

Friday Night

Day in and day out, Patrick Solus drove his old, beat-up pickup truck to work. On Friday nights, however, he took his “baby” out for a spin: a pennant-blue 1958 Corvette convertible. Talk about a head turner! She had white side coves, twin trunk spears, and bumper-exiting exhaust tips, not to mention hood louvers, quad headlamps, and a nine-tooth grille. A real looker. She boasted heavy-duty brakes and suspension, a four-speed manual transmission, and a 283 cubic-inch V-8 engine. Why, this dreamboat even had the original vacuum tubes and the transistors of its Delco hybrid radio. Patrick had sunk every spare penny into that car, and it was art on wheels. An American classic. His pride and joy.

Tonight he had his weekly date with Delicia, a woman almost as beautiful as his car.

When Patrick stepped out of the shower and stood in front of the mirror, he flexed his right bicep, admiring the muscle in his arm. He turned to the side, looked at his flat stomach, and nodded his head. Not bad for a forty-two-year-old man. How many of his high-school classmates had beer bellies by now? Working construction had kept him in shape, he thought as he ran his

hand through his thick black hair streaked with the slightest gray. And all those trips to the gym didn't hurt either.

Once he had finished drying off his well-toned body, Patrick hung his towel on the rack and picked up the can of shaving cream to lather up. Yes, he had shaved this morning before work, but he had a five-o'clock shadow, and he wanted to look his best for Delicia.

Construction was hard work, he mused to himself, placing the razor beneath his right sideburn and carefully pulling it down over his well-chiseled jaw. The bending, the heavy lifting, the hot summer sun, the cold winter wind. By quitting time, his muscles ached, and he was tired. Friday nights—apart from a few beers after work—counted as his one indulgence. He deserved it, didn't he? He had no qualms, or almost no qualms, about it.

Of course, if his young wife, Désirée, had not died in childbirth twenty-two years ago, everything would have been different. He would come home to a loving spouse, dinner on the table, and a quiet evening sitting side by side on the sofa watching television. On some Friday nights, he worried he was betraying her memory.

If only she had borne him a son. He would have had some idea what to do: how to talk to him, what clothes to buy him, how to play with him. With his daughter, Winona, he was at an utter loss. What did he know about being a girl, and how could he ever raise one by himself in such woeful ignorance? It was for her sake that he made the heart-wrenching decision to give her up for adoption when she was just a few months old. Indeed, it left a hole in him that could never be filled.

Patrick brushed the thought of his wife and daughter from his mind as he went to get a shirt and slacks from his closet. For all these years he had lived alone. If he enjoyed the normal

pleasures of marriage and family, he would gladly stay home on Friday nights, but he didn't, and he refused to feel guilty about it—though his feelings of guilt often ignored his refusal.

He punished his body all week long with the pain and fatigue of manual labor. On Friday nights he owed himself the reward of a little pleasure and relaxation. It was only fair. Besides, he was not made of wood or stone; he was a flesh-and-blood man like any other. Why should he be the only one to deprive himself?

Patrick finished dressing and stood again in front of the mirror to view the result. Not bad. He turned a bit. No, not bad at all. His bulging biceps filled the short sleeves of his blue floral sport shirt; his black leather belt fit comfortably around his trim waist; and his muscular thighs gave shape to his slacks. Who would ever guess his real age? He grabbed his keys and headed for the car.

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Outside, the stars shone clearly in the cloudless sky, and the warm breeze felt good against his tanned face once he was heading down Homestead Lane towards the corner. A muscle man in a muscle car—that's what he would have said had he expressed his feelings in words. Oh, how he felt young again. He didn't have a care in the world, except perhaps for one thought that sometimes nagged at him as he made the weekly drive.

What was so wrong with his Friday-night outings, anyhow? he asked an imaginary accuser. When you think about it, Delicia and he really did have some things in common. They both did physical work, though while he worked outside in the harsh elements, she worked in all the indoor comfort you could ask for. Even if their work was unpleasant at times, they did it of their own free wills and probably enjoyed it often enough. Her work did carry certain health risks, but so did his: accidents and injuries happened all too frequently on the construction site.

Neither was self-employed, and their companies made a handsome profit off of their daily grind, but you could hardly call it exploitation. In a service economy, services are rendered for pay. It's just business. Nothing wrong with that. She earned a better hourly rate than he did, but he worked more hours than she, so maybe they came out about the same. They really weren't so different after all.

Patrick flicked on his left turn signal, stopped at the corner sign, and then rolled onto Wide Gate Avenue. In his mind he pictured himself at a classic car show, leaning against the hood of his car in a Jimmy Dean pose, wearing tight blue jeans and a black leather jacket, his hair slicked back 1950s style, as all the girls in bobby socks secretly lusted after him. Or maybe he was going to a good old-fashioned drag race, where all the guys would drool at the sight of his rod.

With the top down, he cruised along the brightly lit avenue with its storefronts and signs vying for attention. He enjoyed looking and being looked at. Somehow the bustle of the traffic, the shoppers and diners out on the town, and the neon lights almost drove the ruminations from his mind, almost but not quite.

After a couple of miles, Patrick took another left onto Broad Street, passed five blocks of upscale buildings, and parked in front of the luxurious Sweet Dreams Hotel. Though all alone in his car, he felt as if the nuns from his childhood Catholic school were glaring at him in silent condemnation. He shook himself to put the mental image to flight. If God had let his wife live, or even found him another wife, he wouldn't be in this situation. What right did they have to throw stones, living in their glass-house convent and endlessly paging through their thick book of rules and regulations? They didn't know what it was like in the real world, what he had been through, the loneliness he had suffered. To hell with them.

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Patrick strutted into the swanky lobby of the hotel. Off to the side sat a middle-aged woman wearing a form-revealing, black evening gown and a string of white pearls with matching earrings. She was nursing a glass of champagne. A picture of simple elegance, she had lost none of her feminine charms. When Patrick approached, she slowly rose to greet him.

Patrick glanced around, took an envelope from his pocket, and handed it discreetly to her. In exchange, she slipped him a room key.

“Sixth floor, room sixty-six,” she said in subdued tones. “Delicia is out of town, but we have something very special for you instead. Something you are sure to like.”

“Good,” Patrick said, then headed towards the elevator, hoping no one had seen him talking to her. Inside the elevator, his palms were sweating like a nervous schoolboy’s and his heart rate increasing in eager anticipation.

When Patrick entered the room, he beheld the back of a beautiful form through the sheer black lace of a waist-length jacket. A couple of seconds after his entrance, the young woman turned around to face him in her skimpy bra and matching panties.

“Hey, baby,” she said almost mechanically.

Patrick’s eyes slithered up from her shapely thighs, to her curvaceous hips, to her slender waist, to her full, well-rounded breasts, to her face—

Suddenly, he panicked, as if he had seen a ghost.

Her shoulders back, her hips swaying, the young woman slunk right up to him, nuzzling her breasts against his chest.

“Are you ready to feel good?” she said, running her fingers through his hair.

Patrick thrust her back with both hands against her shoulders.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like me?”

“No, it’s not that,” Patrick stammered. “I can’t.”

“Oh, don’t worry, baby. I’ve helped plenty of men your age. You just let me work my magic.”

As soon as she started to sidle up to him again, he took a step back and held out both his arms.

“Wait,” he commanded.

She stopped.

“What’s your name?”

“They call me Hot Spice,” she said, almost purring.

“No, I mean your real name.”

“That’s none of your business,” she said, suddenly changing her tone. “This is a fee-for-service relationship, not a personal one. No contact outside of this room. Understand?”

“Were you adopted?”

“Who are you? You’re creeping me out.” She pulled her lace jacket together in the vain attempt to cover herself.

“Did your adoptive parents tell you your real mother’s name?”

“Yes . . . I mean that’s none of your business either.”

“It was Désirée, wasn’t it?”

“How did you know that? Who are you?”

His arms still outstretched, Patrick now took a step towards her.

“Don’t come any closer, or I’ll scream,” she said.

He didn’t.

“And your real name is Winona, isn’t it?”

“You can’t know me. I’ve never seen you before.”

“You look exactly the way your mother did twenty-two years ago.”

“That’s how old *I* am.”

“She was my wife.”

“You mean you’re my—”

“Father,” he said before she could finish her sentence.

“And I’m your—”

“Daughter,” he said.

She burst into tears and fell into his arms. Overwhelmed with emotion, he wept on her shoulder as well.

“Go put your clothes on,” Patrick said after a moment.

She went into the bathroom to change. While she was doing so, it finally hit Patrick: Winona was his daughter, but every young woman whose services he had contracted was someone’s daughter. Right then Patrick knew he would never come to this place, or to any place like it, again. From now on he had to be the kind of man his daughter could look up to and respect. He didn’t know how she had come to this point in her life, but it didn’t matter: he loved her and would do everything he could to help her. True, he didn’t know how to be a father when she was a baby, and he didn’t know any more about it now than he did then, but he was willing to learn how to be the dad his little girl needed. He had come here looking for what he thought he wanted tonight and found what he had really wanted all these years.

When Winona came out in her street clothes, her lingerie stuffed in a large leather handbag, she sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed, and he in a chair across from her. Patrick

told the daughter he had not seen in twenty-two years what most weighed on his heart, and she said what she most longed to say to the father she had dreamed of, fantasized about, and even searched for, but never found.

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Fifteen minutes later, the elevator doors opened. Patrick and Winona stepped out and walked through the lobby.

When the elegant middle-aged woman saw them, she jumped up and hurried towards them.

“Was there a problem? Was something wrong?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Patrick said.

“But it’s scarcely been twenty minutes. Were you dissatisfied?”

“On the contrary, I haven’t been this happy for the last twenty-two years.”

“And I haven’t either,” Winona said. “I’m giving you my notice, effective immediately. I quit.”

At that Winona took her father by the arm and started walking towards the exit.

“But where are you going?” the middle-aged woman called after him.

“Home,” Patrick said, without turning around.

He and Winona would probably stay up all night talking.

Glossary of Names:

Patrick: father (ultimately from the Latin *pater* via the derivative *patricianus*)

Solus: alone (Latin). Patrick is a father who has been left alone by the death of his wife and the adoption of his daughter.

Désirée: the one desired, longed for, yearned for (French)

Winona: daughter (from the Dakota language)

Delicia: pleasure, delight (Latin)