A Girl You Couldn't Hurt

by Con Chapman

It was probably Dean who was responsible for him being where he was right now, he thought as he sat across the table from his fiancée listening to her talk about the wedding and the gifts they were registered for and the reception. He had discovered an album he didn't approve of—Barbra Streisand—among Dean's records when he went to stay with him shortly after he got married to a woman from Cleveland.

“What . . . is this?” he had asked, holding it out gingerly at the ends of his fingers as if it were a dead animal hanging by its tail.

“That's hers,” Dean had said, as if it was no big deal.

“Good Lord,” he had said. “If that's what married life is going to be like . . .”

Dean had just given him the old shit-eating grin, the one he knew so well, the one Dean had pulled off the night a cop had found them stopped along the side of the road and shined his flashlight in the window.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/con-chapman/a-girl-you-couldnt-hurt--2»*
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“Have you been kids been drinking?” the cop had asked and Dean, without so much as a second's lag time, had said “Officer—we're not even twenty-one.”

“You take the woman, you get her records,” Dean said now, and he didn't seem the least bit troubled, the guy he'd shared so many nights with, listening to music in a state of altered consciousness.

“You don't actually . . . listen to it with her—do you?”

“As little as possible, but it's like buying a car with seat covers that weren't your first choice. You don't even notice after a while.”

“Mom said they would buy us four place settings, so we actually only have eight to go to make twelve,” his fiancée said as she scanned their wedding registry checklist. “Do you think you'll want to have bigger dinner parties for clients?” she asked, as business-like as a tailor taking his measurements.

“I don't think so,” he said in an indifferent tone that he didn't have to hide because his fiancée wasn't paying close attention to him with so many details yet to finalize.

“So . . . you actually married somebody whose tastes you can't abide?” he had asked Dean back when he was still looking.

“I've progressed beyond the romantic notion that there's only one woman for me and I have to keep looking until I find her and if I don't, I'll die a lonely and miserable death.”

There was an implied criticism in that response, and he had to admit it wasn't an unfair one. He'd fallen in love with a girl in high school who would joke with him, complete his sentences, borrow his records and books—a virtual female twin, and he had thought they'd get married and live happily ever after. Then her father was transferred halfway across the country to Rochester and she started going out with college guys and after a while he knew she was gone.

“So . . . there's no love involved?” he asked.

“Sure I love her, but not the kind of puppy love you and I used to succumb to. I love her and I want to take care of her and I think she'll make a great mother, and I let her have her sphere of influence.”

“That makes it sound like statesmanship.”

“It is, sort of. She can decorate the house and make whatever she wants for dinner and plan any vacation she wants, and I want to be able to play golf and watch football or whatever sometimes and not go to church.”

“How's it working out so far?”

“Just fine,” Dean said. “It's an economic proposition, too.”

“That sounds cold.”

“Maybe, but that's life pal. When you were picking up skanks at discos . . .”

“Which was never . . .”

“You know what I mean. Hitting on women at parties with no thought more than twelve hours into the future, it didn't matter. If you actually date a woman for awhile with the idea you might want to get married to her you end up knowing where she comes from and who her family is.”

“And that overrules your instincts?”

“It *channels* them,” Dean said.

“I haven't found anybody I want to commit to is all,” he said.

“You haven't found a girl you couldn't hurt is what you mean.”

He stopped then and looked at Dean. “What does that mean?”

“Instead of one of these hard-bitten molls you find in a fancy bar on Newbury Street, find a girl so nice you couldn't hurt her—not in a million years.”

“But . . . if I did, I don't think I'd be attracted to her.”

“Well, that's your problem,” Dean said. “Once you get over that hurdle, you'll be fine.”

“My mom is inviting so many people from Ohio, I can't believe it!” his fiancée said as she ran her finger down the guest list. “I hope they start early to get their reservations, because the hotels will be booked solid pretty soon.”

He looked at her, her head focused on the tasks before her, and he thought to himself that Dean's advice had turned out to be good. He had found a girl who he could tell would be a great mother, who came from a solid family. They shared some interests but each had a zone that didn't overlap with anything in the other's life. And she was so nice, so sweet, he couldn't imagine hurting her in a million years.

The waiter appeared to take their order, and she pushed aside her lists long enough to look at the menu and select the veal marsala. He ordered fish—something that was definitely not something she favored—and they returned to their former positions; a tableau with her poring over her papers while he looked off into the distance, distracted but not unhappy, content to let her put together the beginnings of their nest.

“That music's annoying,” she said. “When the waiter comes back could you ask him to turn it down, please?”

“Sure,” he said. It must have been like a high-pitched noise that dogs could hear but humans couldn't, he thought. He hadn't even noticed the music over the din of the restaurant, but she had. He concentrated a bit—the music sounded familiar but between the clinking of the glasses as the bartender put them into the dishwasher and the guy on his right who was droning on and on to his wife about how he was no slouch in the intellect department, he couldn't identify it.

“It's very jarring,” she said. “How many people are you inviting again?”

“I don't know, I guess . . . I counted eight the other day.”

“Well, give me your list—we may have to do a little pruning if mom keeps sending me names.”

He heard a saxophone which cut through the noise in a way that the piano hadn't, and he recognized that the music was a Thelonious Monk album.

“That's okay—I doubt they'll all make it. It's a long way for them to come,” he said.

“Good. I mean—not good that they can't come, good that it frees up more places for mom.”

He'd only had a few Monk albums in his life, but his roommate in Chicago had had a few, so he tried to recall which one was being played.

“Hel-lo?” his fiancée said. “Are you listening to me?”

“Sorry, I was . . . listening . . . looking for the waiter.”

“Did you ever get in touch with that band leader?”

“I did—he says they're available.”

“Can they play our song?” she said, and as she did she looked up at him and smiled, and extended her hand across the table for him to grasp.

“I doubt it—they're more a swing group,” he said, taking her hand. “So your parents' friends can dance,” he lied. He had picked the band precisely because he knew they would not know any current songs, and could be relied on not to give in to requests to play loud, fast rock numbers as the evening wore on.

“Well, they can practice between now and then, right?”

“Right.”

“Anyway, that's your job. I have a fitting with the bridesmaids this Saturday.” Her voice trailed off and he started to concentrate on the music again. It wasn't from the big collection of classic jazz he'd bought, so it must have been the album with the crazy picture of Monk on the cover, with a machine gun over his shoulder, and a tied-up Gestapo officer and a striking female resistance fighter in the background standing next to—a cow.

“What's so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“You laughed.”

“I was thinking of an old album cover I used to have.”

She looked at him as if he'd said he'd seen a squirrel loose in the restaurant.

“The things you think of sometimes,” she said, as moved her Cross pen—a trinket from some deal she'd been involved in—down her bridesmaids' grid. “Cynthia's boyfriend just got hair plugs,” she said with an expression of obvious distaste. ”I hope the swelling's gone down by the time we need him for the pictures.”

The thought of the album brought back to mind a night when he'd gone to a Frank Zappa concert in Chicago with some guys in his dorm, and all of a sudden an Asian woman had plunked herself down next to him and said simply “Hi.”

“Hi,” he said, and she proceeded to pepper him with questions about the band as if he were a reporter from Rolling Stone or something. He knew a little, but not much, but she didn't seem to care; a good-looking woman attracted to him for no good reason at all—this was apparently what he was missing staying on campus studying all the time.

“We're using Thurston's for the flowers—they're my favorite,” his fiancée said.

“What's the difference—aren't all flowers the same?”

She arched an eyebrow to convey her disappointment in his naivete. “There's all the difference in the *world* between one florist and another.”

“Well I don't know that kind of stuff,” he said, a little miffed. “There's no need to snap at me.”

“I wasn't snapping, I was just stating a fact.”

The Asian woman had sat next to him through the whole concert, then had asked where he lived. He was a little embarrassed to tell her that he was still in a dorm, not an apartment, but she had said “Can I go see it?” One of the other guys in the group gave him a look of congratulation, and the two of them walked to the train together, as a couple, with her arm hooked into his.

When they got to the room they listened to music for awhile; he didn't want to put on rock because he figured they were going to

have sex, so he put on the only piano album he had, the Monk album.

“This is nice,” she'd said as she lay back on his bed, opening her arms to him in invitation.

“Are we going to write our own vows?” his fiancée asked. Her expression conveyed the sense that she really didn't want to be forced to be creative.

“Keep it simple,” he had said, biting on the word “stupid” since he knew she'd take it the wrong way if she hadn't heard the expression before.

They'd proceeded from making out to sex faster than he thought possible, and when they were through he rolled over and found himself still erect several minutes later. He had developed blue balls, possibly because he hadn't had sex for a long time. He got up to flip the record over and came back to bed.

“Uh, I guess we can do it again if you want to,” he'd said.

“I'm ready if you are,” the Asian woman had said.

“Can you talk to your friends beforehand and persuade them to dress appropriately?” his fiancée asked with a tone that he understood meant she was deadly serious.

“Sure,” he said. “Sure,” but he was thinking of something else.