

Grace, In Terms Of 'For Ever'
Winter 2020

My name is Charmian Szymanski Chester. You know me as Nonny, the name your Mother has always called me.

If you are reading this, Daisy, you are now 21 years old. I expect that, Goddess willing, you have graduated from High School and are well into college, or whatever secondary schooling route you choose to take.

No doubt you have questions about your mother and father. I understand your curiosity. Theirs--ours, really--is an unusual and complex story. But your family is your ultimate legacy, so your father and I decided to put this narrative together so you might have the opportunity to know the complete story of how you came to be. It is far more complex than even your mother or father can ever understand, for reasons they still do not know and I cannot divulge to them for reasons which shall soon become apparent.

So. This story must necessarily be written in two parts. My portion, which will be denoted as above, and your father's. He is the storyteller in the family and I have entrusted this task to him. Having read it prior to sealing it within your time capsule, I believe he did a marvelous job of relating your family history...to the extent that he can. Because of the circumstances, there are portions of the story he does not know. You'll understand, I'm sure.

If, however, after reading this, you should decide to share it with them, I accept your judgement; even now, at your young age, you are a bright and prescient girl.

Just be certain that you understand the implications thereof.

Signed, with all of my love,

Nonny

Dearest Daisy,

Nonny told me I should begin by stating my name for the record. Fair enough. I have no reason to not trust Nonny completely.

So, my name is James Edgar LeFleur. And I'm certain Nonny will let you know why I am writing this. It is to be a record of your pre-history, so to speak, and it will be sealed in a time capsule, for you to open when you are 21.

Here, then, is the story of how your Mother and I met. You know the rest.

With all of my love, always,

Daddy

Grace. I can say her name all day long and it always brings a smile to my face and evokes a happy sigh. True love is like that, I suppose. And it still makes her giggle to hear me to speak thus. True love is like that too! Maybe the first thing I should do is describe her, because she hasn't changed since we first met. That part

at least is easy: she is the most beautiful girl I ever saw. Bar none. Honey-blond hair, sky blue eyes, skin like porcelain. Slender, always just that little bit taller than the other girls, a sylph-like body, even when she was young. Imagine the prettiest child, so radiantly lovely that you could, you should fall in love with her the instant you set eyes on her.

Except no one did. I don't think that I did till much later.

Grace Chester is very easy to describe physically. And personally, she is and always has been a delight. Chipper, happy, and radiant. The sort of person it should feel so good to be around.

Except that it didn't. In fact, it was very uncomfortable being around her for any period of time.

And this...this is very, very hard to describe. Especially from my point of view.

It was a long time before I understood how it came to be, but Grace, for all her beauty, was...well, I suppose the politically correct way of putting it would be "intellectually disabled". Back then they called her mentally retarded. A car wreck had left her with a traumatic brain injury that didn't heal properly and left her the way she was.

Was. For part of her story is in how she did change, and why. Please, let me explain this in my own way and time.

School, first. She was "left back" one year, then another, then she was routed into a special ed class and most of my lot didn't see her again.

Except I did. Pretty much every day. She lived just down my block, you see, and I had to walk past her house to get to and from school each day. She always seemed to be outside when I passed. Always. Rain or shine, snow or wind, one thing you could count on was seeing Grace. In the morning she would be sitting on the stoop of her grandparents' home, or just inside the screen door; sometimes by herself, sometimes with her Grandmother, whom she referred to as Nonny. Sunny afternoons she'd either be climbing off of the bus as I walked by, or if the bus had run early as it sometimes did, and the weather was nice, she would be digging in Nonny's flowers. Weeding, she said. And she would talk to you. Talk your ear off if you let her. Always chirpy, always friendly. Always spacey. That's what she got tagged as: Spacey Gracey. Depending on the day or her state of mind, she might remember what she said to you one minute and not repeat it the next. You could have a five minute conversation with her and just learn one particular concept, like, "These are Nonny's flowers and I love taking care of them." You might get that much, maybe a bit more. Maybe you wouldn't.

And eventually you'd drift away. Perhaps you'd say good bye. More often you wouldn't, because it just got so tiresome. I say all of this because I lived it.

She didn't seem to care. That was the lovely thing about being "special", you see; she had no idea she was being ignored. Nor did she have any idea she was being insulted.

I became better acquainted with Grace through Nonny. Nonny was her grandmother, as I've mentioned; Grace had gone to live with her grandparents after the accident. Her parents had both been killed. For many years she had no memory of either of them, and very little of her grandfather, who died when she was seven years old. From that point it was just Grace and Nonny. Charmian Szymanski Chester, that was Nonny, Nonny because Grace couldn't quite manage Grandmother, never mind Charmian, and Nonny eschewed the name Granny. Robert Chester was her late husband.

And this is where I enter the story as someone more than just a passer-by. As I've mentioned, Nonny's house was just one block from ours, and my Mom had worked for Robert Chester, as his secretary. When Mr. Chester died suddenly of a heart attack, Mom, being the caretaker she was, decided that Mrs. Chester and Grace had to be taken care of...whether they needed it or not. So she would cook them a casserole from time to time and carry it down, and I would cut their grass in the summer months and shovel their walk and drive when it snowed in the winter, which it often did in the greater Chicagoland area. I'm not saying I enjoyed it, or even that I wasn't occasionally reluctant. I was. I mean, I was in my teens and, like father like son, I was terminally self-centered. What's more, Nonny hardly needed tending, being a rather robust woman; I knew her mainly as the nice lady behind the counter at the dime store. I shoveled their walks too, and washed their windows.

So Mom was just being herself, trying to help out. Mrs. Chester always accepted the help with a grateful smile, and I guess I didn't mind too much. Besides, Mom always made sure I had a few extra dollars in my allowance...dollars which I later discovered had come from Nonny. But anyway.

It happened on one occasion that I was shoveling a particularly magnificent load of snow from the Chester driveway. It was a big fall, perhaps five or six inches and still coming. But if you don't get ahead of it, it's just worse later. So I'd already done our own rather long driveway and figured, I was already warmed up, why not go ahead and get a start on the Chester's?

I'd often see Grace looking at me through the windows. Fact was, she'd often join me when I did the lawn or the edging or weeding or whatnot, and I would do my best to be pleasant, but it could be difficult. This particular day, I couldn't help but notice an odd, forlorn look on her face as she peered through the glass, sort of a mix of sad and wistful. Then she disappeared, and a few minutes later Mrs. Chester came to the door and called, "Jimmy! Come in and get warm. I've got some hot chocolate on."

I motioned around me. "Well, I really need to get after this. It's only going to get worse, and..."

"...and there's another foot coming, and it's about to hit," she said. "Seriously. Get yourself inside and warm up. Grace would love the company, you know."

Oh, I knew. And I dreaded it. But I was cold, and wet, and tired, and besides, Nonny turned out to be right. No sooner had I clambered up onto the stoop, the snow stopped swirling down and started descending in curtains. It was remarkable, even a little frightening; we hadn't seen that much snow since '67. I shrugged the snow off my coat on the porch, stomped off my galoshes, and gratefully walked in to a warm house.

"Gloves off," Mrs. Chester insisted. "Get all those wet things off. You're going to catch pneumonia."

Too late for that...I'd already had pneumonia twice. I almost said so too, but then I saw the look on Grace's face. Whereas before it had been sad, now she looked concerned...but also pleased. She pressed a hot mug of cocoa into my cold hands. "Here, Jimmy," she said. "Cocoa. It's good."

Now, no one called me 'Jimmy' except my Mom and my Grandma--and Nonny, as it happened--but it sounded okay coming from Grace. Don't ask me why. I'm sure it didn't have anything to do with that winsome look on her pretty face. "Thank you," I said instead. "I bet it is." And it was, and it was hot. It felt good going down. "I guess I didn't know how cold I was getting."

"I was getting cold just watching you," Grace murmured concernedly. "You need a blanket."

"A good idea," Mrs. Chester agreed. "Give me your coat and...my goodness, you *are* wet...clear through..."

You can see where this is going, I suppose. Before I knew it, I was wrapped in blankets and piled onto the sofa in one of the late Mr. Chester's thick bathrobes and terry pants. That was when the chill hit, and I must've drank three cups of cocoa before it eased. All the while, Grace never took her eyes off of me. It was discomfiting, but, at the same time...oddly pleasing. It was the first time I can remember a girl looking at me thus, never mind that it was Grace.

A big orange tomcat wandered into the room. "That's Neek," Grace told me. "Be careful, Jimmy, he's not very..."

I think she was getting ready to say 'friendly' when the cat jumped onto my lap and gave me an inquisitive look. Neek was a rescue, and later I was to learn that his real name was Unique, the moniker he'd been tagged with at the shelter. He looked like an enormous loaf of bread with claws. He was either curious or hungry. Hoping for the former, I extracted a hand from within the pile of blankets and held it out. He sniffed it, then rubbed himself on it with interest. Soon I found myself being groomed by this enormous orange furry lump that wasn't supposed to be friendly. Grace looked stunned, but pleased. "Neeky never goes to *anybody*," she said in what sounded like awe.

Soon came the offer of a late lunch. I'd already had lunch. Well, what about dinner? I had to work. "Don't be silly," insisted Mrs. Chester. "No one is going to be eating out tonight." She handed me their cordless. "Call Zorba's, right now, and tell them there's no way you can make it." And she gave me the first of many of what I would learn to refer to as 'That Look'. It is a look that you can't refuse. Ever. Better to not even try.

I called. I was told by Gus, the owner, "Are you nuts? We're closed. And we probably won't reopen till Monday either, if we open then." Next I called home, and Mom told me to stay put, that it was getting worse. I peered out the window and what I saw was almost solid white.

"Looks like I'm here for a little while," I sighed.

I have often heard the word 'beaming' used when referring to someone smiling. Well, that was the look Grace had on her face. Beaming.

It's funny. Some things about those first days with Grace I find easy to remember. Like sitting in the Chester living room with her seated next to me, watching reruns of "The Brady Bunch", her favorite show. My own, "Kolchak: The Night Stalker" came on almost right after, but Grace visibly shuddered during the opening, and it was probably for the best that the TV went out a few minutes later. At least the lights stayed on, and Mrs. Chester--Nonny, that is, she was now insisting I call her that--motioned toward a shelf full of books. "Nights like this, I just like to curl up with a good book. I imagine Grace would enjoy it if you read to her."

I glanced over at Grace. Yes, the look on her face sure did indicate approval. "I am at your service," I said to her with an indulgent smile. "Is there anything you'd prefer?"

"Well, I have been reading 'The Call of the Wild'," Nonny suggested. She picked up a copy that was sitting on the coffee table. "There's a marker where I stopped."

I found the place and started reading, doing voices where appropriate. A delighted Grace sat rapt the whole while. Before too long, Nonny excused herself, and then it was just Grace and I.

I don't mind admitting that I was uncomfortable, at first. But at the same time, it was oddly familiar. This girl, whom I'd known...how long? Ten, perhaps twelve years? Here I was, sitting on the sofa next to her, snow piling up outside, wrapped up in blankets, not likely to try to go home any time soon. And was it my imagination, or was Grace sliding closer and closer to me?

No. She was edging over as I read. Moving slowly, barely detectable, rather like a soft, warm glacier...appropriate considering the weather. But not unpleasant.

And after a few chapters, I wasn't surprised to find her head resting on my shoulder, then snuggling into place as she fell asleep. A trace of her scent wafted toward me, faintly flowery and clean. I'd never been so close to her hair, and seeing it thus, it looked to me as pure as straw spun into gold, just like in a fairy tale. Or perhaps I was just picturing this because of the unusual position I found myself in.

Now I was in a spot. I kept reading, so as not to disturb her, hoping Nonny wouldn't think the worse of me when eventually she returned.

She didn't. In fact, she had a look on her face not entirely unlike that Grace herself had been wearing not long before.

It was almost as if she'd planned things. But of course Nonny didn't have control of the weather...right?

"Keep going," she whispered. "It'll help her sleep. She had a rough day at school yesterday and I kept her at home today." She nodded toward the picture window. "Which in retrospect turned out to be rather prescient. Your being here is the best thing that could have happened to her." She smiled. "You read wonderfully. Almost like you're performing the story. Better than me by far. I'll bring you a cup of tea."

So I continued and sipped the cup of whatever it was she brought. Not tea; some brownish yellow honeyed concoction. Tasty, but not tea. A little bitter, though I liked it; it was pleasing and had a flowery aroma that was not so far removed from the scent of Grace's hair.

I'd read a lot of London over the years so I was familiar with the story; Nonny had left off around the time Buck had his fight to the death with Spitz, and I managed to get to the part where Thornton sets Buck free before I could feel my eyes start to droop. It wasn't anything I could fight, either. I don't know whether it was the warmth of Grace sitting beside me, or the dim light, or the 'tea', but I was fading fast.

Nonny saw, though. She left the room and came back with a thick comforter. "Listen," she said softly, "your Mom already knows you're staying here tonight." She arranged the comforter around Grace and I. "Do you think you can sleep like that?"

"If you can take this," I said, yawning and holding out the book.

"Done." She took it, then suggested, "Why don't you put that arm around her? You'll be more comfortable, and besides, that's what she really wants, you know."

I wasn't so sure it was what I really wanted, but I did it all the same, and yes, it was more comfortable.

"That's it," Nonny whispered. She dimmed the lights. "Now, shut your eyes and rest."

I did. And I did.

It was somewhere around one thirtyish that I felt Grace's hand take my own, the one that had been resting on her shoulders. Gently she tugged it downward around her, finally laying the palm of my hand on her chest over her heart. She stroked my hand a few times, cooing softly. Then her lips pressed against my neck, just for an instant, before they retreated and her breathing again became silent and regular.

If she was dreaming, it was a happy dream, and perhaps somehow I was responsible for that. It was a very satisfying feeling.

I could never in my life have imagined that Grace Chester would be the source of such an emotion, but I guess I was learning that life can be like that sometimes. I would learn a lot in the coming weeks.

The next morning we were pretty much in the same position, Grace and I. And I say 'pretty much' because she was actually lying across my lap now, having made herself perfectly comfortable. But that was okay because I myself was sort of lying on the sofa's armrest, with my head on the end table, atop a pillow thoughtfully placed there, presumably by Nonny. I certainly didn't remember arranging myself thus, but then I'd just had the best sleep I'd had in weeks. Months. And now the sun was streaming in the front window, brilliantly white, reflecting off the snow which now piled high in the yard. I knew what my plan of the day was going to be, whether I wanted it or not.

But first I had to extricate myself from the puzzle box of humanity in which I had found myself. And that was not something that happened right away. It took Nonny entering the room with breakfast on a tray to bring a stir to Grace, and several minutes more to get her to sit upright. Only then I could do likewise. Slowly, slowly...my back was stiff from having lay that way for heaven only knew how many hours, on top of all of the snow removal I'd had to do the day before.

Which reminded me of all of the snow removal that had to be done again. "Gee whiz," I muttered, looking out the window. "That looks worse than it did yesterday."

"It is," Nonny agreed. "And I know you'll have to go out in it, so eat hearty."

"Hearty," Grace echoed, placing her hand on my chest, like she'd done with mine so early in the morning. "I can feel your heart," she whispered. "Did you feel mine this morning?"

I had to smile. "Yes. Yes I did." Then, an impulse. God, save me from impulse! "I felt something else this morning," I said in kind. "Would it be all right if I returned the favor?"

"Yessss..." she sighed.

I kissed her cheek.

Another sigh.

Nonny just looked at us with a satisfied smile.

So I ate that hearty (hearty!) breakfast, layered up with my now-dry outwear, and went back out into the breech. I did the Chester's walks and drive first of course, more of necessity than favor; it really was that tough to get around, the snow being heavy and wet this morning. Great for snowmen, snow forts, and snowballs...not so nice for snow shoveling. But I got it done nonetheless, and around midafternoon I was back in my own house.

Mom didn't say much, but she did smile widely when she saw me walking in. "I understand you reacquainted yourself with someone," was all she would allow. I nodded and smiled.

Dad had more on his mind. "I would've appreciated it if you'd have brought the shovel back home rather than keep it over at the Chester's all night. It doesn't do me a bit of good there."

Well. I happened to know there was another shovel in the garage. What's more, I knew he knew. Still more, I knew it was a rare moment when he actually cared to take up either to do any work. Why? He had two sons who'd do it for him, right? Of course that "two" was now "one" as my older brother was in the process of moving out. I didn't begrudge him that; he'd done his time. My sister...not so much, but then she was a girl. Right?

"I got it done, Dad," I said. "I'm sorry, and I won't let it happen again." Years of sad experience had taught me that arguing availed little with my Father, and it was best to agree and be as apologetic as possible.

He grunted around a mouthful of potato chips. "You enjoy your night?"

"It was nice."

"You get any?" That was my Dad, in a nutshell.

"It's Grace, Dad."

"So? She's a doll." He lowered his voice. "What's more, you could probably schtupp her all night and she would never remember it the next day."

Mom was blessed--or cursed, take your pick--with super acute hearing. Actually, I think all Moms are. "Jesus, John. That's pretty sick even by your standards," she said to him. "They had a nice evening, and the weather was too bad for him to get home. He spent the night on the sofa after shoveling snow all day. Didn't you, Jimmy?"

I nodded. I don't suppose she had to know that Grace had lay atop me on that sofa most of the night.

"Missed opportunity," Dad said.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, he'll have another. Mrs. Chester wants him to come back over and join them for dinner. She just called and asked if it was all right." She looked at me. "Would you like to go?"

"Suits me," Dad replied in my stead. "Means more dinner here for me."

I left the room. I didn't bother to answer; my Father had done it for me.

Well, of course I would go. Why not? I was appreciated there. And yes, Grace was a draw now.

I was finding that part a bit hard to assimilate. Where had this Grace come from? I mean, I know, she'd always been there. And she'd been "all grown up" for several years now...she was, in fact, two years older than me. And we'd always at least been pleasant to each other...so far back as I could remember anyway. But now? It was as if some set of gears had been set into motion that were drawing me--us--toward some sort of conclusive event.

I asked Nonny about it when I arrived at their home just after 5. Grace was in her room, "Getting herself ready," Nonny told me breathlessly. "And that's the first time I've ever been able to say that. She's never had a chance to fuss over a boy before." She smiled. "It pleases me, even more so that it's you, Jimmy."

I could feel myself blushing.

She laid a hand on my probably very warm cheek. "You know she's head over heels for you, don't you?"

"Oh," I said, "I don't..."

"No. She is, Jimmy. She has been, for years. But you're a young man, you wouldn't necessarily see it. Boys are built like that. My Robert was." She gave a wry smile. "What I had to go through to get his attention. But it was worth it. He was a good man, a worthy man."

"Mom thought a lot of him."

She smiled. "She's a fine lady, your Mother. Your Father..." There was a long, thoughtful pause. "Well, he's good at what he does." She saw the look on my face and added, "Be fair. I know he's well respected as a Police officer. But somehow I imagine you did all of the shoveling."

"Every cubic yard," I sighed. "I can feel it in my legs and back. And arms. And shoulders. And..."

She laughed. "We'll see to that later. Now. I suspect you have some questions for me. Fire away."

Odd. I hadn't had anything in particular to ask her...*until that very instant*.

"Okay," I said, trying to grasp the growing queue of information I suddenly seemed to desire. "Tell me about Grace."

She nodded. "That would be a good place to start, wouldn't it?" She indicated a spot on the sofa and sat next to me. "I suppose you know that she's nineteen. She'll be twenty this April. Perhaps you know she's my granddaughter by blood, but Robert and I adopted her after her parents died. So she's my daughter now."

"Yes. But..."

"How did she get here, and how did she get to be...how she is. I understand. Well, let me give you a wee bit of family background first. Daisy Szymanski was my daughter, and she was married to Jack. They were Grace's parents. A good man, Jack Farmer. You remind me a lot of him, and I wonder if somehow you do that for Grace too. Maybe that's why she's so attracted to you." She paused, then continued: "They were married almost three years before they conceived. Trying all the time. Believe me, Grace was a wanted child. That at least was no accident. She was meant to be. Three years old, she was, when they had their wreck, out at Cline and 45th." She paused. "A drunk. Bastard didn't even stop to see if they were okay."

Her look morphed into something hard and dark, then back to warm and contemplative in the matter of a

few seconds. "But he got his, and Grace came to live with us. It was an awful thing...this was before child car seats, you see. Daisy had her on her lap. No air bags. Barely a seatbelt. Poor child was tossed about the car. To this day you can still feel a crease on the back of her head where they had to do surgery."

She sighed. "Had it happened today, chances are that she'd be all right. I'm not sure Jack or Daisy would've made it even now, but Grace likely would have been right as rain. As it was, she came through the surgery okay, and her broken bones healed well enough. Poor thing spent most of 1962 in a body cast, but she was as good as gold, she never fussed. But perhaps she didn't really have the capacity for it either.

"She was never the same after that. It didn't show itself too much at first, because she wasn't in school yet. The doctors warned us, of course. But they didn't know so much about traumatic brain injury as they do today. Not that it would've made much difference; as soon as we got her home, we knew she had problems, and when she started school, it really made itself evident. She didn't retain anything. It had to be frustrating as hell for her...though we still don't know if she even has the capacity for being frustrated."

"She seems happy enough," I observed. "And she absorbs what she hears. She knew the story last night."

"Well, she has changed a lot since then. Perhaps there's some neural regeneration, though the doctors have always told me that's not possible. But I know what I see. Keep her interested in something and she *will* grow in it. Reading, like you noticed. I read to her every night. Every night. And just like you, I can see her absorbing the story. Ask her about Buck, in 'Call of the Wild'. Or Captain Nemo in '20,000 Leagues Under The Sea'. She can go on for an hour about him. She knows what's happening. You just have to be persistent with her. And happy? Yes, she can be happy." She patted my hand. "I've never seen her happier than she's been the past few days. You've been a blessing, Jimmy. You have no idea."

"Well, you're right about that," I said. "I have no idea."

"But you will. Oh, you will." She took both of my hands in hers now and squeezed them. "And you'll be making someone very, very happy along the way. Two somebodies."

I wasn't sure how to react to that. Even less so when Grace walked into the room.

Radiant Grace. I'd never seen her made up before. Ever. I have no idea how she managed it; maybe Nonny had done it and Grace had been waiting in bedroom all this time to build suspense.

No, really. I actually considered this at the time.

But yes, she was radiant. Angelic, even. She was wearing a dress, a sort of a green floral pattern design. Not really appropriate seasonally, but then that was Grace. Inappropriate. She neither knew nor cared. She just knew that she liked what she saw in the mirror.

I liked what I saw too. It must've showed, because like a mirror, it reflected on her face.

"You are beautiful," I told her.

She blushed, bright red. "No I'm not," she giggled.

I stood and walked over to her and gently put my hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me," I said softly. "Are you listening? This is very, very important."

She looked up at me with wide eyes. Nonny stood still. Even Neek stopped grooming himself as if he were listening too.

"I will never lie to you," I said. "Ever. Do you understand me?"

Still wide-eyed, she nodded.

"So. What are you?"

"I'm beautiful," she whispered.

"Exactly correct."

That radiant face became even more so.

And then there was a sob behind us. We both turned to look, and Nonny was crying. But they were happy tears.

After dinner, we danced.

Well, that was probably stretching that definition. We danced as much as either one of us could. Grace asked so plaintively I couldn't refuse her. Nonny concurred: "It's something she's always loved to do, and it's just

not the same doing it with me.”

So we put some music on and we danced. Mind you, it wasn't exactly the kind of tuneage I would be listening to at home, being of a progressive rock and classical bent, but Abba and the Bee Gees were okay, and I could even stand the Bay City Rollers and Donnie and Marie for short periods of time. Neither one of us were very graceful, but we managed well enough. After an hour and the third go-round of 'Mamma Mia' I had to call a halt. "I'm exhausted," I pleaded. "Please, Grace. I've been going since this morning."

"Oh Jimmy," Grace sighed.

"Really, Grace," Nonny said. "Jimmy has shoveled probably two feet of snow in the last 24 hours, for two different houses. And I'd bet he did the walks between our house and his." She gave me That Look. "Didn't you?"

I nodded. "It was kinda on the way."

"On the way," she laughed. "Do give the poor boy a rest then. I know he was sore this morning, I imagine he's even more so now. Maybe you should offer him some tea."

"Oh yes," Grace brightened. "Tea. Can I make it, Nonny?"

"No, dear. You sit in here and keep Jimmy company. Making the tea is my business." She started for the kitchen, stopping only to suggest, "Why don't you turn on the radio?"

There was something we could agree on. I enjoyed listening to sports and news on the radio, especially as I read, and soon we were digging back in to Jack London while a Blackhawks game played in the background.

This time it was different, though. Tonight, Grace started close to me instead of well down the cushion and gradually easing her way over. And I was okay with it.

Why wouldn't I be? I knew her better now. Perhaps I understood her better, or thought I did, anyway. I still couldn't quite grasp what sort of direction we were heading, but I was certainly enjoying myself more here than I would've been had I been at home playing solitaire or reading by myself. I might've enjoyed the music more at home, but the company here couldn't be beat. And the tea...I could smell it brewing in the kitchen, that same pungent brew I'd smelled last night. Maybe. There was a subtle difference to it, a somewhat sharper aroma, I thought. Or maybe I was imagining it.

No matter. It was hot and sweet and it tasted good, better than the cup I'd had last night. Perhaps it was different, or maybe I was just more accustomed to it. Nonny sat in the easy chair opposite us, leafing through a magazine and occasionally looking up and smiling at us.

We were maybe forty pages from being done with 'The Call of the Wild' when I realized how sleepy I was becoming. More, while that feeling had been stealing over me, I hardly noticed that whatever pain I'd been feeling from my various efforts of the morning--and all of the dancing, of course--had evaporated. The room was warm and friendly, the atmosphere was congenial, and Grace was so close. It all combined to set my mind so much at ease that I began to nod off again, just like I did last night.

"Nonny," Grace whispered, just loud enough for it to register with me.

"Take his teacup, dear," Nonny said. "So he doesn't slosh."

But it was too late for it to slosh. The cup was empty. I'd drained it. My senses were drained too. I was asleep a few minutes later.

I think that I got up once, to visit the washroom. That was all. Apart from that I slept the night through, to wake the next morning on the sofa much as I had the previous morning, except that instead of leaning on the end table, I found myself being supported by Grace...in her arms. There was a pair of pillows behind us, and our feet were propped up on two more. It was comfortable, even luxurious. I admit to being reluctant to prize my eyelids apart.

When I finally did, I looked over at Grace, saw her eyes flutter. "Good morning," I said softly.

"Good morning," she sighed with a happy smile. "You slept good." It was not a question.

"Oh yes. I don't know what's in that tea, but it's amazing."

"A little old country magic," Nonny called from the kitchen. "Are we ready for breakfast?"

I looked at the clock. "I may have to pass," I said. "My Dad's kind of a stickler on church."

A hearty laugh echoed back. "Your father? Church? That's funny."

It was. I had for a few years been convinced that the only reason my Dad went to church was to meet women. Which would've been okay if he hadn't already been married to my Mom, but there you go. "I think so too," I said, "but, you know, appearances."

"I understand. You can't move in here." I wasn't sure, but I could almost swear she added, under her breath, "not yet, anyway." But then I may have just imagined that bit.

"Oh, you're not leaving, are you?" Grace cried softly.

"I have to. Got to go to church. But I can come back later if you like."

"Grace, let the poor man have a break. He probably has some homework to do for school tomorrow." Which I did, in fact.

"He could do it here," Grace sniffled. Which I probably could. But it would've been a terrible distraction, because even after I left, even in church, even once I'd gotten back home, I found myself picturing Grace in my mind. Not in a sexual way--though that would happen eventually--but more as I saw her the previous night, in that green flowered dress, smiling and happy and dancing. So full of life, so different from what I remembered of her in the past. Her eyes, so open and inquisitive, putting the lie to what her school transcripts might tell. Was Nonny right? Was she changing? For that matter, was she changing before my eyes? In any case, I liked what I was seeing.

And for the first time in my life, I began to see myself through someone else's eyes. And I kind of liked what I saw there, too.

The next week passed rapidly. We were back to school on Monday; snow days in my town were and remain extremely rare. Nothing out of the ordinary happened at all.

Except.

Except that on my way home each day, before proceeding home, I would stop at the Chester residence and wait for the bus to bring Grace home. That first Monday, the look on her face as she stepped down to the walk was nothing short of beatific. Hearing her squeal, "Oh Jimmy!" just made a typically difficult Monday very, very different, for both of us. The scene repeated itself each day, till Friday, where instead of waiting on the stoop, I was in the house...Nonny had come home early and let me in.

That weekend though. My Dad had been heaping on the scorn, and I had been doing my best to ignore it. Now, anybody who knows my Dad will tell you that the worst thing you can do to him is ignore him, and I could tell that he was getting angry. Fortunately, I could also see that Mom was becoming infuriated as well, and it all came to a head Friday afternoon, when I told Mom that I would be skipping work and going straight to the Chester's. "The hell you will," Dad said. "You've been spending enough time over there this week. You're there every goddamn day now and I'm starting to wonder what's going on."

"She's my friend," I said. "My best friend. I like being around her."

"Doesn't hurt that she's hot, does it?"

"Does it bother you that she likes me and doesn't seem to know you?" I asked.

He looked at me askance. "What are you getting at, son?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, Dad. I've never had a girlfriend that lasted very long. I'd kinda hoped you'd be happy for me."

"Well, you could find yourself someone who wasn't a goddam retard."

That got my blood up. I wasn't the only one either, judging by the gasp I'd heard from the kitchen. But I was nothing if not prudent, and I knew my Dad could kick my ass without even raising a sweat. I turned around and left the room. The squeak of the mechanism from his easy chair told me that he was getting up to give chase, so I made for the side door just to get out of range.

And that was when Mom stepped into his path.

"Get out of my way, Penny," Dad growled. "Your son and I need to have a little heart-to-heart."

"No, John," she said coolly. "I think you and I need to have one instead." She called over her shoulder. "Jimmy? You go on over to Grace's now. Stay all weekend if you want. In fact," and she tossed her car's keys to me, "Why don't you take Grace for a drive. The roads are okay, and I'm sure she'd like to get out. I'm sure Mrs. Chester

would appreciate it.”

Peering around the corner, I could see my Dad, and he looked like he was about to bust a blood vessel. Several, in fact. But he didn't get another word out, because the next words out of Mom's mouth were, “Now you listen to me, John LeFleur. That's the last time you speak to him or me like that. Do you hear? Don't you even open your mouth, just listen...”

It went on in that vein as I stepped out the door. I waited outside, just to be sure that things weren't really going to go south. Oh, they did, but not for her or I.

I will summarize here. Mom would probably dispute the exact verbiage, but I can assure you it's pretty close.

“Does the name Natalie mean anything to you, John?” Long pause. “Ah, I can see that it does. How about Dawn? She's the dispatcher at the station, right? Sheryl, from church? Dear God, have you no shame? Oh wait, you just called your son's best friend a 'retard'. So you don't. Now, you and I both know that you can make things very difficult for me. But you should know John, that I can make things *much* more difficult for you...and I've told my brothers everything...”

And on. And on. Mind you, I had suspected such for years, and Dad had moved out of the house for several months when I was about ten years old. But I never knew for sure...till now. Mom had taken him back 'for the sake of the kids', but sometimes I wonder if it might've been better if she'd just told him to get lost.

So perhaps I was in a strange state of mind when I steered Mom's old Dodge into Nonny's driveway a few minutes later and walked up to the stoop. Nonny was waiting at the door, having seen the car drive up, and being Nonny, she sensed right away that something was wrong. “You didn't get thrown out, did you?” she asked. “Really. Tell me if you did. I can see you're upset.”

I looked around. “Grace is in her room,” Nonny said quietly. “I think she's disappointed that you weren't here when she got home. Tell me what happened, I'm all ears.” So I did, with her nodding all the while. “Well, it's happened then. Good. Sit down and I'll make you a cup of tea, and...”

No tea, for heaven's sake! Not *that* tea, anyway. “Well, actually, I have an idea,” I said, “something that would get Grace and I out of the house a while. But I need to be clear headed to do it, if you know what I mean.” And I think she did.

“Tell me what's on your mind,” she said.

So I did. At first she was skeptical, but gradually she became convinced. “Well,” she said, “if anyone could do it, I believe it would be you. And it *would* do you both good to get out a while. Grace?” she called. “Guess who's here...”

There was the squeak of chair legs scraping rapidly on a hardwood floor and an excited shout, and a few minutes later Grace and I were on the road leading out of town.

Now, it must be understood that Grace didn't ride in a car with just anyone. Yes, the accident that killed her parents and left her disabled happened when she was three years old. But she knew, Nonny said, and I believed Nonny, that Grace absolutely did not like to ride anywhere with anyone she did not trust implicitly and completely. Just to get her to ride on the bus had been a chore...which made my heart soar when she climbed into the passenger seat of Mom's Dodge with me with a smile on her face.

Having accomplished this much, I then took her to the very last place she could ever have expected to go.

It was an experiment, and perhaps a risk. But it was something for which I thought she might just be ready. With me. Maybe not with Nonny, but definitely with me. I'd been thinking about it the previous week. Maybe the best way to get her over her fear of being in a vehicle would be to show her how to drive...and then let her try. It was perhaps a crazy idea, but I felt I could do it. I'd always wanted to be a teacher; why not start here and now?

We had a perfect venue, certainly. I took her to the County Government complex, where my Dad had taken me the first time he'd put me behind the wheel. It was about ten miles from home, just outside the county seat, and one of its neatest features was an enormous, flat paved area that was always kept plowed and salted. It featured road markings and served as a Driver Training facility for the public and the county's police officers. In short, it was a great big skid pad, and on this late Friday afternoon we had it all to ourselves.

I parked the car, shut it off, and turned to look at her. "Grace," I said to her. "I'm going to teach you how to drive a car."

For just an instant she looked like something out of a Tex Avery cartoon; eyes popping from her face and mouth a huge wide O.

"Now," I continued, "we're going to do this very slowly, and if there's anything you need me to repeat, you just ask me. We won't go on till you're comfortable with everything. I just want to be able to say that I'm the one who taught you. And I will take care of you. Do you understand that? I will take care of you. Nonny wouldn't have let me bring you here if she didn't trust me. You trust me, don't you?"

She nodded. "I trust you, Jimmy."

"Then let's get started."

I showed her all the controls, starting with the signals and lights before moving onto the vital stuff. I had her walk around the car as I worked the switches, so she could see how they worked, then I had her do it while I watched her. I explained how all of the controls worked, and then I had her sit next to me and watch what I was doing, having her repeat everything back to me as I did; I'd found this was the best way to get her to retain information. Repeat, repeat, repeat. She was very patient and watched intently.

Then came the big moment. She slid into the driver's seat and buckled in. I slid over as close to her as I could, placing my left foot over the transmission hump within easy reach of either pedal. Just in case. It wasn't as if there was anything we could hit for a thousand feet, but, better safe than sorry.

Besides. It put me close to her, and that didn't seem to be a problem with either one of us now. And it also seemed to give her that little extra boost of confidence. I told her what I wanted her to do, and she did the rest.

It was only when it became too dark to see the road lines that we headed back home, and I believe we could've gone the distance without headlights, for the brightness of the smiles in the front seat. Hers, and mine. My own was pleased and satisfied; hers was proudly ecstatic. This was a major barrier for her, I knew, and she'd done marvelously. The fact was, she'd done much better on her first time behind the wheel that I'd done, by a far sight. Maybe it was her inherent and understandable caution, maybe it was something as simple as trust. But she was wonderful. When we arrived back in her drive, she barely waited for me to put the car in park before she had her belts undone and was darting toward the house, a grin of triumph on her pretty face.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Nonny said to me a few minutes later. "Not in a million years." She shook her head. "Was she really that good?"

"Like she'd been watching you for years and absorbing everything she saw," I told her. "Maybe she was. She was very smooth on the gas and brake, not all herky-jerky like I was my first time. She used all of the signals correctly and everything. She has the basics now. She'll need plenty of practice making turns and such, but give her some time, and she'll be fine."

"Come here," Nonny said, crooking her finger. I did as she asked, and I was nearly crushed in a hug. "You, my dear, have exceeded every expectation I had for you. You are kind, honest, trustworthy and gallant, something I can't say about a lot of young men your age." She snorted. "Are you sure you're Johnny LeFleur's son? I'm beginning to have my doubts." Then she smiled and said, "But never mind that nonsense. I'm just happy that you came into our lives. Now, go see to Grace. I'm sure she wants to thank you properly. Or at least she will when she comes back to earth."

Another weekend, then, at the Chester's. Friday night, popcorn and the Brady Bunch, smoldering scented candles and later a hockey game on the radio and the conclusion of 'Call Of The Wild'. The selection of the next book: 'The Wizard Of Oz', which neither of us had ever read. A cup of tea, necessarily followed by a full night's sleep, kipped out on the sofa and wrapped in comforters and snuggling with Grace.

Bliss.

Then, Saturday. I had decided that I would take Grace out for lunch; our first 'proper date', if you will. We went to Zorba's, the Greek café where I worked, bussing tables and working the register. Our visit brought startled

looks from my coworkers, who had never seen me out with anyone before. Grace shared a gyro with me and said that she enjoyed it, though I think she might have just been trying to be polite. Gyros aren't for everyone. On the other hand, the saganaki--flaming Greek cheese--made her cry out, but with delight rather than fright. She'd never seen anything quite like it, and she found it delicious.

The real surprise of that day though came from something she'd spotted as we walked out the door. Typically signs were posted in the restaurant foyer for various upcoming events in town and at the school: choir concerts, plays, the weekly movies, and whatnot. She waited till we got back out to the car before she said anything, and what she said I couldn't quite understand. One word, repeated over and over.

"What's that you're saying?" I asked her.

"Oh...nothing, Jimmy," she said mysteriously. "Something I need to ask Nonny about."

"Nothing you can share with me?"

"Nope." She smiled at me. "You trust *me*, don't you, Jimmy?"

Well, I could hardly find fault with that. But when we got home she whispered the mystery word to Nonny, whose face lit up. "Oh my goodness," Nonny said. "Ask him, Grace," she urged, with an expectant smile on her face.

Grace didn't wait long. "Jimmy, what's a 'turnedabout'?"

I had to have her repeat it.

"'Turnedabout'," she said again. "I saw it on a sign on the way out of Zorba's. I understood the second word, but I didn't understand 'turnedabout'."

"What was that second word?" I asked.

"Dance," she replied innocently.

Now I got it. "Oh, 'Turnabout,'" I said. "You saw a sign for the Turnabout Dance. They have them every year at the school. Ours is next month."

"What's a 'Turnedabout' Dance?" she persisted.

"Well...it's a dance where the girl asks the boy to go with her."

"We call them a 'Sadie Hawkins Dance' where I come from," Nonny added.

Grace didn't hesitate an instant more. "Jimmy, will you go with me to the 'Turnedabout' Dance?"

I had to grin. "Grace, I would be happy and honored to go with you."

So I got a haircut and rented a tux and Nonny took Grace shopping for a formal. And then she tossed me the keys to the long, black Cadillac that perpetually sat in the garage; she walked to and from her job at the dime store, and pretty much everywhere else she needed to go. "It needs polishing if it's going to serve as a limo," she said. It needed a wash too, but that's not exactly something you can do at home in the greater Chicagoland area in the deep of the winter. So I took it to a pull-through, then spent two chilly hours waxing it. When I was done, it was gleaming and fit for royalty, which was only appropriate, as it would be carrying a Princess.

On the arrival of the big night, I walked to the Chester home in my tux and an overcoat, fresh haircut and polished dress shoes and all, and knocked on the front door, bouquet in hand. Nonny let me in with wide eyes and an appraising look. "Look at you!" she said appreciatively. "Putting on the dog. Well, don't sit down or the cat may want to put himself on you. I'll go summon your date."

"My *Princess*," I corrected her.

"Your Princess has been a bit out of sorts today. I think she's trying to make herself look perfect, and we both know there's no such thing." She patted down my hair. "Didn't you bring a brush? You could've waited for me to come get you, you know."

"It wouldn't have been the same." I winced uncomfortably as she rearranged a few stray cowlicks.

"Hold still. One more...there." She stepped back and gave me a crooked smile. "You look dangerous. Perhaps I should rethink allowing you to escort my ward to this shindig."

"Nonny!" Grace cried from the doorway behind her. "Don't you dare!"

Then she stepped into the room.

I have already described Grace as being radiant. And I'd heard of women that were so beautiful that they

could stop a clock. While I don't know about all that, time sure did seem to stop for me right then.

She was...well, magnificent. Her dress was pale green and clingy, festooned with bits of taffeta but not overly so. Tasteful. An imaginative sort might believe they saw more of Grace than was really visible, but there was no mistaking her figure, which was lovely. Not girlish by any means; she was a woman. I was speechless. Which was okay, because so was she. Apparently my choice of apparel met with her approval too.

I walked up to her slowly, awestruck.

"I...I brought you some flowers," I stammered. "Grace, you are so beautiful."

"So are you," she whispered back. "I have a flower for you too."

Nonny had to pin on my boutonniere, Grace's hands were shaking so. The bouquet was easy enough to pass over, though I had a wrist corsage for her too and I don't mind admitting that I had trouble getting that on her. At least it didn't involve a pin.

That done, Grace and I climbed into the back of the Caddy and Nonny drove us over to Casa LeFleur for pictures. Yes, there had to be pictures. Nonny herself had already exposed a whole roll, and Mom did likewise. Dad, meanwhile, was somewhat more subdued than usual, though he did leer at Grace a bit...till Nonny gave him That Look and he fled the room.

Back into the Caddy, then, and we were off to the Greek Orthodox Hall for the dance. Along the way Grace and I crossed another barrier of sorts; I held out my hand to her, and she shyly laid hers in it. I took it, squeezed it gently, and held it all the way. Maybe this wouldn't be such a big deal for any other couple--I had younger acquaintances who'd already sired children--but for us, this was a big step. Nonny saw it too, glancing approvingly in the rear view.

We got a few surprised looks on our arrival. For one thing, we were the only couple to arrive in a 'limo'. For another, we were one of the few couples that had gone full formal; Turnabout isn't exactly a formal dance, like the Prom that was held in the spring. But Grace and Nonny had discussed this, and Grace had expressed her desire to go all out. That meant a tux rental for me. Maybe we stuck out a bit, but not too much. And that was okay; if I could ignore my own Dad, I could shrug off the scorn of my classmates.

To my surprise, we had company at our table. I didn't have many friends, but those I did have were all there, with the welcome addition of a few couples I knew from church. Only a few of these knew Grace, but all were accepting and gracious, and we had a wonderful time. Which is not to say there weren't a few nasty looks from elsewhere in the room, and hurtful remarks being made. I distinctly heard "Jim Dandy" and "Spacey Gracey" repeated several times. And yes, it bothered me...at least until I felt Grace's warm hand squeeze mine fondly. She barely turned it loose from the moment she'd taken it in the car, and it served as a source of strength and comfort.

Dinner over, the music began. It was probably just a coincidence that the first tune was Abba's 'Dancing Queen', wasn't it?

Grace eagerly pulled me out onto the floor...and we stayed there pretty much the rest of the night.

Literally.

Every single dance. We did them all. Rock, country, disco. Slow ballads and love songs. Heck, we even did a polka. I hadn't done the polka since my Uncle's wedding, when Mom taught me. We did the polka, Grace and I. The dance of love, Mom called it. Then, during the slow dance after that singular polka, Grace looked up at me with adoring eyes, flushed face and all, and impulsively pressed her lips to mine.

Our first real kiss.

"Jimmy," she sighed afterward, "I am so happy."

"I'm glad," I told her with a smile.

"But I would be even happier if *you* would kiss *me*."

Nonny put her up to that, I decided right then.

But even if she had, that was okay.

I returned Grace's kiss...and let my lips linger on hers. When I finally pulled away, her eyes were closed, and she was smiling.

"Now," she said, "I am as happy as I can be."

“For tonight anyway,” I said.

She shook her head. “No, Jimmy. For *ever*.”

Nonny came and got us, as arranged, at 11:30. The dance actually ended at 11, but she gave us another thirty minutes to mingle afterward, and we took advantage of the extra time, speaking with friends old and (mostly) new and occasionally stealing away to share another kiss. We kissed quite a few times to be honest, more than I have ever kissed anyone ever before in my life, I think. And once we climbed back into the back seat of the Caddy, we kissed some more.

I couldn't help but notice Nonny's shining eyes. But she let us have our moment before finally asking, “Did you have a good time?”

“The best time ever,” Grace declared. “We danced every dance.” And when Nonny questioned the possibility of this, Grace made sure she understood: “Every dance.”

“Poor Jimmy,” Nonny said. “You must be exhausted.”

“I admit, I am pooped,” I said. “I'm going to sleep like a log tonight.”

“Well, let's get you home before this car turns into a pumpkin.”

There was no question tonight of our destination. On weekends my default place of residence had become the Chester home, and I was expected to be there. More, if I was to be at all late, I was expected to call. Work time was to be adjusted around Grace time...which made it kind of difficult for me to afford the flowers and the tux and the pricey Turnabout tickets, but I managed. Besides, it was nice to have a refuge where everyone wanted me.

And oh, I was wanted, all right. Especially now that Grace seemed to be speaking of our being together in terms of forever. Or ‘for ever’, if you will. As soon as we walked in, she was off to her room to change for bed: I had bought her a nightshirt I'd seen while I was out one day, made of soft cotton that hung to just below her knees. It was midnight blue and spangled with gold and silver stars. Large, silver letters on the front read, “Good Night Sleep Tight”. She loved it.

And lying on the sofa were my own night clothes. Not Robert Chester's now, my own, a gift from Nonny and Grace. Red and black flannel bottoms and a matching top and slippers. As if I was a part of the family.

Waiting for her to come back, Nonny said, “Did you really dance every dance?”

I nodded wryly. “I barely got a chance to rest. And every guy there was staring at her. I was kind of afraid that if I didn't dance every one with her, someone else would cut in and I'd never get another chance.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Oh Jimmy, how little you've learned. She only has eyes for you. Do you know, she asked me just yesterday how she should say no if anybody else asked her to dance.”

“Seriously? What did you tell her?”

She laughed. “I just told her she should say ‘No thank you’ the first time, a flat ‘No’ the second time, and the third time she should go get you and let you sort it out. I hope that wasn't too presumptuous.”

“I'm just glad it didn't come to that.” Although I knew she had been asked by other boys, at least twice. I'd seen and heard that happen, and I have to confess it brought me up a few notches when she turned them down flat.

“Well, I'm going to brew some tea. I imagine you could use one.”

I thought about it, but only for a moment. Nonny hadn't done me wrong with her teas yet. “Yes please,” I said. She nodded and left, just as Grace returned to the room in her nightshirt. Her face was still flushed and happy.

“Are we going to sleep together on the sofa tonight?” she asked, a shy but expectant smile on her face.

“He is,” Nonny called from the kitchen. “You, Princess, are sleeping in your own bed. You have worn out your Prince Charming and he needs a good night's sleep, preferably lying flat and not upright or sideways. I'm fixing him a nice nighty-night tea to take care of that. Now, if you want to tuck him in, that's fine, but tonight he needs rest.”

I had never heard Grace cry before, but the sound she uttered just then was awfully close. “But Nonny!” she protested.

“But Nonny nothing,” Nonny said firmly as she walked in with a tray laden with tea cups. “We're going to sit here, talk about the dance, and drink our tea, and then we are going to bed. All of us. Jimmy right here, and you

and I in our own rooms. Tomorrow, if he gets some rest, you can sleep out here with him. Of course," she added mysteriously, "there's always a chance things might turn out differently..."

She didn't elaborate, she just left the tray on the coffee table and disappeared into the kitchen.

I was surprised. Sure, I was tired, and yes, I could use a good night's sleep. But having Grace next to me had actually helped me rest...so why was Nonny insisting I sleep by myself on the sofa?

Or...maybe she had something else in mind.

Perhaps there was something I could do to make the situation more palatable for Grace. "I want to sleep next to you too," I told her. "But you know that Nonny always has good reasons for what she does. You trust her, right?"

The look on Grace's pretty face was priceless. The pout, the lower lip sticking out...it was all I could do to keep from laughing, or maybe crying in pity for her. Instead, I said, "Listen. I know what I can do. If you're a Princess--and you are--and I am your Prince Charming..."

"And you are," she said firmly.

"Well then, maybe I need to carry you to your bedroom. Sweep you off your feet and carry you away like the Princess you are. Then I can sit with you till you're asleep. Would that make you feel better?"

A smile like the morning sun spread across her features. "You'd do that?"

"Well, you know I would."

She looked at me and nodded. "I do. I do know you would. Yes, Jimmy, I'd like that."

"That's settled then," Nonny called. "A splendid suggestion, Jimmy. Drink your tea and off to bed with both of you."

So we sat, we spoke of what had transpired at the dance, and when we'd finished, I stood before Grace and bowed with a theatrical flourish. "My Lady."

She giggled. "My Prince."

"Rise," I intoned dramatically, getting into the role, "and put your arms around my neck, like you did when we danced."

She did. "Oh, how we danced," she murmured. "I want to do that again someday. Someday soon."

"And so we shall." I picked her up and carefully edged sideways down the hall to her room.

We stood above her bed. I paused for just a moment, savoring the warmth of her so close, the delicate scent of her, before I tenderly lay her on the bed.

I kissed her on her forehead, then on each cheek, then on the chin, before finally kissing her lips.

She sighed and smiled up at me. "True love's kiss. Is it, Jimmy? Is it true love's kiss?"

I wasn't quite sure how to answer that. I took the easy way out...for now: "That's for tomorrow, Princess." "Awwwww."

"There will always be a tomorrow for you and me, Grace." That I felt was a safe enough thing to say. I pulled the covers over her, kissed her again.

She smiled happily. "Tomorrow then."

"Till then." I started for the door.

Except.

You've noticed, I guess, that word appears a lot in this story.

Except, that Grace would not let go of my hand.

She was still smiling. "Stay here with me," she whispered. "You promised. Sit here with me till I go to sleep."

I did say that. But there was no chair near the bed. So I did the only thing I could do: I kneeled.

Kneeled before my Princess.

She took my head in her hands and rested it on her belly. She smiled sleepily and said, "Oh Jimmy. You would be ever so much more comfortable and warm here in the bed with me."

Yes. Yes, I would be warm. No doubt about that. Comfortable? Oh, there would be room, to be sure. But I was still in my tux...I supposed I could shuck the jacket and kick off the shoes maybe and...

...what was I thinking? She had asked me to lie down in the bed with her! Nonny would...

And then, as if she'd been summoned, the doorway darkened and there was Nonny.

"Grace, might you turn Jimmy loose for just a moment? I promise I'll send him right back to you."

"But Nonny..."

"Right back to you. I just want to speak to him alone."

"Oh, I suppose," Grace sighed. "But right back to me."

"Right back to you." Nonny crooked a finger at me, drew me out into the hall.

"She wants..." I hissed softly.

Nonny raised her eyebrows. "I know what she wants. And you should do what she asks."

"*What?*"

"Why, get into your nightclothes and get into bed with her!" She nodded reassuringly. "It's all right. I know you'll do the right thing." She lay her fingers on my mouth to silence me. "Remember when I told you that you had exceeded every expectation I had for you? Well, you just keep surprising me. I even understand why you'd be reluctant to declare your love for her. True love's kiss, right?"

"How did you..."

Again she pressed fingers over my mouth. "That's not important, not now. We'll talk about this before the weekend is over. For now, go to your Princess. She's expecting you. Give her what she needs right now. What she *wants*, that we'll discuss when the time comes, perhaps tomorrow. But what she needs? All she needs right now is for you to be close to her."

I leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you," I said.

She smiled. "You're thanking me just by being here. Now scoot." And she gave me the tiniest of shoves toward the living room, where my nightclothes still lay on the sofa, waiting for me.

The door slowly closed behind me. Not completely, left open enough to let just a thin sliver of faint yellow dimness in, but closed enough. I padded over to the bed, quietly removing my slippers. The socks, they stayed on; my feet are perpetually cold.

"Grace?" I whispered.

"Jimmy," she sighed sleepily. "You came to be with me."

"I did. Is there enough room for me?"

She shifted, just a little. "There will always be room for you, Jimmy. Always."

I slipped under the covers. She molded herself to me.

The effects of Nonny's tea weren't long in coming.

And that was how we began our first night in bed together.

Very early the next morning, just after sunrise, Nonny stole into the room and gently shook my shoulder. I looked up at her with bleary, puzzled eyes. She beckoned me outside. Slowly, carefully, so as not to wake my Princess, I got up and followed her out the door and down the hall into the kitchen.

There were a couple of steaming cups of coffee waiting. I sat down before what was clearly mine (Nonny did not take cream) and she sat next to me. "We need to talk," she said.

"All right," I yawned. "I'm listening."

"Drink your coffee. You're going to want to be clear headed for this."

That got my attention. "All right," I said again, sipping the coffee. Nonny's coffee was as strong as her tea and had the markedly opposite effect.

"Did you enjoy last night?" she began.

"Well," I said, "as much as I can remember, I was as close to heaven as I've ever been."

She smiled. "A good answer, and honest too. I expect no less from everything else we discuss here."

"Of course."

She took a deep breath, then let fly: "What are your intentions with my ward?"

It was all I could do to hold back a laugh, but the serious look on her face gave me pause. I finally replied, "Do you know something I don't? Did something change while I was passed out from your 'tea'?" I did air quotes.

"I have no idea what you could be talking about," she said innocently. "It's just plain old tea."

I chuckled. "My Mom drinks tea. This stuff you serve is definitely not tea, Nonny. It's good, and I can't argue that it doesn't have wonderful benefits. I've never slept better in my life. But it's not tea. You could at least admit that much."

"All right. It's not proper tea. But I won't tell you what it is. It wouldn't do you any good to know anyway. It will have to suffice to tell you that I get it from a friend in Hammond, and it's specially blended by me for...specific purposes."

"Such as?"

"The best sleep of your life. Or easing pain. Or calming the mind. All of those and more. Does that help? Because it'll have to. I'm not prepared to tell you more."

If it had been anyone but Nonny, if it had been any other place than her warm, friendly kitchen, had it happened any other time the morning after the best day of my life (for that's what it had been), had even one of these factors been missing from whatever mystical equation in which I had become wrapped...I might have collected my things and left. Clearly this was an unusual situation I found myself in.

Except.

Grace.

Nonny saw the indecision on my face, wiped it away with her next seven words: "You know she loves you...don't you?"

I took a deep breath and looked down at my coffee. "She hasn't exactly come out and said it yet, but I think she's made it clear enough," I said.

"Oh, she'll come out and say it all right. And probably today."

"You think?"

"I know."

"I'm not going to ask you how."

She nodded, the barest trace of That Look on her face. "That's prudent."

I took another sip of coffee and looked frankly at her. "So what do you expect from me here, Nonny? Am I Grace's husband-to-be? Or will I go back to calling you Mrs. Chester and shoveling your walks?"

She looked crestfallen. "Please, Jimmy, don't speak like that. You sounded like your father just then."

"No, seriously. An hour or so ago I was on top of the world. Now I'm beginning to wonder if I'm just a game piece."

There was a prolonged silence. Finally Nonny let out a heavy sigh. "Is it really that obvious?"

"I don't know. Is that what you're trying to do? Because if all you want is to set Grace up with a man, you don't have to settle for me. She had guys flocking around her at the dance."

"That's as may be. But it's more than 'settling'. She *stayed* with you, Jimmy."

"But why? Why me? That's the part I don't get."

"Why. Always why. For what do you want to know the why? Can't you just be happy with the reality? Because it *is* reality."

I stared out the window. A very confused-looking woodpecker stared back at me. Neek rubbed himself against my ankle, then hopped up onto my lap, on his way to the sill to stare at the same bird. I petted him absently.

"That's just how I am. That's *my* reality. I have to know. What is it about me that makes me her Prince Charming? I mean...she's a wonderful girl. Any man with half a lick of sense would fall over themselves to be with her. Why does she choose me?" I paused for a moment, then added, "Because I know why she shouldn't."

She sat silently for just a moment, then she said, "Jimmy, you may or may not believe me. I don't care which." She stopped, shook her head, smiled faintly. "No, I'm sorry. Of course I care. I care more about what you think than I can ever express.

"Grace loves you, Jimmy. With a love far more pure than you could ever hope to offer her. A love that will be forever. Can you understand that much? Just that much. A yes or no will suffice."

A vision of that lovely, innocent face floated before my eyes. Looking up at me at the dance, just before I kissed her for the first time. Behind the wheel of Mom's Dodge, taking her first drive. That ecstatic look, of pushing

boundaries, of better things to come.

"Yes," I said.

Nonny sighed. "Thank you. If you couldn't grasp that much, anything else I could say would be a waste of breath. You have no idea, Jimmy, how long I've hoped for a young man to come along that would be...let's say 'suitable'. And it turns out to be someone she loved all along anyway! How unbelievably fortunate is that?"

This part of our conversation, Jimmy will never remember. I have seen to that. This is the only recording of it that will ever be. Unless you decide otherwise, Daisy, he will never see it.

His story above is wonderful, beautiful. And mostly true. But what he remembers of much of it is scattershot. By design.

The next portion is very important to the conclusion. I will provide it below.

This is what really happened...and why it had to for you to even be born.

"How unbelievably fortunate is that?" I'd said.

"Very much," he agreed. "And yes, damn it, I love Grace. I think I've loved her for years. For how long, I can't really say, but it goes back to when we were very young. She's a beautiful girl, and she has a bright future. With someone. But...I don't think it can be with me."

I know that I looked shocked. "Would it be too much to ask, why the hell not?"

He held up three fingers. "First. I have no future. I have no marketable skills, and no hope of going to school to change that. I would love to be a teacher, I think that's the sort of thing I'm best at. My grades are good enough, but my parents make too much money for me to qualify for any financial aid. I haven't been able to put any money away for it either. So there's that.

"Second, even if somehow the Hand of God pointed down at me and offered me a scholarship, I would still have no way to support myself in the process, let alone support myself and Grace. My Dad will never allow me to keep living in our house without paying room and board, which would mean I would have to work. I certainly don't mind working, but it would take a long, long time to get a degree. Would that be sustainable? How long could Grace put up with it?"

"As long as she needed to," I insisted. "She loves you, Jimmy. She doesn't care if you dug ditches for a living. She'd be in the ditch with you if necessary."

He lay his head on the table, a glum look on his face. "I know. And that's the third thing. The first two, circumstances can change, I might inherit money, I might find cheap digs...."

"And I might offer to support you both through the educational process. And beyond. As long as necessary. Because I love you too, Jimmy. You are so worthy! Can't you see that?"

He thumped the table (quietly, Grace was still asleep) in growing frustration and sat up. "I do. I see that. She is that good, that wonderful, and her love is that pure.. But I'm not. I'm not worthy."

I shook my head. "I don't understand. How can you think that?"

"You don't remember before Grace fell in love with me? I do." Now he was crying. "Nonny, years and years ago, when Grace first became your ward and moved in here, the neighborhood kids teased her mercilessly. Do you remember that?"

"How could I forget?" I said softly. "You're right. They were at least merciless. But..."

"I was one of them."

"No. No you weren't. Perhaps early on, but..."

"Nonny, I was one of the first! It went on for a couple of years here in the neighborhood. Sure, after a little while I felt awful about it, and I stopped." His head went back on the table again, and he sobbed quietly. "Later, I

sort of grew fond of her, and things grew from there. But I was one of them, Nonny. And I'll always know that. Always. And someday, Grace will have to know too."

I looked at him silently.

"So, you see, that's why this can't happen. It shouldn't have gone this far. I feel bad for that part. I couldn't say no and I just got caught up in it all and that's my fault. But last night, when I lay in bed with her...that's when it hit me. How wrong all this is. And if it goes on, it'll just get worse."

There was a minute of awkward silence. Finally I spoke, in quiet, measured words. "If you were to leave her now, it would irreparably break her heart."

"Better to do it now before things get more out of hand. She has to know. I have to tell her. And if she doesn't grasp it all yet, she will. It won't take long. You see it too; her faculties are getting stronger every day."

I did, "and that's why you have to stay," I urged him. "You are bringing about that change, Jimmy. You. You're not doing anything any differently than I ever did...except maybe for the driving lessons, which I still think was completely mental. She's reacting to you! Are you too blind to see that?"

"No more blind than I was all those years ago when I teased her like she was something less than human."

"Jimmy. Listen to yourself. You. Were. A. Child."

A pause, then he stammered, "That's...that's no excuse. She was a child too. I betrayed her. I can't do it again."

And now what composure he had left disappeared under the weight of quiet, wracking sobs.

There was a 'plump' sound as a startled Neek jumped to the floor.

I was quiet for a minute or so, watching him carefully. I'm not going to say that I anticipated this situation; I'd hoped that he could leave his awkward past with Grace behind at least as thoroughly as she could. But it seemed that I had miscalculated, and now I would have to correct that mistake.

Fortunately, I was so equipped. Empowered, if you will.

Yes, that's a better word. Empowered.

I started by laying a supporting hand on his back. "Jimmy," I whispered soothingly. "Jimmy. Listen to me. You're all wound up now. You're so overwrought with guilt that you've worked yourself into a tizzy. And such misplaced guilt! I won't let you do it to yourself. Never mind what it would do to Grace. You've got to calm down." I stood, put my hands on his shoulders, kneading gently. "Shhhh. Be still. This is not unworkable. We can get past this, you and I."

He didn't speak, but shook his head.

"It's all right. Perfectly all right. There's nothing here that we can't resolve, you and I. But we have to work through it together. Can you work with me? Will you promise to try?"

I could just barely hear him. "Yes," he whispered. "I don't want to hurt Grace. I don't ever want to hurt Grace again."

I will confess, I wanted to cry now too. I knew he was sincerely devastated, and it was heartbreaking to witness.

But yes, Grace. First, Grace. I had to make sure that she wouldn't disturb us. Not now.

I took a few deep breaths to compose myself.

"I'll have to fix something," I told him. "It'll take a minute. Will you be all right?"

"No tea," he said. "Don't want any tea."

I smiled. "No dear, no tea. It wouldn't do you any good anyway, you're too upset." I went to a cabinet next to the refrigerator and took out a small porcelain bowl, then filled it with a what looked like a thick brown grass from a sealed jar on the counter. "This is a smudge pot," I told him, even though he wasn't looking. Communication was vital now. "For incense. Different blends bring different results. This one promotes calm. But I won't try to use it on you." I lit a match and set it in the bowl, where it caught the grass alight. "These herbs are specially treated. It doesn't flame, it smolders. As it does it releases a very pleasant smelling smoke. Grace loves it. She says it makes her happy and helps her rest. She likes to have me put one next to her bed once she's asleep." I wafted a little of the smoke toward Jimmy, then placed the vented cover on it. "Not unpleasant, hmmm? Now, wait here. I'll be right back."

I carried the smudge pot to Grace's room and set it on the small table next to her bed. Given any luck, it would help keep her asleep while I did what needed to be done.

She had a happy smile on her face. I thought: hopefully when I'm done, you'll be able to keep that smile. I closed the door quietly behind me as I left.

He was still sobbing quietly when I got back to the kitchen. "Come with me, sweetie," I said, helping him to his feet and leading him down the hall to my bedroom. "Let's see if we can get you calmed down. No tea, no incense, just you and me and the sunshine. Sit here in my knitting chair."

My knitting chair was an enormous, many-times-reupholstered wing chair which sat along the side of the room, just below an east-facing window through which streamed the morning sun. "This is my favorite time to work in here, in the early morning," I said softly. "The sun is so nice and warm and bright, and it makes work so much easier and happy." I patted the thick cushion, indicating where he should sit, and he did. I settled in next to him. "I used to darn Robert's socks here. Back before socks were so cheap you could buy them ten pair for a couple of dollars. Sad, really, it takes all the joy out of being handy."

I nodded toward a knitting basket next to the chair. "I still do needlework and crochet, and I'm teaching myself to knit. It's very relaxing, you know. Sometimes I'll fall asleep in here, my needlework on my lap, and Grace will come in here and sit at my feet and wait for me to wake up. Sometimes she'll fall asleep too, it's so restful. We've had whole weekends pass that way."

"That sounds nice," he said, a hitch still in his voice. "I wish I could have..."

"Shhhh," I murmured. "Deep breaths, Jimmy. Take some deep breaths for me. Long, slow, deep breaths. Feel the air going in and out of you. How good it feels to think of nothing else but breath, the very thing that keeps us alive. And you don't have to do anything! It's wonderful, to know that your body does all this for you, and you don't need to do a thing to make it happen. It just does, and you can relax, relax, relax."

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled his head to my breast. "I know you're tired, Jimmy. You were tired before you started worrying about all of this. Grace wore you out last night, and now this, now this...you're so tired, so very tired. But now, now it's time to let go of all of that, to just relax, to feel the warmth of the sun, the comfort of my embrace. To know that you're safe here, that nothing, nothing at all, can harm you or disturb you. That everything that will happen here will happen in whatever time is best for you, and for your greatest good. Your greatest good."

"This sort of thing happens to all of us sometimes. You, Grace, even me, Jimmy. Everyone. We get so tired, every little thing bothers us. But we can relax. We can de-stress. There's lots of ways to do this, but myself, I find that the best way to de-stress is to try to imagine myself going backward in time. Think about that, Jimmy; imagine how wonderful it would be to become younger just by thinking of it and imagining it to be so. The mind is very strong, you know. Sometimes just believing is enough to make it happen. It's easier though when you don't have to think about it, really. You just find a metaphor of some sort; I like to picture a stairway going down. The destination is always well-lit, just like this room. Well-lit, inviting, and warm. I see the steps, and then slowly, slowly, I walk down them...and as I step down, I picture myself getting younger and younger. Can you do that, Jimmy? You're a very bright, imaginative young man, I'm sure you can. Why don't you try it with me?"

This is not something one can rush. Over the course of the next hour, I slowly, deliberately stepped Jimmy farther and deeper, till I was convinced I had regressed him to a perceived age of five.

Here came the crucial part, the tricky part. Even more slowly and painstakingly, I reforged his memory of his early days with Grace. I didn't replace or erase any specific event; it's better, I have always thought, to redirect dark memories toward pleasant ones and then to build over those unhappy moments. It takes longer, it's more of a sustained effort, but Grace was worth it. Jimmy was worth it.

"You've met little Grace, haven't you?" I crooned to him. "She's a very sweet little girl, don't you think? Her Mommy and Daddy aren't around anymore, it's just her and I, I'm afraid. I think what she really needs is a very good friend. Could you be her very good friend? You'll have to be careful with her though; she had an accident and she hurt her head. But she's getting better...and she's very sweet and nice and do you know, I think she really likes you..."

No mention of every being hurtful toward Grace. All of that is redirected. Now he'll just remember first

meeting her, being taken by her beauty and her kindness, joining her in the garden and helping her weed and do yard work. Things he really did with her at seven and eight, before he got involved in silly boy things like Little League and Scouts and whatnot. I told him about times he might have otherwise spent with Grace; doing play-type things like sharing coloring books and sidewalk chalking. Things he'd probably done for years himself anyway, even if it wasn't necessarily with Grace. It was easy enough to insert a notion of her into a memory of...say, being at Chester Park (named after Robert, of course) on the swings. Why couldn't he have been there with his dear friend Grace? Who said he never shared a corn dog and a soda with her at Boz's, or read to her from comic books at the book store? The nice lady who owned the place certainly knew them well and understood about Grace, and probably she would have let him sit with her on the Wishing Chair she kept in the window sill up front, where he would read to her, explaining the stories to her so she could fill in the rest of what was happening by looking at the pictures...

...much as I was doing with his memories right now. Sketching in the framework, trusting his imagination to fill in the details later, build and expand the stories, as imagination does with us all.

Then, only when I was certain I had more than adequately excised the unpleasantness, I guided him back up the spectral steps, up towards the light and warmth now, gently bringing him back to his reality.

Finally I crooned, "And now we're back, sweetheart, back in the warm sunshine of my knitting chair. It's so comfortable here, so peaceful, but you know you can't just rest here all day. Someone dear wants to speak to you, and I know you have lots to say to her too. And in just a few minutes you're going to open your eyes and know where you are. But wait till she comes in and kisses you. You know who she is, don't you?"

A brief interruption; a shadow in the hallway. Grace is there. I wait till I see her in the doorway and before the girl can speak, I give her what Jimmy calls *That Look*, shaking my head and holding a finger over my mouth.

Don't talk. Back away from the door. Not spoken, but understood nonetheless.

Grace nods and steps back away from the door, just as Jimmy sighs, "Grace."

I turned my attention back to him. "That's right," I said to Jimmy. "Grace. She'll come in here and kiss you, and when she does, all you'll have to do to make her happy is to say what your heart is telling you to say. What her heart already knows. Now, when I get up, just lay your head back and relax and wait. Wait for her, Jimmy. She'll be around directly."

I rose to my feet, lovingly laying his head on the back of the chair as I did. Then quietly, I stepped from the room to the hall, where Grace stood waiting.

"What's wrong, Nonny?" Grace asked worriedly. "Is Jimmy okay? Why do you have him in your knitting chair?"

"He woke up with a headache, sweetie," I told her. One little fib for her today, one big one for Jimmy's yesterday, and maybe they both can have a happy tomorrow. Maybe we all can. "I just helped him relax like I do with you sometimes. I think he feels better now. I bet you he won't even remember having a headache now."

"Oh, I hope so."

"I'm sure. But do you know what I bet will make him feel better? A nice good-morning kiss. Then maybe you can take him into the front room and sit with me. I'll make some toast and jam, and we'll let the day begin. How's that?"

Grace smiled happily. "Toast and jam and Jimmy." She clapped her hands gently, then walked into the room, leaving me alone in the hall.

I've done everything I can, I thought. Now it's up to Grace.

Awakened by a kiss. I can understand why it's so romanticized. It's been done so many times in stories it might as well be a cliché, but when it happens to you, and that kiss comes from a girl--no, be fair, a woman--like Grace...well, it transcends mere words.

I opened my eyes and saw that lovely, smiling face, looking at me expectantly.

One phrase came to mind: "True love's kiss," I murmured.

Tears instantly welled from her widening eyes. "Oh Jimmy. Really? Is it really?"

I stood and took her in my arms. "Yes. Yes, it really is."

Her voice was so soft. "So, do you...?"

"Yes, Grace. I love you."

"And I love you, Jimmy."

And that, really, was that.

There really is something to be said for watching icicles melt. Now, you would think that it would be as boring as watching paint dry, and maybe it's an acquired taste, but it really is a wonderful thing. Especially when the woman you love is sitting there with you, and her adopted mother is just across the room, watching you both, you're all full of toast and homemade strawberry jam, and cocoa is steaming on a table next to you...well, watching the little drips working their way down the slender crystalline stalactites can be very absorbing.

We didn't speak, at least not at first. Anything that really needed to be said between Grace and I, well, we'd said that before Nonny's knitting chair, and while I was still puzzled as to how I'd found my way to that soft, warm chair, I wasn't inclined to ask too many questions about it. "Perhaps you sleepwalked," Nonny had said. "That sort of thing happens all the time in this house." Maybe it does.

So. Nobody said much of anything for the longest time, the loudest noises being the sound of our breathing and the odd tinkle of an icicle falling from the eaves. The occasional happy sigh. Maybe a snore from me; I did doze a bit. It was so wonderful to be there, to be comfortable, to be comforted. And, to be the comforter. Perhaps I was serving as such for Grace. If I was, that was fine with me. I'd go on doing so, like she'd said, "For ever."

Nonny finally cleared her throat and said, "Jimmy, I know you have some concerns about your future, and I'd like to see if maybe I can address them."

"Oh Nonny," Grace complained gently, "it was so nice and still..."

"Shhhh," I scolded her gently. "She's talking about our future, you know."

She looked over at me, surprised. "Jimmy? What do you mean?"

"Shhhh," I repeated. "Go on, Nonny. We're listening."

Nonny smiled appreciatively. "Well, before I made breakfast I spent a few minutes looking over our finances. Robert's portfolio is doing rather well. He was an excellent leader, but he was a shrewd investor as well. We would have been well-fixed for our retirement, but, of course..." She sighed. "It's just been you and I, Grace, for a long time now. And we've been very frugal, I know. We haven't wanted for anything, but we didn't spend excessively either.

"Now, like I said, I've been looking at where we stand financially. And being as we have been very careful over the past ten years, I can't see a single reason why we shouldn't invest in our future. Which is why I think, Jimmy, Grace, that I'm going to recommend a couple of changes take place, effective immediately: first, Jimmy, you need to go ahead and make arrangements with whatever counselors you have at school and decide which college you're going to attend. Because you *are* going to attend college. I think you would make an excellent teacher, Jimmy, and to send you to school wouldn't just be an investment in you, or even Grace and I, but in the future of the kids to come."

I don't mind admitting that I was startled into silence, first of all, by how she seemed to have divined that I wanted to be a teacher. Grace, though, saw things differently, of course. "But Nonny! If Jimmy goes to college, he'd have to leave here, wouldn't he?" She looked at me, and I could already see the tears forming. "Jimmy, you won't leave me, will you?"

"Now, now, let me finish," Nonny said to her. "Grace, you especially need to listen closely to this." Then, to me: "Jimmy, I do think it's time your address changes...but only by a few digits. I think that you should move in here permanently. Again, effective immediately. You could easily apply at one of our local schools, and if you were to go full time, with no distractions like having to worry about keeping a roof over your head or food in your belly, it wouldn't take all that long for you to get a degree. Your father went part time and did it, didn't he? If he can, I know you can." She smiled at Grace. "So you see, there's no reason for Jimmy to go anywhere. Right?"

"Right!" Grace said in surprise. "Right! Jimmy never has to leave!" To me, then: "You could stay here! Be a teacher!"

"And finally," Nonny said, "the last part of my Plan with a capital P, if you will...being as you will be living

here, and ultimately taking care of Grace and I, well, I don't see any reason why you two shouldn't just go ahead and get married. Right away." She smiled at me. "In fact, now would be the time for you to ask for my blessing. Go on, I don't think you'll get any resistance from anyone in this room."

I extricated myself from Grace and walked over to stand before Nonny. "Nonny," I said, "do I have your permission to ask Grace to marry me?"

Grace let out a little squeak.

"Why yes, Jimmy. You do. Why don't you ask her right now?"

I did. And when Grace finally recovered the power of speech, all she could manage for several minutes was, "Oh Jimmy. Oh Jimmy." Over and over again.

Before eventually, she said, "Yes."

I'm not going to tell any stories and claim it was all wine and roses. For one thing, Grace can't drink wine; alcohol can have unfortunate effects on people with brain injuries and can slow the recovery from one. But there have been plenty of roses, and regarding that brain injury and the recovery thereof, Grace has made remarkable strides. She's doing things now that her doctors never dreamed she'd be able to do. Like driving, for example. After that first lesson she became determined to get her license and insisted the I continue to teach her--my first pupil of any kind--and...she got her license. Eventually. It wasn't easy, and it took till the third attempt for her to pass the test, but damn it, she did pass, and now she carries Nonny to and from her doctor appointments and does her share of the driving on the rare occasions we can get out of town on trips.

And reading. Reading! Truth be told, she actually started reading on her own before she started driving. Maybe it's like the old proverb about the bumblebee; science says it shouldn't be able to fly, but knowing nothing about science, the bumblebee just goes ahead and flies anyway. Grace didn't know she wasn't supposed to be capable of learning to read, so she watched Nonny and I as we read to her, having us explain different, difficult words. Yes, it made it more difficult for us to read her a story, but once we figured out what was happening, we naturally encouraged her, and she did the rest. Miracles happen daily here at Casa Chester. Or Szymanski, or Farmer, or even LeFleur, depending on whose family is visiting. And they do visit, all of them. It's as if everyone is rediscovering Grace. And, by extension, Nonny. Which is a wonderful thing, as she enters her golden years.

Nonny had a stroke a few years ago, but while she does not get around like she used to, her mind is still sharp and she loves all the company and attention she receives these days. Daisy, you are the proverbial apple of her eye. It pleases Nonny that you have adopted a lot of her "old country magic", which she never divulged to me, of course, and which your mother never could quite absorb. But it's all written down now, so maybe she'll get around to it someday. I'm afraid it's probably something better left unknown to me!

Of course we still live in the same house, just down the street from where I grew up. Mom finally divorced my Dad a few years after Grace and I were married; he still lives in town and strangely, we have a closer relationship now than ever. Mom, though, as you remember, passed away a few years ago. I'm glad she did get to enjoy your company for a few years at least. I'm sure you hold those memories as dear as she did.

And me? I did go to school, I did become a teacher, and I got hired at the same school from which I graduated. I teach English, Creative Writing, and Drama. Some days I think I'm actually good at it. Others, I come home and I feel like I'm the world's biggest failure. Then I look at Grace, and you, and I realize how foolish I am. And if all else fails, I ask Nonny to brew a cup of tea and share some wisdom. She's good at both.

For a while now, Nonny kept insisting I write a story about how Grace and I met, for a time capsule you will open when you turn twenty-one. You're holding my part of it right now. I hope it helps you to understand a story I still don't fully grasp myself.

Except: that it was Grace who got me to understand life in terms of 'for ever', and Nonny whose magic made it all possible.

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