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LOVE MADE A FOOL OF ME

[Continued from page 34]

pot suspended over my cup. "Rita! What a terrible mother I am! Why didn't you remind me it was your birthday?"

I gulped down my coffee and kissed her good-bye. "Forget it, Mom. I know you love me," I said. But as I walked to the subway, I did feel kind of bad. It was the first time she'd forgotten my birthday. Maybe that's what made me buy the blouse...

The wrapping desk at Holbein's Department Store was very slow that morning. I worked at the desk with two other girls, Fran and June, and June had just come back from a shopping trip around the store. We were allowed to do that when it wasn't busy. She was all excited.

"I saw a stunning blouse on the third floor," she said, "reduced from twenty-five dollars to eight. Just my luck, it was too big."

"Would it fit me?" Fran asked.
"Uh-uh, too big," June said.
"What size was it?" I asked, just to make conversation. Even with my employee's discount, I couldn't afford to buy an eight-dollar blouse.

"I don't exactly remember," June said diplomatically, "but it might fit you. Why don't you try it on anyway? It's a shame to pass up a buy like that."

Some customers came over to the desk then, and the conversation broke up. I forgot all about the blouse until after lunch. Then I still had about twenty minutes, so I walked around the store. Without meaning to, I wandered into the blouse department, and I spotted the blouse on a rack. It was the most beautiful shade of dusty rose, and when I felt the material, I was lost—it was soft as a kitten's ear. I couldn't resist trying it on.

"You look pretty in that color," the salesclerk said. "And what a buy too."

"I'll take it," I said, pushing it over the counter before I could change my mind. When I got back to the department with it, the girls drooled.

"It's a gorgeous color for you," Fran said. "It does things for your skin. But you've got nice skin anyway." Two compliments in one day! No wonder I was walking on air when I came out of the store that night.

I GOT A SEAT on the subway too, and opened the box to take another look at my blouse. I must have looked awfully silly, because I heard a chuckle and a voice saying, "It must be something you've wanted for a long time, to make you look like that."

I looked up at the man who was smiling down at me. He was big—not fat, exactly, but sort of thick looking, and his brown eyes were warm and kind.

Well, maybe he wasn't handsome, but I was flattered anyway. I smiled back, glad that I'd taken the time to make up my face before leaving the store. Sometimes lately I just hadn't been bothering. It seemed more important to hurry out and get a seat in the subway.

But today it had been important—today was my lucky day. It was the blouse, I was sure. It had started my good luck.

I opened the box a little wider so he could see it better.

"Beautiful color," he said. "You must look good in pink."

"It's dusty rose," I said.

He laughed. "All I know is that it's pretty." He leaned over and touched it. His fingers were short and broad, but I noticed the nails were neatly trimmed

and clean. "I love nice material. Unfortunately, I can't always afford what I like."

"I'm the same way," I said. "I mean, if I could afford it." He nodded, and it made a sort of conspiracy between us.

After the next stop he got a seat next to mine, and we talked. His station was just before mine, and by the time he got up to leave, he'd made a date with me for the following evening.

I couldn't wait to tell Mom. When I got home, the table was pulled out from the kitchen and set up in the living room. It looked pretty, and there was a cake with candles and two nice hankies next to my plate.

I threw my arms around her. "You're a wonderful mother," I said, "and this has been a wonderful birthday! I have a surprise for you too." It made me feel good to see her thin, tired face light up when I told her I had a date. And right away, of course, she bombarded me with questions. "Wait," I laughed. "His name is Fred Whitlock. He lives one station from here, and he works in a shoe store downtown." I stopped and looked at her, and then I said, "He's kind of hefty, like me."

She was so excited, she didn't ask where I met Fred. Maybe if she knew, she might even have persuaded me not to meet him. But she was just so happy for me, she wasn't even angry about the blouse.

After dinner, I washed my hair, did my nails, and pressed my suit. Then, since it was still early, Mom suggested that I go downstairs and keep Dorry Clark company. She was a crippled girl who lived on the ground floor.

"Stay with her for an hour or two, poor girl," Mom said. "She hasn't got a thing in the world to make her happy."

As I went down the stairs to Dorry's flat, I was thinking that up to tonight, I didn't have anything either. I thought of all the nights I'd spent in her cluttered, shabby little living room playing gin and talking about other girls' dates. I was remembering the terrible night she had told me I was just as bad off as she was, fat and ugly. I was eighteen then, terribly self-conscious about my size. Dorry and I were playing gin.

"Evie Nelson has a date tonight," she'd said. "I saw her getting into a big car. She's cute."

"I wish I had her figure," I'd said. "What about her face?"

"Oh," I'd laughed, "I'll pass with a push. I'm not that bad."

"Mirrors don't lie, Rita. You're no beauty."

"Who said I was? But I'm certainly not ugly." I was annoyed with her, and hurt.

She gave a short, nasty laugh. "Let's face it. We're two of a kind. I'm an ugly cripple, and you're ugly and fat."

I stared at her, but she turned her unhappy brown eyes away. *She's only saying that to make herself feel better*, I thought, stopping the angry retort that was on the tip of my tongue. But when I got upstairs later, I went into the bathroom and looked at myself closely. I felt like I was seeing a stranger.

"Maybe I am ugly," I whispered to my reflection. And an aching kind of doubt was there now, and somehow after that night, I just never seemed to be able to rid myself of the feeling of inferiority it gave me.

AS THE YEARS PASSED and all my friends married, Dorry and I were the only un-

attached girls left in the whole building of forty families. I began to think more and more that maybe she had been right—that we'd both end up old maids.

I was thirteen when my father died of TB. Right away Mom got a job in a milk plant in lower Manhattan and made me finish junior high. I started getting fat around that time. Mom said lots of girls got fat when they were in their teens. She said it would go away. But it didn't.

When I was sixteen, I got the job at Holbein's. They wouldn't hire you without a physical, and they said I was too heavy, so I promised I'd go on a diet. I did too, for a while, but after I was sure of the job, it didn't seem worth the effort.

Knocking on Dorry's door now, I was thinking that maybe she had been wrong after all, maybe I wasn't going to end up an old maid. Wouldn't she be surprised when I told her about Fred!

When I got inside, though, she was stretched out on the sofa, her face drawn with pain, a heating pad over her bad leg. *I'll tell her some other time*, I thought.

"How about a game of gin, Dorry?" I asked. She nodded. But after an hour, she said she was tired, so I went upstairs, glad I hadn't said anything.

The next day was endless. I'd told Fred that I'd meet him at six in front of the store. I got there on the dot, though I didn't expect he'd be there yet. He wasn't. It was nippy out, even for October, and as I stood there waiting, watching the minutes tick away, I began to get chilled and worried. A half hour passed, and then another, and then it was almost seven-thirty. I was half frozen and close to tears when I saw him walking toward me.

"I was beginning to think you were going to stand me up," I said jokingly.

He looked at me solemnly for a moment. "I almost did," he said.

"But why?"

He took my arm. "I don't know. Sometimes I don't know what's with me. But anyway, I'm glad you waited, Rita. Are you hungry?"

"I can always eat," I said.

He laughed. "Me too."

We went into a cafeteria, and when we got our food, we sat down at a little corner table. It was past the dinner hour, and nobody bothered us. We sat there for almost two hours, just talking. He told me he lived with his mother and father, and that his two married sisters lived out of town. "I'm the baby," he said, taking off his hat. I'd been wondering why he was wearing it, but I hadn't wanted to say anything. Now I saw it was because he was almost completely bald. He was looking at me when he took it off, and he laughed, sort of embarrassed.

"Don't let this bald noggin of mine throw you. I'm really only twenty-seven. It's a family curse."

"It's not so terrible," I said, hoping I really sounded as sincere as I meant to. Who was I to talk about beauty? He kept rubbing his hand over his head as though it hurt.

"Have you got a headache?" I asked.

"No, no. It's just a nervous habit I have, I guess."

I realized then that he didn't like to talk about it—that he was the same way about his head as I was about being heavy.

Sitting opposite him in the brightly lit cafeteria, I wondered what he was thinking about me. I wondered if he was sorry now that he'd come.

When we were finished eating, I suggested going to my house. I knew Mom was dying to meet him, but I was nervous when we got there. "Let her like him, let her like him," I said over and over to myself as we went up the stairs.

Mom expected us, and she was wearing one of her best dresses. But no sooner did we all get seated than Mom started asking Fred questions, and she kept looking him over as though he was some kind of specimen. I was dying with embarrassment. I could see him squirming under her gaze. He kept rubbing his hand across his head, and I had to dig my nails into my palms to keep from screaming at her to stop. Finally, desperately, I interrupted, suggesting it was time for coffee, but she waved me quiet. "Wait, wait, it's early yet," she said. "I want to talk to your young man."

When she'd finally finished and was getting up to go into the kitchen and make coffee, Fred suddenly remembered he had promised to be home early. He was out of the house almost before she had stopped talking.

I WAITED for the downstairs door to close before turning to her angrily. "For heaven's sake, Mom, what were you trying to do?" I was close to tears.

Her eyes were wide with surprise. She put her hand on her chest. "Me? What did I do, honey?"

"What did you do? What didn't you do? Where do you work, Mr. Whitlock? How much do you make? How old are you? What does your father do? Who, what, when, where, why! What are you, a judge putting him through the third degree? What right did you have to ask a perfect stranger those things?" I slumped down on a chair. "My first date in twenty-five years, and my own mother in nothing flat makes sure it'll be my last. How could you be so—so stupid!" I looked over at her. Her face looked stricken, and I felt a pang of anger at myself for talking to her like that, but I couldn't help it.

"I didn't mean anything, Rita. What did I ask? What any mother would ask. Who knows what he is? After all, you have to be sure—"

"After all what, Mom? What did you expect me to get? A movie star? I don't care anything about him, do you understand, Mom? I don't care who he is or what he is or anything, as long as he wants to take me out. That's all I care about!"

We faced each other angrily. I was sick inside, talking to her this way, but this was something that mattered too much to me. I had waited so long for it, dreamed about it so many years. How could she want to try to take it away?

"All right," she said quietly. "You're not a baby. But about one thing you're wrong: You must never belittle yourself, Rita. You're just as good as anyone else. If you have no respect for yourself, how can you expect others to respect you?" She turned and went into the bedroom.

"But what counts, what counts?" I said

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to myself. "Not what's inside of you, but what shows. That's what people see. I can't afford to be particular. Why doesn't she see me the way I really am?" And then I laughed, wondering what I was getting so excited about. I'd had just one date with the guy, and would probably never see him again.

I wandered around the apartment for a few minutes and then decided to go down to see Dorry. Mom had probably told everyone in the building about my date, and I didn't want Dorry to think I was getting high-hat.

She looked at me enviously when I came in. "Why didn't you tell me about your boy friend?" she demanded.

"I was going to, Dorry, but you didn't feel well last night."

"You thought it would make me feel worse, huh?" She laughed bitterly.

The November Issue of

True Confessions

ON SALE

OCTOBER

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"You're lucky, Rita, you're sure lucky." And she stared down at her leg.

"Don't congratulate me yet. I'll probably never see him again. Mom didn't like him, anyway."

"Why?"
I shrugged, and changed the subject. After about an hour, I went back upstairs. Mom was asleep. I made up my bed on the couch in the living room, undressed, and got into bed. But I couldn't sleep. I kept going over the whole evening—what I said, what Fred said. Maybe Dorry was right. Maybe I was going to be lucky at last.

But I didn't hear from Fred the next week or the following week. I was sick with despair. Mom kept her word, she didn't say anything, but she could see how I felt. I avoided Dorry too, because she kept asking me if I'd seen him again. I made it a point to get in the same train every night, and I always looked for him on his platform. I even got out at his station one night and waited for a few trains. I don't know what excuse I'd have made if I did see him. How stupid could you be? One date, and I thought I owned him. I thought he had to feel like I did. I was half in love with him. Maybe I would have fallen for anyone, I was so starved for affection from a man.

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, he was waiting for me outside the store when I came out.

My heart pounded crazily. "I wondered why I didn't hear from you," I burst out.

He scowled. "Look, Rita," and annoyance grew with each word, "you're not the only girl I know. So don't go getting ideas."

"I didn't mean it that way, Fred. I just meant that—I mean I'm awfully glad to see you again."

"Okay, just don't go getting ideas. I take lots of girls out."

"Do you want to come up to my house for dinner?" I said quickly. "I'm sure Mom will have enough." But even while I was asking him, I was worried about how Mom would act if I did bring him up.

But he'd had enough of her—he said he'd rather not make the trip. "Let's just have a sandwich now and walk," he suggested. "We can have dinner later. It's such a swell night. I love to walk, it gives me a chance to think. Maybe I don't look it, but I'm a great thinker—I'm always knocking things around in my head."

"I love to walk too, Fred," I said. "That's another thing we have in common!"

He took my arm, and it felt so good to walk that way with a man. It was a clear, crisp night, and the brightly lit store windows glittered invitingly as we strolled past. Everyone seemed to be in pairs, going someplace together, talking as we were. I was just like everyone else, with my arm through a man's. This was what I had dreamed about so many times. I filled my lungs with the brisk air, straightening my shoulders. I even felt slimmer, prettier somehow.

Fred looked at me and smiled. "It doesn't take much to make you happy, does it?" He looked away from me, shaking his head. "I wish I was that way. I'm always wishing for something I can't have."

"Like what, Fred?"

"I don't even know myself," he said. "I guess I just don't know when I'm well off."

By the time we found a restaurant, we decided we were too hungry for just a sandwich and had dinner instead. It was a pleasant meal, and Fred seemed to be enjoying it as much as I. But when we got outside, he suddenly said, "Do you mind going home yourself? I have something to take care of." He didn't even wait for me to answer—he just walked off.

I stood there looking after him. Had I said something? Was he angry? Quickly, I went through our dinner conversation. Why hadn't he told me inside? I stood there, utterly miserable, not knowing what to think.

IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, he did all kinds of strange things that I couldn't find an explanation for. He seemed almost to be fighting with himself. He'd keep me waiting hours, or he wouldn't show up at all. He made fun of me too. He said I was too fat. I wasn't pretty. I didn't talk right. I didn't do anything really, that pleased him. But right after he'd say something mean, he'd beg me to forgive him.

And he was always talking about other girls. I was sick with worry because I already liked him much more than he liked me. Like? I was in love with him, and I knew he wasn't in love with me. He was just going with me until something better turned up. I couldn't hide my misery when he spoke about his other girl friends. And then he'd say something nice to me.

"You've got nice hands, Rita, nice, long fingers. Not like mine." He'd stretch out his soft, white hands with their short, blunt fingers. I'd put my own hand over

his, and show him how much I cared—I couldn't help it.

"I like yours just the way they are, Fred."

"You're a lot nicer than I am, Rita. Why do you bother with a mixed-up character like me, anyway?"

"Because I love you." I felt a little frightened after I'd said it. Maybe it would make him angry.

He didn't say anything for a moment, and then he leaned across the little table in the bar where we were having a beer, and kissed me. It was a sweet, tender kiss. It was different from the way he'd kissed me before, when we'd said good night in the dark, drafty hallway of my house. It was gentle and really loving. It made me feel good inside.

But the next instant he was different again. He shoved angrily at his glass.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Rita." "But you do like me, Fred, don't you?" I pleaded. "I don't expect you to love me. I'm satisfied if you just like me."

"Sure, I like you. I like lots of girls."

I had to be content with that, and I pretended I was, but inwardly I knew I wanted more. "I have to make him love me," I told myself. "I'll do anything—anything!"

ONE VERY COLD NIGHT Fred was waiting for me outside the store in a car. It belonged to his friend, he told me as I got in.

"I remember you said you'd never seen the Palisades," he said. "I thought you'd like to. It's just over the bridge."

"You remembered that?" I said. "You're nice, Fred, you really are."

He gave a funny laugh and started the car. He was leaning forward, his hands gripping the wheel. I imagined it was because he didn't drive much, and there was a lot of traffic.

There wasn't any heater in the car, and I moved close to him and snuggled down into my coat collar. "I guess I better not bother you while you're driving," I said. "I'll just sit back and relax."

When we had left the crowded city and the twinkling bridge lights behind, we started to talk. I asked him, sort of coyly, if he'd noticed anything different about me lately.

"Is it something you have on?" he said.

I laughed. "No, it's something I've taken off. Ten pounds. I'm on a diet, and I'm going to stick to this one, I've made up my mind, until I lose at least another thirty pounds. I mean it," I added as he chuckled.

"Why? What are you knocking yourself out for?"

I hesitated. Did I dare say it? Well, what did I have to lose? I took a deep breath. "For you, Fred. Maybe then you'll like me better—"

He interrupted. "I told you, Rita, I do like you. There are lots of nice things about you." We were approaching the Palisades, and the road was dark and deserted. He pulled the car over to the side and turned to me. "Lots of nice things," he repeated, moving away from the wheel and putting his arms around me. "You got nice hair and nice smooth skin, and you smell good." He was trembling. "It's so cold," he said, slipping his hand under my coat.

"Don't, Fred, please! Please don't do that!" I cried as my blouse came undone and I felt the shock of his cold hand.

"Please, Rita, it's so cold." His hand caressed me, and suddenly there was a flame inside me and all around us.

"Oh, no, no!" I moaned, whimpering brokenly, and my exclamations were a confusion of fright and conscience and

terror and desire. And then my judgment faded and vanished, and afterward it was too late for crying. . . .

Later, he moved away from me and pillowed his head for a moment on the steering wheel, queer sounds coming from his throat. Then he straightened up with a heavy sigh and reached into his pocket for his cigarettes. He lit two and handed me one, saying, "Don't say anything, Rita. Please, please don't say anything now." His voice rose hysterically. "I couldn't bear it!"

I thought I saw and heard these things, as I sat up, shocked and ashamed. I saw the cigarette trembling in my fingers, but it wasn't me this had happened to—it couldn't be. I wouldn't let it be. Not me!

"Close your coat, you'll catch cold," he said, and then he started the car.

As the cold air washed over me, my head cleared and reality forced itself upon me. "Don't say anything," he'd said. What was there to say? How could this have happened to me?

I tried to fight it—I begged him, I thought. Yet all the time I knew that it was something I had really wanted. If I hadn't, why had I come to this wilderness in the dead of night? Why should I want to look at a park in the dark? And he knew it. He'd been playing with me.

How could he care for me now, after this? And, what hurt most, I still loved him, now more than ever. Mom had been right—if you have no respect for yourself, how can you expect anyone to respect you? Maybe she'd known what he wanted right from the start. I was the stupid one, not she.

We barely spoke all the way home. My shame was like a thick wall around me, and I hoped it hid me from him. When we reached my house, I opened the car door and rushed out.

I DON'T KNOW what was showing in my face when I got upstairs. Mom was sitting on the sofa, reading the paper. She looked up at me, startled surprise in her eyes.

"What happened?" she said. "You look funny. You look sick. What is it?" I stared back silently. "Rita!" She got up and came over to me, taking my arm. "What is it?"

I pushed past her and sank into a chair, and then the tears came, terrible, tearing sobs. She stood over me, shaking her head miserably. "He's making a nothing out of you, that Fred. You have to stop going with him."

"I won't, I won't!" I sobbed. "I love him. Can't you understand that? You always said you want me to be happy. Why are you trying to take him away from me?"

"Because you're not happy. You're miserable. Do you think I'm blind? Don't you think I've seen what you've been going through with him? How can you let anyone treat you like that? You're a person, Rita, not a doormat. Give him up, darling, before it's too late."

"It's already too late," I said, my eyes on the floor.

She was quiet, and I looked up at her, frightened. Her face seemed just to have fallen apart. I couldn't stand it. I had to say something to take that look away. So I said the first thing that came into my head. "Don't look like that, Mom, it's not as bad as you think. He's going to marry me. He said so. He promised me," I lied frantically. "He promised me tonight."

"I don't believe it, Rita."

"It's true, it's true. He's giving me a watch next Saturday," I said as she continued to shake her head in disbelief.

"When I see it, I'll believe it. Dear God, what have I done to deserve this!" She gave me one last desperate look and then

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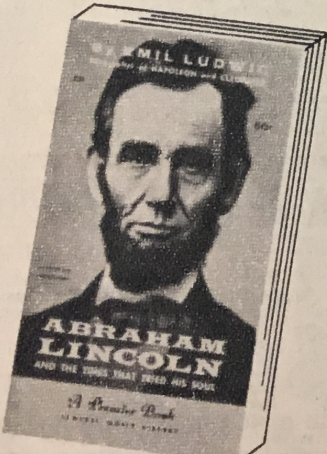
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ran crying into the bedroom. I looked after her. Why had I said that? If only I could have those words back! This new worry pushed everything else out of my mind.

The next week was the most terrible week of my life. When I wasn't sick with loathing for myself for what I had done, I was sick with worry that Fred was finished with me. And I was desperate about the watch—how could I produce it? I couldn't buy one on time. Even if I could get together the down payment, I couldn't make the payments out of the three dollars a week I kept from my salary.

I couldn't work—I couldn't do anything, really, but worry. At the store, I kept leaving the desk and running to the washroom to smoke. I told the girls I didn't feel well. It wasn't busy in the department, so they could manage without me.

By Saturday morning, I was a wreck. About ten o'clock I went into the washroom for a cigarette. It was empty except for a girl from the next department. I didn't know her, but I remembered seeing her around. She had taken off her watch and was washing her hands at the basin. She went from there to the roller towel nearby, and then to the long mirror on the other side of the sinks to comb her hair. Another girl stuck her head in the door and called her, and she ran out.

She forgot her watch, I thought, picking it up and running to the door with it. But some crazy impulse hit me, and I didn't open the door. Instead, I slipped the watch into my purse and hurried back to the desk. *What did I do that for? I'm out of my mind, I thought as I sat there wrapping parcels. I'll bring it back to Lost and Found on my way out to lunch. It won't be too late.*

I didn't eat with the girls in the cafeteria, though, as I usually did. I made some excuse and went to a little lunchroom outside. I got some coffee and sat down at a table by myself, and then I took out the watch. It was gold, with little diamonds around the face and a flexible band. I put my hand down under the table and slipped it on. It fit. I took it off quickly and put it back in my purse.

I'm crazy, I thought, stark, raving mad. Whatever made me do an awful thing like this? I'll bring it back when I get to the store. It's still not too late.

But I didn't. And when I got back to the desk, Fran said Miss Ryan, the supervisor, wanted to see me. She looked worried. The grapevine didn't miss much, for they knew already.

MISS RYAN was unsmiling and business-like. "Sit down, Rita," she said. "I've known you for nine years, and you've always been reliable and a good worker. As a matter of fact, I have a recommendation on my desk right now for a stock-clerk promotion for you. That's why I feel so terrible about what I have to say now." I stared at my hands. "Trudi Reynolds from Children's Wear left her watch in the washroom early this morning. You were the only one in there with her. When she came back, just a few minutes later, it was gone."

Her clear, honest eyes held mine for a moment. I couldn't lie to her. I didn't even want to. I suddenly wanted that watch out of my possession. I snatched it out of my purse and pushed it across her desk. I didn't even say that I was going to turn it in after I showed it to Mom.

She shook her head unhappily. "I'm sorry this happened, terribly sorry for you, Rita. You'll have to leave. . ."

I stumbled out of her office and went to my locker. Then I left the building. Outside in the cold, I tried to get my wits together. How could I go home now? I walked around, numb with despair, until the store closed. How could I justify this to anyone, even to myself? How could I tell Mom?

But I didn't have to. A social worker from the store had been there before me. When I came into the house and saw Mom sitting hunched over, her head in her hands, I knew that she knew. I wanted to throw my arms around her and say, "It's not true, it's all a terrible mistake! Don't believe it!" And then she looked up at me, her face streaked with tears.

"Why did you do it, Rita? Why? From one terrible thing to another! Where did you learn this? I tried to make you a decent person. I went to work so you could go to school, so you could have a decent home, and you paid me back like this." And then her face hardened, and she got up angrily and came to where I was standing. Her hand whipped across my face, back and forth stingingly. "You did it for him!" she screamed. "He's made a tramp and a thief out of you. I could kill him! I could kill him with my bare hands!"

"I didn't mean to keep the watch, Mom—honest!" I cried. "I only wanted to show it to you, so you would like him. So you wouldn't make me stop seeing him. All

There are some things which men confess with ease, and others with difficulty. Epictetus

right, everything I've done is wrong, but I thought I had to do it to keep him. Because I love him, and I need him to make me feel like a human being."

I was sobbing wildly by then. "You can't know what it's like to be ugly and fat. You had Pop who loved you, and you loved him. I wanted someone to love me. You don't know what it does to you when you see all your friends getting married, and you know you'll never have that. You begin to feel like a—a monster. And then I met Fred. Maybe he's not so good looking, maybe he'd bald, but who am I to pick and choose? Just because you think I deserve better, doesn't make it so. But I didn't mean to take the watch—I didn't mean to keep it. I must have been crazy."

She started to cry again and went out of the room. I walked to the window and stared out at the littered street. People were hurrying home from their jobs, honest people, people with nothing on their consciences. Dorry was struggling up the steps, stopping to rest every few minutes. "How lucky do you think I am now, Dorry?" I whispered. "Now I'd even change places with you. You're the lucky one now—you've got your self-respect."

I don't know how long I stood there before I was conscious of footsteps in the hall. It was Fred's footsteps. I flew to the door and slipped outside, just before he reached the landing. He smiled at me.

"I came to—" and then he looked startled. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's my mother," I lied. "I mean, she doesn't feel well. Could you meet me on the corner? I'll be right down."

"But I have something important to tell—" he started to say, and then the door was flung open and my mother stood there.

"Come inside, Mr. Whitlock," she said icily.

He looked from her to me, worry creas-

ing his forehead, as he came inside. "It's pretty cold," he said, trying to ease the silence, and I wanted to agree, but no words could get past the terror in me. Mom said she'd make coffee. But I wasn't fooled—I knew why she had called him in. I ran after her into the kitchen.

"Please, Mom," I pleaded, "please don't say anything! He hates scenes."

She stopped with the coffeepot in her hand. "He hates scenes! I don't care what he hates," she hissed at me. "You have a right to ask me not to make a scene? You ought to be on your knees, begging me not to throw you out on the street. You tramp. You thief!"

"Shhh, Mom, please—he'll hear you!" I implored her frantically. She poured the coffee, her hand shaking, slopping it over into the saucer. Then she brought it into the living room, and I followed behind her, watching anxiously as she handed the cup to Fred.

"I ought to throw this in your face!" she said as he accepted the cup.

"Wha-at," he stammered, backing away. "Mom!" I screamed, unable to bear it any longer. I tried to push her away, but she shoved me into a chair.

"I think I'd better go," he said, looking around for someplace to put down the cup.

"Not until you hear what I have to say," Mom barked. He sank down on the sofa, and she pointed her finger at him accusingly. "It wasn't enough for you to make a tramp out of my daughter. You had to make a thief out of her too. She stole for you. For you! You did this to her, you monster! And she thought she wasn't good enough for you!"

"Stole?" Fred said, shaking his head dazedly. He tried to say something, but nothing came from his half-open lips. He sat there, with the coffee cup trembling in his hands, and his face was pitiful.

Suddenly, looking at him, I found strength to stand up to Mom. I pushed her away from him roughly. "You're wrong, Mom," I said. "You're terribly wrong. Why are you blaming him? I'm the one who stole the watch. I'm the one who went to the park with him. He didn't hit me on the head and drag me out there. I wanted to go, and I guess I wanted it to happen. I'm old enough to know right from wrong."

She looked at me and her whole face seemed to shatter. Then she ran sobbing from the room.

I sat down on the sofa beside Fred. "You don't owe me anything, Fred," I said. "You don't have to have anything on your conscience."

"Oh, but I do, I do," he said, getting up and going to stand by the window. And then he was talking quickly, as though he was afraid he'd forget the words, as though they were a burden he had to lift or go down under.

He told me that no matter what I'd done, I was still good and sweet because I wasn't a fake, like he was. He wasn't the big shot he'd pretended to be with other girls. That was what he wanted to believe he was, so he kept saying it, even when he saw how miserable it made me. But he hadn't really wanted to hurt me. He was just so mixed up, he didn't have sense enough to know what he wanted.

"It's this bald head of mine!" he burst out. "Baldy, that's what everybody called me. I began to feel like a freak. After all, I was only twenty when it happened." He came and sat down on the sofa again and took my hands in his, holding them tight. "But you thought I was okay. You liked me, you loved me. Why shouldn't that have been enough for me?"

He stared down at our twined fingers, and then he went on to say it was his

foolish ego that wouldn't accept it, because I wasn't the kind of girl he'd dreamed of marrying. He was angry with himself for loving me, for taking what he'd so foolishly convinced himself was second best. So he'd decided to quit while he still could, and he was going to tell me the night we went to the park. But even on the way, he knew he wouldn't, he didn't want to. And then that terrible thing happened, that terrible thing he'd done to someone who loved him and trusted him, someone he loved.

He looked up at me, his eyes wet with tears. "Why did you let me, Rita? You should have stopped me. I've hated myself so since then, I've wanted to die. Can you ever forgive me?"

I pulled his head down against me. "We were both of us lonely and unhappy, and it made us both do foolish things," I told him. "Maybe that's how it has to be, so you'll learn. Maybe that's how you find out what you're really like inside."

He hugged me fiercely. "You're not like me at all. Don't ever say that. You're good and sweet and—and pretty. Yes, you are."

I laughed shakily. "If you can say that, I'm sure you love me."

He kissed me gently. "I didn't just come to ask you to forgive me, Rita. I came to ask you to marry me. But I think I ought to ask your mother first—I guess I owe it to her."

I nodded. Maybe it was old-fashioned, but I knew how much it would mean to her if he did. She had suffered the same misery as we, and I wanted her to have her moment of happiness too. I called her in from the kitchen.

Her eyes were red. She sat down across from us, looking down at her thin, veined hands. I wondered if Fred was feeling as I did, that her suffering had been so needless. I went to her and put my arms around her. "Fred has something to ask you, Mom."

When he had stuttered out the question, he didn't wait for her to answer, but went on quickly to say he knew he'd done lots of terrible things that must be hard for her to forgive or forget. He didn't blame her, he said, for feeling the way she did about him—he deserved everything she'd said. But he knew now how wrong he'd been. He loved me very much and he needed me, and he wanted to marry me, if she would let him. I looked from Mom to Fred, the two people I loved best in the world. "Make them friends," I prayed. "Let her forgive him as I have."

She looked at him quietly for a long moment. "An old woman says many things, some good and some bad," she said, finally. "All I want for Rita is happiness. Maybe I've said things to you that I shouldn't have. But I'm a mother, and for Rita I've had to be both mother and father. I had to protect her in whatever way I thought right. I want to believe that you love her, because I know how much she loves you. If you tell me now honestly that you, too, only want her happiness, I can't ask for any more."

I jumped up and threw my arms around Fred. "It's all right, it's all right! Oh, I'm so happy!" Mom blew her nose, and got up and went toward the kitchen, saying she'd make some tea.

Fred hugged me close. "I love you, Rita, I love you so much. You've made me feel different too. Your loving me has made me feel better and stronger and just as good as anyone else. No, better than anyone else, because I have you."

He bent down and kissed me, and as I returned his kiss, I was thinking that I felt different too. Better and prettier and rich, so very rich—with happiness.

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