



Lovers Lame

a novel by

**Robert
Rudney**



Lovers Lane is the novel that makes disability sexy. David Levin, who struggles with left-sided paralysis, falls hopelessly in love with Jessica Cowan, an artist battling the debilitating effects of multiple sclerosis. Jessica's cryptic world unravels as David pieces together the puzzle of her tempestuous, pre-MS life style. *Lovers Lane* is both a poignant love story and a plea for economic and social justice, raising the curtain on the hidden universe of people with disabilities.

Lovers Lane

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Chapter 1

Imagine feeling like you're half a person. Muscles constricted in your left arm and left leg, no real function in your left hand. You constantly lead with your right, rely on your right to pour a glass of water, kick a ball, hit a computer key. Always compensating, always trying to anticipate one step ahead.

And falling one step behind, always feeling awkward. Self-conscious and self-aware. Trying to hide what's absolutely obvious. Even worse with the opposite sex. Talk about involuntary motion. Ka-zam, left hand in her face! Or almost. More likely, I never utter a word, stuff my left hand in my pocket. Just stand and watch. Stand and watch.

I always saw myself as an 'observer.' Others participated, I observed. It was a great way to rationalize things for everybody, except myself. After a while, it got tiring - and boring - and depressing.

Yes, depression, the flip side to disability. There, I've said the word: cripp, crippled, gimp, handicapped, spazzed out, REE-tard, LA-A-ame! I am it, The One, the Unique Hemiplegic Rock God! Rock On! What a Life!

And What a Deal! At no extra charge, a lifetime membership in the PWD Club. That's 'People With Disabilities.' Please appreciate the politically correct 'people first' format. It's not 'disabled people,' or even worse 'handicapped people.' The PWD Club is the one club that just about everyone eventually joins.

Please rest assured - this is not going to be another sermonizing activist screed. Nor will it be another "inspiring tale" of a cripp "overcoming tremendous obstacles" to achieve "heart-warming success in life." I am not a poster child, and I

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am definitely not a role model. In fact, some of the biggest SOBs I ever met were people with disabilities.

What the hell am I getting at? I don't wager that my story is worth much, but it's a helluva way to get some things off my chest. Chest is OK, last time I looked, one of the few parts of me that works according to warranty.

Anyway, have you ever tried to chat up a woman with half your bod doing its own thing? I don't recommend it. There's something unsettling, unrefined, a surefire turn-off for the fair sex. And to think people get obsessed about the length of their noses. Oh yeah, I've got one of those too. Heritage of the Chosen People. So I began life with two huge strikes against me. My God, Hitler would have gassed me at least twice over just to make sure I wasn't around to pollute one of his buxom *Mädchen*.

Now, I'm not the type of person who unbundles his feelings at the batting of a feminine eye. I've had to learn to let go of my emotions. It's like that for many people with disabilities, especially men. Most guys tend to bottle up their feelings, and guys with disabilities are even more emotionally constipated. We gravitate without thinking to a knee-jerk stoicism, ostensibly demonstrating self-control, but really protecting ourselves against an unforgiving world. A lot of it is simply making pretend that we are 'normal,' whatever 'normal' means. The tension, the strain between acting 'normally' and living 'abnormally' inevitably builds up inside of me. I sublimate, I compensate. I want so desperately to fit in. But I can never quite act the part. People see the disability before they see the person.

Then the impossible happened.

There was a woman.

Disability brought us together, and disability tore us apart. I'm still not sure what she felt, but she was the great

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love of my life. Here's another reason why I'm writing. I'm still coming to terms with what happened. It all traveled so fast. She broke down all the psychological barriers I had painstakingly raised to protect myself from disappointment and humiliation. No longer was I the 'observer.' I was in the middle, actually dancing, no longer content to observe what was happening. It was glorious. It was awful. I was no longer limping. My feet were not touching the ground.

Chapter 7

Jessica didn't call the next day. Or the next. Or during the next week. I had almost given up on her. Then she called – out of the blue -- about ten days after the Abilities meeting.

"I'm sorry if I haven't been too communicative." She sounded tired. "I've had a lot of obligations."

"I'm happy you called. How are you feeling?"

"My knee's OK. I just feel a lot of fatigue." She paused. "Thanks again for all your concern that evening."

"I'm glad your knee's better. Would you be interested in meeting? Maybe for a cup of coffee or something." I hesitated, waiting for a signal. No signal. "I'd like to see you again."

"That would be nice." Her voice perked up a bit. "But I'd like to invite you to lunch Saturday afternoon. I prefer afternoons, evenings these days I'm exhausted. Here. I'm not much of a cook. Something simple. If you're not busy. You've been so helpful. I feel I owe you something."

"Nonsense." Why did I say that? "I'd love to come. That's very nice of you." Don't sound too saccharin. "Let me have your address."

She gave me a time and her address in a high-rise in South Arlington. She tried to give directions and explain where the handicapped parking spots were, but got totally confused. "I'm a spatial nonentity," she confessed. "I get lost going around the block."

"That's fine. I can get directions online. Anything I can bring?"

"No, just yourself. Actually, I have a special request. Can I sketch you? I purport to be an artist, and I like to do sketches of my friends." She laughed. "You have interesting facial features."

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Her “friend” comment had registered. I laughed back. “You mean a big nose and a crazy uncontrollable left arm.”

“No, please. Don’t feel self-conscious. It’s just a habit of mine. I sketch all the time. Maybe if you behave yourself, I’ll do a portrait in oils one of these days.”

“My own portrait?” I didn’t know how to interpret her remark about behaving. “I feel so important. Like a Senator.”

“You haven’t seen how badly I paint. I may give you three eyes and six noses.”

“It would be an improvement.”

“I’ll take you just the way you are,” she sang. A Billy Joel fan?

To say I couldn’t wait until Saturday was an understatement. I had trouble sleeping, I actually went out and bought a new shirt (a major departure for me), I rehearsed my lines and pondered how I’d keep my left arm in line. Then I remembered her fall, her vulnerability, her secret side so suddenly revealed. So unlike Lisa. Lisa. For a moment, I caught myself wondering how she and Josh were getting along. I quickly shifted mental gears so as not to bog down in that dead-end morass.

That week, I went through the motions, working on dull editing jobs I got as a freelancer. Atrociously written technical reports churned out by engineers and consultants. God Bless Track-Changes and Delete-Copy-Paste. I was also sending out resumés, making phone calls, meeting with a senior manager in the Department of the Interior. He was a vague acquaintance of one of my Capitol Hill contacts. The potential vacancy was in the program analysis office buried deep in their Bureau of Land Management. I thought maybe I could leverage some of my energy policy experience there.

Unfortunately, I had mentioned on my resumé that I was a Board member for Abilities, “an employment advocacy

organization for people with disabilities.” That must have raised red flags in the manager’s mind. On the phone, without any prompting on my part, he asked if I needed any accommodations. At the interview he looked even more nervous than I was. First, he ran to his office door to greet me and escort me to a chair. I almost felt he’d be willing to carry me on his shoulders. A middle-aged lady, introduced as his assistant, sat wordlessly through the interview.

“You’ve got an impressive resumé,” he said guardedly. “This job requires a great deal of travel.”

The vacancy announcement had estimated travel time at 10 percent. “I’ve done plenty of business travel in past jobs,” I replied, as upbeat as possible. “I appreciate getting out and meeting new people, gaining new perspectives.”

“It does require lots of travel,” he mumbled under his breath. “We have a number of highly qualified candidates. What do you think sets you apart?”

I rambled systematically through my professional experience, policy savvy, publications background, and focus on renewable energy. He remained awkwardly stone-faced, barely making eye contact. I was more nervous than ever.

“Out in our field offices, there may be some hiking to get to work sites....” His voice trailed off. I began to understand his concern.

“I’m in perfectly good health and enjoyed hiking up in the Rockies a couple of months ago.” A bit of an elaboration on my walk to Lake Lily with Abby, but I needed to show I could trek up mountains if required.

He immediately switched subjects, launching into a tedious description of the Bureau’s management structure that took up a large part of the remainder of the interview. He made sure I had no opportunity to break into his monologue. As he brought the meeting to a close, he repeated his early

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admonition. "We have a number of highly qualified applicants applying for this position. Several of them have direct experience in the BLM." The silent woman stayed silent.

As I left his office, I had the sense that he was striving to get through the interview and find a pretext to reject me without violating the ADA and risking an EEO complaint. I wouldn't have been surprised if the mute woman was an HR or EEO specialist, sitting in to make sure the manager made no costly mistakes. And he had not made any costly mistakes. I had the feeling that he was rejecting me on the basis of my disability, that he didn't think I could handle the physical side of the job, but I had no proof. He had run a perfectly legitimate job interview.

I notched another mark on my networking belt.

Saturday came, and it was raining. I had imagined Saturday all week as sunny and balmy. Maybe we'd go out after lunch. Take a walk in the park. Trip and fall over each other. Roll in the grass.

I needed to be squeaky clean. That was always my pre-first date obsession. To this end, I applied my full panoply of hygienic workarounds. One challenge in the shower is scrubbing my right arm. I soaped up the wash cloth and laid it across my left forearm, then dragged my right arm across the washcloth as best I could. A bigger challenge was clipping my right finger nails. I pressed the top of the clippers against my thigh and used my right thumb for leverage. Then, to clip my right thumb nail, I wedged the top of the clippers once more against my thigh and pushed hard with my right middle, ring, and pinkie fingers. As I couldn't see what I was doing, the result was a less than exceptional manicure job.

I tried to give myself an extra-close shave and ended up cutting myself. I searched madly and futilely for that styptic

pencil. A small piece of toilet paper would have to suffice. I looked like an idiot in the bathroom mirror. But, hey, idiots qualify under the ADA.

Dressing proceeded without insuperable problems. I fastened the right sleeve buttons on my long-sleeve blue dress shirt before pushing through my right hand. Flipping through my uninspiring wardrobe, I picked a pair of khaki Dockers, nothing too formal, but recently pressed at the local Korean laundry. I slipped on an Eddie Bauer rain jacket and wedged my left hand in the pocket.

The hardest part was picking up a present for Jessica. Something not so small, not so big, not so ostentatious, not so modest, especially not so expensive. A bottle of wine? She may not drink, especially with the MS. A book? Too nerdy. Besides, which book? A pair of slacks to replace the one she ripped? Get real! I didn't know her size and had abysmal taste in clothes and, dammit, that was not something you brought as a token gift for a lunch date. This was only lunch, stupid. In the end, I settled for a dozen yellow tea roses. A nice contrast to the rain. I didn't know how much of a romantic she was.

"Thanks so much for the flowers, David," she exulted at her apartment doorway. "They look so beautiful!" She gave my left arm a playful squeeze which set it off on a spastic jerk. No hug, no kiss. She carefully let go of my arm and bowed a bit as she pushed her door open. "Please come in. I apologize for the mess." I noticed she was not using her cane.

"No problem," I piped nervously, stuffing my left hand deeper into my jacket pocket. "Thank you for inviting me."

She cradled the roses and exhaled. "No, please. I felt so badly for delaying so long. For not phoning you. I've been so tired and busy. Until this weekend..."

I gave her apartment a quick 180-degree inspection scan. Well-worn, but comfortable looking. Obviously the home of an artist, well-lit, canvases covering the walls, three easels in one far corner by the window, brushes and paint tubes and other unidentifiable artist accoutrements piled high on an open rollaway desk.

Unlike me, Jessica was dressed casually, in jeans and a nondescript sweatshirt. "This is both my living room and my studio," she explained while delicately arranging the roses in a vase. "I don't have the money for my own studio. It's easier for me here. As you can see, there's plenty of afternoon light, even today with the rain. That's what sold it on me."

I stopped in front of a striking set of three framed oil portraits of a young woman. "These are really extraordinary," I said by way of well-meaning flattery.

"Those are paintings of my older sister, Claire, from a while back," Jessica replied, absent-mindedly brushing a few strands of hair from her eyes. "We're very close. Except she lives in Boston now. Near Boston. A financial planner – she inherited all the business genes. She's been very helpful. I really captured different sides of her personality, I think, in those pictures. So I framed them. And kept them to remind me of her."

"How long have you been living here?" Another dumb ice-breaker question.

"Three years. It's what I can afford – barely – these days. I give some private lessons, some adult ed courses, sell some canvases." She looked down. "My sister has helped out financially. And my parents. It's difficult living 100% independently."

"I know what you mean," I agreed, moving self-consciously toward a comfy aging arm chair. "I have lots of freelance editing jobs, but no full-time employment. I can get

by, but no luxuries. And no benefits, no health insurance." I plunged into the comfy arm chair which proceeded to swallow me up.

"That's just it. I depend on the generosity of others." She paused. "My parents pay for my health insurance. Just bare-bones insurance. With the MS, that's all we could afford." She stood over me and the all-embracing arm chair, still clutching the vase of roses. "And they're fairly well off."

"That's generous of them." I tried to lean forward.

"Yes, here I am, 35 years old, with other people helping to support me." She grimaced, then broke into a smile. "Let's change subjects. You obviously need something to drink."

"That would be great." I had given up struggling with the man-eating arm chair and had sunk into its recesses. How was I ever going to get up?

"I can offer you a Coke or orange juice, if you're a health nut. Or I may have some white wine left over." She moved cautiously into the kitchen.

"Orange juice would be fine," I said. "Even if I'm not so much of a health nut."

Jessica poked her head out of the kitchen. "I made a *salade niçoise*. With tuna, eggs, olives. You're not allergic to any of that, right? I lived on this stuff when I was in France."

"You lived in France?"

"It was my junior year abroad. I still keep up with friends there, artist friends, but haven't been back—" she paused, "—since the MS. One of these years I'll go back. It's a great place for artists. Especially in Provence, on the Mediterranean. Dazzling light. It changed my life." She disappeared back into the kitchen.

"That's great that you've kept up ties for so long," I called out, consciously absorbing all these little tidbits of her life. "I

always wanted to go to Europe, but there were always money problems."

"Let's not talk about money problems." She was now perching herself on the edge of a coffee table, directly across from my arm chair, peering into my eyes. "Permit me to pose the first interview question, according to what we learn in Abilities." She straightened her back and huffed. "Well, Mr. Levin, tell me about yourself. You have two minutes."

I sipped the glass of orange juice that Jessica handed to me. "How to start?" I shrugged my shoulders, frowned professionally, then pushed uncomfortably forward in the arm chair. "David Levin combines extensive strategic communications knowledge and experience with superb people skills to go nowhere in a down job market."

"Get serious," she interrupted, sitting back carefully on the coffee table.

"I'm basically a decent guy looking for a job, looking for a friend. I worked for eight years as editor in charge of several energy e-newsletters. I was laid off earlier this year and have been doing piecemeal freelance work ever since."

"Get personal," Jessica cut in, smiling.

"David lives in a one-bedroom-plus-den apartment on Connecticut Avenue in DC. He drives an ancient 1999 Honda Civic with about 110,000 miles on it. It badly needs an oil leak repair. His assimilated Jewish family comes from New York, Westchester, near New Rochelle. My father is retired from working in HR at IBM. Mother did some secretarial work. We haven't been very close in recent years. Now that I'm part of the Army of the Unemployed, I have even less incentive to see them. One brother, off in California. I'm not presently in a relationship. At least not since six months ago. She broke it off."

"That's too bad. What was she like?" She abruptly stood up, stretched a bit, and headed once more toward the kitchen.

I replied to her back. "A real Washington creation, very smart, very ambitious, very career-oriented. Too career-oriented for me. We didn't last very long."

"Enough said," she said, waving me into the kitchen. "True confessions appreciated. Let's eat."

We sat down at the tiny table in her kitchen. She apologized for the squeeze, dished out the salad, and passed me some whole wheat bread. "I'm big on eating healthy," she added. "Every little bit helps."

"I hate to cook just for myself," I admitted, chomping on a large piece of lettuce. "So I live on frozen foods, carryout, and salads."

We continued the good-natured banter through lunch. Jessica brought out a container of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey. "My one indulgence is ice cream," she confessed, digging in.

After finishing dessert, I summoned up enough courage to turn the tables playfully on her. "Well, Ms. Jessica Cowan, thank you for applying for the vacancy at XYZ International. How would you describe yourself? You have two minutes."

"Why thank you, Mr. Levin." She smiled. "I'm grateful to XYZ International for the opportunity to explain how my negligible IT skills and revolutionary artistic temperament can contribute *nada* to the company. Even worse, I'm a terrible marketer and can't spell."

"Not a concern," I joked. "We have spell check."

Jessica gave me an impish look. "I lived a wild, impetuous youth. My parents moved me from private school to private school to public school. Even back then, I didn't want to conform. I was a natural athlete, running, soccer, tennis. But I found my true emotional and intellectual outlet in my art

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work. I was good enough to be admitted to the Rhode Island School of Design, RISD. Only I hated Providence, and life there was a crazy, druggy existence. I dropped out early in my sophomore year. After that, my parents sat me down and talked some sense into me. They convinced me to go to the University of Maryland – we lived in Bethesda back then – and major in arts education. I actually graduated and taught art mainly in elementary schools. I loved the little kids. They were so creative and uninhibited. I continued to paint and hang out with my painter friends. Yes, I had plenty of boyfriends. Too many. Some very strange creatures. I'm too embarrassed to go much further."

"Hey, this is PG," I said. "Save the prurient details."

She stared at her empty plate. "Anyway to make a long, sad story short, six years ago, I started to have symptoms. First chronic fatigue, along with tingly sensations in my arms and legs, then some dizziness. I chalked it up to too much work and too much play and decided to cut back. Then five years ago, the symptoms got worse, and I had my first real episode with blurred vision and real vertigo. I took a leave of absence from school and had a battery of tests. The MRI indicated multiple sclerosis. I was devastated. I figured this was God's punishment for my life of excess. Did I tell you that my family was Irish Catholic? I quit teaching outright, stopped seeing my friends, isolated myself. I even had suicidal thoughts. That's why I was so responsive when that Jeff guy at Abilities spoke about his thoughts of suicide. My sister saved me. She was always the upbeat, practical, problem-solving one. I lived with her up in Boston for a while, began drug treatments, saw a psychiatrist. My condition more or less stabilized, although I still have vertigo attacks and the pain in my right leg makes walking difficult. So I bought the cane. I decided to move back down here, to

try to live independently. I didn't want to be a perpetual burden on Claire. She helped set me up in this apartment. I tried teaching again, but it was too tiring. Then Sandra Staley suggested Abilities. You know the rest."

"Thanks. If I can help-- ." I didn't know how else to respond to her story.

"You can have some more ice cream," she said, pushing the container toward me. "I didn't mean to ramble so long."

"No more, please, lunch was great," I said, suppressing a yawn. "I'm sorry, I didn't sleep much last night."

"Nor did I," Jessica added. "Before you nod off, please come into the living room." She took my hand. "I'd like to sketch you. You have such an interesting expression."

"Do I have to stay awake while modeling?" I joked, yawning on purpose.

"You can sleep all you want. But then I won't guarantee I'll show you every sketch I make of you. I might add horns and a tail."

She sat me down in a stiff chair by the window and put on a classical CD. "Mozart, for mood," she said. Facing me, she stood back, then nudged my chin a little to the right. "Hold that pose," she ordered as she picked up her sketch pad and pencil.

"How long?" I asked.

"As long as I say. No scratching nose or fidgeting. No smiling, keep your serious look."

Naturally, I began worrying about my left arm, now wedged uncomfortably between the chair and my back. I involuntarily raised my left shoulder. "Sorry," I whispered.

"Understand," she said. "Some things just can't be avoided."

I quickly fell into a zone as she appeared to finish off several sketches. After what seemed like an hour, but actually

took only 20 minutes, she signaled I could relax. "I need a break too," she sighed. "After all, I'm doing the work. All you have to do is look beautiful."

"Can I see what you've drawn?"

"These are just rough sketches." She handed me several pages. "I'm not sure if I caught your spirit."

The drawings were simple but stunning. I didn't look like a Greek god, more of a tragic Romantic figure with rebellious dark hair. "You have such knowing eyes, such an intelligent, long face," she said. "One of these days, I'll do your portrait."

"You have such talent. In just a few minutes..."

"You're too kind," she said modestly, playing with her hair.

"No really, each one of these sketches seems to capture a different me. Even this one with my arm behind my back."

"Let me draw your arm. It's part of you, part of your personality. Like my MS."

"You really want to draw it? It won't keep still." I pulled my arm from behind my back, let it drop in my lap.

"Please pull up your sleeve," she asked. She gestured to a bookcase near my chair. "Can you put your arm on top of these shelves where I can see it from different angles?"

"OK, if you want. I've always kept it so hidden."

"There's beauty in your arm, your hand." I pulled up my shirt sleeve as requested and placed it awkwardly on top of the book shelf. Jessica picked up her sketch pad and pencil and moved around the bookcase. She slowly approached my shaky hand, bent over, and kissed it.

"Now let me draw for a few minutes," she said softly. "It can move around if it wants."

"Don't worry. It has a mind of its own." I tried to adjust to a comfortable position.

"Well, you've never awakened one morning and discovered your whole side paralyzed so that you couldn't move." She began to draw furiously.

"That's what happened to you?" I readjusted my arm on the shelf.

"During one of the early episodes. Of MS." She finished one sketch, flipped the page, and started another.

"What do the doctors say?"

"That it will continue. At least with yours, it doesn't get much worse, I assume."

"That's right. It's congenital, a birth accident."

She finished the second drawing, looked up at me, and paused. "Would you like to rest your arm?"

"Let me see your two drawings."

"I'm a little disappointed..." She handed me the pad. "There was this Italian Renaissance painter, Parmigianino, from Parma, the home of the cheese. He painted a famous self-portrait with his right hand extended in the foreground. The fingers are all elongated, distorted. He actually used a convex mirror to get that effect. And he painted the portrait on a rounded surface. He gave the self-portrait to the Pope. Tell me if I should send these to Rome."

I'd recognize my claw anywhere. Forearm rigid, wrist contorted, fingers twisted out of control. The pictures were rough, the product of a few minutes' work.

"This is remarkable, but maybe not quite suitable for the Pope. Can I have the sketches?"

"Please keep them. Would you like something else to drink?"

"No thanks." I extended my right arm and peered at the drawings from a distance.

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She sat down by the window, closed her eyes for a few seconds, and exhaled. "The sun is great here. It finally came out." The rain had dissipated.

"Jessica, I'm not kidding, you really do have talent. Have you ever done a show?"

"Not recently, not for a few years."

"You must show your talent. You've just got so much insight, so much tenderness." I sat on the edge of the man-eating arm chair, perhaps three feet from her. I wanted to reach out to her, but something held me back. A fear of rejection? She had kissed my left hand. What could be more intimate?

It was Jessica who broke the silence. "David, you're so sweet and so understanding, and so, so supportive. Let me be truthful with you. What I need at this point in my life is a friend, a good friend. I'm not in the market for anything more—"

"I never —." I was flabbergasted at her directness.

"Let me finish, please." She leaned forward, only a foot away from me. "I have this feeling, this sense that you see too much in me. I appreciate your complimenting my art work. That's so nice. It's absolutely essential that my art, my drawings, communicate something. I want to communicate something to you through my art. That's why I asked to draw your arm. But I have this instinctive sense that you are going to demand too much from me. I'm selfish." I shook my head. She put up her hand.

"Yes, yes, I am. You don't know me. I'm not ready for a serious relationship. Not now, I have too much hanging over me. I could use a friend, a confidante. I'm afraid, David, that may not be enough for you."

I was speechless for what seemed like minutes after she finished. She looked out the window, closed her eyes again, and murmured, "The sun, the sun."

Finally, I found my voice. "Yes, I can be your friend if that's what you really wish. I don't know what I felt when I came here. I was attracted to you, Jessica. I admit it. I thought you were attracted to me. We're just two lost souls, trapped inside recalcitrant bodies. When you fell the other night--."

"I'll show you the scab." She rolled up her jeans leg to show the ugly mark on her knee. "It hurt, and it was bleeding. But I didn't want to show weakness. Not to you, not to anyone."

"Why do we have to be so strong, so stoic? All of the time?"

"I don't know anymore, David." She looked at me wistfully. "We do need to stop being so self-absorbed. We need to get out and feel the sun and walk in nature - and run! Yes, run, do you know how long it's been since I ran? I used to be a jogger."

"Then let's run. I'm game. On my game leg."

"That makes two of us. The difference between you and me, David, is that you were always like this and I've been changed. I'm trying to be brutally frank. But I think there's a difference in perspective. I keep thinking back on the old me, who was an athlete, an extrovert, one very crazy person. I'm not like that anymore. I'm too fearful. I'm scared of what the future holds for me. I've been hurt in the past. Can you understand? For you, it's holding the line. For me, it's wondering when I'll lose it all."

"Don't talk like that." This time, I took her hand. "We have to be strong because we have no choice. I wish I could help. I wish I could provide support. You're a wonderful

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person. When you kissed my hand, it's almost as if you healed it."

She began to weep. "I'm also a very emotional person. That's another difference. You seem so much more reserved, keeping your feelings all bundled up. I could tell right away. Call it female intuition. But that's the way most males act, especially when they're dealing with a disability. You hide your disability as best you can. One day, I'd like to paint you, to paint your arm in the foreground and your face in the background. Like Parmigianino."

"I'd like that. I'd like to see you again."

"Yes, this was fun." She took a tissue from her pocket and wiped her eyes. "We'll have to do it again. But soon, I'll have to show you to the door. I'm getting a little tired. I still have to clean up and do some other chores."

"Can I help?"

"No, it's not all that much. I have my own system. I'm just tired."

"When can I see you again?"

"Whenever you wish. As long as you understand my limits. I don't want to dictate. This was already quite a first date." She broke into a smile. "You move quickly."

"We can go to a movie or go out to dinner. Not too late." I was trying to adjust to her time schedule.

She got up and began straightening up. "I'm not a total invalid. I can actually go out at night. I just don't want you hovering over me, protecting me."

I stood up as well. "Understood. Next weekend perhaps. I'll call you."

"Let me call you," she replied, heading toward the kitchen. "I'd prefer it that way. It worked out well today."

Chapter 8

She did call the very next week. We went out to dinner at a little Thai restaurant in Arlington. "You can throw a rock around these parts," I said, "and you're guaranteed to hit a Thai restaurant. But they're all great." She ordered a green curry, and I ordered the pad thai.

"You know, that guy Jeff from Abilities called me last night. The guy in the wheelchair. He wanted to go out."

"What did you tell him?" My early warning antennae were picking up strong signals.

"Well, I told him I was seeing you." She smiled, and I breathed easier. "He repeated the same sad story that he told us at the Abilities meeting. I met him yesterday for a cup of coffee at Starbucks."

"Are you going to see him again?" My antennae were picking up too much interference.

"That's my problem, David. He's a good guy, he's been through a lot, I like him, and I think I can help him. I just don't want to deceive you. You and I are not exactly going steady, whatever that means at our advanced age."

"I just enjoy your company so much. It's nice of you to lend your ear to Jeff." The bastard.

"My ear is not the only part of me that he's interested in." She waved her hand in front of her mouth. "This curry is hot!"

"Well, it's your decision." I couldn't cloak my disappointment.

"I told him I'd be happy to meet him again for coffee. He gave me this sexy look. But he's not my type."

"What is your type?" My antennae had suffered system overload.

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"David Levin with a little more life to him, a little more spontaneity and sense of adventure. You seem to be coasting. We can't coast through life."

"You're right. I tend to be too passive. A lot like other Abilities members."

"I hope I can go to more Abilities meetings. Ron is a great guy. He's really outgoing and involved in so many things. He could be a mentor to you."

"Just getting your feedback is really helpful to me." I had finished my pad thai and leaned back as the waitress cleared the table.

"I enjoy your company, David." She smiled. "It's decided. Let's go steady."

"What do you mean by 'going steady'?" I asked. I wasn't too enthusiastic about this ancient adolescent fantasy finally realized.

"We can go out," she said. "We can get to know one another. We can respect each other's differences, each other's space. Do you have any alternative to suggest?"

Outside of falling madly in love, I didn't.

So, over the next several weeks, Jessica and I 'went steady.' It felt a little bit like those weeks with Lisa when we were visiting all the sites in the Washington area. The major difference was that I didn't feel in competition with Jessica. Lisa was operating all the time, scheming for the future. Jessica seemed to live every day, appreciate every day. At times, her leg would act up and she'd bring out her cane. She didn't seem self-conscious about leaning on a cane, so unlike me, constantly aware of my leg and arm. There were also days when she was too tired to go out. There were times when she was too tired to talk on the phone. I would hold off until she phoned me. She was always the one to take the initiative.

One Friday afternoon, Jessica called to tell me she had scored a couple of tickets to the Kennedy Center for a National Symphony Orchestra concert that evening. It was Yo-Yo Ma playing the Dvořák Cello Concerto. I was never sold on classical music, but I never passed up free tickets, especially with an attractive date attached. Jessica wore a full-length black velvet evening dress, sleeveless, with a sapphire pendant on a gold chain and matching sapphire earrings. When I complimented her jewelry, she told me they were a present from her mother. "Sapphire is my September birthstone." She had on a hint of makeup, a light touch of red lip gloss, and a few drops of a seductively scented perfume. All I had on was a veteran navy blue blazer and gray slacks.

"Am I worthy of being seen in public with such a radiant young woman?" I asked.

"Every once in a while, I like to give a charity case a small break," she joked and put her left hand through my right arm. "No cane tonight, I'm leaning on you."

It was a scintillating evening. The music was divine, the seats were great, and Jessica was stunning, funny, happy, glowing. We 'people-watched' at intermission, rating the evening gowns and coiffures.

"These people look so rich, so self-confident," Jessica observed. "They look as if they belong here."

"You outshine them all," I said, blushing.

"I'm always looking at faces, at hands, drawing and painting them in my mind. There are a lot of people here I'd love to have as models."

"And when do you paint my portrait?"

"Soon, baby, soon."

We found a little Vietnamese place in Georgetown for a late, post-concert dinner. In our Kennedy Center finery, we seemed a little out of place among the mostly student

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clientele. Jessica ordered a green papaya salad, I ordered a *phở* soup. "Those Concert Hall seats were great," I said as soon as the waiter had cleared the menus. "Who gave them to you?"

"A friend," Jessica replied cryptically. "A music lover. Every once in a while, he calls me with free tickets." She raised her water glass. "There are so many cultural events in this town. It's overwhelming."

"Washington certainly has become a cultural capital," I said, having slurped up my soup noisily. I had been given one of those pseudo-porcelain soup spoons that are impossible to employ neatly. "I read that way back before the Kennedy Center was opened, Washington was a sleepy Southern town."

"The Kennedys did so much," Jessica added.

"Yes, but they took themselves to be a royal family and unfortunately suffered the consequences."

"For Irish Catholics like me, they were almost deities," she said. "My grandparents from Massachusetts practically worshipped the Kennedys. They had a photo of John on their living room wall, right next to Jesus and Mary."

"And your parents?"

"My parents got affluent. My father went to engineering school and now works for a big defense contractor. He's changed his political views since he's become dependent on Pentagon largesse. My mother was never very political."

"Where do they live now?"

"They moved down to Florida a few years ago. My father manages some big defense electronics contract near Tampa. I hardly ever visit. Florida never appealed to me. Plus I've never gotten along very well with them. They're golfers, I'm an artist. There's a clash of cultures."

"I have a hard time communicating with my parents as well," I conceded. "My unemployment really put a strain on our relationship. They would probably like to be more 'buddy-buddy,' especially my father. But they are both so career-oriented. And they can't understand an organization like Abilities."

Jessica had finished her salad. "My parents probably would have split, had it not been for the Church, *sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*. My mother was – is an alcoholic. She still goes to AA meetings. She has the passion of the converted and devoted plenty of time trying to fence in her revolutionary artistic daughter. Which only made me more revolutionary."

That night, in an act of revolutionary fervor, Jessica invited me into her bed. I had driven her home, since she preferred not to drive at night. I was ready to drop her off when she pointed to the one free handicapped parking space. "You might as well take it," she said laconically.

"Can I come up?"

"It's been a wonderful evening." She leaned over to kiss me. I put my arms around her. She pulled back a bit.

"I'm cold, David. Let's go inside."

I followed her timidly through the apartment building lobby. A security guard was perched by the door. "Evening, ma'am," he said, pushing back his hat.

"He's with me," Jessica replied, pointing in my direction.

"Well, good night, ma'am." He gave me a knowing look.

I mumbled a quick "good night" and meekly followed Jessica across the lobby.

The elevator arrived. We entered and Jessica hit her floor number. She didn't touch me.

"Are you sure you're okay with my coming up?" I didn't know how to interpret her words.

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"Yes, I'm okay." She turned to me and let her hand caress me lightly between the legs. "And how are you?"

"Much better." That was all I could say. She smiled wickedly as she continued stroking me.

"I'm glad you're feeling so perky. I love to tease. I love going steady with you." The elevator doors opened. Luckily, nobody was there. I was out of my mind with ecstasy.

"Please come in, Mr. Levin," she said mockingly as she unlocked her door. "We're expecting you."

I began to caress her breasts with my right hand. "Let's go to bed," she whispered seductively. She led me into the bedroom and pulled down the bed spread. "Please excuse me. I need to go to the bathroom."

She came out five minutes later, totally naked. I was still dressed, sitting on her bed, uncertain of the next step.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked and laughed as she jumped under the covers. "Do I have to do all the work?"

I needed no more invitations, pulled off my clothes, and leapt under the covers. I could feel her body heat. "Please go slowly," she whispered. "Sometimes, I'm a little dry."

We made slow, meticulous, maddening love that night. I felt the curve of her body. She ran her fingers across my chest. I brought her pelt of brown hair to my face, lost myself in its luxuriance. She moaned softly as I wedged my knee between her legs, kissed her shoulder, her neck just below her chin. She whispered the magic word, "Come," and lay on her back, expectantly. I fell into her universe, swallowed up, floating in a heavenly embrace. We both cried out, and I fell, panting onto her shoulder.

I spotted the small black tattoo on Jessica's upper right thigh early in the morning. She had kicked off the covers, was sleeping soundly on her side. I had moved closer to look at

her, to explore her body with my eyes, to kiss her. As I approached her side, I saw the two tiny Asian ideographs. I didn't know if it was Chinese or Japanese. I was sure there was a story behind it.

When she first awoke, I was still kissing her body. Reaching her thigh, I kissed the small figures. Innocently, I asked, "What's this tattoo?"

"Oh, that, an old memory," she murmured, half-aroused.

"What does it mean?"

Jessica rubbed her eyes and yawned. "It's Japanese, *hangyoku*, half-jewel or something." She turned over instinctively to hide her right thigh.

"Why did you decide on a Japanese tattoo?"

"I just - why are you asking so many questions? It was years ago." She perched herself on an elbow, fully awake.

"It means half-jewel?"

"If you must know, it was an old lover from years ago who had a thing about Japan and called me *hangyoku* and we visited a special tattoo place and I had the sign tattooed on my leg. Satisfied, Mister nose?" She bent over to kiss me on the cheek.

"More or less." I was still curious. "What's a half-jewel?"

"It's some sort of artistic or poetic thing. Maybe I was an unfinished gem, in this person's eyes. I can't remember the exact connotation."

"Maybe I should call you that, *hangyoku*, unfinished gem."

"You had better not," she warned. "It's a part of my life I'm trying to escape."

At that, Jessica pulled her nightgown over her head. She pivoted to the side of the bed and began to stand up. Almost immediately, her right leg buckled under her, dropping her to the floor. Luckily, a throw rug cushioned her fall.

I leapt to her aid. "Are you all right?"

"I-I just lost all control of my leg," she replied, catching her breath. I helped her to a sitting position on the throw rug. "Sometimes, this happens, out of the blue, I lose my balance." She began to weep.

I looked for a tissue box. "Please don't be upset. I trip all the time over my left leg. I understand."

"It's just different for me. One minute, I'm feeling okay, then the next minute I'm flat on the floor. It's humiliating. I hate MS." She took the tissue I handed to her, turned away, and blew her nose.

"Is there anything I can do?" I sat down on the rug next to her.

"You can cure me of this goddam MS. It's a plague. What I can't stand is the uncertainty. Sometimes, I just want to curl up and die."

"Don't talk like that." I stroked her hair softly. She pulled away.

"Leave me alone."

"Let me help you at least get up on the bed."

"All right, help me up. Then leave me alone." She was crying again.

I wrapped my right arm around her and heaved her up onto the edge of the bed. "I can't just leave you like this, Jessica."

"Just let me rest. Alone. My head is spinning. Go read a book. Watch TV." Her sobbing continued. "Please, David, please. All I want is a little peace."

"I'll let you rest for an hour or so. But then I'll check in on you. Do you want to go see a doctor—"

"No, no doctor," she shouted as she collapsed on the pillow. "They know nothing. They're useless. Let me rest. My head is spinning."

I pulled her legs onto the bed and covered her with the sheet. Her eyes were closed, and she appeared lost to the world.

"I'll let you rest for an hour," I repeated under my breath. I picked up my clothes, tiptoed to the bedroom door, and shut it behind me.

After dressing in the hallway, I found some instant Maxwell House in her kitchen, boiled some water, and made myself a bitter mug of coffee. I was agitated by Jessica's words, frustrated that I couldn't do more to help her.

The first hour passed like torture. I stared blankly at Jessica's paintings, assorted rough sketches, piles of art books, scattered photos. One of the photos appeared to be of her nude. I wondered who the photographer was. Perhaps the guy who made her get the *hangyoku* tattoo. I couldn't stop thinking about the tattoo. I knew I should be worrying about her fall, her MS, but I couldn't shake that image (with all it connoted) out of my mind.

After a wait of almost two hours, I summoned up enough courage to pry open her bedroom door. She was awake, immobile, lying on her back.

"I'm sorry, David," she said. "I'm very sorry. I wasn't very nice to you. You were so kind to me."

"How are you feeling?" I asked, moving gradually toward the bed. "I was so worried about you."

"These things happen." She remained frozen. "I can never get used to it. I need to have my cane by my bed at all times. Like an old lady."

"Nonsense. You're so lovely, so beautiful..." My vocabulary was rapidly abandoning me. "I care so much for you. Last night was so marvelous." Marvellous. Like what Lisa said.

She still had not moved a muscle. "You need to leave. I don't want you around when I'm like this. I'm so hideous and bitchy. I care about you too, David. For a moment, when you were moving inside of me, I could forget the MS, the pain, the falls. But you have to understand. I'm not in love with you. I don't want to marry you. Not with the MS. I enjoy going out with you. I enjoyed going to bed with you. But that's it. I can't make commitments. Not now, maybe not ever. I'm being terribly unfair to such a decent, generous person, but you have to hear this now, better late than never. You need to leave. I have to be alone."

"Will I ever see you again?" My heart was in my throat.

"Yes, we can see each other. Stop being so dramatic. This is not the end of the world. But you seem to worship an imaginary, idealized Jessica. I don't want to be set on a pedestal. I can be mean and selfish and hurtful. Maybe I made a mistake, having sex with you. I don't want to hurt you any more than I already have. You need to leave - now."

"I'm going. Can I call you? I'll respect your limits. Just don't toss me out of your life."

She sighed. "One day, you'll understand. I need my space. MS does more than destroy the myelin, it destroys my feelings. I need this hard shell around me. Last night, you penetrated that shell. I allowed you. But that shell has sealed itself once again."

"I don't understand." I shook my head vigorously. "Why do you hide yourself in this imaginary shell? Why is it so hard to put yourself back in touch with your feelings?"

"Get out," she shouted. "Get out now."

I left.

Ron called the next evening and asked if I would go out for a beer. He was downbeat. "Every time I go into the hospital, I wonder if I'll get out alive. I appreciate what the docs are doing, but I get very tired of the whole process."

"Is there any long-term solution so that you wouldn't have to go back all the time?" I asked. I thought of getting his advice about Jessica, but figured this was his opportunity to vent.

"Modern medicine is great at inventing state-of-the-art prosthetic devices," he said, "but not so great at sculpting a leg stump so the prosthetic device fits. I'm constantly getting infections and stuff. I've got a whole closet full of old prosthetics that don't fit any more." He shook his head. "If you ever need a wooden leg, come see me."

"Thanks for the offer."

Ron shifted gears. "But I didn't bring you here to complain. Our Abilities board election is coming up next month, and I want to nominate you for Vice President. A huge salary, bonus, benefits, and chauffeured limousine come with the position. Helen Carsten is getting too tired and fed up. My nightmare is that Peter might want to step in, that is, if he could step." Ron chuckled. "That would be a disaster. So I want to promote you pre-emptively."

"Gee, thanks, Ron. This is the first step on my long and distinguished political career."

"Dream on, dude. You got quite a ways to go."

Ron had just come back from a veterans' employment presentation at the Labor Department. "Man, I saw two complete worldviews come into collision. Someone from DoD made the presentation, kept talking about 'disabled veterans.' A lady from the Department of Labor - she was in a wheelchair - raised her hand and asked why the speaker kept referring to 'disabled veterans' instead of using the 'people-

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first,' politically correct designation of 'veterans with disabilities.' An old guy in the audience, obviously a vet, then got up and said that these veterans were proud of their disabilities, that they'd gotten disabled in the service of their country. They didn't want to hide their disabilities like civilians. My experience is just the opposite. These young guys from Iraq and Afghanistan even deny they are disabled. They just say they're 'banged up.'"

"I guess I just feel sorry for those guys, being blown to bits for a pair of accidental wars," I added. "Bush took us into Iraq through the backdoor. He and his cronies thought it would be a clean victory, with minimal casualties and collateral damage. God, I hate that term. We used to talk about civilian war dead and injured, now it's collateral damage. Well, it's six years later, and we're still fighting. Then in Afghanistan, we chased the Taliban out in 2001, then let the whole country turn to shit, backed a corrupt government, just dropped the whole country down the memory hole. And now our soldiers are paying for it."

"Yeah, how long is America going to be the world's policeman?" Ron asked rhetorically. "The question was asked right after Vietnam. We never got an honest answer. It seems to me that the world is just too big and too brutal for the U.S. to police. We should have learned our lesson in Vietnam. I learned my lesson in Vietnam."

In addition to all his work with Abilities, Ron volunteered to counsel injured soldiers, now labeled alliteratively as 'wounded warriors.' "Those guys don't know what they're up against," Ron said. "Yeah, they're getting plenty of tender loving care now. Plenty of sports events and TV specials for them. They're getting all the superficial positive reinforcement they can stomach. Standing ovations all the time by a people who've never known military service, let

alone combat. A lot of them are simple patriots, but a lot of them are basically mercenaries, trying to escape Appalachia or the ghetto. They only saw the benefits when they signed up. They never thought they'd be sent over on three or four tours - back to a totally hostile environment where they risk their lives with every step. No wonder so many of them come down with PTSD. The whole country's suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder - losing all those small wars, economy in the crapper, hysteria over 9/11. Insecurity everywhere, suspicion everywhere. We're throwing tons of money at the Pentagon and intelligence services and homeland security, and for what? Shit."

Ron paused, took a sip from his beer, and made a face. "The worst part is the military officers - most of them are goddamn careerists. You ever notice how few U.S. officers are killed in action in Afghanistan or Iraq? It's mostly enlisted and noncoms who pay the price. All the officers are working useless staff jobs in a bunker at the base. Then they retire from the military after 20 years and get paid big bucks by defense contractors."

At the next Abilities meeting, I was duly elected Vice President. Peter didn't even bother to appear. Every third Thursday of the month, I religiously showed up with Jessica for the Abilities meeting. Ron had recruited a couple of computer geeks to launch a website where members could post their resumé's and an online forum where they could trade contacts and referrals. Still, I saw very few members getting jobs. "The economy sucks," Ron said, "but that doesn't get us off the hook." I continued to talk at employer networking meetings, call HR offices to book speakers, and

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mentor younger Abilities members just out of school. But I never saw much in the way of results.

I had always been a political observer, not a participant, but Barack Obama's election victory on November 4th transported Jessica and me, along with thousands of other delirious revelers, out into the Washington streets. She came by earlier that evening to watch the blue state/red state results on TV. But she rapidly became frustrated with all the TV journalist bloviating. When we saw reports of the celebration outside the White House gates, we immediately made tracks for the nearest Metro station. It was wild to see Washingtonians celebrating as if it was New Year's Eve at Times Square. We jumped and jumped and yelled and yelled and hit a couple of bars and went home and made amazing, audaciously hopeful love.

Lying in bed that morning, I thought back on my conversation with Ron. Would Obama's election signal the beginning of a new era, the end of America's fixation with maintaining global security and stability at such a huge cost at home? It would be a difficult adjustment, a candid admission of our inability to control events. There were plenty of special interests – the military hierarchy, the defense industries, the conservative media and think tanks, Congressmen worried about base closures – aligned in opposition. Any hint of a pullback from a distant commitment would inevitably meet with ferocious warnings about imperiling our national security. But wasn't our national security imperiled even more by our failing economy, addiction to foreign oil, and crumbling infrastructure and manufacturing base?

One wintry Saturday afternoon, Jessica finally launched into my long-promised portrait in oils. First, she had to pose me. It was a more tortuous exercise than I had imagined. She

pushed and prodded me into several classic poses, but none satisfied her. Ultimately, she came to a decision.

"I want to paint your left arm in the foreground. The drawings I made like that were really powerful. That's the message I want to get out – that people with disabilities can be proud and forthright and maybe even a little sexy. We'll have to unbutton your shirt..."

"I'm not posing nude," I joked. "It's too cold."

"No, but we need a position where your arm can rest comfortably in front of you." She looked around the room and finally let loose with a "Eureka!"

Jessica extricated my old nemesis, the man-eating arm chair, from its banishment to a living room corner. "You sit here with your left arm fully extended on the arm rest. I can paint a three-quarters profile. Even better, we'll move the arm chair over toward the window. That way, we'll get natural light falling on your arm and face. When it's sunny."

"It's sunny now." I helped her move the beat-up arm chair that was no doubt eagerly preparing its death trap.

"Let's get to work," Jessica said sternly. I immersed myself in the arm chair once again, propped my arm comfortably on the arm rest, and let Jessica tug at my chin to obtain just the right angle, just the right expression. She did succeed in undoing two of my shirt buttons. "Hold it right there. You're beautiful. You're much sexier than Parmigianino. The Pope will be overjoyed."

As before, she buzzed through several rough pencil sketches, adjusting both my arm and face to reflect the light more effectively. Then she attached a small canvas board to her easel and prepared her paints. "I'm making a rough under painting using blue just to get the tones, the intensity right," she explained. "You can ask me anything you want, so long as you stay still."

"Tell me about your first love." We might as well make it interesting. I assumed the pose and went into a deep freeze.

Jessica shook her head as she prepared her palette. "You're kidding, right? Okay, you win. I guess it was Terry Tilden, a very hot football player in high school. I used to do secret sketches of him in all my notebooks. Whenever he spoke to me, I'd practically wet my pants. I wanted him that badly." She was madly putting down strokes with her paint brush as she talked.

"Well, Terry asked me to the movies, and at the movie, he was all paws, couldn't grab enough of me. I let him explore all he wanted. I can't even remember the name of the film. We began to make out. He slipped his tongue in my mouth. I reciprocated by caressing him lightly between the legs. He moaned a little, and I told him to hush. Finally, the movie - whatever it was - ended."

"Out in the car, he wanted me to take it in my mouth. I resisted and continued stroking him. He unzipped, and I took it in my hand. He came all over the car's upholstery. I had to help clean it up. Meanwhile, he'd done nothing for me. I was melting, I was so hot. He drove me home and kissed me politely and deposited me on my doorstep."

"Anyway, after that, he lost interest in me. I guess I wouldn't go far enough for him. Is that a sufficiently erotic first-love story? So, what was your first love like?"

"I fell in love with dozens of girls in high school," I confessed. "But none of them would so much as look at me. In high school, I was simply miserable. All the girls like you went for the jocks or the most-likely-to-succeed frat boys. In college, I went to a dorm party. There was plenty of booze and music, and I chatted up a coed named Mandy. She was, shall we say, Rubenesque. We started to make out. It was so dark at the party and we could barely see each other.

Probably best for both of us. She dragged me up to her dorm room, made sure her roommate was nowhere to be found, and pulled me into her bed. We didn't even get undressed. She pulled down her panties, I pulled down my pants, and she guided me in. I must have come after only about 30 seconds. She stared at me with a disappointed look, kissed me on the chin, and told me to pull up my pants and get out. She was terribly afraid her roommate would show up. After that, I saw her around the dorm. She was pleasant, but she obviously wasn't interested in me anymore. She probably didn't realize how disabled I was when we were making out in the darkness. How's that for a soppy romance?"

"Hold it right there," Jessica ordered. "You're moving. This is exciting you too much. We should change to PG topics. What do you want to know - my philosophy of painting?" She squeezed some more paint onto her palette. "A work of art has to be approached fresh, no preconceptions. It's got to draw the viewer into the artist's world, stand the viewer on his or her head. Painting can't just be a cruder form of photography. My goal here is to capture the essence of this guy, David Levin. I want to capture his soul, make it flow out of the painting."

"Wow, that's ambitious. Nobody ever told me I had a soul." I was trying to keep a straight face. "Soon I'll need a break."

"Take it now." Jessica brushed a stray lock of hair out of her face. "This preliminary painting is beginning to take shape." Her eyes suddenly bugged out in pseudo-dramatic form. "I am be-gin-ning to pe-e-e-e-r into your so-o-ul!" she said in her best Vincent Price ghoulish voice. She immediately switched to a high-pitched witch falsetto: "Soon, I'll grab it and bottle it and sell it," she cackled unconvincingly. "You'll never know it's gone."

I got up and stretched. "You've already captured my soul."

"It wasn't hard." I moved around to look at her preliminary painting. It was a striking exercise in blue. My eye was drawn in automatically by the curve of my left arm leading to my face. I had something of a gaunt look. "Don't I seem a little morbid here?" I asked.

"Hey, it's just a sketch. Don't be so critical."

I poured myself a glass of water in the kitchen, and Jessica put on an Eva Cassidy CD. "She died in her mid-30s. My age. A real tragedy. Such a great voice, such wide range, so much vivacity." I had never heard her sing before. We listened to "Fields of Gold," "Wade in the Water," and "Autumn Leaves" before Jessica signaled me to resume modeling.

"Eva Cassidy actually was a Washington area native. Washington doesn't produce many singers or musicians. Everyone is obsessed with politics."

"I really like her style, her sense of rhythm."

"Why don't you tell me what you see in journalism?" Jessica suggested as she took her rag to do fine touches to the canvas. "I already described what I get out of art. You tell me what you get out of journalism."

"Only I'm not a journalist."

"Well, then, your philosophy of journalism. Stop being difficult. And don't move."

I pondered for a minute. "Journalism used to be practiced by what were called newspapermen. They were all hard-bitten cynics, poor, drunk, and absolutely committed to getting the story. Today, journalists here in Washington think they're part of the story. They're more important than the politicians they're supposed to cover. They out-earn the politicians, they go to more parties, live in fancier houses,

schmooze all day on the phone waiting for the perfect leak. That's not journalism. Nobody has the commitment anymore, nobody's willing to do the digging, to do the research, to get their finely manicured hands dirty. Plus the corporate interests owning the media exercise a de facto censorship on stories. And all this 24/7 mayhem on cable. It's not news, it's who can scream the loudest..."

"Hold it right there," Jessica shouted. "You're moving again. Change subjects. Listen to Eva. I need ten minutes more on this painting."

When she finished, she put the small portrait up on top of her bookshelf. She told me it was in cerulean blue, and the monochrome composition conveyed a somber mood. I looked pensive, staring over my left arm into the void, into the eyes of the beholder.

"I'm still so serious."

"You tend to be serious," Jessica replied as she took out a much larger stretched canvas for the final portrait. She laid it flat and put a light blue wash on it.

"Another study in blue?" I asked.

"I'll do a blue under painting, then build up other colors. I hope to finish the under painting today, basically establishing the composition. Get ready to pose."

"What do we talk about now?"

"Why don't we try to be silent, meditative for a while?"

I plopped down into my favorite arm chair. I now knew every contour of the seat and could extricate myself from its embrace much more easily. The arm chair had become my friend. I leaned my left arm on the arm rest. Jessica told me to move it a little to the left, then she took my head in both her hands and adjusted my pose. I kissed her left hand as she pulled it away. She smiled and whispered, "Stay put."

Eva Cassidy's CD had ended, and Jessica put on a CD with a guided meditation and New Age whale music. I tried to zone out, but the monotonous voice on the CD and the whale burps did nothing for me. I alternated between nodding off and permitting my 'monkey mind' to leap from undone laundry to unfilled prescriptions to Energy Department drafts to the cleavage in Jessica's blouse. I focused on the latter and, remembering Abby's instructions, listened to my breathing. That lasted about 60 seconds. Finally, I just shut my eyes and fantasized on what was underneath Jessica's blouse. She seemed to know instinctively that I was not following the program. "I need your eyes *open*," she ranted in her finest Marine master sergeant tone.

So I concentrated on the overriding desire to scratch my nose for the next hour. Thankfully, even Jessica showed signs of fatigue and let me relax and scratch like crazy. "I think that's it for today," she said, much to my relief. "But just one more thing."

She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out her digital camera. The master sergeant voice re-emerged: "Assume the pose." She positioned herself at the angle of her easel and took several shots of me and my extended left arm. "For posterity," she explained. "If you get hit by a bus later today, I'll still be able to complete your portrait posthumously. I'm sure you'd want it that way."

"That's comforting," I agreed. "Any sacrifice for art's sake." She was already cleaning up her painting paraphernalia. I glanced at the canvas. It was very blue, very unfinished.

I excused myself to go to the bathroom. When I closed the bathroom door, I noticed a long blonde wig and sexy black lingerie hanging from a hook. I shut my eyes and fantasized Jessica as a blonde. Maybe, one evening, I'd ask her to try it

on. And the lingerie as well. But I decided not to bring it up. We were just beginning to know one another.

Once Jessica finished cleaning, we went out to Starbucks for a frappuccino. Jessica claimed she was very tired and didn't feel like doing anything in the evening. I dropped her off at her apartment and went home.

I came back that Sunday afternoon. The late autumn weather had turned dark and cloudy, so Jessica rigged up her light system to cast a reflection similar to the natural light of the previous day. After a marathon session of several hours, both of us were exhausted. I barely had enough energy to peer at the painting. It immediately woke me up: bold strokes, vivid colors, my arm transporting the viewer into the picture, my facial expression balancing resolution with delicacy.

"This is remarkable." Those were the only words I could muster.

"I kind of like it myself. All it needs are a few finishing touches." She saw my alarm. "Don't worry. I don't need my model. I can always look at your photographs."

"What do we do with this when you're finished?"

"I'd like to exhibit it. Come to think of it, I'd like to do other Abilities members. Ron and Christy. The deaf lady. Even Peter. It would make a powerful collection. All those pent-up possibilities."

"That's a great idea," I said. "What do you want to do tonight?"

Jessica was teaching an art class the next morning at an Arlington senior center. She apologized for being a party pooper two nights in a row. "Not a problem," I said. "I've fallen behind on my freelance editing. Can we see each other later in the week?"

She kissed me long and hard on the lips. "I'll call you."



Lovers Lane is the novel that makes disability sexy. David Levin, who struggles with left-sided paralysis, falls hopelessly in love with Jessica Cowan, an artist battling the debilitating effects of multiple sclerosis. Jessica's cryptic world unravels as David pieces together the puzzle of her tempestuous, pre-MS life style. *Lovers Lane* is both a poignant love story and a plea for economic and social justice, raising the curtain on the hidden universe of people with disabilities.

Lovers Lane

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