loved Raggedy Andy, she was free to soak her pillow. She momentarily mused that the tears were too many to be her own; surely heaven itself was weeping with her.

Too bad Andy couldn't commiserate: he had a happy home shelved with Raggedy Ann. The twosome had been inseparable since the day they'd met. Once, years ago, Lara had awakened to fiery whispers under a curtain of darkness. As her eyes adjusted, they focused on the shimmering glass display case, reflecting headlights in the night. Before her straining fingers could locate spectacles, her ears uncovered fuzzy moaning. Ann's blazing orange hair glowed across the room, and Lara's fingers halted in their reach, retreated, and pulled the covers up to her chin.

Theirs, she knew, was a bond that would last beyond their seams and stuffing, that endured out of reach of the regular senses. Theirs was a love that lived only in dreams. And so Lara sank into sleep.