

CROSSROADS

One Day Of Magic



Larry J. Bristol



Prologue

Once upon a time...

Monday, September 10, 1973

Diary

Larry was bubbling with enthusiasm from the moment he woke. This was to be one of those proverbial red letter days, one he had been eagerly anticipating for weeks. The only negative he could think of was no one woke beside him to see and share his enthusiasm. Even *that* issue could not dampen his spirits this morning. Taking steps to address that issue was exactly what this day was all about!

All of the plans had been carefully laid. As long as he kept his wits about him, he could slip inside, do the “dirty deed” as it were, and be gone, without anyone knowing a thing about it. He chuckled to himself realizing this was not exactly true. Mrs. J would know, of course, but she was remarkably good at keeping secrets, especially from Mr. J and their daughter, Julia.

Isn't that strange? he thought turning on the shower to let the water warm up. *I've known them all this time and never given a second thought to the number of “J's” in our names – Lawrence Jackson Bristol, Julian Jacobson, Jessica Jacobson, and last, but not least, Julia Anne Jacobson.* He shook his head in wonder. The thought had entered his brain from nowhere, like a stray neutrino that appears briefly, performs the random mischief for which it was designed, then disappears back into the void, swallowed by a black hole. *That's all the universe is,* he chuckled stepping under the warm spray of water, *one huge black whole. Come to think of it, why does it have to be huge? Maybe it's actually a very tiny black whole!* He laughed out loud realizing relative terms like “huge” and “tiny” have no meaning when applied to the universe. “Huge compared to what?” he asked aloud grinning. He received no answer to this query; he had learned over the twenty-four years of his life not to expect one.

After drying himself, he continued his morning routine, brushing his teeth and shaving the light stubble that grew on his face. He never had much facial hair. Perhaps he had a little too much native American blood in his veins, a mixture of Cherokee and Choctaw, carefully blended with those White Anglo-Saxon Protestant genes. He wondered what his beard or mustache would look like if he could actually grow one. Studying his face in the mirror, his mind began to contemplate this great question. How would a brown beard look on his five foot eleven inch frame, beneath his brown hair and brown eyes? Would covering up his ordinary features somehow make him look more mysterious? With his hair in a Beatles style shag as it was, would a beard make him look more like Paul McCartney as well as sound like him?

After a moment, his mind returned from his journey and he answered his question with a resounding, “Probably not!” Once again he contemplated his face in the mirror. He suddenly stuck out his tongue at his own reflection, mildly amused when the image in the glass returned his taunt. “What’s the matter, old Spectre?” he asked mockingly. “It’s been almost exactly two years since you paid your little visit. Don’t you want to come out and play again this morning, or are you now too busy eating those words you said to us?”

Receiving no answer (he had not expected one), he shook his head and stuck out

his tongue once again. “You really need to stop talking to yourself, doncha know,” he mused. “People will realize you’ve lost your mind completely!”

“Nonsense!” he answered. “Talking to yourself is completely normal, especially when you’ve spent as much time alone as we have. It only indicates a problem when you start carrying on complete conversations with yourself.”

“I’m not so sure,” he countered. “If I were you, I’d be more careful about that.”

“Well, I *am* me, and I say you’re wrong!” he said mockingly. “I happen to know you quite well! The clearest sign emotional problems need to be addressed is when you start giving yourself advice during those conversations!”

“Or when you start arguing with yourself,” he countered. “That’s a sure sign you’ve gone completely nuts!”

“No, it isn’t!” he replied.

“Yes, it is!” he answered with a laugh. “Besides, I have it on very good authority you don’t have to worry about losing your marbles as long as you still have enough wits to worry about whether you’re losing your marbles. You see...”

“Mishuganah! Du bist eynss kranken hint!” he interrupted. “If you’ll kindly excuse me, I have things to go, places to see, and people to do this morning.”

He headed into his closet and selected his clothing for the day. He needed something practical, yet something he would not mind getting dirty. He bounded down the stairs of his studio apartment, pleased to find, strangely enough, the kitchen was still in the same place he had left it the night before. Surely this was a good sign, and meant the day was off to a good start!

He began his search for breakfast with the refrigerator. Staring inside, however, did nothing to alter its contents. There were the things one would expect to find in the refrigerator of a twenty-four year old bachelor – two six packs of beer, each with three cans removed, some loose cans of soda, a box containing the remains of a half-eaten pizza, bowls of various shapes and sizes containing forgotten leftovers from equally forgotten meals, a half-gallon jug halfway filled with milk (not half empty; he was known by his friends as the eternal optimist), and a crisper drawer filled with what an imaginative person might easily describe as an active study in microbiology.

He collected the milk jug, then scanned his small pantry, quickly locating an unopened box of Grape Nuts Flakes, his favorite cereal. Grabbing a bowl out of the dishwasher, he briefly asked himself whether it had been run recently. After a shrug, he opened the cereal box and poured himself a generous serving. Something made him hesitate just before he poured on the milk. When he put his nose against the opening of the jug, its aroma caused him to pass on cereal that morning. Calmly placing the cereal bowl and milk into the refrigerator (hoping it might somehow be better tomorrow morning), he decided leftover pizza would make a perfect breakfast.

His excitement began to build while making the short drive from his apartment to the Jacobson house. He turned onto the now very familiar country lane leading to his destination, and found himself humming *On The Street Where You Live* as he drove along. When he pulled into the driveway, he once again urged himself to be careful, as it was absolutely vital the true purpose of today’s quest remain a secret. One misstep, and she would know instantly what he was up to. Even his best friends, John and Sam, had no idea what he was planning. After all, the only way to keep something truly secret was to tell no one at all. So far, so good!

Jessica Jacobson was captivated by the bright smile greeting her when she opened her back door. “Good morning, Mrs. J!” Larry beamed. “How are you today?”

“Fine, Larry! Just fine. And yourself?” she answered. “You certainly seem to be in a good mood this morning.”

With a small shrug and a sly smile, he answered, “Yes, ma’am. I’ve been looking forward to this, and I can hardly wait to get started!”

Jessica could sense the excitement in the young man, something she had seen in him many times. She also sensed his excitement was somehow different. This was going to be an unusual day! “Well, let’s be patient, shall we? We can take all the time we need. Have a cup of coffee and tell me exactly what you’re looking for.”

Larry entered the house through the back door, like he had done so many times before. “I’m not really sure what I want, Mrs. J,” he answered with another shrug. His smile beamed once again as he added, “but I’ll certainly know it when I see it!”

When they arrived in the kitchen, she directed Larry to the table and poured their coffee. The enthusiasm of this young man was certainly contagious; she also felt a sense of excitement. He reminded her so much of her husband as a young man – free of worry, warm and tender, and so very romantic – things not too common among other young men she knew. Her husband, Julian, still had all of those characteristics. He was just more mature now, having carried the weight of supporting his family for years without a single complaint. While still a strong man, Jessica could see this burden had bent his back just a little. She smiled thinking he would vigorously deny that. This was merely one of the many reasons why she loved him so.

Placing a steaming coffee mug in front of him, she noted, “Most of the old stuff is in boxes in the attic. The personal items, especially the more recent ones, are in her bedroom.” *How lucky Julia is to have found a young man so much like her father.*

“I want this to look like that old *This Is Your Life* television program,” Larry explained. “Personal items will be best, the more personal, the better. I also want to have some family history to introduce it all. You know – things about how you and Mr. J met and got together. I’ll tell about Julie as a baby, her early childhood, and finally about how she and I met. I want it all to be fun and light-hearted, but if I can embarrass her a little, that will be fun, also. Some of the stories I’ve been planning will probably be more embarrassing to me, unfortunately, but what the heck!”

“I hope she’ll forgive us,” *and especially me*, Jessica thought to herself, “for going through her personal things without her knowledge.” *And I hope she’ll forgive you if you embarrass her too much!*

“If this comes off like I hope, Mrs. J, she won’t even realize we’ve done so.” He laughed, “At least, not until she sees it along with everybody else! By then, I think she just might have forgiven us. If not, I’ll disavow any knowledge, doncha know.”

Jessica noted how he grinned like a Cheshire cat, and wondered just what he might have on that devious mind of his. “And leave me holding the bag, eh?” she giggled. “Just please try not to embarrass her too much. Remember this is her twenty-first birthday party. Not only will all her friends be there, but so will most of our family. And don’t you forget Rabbi Tober is also coming, so try to keep it clean, OK?”

“Why, Mrs. J!” he feigned surprise. “Surely you know me better than that!”

“Yes, I know you very well, you devil!” she teased him.

They both laughed. “Well, OK, I’ll try. Of course, this means I won’t be able to

use my best jokes. Would it be OK if I sneak in a few good ones? Rabbi Tober has heard me tell jokes before. I think he'll be disappointed if I keep it squeaky clean."

Jessica smiled as she shook her head in half-hearted dismay. "But don't forget you'll also have to answer to Mr. J for any serious indiscretions you commit."

"Oops," he gulped smiling. "I almost forgot. I guess I'd better behave myself."

While they finished their coffee, they talked more about the details of Julia's special birthday party. It would be held on their patio, the traditional location for her birthday parties. They had invited just about everyone she knew. They would start with dinner, followed by the traditional birthday cake and ice cream. Julia would open a few gifts, mostly gag items from her friends. More significant gifts would be given to her privately. Then Larry and John would entertain, a tradition for Julia's birthday parties. Once again this year, they would be joined by Riverside, the rock band they had started. And also this year, it was Larry's idea to conduct a special *This Is Your Life* segment in honor of Julia turning twenty-one.

"Let's start with the attic, if you don't mind, Mrs. J," he suggested, pulling the folding stairway from the ceiling and starting his climb. "I need to come up with some ideas about the early days for you and Mr. J. While we look, maybe you can tell me where you and he were born, how you got together, and that sort of thing."

Jessica followed hesitantly, anticipating the attic to be dusty and dirty, filled with bugs and spiders and other nasty creatures. Attics in central Texas are uncomfortably warm, even in early September. Reminding herself she was doing this for Julia, she tentatively climbed the stairs, diverting her fears by thinking it might be nice to remember the old days and tell Larry stories about those times.

Larry sensed her apprehension and saw it as a perfect opportunity to tease her. "If I scream, be sure to pull me out of here as quickly as possible. I would hate to come face to face with a black widow spider about six inches across, or even worse, a brown recluse of *any* size."

"If you see either of those," she choked, "you'd better not say a word unless you want me to faint outright."

"I'm hip!" he agreed. "So let's make a pact. If either of us faints, the other promises to drag them down the stairs to safety!"

"You're not helping things at all!" she grimaced. Reaching the top step, she sat on the floor near the opening. "I think the things of interest will be in the stack of boxes over there. Oy, I should have had Julian fetch them down yesterday."

"But then Julie would have seen them! You know how sharp she is about that sort of thing. She'd know instantly something is going on! We'll have to go through them and get everything packed back up and stored away before she gets home."

"That won't be until late this afternoon," Jessica sighed. "Fortunately, she has a full day of classes today."

Larry fetched the first box and after inspecting it carefully for the little nasties they had joked about earlier, opened it. The top item was an old photo album containing pictures of people Larry clearly did not recognize. "That's one of Julian's old family albums," Jessica explained. "I'm somewhat surprised he doesn't keep it in his study."

"There's a picture of his father and mother, Benjamin and Ruth Jacobson. It must have been taken in Amsterdam in the early twenties. That toddler his father is holding is Julian's older brother, Benjamin Jr., and if you look closely, you can see his mother is pregnant. This is probably the first picture ever taken of Julian!"

Amsterdam. That's where he was born, in 1923. His father was a successful diamond dealer in those days.

"Then things started getting a little dicey in Europe. It wasn't just bad in Germany. There were problems of various degree in all the surrounding countries. In the early 30's, when Julian was ten years old, his father sensed danger. He picked up the family and moved them to America, to New York City, leaving everything he owned behind, including his business and the rest of his family. There was a thriving Jewish community in New York where they could fit right in, and they were soon back on their feet again.

"When the war came to America in 1941, his brother Benjamin was among the very first to volunteer. He went into the Marines. Just look at this picture of him! He was so handsome in his uniform. Julian literally worshiped his older brother, and he joined the army himself a few weeks later. There he is, my handsome young man at eighteen – just a boy, really.

"Julian saw action in North Africa, then Italy, and the big push into Germany itself. You've heard him tell some of his war stories. But he still won't talk about those final days of the war, even to me. I think he saw things he would rather forget.

"Right after he enlisted, Benjamin married Mary, his high school sweetheart, like so many other couples were doing in those early days of the war. Before he shipped out, Mary was pregnant. Their daughter, Sarah, was born while he was out in the Pacific. She sent him pictures of her, but he never actually got to see his daughter, never got to hold her." Jessica could not hold back her tears adding, "He was killed on Guadalcanal. I never actually met Benjamin, myself, but I can feel Julian's pain whenever the subject of his brother comes up."

"I know you and Mr. J treasure family as much as anyone I've ever known," he said softly. "I think for my purposes, I should avoid this subject."

"That's probably a good idea," Jessica agreed. "Things quickly went from bad to worse. Julian's father died of a heart attack while reading the telegram bearing the news of Benjamin's death. Suddenly, Julian found himself the patriarch of the whole Jacobson family, responsible for his mother, his sister-in-law, and even his brother's infant child."

"What about you, Mrs. J?" he asked. "Where are your roots?"

Jessica stopped turning the pages in the current photo album. "There's another album here somewhere, with pictures of my family. They're not nearly so exotic as these, I'm afraid. I was born in New York City and grew up there. I won't tell you what year it was, although I'm sure you'll be able to figure it out if you try hard enough. But if you reveal it to anyone during all this, I'll skin you alive!"

Larry grinned. "Will it be OK if I say you're over twenty-one? Since Julie is going to be twenty-one, most people would suspect that." They both laughed, and Larry continued, "I've heard it said if you want to see what a girl will look like in twenty years, all you have to do is take a look at her mother. I hope in twenty years, I'm married to a lady as lovely as you."

Jessica blushed. "You silver-tongued devil!"

"I hope you mean me no evil!" he grinned. "I assume the '*silver-tongued*' part is intended as a compliment, meaning I say nice things. But the devil is the Prince of Lies, and I assure you I'm only saying what's on my mind and in my heart."

She smiled at him once again, then returned her attention to the photo album, mainly to change the subject. "Here's a picture of Julian and I together a few years

after the war. It was taken in the summer of 1949.” She removed the photo from the album and handed it to him, seeing he was intrigued by it.

“I would have bet this was a picture of Julie!” he said. “It occurs to me if I can look at you now and see an image of what Julie will look like in twenty years, then I must also be able to look at Julie and see an image of what her mother looked like twenty years ago. This photo proves it!”

“You *are* a devil, young man,” she grinned before continuing to describe the photograph. “It was in the middle of summer. We were out on Coney Island, and so much in love it was disgusting! I think you know what I mean,” she grinned. “Just moments before this picture was taken, Julian proposed to me. One of the happiest days of my life, I remember that day like it was yesterday – July 2, 1949.”

“That was the day he proposed to you?” Larry asked. He seemed stunned by this information. He looked at the date written on the back, then turned once again to the front. In the photo, the face of a clock could clearly be seen in the background, and Jessica noted how fascinated he was by that clock. It showed the time to be 4:37 in the afternoon. *Why does he find that so significant?* He spoke before she could ask. “Mrs. J, I beg of you to let me borrow this photo! I promise I’ll be very careful and return it unharmed! This is exactly the kind of thing I’m looking for!”

“Of course you can take it, Larry. What is it you find so interesting?”

“I... I can’t tell you right now, Mrs. J,” he struggled, “but it’s very important, I think. Can I wait and explain it on her birthday?” They sat in silence a few moments, Jessica noting how Larry stared at the photo, obviously lost in thought. Eventually, he placed the photo into an envelope he had brought, and looked up. “So what happened next?” he asked, as if the photo now meant nothing to him.

“Well,” she smiled, “Julian and I got married, of course! He was quite a catch! We got married the next spring, on March 20, 1950, and since you seem to like fairy tales so much, I’ll tell you we lived happily ever after.” Larry burst out loud with laughter at this jab. “You ought to think about getting married yourself,” she continued with a grin, now showing him the wedding photos.

Larry snickered as he picked more photos, placing them into his envelope. “Do you have anyone in mind? I’ve never been very successful with girls, as you know.”

“Oh, you could marry any girl you please,” she said as a matter of fact.

“I know that,” he grinned back at her, “but apparently, I’ve never pleased one.”

“Old joke, Larry,” she snickered.

One corner of his mouth turned up into a smirk as he shrugged. “Do you think I’ve been pleasing Julie? You know how much I want to marry her someday, if she’ll only have me. But she still has another full year of school to go before she gets her degree. And besides, I promised Mr. J I’d seek his permission and blessing first. You wouldn’t want me to break my promises, would you?”

“You’d better not!” she chuckled. Jessica was sure she knew all about Larry’s plans. She prided herself on her ability to wrestle tiny bits of information from various sources, then put them together to form a coherent picture. She was seldom surprised about matters as important as this! For the last several weeks, she had been gathering tidbits from Julia, Larry, her husband, and some of their friends. Everything indicated Larry was going to propose to Julia this coming Valentine’s Day, assuming he could get up the nerve. Jessica was not sure who was more excited about the prospect – herself or Julia!

“Mrs. J, tell me something, honestly,” Larry asked seriously. “Do you really think I’m good enough for her? What could I do to prove myself worthy? I mean, don’t you think there’s some other man who’d make her much happier than I ever could?”

“Is this supposed to be a joke?” Jessica grinned. “You know as well as I no man could possibly make her any happier than she’ll be the day she marries you!”

Jessica sensed Larry was extremely pleased by her answer. In fact, he seemed almost smug about it! When he smiled innocently and tried to move things along, she wondered if he was hiding something. “So how about some of Julie’s baby pictures? I hope you have a picture of her naked on a bear skin rug!” he grinned.

“As a matter of fact, we do,” Jessica laughed, setting aside her suspicions for the moment. “She’s liable to kill you if you show this picture in public.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he smiled. He gathered various photographs of Julia as a baby in the hospital, on the bear skin rug, her first day of school, and other events.

“We were still living in New York when Julia was born, of course. You know the date well – October 22, 1952. At about the same time, Mary, Julian’s sister-in-law, lost her battle with cancer, and we legally adopted our niece, Sarah, then nearly ten years old.” Larry gathered a few more photographs and absorbed vital information as Jessica described the early years of Julia’s life before moving to Texas.

Turning to a new page, Larry asked, “Who are these people, Mrs. J?”

She could see Larry was intrigued by the photograph of a couple in their early thirties, posing behind a boy of perhaps ten. She wondered, *Is that a look of recognition on his face he’s trying to disguise?* “That’s one of Julian’s old army buddies, David Udasel, his wife Barbara, and their son Richard. You might find this interesting. They were very instrumental in getting us to move to Texas!”

“Really? I’m very interesting in things like that! What’s the story?”

“Well, let’s see,” she smiled, putting aside her earlier question. “That was taken in the summer of 1961. Julian and I came down from New York to visit the Udasels who lived here in Bryan.”

“Did Julie come with you?”

“No. Julia stayed with her grandmother to attend a summer dance class.”

“I see,” Larry said looking slightly disappointed. “I was just wondering... Do you remember the night we first met how Julie was sure she’d seen me somewhere before? I thought maybe she saw me while visiting the Udasels.”

Jessica smiled. “Nice shot but no cigar. Why is figuring that out so important?”

“Oh, it’s not important, Mrs. J,” he said dismissing the idea, even though she could clearly see otherwise. “Some people put a lot of stock in silly coincidences like that, but not me. I don’t believe in fate, kismet, predestination, or any of those things.”

“Of course not, dear,” she said, trying not to chuckle.

Larry blushed and moved to change the subject. “So, how did the Udasels convince you to move to Bryan?”

“We had a great time during that visit,” she replied, “and it sparked our interest to move away from the city so Julia could grow up in a simpler, more easygoing environment. The highlight of the trip was the afternoon we went to watch Dickie play in a Little League Baseball game. He was a pretty good pitcher, and his team won by something like one hundred to three,” she giggled, “and in truth, the other team scored those three runs only after the coach put in a much younger backup pitcher to give him a little experience. I took this picture during the game. Little

Dickie has just thrown a pitch. You can see the batter swinging, but if you look closely, you can see he's missed, and the ball is about to go into the catcher's mitt!"

"That's a neat picture, Mrs. J!" Larry smiled. "And this baseball game made you guys want to move to Bryan?"

"I think it was probably several things, really," she said thoughtfully, "but that baseball game made a big impact. I remember when the game was over, both teams came out onto the field to shake hands, and as soon as the coaches let them, all the little boys ran as fast as their legs could go to get in line at the concession stand! I'd never heard so much delightful laughter as they ran away whooping and hollering! Apparently, win or lose, the coaches bought them all a snow cone after the game, and naturally, they all wanted to be first in line!

"I also remember seeing this little girl run up to a couple of Dickie's teammates, apparently expecting them to share their snow cones with her! After a mild argument and maybe a little skirmish, they must have given in, because I saw them later sitting side-by-side in the bleachers, sharing the two snow cones. How carefree and happy they all seemed! I decided right then I wanted Julia to live in a place just like that, and to have friends just like that!"

She noticed Larry almost choked on his words. "That's a sweet story, Mrs. J!" She asked herself, *Does he really think it's that sweet, or is he just happy we decided to move to Bryan?* He did not give her time to ponder that question. "May I borrow these pictures? I definitely want to include this story on her birthday."

"Of course you may!" she grinned. "I really wish we could have left New York sooner. It wasn't really a great place for either Sarah or Julia to grow up. When we got back home from that trip, Julian did some research, and before I knew it, we were making plans to move. It took two years before it actually happened, but we moved here in the summer of 1963. Julia was ten, about to start the sixth grade. By that time, Sarah had joined the Peace Corps and was living in Africa." She turned the last page of the album and looked into her young friend's face. "That seems to be the end of this photo album, Larry."

For the rest of the morning, they continued digging through other boxes, looking at photographs and other memorabilia. Larry seemed to be very pleased with the results. Not only was he gathering photographs of Julia's life story, he was learning a lot of intriguing information about her family and her life before he met her. He and Jessica carefully repacked everything they had studied, then descended the staircase. Jessica made them a light lunch and they engaged in small talk as they ate.

"I'll also need stuff about the years after you moved here," he said after lunch.

"This is going to be the tricky part," Jessica offered. "I assume you mostly want things about her, not Julian and myself, and that means we'll need to invade her privacy. If you take anything, there's a real danger she'll notice it's missing."

"That's a risk I'll have to take," Larry sighed. "Like I said, I think she'll forgive us if this comes off as planned. I want to avoid things that are extremely personal, like her diary, for example. As much as I'd love to read her diary, I know better. A Bread song by the name of *Diary* comes to mind, and the story frightens me. Even though that story doesn't apply to our situation, I think reading her diary would be tempting fate just a little bit too much!"

Jessica knew enough about his past to understand his concern. "I thought you didn't believe in things like fate," she teased, grinning as she saw his face turn red once more. After a pause, she announced, "Julia's been keeping a scrapbook ever

since we moved to Bryan. I doubt it'll contain anything nearly as secret as her diary. Maybe you can find what you need there. And as busy as she is starting her final year in school, maybe she won't notice if one or two things are missing."

"That sounds perfect, Mrs. J! Can we take a look?"

Jessica led Larry into Julia's bedroom. She knew he had been there several times before. Most of those visits were completely innocent, of course, but she could sense a little apprehension in him as they entered, as other less innocent visits jumped into his memory. Larry surely knew Julia had told her much about those times, as well as other times in other places. Still, she thought it was sweet how it all seemed to make him just a little nervous to be there. *Yes, Julia has this one completely snared. What a lucky boy!* But she also knew Julia was a lucky girl to have found him.

Bringing her attention back to the matter at hand, Jessica located the scrapbook high on a shelf in the back of her daughter's closet. She and Larry sat on the edge of Julia's bed, examining its contents. Many of the things they found were completely expected – pressed flowers, some ticket stubs, valentines and other greeting cards – normal items a young girl might collect as memorabilia of her life. As they flipped randomly through the pages, Larry smiled brightly at each of the seven dried red roses they saw, each representing one of the last seven Valentine's Days.

But Jessica saw him nearly jump out of his skin when they turned to one of the earliest pages. On a page by itself was a carefully preserved program from *The Sound of Music*, a musical production performed by members of the A Capella Choir of Bryan's Stephen F. Austin High School in 1965. He tried to act nonchalant, but a slight tremble in his voice betrayed his keen interest. "What's this all about, Mrs. J?"

Jessica's smile broadened as she remembered the story. "Oh, it's just one of those silly things a young girl might keep. It was during the second year after we moved. Julia was twelve, as I recall, in the seventh grade. Julian bought tickets for us to attend this play. Even though we loved living here, we were starting to miss some of the cultural advantages of the big city. We heard these kids were pretty good, and as it turned out, they really were!

"See the date? It was our fifteenth wedding anniversary – March 20, 1965 – and Julian took Julia and I to see this play. Julia wasn't excited about the idea when she first heard about it, but that all changed once we got there. It must have been her first big crush. Do you know the story? There's this telegraph delivery boy..."

"Yes," Larry interjected. "The telegraph delivery boy is named Rolfe."

"I think you're right," Jessica agreed. "Anyway, there's this darling little scene where he meets up with one of the Van Trapp daughters..."

"Liesl," Larry stated.

"Yes, that sounds right, also. How do you know so much about it?"

"I've seen the movie. I like musicals, just like you."

Jessica was a little skeptical about his answer, but continued. "So in the scene, the boy sings, *'You are sixteen going on seventeen...'* It's actually a duet, and in the second verse, the girl sings since he's *'seventeen going on eighteen,'* she'll depend on him to take care of her, and kisses him on the cheek. He ran off the stage with the wheels of his bicycle hardly touching the ground, letting out a *'Yippee!'* that almost brought the house down. It was just darling!"

Larry pondered this for a moment. "I don't think that's exactly how it goes in the movie," he stated, biting his lower lip. "So why is this program in her scrapbook?"

“I think Julia’s first big crush was on that boy. All she talked about for days was that play and that boy. She was simply love sick! A few months later, of course, she found her first *real* boyfriend, and poor Rolfe got put out to pasture.” She smiled as she remembered this time in her daughter’s life so many years ago. “Obviously, she never forgot about him completely, and kept this program all these years.”

“May I borrow this, Mrs. J? This is exactly the sort of thing I’m looking for!”

Jessica could once again sense there was more to this than could be seen on the surface, but she decided to let it go. She knew Larry well enough to know he would not easily reveal whatever he was thinking, at least not right then. She could find out soon enough. All she had to do was ask his friends a few subtle questions. “Of course, Larry. I know you’ll take good care of it.”

Larry held the program in his hands staring at it, shaking his head slightly. He was startled when he opened it. “What happened to the inside part? It’s blank!”

“It was just a misprint, I suppose,” she replied. “The ones Julian and I were given listed the characters in the play, and the names of the cast members. Unfortunately, we didn’t keep ours, and we didn’t discover Julia’s was misprinted until we got home. By then, it was too late.”

Larry collected a few other items Julia had placed in her scrapbook, especially information about her former boyfriends. “I think I have enough, Mrs. J,” he announced finally. “If I can’t tell her life story in an interesting and, I hope, humorous way from all of this, then I really shouldn’t even try.”

Saturday, December 10, 1966
I Get A Kick Out Of You

The gang was slightly shorthanded for the radio program that night. Julia decided to stay home with her parents to celebrate Chanukah. Jimmy decided he would go to the radio station stag, even when John indicated he would rather have the chance to spend more time alone with Helen, without his kid brother looking down their necks.

At 8:00 o'clock, the speaker in the main studio played the familiar theme from the Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoon as the *Top Forty Showcase* program began. Larry and Linda were intimately squeezed into one of the sound booths, while John and Helen occupied the other. "And now..." Larry said imitating Rocky the flying squirrel.

"Hey, Rocky!" John said as Bullwinkle. "Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!"

Larry had a sudden inspiration and varied from the script. Still using the Rocky voice imitation, he fired back an unexpected ad lib. "Out of your *what*, Bullwinkle?"

John continued as if on cue. "See? Nothing up my sleeve," he said as Bullwinkle. He then realized Larry had changed the script and looked through the glass panels to see Larry grinning. He caught the joke and started laughing, having completely lost control of the Bullwinkle character.

Larry began a tirade of ad libs, still in character, still using his Rocky imitation. "Every week, it's the same old thing. *'Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!'* And every week, you have the wrong hat. Don't you think we've all had enough of this?"

John still had not regained control of himself. He and Helen were just sitting in the booth laughing on the air. So Larry continued, "I shouldn't have to work under such conditions. Look at me! I'm a *star!* I have my own television show. Why should I have to put up with a stupid moose who can't keep track of his own hat?"

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha!" he said next, switching to the voice of Boris Badenov. "Moose and squirrel have finally cracked. We must contact Fearless Leader!"

Linda joined the fun with her imitation of Natasha Fatale, "Yes, Borees!"

"And that's another thing," Larry said, returning to his Rocky imitation. "Why do I have these inept spy types following me around all the time? Why would a spy have any interest in a flying squirrel and his stupid moose sidekick?"

"I don't know, Rocky," John giggled as Bullwinkle, trying to recover.

"Shut up, you stupid moose!" Rocky said. "I've had it. I'm a star! A star like me should be surrounded by starlets and beautiful show girls, not by a couple of incompetent spies and a stupid moose!"

"I weel be your showgirl," Linda offered as Natasha.

"Defecting, Natasha?" Boris interrupted. "What weel Fearless Leader think?"

"I'm not afraid of Fearless Leader," Natasha said.

"Forget it," Rocky continued. "I need starlets and showgirls, not a retired spy. The worst thing of all is this high pitched voice I have! Do you realize how old I am? My voice should have changed years ago. I need a *real* woman, not some cartoon floozy. Say, where is that Sam chick? Now *there's* a real woman!"

Larry signaled to Diggs to cue the microphone in the main studio. The radio audience heard Sam and Jimmy laughing. Seeing the microphone was on, Sam recovered enough to respond, "What do you want, Rocky?"

Larry continued his tirade, "Hey, Sam! How about it? What do you say we grab a

couple of bottles of mooseberry juice, then go out behind the station and have a go! I'll put a smile on your face you won't be able to wipe off for a week. Flying squirrels have a lot of interesting tricks up their sleeves! Not like a stupid moose who can't even pull a rabbit out of his hat."

"Oh, Rocky!" Sam gushed, playing along. "I didn't know you cared!" She handed the list of dedications to Jimmy. The audience heard some footsteps and a couple of doors opening and closing, as Sam and Rocky supposedly left the building.

When Jimmy looked dumbfounded, Sam urged him to go ahead with the first song dedication. "Uh, OK, gang. It looks like I've been put in charge. The first song is dedicated to Bill and Nancy, Tom and Wanda, and Roger and Sally." He added with a giggle, "And I think I should add a special dedication to Sam and Rocky!"

Diggs killed the microphones and spun the first record. When everything was settled, he grinned at Larry, but shook his head, and pointed a finger at him accusingly. Almost immediately, the expression on his face changed as he reached to answer the red telephone, and signaled for Larry to come into the control room.

The rest of the gang watched anxiously as Diggs talked on the phone. Larry stood in the control room waiting. After a few moments, Diggs gave the handset to Larry. They could not hear the conversation, of course, but they could easily read Larry's lips, since about the only words he was saying were, "Yes, sir," and "No, sir."

When the current song ended, Helen read the next dedication, with some clear tension in her voice. Diggs routinely killed the microphone and spun the next record. The kids saw Larry tap Diggs on the shoulder and then point, first to the hand set and then to the main studio. Sensing his request, Diggs patched the telephone conversation onto the speaker in the main studio so the rest of the kids could hear.

"...thought you knew better," Mr. Krueger said.

"Sir, yes, sir," Larry said. "I'm sorry, sir."

"That's just not good enough, young man," Mr. Krueger insisted. "You can apologize to me all you want, but who's going to apologize to the listeners? And what about the parents of those listeners? Who's going to apologize to them?"

"I will, sir," Larry suggested. "I understand your concern, and to be perfectly frank, I agree with it. I'll be happy to make a public apology if that'll help."

James Krueger thought about that for a second. "Do you really expect me to let you back on the air after this?"

"I just wasn't thinking about that aspect of it, sir," Larry pleaded. "Frankly, I was more concerned about the sexual implications, and it just didn't occur to me the reference to *'mooseberry juice'* implied the use of alcohol and was promoting teenage drinking. I know I have this tendency to push against your limits, but I really do try to be careful. I'd never intentionally violate your rules."

After a pause, Mr. Krueger relented slightly. "I'll let you back on the air, but with one condition. You must make a sincere public apology indicating neither this station nor you personally condone the use of alcohol by teenagers."

"I understand, except for the personal part. Is that really important?"

"Absolutely!" Mr. Krueger insisted. "I want it to come from you *personally*. A lot of young people look up to you and respect your opinions, and much of that respect is the result of your involvement with this radio station. I don't want it to sound like you were forced into making this apology. I want everyone to know this apology comes from you personally, and that you fully support it. And you'd *better* make it

sound sincere!”

“Yes, sir,” Larry agreed. “I’m really sorry. Does it have to be a formal sounding statement, or would it be OK if I made this apology as part of a casual conversation between Sam and myself?”

“That’d be fine,” the owner agreed. “In fact, that might make it sound more sincere, even if you don’t really mean it.”

“Oh, but I do mean it, sir,” Larry continued. “I don’t normally like voice-overs, but would it be OK if the conversation is conducted while a record is playing?”

“What song?” Mr. Krueger asked, wondering if Larry was up to something.

“Nothing in particular. Just whatever comes up next.” He looked at the top of the record stack. “There’s a Beatles song coming up called *Girl*. Would that be OK?”

“How does it go?” Mr. Krueger asked.

“Is there anybody going to listen to my story, all about the girl who came to stay.”

“OK,” Mr. Krueger agreed. “That’ll be fine. Make your apology. And watch yourself in the future!”

“I will, sir. Goodbye.” Larry handed the telephone back to Diggs and walked out of the control room, returning to the main studio. Diggs killed the speaker in the studio, and while Larry walked back, the kids saw Diggs talk briefly with the station owner and then hang up the red telephone.

Because two turntables were used alternatively for the program, the record on the top of the stack was not actually the next song to be played. When Diggs cued the microphone, Linda made the normal announcement of the dedications. He killed the microphone and spun the next record. Larry had a moment to relax and reflect.

“What are you doing to do?” Sam asked.

Larry looked at her sadly. “Exactly what he demanded, Sam. I’ll do the dedication as normal, but we’ll leave the microphone active. No, wait. I don’t want any of the requested dedications at all. During the song, I’ll make the public apology. I want you with me, Sam, but everyone else is to leave the studio. Or I guess you and I could go into one of the sound booths.”

“Let’s do it that way, Larry,” she said. “It’d be less trouble for the others.”

Larry and Sam went into the sound booth to wait for the next song. Now isolated from the others, Sam asked, “Are you up to something, Larry?”

He looked at her, smiled, and Sam saw a twinkle in his eye. “Do you really think my reference to *‘mooseberry juice’* will influence anybody to drink alcohol?”

“Of course not,” Sam agreed. “But Larry, if you don’t sound sincere, he’s not going to let you come back!”

“That’s not a problem. I’ll sound sincere, because everything I say will *be* sincere,” he assured her. “But there’ll be a double message. You’ll get it. So will Diggs. John and Linda will get it. I don’t know about the others. A lot of the kids listening out there will hear it and get a real kick out of it, but their parents won’t get it at all, and neither will old Mister Stuffyshirt! Whatever you do, Sam, please don’t laugh. If he gets suspicious, he’ll kick me out of here with no questions asked.”

“Then why take the chance, Larry?” Sam wondered.

“I don’t know, Sam,” he said honestly, smiling. “It just seems to be the right thing to do at this particular moment in time.”

The record ended and Diggs cued the microphone in the sound booth for Larry to introduce the next song. “The next song has a special dedication from me to Sam,

my dear friend. Sam, I want to make a public apology to you. You and I have known each other for a long time, and are very good friends. We tease each other constantly and don't think anything about it. I know we're teasing, and you know it, but people listening to this program may not understand that. Some of the things we say could be interpreted incorrectly if one doesn't understand these things are just part of a joke. I want to apologize to you for the things I implied earlier this evening. When I suggested you might go out behind the station to have some fun with me, I implied you might be less than the very nice and sweet girl I know you to be. I was just joking, of course. You knew it was a joke, but some of the listeners might not have known. I went too far with this joke, and may have damaged your reputation. I apologize most humbly and sincerely. I hope you will forgive me."

"Oh, Larry," Sam said, realizing this apology was completely sincere, "no apology is necessary. Of course I forgive you."

"I appreciate that, Sam," Larry said, signaling Diggs to start the record. "This song just happened to be the next on the list, but in some ways, it's very appropriate. You're a very special girl to me, just like the one described in this song."

He began speaking again during the second verse. Diggs adjusted the volume of the record so his voice was dominant, with the music in the background. "I also want to apologize to all our listeners for something else. Earlier this evening, I made a statement implying I thought it acceptable for young people to drink alcohol. I want to state for the record neither I nor this radio station condone teenage drinking."

He timed his speech so that as the Beatles sang, "*Ah, girl,*" he was saying, "Personally, I don't drink alcohol." Again, the Beatles sang, "*Girl,*" as he stated, "I don't condone the use of alcohol." In the recording, just after the words "girl" at the end of each verse, there is a sound of someone sucking heavily on a cigarette.

During the bridge, Larry continued his apology. "I want to urge all of our listeners to think carefully before drinking alcohol. Alcohol is the number one cause of accidents and traffic fatalities. Alcohol abuse has serious health implications. So I urge all our listeners to do like I do, and abstain from the use of alcohol."

He continued during the next verse. As the Beatles sang, "*Ah, girl,*" he stated, "Alcohol is bad for your health." As they sang, "*Girl,*" he urged listeners, "Please do not drink alcohol." When the song finished, Sam read the next set of dedications and Diggs spun the record. Larry and Sam looked out of the booth to see Diggs grinning from the control room, shaking his head. In the main studio, John was doubled over in hysterics. Linda, Helen, and Jimmy were giggling and whispering to each other.

As Larry and Sam exited the sound booth and returned to the main studio, the kids once again saw Diggs answer the red telephone. Larry immediately asked everyone to straighten up and act naturally. Knowing they were anxious about the telephone call, Diggs patched the conversation onto the speaker in the main studio.

"What did you think, Mr. Diggins?" Mr. Krueger asked.

"He sounded sincere to me, sir," he said, trying not to snicker.

"Yes, I thought so, too," Mr. Krueger continued. "I thought the apology to Sam was a particularly nice touch. Tell me what they're doing right now."

Diggs looked at the kids, all of whom were gathered in the main studio looking at him anxiously. "They're looking at me talking to you on the telephone, sir."

"No one is laughing? No one thinks this is all some big joke?" the owner asked.

“No, sir. I think you underestimate these kids, sir,” Diggs said. “They’re young and inexperienced, but they have a vitality and enthusiasm that just can’t be denied.”

“I can see that,” the owner said, “but that can get them and us into a lot of trouble with the FCC if we don’t keep them under control.”

“Yes, sir,” Diggs agreed. “But I think they’ve learned their lesson for now.”

“I hope so, Mr. Diggins,” he said. “I hope so.”

Diggs hung up the phone and killed the speaker in the studio. He gave a big grin and an enthusiastic “thumbs up” before returning his attention to operations.

“You are absolutely nuts!” Sam said.

“You are absolutely right!” Larry agreed with a smile.

“Why did you take such a chance, Larry?” John asked. “You could have gotten us *all* thrown out of here!”

“I know, John,” he said sincerely, “and I apologize for that. I wish I could have consulted with you guys first, to let you know what I was thinking, but there just wasn’t enough time. There were three reasons I did it. First of all, I admit I was being selfish. As you well know, I’ve worked very hard to build up my reputation, to make other kids think of me as someone cool. I was afraid I’d throw that all away if I did it straight, exactly the way he demanded.” John and Sam indicated they understood this reason.

“Secondly, I was thinking about *our* image. I hope our friends will realize we don’t condone the double standards set up by the establishment, whatever that is, concerning drugs and alcohol. I hope the message they got was if they used either drugs or alcohol, they should do so in a sensible manner.” John and Sam agreed with that, also.

“Finally, I was thinking about the program. I knew it was going to be obvious to everyone I was being forced into making that apology, no matter how sincere I tried to make it sound. I wanted to divert attention away from that, so nobody got mad at us, the program, the station, *or* its owner.”

“So you were actually doing him a favor?” Sam asked with a grin.

“Of course!” Larry said with a twinkle in his eye.

The rest of the program went without incident. The number of calls into the request lines that night was the highest in history. Many of the callers did not request a dedication, but called just to offer support to the gang for taking a stand.

Thursday, May 25, 1967
Pomp And Circumstance

When the ceremony completed, Larry went searching through the crowd to find his parents. On his way, he encountered Mrs. Kronkite looking for Sam, and begged her to stay with him as they searched. He soon spotted his parents chatting with Sam. Larry and Gayle maneuvered their way through the crowd to join them.

“There he is!” Sam pointed. “It looks like he’s found mom. Over here, Larry!”

“Whew! Now I know how a salmon feels!” Larry grinned. “Why do you suppose everyone else is going in *that* direction?”

“An educated man like you should already know the answer,” Larry’s father said. “Congratulations, son! We’re very proud of you!”

While Larry thanked his parents for their support in getting him through school, Gayle gave her daughter a hug. “Congratulations, sweetheart!”

“Thanks,” she said, then turned to her dearest friend. “Congratulations, Larry!”

“Congratulations to you, too, Sam,” he replied, offering her a hug. They laughed merrily together for a moment as they embraced. “We finally did it!”

John stepped out of the crowd. “You did? Why am I always the last to know?”

Sam looked at Larry and asked, “Are you going to deck him, or shall I?”

“Be my guest!” Larry laughed. “Mom, dad, you remember Sam’s mom, right?”

“Of course,” Lena said. “It’s good to see you again, Gayle.”

“It’s nice to see you again,” Gayle smiled. “Isn’t it wonderful to see these children growing into fine young men and women?”

“It certainly is!” Lena replied.

“I’m sure you’re going to want copies of the pictures I took on prom night. They came out perfectly! He was so handsome!”

“Please!” Lena said, returning that smile. “It may be the last time I get to see him all dressed up for years! He told me how beautiful Sam was. I’m looking forward to seeing those pictures.”

Sam, John, and Larry looked at each other and made gagging noises, until they were interrupted by the arrival of Julia and her parents. “Congratulations, Sam!” Julia said as she gave her friend a hug. She turned to Larry, hugged him just as warmly and repeated the greeting, “Congratulations, Larry!”

Larry stood in stunned silence for a moment, trying to recover from yet another gap in the space-time continuum. Jessica hugged each of the graduates and congratulated them, quickly followed by congratulations from Julian. Larry happily accepted a handshake, while Sam waved it off and gave Julian a warm hug instead.

He came to his senses long enough to introduce his parents. “Mom, dad, you’ve already met Julie. These are her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson.”

“Call me Jessica,” she smiled.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Jessica,” Lena said. “Call me Lena, and this is Josh.”

“Nice to meet you, Jessica,” Josh said politely.

“And please call me Julian,” he added, offering his hand.

“Josh Bristol,” he smiled. “It’s very nice to meet you, Julian.”

Sam stepped in and introduced her mother to the Jacobsons. When all of the parents were on a first name basis, and talking about how wonderful it was Larry and

Sam had graduated, the kids resumed their conversation. John was in a particularly festive mood. “I can’t believe I just watched all those people matriculate right here in public! It was unimaginable! It’s bad enough to see Larry doing it, but I’ve seen him matriculate many times before. I’d never have thought I’d watch Sam doing it. What does it feel like to matriculate in public?”

“I see John’s been studying the dictionary like you do,” Sam snickered.

Larry rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You should have been with us at dinner, John. You could have watched me masticate!” Julia giggled brightly, and she tried to cover her face which was turning bright red, much to Larry’s delight. He pressed the issue just to tease her even more. “Imagine that! First I masticate in public, and then matriculate, all on the same night! No doubt Mallory will be looking for me again!”

“I’m just happy you aren’t the president of the debate club,” Sam giggled. “Can you imagine what John would be saying if you were a Master Debater?”

The parents had not been paying much attention, but could not help but notice the kids were laughing. “What are you kids giggling so much about?” Jessica asked.

“Just childish foolishness,” Larry replied with a grin. She returned his smile, nodded her head knowingly, and returned her attention to the adult conversation. Once they were being ignored again, Larry grinned at his friends. “What brought you and your parents out here tonight, Julie?”

“Our car,” she replied smoothly, with a sweet smile. Larry grinned at her, closed his eyes, and shook his head slowly, while Sam and John broke into laughter.

He considered his next question carefully. “Why did you and your parents come to the graduation ceremonies this evening?”

“So I could watch two of my best friends matriculate!” she chuckled.

Her answer was the perfect accent to John’s joke. While John and Sam giggled, Larry smiled brightly and gazed into the green eyes of this little girl, this horrible monster who had been disturbing his sleep for the last several months. His appreciation of her intelligence, sense of humor, and style rose even higher than before. When he first met her, something about her had reached into his very soul and shaken it. Just in case there had been any doubts, she shook it again, proving to him it had not been an accident. “I’m honored,” he said sincerely.

“And I was honored this afternoon,” she replied. “Did you think no one noticed you sitting up there in the top of the gymnasium during my ninth grade ‘graduation’ ceremonies? Why didn’t you come down and say something when it was over?”

“I figured everyone would be too busy congratulating you,” he said, embarrassed he had been caught. “I needed to be there, anyway, and I didn’t want to interfere.”

“Don’t be silly! You wouldn’t have been interfering!” she assured him.

The conversation among the adults reached a lull, so Julian took the opportunity to bring the kids into the circle. “So what do our graduates have planned now? What are you going to do with that diploma you worked so hard to acquire?”

“I’m going to celebrate all summer!” Sam laughed. “Then it’ll be back to the books next fall, when I start working on a business degree out at A&M. By the way, Mrs. B, I want to thank you again for your efforts in helping A&M go coed.”

“I’m afraid I didn’t do very much,” Lena said. “I’m glad you girls now have the opportunity to study there. I know the boys are glad about that, also!”

“Amen to that!” Larry grinned. “As for myself, Mr. J, there shall be no rest for the

wicked. I'll be registering for summer classes first thing in the morning! It's not that I really want to get a jump on the degree plan, but I have to be registered before I can apply for a part time job at the computer center. A friend of mine, a PhD in the Industrial Engineering department, promised to get me a job there!"

The topic of the conversation changed as Jessica picked up on Sam's comment. "Lena, what does Sam mean about you helping the school go coeducational?"

"Oh, it wasn't much," Lena said. "That was almost ten years ago. Another lady named Barbara Tittle and I tried to enroll in A&M. When we were refused admission because we were women, we sued for illegal discrimination. We won in district court, but the school appealed, and the appellate court overturned the earlier ruling. The Texas Supreme Court upheld the reversal, and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case. So, the bottom line is nothing happened."

"Yeah, but she helped get the ball rolling," Sam added. "A&M slowly started accepting a few more women over time, as exceptions rather than the rule. Last year, they finally opened the doors for all women."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Jessica said. "Whether you think you deserve it or not, I'd say congratulations are in order! You stuck to your guns and fought an injustice. My people know what happens when people don't take a stand and fight injustice."

"Well, thanks," Lena said. "I guess we did our best. Only now, it might turn out to be a problem for him!"

"Why is that?" Julian asked.

"There are some people who are very unhappy A&M is now coeducational," Larry said, "especially the 'old army' types who graduated a hundred years ago, back when dinosaurs still roamed the earth. A lot of them are now professors and administrators out there, and they have very long memories."

"You think some might discriminate against you because your mother sued the university?" Julian asked.

"I don't know. It's possible, but I like to think people are better than that. All I know is I plan to keep a low profile, especially around the ROTC people. Can you imagine what they'd do to me if I was in the Corps of Cadets and they found out about this? Thank God that's no longer compulsory!"

"It just occurred to me," Sam giggled. "You inherited that feisty attitude from your mother's side!"

"Maybe," Larry grinned, "or maybe *she* inherited it from *me*!"

"What are you going to do at the computer center?" Julian asked, impressed by the industriousness of his young friend. "Will you be programming the computers?"

"I wish! I'll be doing odd jobs, like loading blank paper into the printers, or mounting tapes. Maybe I'll even get to be the main system operator now and then!"

"Mounting tapes, did you say?" John smirked. "I'm not surprised you'd try to get a job mounting *something*, but tapes? That sounds more kinky than I'd expect!"

"Get your mind out of the gutter, John," Julian said, chastising even as he smiled.

"He's such a juvenile," Larry said with mock disgust, drawing a giggle from both Sam and Julia. *Why is the sound of her laughter like music to my ears? What could I do to hear her laugh again?*

Sunday, September 22, 1968
Somebody To Love

“Happy birthday, Mrs. J!” Larry beamed.

Jessica greeted him with a hug and a smile. “Thanks, Larry.”

“I’d like you to meet some new friends of mine, Mrs. J. This is Penny, Nicole, and Krystal, otherwise known as the famous Ball sisters. Ladies, this is Mrs. Jacobson. And this little fellow trying to climb my leg is Schotzy!”

“It’s nice to meet you girls,” Jessica smiled.

The girls took turns introducing themselves both to her and to the dog. “Thank you for allowing us to come to your birthday party, Mrs. Jacobson,” Penny said.

“Come on inside. We’re happy to have you,” Jessica assured them. “Friends of the famous *Four Musketeers* are always welcome here! I’m not actually having a party, anyway, just a gathering of a few friends.”

“Isn’t that what the best parties are?” Larry asked.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jessica smiled. “OK, girls! Welcome to my birthday party! Please call me Mrs. J, like the others, or simply Jessica if you prefer.”

“Happy birthday, Mrs. J,” Nicole said stepping inside, joined by her sisters.

“My goodness!” Jessica exclaimed. “I understood you were identical twins, but I wasn’t prepared for this! I can guess which of you is Krystal, but how does anyone tell which is Penny and which is Nicole? You’re even dressed exactly alike!”

“It’s not easy,” Penny and Nicole giggled, “unless you’re one of the privileged few who knows our secret!”

Jessica chuckled along with them, carefully noting the way they glanced at Larry, and how it caused him to blush. She came to the conclusion this secret, whatever it might be, would not be revealed while the girls were fully dressed. Then she wondered whether they were teasing Larry because he wanted to know their secret, or because he did! “You’re always full of surprises, Larry. Can *you* tell them apart?”

“Of course, Mrs. J,” he beamed. “This is Nicole, and this is Penny.”

“Are you sure?” Penny giggled. “Don’t you want to ask anything first?”

“It’s not necessary, Penny,” he smiled.

“Is he right?” Jessica grinned. The little interplay told her he knew their secret, but was claiming he knew another way to tell them apart. The girls were certain to call his bluff before the day was over. That would provide even more entertainment!

“This time,” Nicole grinned, “but he had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing!”

“You have a lovely home, Mrs. J,” Krystal commented as Jessica led the group through the family room to the back door. “How do you like living in the country?”

“Thank you, Krystal,” Jessica smiled. “We find it comfortable. We all like living in the country, especially when friends come to visit. The *Four Musketeers* spend a lot of time on the patio when the weather is as nice as today. The others are eagerly waiting for your arrival so the fun can start.”

“She must be talking about some *other* group!” Larry laughed. “The *Four Musketeers* I know can have fun anywhere, anytime, whether I’m there or not!”

“But they have more fun when the whole group is together, now don’t they, Mr. Smarty-pants?” Jessica teased. “Girls, this is my husband, Julian. Why don’t we put him to the test again? Step on up, Larry, and introduce your friends properly.”

“Hi, Mr. J! This is Penny,” he said designating one of the girls.

Penny smiled at her sister. “It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Jacobson.”

“Nice to meet you as well,” Julian smiled. “Call me Julian. Oh, why do I bother? By the end of the day, you’ll be calling me that ‘Mr. J’ nonsense like all the others!”

“This is her twin sister, Nicole,” Larry grinned as he introduced the next girl.

“Welcome, Nicole,” Julian smiled as they shook hands.

“Wonderful to meet you,” Nicole smiled.

“And this is their sister, Krystal,” Larry said, introducing the remaining girl.

Krystal offered her hand, “Pleased to meet you, Mr. J,” she smiled.

“See what I mean?” Julian grinned. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Krystal.”

When Larry turned his full attention to the one remaining member of the Jacobson family, Jessica sensed there was something more significant about the event than seen on the surface. “Girls, the other night, you met all of the *Four Musketeers* except one. This is Julia Jacobson, and her friend, Ed Doggett. You already know John and Sam. Guys, this is Penny, Nichol, and Krystal, the famous Ball sisters!”

As Julia and Ed greeted each of the sisters individually, Jessica wondered about the significance of this event. She was so distracted she almost missed the obvious exchange between John and Krystal. “Hi, John,” Krystal said smiling brightly.

“Hi, Krystal,” John replied softly. “You look as stunning as you did last week!”

“You’re sweet!” she smiled. “Are you going to make some music this afternoon?”

“That’s the plan!” John brightened. “What do you say, Larry? Are you ready?”

“Whenever the birthday girl is ready!” Larry grinned.

Larry and John had prepared a program of Jessica’s favorite songs from Broadway plays and musicals. They began with songs from *South Pacific*, including *Bloody Mary*, *Younger Than Springtime*, and *This Nearly Was Mine*. They continued with *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning* and *People Will Say We’re in Love* from *Oklahoma!* From *The Music Man* they added *Till There Was You*, followed by *With a Little Bit of Luck*, *Get Me To The Church On Time*, and *I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face* from *My Fair Lady*. From *Carousel*, Larry sang *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, but avoided *If I Loved You*. During rehearsals, Larry never sang that song to completion without his voice breaking. From *Flower Drum Song*, Larry added *You Are Beautiful*, a song he had studied in the few private voice lessons he had ever taken.

Jessica’s favorite musical was *Fiddler on the Roof*. The highlight of the program for her was when Larry put down his guitar and did a passable, but laughable dance singing *If I Were a Rich Man*. They ended her birthday performance with what many people thought was the most beautiful song from that show, *Sunrise, Sunset*. Unlike the original, where the various lines are sung by different characters in the play, Larry simply sang all of the verses himself.

No one noticed none of the songs from *The Sound of Music* were included. John and Sam assumed Larry was not interested, and did not want to drag up ghosts of the past. No one gave any thought that songs from *Oliver!* had been equally ignored. Frankly, because the program contained so many songs, no one even noticed these omissions.

Even when the program officially ended, however, there was still one more song to be sung. Just as the concert of show tunes concluded, Julia and her father sneaked into the house and signaled when they were ready. Larry got everyone to join him in

singing *Happy Birthday* to Jessica while her family brought out the cake.

Larry started the drive back to the girls' apartment lost in silence. Krystal had come along for the ride that afternoon, happy to continue her acquaintance with John, but mainly interested in hearing the boys make more music. It was clear to both boys the romantic relationship between John and Krystal would not consist of more than the one-night they had already shared together. When John had offered to drive Krystal home himself, her response, that daddy had taught her "always go home with the one that brung ya," gently emphasized the point.

Larry's relationship with Penny and Nichol was no different. None of them thought this afternoon was a date in any true sense of the word. They were simply good friends, spending a little time with each other, just like the *Four Musketeers*. These particular friends had enjoyed the physical pleasures derived from sharing their bodies, and all of them agreed it had been a wonderful experience. Larry had a fabulous memory of a fantasy fulfilled he would cherish until the end of his days. But they would also agree this brief and shining moment was now in the past, unlikely to ever be repeated.

Penny broke the silence as they drove home. "She's a delightful girl, Larry. It's no wonder you're so much in love with her."

"I wish I knew for certain that's what this is all about," he sighed. "How can I be in love with her, Penny? It's true I love her as a dear friend, just as I love John and Sam. I've only known you a couple of weeks now, and I also love you. We've shared a few moments of intimacy together, enough to know our destiny isn't to share a future. I know I'm not *in* love with you, and you're not in love with me. On the other hand, Julie and I have had no such moments of intimacy, sexual or otherwise. We've never so much as held hands, looked into each others' eyes, or shared our innermost thoughts, hopes, and dreams. Don't you think you have to share at least a little of that before you fall in love with someone? Or do you actually believe in love at first sight?"

"I've never believed in love at first sight," Nichol answered. "I understand what you're saying, but I can see the love in your eyes when you look at her."

"I don't know how to explain it," Penny admitted. "But there's definitely something to this. You'll have to keep chasing this dream to find out what it is!"

"Maybe it's like the *Flower Drum Song* you sang for Mrs. J," Krystal suggested. "Maybe Julia is like the girl in the flower boat. All you really know about her is your eyes met briefly when her boat went drifting by one day. The day you first met her, you somehow knew at that moment, just like the last line of the song, *"You are the girl I will love someday."* Perhaps that's what love at first sight really means."

They rode along in silence again as Larry contemplated Krystal's wisdom. After a few moments, Penny broke the silence, "Nicole, I think our little sister has grown up a lot more than we thought, wouldn't you agree? Larry, you're only nineteen, and Julia isn't quite sixteen years old. You and she have a wonderful friendship. Perhaps the intimacy you seek to answer your questions is something the two of you aren't quite ready to share. Perhaps that lies ahead, somewhere in your future."

Larry nodded his head gently. "It's the best explanation I've heard yet. But I want her so! I need her so! What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"I suggest you treasure the friendship you share with her," Penny said, "and you treasure your dreams of how wonderful it'll be when the moment finally comes

where you can hold her hand, look into her eyes, and share with her your innermost thoughts, your hopes, and your dreams.”

“But I already treasure those things! How long must I have nothing but dreams?”

“Give that question some thought,” Nichol said. “Perhaps someone smart enough to figure out a way to tell us apart without asking our favorite color is smart enough to come up with the answer on his own. Are you going to explain how you do it?”

“No,” he smiled. “All I’ll tell you is I’m sometimes able to sense what certain animals are thinking. After all, humans are animals, too!”

As was his custom, Larry opened the car doors and walked the girls to their front door. Krystal said goodnight and departed to her upstairs apartment, while the older sisters stood at the door for a few parting words. “Thanks for letting us meet her,” Penny said. “I hope you’ll let us know now and then how things are going.”

“Yes, Larry,” Nichol agreed. “Please let us know.”

“I will,” he assured them. “I’d also like to hear how you two are doing from time to time. I hope you can find suitable replacements for Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Jeez, this sounds so damn final, like we might never see each other again!”

“Our paths will cross again one of these days,” the twins smiled in unison. “Goodnight, sugar!”

“Goodnight,” he said softly.

On her way to retire for the evening, Jessica stopped by her daughter’s room, as was her custom. Sometimes, when she knew there was no reason to think anything further was needed, she would simply stick her head in the bedroom door and wish Julia goodnight. Other times, such as tonight, she could sense there was a reason something more might be needed, and would give her daughter the opportunity to engage in a conversation. “Did you get all your homework done, sweetheart?”

“Yes, ma’am,” came the unenthusiastic reply.

“So you’re all set for another week of school?” Jessica asked calmly.

“As ready as I can be,” Julia answered.

“OK, then bubee,” Jessica smiled. “Goodnight, and sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight, mom,” Julia replied. “Oh, and happy birthday!”

“Thanks, sugar!” Jessica answered warmly, opening the door of opportunity for a conversation to begin. “And just think! Your own birthday is now just one month away. This year, you’ll be turning sweet sixteen! Aren’t you excited about that?”

“A little, I guess,” Julia answered without much enthusiasm.

“Well, you *should* be!” Jessica smiled. “Sixteen is the age girls start to take more control of their own lives, becoming a little more independent from mom and dad. You’re almost all grown up!”

“If you say so, mom,” Julia shrugged.

“I though something might be bothering you,” Jessica said. She sat on the edge of her daughter’s bed. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” Julia answered without answering.

“If you didn’t want to talk about it, then you would have said so,” Jessica smiled. “So what is this thing you want to talk about, but you don’t know *how* to talk about? Are you worried about your next birthday?”

“Not really,” Julia said, “although I admit I don’t feel very grown up right now.”

“Are you and Ed still getting along?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah, we’re OK,” Julia said.

“Something is troubling you,” Jessica smiled, “something you don’t understand.”

“Maybe it’s myself I don’t understand,” Julia said looking down at the floor. “At first, I thought I was just upset because of the way Ed gawked at the Ball sisters all afternoon.”

“Very pretty girls have this ability to turn a man’s head,” Jessica smiled. “It’s just something you have to accept and live with, because nothing will ever change it. Even an older man like your father is not completely immune, although I doubt he noticed himself how often he ogled them.”

“What?” Julia asked, somewhat surprised by this bit of information.

“Oh, he’d never seriously entertain for a moment the thought he might actually do anything,” Jessica grinned. “In fact, if they so much as looked at him cross-eyed, he would run away and hide so fast it would make your head spin!” The girls giggled to themselves at the incongruity of this image before Jessica continued. “It’s just the way nature has made them, sugar. Deep in the male brain there’s a place where they subconsciously evaluate their chances of spreading their genes with every female they encounter. Consciously, they’re completely unaware of this activity.”

“Unless they think their chances are real?” Julia grinned. “Or even fifty-fifty?”

“They don’t even have to be that good!” Jessica said, returning her daughter’s grin. “So don’t be angry at Ed. He really couldn’t help himself, no matter how hard he might have tried.”

“I didn’t know the reason,” Julia sighed, “but I wasn’t really angry. I guess I’m just jealous. I wish I could be one of those pretty girls who can turn a man’s head.”

“But you *are*, bubee,” Jessica said giving her daughter a hug, “and you’re getting prettier every day.”

“Aw, mom,” Julia said. “Don’t try to fool me. I’m just a ugly, skinny little kid with a mouth full of metal. I’ll never be able to turn a boy’s head the way Penny, Nichol, and Krystal do.”

“I won’t try to fool you as long as you don’t try to fool yourself,” Jessica assured her. “You are most certainly not ugly! You have lovely facial features, with nice high cheek bones, an adorable little pug nose, and rich full lips. Don’t you think for a moment those beautiful green eyes go unnoticed! You’re certainly not skinny anymore, either. If you take a good look at yourself in the mirror, you’ll see you’ve been filling out very nicely in all the right places for the last couple of years. You have a beautiful figure that’s already capable of turning heads, and it’s going to get even more capable in the near future.

“And sweetheart, I know you hate them, but please remember you won’t have to wear those braces forever. You already have a very sweet smile, and when those braces come off, your beautiful, straight teeth are going to make that smile dazzling! When your features mature a little more, and your braces finally do come off, every boy you meet is going to notice you, just like they notice the Ball sisters, and that’s a promise!”

“You’re just saying that because you’re my mom,” Julia said sadly.

“No, bubee,” Jessica assured her, “I’m saying these things because they are true.”

“Do you think he’ll notice me when my braces come off?” Julia whispered.

“Do I think *who* will notice you?” Jessica asked.

“You know who I mean,” Julia said softly.

“You still have a crush on him?” Jessica asked, a little surprised by this revelation.

“Sometimes,” Julia confessed. “Especially when I see him with beautiful girls like Penny, Nichol, and Krystal. I sometimes find myself wishing I could be the one who holds his hand, looks into his eyes, and shares secret hopes and dreams with him. But he wants to be with Sam, so what chance do I have?”

Jessica nodded her head to acknowledge her understanding, and spoke softly. “Does this crush create a problem with your friendship with either Sam or Larry?”

“I don’t understand why she doesn’t take what he’s offering like I would,” Julia sighed. “Sometimes I want to be both his friend *and* his girlfriend. Is that terrible?”

Jessica smiled warmly. “Hardly, sweetheart. That’s the way I’ve always thought things should work. Two people start out as friends, and then one day, they find they have changed into lovers.” Sensing that Julia was hanging on her next words, she thought carefully before proceeding. “I don’t understand a lot of things about him. For example, I don’t really understand his relationship with Sam. I know he noticed you, but I don’t know why he didn’t chase you when he had the chance. But he’s known Sam for a very long time, and it’s clear he has his sights firmly fixed on her.”

“What should I do, mom?” Julia asked.

“I know it won’t be easy, sugar,” Jessica answered, “but all you can do is sit back and wait. The way she keeps resisting his advances, things might change someday, and his eyes might turn in your direction. If so, it’ll be *his* responsibility to make the first move, and until he does, all you can do is wait. You should continue to be his friend, his best friend, just as you are now. Keep your options open. Like we talked about a few years ago, you have to look at a lot of possibilities before you know who’s the right one, the one you’ll share your life with.”

“I know,” Julia said. “I also said I hoped I wouldn’t meet the right boy until I had enough experience to *know* he was the right one.”

“You’re still young, almost ready to turn sweet sixteen,” Jessica smiled. “I promise you still have plenty of time. And when you *do* find the right one, you’ll *know* he’s the right one! Are you OK, sweetheart?”

“I’m OK, mom,” Julia smiled. “I love you!”

“Goodnight, my daughter,” Jessica said returning that smile. “I love you, too.”

Monday, December 1, 1969
Draft Dodger Rag

Sam and John were in the front seat of her car, while Larry and Julia sat in back. They were parked in the place they called their smoking room, but their interest was not on smoking. Instead, they were glued to the radio, as faceless voices described the events at the Selective Service National Headquarters in Washington. For the first time since 1942, a lottery drawing was being held to determine the order of call for induction into the armed forces during calendar year 1970. It would apply to those born between January 1, 1944 and December 31, 1950. Larry and John both fell within this range.

“What would you do if you were called up?” Sam asked.

“I don’t really know,” John answered. “I’ve been thinking I might go to Canada. One thing’s for sure – I’m not going to participate in any of this madness.”

“What about you, Larry?” Julia asked.

Unsure of his actions, Larry shrugged and sighed. “I should tell you guys something. When I registered for the draft, I checked the box indicating I have a conscientious objection to serving in the military. I just wanted to go on record, doncha know.”

“I hear you,” John said. “I saw that box, but I figured it was pointless.”

“I thought so, too,” Larry said, “but I checked it anyway. The strangest thing happened. A few weeks later, I got a letter from the local draft board asking me to come and explain. So I went in and told them I didn’t believe in fighting. They asked me to tell them things that had happened in my life to demonstrate what I meant. I told them about the time that creep cornered me in the boys’ locker room at Lamar and beat the crap out of me while I just stood there. Then they wanted to know the names of some people who’d known me a long time who might confirm my beliefs. So I gave them names of some teachers and people from church. A few weeks later, I got a new draft card in the mail, reclassifying me as 1-A-O.”

“Are you kidding?” John asked. “You’re classified as a conscientious objector?”

“Yes, although it’s not as wonderful as it sounds, John. 1-A-O means I can still be called up for military duty, but only as a non-combatant.”

“Like a truck driver, cook, or something like that?” Sam asked.

“With my computer training, it’d be logical to give me a job in logistics, but since the phrase ‘military intelligence’ is an oxymoron, I’d probably become a medic.”

“Oh, shit!” John said.

“You got it,” Larry agreed, shaking his head.

“What’s wrong with that?” Julia asked.

“The first guys shot are the ones with brass on their collars or a red cross on their helmet!” John explained.

“Why do you say that?” Sam asked, suddenly looking concerned.

“Kill the officers and the grunts will be unorganized,” John explained. “Kill the medics and the wounded will die.”

“I understand the officers don’t wear their insignia in combat,” Larry noted. “The men know who they are, and don’t need to see brass on their collar to know who to obey. I hear the medics don’t wear those red cross helmets anymore, either! Some are even carrying rifles, without ammunition, to disguise themselves from Charlie.”

“Hang on,” John said. “They’re drawing the first capsule.” The radio announced the lottery had begun. The first date drawn was September 14. “Whew!” John laughed nervously. “I had visions of being called up tomorrow morning!”

“Me, too! Number two isn’t likely to be any better,” Larry added. “I wonder how deep the draft will go, anyway?”

“A guy I know told me they’d probably be calling up guys with numbers as high as two hundred,” John said. “We have a long way to go!”

“I won’t feel safe unless I get three sixty-five, and maybe not even then!”

The next dates drawn were April 24, December 30, and February 14. “It figures,” Sam said. “Valentine’s Day is fourth. I suppose Jesus’ birthday will be next.”

The fifth selection was October 18. “You may be right!” Larry laughed nervously. “Who knows when He was born, anyway? Does you know Moses’ birthday, Julia?” he asked rhetorically. The next selections were September 6, October 26, September 7, November 22, and December 6.

“At least we escaped the top ten!” John chuckled.

“I hope we can escape the top two hundred,” Larry said seriously.

The boys were nervous about this whole process. Their plans for the future depended on the random selection of blue beads from a glass bowl. If it was not so serious, it would have been ludicrously funny!

The lottery continued with August 31 and December 7, “a date which will live in infamy,” Sam joked, also feeling nervous – not for personal reasons, but for the sake of her best friends. The next numbers were July 8, April 11, July 12, December 29, January 15, September 26, November 1, and June 4.

Larry flinched each time a day in July was called. John did the same with days in June. The twenty-first date was August 10, followed by June 26, July 24, October 5, February 19, December 14, July 21, June 5, March 2, and March 31. On and on, capsules were drawn and dates announced. The one hundred seventeenth capsule was October 22. “I guess Julia will get called up sometime next year,” John laughed.

“No,” Larry chuckled, “she was born in 1952. This lottery only applies to people born up to 1950. You’re safe for now, sugar.”

“Do you suppose it might also matter that I’m a girl?” Julia giggled.

“It damn sure matters to me!” Larry laughed. Sam saw a sad look pass over his face, as if to say he *wished* it mattered, anyway, and smiled at Larry reassuringly.

The tension mounted as more and more capsules were drawn and the selected dates came and went. They all breathed a sigh of relief when March 19 was announced as number two hundred, and neither of their birth dates had been called. They became more and more relaxed as more and more capsules were drawn, more and more dates were called out, and still their birth dates had not been mentioned.

Finally, when the lottery reached number two hundred forty-five, the radio announced the drawing of the capsule containing August 26. “It looks like you’ll be the next to go, Sam,” Larry laughed. “You *were* born before 1950!”

“Does it matter that *I’m* a girl?” Sam asked teasingly.

“Prove it!” Larry demanded. “Show me some physical evidence of that claim!”

“I should have known you’d say something like that!” Sam laughed.

More and more capsules were drawn. They reached number three hundred, and still neither of the boys’ birth dates had been selected. The lottery went past selection number three hundred ten, three hundred twenty, then three hundred thirty, and *still*

they had not been drawn. “Do you think maybe they forgot us?” Larry asked. They passed number three hundred forty. “I hope mine comes up before they get to the end! I’d hate to find out I missed hearing it somewhere back around number forty-two or something!”

“You didn’t miss it,” Sam insisted. “Keep listening.”

The announcement declared the three hundred fiftieth date selected was July 2. “That’s me!” Larry exclaimed with a mixture of relief and joy. “At least I know I didn’t miss it earlier. Now we just need to hear John’s birth date!”

Three hundred fifty-one was April 25, followed by August 27, June 29, March 14, January 27, June 14, May 26, June 24, and October 1. “Good grief!” John said. “I’m convinced I missed my *own* birth date!” Number three hundred sixty was June 20, three hundred sixty-one was May 25, three hundred sixty-two was March 29.

“I’m betting you get number three sixty-five, John!” Larry laughed. Three hundred sixty-three was February 21, three hundred sixty-four was May 5. “Here it comes!” he said smugly. Number three hundred sixty-five was February 26. “Huh? Now *I’m* worried! How could we have missed it?” The radio announced the final date, number three hundred sixty-six, was June 8.

“You forgot about leap years!” Julia laughed.

“Holy shit!” John yelled. “Three sixty-six – I must be living right!”

“Congratulations, John,” Larry said sincerely, giving his friend a high five.

“You, too,” John replied. “Three fifty and three sixty-six! We’re *good*, dude!”

“This is even better than winning the Irish Sweepstakes!” Larry laughed.

“This calls for a celebration!” Sam announced. “I have a surprise for you guys. I figured we’d either need to celebrate or drown our worries, so I called in a favor from this guy I know and scored a pint of Jack. I’ve also got some weed, all safely hidden away in the trunk. Who’s ready to join me?”

“You took a big risk, Sam,” Larry chuckled, “but I’m *always* ready to join you!”

“I know you are,” Sam giggled, “but not tonight, big boy. Sometimes I wonder what you’d do if I suddenly accepted one of your indecent proposals.”

“You know, Sam, I wonder about that, also,” Larry said pretending to be serious. “Why don’t we find out!” he grinned, reaching out like he was going to grab her.

“Eek!” she screamed playfully, easily jumping out of his reach. When she opened the trunk of her car, as promised, she produced a small ice chest containing ice, one small bottle of Jack Daniels Kentucky Bourbon, and a few plastic cups.

The boys grabbed the four cups and added a little ice to each. Sam opened the bottle and poured about two ounces into each cup. They lifted their cups and looked at each other, thinking someone should say something.

Beginning to feel a little more serious about the matter, Larry was the first to speak up. “I feel like a tremendous weight has been lifted off my shoulders, guys. Not only do I feel better personally, but I also know my best friend won’t face making a terrible choice. John, I would have supported whatever choice you made. Thank God you won’t be forced to make one!”

“Hear! Hear!” Sam agreed, lifting her cup.

“To the future!” John said with a smile.

“Le Chaim!” Larry and Julia said enthusiastically.

They each drank a significant portion of the liquid from their cups. “What does that mean, anyway?” John asked. “It’s a Jewish expression, isn’t it?”

“It means, *‘To Life!’* I can’t think of anything more appropriate at this moment!”

“Me, either,” John agreed. “*Le chaim!*” he said, joined immediately by Sam.

“To life!” Larry and Julia agreed.

The boys felt like singing. “John, I know the perfect song for us to play right now!” Larry laughed. He played a few chords, John smiled with recognition and soon joined in, singing *Draft Dodger Rag*, written by Phil Ochs. After the song, the foursome drained their cups and looked at each other with smiles on their faces. Sam poured a second round, killing the bottle. “Are you planning on getting us pissed so you can have your way with us later, Sam?”

“I don’t mind you getting pissed,” Sam laughed, “but I don’t plan on having my way or anyone else’s way with either or both of you at this time!”

“Damn! I was hoping to get booze, drugs, and sex at the same time!”

“Two out of three ain’t bad,” John snickered.

“As long as I get to pick which two I get!” Larry chuckled.

“Well, *I* picked which two you can have tonight,” Sam said. “You’ve had booze, and now you can have some grass. Take it or leave it!”

“I’ll take it!” Larry sighed.

The foursome shared several joints and a lot of laughs. Eventually, they agreed it was time to let themselves sober up so they could drive home.

Julia’s house, of course, was the first stop. As was his custom, Larry walked her to the front door. “So you won’t get lost on the way,” he explained if she asked why.

“My grandmother is coming Wednesday,” she said. “Do you want to meet her?”

“Of course,” Larry replied, “but I don’t want to interfere with family time.”

“You won’t,” she smiled. “She’ll be here before I get home from school. If there’s anything special planned for that night I’ll let you know, but unless you hear from me, why don’t you come over about 6:00 and you can have dinner with us.”

“I’d be honored! Make sure it’s OK. I don’t want to impose or be a burden.”

“I’ll check,” she smiled, “but when have you ever been a burden out here?”

“I don’t know,” he grinned. “Maybe I’ve been a terrible burden and you and your folks are just too nice to tell me!”

“See you Wednesday,” she said, subtly calling his suggestion complete nonsense.

“Goodnight, Julie,” he said. He wished he could say that more intimately.

She reached over and gave him a warm hug. “Goodnight, and congratulations on having such a good birth date. Tell John I said the same for him, also, will you?”

“I will,” he said. He watched her open the front door, step inside, and turn back to look at him. They waved to each other. As Larry turned to walk back to the car, he heard the door close softly behind him. He sighed once, gently shook his head, and forced himself to once again take that first step that he disliked so much.

He sat in silence during the ride home, staring out the car window. John and Sam both knew what was on his mind, and decided not to disturb him. They simply exchanged a single glance and a sad shrug.

Sam pulled up to Larry’s house and stopped. “Goodnight, Larry. Congratulations

on winning the lottery!”

“Thanks, Sam,” he said softly. “Congratulations to you as well, John. I’ll see you guys later, OK?”

“Goodnight, Larry,” John said. “Take it easy, man!” Larry nodded his head in agreement, then turned and silently walked away. “Man, he’s got it bad!”

“Over three years now,” Sam said. She turned the car towards John’s house.

“Do you think she knows how he feels about her?” John asked.

“I doubt it,” Sam said. “I guess it’s what they call selective vision. I know she used to have a big crush on him, but when he didn’t make any moves for her, she decided he wasn’t interested. Now she has lots of boyfriends to divert her attention.”

“It’s a real shame,” John said. “I feel a little guilty myself, since it was the promise he made to my little brother that caused such a problem.”

“Not to mention his refusal to break that promise,” Sam said.

“Do you think they’ll ever get together?” John asked.

“I hope so,” Sam said simply. “Not only for his sake, but for hers! I don’t know if you’ve been paying much attention, but she’s not very happy, either. She has all the boyfriends a girl could want, but she doesn’t really care for any of them.”

“I didn’t know that,” he said, shaking his head. “As long as she has a boyfriend, he’s going to just sit on his hands. He doesn’t have enough confidence in himself to make a move, to tell her how he feels.”

“And as long as he seems to ignore her,” Sam continued, “she’ll have a boyfriend, and whenever she gets so tired she can’t stand him anymore, she’ll pick a new one.”

“Can you think of anything we could do to break this vicious cycle?” John asked.

“Maybe,” Sam said thoughtfully, “but you know what *he’d* say about that! He’d tell us to leave it alone, saying it’ll happen all on its own if it’s meant to be. He believes if anyone tries to intervene, it’d only cause more problems, and ruin his chances forever.”

“Do you believe that?” John asked.

Sam looked at him. “Are you willing to take the risk that he might be right?”