

Cloudburst on Seventeenth Street

By Scott Cimarusti

Gridlock.

Again.

Seventeenth Street is a seemingly unending stream of cars snaking lazily toward the cluttered horizon like an iron-scaled dragon belching out noxious clouds of exhaust under a leaden sky.

Near the intersection of Seventeenth and Washington, John Martin slams his unremarkable Buick Regal in PARK and settles back in his seat, tapping the steering wheel impatiently. All around him, pale, sluggish faces peer out from their glass and steel cages, like exhibits in some bizarre zoo.

John yawns and stretches. He was up way too late watching an old movie on cable last night. He usually avoided those sappy, black-and-white romantic melodramas; but for some reason, this particular film had managed to lure him in and keep him captive until almost two in the morning. Something about the chemistry between the on-screen couple had seemed so genuine. They reminded him a little of how he and his wife, Jane, used to be, once upon a time.

John sighs and leans forward to switch on the radio, desperately searching for anything resembling entertainment to while away yet another morning traffic jam. All he can find, though, is the customary incessant drone alternating between static and mindless chatter. Now even more annoyed, he jerks the volume knob to OFF and closes his eyes.

“So much for making it to work on time,” he mumbles. Hopefully, he’ll be able to slink in unnoticed. Though Sandridge will probably be lurking right outside his cubicle like a starving jackal. And once Sandridge finds out that he is late again—twice this week—it won’t take long for that little news bulletin to be transmitted all the way up the chain of command straight to Goldstein’s office. John tries to recall the last time he updated his resume.

His cell phone chirps from the passenger seat. John blindly reaches for it and answers it on the second ring.

“Hello? Hi, Jane...Mm-hmm...Mm-hmm... Yes, I know...I know Kimberly tried to sneak out again last night to go see him. She’s fifteen, Jane—that’s what girls her age do when their parents forbid them to date someone. Remember what it was like to be young and in love? Well, no, I’m not excusing her behavior, but...Mm-hmm...Mm-hmm... Well, I’ve already tried talking to her—several times in fact...she doesn’t care what her father thinks. Yes, I—yes, I know that. Yes, I know that she won’t get into a good college if her grades don’t improve...but what else can I do? You make it sound...You—You make it sound like it’s *my* fault. Mm-hmm...” John pulls the phone

away from his ear; the voice on the other end continues to chatter away like a frantic chipmunk. “Mm-hmm...Well, how about taking her to see a counselor or something? I *know* we can’t really afford it right now, but we have to do *something*. I know...I know...I *know*...” He shuts his eyes. Please let this conversation end. “OK...Let me—Let me see what...Mm-hmm...OK. Let me see what... Listen—I’ll have to call you back when I get to work...my battery is almost dead.” He had just taken it off the charger this morning. “OK...OK...Yes, I’ll call you later...as soon as I can...OK...OK...’Bye.”

John stabs the END button and, resisting the urge to hurl the offending phone out the window, chucks it over his shoulder into the back seat instead. He shakes his head slowly and buries his face in his hands. It was turning out to be “one of those days”. Hell, almost everyday for the past several years was “one of those days”.

He never imagined that he could ever be this exhausted, this drained at thirty-nine—almost forty, actually. He still couldn’t believe that he only had ten days left before he finally passed the milestone that had had loomed ominously down the road ever since his thirtieth birthday. Here he was: almost middle-aged—and what did he have to show for it?

Fortunately, he knew that this birthday would come and go like the countless others before and probably after it. His wife Jane and daughter Kimberly would acknowledge the day in their typical obligatory fashion; bestowing upon him the customary generic gift of socks and a tie. Then the three of them would dutifully march over to the Italian restaurant down the street where, inevitably, an argument would erupt at some point—typically about a half-hour into dinner. Thirty minutes seemed to be the limit that his wife and daughter could tolerate each other’s company. And—despite the occasion—they both would close out the evening fuming in silence while John mechanically consumed his complimentary birthday dessert. But before he blew out the solitary candle, he would wish—hope, really—that next year’s birthday would be different.

But something was telling him he would be making that same unfulfilled wish again this year.

John decides to try the radio again, for lack of anything else to do. Panning across the dial, he stumbles across a familiar song from a forgotten time. A wistful smile creases his face, and his vision blurs slightly. The lyrics and the singer are inconsequential to him; it is the related memories that have him spellbound. With that singular power of music, he is instantly transported back through the years, and overcome by a tide of bittersweet nostalgia.

He can almost smell the lilacs of a summer nearly two decades past. A summer of innocence and discovery; the summer he met Jane. He remembers the musty smell of her parents’ beat-up blue Chevy ...cool, crisp evenings by the lake, huddled together beneath

an old blanket...ice cream cones and private picnics...holding hands and gazing up at the swirling August stars.

The song ends regrettably soon, and John finds himself back behind the wheel of his unremarkable family car, mired in a sea of traffic. The hopeful young man from that summer—standing at the threshold of infinite possibilities—is now the man he sees staring back at him from the rearview mirror, burdened by shackles of obligations and unrealized dreams. And the spirited and carefree young woman he once made love to under those August stars, is now his wife of almost seventeen years, with a short fuse and a sharp tongue. Having once embraced him in spite of his shortcomings, she is now the first to spotlight his faults; the tender declarations of love from those summers replaced by pointless bickering and explosive arguments.

He still can't believe how much Jane has changed over the years. She just never seemed happy about anything anymore. And nothing John could do the past several years changed that.

The last wisps of his wistful daydream shredded by the urban cacophony around him, he resumes his search for a traffic report on the radio.

Then, by some miracle, the brake lights on the gray Nissan in front of him wink out and all the cars around him gradually heave forward. John sits up quickly, banging his knee on the steering wheel, and gingerly taps the accelerator. The engine revs to life, but the car remains motionless. Impatient horns berate him from behind and he realizes the car is still in PARK. He sheepishly shifts into gear to catch up.

After a few seconds of progress, John checks the digital clock on the radio's display. Ten minutes to get to work now. Not too bad. If this keeps up, he'll only be about ten minutes late. Hopefully that will be punctual enough to escape Sandridge's notice.

He casts a daring glance over his left shoulder, looking for an opening, when out of the corner of his eye he glimpses the Nissan in front of him lurching to a halt. Fortunately, he is able to react just in time, slamming both feet on the brakes and narrowly avoiding a rear-end collision and even more delay.

He stares ahead blankly before hanging his head in defeat. The victory—like all the rest the past few years—is only temporary.

John cranes his neck forward to see if he can spot the reason for the impasse, or at least an escape from this urban labyrinth, when his eyes are drawn to something else.

The blonde woman waiting for her bus.

With the aggravation of the traffic, he had forgotten to look for her this morning—even though it had become a ritual during his morning commute.

The first time she had enticed his gaze was about six months ago, standing out like she did from the dreary city landscape; a delicate rose growing out of a crumbling ruin; a beacon of beauty amid the chaos, inspiring and unexpected.

Something about the sight of her made John feel like his soul was temporarily lifted; as if he had beheld something sublime, albeit briefly. So much so, that he soon began scheduling his morning commute to increase his odds of catching a glimpse of her every day.

So now his drive to work each day is spent seeking out this blonde stranger and crafting scenarios about who she is and where she is going. Some days she is an aspiring actress on her way to an audition. Other mornings, she is a struggling writer going to meet her agent about selling her first manuscript.

But even after her image in his rearview mirror has long diminished into obscurity, thoughts of her still trail behind him like a child's kite; daydreams of her offer a welcome distraction from his menial job and frustrating family life, and her nightly appearances in his dreams give him something to look forward to as he drops off to sleep.

Though a few weeks ago, something happened to make John seriously wonder if his infatuation with the anonymous woman was beginning to crossover into a twisted obsession. He had been on his way back from the break-room with his midmorning coffee refill, his mind still back at the bus-stop, when he almost plowed straight into Goldstein himself. Narrowly avoiding dumping hot coffee on his boss, he chose to scald his own arm instead. Of course Goldstein didn't even notice John, or his sacrifice; he simply continued on his way at his customary deliberate pace. Later that evening, though, Jane surprisingly noticed the minor burn on John's arm, and inquired about it. Hoping she wouldn't read the guilt in his eyes, John invented an explanation that seemed to satisfy her mandatory and superficial expression of concern.

But even after that close call, he still continued to rationalize his fixation as harmless daydreaming. Though a part of him he could not deny, felt shame at his intense interest in a woman who was not his wife (plus, for all he knew, she was married too). So the following morning, John made a vow not to look for her anymore. He would break the habit before it became even healthier.

But her allure proved to be too powerful. He was addicted. He tried to convince himself that it could be worse; it could be drugs, alcohol, or prostitutes. All he was doing, after all, was admiring an attractive woman from afar.

And—for better or worse—that's only as far as it would ever go.

He smiles a little as he gazes out his windshield at her. One consolation of being stranded in this morning's gridlock is that he doesn't have to settle for the usual fleeting glimpses of her as he is swept along in the tide of traffic. For once, he can allow his gaze to linger and drink in her beauty.

Today she is wearing a khaki barn jacket. Her shoulder-length golden hair is pulled back in a ponytail; a few carefully-placed loose strands frame her smooth, oval face. Behind dainty, wire-rimmed glasses, her eyes (though he cannot tell from this distance, John imagines them to be a brilliant, soothing forest green) focus on a book cradled in her left hand. Her right hand lazily twirls an umbrella at her side.

Today he imagines that she is a photojournalist returning from an assignment overseas, anxious to get back to her office to hammer out her next article for *Time* magazine. Maybe *Newsweek*.

Suddenly, the patter of raindrops on his windshield interrupts his train of thought. He reaches over to roll-up his window and flick on the windshield wipers. Through the silver fans of rainwater left in the wake of the wipers, he watches as the woman at the bus-stop stows away her book and attempts to open her umbrella, though with some difficulty.

Soon the raindrops become more numerous and deliberate, and her efforts become more desperate. The drizzle quickly escalates into a downpour, and still the blonde woman has no luck with her stubborn umbrella.

John's eyes wander to his own umbrella folded neatly on the seat beside him then back to the bus-stop. Suddenly, he feels his chest swell with a surge of chivalrous inspiration. He will come to her rescue by bringing his umbrella out to her.

He grasps the umbrella in one hand, the door handle in the other, and braces himself for the downpour. But he pauses. The timid, whiny voice of restraint in his head has to have its say first. He has no business offering his umbrella to a strange woman. She'll probably tell him to go to hell and leave her alone.

The rain continues to hammer away at the roof of his car while John's internal debate drones on. The voice continues its nagging litany, accusing him of using the umbrella as a transparent scheme to finally meet the object of his obsession—how pathetic is that?

John watches as the blonde woman hurls the disobedient umbrella into a nearby trashcan. She then pulls her coat collar up around her slender neck, accepting her fate.

This is ridiculous. Why shouldn't he do something nice for a stranger? This is what's wrong in the world today—nobody is willing to help anyone else. And if she tells him to go to hell, so what? At least he'll know he did the noble thing. It's good karma.

He chuckles at this thought and steps out into the rain before he can convince himself otherwise.

Hurdling several puddles, John approaches the blonde woman who, though technically a stranger, has become a fixture in his life of late. She turns to face him and he is suddenly struck speechless by her beauty—despite her drenched appearance. Up close, she is even more striking than he expected. She brushes aside the dripping tangles

of her hair from in front of her eyes and regards him warily. John notices that her eyes are indeed a bright green. Just as he imagined. An awkward silence threatens to loom between them until he rediscovers his voice.

“Hi.” He clears his throat. “You look like you could use this.” He opens the umbrella and extends it out to her, sheltering her from the rain.

Like the first rays of spring sunshine after a winter thaw, a smile of naked gratitude illuminates her face.

“Thank you,” she replies. Her voice has a soothing melodic quality—almost hypnotic. “But don’t *you* need it?”

John stares blankly at her. He is so enchanted by her voice that it takes him a few seconds to process her question.

“Huh? Oh no. My car’s right over there—stuck in traffic.” He gestures to his idling Regal, the driver’s door still ajar. He forgot to close it. He winces as he envisions the puddle pooling in his front seat.

She raises the umbrella between them to shelter them both. “A few more minutes out in this, and I would look even more like a drowned rat.” She self-consciously adjusts her hair. “I must look terrible.”

John can feel himself flush and he lowers his eyes. “You look fine.” He misses seeing her cheeks bloom as well.

“Well, thank you for the umbrella; that was very thoughtful of you. But how will I return it to you after the rain has stopped?”

He waves her off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll pick up another one. You obviously need it more than I do.”

She appears to consider this, glancing up and down the street. “Well, it doesn’t look like this traffic is going anywhere anytime soon. Why don’t you see if you can pull off and park somewhere and I’ll buy you a cup of coffee for your trouble. There’s a coffee shop right on the corner.”

Suddenly, John’s mind begins to swim as a surreal haze washes over him—a feeling almost like *deja-vu*. He feels strangely disconnected from his surroundings, as if he has become a detached observer watching this scene from outside himself. He opens his mouth to stammer out an excuse why he shouldn’t, when activity beside him catches his attention.

Surprisingly, the traffic has finally begun to move again.

“Quick!” the blonde woman shouts. She scans the street. “There’s a space down by the corner. See where that taxi’s pulling out? Grab it!”

Without thinking, John sprints back to his car, splashing through more puddles and soaking his pantcuffs and shoes (as well as last year’s birthday socks). He dives into the driver’s seat, only remotely aware of the puddle he has just sat in. He locks the car in

gear and inches forward with the growing tide. He searches frantically over his shoulder for an opening on his right that he can maneuver into. Finally, the blue Volkswagen next to him hangs back in an attempt to merge into his lane behind him. He zips over, almost clipping the bumper of the Nissan in front of him.

He hopes that this is for real this time, and not another false start. He continues to creep along, his eyes darting between the empty space up ahead and the blonde woman waiting patiently by the curb. He can feel his pulse racing, expecting at any moment to see brake lights flare up in front of him.

Just a few more feet.

The flow of traffic is now beginning to gain momentum. The vacant parking place is now only about two car lengths ahead. He grips the wheel tighter, watching for another car poised to swoop in.

So far, so good...

After a few more tense moments, he is slightly ahead of the welcoming space. He flips on his signal, and with a few skillful jerks of the wheel, his Regal is snugly parked.

John sighs with relief and reaches to switch off the ignition, but then stops. What the hell is he doing? The traffic is moving again—he should be back on his way to work. He can picture Sandridge again, skulking outside John's cubicle with one eye on the clock.

Through the rain-streaked passenger window, he can see the figure of the blonde woman standing beside his car, smiling expectantly.

Time to make a decision.

His eyes wander to the familiar gleam of gold on his left hand. Guilt coils in the pit of his stomach.

Snap out of it—it's just coffee, for God's sake. What's a few more minutes, anyway? If he's cornered about it later by Sandridge—or worse yet, Goldstein—he'll blame it on the traffic jam. He can't be the only one late to work due to this morning's traffic.

He slaps a hand on the steering wheel in frustration. One cup of coffee with an intriguing stranger; then he can slink back into the drudgery of his routine.

Before he can change his mind, John scoops up a handful of coins to feed the parking meter and steps out of the car. The blonde woman offers the umbrella and he politely shakes his head. He plugs the meter and begins to follow her to the coffee shop—but then hangs back. A single question to her gives him one last chance to let himself off the hook.

“What if your bus comes?”

She bites her lower lip as she mulls this over. “Well...I do need to dry off a bit. And a steaming hot mug of coffee sounds perfect right now.” She shrugs her shoulders. “I’m late already. What’s another ten minutes?”

He wishes he could share her carefree attitude.

As if reading his mind, she flashes him a daring smirk. “But if you have to go...I understand. I guess I’ll just have to remain in your debt forever.”

It is that smile that crushes the last remnants of John’s trepidation into dust and finally gags the nagging voice of caution in his head. He surrenders to it and follows her, a smile of his own sneaking its way onto his face.

And he is a little surprised that his face still remembers how.

The coffee shop is warm and inviting, a *mélange* of welcoming aromas: hot muffins and the tang of freshly-brewed coffee among them. A soothing murmur of conversation accompanied by mellow jazz envelops the room and drowns out the traffic noises outside. The cappuccino maker behind the counter slurps mechanically.

John and the blonde woman approach the counter and give their orders to a college student adorned with a variety of piercings and tattoos. John gets his unpretentious usual: coffee—black, while she opts for a tall latte.

John retrieves their drinks and the blonde woman politely excuses herself, heading for the ladies’ room. He scans the coffee shop and makes for a secluded booth in the corner farthest from the door. Shedding his coat, he settles in, sitting with his back to the room so no one can see his face upon entering. Just in case.

Outside the window, the unimpeded traffic now zips past, sending up silver sprays of rainwater in shimmering waterfalls. Pedestrians armed with umbrellas scurry for cover, plowing through the swelling puddles. A wheezing bus lumbers by. John tries to shake the irrational paranoia gripping him that someone who knows him will pass by the coffee shop window and see him sitting with a woman who is clearly not his wife—especially when he’s supposed to be at work. He turns his head to check again for witnesses but finds a now-familiar welcoming smile instead.

She has returned from the ladies’ room, her hair and make-up somewhat restored. She is radiant.

“That feels a little better,” she proclaims, removing her coat and sliding into the booth across the table from John. She is wearing a blush pink turtleneck sweater that loving caresses her feminine shape, and a light khaki-colored skirt. “So,” she takes a few sips of her drink. “I don’t even know the name of my mysterious benefactor.”

Not understanding what she means, he stares at her blankly.

She chuckles. “I mean, what’s your name?”

He grins sheepishly. “Oh... It’s John. John Martin.” He automatically offers his hand then starts to withdraw, suddenly feeling awkward. But she politely returns the gesture. Her skin is smooth and warm.

“Nice to meet you, John. I’m Amanda.” She takes another sip from her latte and leans back in her seat. “So tell me a little about yourself.”

John absent-mindedly stirs his coffee and shrugs. “There’s not much to tell, really. I’m an accountant...” He trails off, his mind searching frantically for anything remotely interesting about him. “Let’s see, what else...”

She gestures to his left hand. “I see that you’re married. Any kids?”

John lowers his eyes and forces his face to maintain its smile while the expectant thrill of the moment suddenly dissipates like smoke. Why did she have to spot the ring so soon? Any hopes he had for where this conversation might have gone had she believed he were a different person now withered away. What harm would there be if—just for an hour or so—she hadn’t known he was a prisoner of his obligations and commitments? Besides, he had no intentions of letting anything between them go further than this coffee shop.

“I have one child—a daughter. She’s fifteen going on twenty-five.”

She rolls her eyes. “I remember that age.” She takes another sip of coffee. “What else? What do you do for fun?”

I don’t have fun anymore is what he wants to say, but doesn’t. “Well, I play golf now and then. I read a lot... I don’t know—I like old movies...”

Amanda’s eyes light up. “Me too! In fact, I was up until almost two in the morning watching one on cable last night. It was one of those sappy old black-and-white romances that I’m a sucker for. I can’t remember the name of it, but it was about this housewife who meets a doctor at a café. They’re both married, but there’s still this spark between them, and they wind up meeting each other every week, and oh, it was so sad because they eventually both realize—”

“—That they can never be together.” John finishes for her. His eyes are wide in amazement. The odds of them both staying up later than they should have watching the same old movie... His stomach flutters a little at this thought.

“Yes! That’s it! Oh...it was such a sad, sweet movie.”

“*Brief Encounter*, with Trevor Howard and...what was her name...” He snaps his fingers as the name suddenly comes to him. “Celia Johnson.”

Amanda gapes at him in surprise. “Impressive...”

John smiles. “I told you, I’m a movie-geek. In fact I can even... No, it’s stupid. Never mind.” He shakes his head and sips his coffee.

“What? What is it?”

“No—forget it.”

“Tell me.”

Johns sighs and hangs his head. “I can name every film that has won a ‘Best Picture’ Oscar.”

Amanda’s eyes widen in amazement. “Really?”

“I memorized them for a radio contest a few years back and it stuck with me.”

“Best Picture, 1953?”

“*From Here to Eternity.*”

Amanda picks another year, and John asks why.

“That’s the year I was born.”

“Oh.” John quickly calculates her age, and it turns out he has about fifteen years on her. Suddenly, that whiny inner voice posing as his conscience returns, threatening to make him feel lecherous about the age disparity. But thankfully, he is able to ignore it with little effort this time. And after a brief pause while he searches the archives of his mind, he comes up with the correct movie title.

Amanda nods approvingly. “I’ll have to take your word for it, but that’s pretty impressive.”

John allows himself to savor the compliment before changing the subject. All this talk about him makes him feel even more self-conscious. “So how about you? Tell me about you.”

Now it’s Amanda’s turn to fidget, her eyes wandering. “Well...I like movies too—we already covered that... I write poetry and I paint a little. I love to read too. I jog... Let’s see...what else...”

The question that John really wants to ask her hovers right on the tip of his tongue. And even though her response won’t change anything between them, and he shouldn’t need to know the answer quite so badly, he also knows that he will never be able to live with himself if he doesn’t ask. So, feigning nonchalance he blurts out, “Are *you* married?”

The sight of Amanda’s smile withering makes John wish his curiosity hadn’t been quite so demanding.

“No. Much to my mother’s dismay, I’m afraid.” She chuckles hollowly, her eyes wandering to her bare left hand. “Almost, though. About a year ago. To a guy I met my freshman year in college—my first serious boyfriend. We dated exclusively all through school—even grad school. Then right after we graduated, he proposed. I said yes, of course. But then as we started all the planning, I began to wonder if I was only marrying him because he was safe—you know, a sure thing. So...since I was having these doubts, I figured it might be a good idea to postpone the wedding—just for a little while, so I could get my head straight.” She lowers her eyes. “But he didn’t want to wait. In fact,

he broke off the engagement and wound up marrying someone from his office about six months later.”

She trails off and sips her drink. “Deep down, I know it was for the best, though. He just wanted to be married, I think. Not necessarily to me. I just happened to be... convenient.” She turns toward the window, her eyes distant, her face clouded. The streams of raindrops swimming down the glass cast shimmering shadows on her face. Her voice is barely above a whisper. “The city can be such a lonely place...”

A pang of guilt spears through John’s chest for drudging up such an obviously painful memory for her. Like a turtle backing into its shell, he can sense her withdrawing away from him. If he doesn’t act quickly, the awkward silence already growing between them like a gathering thunderstorm will drench what could have been a genuine connection between two intimate strangers.

Before he can stop himself, he unburdens himself to her. Everything. His disintegrating marriage, his distant daughter, his aimless career—all of it. All of his pent-up anguish and despair trickles out slowly at first, then rushes out in a cloudburst—not unlike the unrelenting storm outside.

When he finishes, there is a new silence between them, a comfortable silence now, that neither feels the need to fill. Outside their intimate circle of self-disclosure, the jazz and conversation are still a murmur, the rain still falls and the traffic drones. And all are oblivious to the two lost souls who have found each other in the corner booth.

Though John feels an undeniable sense of relief, as if the world itself has rolled off his shoulders, his temporary peace is tainted by the flicker of shame at having dumped all his problems on a complete stranger. A stranger though she may be, Amanda has been a patient and attentive listener; something he sorely misses about Jane.

John sighs heavily. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. You don’t need to hear about all my problems. We just met.”

She shakes her head slowly. “Don’t be. I aired out my dirty laundry to you too.” She offers him a meek smile. “Maybe it’s like that stranger-on-a-plane syndrome—you know, when you completely open up to a stranger next to you and tell them things you wouldn’t tell your best friend. You don’t worry about what they think of you because you’ll probably never see them again.”

A cloud of hopelessness descends upon John again; except this time—to his credit—he is able to mask it with a wistful smile. He had been stubbornly avoiding the harsh truth that their time together would end soon; that he would have to return to settling for the stolen glimpses of her as he drove past her bus-stop each day. He just hoped there would be a little more time to indulge in ignorant bliss.

Silence fills their booth again, and John uses the opportunity to check his watch. They have been talking for almost an hour—which means he is now extremely late for work.

His eyes widen and his stomach twists into a knot. He told Jane he would call her when he got to work. He can picture her on the phone now, calling his work extension repeatedly—then trying the main number when she continues to get his voice-mail greeting instead. He can almost hear the receptionist informing her that, no, Mr. Martin has not shown up yet today—would she like to leave a voice-mail.

“Wow—it’s getting late. I really should get going.”

Amanda looks at her watch too. “Oh my God! Is it that late already? Wow, the time sure flew by.”

“Yes it certainly did.” John stands up, looking down at her. “Thanks for the coffee.” When her eyes meet his, he holds her gaze, and finds himself a little surprised at the weight of sincerity in his voice. “It was really nice to meet you, Amanda.”

Amanda smiles up at him—does he see a hint of regret in her eyes? “It was very nice to meet you too, John. And thank you for the umbrella. You really saved the day.”

John blushes a little and shakes it off. “You’ll get to work OK?”

“Eventually.” She examines her outfit. “My clothes are still damp, though.” She shrugs it off. “But it would have been a lot worse without your trusty umbrella.”

John’s smile falters a little as he is torn between his desire to prolong this moment and his insistent obligations. “Well...take care.”

“You too.”

John steps away from the booth.

“John?”

He turns back to her.

She lowers her eyes. “I really hate to ask this—especially since you’ve been more than kind already.”

“What is it?”

She sighs, struggling to choose the right words to avoid sounding needy. “I know you’re late already, but could I trouble you for a ride to work? I could *really* use a change of clothes...and I’m not sure when the next bus comes by—especially since they’re probably way behind schedule because of the traffic jam. My apartment is only a block away—it’ll take me five minutes to change—tops. You’d really be helping me out...”

John checks his watch again. He can’t shake the image of Jane on the phone, calling his work number again and again. The wheedling voice of reason has returned, much to John’s annoyance, reminding him that he has pushed his luck too far already—he really should get to work. His job could be at stake, for God’s sake.

He looks back at Amanda. She is staring up at him, her eyes betraying her mask of indifference. He can see naked desperation there, and he succumbs again. A smile of weariness sneaks onto his face.

“OK...If we hurry...”

The spark returns to her eyes, followed by a smile. “Thank you *so* much.”

She jumps out of the booth, grabs him by the hand, and drags him back out of the coffee shop and back into the rain.

John has definitely crossed the line of danger now. He may have been able to get away with just having coffee with a strange woman. But if it ever came to it, there was no way he could ever explain standing in the entrance to her apartment.

Amanda shuts the door behind them and flicks on a light. The kitchen is to the immediate left and a small dining nook is to the right. From what he can see, her apartment is sparsely, yet tastefully furnished.

She gestures to a row of hooks on the wall beside him. “Take off your coat and have a seat. I’ll only be a minute.”

John mechanically removes his coat and hangs it up. He steps gingerly toward the living room, admiring the framed artwork on the walls and wondering if any of the paintings are her creations. He can hear the muffled hum of traffic outside mixed with the patter of raindrops on her window.

She brushes past him and he catches a hint of her perfume. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

“It’s very nice.”

“You are so sweet for doing this. I promise I won’t be long.” She disappears down a hallway between the dining nook and the living room, presumably heading for her bedroom to change into dry clothes.

John paces nervously, wandering over to examine several framed photographs atop a nearby bookshelf. The first one he finds is of Amanda between an older man and woman—her parents judging by the resemblance. Behind it is another frame coated with a thin layer of dust. Inside is a snapshot of Amanda standing next to a burly young man with sandy-blond hair and a go-to-hell smirk. He looks like the typical guy that John always lost girls to in high school and college. The guy has one arm slung around Amanda’s shoulder, a can of Stag beer clenched in his fist. Amanda is smiling too, but something about her expression looks painted, artificial. John picks up the frame for a closer look.

In the picture, Amanda’s eyes appear distant, troubled—nothing like the enchanting glint he has become familiar with during the brief time he’s spent with her. Her expression hints that on some level, she knows that something is not right about the

guy next to her, but she's desperately trying to convince herself otherwise. John feels a powerful urge to step through time and into that photograph and wedge between them to shield that younger, naïve girl from the impending heartbreak.

"That was taken in college."

John whirls around, almost dropping the frame. He feels like he's been caught pawing through her underwear drawer.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

Amanda gingerly takes the picture from him, the melancholy expression he glimpsed earlier in the coffee shop returning. "That was at my sorority barn dance our junior year." She tries a weak smile. "He gave me his fraternity pin that night. It all seems so long ago..."

John can see tears brimming in her eyes now. As much as she would like to convince herself and everyone else of otherwise, it's clear that this particular wound has still not healed yet.

"I'm sorry. It's just that talking about all of this caught me off-guard today. I really thought I was over him." She wipes her eyes with the heels of her hands in a frustrated gesture. "I'm acting like an idiot."

John places his hands on her shoulders. "No you're not. I know exactly how you feel. Like I told you back at the coffee shop, I feel like my wife has left *me*—even though she's still a part of my life. Earlier today I heard a song on the radio—just before I ran into you—and it brought back some wonderful memories. But those memories only serve as reminders of how much things have changed between us. And it hurts. A lot sometimes." He lowers his head to face her directly. "Take comfort that he vanished from your life before you made a mistake that would have led to even more heartache in the long-run."

After a brief hesitation, her eyes find his. And for a small eternity, they gaze at each other, sharing an unspoken bond of mutual understanding.

Riveted by her hypnotic stare, his mind becomes a swirling torrent of emotion and before he realizes what he is doing, he is leaning in to her. Their lips touch—tentatively at first—then with increased desire.

Their kisses rapidly become more deliberate, more passionate. Her hands entwine around his neck, his find her waist.

He can feel his stomach drop like a plummeting elevator. The sensation is distantly familiar, almost foreign. And a forgotten door in the cellar of his subconscious is suddenly thrust open. In a flash of faded images, he remembers the last time he felt such a dizzying rush of passion.

It was a summer night a thousand years ago. Beneath the twin oaks in the park, by the softball fields near Jane's parents' house. Their first kiss under a Fourth of July moon.

Bliss.

Suddenly, without warning, guilt smashes the moment like a hammer, bludgeoning into the present, and John breaks the kiss abruptly.

"I can't. I shouldn't. It's not right." Stammering, he turns away from her. "I'm old enough to be your—"

She places a tender finger on his lips to silence him. "That doesn't matter." She gently turns his face to hers. "This may sound trite, but maybe we were supposed to meet today. Two lonely people lost in a city of millions finding an oasis of understanding in each other."

John smiles. "That, and an umbrella."

She giggles and it is music.

But his smile quickly fades. "It's still not right, though. I'm married."

Amanda caresses his cheek. "Which is more wrong: a loveless marriage between strangers, or a tender, once-in-a-lifetime moment between kindred spirits?"

His silence is his answer. And he loses himself in her eyes once more, distantly aware that the rain has stopped and sunshine is now streaming into the cozy apartment.

Without a word, Amanda takes him by the hand and leads him toward the hallway, which is now bathed in the warm, ethereal glow of the eager sunlight. She is an angel beside him, her touch divine.

But for some reason, the noise of the traffic below have become increasingly louder. It almost sounds like he is back in his car, down in the street, and from somewhere behind him, a horn is blaring incessantly, piercing his head like a cleaver.

He realizes now that something is not right.

He turns to Amanda but she is no longer there.

The space beside him is empty.

The seat beside him is empty.

Except for his neatly-folded umbrella.

The mob of impatient drivers behind him continues to scold him with a barrage of horns.

It looks like the traffic jam has finally broken up.

John looks around, waiting for his mind to clear. The pavement and the cars around him are dry. It never rained.

The clouds have finally broken, though; the welcome sunshine finally released.

John sighs. He must have been lost in a daydream for a while. Probably brought on by the song on the radio. Or the blonde woman at the bus-stop. Maybe both.

Whatever the reason, he needs to get going. Back to work, and back to reality.

John Martin reluctantly shifts his Regal into DRIVE and nudges forward.

But not before stealing one more look at the blonde woman waiting at the bus-stop.

Indifferent to the traffic—and him—her attention is still on her book.

Looks like she didn't need his umbrella today.

But there's always a chance for rain tomorrow.

Or the next day.