

At eighteen, two things pressed down upon me with extravagant urgency: to become a great artist and to get lucky with a girl, any girl. The first I considered inevitable, the other more of a challenge; but such were the optimistic years of my youth. A different girl every weekend was the ideal goal but, during calm reflection, overly ambitious. It didn't matter; at eighteen, the heart makes its own plans.

That's where she comes in. Life digging along happy as a clam until that little bit of grit slips in the shell. "You'll fall like a pile of bricks for the first girl you date," my father told me soon after my high school graduation. I smiled and shrugged off his warning before it had time to settle on my shoulders. The truth--he was more than right, but I never expected Minna. Before her, every girl was a possibility as far as my imagination could carry it, and afterwards, they all faded like diaphanous shadows from another life. Every girl, once a promise, now happily forsaken. Minna overwhelmed me in a way I wouldn't have thought possible a day earlier. Whatever gaping void hollowed out my core, she filled and filled completely. From her first toehold upon the inexperienced chambers of my heart, she exhilarated like an anguished, compulsive dementia. But isn't that the best kind of love, the only kind really; everything else is just a glass of lukewarm milk. And you won't find a pearl in a glass of milk.

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Early, one Saturday evening, we were sitting in the front seat of her father's station wagon outside Harold hall. Minna had taken the bus home that morning to collect some spring clothes and borrowed his car for the return trip. The two of us arranged to go home together for the remainder of the weekend. But now she sat with her hands on the steering wheel, not saying a word.

"Are we going?" I asked.

Minna nodded, "In a minute, I just want to sit a bit...if that's OK."

"Something wrong?"

She shook her head, then started weeping.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's stupid."

"What is?"

After a few seconds, she cried, "I'm scared."

"Scared?" I almost laughed. "Scared of what?"

"Of the way I feel. What if we should break up, Nicky. I love you so much...it scares me."

"Why? I love you, too," I assured her, now no longer able to stifle that laugh. "I've told you a million times."

"See, I shouldn't have said anything. You think it's funny."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do! You're laughing."

"No, I'm not...it's just silly. You know I love you."

"I know you do, but what if I do something stupid, or make you mad, and you stop loving me."

The girl had a point; there was no denying it. I could be an asshole at times, overreacting to small shit when I was in a mood. I already tried to break it off over some insignificant nonsense.

"Nicky, you're the kind of guy I could marry."

"Marry?" Now, Minna was scaring me. "I'm too young! I'm only eighteen!" I laughed.

My clumsy effort to lighten the mood and spare her feelings fell flat. She answered somberly. "I know we're too young. I'm not saying I want to get married now."

"Well, stop worrying about it. It's stupid to worry about what *might* happen."

Minna stared at the steering wheel. "I'm sorry. You're right...I'm being silly." Now more composed, she leaned forward, looked in the rear view mirror and dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "I don't know what gets into me sometimes." She settled back in the seat and rested her gaze on the rose colored light ebbing on the horizon. "You see that star?"

I looked out the windshield of her parent's Buick, not sure what I was supposed to see.

"There, above that tree." She pointed into the night. "That's Venus."

I followed the line of her finger and extended my focus to a bright spot in the twilight. "How do you know it's Venus?"

"Dennis and I used to look at it through his telescope. They say that if two lovers see Venus rising in the evening sky, they're meant to be together."

"You and Dennis aren't together."

Minna frowned, unhappy at my response. "It'll be different for us," she whispered.