

At eighteen two things pressed down upon me with extravagant urgency: to become a great artist and to get lucky with a girl. I convinced myself the first was only a matter of time, such being the optimistic years of my youth. I still believed in that sort of thing back then—artists achieving great things. I still do. But after a few bad turns, you learn that road has a lot of crooked detours and ragged edges.

As for the other, more daunting challenge, a girl like Diane Joslin, the blond jewel of my high school days, was the ideal goal but, during calm reflection, overly ambitious. None of it mattered; at eighteen, the heart makes its own plans.

“You’ll fall like a pile of bricks for the first girl you date,” my father told me soon after my high school graduation. He liked to make such pronouncements and, my father being an obstinate man, I always found it easier to indulge him with a dismissive smile and nod of my head. And I saw no reason to change the habit for that dire prediction. But then I never expected Minna.

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Five minutes later, we’re arm in arm and walking out to her father’s station wagon parked outside Harold Hall. Minna had taken the bus home that morning to collect some spring clothes and borrowed his car for the return trip. Since the car didn’t have to be back until the next morning, we decided to go to Dunkin Donuts for some coffee.

After getting in the car, she just sat with her hands on the steering wheel, not saying a word.

“Are we going?”

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? What is it?”

“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 did break up, Nicky. Sometimes I think I love you too much...I can’t help it...it scares me!”

“Why? I love you, too,” I assured her, now unable to hold down 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 look at today...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 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 laughed. “I’m only eighteen!”

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.”

“You’re right...I’m being silly.” Now more composed, Minna leaned forward, looked in the rear view mirror and began dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “I don’t know what gets into me sometimes. Just forget what I said...OK.” 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.

She pointed. “There, above that tree. That’s Venus.”

I extended my focus beyond her finger 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.