

PHILANDERING

by DeWitt Henry

Jack was sitting in his reading chair, comfortably perusing a book about Shakespeare, when the phone rang. He expected it to be Pat, with whom he had a date for that evening, as he had been accustomed to have for the past five Tuesday evenings, and he had been looking forward to seeing her. She was a cute, exuberant blond, quite young, who worked as a secretary for the Peace Corps. He was a graduate student in English, twenty-four, preparing for his orals and teaching freshman composition at Harvard. Within the past year he had been mixed up in, and had lost, two major love affairs, so that at the moment he met this girl his life had seemed especially lonely, sad, and arid. She was not major; she was obviously minor; there was no question of his ever loving her. But she was devoted and she was a consolation and he found himself encouraging her. He thought he wanted to sleep with her. They had kissed and petted heavily from the first. Taking her home, in fact, tired and drunken from the party at which he had met her, she had whispered could she stay the night with him, would he take her to work next morning? But there had been other people to take home as well; circumstances intervened; he found himself kissing her good night at her own door and being called nice instead.

He'd had sex in mind when he looked her up the week after that; yet she immediately began to hope and believe that something more was possible, and to use her body to lead him on and prolong matters. She read books and plays and talked about returning to college, and finally did enroll in the night course in Spanish that brought her to Cambridge on Tuesdays.

He saw what she wanted, but hadn't the strength to stop it there and say, simply, that there couldn't be something more, that she must either be satisfied with sex or break things off, forget it. For

he was afraid that she would break things off, and he couldn't let that happen. He wanted and needed somebody now. He had had no sex life since a brief encounter with a Cambridge trollop at the end of the summer. No one else he knew now really desired him, and Pat did.

They both led busy lives, which was one reason they saw each other only once, or at most, twice a week, and why matters took so long in coming to a head. He had a number of other friends and his teaching and studying kept him busy. Besides, he lived in Cambridge, and the complicated twenty-minute drive over the river to her apartment in Brighton was annoyingly inconvenient (not to mention the six-flight walk-up, which she always made him climb). He would think of her only when his work, or intervening time, or after rejections and disappointments concerning other women had made him lonely, and then he would seek out refreshing exposure to her desire, the reassurance of being enthusiastically welcomed by this simple, trusting young girl--who had no bitter memories; who had never been badly frustrated or hurt; who was wrapped up in her own dreams. And who kept alive a picture of him in her mind that could not keep alive in his own.

They had their dates on her Cambridge Tuesdays, when he would pick her up at the subway and take her to his bachelor apartment for dinner. Also they had some weekend dates, the last of which had been only a few days ago, when after petting he had led her to his bed. They had tossed and rolled around and kissed, until he tried to take off some of her things, and she had said, no. And deep down, he had preferred it that way. So she fell asleep beside him, and if he moved he would wake her up. But he took no particular pleasure in lying beside her; he wasn't sleepy..."Why did you wake me?" she demanded--and he took her home that night.

As for this Tuesday, tonight, he was determined to have a showdown. He wanted to make love or call it quits.

But when he answered the phone call, the voice he at first mistook for hers turned out to be her roommate's, Dian's, and Dian was telling him a queerly apologetic way that Pat was in the hospital. She had been in a motorcycle accident the night before, a bad one; she had broken her collar bone and her leg, suffered a concussion; they'd had to operate on her; her mother had flown in during the night; and she, Dian, had stayed up all night with them, and Pat had wanted her to call him so he wouldn't be expecting her to keep their date tonight. He made the appropriate interjections and asked the appropriate questions; her repeated, "Oh, that's bad....," and asked "Can I see her?" But he didn't sound convincingly concerned, and Dian wasn't satisfied. She wanted something more of him; he felt cornered and exposed.

He spent moments later that evening, however, and on during the next day, thinking about it: Pat in hospital...her collarbone...her leg...operation...six weeks recovery...trying to make it real and trying to care about it. And then visions came: of her lying bashed up in the street, crying and moaning. The scene of the accident, cars backed up and circled around, headlights, visions of that fragrant, soft little body broken and bleeding. And he managed to work up a more responsible degree of concern. He must go visit her; he had promised Dian. But he wondered what there was to say. To her, Pat, what was there to say?

He went to the hospital. A sign on the door said: "Visitors--Five Minutes Only!" Timidly, he knocked. "Yes?" replied a voice from inside, which he assumed to be her mother's (they had said that her mother would be with her).

"May I come in?"

Again: "Yes?"

He pushed open the door and looked in, just as Mrs. Davidson was coming towards him. He saw Pat in the bed, her eyes dark and hollowed, her face terribly beaten up and her recognition of him, as their startled eyes met across the room. And Mrs. Davidson was saying, "Just a minute--." And he was saying, "Uh, okay...." And they both retreated into the hall, as Mrs. Davidson closed the door carefully behind her, a genial smile on her face. "We'll have to get ready for you," she explained.

She was a short, frowsy, deliberately pleasant woman--in her early fifties, perhaps; she wore a tweed suit, and gold spectacles hung on a chain around her neck, while she blinked her small eyes expectantly at him, preoccupied with thoughts about receiving him and impatient to get about it. Thinning gray hair was scattered around her head; her complexion was pale and dry; her face was round, but the skin seemed drawn tight with wrinkles, as if the face had been shrunk with steam. Remembering about looking at their mothers first, he was disappointed that she wasn't attractive. But she did have Pat's good nature and energy.

"You must be Mrs. Davidson," he said, introducing himself and smiling his most mature, social smile, but also grave.

"Yes," she said hastily. "Patty's told me a lot about you; she's spoken of you often....If you could--"

"I'm pleased to meet you," he added, "but sorry it had to be under these circumstances."

"Yes, that's what her friends have been saying--we'll have to get the nurse; could you wait a few minutes before going in? There's a little room at the end of the hall. I'll get the nurse."

The little room was full, with a person in a wheelchair and some other people, and shy of interfering with them, he ended up leaning

against the corridor wall and staring at the floor, waiting. He felt skittish and embarrassed, troubled about his right to be here, disturbed by the sickness, weakness and infirmity around him. And people came by and glanced at him as if he were a grieving relative, an expectant husband, something of that sort. Orderlies wheeled stretchers past. He felt conspicuous. Meanwhile, up the hall, Mrs. Davidson came and went, with nervous glances at him.

Finally she approached and said, "All right, we're ready for you now. Sorry we kept you waiting. Patty kept saying, Oh Mother, don't make him wait! Hurry up! He doesn't have all day!" Probably she thought, who do you think you are, anyway, that my daughter should be so concerned about your precious time? What have you been doing with her? Out loud, he said, "Oh, for gosh sakes, I don't mind," and mumbled, "Limits to courtesy, for goodness sake."

He followed her down the hall into Pat's room.

"Hello, Jack..." came from the bed, feebly apologetic, woeful. "How are you?"

Mrs. Davidson went briskly around the bed and sat in a chair.

"I'm fine," he said expansively. "The question here is you." He stood there searching for her, at a loss. He didn't care enough to break down and cry, and he couldn't be too flippant without seeming irreverent. She was like a crushed flower--muffled, drugged, beaten-up and bruised, with all the post-operative accoutrements, tubes in her veins, and all that. Her whole face was black and blue, like a raccoon around the eyes; her nostrils were torn, her mouth torn and swollen and greased with ointment; her hair had been clipped raggedly short: she looked suddenly as if she were in her eighties--someone he'd known in his youth.

"Mother...take his coat...make him comfortable," she said, with a

painful turn of her head towards her mother.

He hung up his own coat. Then she asked him to pull a chair close, so she could see him without turning her head. She spoke in a drugged, distant voice, pausing to wet her lips.

"I missed our date..." she half-complained, half-apologized. "Did Dian call you?" She watched him from behind her face.

He said yes, and that it had been a shock, and went on to explain that he had had two killed on motorcycles recently. This wasn't quite true, but it offered her mother the chance to chime in with bitter condemnation of all motorcycles, which Pat feebly protested.

From this point on, the visit assumed aspects of a parlor interview. Pat was trying to show him off, and he was trying to make, and to get, a proper impression. Pat asked him what he was doing, explaining before he could answer, "Mother...he goes dancing all the time...tell her, Jack...He does everything...." He grimaced, answering for himself: "Same old thing. Teaching, grading papers, going to the movies." The mother, having removed her spectacles, blinked and smiled: was he teaching? what? where? what was his thesis? Talk jumped to divine Shakespeare, movies, O'Neill's new play (Pat interrupted to recall falling asleep with her head on his shoulder in the movies--"Jack has a very soft shoulder, Mother"), so that the Davidsons appeared as play-goers, worldly, well-bred cultured people. He lit a cigarette. But Mrs. Davidson who had been attentive to Pat, immediately stopped the conversation to demand whether that smoke hurt her nostrils? She insisted: Did it hurt her? And Pat insisted back: No, Mother. It's all right.

He got up to leave, putting on his coat and invoking the five-minute-only notice on the door: he reassured Pat he would come again. "When? Soon?" He said maybe not tomorrow, but the next day.

He left gaily, at a half-run. He was full of what a good fellow he was, and that it hadn't been half that bad, especially once it had turned to parlor conversation, and, of course, he was firmly resolved never to go back. He'd done his duty. The outside air was fresh and wild, and he had a busy afternoon to face.

But he couldn't help thinking about her, and soon felt guilty. The accident had been as cruel to her as his own lust might have been. He was relieved that he hadn't been the one to bring her down to earth. But now she was helpless and in need, no longer an object of desire. She needed his good faith; to believe in his friendship, if not in his love. She would wonder why he didn't come back, waiting for him, inventing excuses. But this was an imposition, and he refused to be bullied.

He felt like a celebrity as he graciously bestowed his time and attention a few evenings later. She wasn't pining and forlorn, however; on the contrary, she was surrounded by love and attention.

The room displayed get-well cards, stuffed animals, toys, baskets of food, vases of gaudy flowers. The mother bustled in and out; a younger sister, Jill (dark-haired, loud, mouthy) joked and brayed, while her nameless roommate (a fat, pimply, bespectacled girl) nodded approval. The boy she had been riding the motorcycle with was there too (he'd been neither hurt, nor at fault for the accident). His name was Jeff; he was tall, quiet, amiable and had a crew cut, and seemed, at first, to be her younger brother. Talking and listening with animation, raised up nearly to a sitting position, her bruises faded and her eyes bright, Pat herself was much better. She greeted him in a confused manner; formally introduced him; had them show him her cast, with her toes sticking out; tried to force on him half a sandwich and cookies the others had brought, and asked him, finally, in amongst the other talk, what he had been doing? He told her about one party he'd gone to, only to have her complain, "You don't waste any time." "Well, life goes on," he said. "Jack's

always so consoling," she commented to Jeff.

Next visit, he met Richard, the home town suitor, who had made a special trip from Warwick, N.Y., to see her. She and Richard, scandalized that he'd never heard of it, explained that Warwick was a prestige socialite colony north of Manhattan. Her parents owned some sort of inn there and were the popular toasters of the town. Richard said that an hour after the accident, news was all over Warwick that Patty Davidson had had an awful motorcycle crash and that her left leg had been amputated to the knee. Then, more gravely, Richard asked about scars (none), and the insurance (the man who hit them came through a red light), about her job (secure). Jack gathered that Richard might have won her long ago (he admired her parents, even seemed to want their inn), if she hadn't set her heart, after her graduation from junior college, on adventuring.

Then her father came up, and Jack met him: a short, white-haired, natty, energetic man, full of smoking-parlor humor and cavorting for his daughter. He brought several quarts of Vat 69 scotch, as presents for the doctor, the lawyer, the nurses, and was in the act of plying one himself. He behaved more as if at his daughter's wedding than at her hospital bed, publicly reiterated his policies towards her as her father, and bragged of his readiness to accept her as a young woman on her own, to respect her as such, and not to interfere. Nor did he begrudge her fate. She'd had a bad experience, but was on the mend now, and he would slop around no protective sentiment. He duly shook hands with Jeff, a newcomer named Tom, and with Jack, basked in them as "her young men," and left them the field.

She improved rapidly, while Jack visited less and less often, and Jeff became a fixture, quietly, inevitably at her side. Jeff's soft, patient eyes, his dress, his manners, all testified to his serious interest, even though he'd originally come to town to see her sister. He'd dropped

out of college and was waiting to be drafted.

One afternoon, not having visited for ten days or so, Jack stopped by and found the two of them in the silent intimacy of young, adolescent lovers. They were watching a TV show. Pat no longer wore a cast and was sitting in a chair; Jeff was sitting on the floor beside her. They took Jack absently for granted ("Oh, hullo, Jack...") as he sat on the bed and they all three watched TV. He didn't feel like talking about himself and he assumed nothing worth talking about had happened to her, but during lulls in the TV dialogue, he asked and replied to idle questions. Her parents were taking her home soon. She was getting rid of her Brighton apartment. She hinted in a meekly chiding manner that she resented his neglecting her, and then, as if she'd discovered something worth saying, she stretched and smiled; and affected a coquettish little glance, and said: "I'm almost back to normal, Jack."

Another ten days and she was well enough to use a walker; she hobbled down the hall and called him on the pay phone. He didn't know her voice. Preoccupied with other friends, the work he must finish before vacation, and the very important girl he was about to meet in New York, this tremulously plaintive voice confused him. She chided him for not visiting her: why hadn't he come? "I've missed you, Jack." Against his will, he found an excuse. He'd never been able to see her alone; Jeff had always been there, so he'd concluded that something was going on between Jeff and herself. Oh, no! she said, there was nothing with Jeff. He was lonely, that's all. He had no job. He was going to be drafted. He had nothing to do all day. "Look," Jack asked, "do you know anything about Jeff's feelings? Is he in love with you?" She insisted, "No, he just doesn't know anybody else in town."

When he visited next day, she was alone, sitting up in bed and wearing a frilly pink night dress, with a ribbon in her hair. She asked what he'd been doing. He signed moodily, looked away, and

said, "Nothing. Except I've been getting depressed about women." He told her about the girl in New York, and about another girl here who loved someone else--all as if she herself could only be a sympathetic, sisterly confidante.

When she called to say she was leaving, her voice was cautious, wistfully asking nothing because she knew he wouldn't want to be asked--yet wanting to ask anyway. Would he come to say goodbye before she left tomorrow? Exasperated, he said, "Of course." He was come by eleven, then, if that was the earliest he could make it, because the plane left at twelve-fifteen, and they had to get to the airport.

"Wait a minute. Are you trying to get me to drive you?"

She was. And he did drive her. With her mother, who remembered him when he was introduced a second time, but who really preferred to take a taxi--she had so many last minute matters to settle and errands to run. And also with Jeffrey, dressed up in coat and tie, and scrubbed, and his hair cut--all in honor of the day. For the day was Pat's. Everyone laughed, chattered, wished Pat well, and Pat was coyly giddy as a birthday girl. It turned out they had to make only two stops on the way; the first of these, in honking, angry Boston traffic, was sister Jill's, where he endured more of their wriggling family ecstasies ("You're going home!"), a check changed hands, and the stuffed animals, radio, vases were returned; and next, was at a certain fish market in Back Bay, where Mrs. Davidson was determined to get carp for tonight's supper.

By the time they got to the airport, Jack quietly hated them.

Long after they had gone, he was sitting back home, reading, when he reached the bitter conclusion that she had been using him--all along. He had been the innocent stooge for a young girl's selfish

dreams. He vowed to be more careful. He would rather be lonely, if need be, than compromise himself with girls like that.

