

The Letter-Part 1

“Shit! Look at the crap piled up in there.” Normally, David Collingsworth enjoyed his short walk to his mailbox. However, since his grandmother had died 11 months earlier his enjoyment of “mailboxing” (as he called his walks to it) had somewhat faded during the months following her passing. Today, instead of the usual mail being insurance, banking and funeral home correspondence, to pick up, sort through, and send payments for, it was all “crapmail.” The “crapmail” was the first since last December when his grandmother, Christine Collingsworth, had died from ovarian cancer at age 77. His walks to the mailbox at that time had been glum and it didn’t help that it was freezing and there was still snow on the ground. The short half-block trip had worn him down emotionally back then. As if he hadn’t been depressed enough he had had to go through the paperwork of his inheritance with her attorney. When he discovered that she had been much more wealthy than he had envisioned it also took a toll. By late February David had gotten through the worst of his ordeal and was attempting to learn to live without taking care of his grandma.

It was at the attorney’s office that he found, and was shocked almost to fainting, the news that he had been adopted by Christine. In all the years of caring for her she had not mentioned this. He had asked about his parents when he was very young but Christine told him that they had died in a automobile accident and she had taken him in to her home to raise him. The attorney told David that it had been stipulated in her will that he not to be told of this until her death. She had held that fact from him for reasons he couldn’t fathom but after a month of assessing what it all meant to him he came to the conclusion that, although he wondered who his parents actually were, in the long run, it made no difference. David loved puzzles and this was just another to pursue. His love for his grandma wasn’t diminished in the least because

David knew her so very well and, he reasoned, it had all worked out. It was amusing to David that he now knew why his grandma called her attorney "The Bagman." "I have to run down to town and take care of some business with the Bagman," she had often said. The attorney's full name, it turned out, was Bartholomew Anderson Godfrey and his grandma calling him "The Bagman" was yet another of her eccentricities. The attorney thought it strange that David seemed so unaffected by his grandma's passing but his friends knew that, had it been anyone else, it would have been strange but they knew David and were not overly surprised. David was a smart guy and his upbringing had been stable as a rock. David would never know that his mother and father had both died from drug abuse thereby, his grandma reasoned, he would never have to face that fact; right or wrong on her part.

Now, it was May. All the funeral fuss had been taken care of and Spring had burst forth with a vengeance. It was a chance to come out of his "dungeon" working on his computer to say hello to the neighbors and get some fresh air. Today, however, "mailboxing" was going to be almost for naught. But for one letter, which he didn't at first notice, it was all circulars and ads. David hated junk mail. He hated it with a passion. For that matter, David hated the email stream of crap he spent so much time deleting from his inbox on an almost hourly basis. At one point he had spent almost six hours clicking on "unsubscribe" at the bottom, and barely legible, of one after another emails that he couldn't remember even subscribing to. Having the same crap in his mailbox was just another dig into his life. He was single and he had no reason to subscribe to a site which sold and sent bouquets of flowers. He also knew full well that he hadn't subscribed to "Lusty Ladies!" Not only was David not interested in porn he was also a man who had very high standards of morality. Though not overly religious he had the philosophy, learned from his grandmother, that any type of degradation of others only degraded oneself.

The day had not started well. The web server he was working with wasn't Linux, it was Windows. A "sudo yum" server is what he called Windows; his little dash of humor. Windows may have its place in this world but it wasn't as secure as Linux and David wanted as little to do with it as possible. After all, he had thought before taking on this website, how can any developer do Windows on a Mac? It isn't kosher! David was a nerd from birth and there was just no getting around it.

He bent down and looked again into the mailbox at the neatly stacked pile of correspondence awaiting his retrieval; all neatly sorted and placed like a row of books on a shelf by his mail carrier. Reaching in with spread fingers David withdrew the "pile of crap." As he straightened up he saw a chickadee dart into a hole in the old oak tree near his mail box. His jaw dropped as the little bird darted, without slowing down, into a hole not much bigger than a half inch. Almost immediately another bird which he thought must be the female of the pair. Peeked quickly out then flew on its way with beating wings to a nearby stand of oaks. *Watch out BUGS!* he laughed to himself. For a few moments, gazing at the hole in the oak, David stood by his short row of mailboxes mesmerized, unmoving. He thought to himself, *how do they do that?* How can a little bird be that precise? If I tried something like that I'd be splattered all over. Of course, David was a "nerdlinger" and had known so since he was a kid so it wasn't really a statement he needed to think about. He would be splattered all over at most anything he tried outside of computers.

The morning was bright and warm. It was a "typical" Spring day in May if a day in May can be categorized that blandly. In May the word "typical" loses all sense of reality. The day's warmth and clarity was stunning. Perhaps "perfect" is the better word and context to describe the set of criteria for a day meant to be out in. It was the kind of day that his grandmother would have said was a rare gift to a troubled

world. She had been a Christian woman and had raised David since he was a baby. On a day in May such as this she would be out gardening and singing hymns to her Creator. Hymns of thanks as she had always told David to count the blessings which were small. Appreciate what you have and “covet not” that which you want. David had taken that to heart.

At the age of eleven David asked her a question that had been on his mind for some time, “Why don’t you go to church if you are a Christian?” She supposed that, in some way, she had expected David to ask this of her. After all, most of his friends at school had parents who took them to church each Sunday and said that their church was the “right” church. Right about what had never come up as far as David could remember. He knew that his grandmother had prayed at least twice a day and read her old Bible an hour each day telling David that God’s word was the only way she could face the day in a world gone over to the dark side. It was the promise of better things to come which was her stated reason for her belief. She had told him often that without hope you have nothing and with too much junk you are worth nothing. He sort of understood her; sort of.

The Letter-Part 2

Shaking off his revelry, David said a hearty good-bye to the Chickadees. He turned and headed for home with the “crapmail” clenched in one fist. Although he couldn’t whistle to save his soul he started, unconsciously, to do so. It was that kind of day and, as his friends knew only too well, nothing got David down for long. Along the way he got, and returned, a wave from his neighbor across the street Betsy. When Betsy saw him wave

back she shouted out, "How are you doing David? I miss Christine and I know you must also."

David walked across the street to speak to Betsy. As he was walking he returned to her, "Yeah, I do miss her but, you know, I have to keep going. It's a for sure that nothing will ever replace her in my life." As he got to where she was standing Betsy gave him a hug which he returned in kind. They spoke for a few minutes before David took his leave with a promise to come over for dinner at his convenience. "There will always a place set for you sweetie" was the Betsy's parting comment. David walked back to his house and went inside.

The house, which had belonged to his grandma, was all of 1200 square feet and five rooms plus one bath. To say it was cozy would not be giving it credit. It had a fireplace in the living room and an old wood stove in the kitchen next to the stove which, during the cold winters, helped maintain the coziness of the house. David had repainted the inside of the house and was scraping, sanding and getting ready to paint the outside. Over the years the exterior paint had been peeling where the gutters and downspouts were fastened and David had decided last winter that he couldn't let the summer go without repainting the entire house: inside and out. When he was outside doing the removal of paint a neighbor would occasionally come over and spend a few hours lending David a hand. All in all, David had no desire to move. Even the revelation of his grandma having left him some 4 million dollars could not affect a move. this had been home and would continue to be.

He changed into his painting clothes (a pair of ratty Levis and an age old tank top; faded green (which was not his color) and got ready to go at it outside when he thought of the letter. It was still stuck down in the pile of crapmail he had brought home. Looking into the living room he almost decided that the letter could wait. What kept sticking out to him,

though, was the lack of a return address on the envelope, how beat up it was and the light shade of lavender. The color alone struck him as curious. A woman? His address had been handwritten on the front but there was no other lettering on the front or back. He was used to letters from the funeral home with their address printed on the back seal of the correspondence but the fact that this had no such address piqued his curiosity. Sitting down he passed the letter from hand to hand looking it over and over. The envelope was timeworn with one bottom corner obviously folded over then straightened. There were other folds and creases in it which making it appear to have been shoved deep into a drawer or carried around in pocket or purse for quite some time before it was posted. *Interesting*, David thought. *Who in the world could this be from?* He sat there for some time, just staring at the envelope. His mind systematically sorting from who this could have come. Could it possibly be from his grandma? Perhaps a letter posted for her after her death to tell him something which she didn't wish the attorney to know? Or, it could be from schmuck who had found out David had come into some money and was soliciting him for funds for some project. Probably the latter, David mused. He thought that everything his grandma could possibly want to give him or let him know had already been made clear and those matters were now closed.

He sighed, started to put the letter down, thought better of it but then put it on the table. He needed to finish outside and thought he would read the letter after dinner. In fact, he rose from the couch and headed toward the front door when he realized that he'd left his paint scraper out on the potting bench on the back porch. *Another item I have to fix*, he thought referring to the potting bench. It needed new screws at the corners to stop the pronounced wobble and, also, to be enlarged; if it was going to be at all practical as he made repairs to the house. Not that the house was falling down, mind you. It wasn't in the least. Nerdy as David was, though, he was mechanically adept which only made more work for

himself. At least, that's how David thought of it.

Going outside he noticed the breeze. Thankfully, it had come up as David started back to work scraping. There were only a few feet left to scrape and sand before he could start painting and he hoped that the color he had picked, a light, light blue and darker blue trim, would meet with the approval of his grandma. She had loved blue; always wishing the house had been painted that color. On the other hand, David was a forest-green kind of guy but, in the final analysis, blue had won out.

Finishing the sanding took less than 30 minutes. The exterior was ready for primer and David was through for the day. As the sky started turning indigo he again thought of the letter. After a shower and a light dinner there was only the letter on his mind. David went to the living room and sat down. Once again he tried to guess who this could be from but nothing he came up with made any sense. He carefully opened it and inside was a slip of stationary. A single sheet with handwriting covering three quarters of one side. As with the envelope the stationary was a lavender hue and the ink was blue, not black. He immediately recognized the lettering as having been penned by a fountain pen. The name at the bottom shocked him. A name he hadn't thought of in years: Susan.

The Letter-Part 3

Sticking his finger tip between the body and flap he slit the envelope open. Inside was a single sheet of folded, light lavender paper. David turned the letter over to examine the time stamp on the cancellation of the stamp and saw that it had been sent just three days ago. Wondering if the dates of

writing and posting were even close he checked the top of the letter itself after removing it from the envelope. As he suspected, there was a three week discrepancy between the dates which certified his belief that the letter had been carried around for a long while before being mailed.

With a deep breath he started to read. The lines were in a controlled and lovely cursive, each line compressed one below the other without slanting down or up; filling the page. It started simply enough:

Dear David,

I hope this finds you well. You probably don't remember me but you and I went to high school together. That was years ago now but you had an incident with my then boyfriend, Geoffrey, when he thought you were trying to take me away from him, in junior year. I remember what happened like it was yesterday. I had tried to stop him, tell him you were not doing anything and that you and I were barely acquainted. He hit you mercilessly, knocking you down and bloodying your face. I was in horror and have never forgotten the fight.

In all honesty, it has haunted me until this day which is the reason I am writing you; out of the blue, so to speak.

David was, for a moment, confused. Then it hit him, like the guy mentioned in the letter. Susan! Susan Murphy! Crimeinitaly! (as close as David normally got to a swear.) Susan, beautiful Susan Murphy. I had a crush on her like there was no tomorrow!

Susan was an auburn haired beauty and her boyfriend, Geoff, had been pure punk. David had never understood what attracted such a smart and pretty girl to a guy who was a complete loser. He remembered the beating, oh yes, He still had a scar on his cheek from Geoffrey's signet ring. There was something else, though, Susan had come to his aid after slapping

Geoffrey for what he did. She had screamed at Geoffrey and told him to stop or they were through. The incident did not escape the attention of the Dean of Boys and Geoffrey was not seen around school for a month. David read on.

This is not easy for me to write. It's been so long but I want you to know that I have always regretted what happened to you . Geoff and I broke up after he returned to school but by that time you and your Grandmother had moved. To borrow a phrase from my Dad, this whole event has eaten at my conscience ever since. It does, in fact, hurt for many reasons. Geoff was killed a couple of years ago; a drug overdose. That's what brought this all back to me and I was saddened again remembering seeing you laying there so badly hurt. It was awful. I am so sorry!

I wanted to tell you that I would be out your way in a couple weeks and I would love to drop by and say hello. If that's OK? My phone number is at the bottom of this and it would be alright if you say no. I will understand.

Call me... please?

Yours,

Susan Murphy

He just sat there, on the couch, mouth agape. He might have gotten even more light headed had he not realized that he wasn't breathing. He took a great inhale of breath, mind spinning. Did he remember Susan? Oh yes! He remembered Susan only too well. If he could have just held her hand once, just once, he would have had his life satisfied for all time. But this? How did this letter find him and what was this about? More, Susan had thought about me for all this time? Ten years or more? NOW?

Setting the letter gingerly down, as though it would break

like some piece of antique crystal, David fell back on the couch. For several moments he thought about pinching himself. Not so much to see if he was awake, more to see if he was alive or had died and gone to heaven. He sat that way for more than 10 minutes trying to put the pieces of this puzzle together. He hadn't seen Susan since high school; much less spoken once with her. He had lost track of most of his friends from that time and yet, somehow, she had not only found him but written him expressing such regret for an incident that he had almost forgotten about all these years later. It didn't, in fact, make any sense.

David was a pragmatist. Logic was king to him and the logic of this was too far out of reach to grasp. Not for him, hell, not for anyone. This doesn't happen in reality! Not his nor anyone's. Too many years of life had gone by for some dream wrapped in lavender to come calling his name with perfumed voice. Nope. Something was up. Somebody, he didn't know who, was pulling a fast one on him.

Henry Forsythe! That SOB had been the biggest, and most masochistic, joker he had ever known. He had mailed his aunt a kitten in a box for God's sake. When it got to her the kitten had been dead for a week. Henry had had his hide tanned a good one for that. But Henry? Will, David didn't know if Henry was even alive to do this to him. Besides, Henry couldn't possibly know where he lived or to where he and his Grandma had moved all those years ago. He supposed that Henry might have found him using a Google search but that didn't ring true.

Henry? Picking the letter up again he put it to his nostrils and took a deep inhale. Unmistakeable, that subtle smell of perfume or hand lotion. Henry was a jerk but he didn't have this kind of ingenuity. Nope, wasn't Henry. Who else?

Ten minutes later David got up and walked to the kitchen. Shaking his head he thought he needed to let this go until the morning. Though he was pretty sure that sleep was going to be

difficult, if not impossible, he made up his mind to hit the sack and let the cards fall where they may.

Susan Murphy. Holy Shit!

The Letter-Part 4

David awoke late that morning. It had been 9:30 am when he opened his eyes to a bright sun glaring through his bedroom window. The window had been open during the night so he could fall asleep listening to the old owl that made his night watch in an oak down the street and back toward the little creek that ran gurgling past he and his neighbors houses. He loved to hear the owl hoot and then listen as another owl would answer from some mysterious perch located in what could easily be imagined as a land far away. A land where the trees at night swayed to and fro in a warm, gentle breeze, murmuring words and song only they understood.

It had been a late night for David as he would pick the letter up, read it again and again and put it down resolved to go to bed. His thoughts had ben of surprise and then, after a few readings, a rising suspicion as to any motive behind the letter. The "Bagman" had warned him that people may very well come out of the woodwork, people David had never heard of, asking for money for grants and causes or claiming to be distant relatives or friends of Christine's to whom she had promised, or owed, unlikely as that seemed, money. David had heard of this happening to lottery winners yet had doubted this would happen to him.

On the other hand, less than a month and along comes this

letter from a person (this is the way he ended up considering the letter) claiming to be Susan or Susan had somehow heard he had received this money and was trying to horn in on the action. Caution had stolen over the warm and glad feelings he'd had earlier in the evening. It was at that point that he felt more himself and decided a new day was needed to allow him to shove back the feelings of first glow over the letter for a more sober approach to it in a more business-like manner.

Breakfast of oatmeal and two eggs finished, he changed into his painting clothes and was on the back porch when he heard his name being shouted in front of the house. It was John Alan from up the street. John was a painter and told David that he would lend him a hand with his sprayer if he had time from his other jobs. There he was as David walked up the side of the house to his front yard. The spray rig was already set up and tarps laid. "Thought you'd never wake up!" John said with a grin. "I've been out here for six hours waiting for you to finish your "wonderland" dreams and get the hell to work." David waved as he rounded the corner.

"There's wrinkles in that tarp over there and that one is way too full of oversprays to be used 'para mi casa!' " David returned.

"Now...don't be talkin' big to me boy! You know I ain't never set one foot in the school house. That's why I'm a painter! Talking German to me won't get you a free lunch anyhow! Don't my lack 'o' learnin' show all over my fair countenance?"

David chuckled. "Thanks, John. Glad as hell to see you. I'm really grateful that you would do this for me."

"Hey," John said, matter of factly, "It's what I do. I hear you 're rich now so wait till you get the bill!" Quickly followed by, "I'm damned sorry to see Christine gone. I know how much she cared for you and, hell, everybody else who ever

took a breath. She was kind to our family when my folks died. Looked in on me and my Sis after their funerals.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. She was something special. She mentioned you and Helen on more than one occasion. It sounded like your Mom and she were pretty good buds.”

John looked down for a moment. Looking back up he said with a catch in his throat, “Let’s get spraying, shall you?” David caught the pronoun and laughed breaking the feeling of loss each felt.

“Yeah, let’s *me* get spraying. I don’t have a clue but I guess I’ll learn.”

For the first hour John taught David how to use the sprayer. Starting under the eaves and working back down the wall, letting off the trigger only after making the pass left or right. Depressing the trigger again almost immediately before the return along the wall. As David quickly got the knack of laying down an even coat John began back-rolling after David. The time went quickly and nine hours later they were done.

The sun was setting as they rolled up and put the tarps on John’s truck. John and David agreed to get together in the morning and double check the work done after the sun had started to set. With a handshake and mutual “atta-boy’s” John left for the evening leaving David to shower and clean up after what was just now beginning to feel like a ton of hard work. As per his custom, he got himself a Micro-brewed root beer from the fridge and sat down to assess, not just the day’s work, but Susan’s letter; probably for the 1000th time it seemed to David.

Rereading it from the beginning he again was perplexed by the suddenness and out-of-the-blue nature of the missive. Although he wanted to *not* think it a come-on for money, he realized he at least had to consider that a possibility. After all, he thought, when was the last time Susan and he even had an idea

of where the other was. Much less what each other's roads had been taken in their lives. Still, there was her phone number at the bottom of the letter. She had given it to him without contacting him which, he reasoned, left the contact, were there to be one, up to him.

For the first time since the letter's arrival in his mailbox he looked at the phone and considered punching in Susan's number. The very thought of hearing her voice answer left him nervous. Nevertheless, he got up and drug the phone over to the couch. Looking at the number she supplied he guessed it to be a cell. A cell phone was something that David had never owned nor wanted. It wasn't that he didn't have friends to stay in touch with it was just the fact that he worked from the house and had no conceivable use for one. Add to that his computer savviness he was aware that tracking and that kind of algorithm was something he wanted no part of. It wasn't paranoia, it was knowledge of coders and some of their mindsets. He understood human nature as this was forced on him as a young boy. Being picked on and bullied taught him situational awareness at far to young an age. The same naturally carried over into adulthood and had stood him well in most of life's situations. Trust but verify as Ronald Regan once said.

Another emotion was coming to the fore as he mulled over his call. An emotion that left him more than a little uncomfortable. He had been in love with Susan. He had known that the love he felt for Susan was genuine yet unattainable. After all, he was a nerd and she was a beauty. As he considered this complication his palms started to sweat. He started put the phone down as self-doubt attempted to take sway over him but then thought better of it. It had come to the old rock and a hard place for David. Was he a man or still a shy young guy? Why would Susan contact him after all this time if she didn't sincerely wish to relate something to him. Either that something was going to remain hidden or he could

summon up his courage and perform the simple task of dialing a number and saying hello if someone answered. How tough could *that* be? Didn't he talk to all sorts of people most every day on the phone? Was he still mortifyingly shy and acting like a child? He caught himself in the middle of the last self-imposed question and dialed the number.

As the phone rang on the other end he felt his stomach twist into a knot. One ring, then two, then three. Almost, he hoped fate would intervene and find her not answering. Then he could at least say he tried, right? The number of rings now counted six, seven, eight. He moved to put the phone down when there was a click on the other end.

"Hello..."

The Letter-Part 5

Fate is nothing but the deeds committed in a prior state of existence.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

..."This is Susan. I will be away from the office for an indeterminate time. Please leave your number and I will call you as soon as I return."

David lowered the phone and looked at the receiver, "Shit!" He mumbled, sitting down heavily. It was anticlimactic in the extreme. He didn't put the receiver back on the cradle but, instead, sat there looking numbly at it in his lap. Away for the office? She had to have been there! For just a second he

felt sorrow with a modicum of relief. What had he told himself, "At least I will have tried, right?" Yeah! will shit, I didn't expect to fail! And dismally at that.

For a number of seconds he looked to his past in silence asking himself why he had even dared to hope. Hope what? That she would run into his arms? That's not the way life works; at least, not his. He caught glimpses of memories. Memories of Susan, his beating at the hands of Geoff, his childhood, his introversion, and his grandma. Lord knew he had loved Susan. And now he started feeling detachment. Detachment from his life as it was and, in doing so, started to realize just how alone he was at this point. Devastation, like a dark, black cloud was attempting to take hold of him. Just for a moment he felt the icy grip of depression, loss, and, what was this: self-pity? . But it was when he started to tear up that he shook himself out of his funk. Standing up he walked outside through the back porch to walk around the house. Looking at the paint job he saw a couple of spots he had painted a bit thinly. John either hadn't noticed or had said nothing. Oh well, he wasn't in the mood to touch them up anyway. Not now. Not with what had just happened.

The next morning David awoke with the letter still on his mind. More, he became contemplative about himself and how he came to be here; in this moment of time. He had gone outside to look again at the house trying as best he could to consider his reasons for just about everything he was at this point of his life. The letter had sparked this train of thought and a dream he had last night was of Susan as she stood watching Geoff assail him. He recalled now the look on her face of shock and horror as Geoff had beaten David to the ground.

While he stood in contemplation, looking at the house, it dawned on him that he hadn't even thought to leave a message on Susan's machine. A simple message like: *Hi, this is David. I got your letter.* But what would he say after that. *I am crushed? I love you? Where the hell are you?*

In truth, David thought, his relationships with women had been sketchy at best. He'd had a few lady friends whom he had gone out with. Dinner and a movie but no more. His shyness was debilitating. He supposed that was due to being picked on most of his young life. His confidence hadn't matured as he grew. He still thought of himself as being inferior for a woman. Hell, he reasoned, I've never even had sex. A rarity in this world but David had always considered a woman's body as sacred in some fashion. Whether or not anyone would agree with his assessment of a woman and her reproductive system as being very special was not the point. To him it was and for that reason he was loathe to contemplate using a woman just for a thrill. Archaic he thought, archaic but so what. He felt that way and wanted desperately to love but that way of thinking had built a wall over which he could not climb. Still, there was Susan and she had been the only one to which he would have loved to express his feelings. The very thought of that expression was daunting to him. No, he was better off letting time take its course. Somehow, some way, he thought he would meet a lady to hold dear and, perhaps, raise children with.

Maybe, he thought, he should have talked to his grandma about all this. Instead of balling it up inside he might have been able to talk through it. The thought brought another sense of the finality of her passing to him and he realized that this wasn't going to be a great day. He had handled the death perhaps to matter-of-factly at first. Maybe the whole finality was catching up to him. He felt sick inside. My God it was lonely! Quiet. Even the chirping birds sounded dull.

"David?"

He jumped, startled from his maudlin reverie. He knew that voice. He had been almost to the point of going back inside and trying the phone again. He turned in the direction of the front of the house from which the voice had come.

Standing there not twenty feet from him was a vision lovelier

than a sunrise over Venice. Susan, sun rising behind her. Lights started to dance in front of his eyes and he realized his heart was beating out of his chest. Everything he had been thinking was whisked away in a cleansing breeze. He choked on a response. Instead of the simplicity of the statement , *Hello, Susan* he was only able to yammer out *Su-Su-Su*.

"Oh God, are you all right?" Susan said loudly. Concern was limned in her face as she started toward him.

"I'm, I'm OK, you just startled me." he finally managed. "Just looking at some thin spots in the house paint we did yesterday," came a whisper from David. By this time Susan was at his side with one hand on his shoulder.

"Where can we sit?" she asked. "You need to sit down for a minute. Oh, I'm so sorry! I got the address wrong and parked down the street. I had to walk here a half block. I saw you standing there and I didn't think. I didn't mean to scare you! I'm so sorry."

She was a vision of loveliness and just as David remembered her. She was wearing sandals, blue jeans and a long sleeved blouse, lavender in color. *Like the letter*, thought David. With Susan's help they got around to the front stoop where David sat down. She stood in front of him for a minute.

"Are you OK?" she asked again.

"I'm fine. I guess I'm just in disbelief. I never thought I'd see you again and..." his voice trailed off just before he stated his feelings for her. He would probably have gone and stepped in it if he hadn't caught himself. Like a canoe in a hurricane, he was officially out of his element now. "Well, anyway, how've you been?" David immediately wished he hadn't said that. "You know, since the last time I saw you?"

Susan picked up on David's discomfiture. "I guess you're surprised that I dropped in on you like this. I almost thought

better of it but that thing that Geoff did to you has been on my conscience forever. Oh, it's such a long story. Can we just chat a bit until I get my thoughts together?" David nodded as Susan took a mental step back. "Where's your kitchen? I could really use a glass of water. You?" Again David nodded in the affirmative. Susan pointed at the door, "Through there?"

Yeah." David said, "Straight through to the kitchen. Glasses are in the cupboard above the sink." Susan nodded, said Ok, I'll get two glasses, and went into the house.

At first she got her bearings, saw where to go and headed there. She was amazed at how together the home was. Knowing it was Christine's old home she wasn't surprised but David, it seemed, had kept it neat as a pin. Going into the kitchen she got two glasses down and filled them both with water. She just couldn't help opening a couple of other cupboards just to see what David kept on hand. Everything was in such neat order that she was impressed. Not a lot of junk food. She went to the fridge and got some ice cubes, dunking them ker-plink into the glasses.

Outside, David waited for her to come back. The foremost question on his mind being, *what now?* It wasn't that he was confused so much as that he was off balance. On the one hand it was almost the beginning of a dream come true. On the other hand, however, it was also the cusp of a major disappointment in progress. A woman like Susan wasn't here to strike up a friendship out of the blue; that just didn't seem possible.

What David didn't know was that Susan had always wondered about him. Had always wondered who the man behind the veil was so to speak. Behind that veil of shyness and awkward presence in front of her. The fact of the matter was that she had always like David and the incident with Geoff and David had cast a pall over what, until that incident, she deemed a real man was. She had been trapped in a bad way with Geoff and had not fared much better in other relationships she had. David

was the unknown factor in her life as, had she known it, she was to David. She had come to try to straighten out her confusion with hope of something more than, well, she wasn't sure.

She did, however, think she knew who David was. At least, *hoped* he was.

The Letter-Part 6

As Susan came back with water glasses in her hands she saw through the screen door David, still sitting, back to her, looking out at the morning dew which hadn't yet evaporated. The Sycamores were fully leafed out and the old street was dappled in morning light. Looking at it, she realized just how beautiful and tranquil this place was. So different to what she was used to. She stood for a brief moment wondering if she was doing the right thing: coming to David. It was something she had decided to do without a lot of thought. Standing there, looking at his back, however, she was less certain now. In reality, thinking of his reaction when he turned and saw her, she felt the question of the rightness of this would have to await the answer which could only come from David. Again, she was left only with hope for now.

As she opened the screen door David looked back, got up and took a glass from her. "I think I need this," he stated with a shy grin. "I'm not used to pleasant surprises. At least, I hope this is a *pleasant* surprise. I have to ask, Susan, why you came?" As he started this train of thought when Susan interrupted.

"Let's sit down and I'll do my best to explain." She motioned to the stoop and sat down on the top stair. David sat beside

her looking at her with a quizzical expression.

Susan was gazing out at the tree lined street. The air was graced with the coolness of the morning and the whisper of a breeze which would die within the hour as the day reached out with midday heat. For now, though, it was an idyllic scene. She turned to David and began:

“I guess I have to start with Geoff and the mistakes I made growing up without full realization of what the world was about. The world certainly has its good side but I think what I found was that the bad side of it permeates too many people. When a young girl starts getting romantic notions they don't always come with wisdom.”

As she and David sat there she began laying out the horror that Geoff had imposed, not only on David, but on her. She related that Geoff had started hitting her when she had attempted to excoriate him for beating David. As she spoke she reached a finger to his face to gently trace the scar left on his cheek by Geoff. It had grown much fainter now but, nevertheless, was plainly visible. She said that she had broken it off with Geoff which got her another beating before he walked out on her. After that, she told David that she had had two other relationships with men who fooled her into thinking they were kind but ended up being abusive. Either physically or mentally or both. She had stopped dating anyone for a couple of years as she tried to recover her sanity about herself and had remained alone even though several men tried to talk her into a relationship of one kind or another. She supposed, she said, that her self-confidence had been shaken to its roots.

It had been sometime during the summer of the past year that she had thought of David. She remembered him, she was surprised, with fondness. She turned to him after relating this and said, “I recalled that you had once said that we were all God's children and each deserved better than this world

could give." She went on to say that those words came to her unbidden and brought with them a feeling of peace which she hadn't known before. She hadn't understood this nor remembered when he had said this to her but it came to her while she was feeling down and lost. It buoyed her spirits back up and that is when she started thinking about David in a different light. That was also the time when she had contacted Christine to see how David was doing and had learned that he was doing great but, when Susan had brought it up, was told that David hadn't married because he couldn't find the right woman. At least, that's the way Christine had put it.

"Hi, David! Who's your lady friend?" The unmistakable voice of Betsy bellowed out from the street. There, walking her cat (which left those not in the know aghast) was Betsy all decked out in garish flowered shift and huge straw hat. She was waving and altering her course toward David and Susan sitting on the porch, deep in conversation.

David looked at Susan, "That's Betsy. She lives down the street. She's a great cook and just a tad eccentric.

"A tad?" Susan returned while standing up to greet Betsy. "Hi," Susan said, "I'm Susan, an old friend of David's."

"Come to visit? That's wonderful. You have to come to dinner at my house tonight and I won't take a "NO" for an answer!" Betsy strolled across the lawn and shook hands with Susan. "David never mentioned a pretty girl who was a friend. It's high time he settled down and you appear to be just the one for him!"

David, who had been listening with wrapt attention to all Susan was saying was flabbergasted. He had never dreamed of Betsy being so forward. But then, she was Betsy, after all. "Perhaps some other time. She's only here," looking questioningly at Susan, "for the afternoon."

"I'd love to come with David to dinner." Looking at David she

coyly asked, "If that's OK with David?" David nodded. What else could he do? "What time should we come over?" finished Susan.

"How about 7? That's a nice round number." came back from Betsy. With that she walked on down the street. Susan and David watched as her garish shift and too-big hat rounded the corner out of sight; cat waddling along after her.

Susan looked sheepishly at David, "I hope I didn't act foolishly. I actually had not thought to be here just this afternoon. I have so much to speak to you about and..." David smiled a huge grin at her and cut her off, mid-sentence.

"This is great," he said grinning even larger, "I haven't heard more pleasant words in twenty years. So that means not since I was 7!" The relief on Susan's face was so sincere that David wished he'd had a camera. Instead of the camera Susan gave him a hug. When the hug lasted more than a few seconds David started getting warm.

Pulling back he stammered, "Wow, all I can say is I didn't expect any of this. I think we better go back and sit down before I fall down." Susan grinned as she felt a little bit of tension evaporate into the morning air. To say the hug was an ice breaker would be far short of the mark. For Susan, it answered a question. For David, it was almost fulfillment. Fulfillment of exactly what he dared not consider. Not yet.

They spent the morning having breakfast and coffee, speaking of times past and gingerly skipping past anything too personal.

She talked of her childhood, her Mom and Dad (her Dad had passed a few years ago) and those things that she thought had led up to her penchant for abusive men. David spent most of that time, but for a few timely interjections, listening her pour-out the reasons for her change of heart and her hopes for the future now that she was sure she had come to terms with

herself and with her life. It was during a pause that he asked her again why she had come to see him. When she looked him in the eyes he thought she was close to tears.

“I told you that I had thought about you for some time.” David nodded but let her go on. “What I realized as I went through all this was about you. It came to me that you have always been a gentle person. That’s what makes you what you are and that is so rare.” David hadn’t been called “gentle” before. As he considered the moniker he thought that she might be on to something. After all, being gentle is not seen that often and it bodes ill for a kid who is born gentle; as David could attest. Susan went on, “When I finally understood that a lot became clear to me, about you, and I saw how stupid I had been to think any of those men I was with were actually manly. Men don’t beat women to prove their masculinity. They do so because they’re weak and easily threatened. Oh, not by a woman being strong, they’re threatened by themselves being weak and somewhere inside they’ve always known it and can’t deal with it without violence. Brain poison, I guess one could say.

“I came here to see if you were interested in my being a part of your life in some way. As a friend or...?” Her voice trailed off but, in contrast, David’s heart rose as high as it had ever gotten. He didn’t ask himself what he should do now. He gently reached both arms around her waist and kissed her softly, very softly, tentatively on the lips. Her response was instant and she kissed him back for a long, long time.

When they parted David was dizzy. Susan backed away a step. “I hope you meant that. I truly do.”

David was out of breath but replied softly, “With all my heart.” He was suddenly in a place he had never been. Emotions so strong that he had to sit down. Tears came to his eyes as he whispered, “What now?”

“We take our time and talk until we can meet again as friends

first I should hope. I mean, not that we aren't friends but this is a big step for both of us and I can't let anything get in the way like, you know what I mean, sex?"

David turned 25 shades of red. Oh yeah, he knew what she meant. She meant not doing what the very thought of had scared him to death all his life. Sex with a woman! No, that was out because he figured he'd have a heart attack if things got that steamy. As it was he sat down half to save himself from embarrassment. Being a guy and all.

They talked about anything and everything for yet another hour. They other expressed what their feelings were about life. the joy and the heartache. Christine came into the conversation as did Susan's business. All of which was computer based like David's. Before long it was time to go to Betsy's home for dinner. She received them with her usual aplomb and what was actually a fashionable dress rather than her normal rummage sale garb. Betsy was a great cook and diner was more fun than either could have hoped. Afterwards they played Trivial Pursuits which David won hands down. Neither woman had any idea how much crap David could recall at moments notice.

It was after dinner that Betsy took Susan aside and offered Susan her house to stay in while she visited David. "It's none of my business, mind you, what you do but I wanted at least to offer a bedroom for a lady. I won't think poorly of you no matter your preference." Susan then spoke to David about it and David thought it was a good idea. Especially after the mention of sex had come up. He said he thought that would work fine as he hated sleeping on the couch anyway. Susan thought better of asking him how he knew anything about sleeping on his couch but let it alone.

As he left he thanked Betsy for letting Susan sleep over. He then shyly and timidly went and kissed Susan goodnight. He was so hesitant that Susan grabbed him in her arms and wouldn't

let him go. As he walked to his own home he felt great relief in having the idea of Susan coming over early in the morning for breakfast. Even more relief of not having the pressure of a woman he loved sleeping in his bed. He figured most guys would think this weird but he didn't care. If life worked out as he hoped there would be plenty of time for all that stuff. He might even get good at some of it!

David and Susan, using David's computer for work and Betsy's house to sleep stayed together for over a week. It was a Monday that she packed her car and started home. the separation would be tough for both as their time together had, it would seem to Betsy, very possibly cemented their future.

The two kept in touch by phone like two teenagers in love but a date was finally set for Susan to come back to David. After making all the business arrangements necessary she moved to David's house. On that same day they went to the Justice of the Peace and got married. Susan's mother was there to give Susan away and Betsy stood in as Best Woman for David.

Sure, it was a little nonconformist but the wedding pies that Susan's Mom and Betsy made were the hit of the town. All the neighbors showed up for the wedding as no one wanted to miss the event. In truth, a lot of neighbors were wondering about David's sexual preference, him being alone so much.

Six months later David and Susan had become loving friends as much as husband and wife. It was November when they decided to paint the spare bedroom blue. they were going to be traditionalists no matter who they offended. And, so they were.

End