

It's Stupid, Stupid, What Will Become Of Us

by Jerry Ratch

Whoa! *Whoa!* This just in! You mean we were minutes away from some kind of immanent Greek tragedy!!?

Let me get this straight. I cheated one time on Jolene with Jolene's baby-sitter (you!), whom she used to cheat on her husband (with me)? I guess I'm lucky her husband didn't come looking for me, like the Italian mobster guys you described. (It wasn't that much further down St. Charles Road, you know, the Villa Nova, from where you used to wait tables.)

You may be happy, or at least somewhat pleased, to know that I was seeing Terry a number of times while I was with Jolene. Terry actually moved out to Lombard at one point, to take a permanent childcare job, and she would call me up and we'd have these long conversations where she would end up sort of howling like a cat in heat, trying to convince me to come out to see her. I was spending a lot of time at home trying to write my very first attempt at a novel, ironically about her and Lynda. It was about how the after-effects of your first love can have a disastrous, poisonous effect on your second, because you never quite get over that first one, really, do you?

And I would listen to Terry howling like that and we would meet at some park and have sex on the grass in broad daylight without a stitch of clothing on, and we didn't care if anyone was watching us or not. It was too hard to resist the erotic nature of doing it out in nature. Lilac Park was one of the places, I remember. And some other forest preserve I can't remember the name of. (Churchill Woods, maybe?)

But it was the last night I spent with her, before leaving to go to graduate school out in California in August of 1968, that I will never forget (which I wrote about in my book that you read.)

The last night that she called was on my birthday that August, which was also the summer of the famous Chicago Democratic convention when Mayor Richard J. Daley called in troops of the National Guard to quell the riots that erupted in the streets that year. I saw them going in a long, unending procession into the city as I was driving west along Route 66 on my way out to California. It looked like they were heading into a war zone for the long haul. They were preparing for something very big. No one knew right then how big. But all the politics of the nation aside, the evening of my birthday — the night before I left Chicago for good — was the kind of hot, lyrically humid Midwestern night where it never seemed to cool off until after midnight, and it always made things extra sensual for some reason.

It seemed to make the skin more palpable, and touch even more exciting than usual. In which your skin lightly stuck to the other's skin upon contact, as though the skin itself were indicating a desire to merge. Terry had that special sound in her voice, a huskiness that had come to register deep need and desire, something I had come to immediately understand over the years we'd been lovers, and couldn't help responding to, even in the midst of the many fights that went beyond ordinary mortal battles, into an area mixing sex with sweat and rage and tears. I listened as Terry took a deep breath on the other end of the line.

"Can we go out one last time, before you leave?" she asked. I could hear distinctly her breathing, which seemed unusually calm. "I have a birthday gift for you."

"A gift?" I asked.

"It's something very special and I need to give it to you in person. In your car," she said.

"Oh, and it has to be in my car?"

"Of course in your car, stupid. Or else in one of our special places where we would go to park. How about the Naperville quarry, or out on the Fox River in your dad's boat?"

"And it couldn't be something closer by, could it?" I asked. I used to be terrifically sarcastic.

"Fine!" she said. "I didn't think I would become just another one of your cheap dates so soon."

"So soon!" I retorted.

There came one of those deadly silences from the past that seemed to creep between us sooner or later. To me it came to be known as the Chicago Freeze: a particular Midwestern brand of non-communication between men and women. I had seen the parents of my generation participate in it all too often. It was what made men seem hard; even sometimes stupid. It was not an inherited trait. It was something that was learned by us, I think, and something that had to be worked at, in order to be unlearned. It wasn't a pretty trait.

"I'm sorry, Jerry," Terry said after a time. "I didn't mean it to sound like that. You know how I am. I promise to keep my mouth under control. Please, Jerry. Just this one night?"

"Why, Terry?"

"It's something I know you will like," she said. "When can you come get me? I'm ready right now."

"Terry, I'm packing. It's late already and I've got to be on the road first thing in the morning."

"That's why I called you tonight. It's your birthday gift and I have to be there in person to give it to you. You're going to love it, Jerry. You are going to love it."

"Terry..."

"I love you so much, Jerry. You have to grant me this one last desire. It's something I promised my mother."

"Oh, your mother now! I always thought your mother hated me."

"It's not you she hates, you fool, it's me. It's just that she knows I love you like no other woman ever loved anybody else on

this planet, that's all. I always thought she was jealous of me. Actually she says she doesn't believe in that kind of thing."

"What *does* she believe in?"

"Marriage and children and duty, and that's all," Terry said. "She's angry at me because I was never able to pin you down in marriage. She got real angry when she found out that we were actually living together when we were, in sin."

"*In sin!* There you go again," I said, "with the *sin* stuff."

"Those are her words, not mine," she said. "You know I love you more than any other woman ever will, my sweet Jerry."

"Terry, honey..." I hesitated, but I hesitated too long and she knew it. "When I come back, Terry ... I will come back for you someday ... and I'm going to marry you."

I believed this when I said it. I loved her and I knew how much she loved me, but we were like explosives and detonators in the presence of each other, with the eroticism and the malice of it, and it would have never worked between us and we both knew that it would not.

"Come over and pick me up, Jerry. Make it as soon as you can. I need to see you this one last time. Please?"

"So what's this great gift? Is this something your mother put you up to?"

"Get serious. My mother would be happier if I never saw you again and I went out and found some nice Catholic boy and had a hundred and fifty children. Even then, she wouldn't be happy."

"Oh, shit," I said. "I shouldn't have picked up the phone."

"I hunger to kiss your sweet lips and plant kisses all over your face," Terry said, breathing into the phone with that especially low, gravely element in her voice. "Just one more time," she said, "and then you're free to go out to your stinking California."

I knew now what kind of a gift she had in mind.

"Jerry, please, I can't stand the thought of your going without seeing you this one last time."

"We've already had our last time," I said. "About a hundred of them."

"You're going to love it, Jerry." I heard her breath on the other end of the line, and then I thought I heard her whine just a little, way up in her throat. I hated it when she did that.

"I'll be waiting in the park across the street," she said. "I'll go out there right now and wait until you come and get me. I'll be right by the pond, by the willow tree. I'll go anywhere you want. Or, will you just come to my door? Whatever you want. Please?"

You could hear that breathing across the hot August night air. I remembered the fine hairs along her arms; I had counted them one at a time, every one. She was living in the next town away, in Lombard.

"Okay, baby? Will you come over and get me? Right ne-e-o-ow!" she yowled, imitating her cat perfectly. It had always been a joke between us, that we used. Instead of pet names, she had taken to imitating her cat. "Please?" she asked.

"Okay, Terry," I said. "When should I come over?"

"Now," she said. "Oh, Jerry, oh, baby, you are so dumb," she said. "You have no idea how much I love you."

She was twenty years old. We drove out to a park we had been accustomed to parking in and using for sex when we had first become a couple. It had always been exciting to do it in the back seat of the car on hot summer nights with the windows rolled down, sweating on each other and listening to the special, funny sucking sounds the wet flesh made against the other's wet body, intermixed with the smell of sex and the smell of the trees the wind carried and the smell of ragweed and earth.

When we got there Terry told me not to move, that she would do everything, and she began to undress me slowly, purposefully, stripping off one piece of clothing at a time.

"You just sit there like you were a little boy and don't make a move and let me undress you," she said. After she had removed everything, she said, "Now I have to memorize your body. This is for the future, for us both."

After looking at me in the faint light with an extraordinary look in her eyes, an animalistic hunger I couldn't ever remember

seeing before, she removed her own clothing, and went down on me with her mouth.

Very close to the end of our love-making, in the muted light from outside I could see well enough to notice for the first time, as she faced me dead on, sitting straddled on top of me, that her nose was actually slightly askew. Was it that everybody's nose was that way? I wondered. I couldn't help but reach up and touch my own face, and then I touched hers. Her eyes were closed. She made a serious movement with her hips and I felt that first lunge of the human sexual oil coming into the world.

"You're so stupid," she said. This was after we had both exhausted ourselves with each other. "Jerry?"

"Yes, dear."

"Do you think, while you're out there at that big graduate school in California, are you going to miss me? ... At all? ... A little, once in awhile?"

I did not answer. She was breathing heavily, her chest heaving with it, and so was I. There was a small trickle of tears running down both her cheeks that I tried stopping with my thumb, but they just ran around it and continued dropping from the bottom of her chin, intermingling with our sweat.

That was when she said, "I bet you do, you damned fool. You have no idea what you're throwing away. No idea at all."

"Come with me, Terry," I said, trying to get my breath. "You can get a job out there."

She laughed and I felt the laughter all the way up inside her. "My mother would make sure that my brother hunted you down," she said. "Anyway, you know as well as I do ... it would never work."

"We might be able to make it work," I said. Still and ever, still and ever, I thought, the fucking stupid youth-filled rolling laughing dreadful ever-ambitious soul of the romantic.

"It's stupid," she said, "stupid ... what will become of us."

