

MODERN TABOO

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There was something about this time of the year that Natalie did not much care for. She explained it to friends in simple terms: "You can take off only so much. Then there is no more to take off, and it is still smelting, sweating hot. At least when it's cold, you can layer and layer. And then you can snuggle up against someone special... sitting by a crackling fire...drinking..." So it was with some dislike that she looked around her neighborhood and saw how people were out dealing with summer. She was looking out from inside an artificially cool environment, knowing eventually she would have to leave it behind and suffer the heat of the real world beyond, if only briefly.

She drove slowly, taking in the sight, not so much to people watch –sweaty, lobster-red or pale hirsute bodies did not appeal to her– but to be ready for stray balls and youthfully careless children crossing her path. She had lived in this neighborhood for a long time. She knew, more or less, which faces belonged here and where. She knew which house was frequented by hordes of little kids and where she could travel without fear of running anyone over. Around one specific house she had to be particularly careful for loose, aggressive, yappy dogs running out to attack her car. One street over from there and she was in retired-land –no one there seemed to be under the age of 65.

It was turning into her own street that something caught her attention. No, not something, but someone. She saw the figure in the distance. The very first thing that arrested her senses was the person's attire. He had no shirt on. A cringe of repulsion and nausea shock her body and mind. Her mind's first thought and image was of hairy fat, soaked in sweat. Not a pretty picture in the kindest of worlds. Inching closer though and her eyes and mind registered an anomaly. This was not a fat, sweaty sack of old... bones. Bang! Her mind identified the shirtless body. Yes, she had no doubt, even in this distance, she knew it was him. She winced at first, thinking of her particular neighbor who this body could belong to. Usually not one of her neighbors came close to attracting her attention –fully dressed. None would have her look even for a split second shirtless. Yet here she was, looking.

Slowing to a respectable but not obvious reduced speed she continued her travel, coming closer to this shirtless body. Details began to come clearer. He, this shirtless body, was walking behind a lawn mower. He was moving back and forth at a fast clip, leaving a trail of uniformity behind him; alternating dark and light shades of green paths of freshly mowed grass. There was a spring to his step –and a sharpness to his movements. He turned and walked towards the road side just as she was coming up on the house. Recognition finally struck her. "Oh my gosh, Bray!" she uttered in surprise. She drove on, but several times looked back in the rearview mirror, her attention drawn to him from a deep-rooted attraction.

Once at home, Natalie had to try hard to collect her thoughts. She had looked a little more intently than she should have, she felt. Heck, she stared and craved with far more interest than she had in a very long time. *Like a school girl*, she thought to herself. Sitting at home now, she looked to analyze these revealing feelings. Seeing the vibrant, youthful body kindled a desire that she had long learned to do without. She loved her work. She loved her independence. The importance of being with someone, of being a part of a relationship had been supplanted by other things in her life. All of the sudden though she found herself wanting, or at least imagining something different.

Then there was the fact that the person that had enlivened this burning within her was someone she had met some half dozen or so years earlier. She remembered the event only vaguely. She remembered that she had wanted to decline the invitation. Her introverted personality rejected socializing even when her soul craved human contact. She was the newest resident in the neighborhood then, which gave her an easy way to withdraw into a self-imposed isolation. She was trying to put more distance between her and a past life. Her idea had been to make her new home her own and interact with others as little as necessary. Her thought was to use the isolation to find herself. Then the incident occurred; a random event that could have resulted in a great tragedy. It would have surely destroyed a family and shattered several lives – including her own. It did not. Events took another road. And from there an overly energetic and overzealous personality broke her barrier. It resulted in the invitation; yanking her out of her isolation. She acquiesced to the neighbor's call. And there she met Bray -properly.

Bray Sterling. The thought of him now, as she remembered him from back then and how she nearly ran him over with her car, brought a smirk to her face. When exactly it occurred was a blank to her now; like a quickly fading dream, a fragmented detail irrelevant to the actual turn of events. She recalled being on her way home from a better than normal day at work. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of something moving from a yard towards the street. The sound of the popping ball and jolting of her car caused her to jab her foot on the brake. It saved her from living a very different life. That split second meant the difference between being able to drive on, or suffer the agony of having struck down and surely killed a young boy. Bray.

After many tears of joy, many apologies, and countless offers for "anything we can do" from extremely apologetic parents, Natalie accepted the gracious parent's invitation to a holiday cookout. This affair turned out to be a small, mixed family and neighbor event that the Sterling family catered every year. It was low key but light hearted. Natalie often looked back on it thinking how she felt almost comfortable there. Almost. As close to comfortable and congenial as she thought possible back then. As close to it as she wanted to, during a time when she thought she desired and needed isolation. The other thing she remembers, almost as vaguely as the gathering itself, but with a rather odd pleasantness was little Bray.

How old was he then? Natalie tried to recall. *A mere child*, she knew; but how old? She remembered that he had been very shy, yet unsettlingly inquisitive. *Yeah, he shadowed me the entire time.* More glimpses of that day were coming back to her. It had been a pleasant party. She never went again, but it was not for lack of interest. Work just became more demanding. Never going again and getting more and more busy with work also meant that she rarely ever saw Bray again, except here and there in the neighborhood. Until today, that is. Until he drew her attention –in a most bizarre way. *He can't be more than...* she lingered on a number, Fifteen! *About 18*, she told herself.

A few days after her lustful glimpse of Bray Sterling, while sitting at her computer at the end a regular, uninspiring day, Natalie wrote an old school friend. They often communicated through GMail's instant messenger rather than talking on the phone. Natalie knew it was a quirk in her friend. One she easily accepted and sanctioned by conversing almost exclusively through the medium. As she knew her friend was very adroit at doing, it allowed for some multi-tasking. The friend was into law –a lawyer or paralegal or something. Ever busy. Always doing something. Always occupying her mind with... stuff. This night, Natalie danced around one particular subject. She dared not ask the question she wanted to ask out right, but she had little trouble

typing out her thoughts. That was the thing about e-mail and instant messaging; shyness could be hidden --and even oppressed.

"What was that case you mentioned once about a relationship between an adult and a minor?"

Naturally the question got the friend's attention, but it was a subject they had discussed -- in great detail- before. Natalie had avoided dating for far longer than her friend felt was normal -- or natural. "You NEED to be out there, fishing the waters; using your natural attributes to snare and devour men like the slimy creatures they are." That opinion was saved on Natalie's messenger log as a reminder of her friend's quirky personality. Her friend had some unique perspectives. Not all of these were at odds with Natalie's own view.

They had agreed that the law --of one particular state, at least- was blindly strict and almost absurd in its implementation. "A very narrow take on so called Christian values," her friend had written. Through working the system, word of mouth, and some research they had found out that there was much that fell under the state's statutes as being illegal. This included any sexual activity that did not conform to missionary style, man-woman, married, un-aided (no toys, enhancing lubes, etc.), for-procreation-only, intercourse. Natalie was cool on her position but her friend would let loose an irate, indignant tirade that often did not moderate for days on end.

"Is 18 some kind of magical number?" she would incessantly ask. "Why?! Why? Why?!" "Why 18 in one state while it's 16 in another?" This was often followed by the question: "If there shouldn't be pleasure in it, why is it that it can feel so good?" She disliked the idea that sex was exclusively for reproduction --and hence only "allowed" between a man and his subjugated wife.

"Even among some animals, sex is physically pleasurable and not just something necessary for spreading and sustaining the species." Natalie had understood and partly supported this point of view. She also knew of the reality that same... gender sexual interaction was not limited to human beings alone --it had been thoroughly researched and discussed to ad nauseam by her friend.

"When we were less hypocritical, less arrogant, and less of brain-washed simpletons, society extolled homosexuals for their uniqueness. They embodied the best of both sexes, enriching the community." The statement had, at first, perplex Natalie, but her friend filled the messenger screen with points of view, facts, and rationalizations that broke down walls of prejudice, ill-conceived political, social, and religious misconceptions that had held Natalie in a narrow world.

Now Natalie was in turmoil over something that wasn't even anything... yet.

"I felt my pulse race," Natalie wrote.

"Heck girl, that just shows you are human!"

"A dirty human."

"Nonsense, Natalie. What you are feeling is the very essence of being alive. I only wish you would drop that wall of yours. Let go of the idea that pretend good girls are better. They're living a bigger, more morally corrupt lie. Let go of the brain-washed idea that sex is dirty, sinful, and a perverted weakness."

Natalie read through her friend's words, rejecting them at first. But deep inside herself she knew there was something that rung true in some of what her friend said.

"You have been alone for too long. You need to go out." When her friend threw in that one dreadful line --"you need to get laid"- Natalie ended the conversation and stepped away from the computer.

"GTG" she type, and logged off.

The interchange with her friend left Natalie feeling off for days. Probably more out of spite than any real true desire, she put herself out in the arena of the single and available. A co-worker, a crass, self-centered, arrogant piece of male specimen, hit on her right away, and she relented.

What have I done?, she thought to herself just as soon as she said yes. Colin Pilfer was the poster child of male chauvinist, black-hole of a soul, waste of physical perfection human being. *Maybe I can tune him out and just stare and appreciate his physical appearance.* Natalie also contemplated a chance for some much missed physical contact. *Maybe he makes up for his arrogance with excellent skills in bed.*

"About time you crawled out of that prissy world of yours," Colin Pilfer stated just as soon as Natalie agreed to having dinner with him. "I knew eventually you would give in to me."

These shallow statements set the stage for a very arduous night out. Natalie won one battle by standing firm on meeting Colin at the restaurant rather than having him pick her up at home. At the end of the night, this choice saved her from resorting to violence. Throughout the evening Colin laid out his best performance as a domineering, worth his weight in gold man.

It started out with Colin asking, "should we just skip this bit of pointless ritual and just get it on at my place?" Natalie laughed it off and tried to ignore his coarse wooing. But he had an arsenal of lines: "Once you let go of that prude stubbornness, you will worship my body." His position was clear: women could not get enough of him. "I make them squeal; they are all weak legged and wet with lust after I get in there."

Natalie fought some deep impulses and simply sat back and smiled, fielding all of Colin's advances with a detached, cool disposition. But to Colin's wrath, she did not give her body over to him. "No, thank you," she replied to his request that they head over to his place –to 'ride his pony,' as he stated. "You are an uptight, selfish loser." He followed that opinion with several other, less pleasant statements, questioning her womanhood, sexual orientation, physical attributes, and intelligence level.

As Natalie drove home, she gave thanks to being smart enough to have insisted on meeting Colin at the restaurant rather than allowing him to control the evening by driving. *If that is what I have been missing, I am grateful for being such a prude, prissy wench.*

The evening with Colin Pilfer cooled Natalie's resolution to seek out male companionship. But it did not kill her resolve to try to be a little bit more social. She laughed at the thought of her friend's suggestion that "maybe another woman's companionship" would serve her better. Natalie worked with plenty of women to know that was not at all a better solution than the likes of Colin Pilfer.

Natalie went out some more. These were 'girl's night out' and group gatherings that afforded some level of social interaction without the messy one on one confinement of a date. In this way she met a few interesting guys. She met Devon Bradshaw at an after business conference dinner. He was an upstart in the corporation. His mopyy blond hair, gray-blue eyes, and chiseled yet kind-looking face made up for a modest stature (5 foot six, at most) and a 'swimmer's build a few years and 40 pounds past its prime' –as one of Natalie's co-worker conceptualized. For a 24 year old, Natalie thought, he was surprisingly poised, polite, and oddly charming.

"He's gay."

"What?" Natalie replied sheepishly, not wanting to show her true disappointment.

"In the closet, but still very much gay." This was more opinion than fact; office gossip, but it did explain Devon's... peculiarities.

“And rumor is that married Larry tried to hit on him.”

“Larry is married?” Natalie did not hide her disappointment at hearing that bit of news. Larry was one of the few other men in the office Natalie found even remotely interesting. Or at least less offensive.

“He keeps it well hidden. Married and with two young kids.” Apparently the gossip suggested that the marriage was one of convenience, hiding deep, nasty secrets, that somehow was far more stable than many of the office’s true heterosexual commitments.

Nice enough guy, Natalie thought.

“It’s a shame, I know,” the co-worker added. “He’s actually one of the nicer guys around here.” As an afterthought, the woman added, “Devon could do worse... if THAT rumor is true.”

And so Natalie’s quest for companionship was thwarted once again. *Just as well*, she thought. *Work-place relationships are a bad thing*. Not that the girls-night-out venture was yielding better results. That was turning out to be a lot of pats on the bottom by drunken, sloppy men and sexual come-ons by egocentric, uninhibited by alcohol, married men looking to rekindle some sort of youthful exuberance and amorousness they may have believed they had but probably never actually possessed.

Over the passage of the months and in the course of all the different experiences Natalie went through during her effort to be more... available, she felt a pang from a specific sort of emptiness and a hunger for something that was deeper than what she was seeing –and being bombarded by from the men she was meeting. Little by little she sedated these feelings by filling her time with work. Eight hour days turned to 10 hour days; then twelve hour days; then work came home with her. And pretty soon there was little time for anything but work.

Between work and home, Natalie caught glimpses of the trifles of the world around her. These included the hustle and bustle of people, rushing about like a disturbed ant hill. It didn’t always strike her that her life was this mindless scuttling about, seeking superficial, fleeting pleasures. More often than not she was lost in that very rush. Every so often though, she would reflect deeper; a pause before picking up her latest edition smart phone or a second between flipping through dozens of high definition television channels offering useless, mindless, shallow entertainment, when her mind would become lucid and receptive. When those fleeting moments came, Natalie would feel the farcicality of the modern world, the shallowness of it all, and she would wonder where humans had gone wrong –and where it would ultimately lead them.

Driving home then, sometimes, Natalie would pause to see the little things that were life, through a cogent, uncluttered, unmalleable or corrupted mind. The sounds of birds singing rang truer then. Trees looked greener and more alive. The sounds of playing, happy children brought a truer sense of being alive and of living. One could see a hint of a smile if they saw her drive by them. During those precious few seconds, Natalie was seeing the world for what it was; not a commercialized doldrums of consumerism and shallow ambitions and fleeting pleasures. These glimpses into a simpler, perhaps better life should have given her some peace and mild mirth, instead they rumbled her soul.

Listening to the laughing children, hearing the sing-song of the various birds in search of life, seeing the swaying of the trees for the living things that they are rather than green and brown objects that are just there, and taking in the smell of freshly mowed lawns and admiring the patterned, colored variations of meticulous lawns, Natalie thought of things missing in her life. There was a hole in her soul; an emptiness no new, fantastic, fandangle gadget or temporary, superficial thrill could replenish. That familiar pang struck her. A longing rattled her core.

Then the familiarity of home, of the familiar environment, the gadgets and trivial splendors eased or appeased her inner turmoil; it beat her senseless again. Familiarity, routine, and contemptuous acceptance returned and Natalie embraced it all and continued in her proverbial, vacant living. Routine and familiarity feeds the illusion of comfort, happiness, and safety. The TV went on, spewing out background noise. A whirling computer fan polluted the silence, adding to the many various sounds of electronic gadgets and doodads. Clicking of a virtual keyboard joined the unregistered din. It was all a chaos and cacophony relegated to the subconscious. None of it even phased Natalie's sedated mind. Her ears captured the noise, but the signal was discarded by the beaten and battered brain.

Natalie paused from her work and recalled the scenes outside. Life. The craving for something more substantial in her life was stronger than all the pomp and fluff of her world. So she looked outside her comfortable shell. She thought of the manicured lawns and the symmetry there. Someone had done that. Someone was taking the everyday world, manipulating it with modern conveniences, making it special; sub-ordinary. It gave her a pinch of gratification. *Bray!* Natalie mused. Bray Sterling was the architect. That thought broadened Natalie's gratification – turning it into an almost a girlish glee.

Life went on. The routines kept flowing like a slow yet powerful stream. Natalie could deviate, but she could not stop the flow. She could break the surface and look around, but the flow would drag her on. Yet the idea, that jab that infused a rush of life into her soul, that subtle, barely perceptible reverie that hit her when Bray Sterling came to mind. Why? What was it? Where was it leading her?

Rushing out one morning, Natalie ran into young Bray Sterling. Literally ran into him.

"Ohh! Excuse me." Natalie said as she pulled her hand away from Bray's chest. Instinctively she had put her hand up to keep from crashing flat into the young man. Flashes of movies' star-struck lovers crashing into each other's arms hit Natalie's mind's eye. The combination of the flashes and the electrical shock that charged through her body as she made contact with Bray's body made her shudder and gasp.

"Wow! You okay?" Natalie asked as she tried to regain her composure.

"I'm fine, ma'am," Bray replied with a wry smile. Perfectly straight, white teeth glimmered behind slightly parted, smooth, sanguine, fleshy lips.

After a short pause, adding to the mystery and weirdness of the encounter, Natalie spoke again.

"Bray... Sterling, right?"

"Y-yes." He replied in perceptibly terse fashion.

"Right," Natalie sucked in a deep breath, gathering her thoughts and addressed Bray again: "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, right." The smile (smirk, really) faded. "I-- I do lawns in the neighborhood." (*DUH!* thought Natalie. Like she hadn't already noticed –as most of the women in the neighborhood had.)

"I've just got the guy next door to hire me on as well and thought you would do the same." His initially suave demeanor faltered as he drone on.

Not so cavalier after all Natalie mused the more Bray spoke. She made no move to speak.

"I mean, ma'am, would you be interested in having me take care of your lawn?" awkward pause. "I usually mow front and back every two weeks and trim any bushes once a month." Another silent pause. "I can do it more often if you like... or less. Ahh, uhhmm, I can

also trim trees... and clean gutters... as needed." Now he paused, looking at Natalie, expecting some reply.

As Bray spoke, selling his services, Natalie regain 'consciousness' and began to take in the scene. Bray stood maybe two feet away from her. He gave off a scent of mixed fresh mowed lawn, gasoline, youthful body sweat essence, and a hint of some artificial fragrance. As he spoke, his chest moved out and in, puffing and collapsing in a rhythmic movement which would break from his talking rhythm then merge with it, chaotic yet structured, like some choreographed modern music dance. Muscles tightened and relaxed, giving a sort of fayness of rippling waves moving up and down his body.

That moving chest and ripping abdomen were bare. The youthful, male chest muscle structure lay clearly defined, bulbous and taut, tapered and convex in just the right places. It was covered only in a wet film of perspiration. (The same perspiration that had transferred onto Natalie's hand and was cooling it disquietingly.) The dewy abdomen fluctuated from smooth to textured like a living washboard flexing from a corrugated to a flat surface and back. The bedewed wetness on him made his sinewy, tawny tan skin scintillate like a high tech, science fiction, optical illusion. Bray wore only a pair of cargo pants which draped over green-stained, scuffed, dark brown in color work boots.

"So, would you be interested?"

The words brought Natalie back. She could feel a flush reddening her face as she realized she'd been staring at his body. Some... thing deep inside her had plowed to the surface of her being and had shut down all cognizant, analytical, rational controls. Bray's smooth voice, deep in a pleasing way, leashed that inner being back into submission.

"I'm not..." Natalie stammered, unable to completely clear her mind and assert her true position.

"My... I charge a monthly... There are... I can..." Bray stopped, shook his head and tried again. "I usual bill customers; by the job, a monthly charge, or in a couple of cases, yearly." Remembering that he was holding something in his hand, he added, "here." He handed Natalie a paper with his available services, fee schedule, and contact information. Realizing Natalie was not answering right away, Bray put in "you can look that over and let me know later."

"Right, okay. Thank you." Natalie intoned with a sort of dead enthusiasm, making her flush even further.

"My contact information is on there," Bray pointed at the flyer gripped in a death clutch in Natalie's hand. After another awkward silent pause, Bray said: "my number is on there."

Internally, Natalie laughed. She caught the inferred smugness in Bray's statement. Like something he learned from arrogant adults. *Or TV*, she reflected. To him she said, "yes, I see that. I appreciate it."

"Well, I have to go," Bray finally said. He said it as he moved away, stepping backwards, not breaking eye contact with Natalie. Something had taken hold of him in a way he had never felt before. It was making his heart race like death had just rushed up behind him and yelled 'boo!' Certain parts of his body were reacting in the most profound –and discomfited- ways. This was like nothing he had ever felt before. He still remembered his first kiss; how he felt all queasy and tingly inside. He felt completely self-conscious with his racing heart thumping in his chest and his sweaty hands that he was constantly drying on his pants. But the feeling today was different.

Once Bray was out of sight of Natalie, he started to focus on the situation. *Am I just horny today?* He wondered. He counted back to the last time he felt the intimate touch of a girl. That would have been Missy, about 20 months ago. The thought of her made him smile (and started again a physical reaction between his legs). He dated Missy for just short of a month. She went

from a stranger he normally would not have looked at twice to the closest his young body had come to the female body (and its unique and much sought after attributes). Within a week after officially becoming girlfriend and boyfriend, she had him in bed, naked and helplessly lost in lust.

Missy tried to take Bray's maleness inside her on two different occasions and both times she had given up and been resigned to satisfying him orally. Bray enjoyed the fellatio well enough. He had been made familiar with its effect on him with a previous girlfriend. It was far better than being home alone, bringing physical satisfaction on himself. But coming so close to something more, something with far greater satisfaction and meaning, he was left a bit deflated. The fact that Missy promptly turned her back on him, discarding him like an ill-fitting pair of shoes, scared his young ego. In the year that followed, Bray tempered his libido and focused on other things. Now he was working his body, amassing a substantial savings fund, and subduing any errant sexual desires.

Then Natalie stopped a collision; she touched him. Now he was caught in some whirlwind of pent-up desires that were overwhelming him and making him dizzy and short of breath. *What is wrong with me?* He asked himself in frustration. He tried to dismiss the situation with things like *she's old* and *I'm just a looser kid*. *What hope would I have with a woman like her?* That was his last thought as he pushed himself to refocus on his happy little world.

Natalie continued to do the girl's night out with co-workers, but with much less enthusiasm. *I'm just the designated driver*, she thought to herself. She was there as a shadow –and the sober, guarding entity of the group; the group's DD. She avoided being drawn in by the myriad of men that approached the group, hustling for attention and admiration. She was pleasant and attentive, but she shun away from any guy who appeared to want to take things beyond the evening's social event into something more private and personal. It was giving her the reputation as the group's cold fish. *Fine with me*, she thought. *Cold, clammy, and safe*.

One particular Friday night (carrying over into the early hours of Saturday), Natalie was forced to take responsibility for one of the women in the group. There had been a lot of heavy drinking. For most of the women there was a less drunk man to dispose of them for the night. Little by little, pairs departed; some with more coordination and intact motor functions than others. Natalie could not prevent this. All she felt compelled to do was linger and wait for the more inebriated to seek a way home –or just a HOME to be taken to.

By 3 AM there was only one woman left behind. The rising and falling of her chest was the only clear indication that she was alive. She reeked of bile and assorted alcoholic beverages – as well as some best-not-investigated odors reminiscent of too long left unchanged crying babies. Natalie stepped up in her role as the designated driver. With some effort she carried the intoxicated co-worker out. Once the woman was secure in Natalie's car, "Oh, why MY car?!" Natalie had toiled over the decision; reality hit. Natalie didn't know where the woman lived. Getting information out of the incoherent, nearly comatose woman was not possible.

After hearing some ominous grumbling coming from the woman and smelling some tale-tail odors coming out with each deep, thunderous breath, Natalie chose to drive the short distance to her own home, hoping nothing vile and unpleasant came up and out from her passenger along the way. She could figure things out later, when hopefully some of the intoxication would have subsided. By 10 AM Saturday, all was falling into place.

"Who's the shirtless Adonis?" the now sobering co-worker asked while drinking some hot tea and looking out the back window of Natalie's home. Natalie stacked the last pancake onto

a plate and walked over to the window with it. She set the plate on a small, tall two-seat table by a bay window nook and looked out to see who her co-worker was referring.

"Adonis?" asked Natalie before seeing who the person of interest actually was.

"That bit of tanned, tight, sweaty morsel of male specimen," the co-worker said while pointing a finger out the window in the direction of the neighbor's back yard. Natalie followed the pointing finger to the subject in question; Bray Sterling.

"Hmmm", Natalie stumbled for a second, then said "that's the neighborhood's lawn ma...guy." She broke her stare and tried to steer the co-worker to the table. "The pancakes and orange juice should make you feel better."

"I'd feel better if I'd woken up next to him," the co-worker said, still staring out the window. "Hell, I'd feel better if he came over here right now and sowed my fields and laid his seeds deep..."

"I would have driven you home but I didn't know where home is." Natalie tried to reign in the woman's lecherous comments. She hadn't given the rumors much credence, but now hearing the words flowing from the woman, Natalie was realizing the harshness of the names assigned to the woman by the office staff were not far off.

"That is some sweet bit of flesh. I don't suppose he does your lawn? Not that he'd get much done if I got a hold of him. Come wet me up with some of that sweat!" the woman's voiced raised to an almost scream.

"Let's get into this food before it goes cold, then I can take you home." Natalie was starting to feel repulsed by the woman's commentary. The sooner she was rid of her the better.

"Any chance you have a little something to fire this up?"

"No," was the curt reply. No chance Natalie was going to give the woman any alcohol to add to the orange juice –and to the still too high alcohol levels currently coursing through the woman's veins.

"Too bad," the woman said. What she was thinking though was that Natalie was an uptight, prissy woman wasting away like an ignored plum.

On her way back home Natalie felt relieved to have rid herself of the crass co-worker. But she also felt conflicted over some of the woman's comments. Natalie hadn't thought much about Bray lately. She hadn't given herself much time to think about the young man. Bray had stopped by once, knocking on the door and finally leaving another of his fliers behind. Natalie ignored him. She went on to mow her own lawn, trying to put him out of her mind. Now he was back. Every time she closed her eyes she saw him out in the back yard, shirtless, tanned and wired tight, sparkling in dewy sweat.

Other images crept into her dreams. Dreams where Bray's body took center stage. These made Natalie feel dirty and lecherous. She was really beginning to feeling weak and shallow. These were not feelings she wanted to entertain. They represented a type of identity she related to a socially popular yet superficial and too simple persona. She had developed this idea after reading a line in a H.G. Wells book: "As men emerged to civilization, women seemed going back to savagery -to paint and feathers." She refused to digress to paint and feathers.

Not two weeks after having rescued the co-worker from a drunken stupor, Natalie found herself facing Bray Sterling. It was a miserable, gray, drizzly day. Summer was loosing its grip on the land. The windshield wipers on her car were moving back and forth in a slow, random, melancholic way, much in tune with her inner mood. She was driving on a sort of autopilot; not paying much attention to her surroundings, just heading home like a mindless carrier pigeon.

The gloom of the day was weighing heavily on her. Not because she was particularly sad or sullen. It was just a deep emptiness that the weather was filling with gray, wet gloom.

Ahead on the road, Natalie's subconscious caught sight of something out of place. The roads had been barren and lifeless for miles so the nearing object glimpsed like a spider descending stealthily from the ceiling brought her mind out of its stupor. Slowly, Natalie refocused on her far-away world to the road ahead. There was a body out there; moving along the side of the road. Keeping her speed low, for the adverse weather conditions merited respect and caution, she approached the person. They were huddled over in a futile effort to ward off the cold, soaking mist.

Natalie felt the person's misery radiating out like a wave of heat coming out of a just opened 400 degree hot oven. She was feeling conflicted as she neared. A part of her was motivated to giving succor to the individual, regardless of who they were. That would be the right thing to do. The rational side of her was somewhat more heedful, considering the possibilities that the individual was a potential threat. Driving on without stopping might be the correct thing to do. Still, Natalie slowed even further as she came closer.

Details were better perceived with the narrowing proximity. The person's clothing was clinging to the body; soaked through and through. The body's build and gait suggested youthfulness; not serial killer, aged material. The clinging coat was nothing more than a dark color, thin cotton hoody. Black canvas shorts dripped rivulets of water down otherwise bare (but muscular, shapely) legs. *Male legs*, Natalie thought. A red container hung from the man's left hand, hanging low, motionless, glistening wet. *A gasoline container*, Natalie discovered as she drew a car's length closet to the wet walker.

Something inside Natalie moved her muscles to let off the accelerator, and she slowed to a crawl as the car came level with the miserably wet pedestrian. The person turned just as Natalie looked out her passenger side window. "Bray!?" Natalie actually vocalized out loud –for no one to hear.

"Bray?" Natalie uttered again out of her just opened window. She had stopped her forward movement through the day's wretched weather, arresting the pedestrian's own miserable stride. Only misty rain and the heavy, empty sound of a sodden, withdrawn world entered her dry, isolated world. The hooded figure moved slow, fighting the weather as if it were a viscid substance. He turned and looked into the confines of the warm, dry car interior.

"Bray Sterling? What...? Why are you out here in this weather?" Natalie was struggling with her words and thoughts. Finally she shook her head and spoke in a clear, authoritative tone: "Get in this car and get out of that mess," the click of the automatic door locks accentuating her words.

Bray's face was partially hidden inside the cover of his coat's hood. The dark, cottony cloth clung to his face, hiding his features. His eyes looked like distant twin suns piercing the darkness of the cosmos. Natalie couldn't tell what expression was framed on Bray's face. He was like a black hole covered in rain sodden clothing. Natalie felt a second of trepidation; for a moment unsure if she was actually letting a stranger into her vehicle. The long pause passed and the believed Bray entered. He plopped down into the dry seat with a soft sigh; there was a sort of discernable crumpling of the wet body frame, as if the heavy weights it had been carrying were burden with a final overload of weight.

"Why are you out here, Bray?" Natalie asked. She reached over and touched Bray's forearm to get his attention. He'd just sat and stared straight ahead, silent.

It took a few moments for Natalie to bring Bray out of whatever world he had retreated into. She was patient about it. Only the car's hazard light's ticking breaking the car's silent interior. Rivulets of water oozed off of Bray's clothing, dripping down onto the car's tan leather

seats. Click, click, click went the hazard lights. Natalie waited, allowing the heater to chase away the cold that had invaded the car's interior.

"You at least feeling a little warmer?" Natalie softly asked. Bray nodded ever so lightly. Feeling a little more assured that this was not some crazed, dangerous stranger; Natalie began to relax and wonder. Bray's nodding showed he was not some evil dark force hiding under human clothing, which emboldened her. She reached up to him, gingerly touching the soaked hoody, and pulled it off and away. It moved heavy with weight of the soaked in rain. Heat radiated from Bray's exposed head. The sight of his sharp but soothing facial features made her heart race and falter.

"Bray," Natalie felt herself whisper just as her hand was reaching up to his face. She did not touch him. Instead she flicked off the hazard lights and started moving the vehicle forward again. Minutes passed with only the sound of the engine and the slow, rhythmic noise of the windshield wipers intruding into the isolated interior. They were heading home. Whose home was not yet clear in Natalie's mind. One thing at a time.

"I can't go home." These words came out harsh and cold. In a milder tone Bray added, "No one's at the house... and I don't have my keys."

Well, that settles that, Natalie told herself. Out loud she said, "okay." And on she drove, towards her place.

The car pulled into the garage, backed in, as Natalie preferred to park. The lumbering metal garage door eased down from its perch, closing out the snarling world outside. Natalie ushered Bray into the warm, inviting house. He moved with resistance; slowly, lurching along with a sort of blank stupor of the sensationalized, theatrical undead.

"Ah! Warmth," Natalie said, just to break the silence. It didn't feel like enough so she grabbed a hunk of Gorilla glassed micro-electronics that served as her universal Universal remote control and turned on the living room television. Its soothing din easing her building anxiety.

Darn, Natalie thought to herself as she looked at the still dripping Bray. He was standing at the landing between the living room and the kitchen. Marble tile floors, impervious to water, covered the floors of all living areas, so Bray's dripping didn't faze Natalie much. *It will dry easy enough,* Natalie mused. What did trouble her was having him stay in those sodden clothes. As if on cue Bray started to quiver. Not a full on, obvious shiver, but a discernable shake nonetheless. He was fighting it.

"Do you have a shirt under that?" Natalie asked, pointing at Bray's soaked hoody.

Bray's answer to the inquiry was to lift the bottom of the hoody, exposing the clinging maroon colored shirt underneath. Then he grabbed the shirt in a fist, peeling it away from his body and its well defined contours, and gave it a squeeze. Drops of water fell to the tile floor. That exercise answered Natalie's next question, 'Is it dry?'

"When will your parents get home?"

Bray shrugged.

"What happened to your keys?"

Another shrug.

Natalie was starting to wonder if Bray was not a little mental health; a little shot-out, perhaps. *Oh well,* she thought with an easing impression, *can't leave him dripping and cold.*

"I gather that you'll be here for a spell. So, best not let you just stand there like a fountain statue, slobbering water all over my floor." Natalie had an idea, and now ran with it.

"The bathroom is through that second door. There's a shower. Get in there and take a long, hot shower... long enough to give me a chance to dry your stuff."

Bray eyed her with something between contempt and admiration. But after a pause, he goose-stepped towards the bathroom.

The bathroom door closed behind him. *It didn't slam*, Natalie considered. She remembered how teen boys tended to slam doors as if it were a sport. Every slam a challenge to the world as if saying, "I am here!" and "I am my own boss!" Bray closed the door without a sound. While thinking of good parents and proper upbringing, she focused on the closed bathroom door. *Crud!* She realized, *I didn't tell him to leave the cloths out*. She would need to get Bray's wet stuff to dry while he took his shower. Just as she moved to the door she heard the water turn on.

Natalie knocked and heard a grumble that may have been a "its open." She tried the door. It was unlocked, so she opened it a few inches. Through the open gap she could see Bray's silhouette in the shower stall. The frosted glass obscured his features –to some extent. She looked away; down to the floor where Bray had left his clothes. She scampered in and out, taking Bray's clothes without glancing up at the shower.

The shower ran for close to 40 minutes –just as long as the drier took to tumbled dry Bray's clothes. With dry clothes in hand, Natalie approached the bathroom, fretting over things that were developing in the back of her mind. Bray met her at the door, opening it just enough for his head to peek out. The delivery of the dry clothes turned out rather innocuous; much to Natalie's relief. There was just a "here" and a "thank you," passing in blurred seconds. From there on, the worst thing was getting information out of Bray's reticent, youthful mind.

"Your shoes will take a wee longer to dry," Natalie said as Bray walked, barefooted, into the living room. He'd move too quiet for her comfort. *He could easily have snuck up on me... I could have been scratching my behind!* She mused, letting a slight smile twitch her lips.

Bray said nothing in return. He just loomed over the threshold between living room and foyer, hands in pockets, looking sheepish and shy. It was a conflicting look for him. Natalie thought it made him look both endearing and broody.

"Come in and relax." Natalie motioned to the couch in front of the TV. "Actually," she interjected before Bray took two steps. "Actually, you hungry? Come on..." She walked into the kitchen, pointing to the dinette nook by the bay window as she walked past it.

Natalie started rummaging through the refrigerator. The choice of foods in there was not bowling her over with desire. *Teens don't eat this tuff*, she thought as she pushed "healthy" food items around the refrigerator's glass shelves. About the only things she found that might seem appropriate were the juices she often kept. She pulled these out for his choosing.

"Pick one of these and I'll order some pizza. Pepperoni good for you?" Before he answered (not that he was truly likely to answer, not in words anyway) she said, "Actually, I feel like a meat lovers." She picked up the phone while he poured himself some green tea.

Moments later they both sat at the nook, looking out at the pouring rain pelting the back yard. Things had picked up since they were in the car. It looked as if some of the falling rain was coming down solid. For a brief moment Natalie felt guilty at having ordered pizza –forcing some guy to drive in the wet mess outside. *There just around the corner*, she told herself, trying to ease a mild case of guilt. Sure enough, within minutes the door bell rang and the aroma of hot, fresh pizza permeated into the house. Soon, two boxes of meat stacked pizza laid open on the little table.

Better than sex Natalie thought while eating the pizza. What she said out loud was "even bad pizza is good pizza." Bray just nodded.

"So where are your parents?" More silence followed.

"When do you think they'll be back?" Natalie asked as she wondered how much of the reticent, angst poster child passivity and false apathy she could endure. Maybe she could drive him home right away. *He can eat while I drive*, she thought wryly. Looking out at the pouring rain though she reconsidered; rain drops were starting to bounce on the grass, freezing into sleet. Larger stones were also falling here and there.

"That," pointing at a hail-stone the size of a baseball that had just dropped through the trees, splashing into pool, "would smart some." Natalie was thinking of all those people who had two, three, even 4 car garages, making their million dollar homes look more like car hangers with an afterthought of a house attached to them, yet insisted on parking their \$80,000+ cars in the driveway. She sighed knowing her garage was housing her vehicle, safe and secure; rather than serving as a storage bay. Then another thought hit her: *No chance I'll drive in THAT mess.*

"Your parents won't be driving in that." Silence followed Natalie's statement.

"They're not coming back." Bray finally spoke. His words were rather ominous, Natalie thought. She looked at him with a concerned expression.

"They're at some overnight retreat thing." Bray added quietly. His words were heavy and laden with palpable pain.

After another long pause filled only by the sound of rain, wind, thunder, and the soft smacking of mastication, Natalie said "at least they won't be caught out in that." She nodded to the window and the storm beyond.

"Are they on vacation?"

"No."

"Could you have gone with them?"

"No."

"I guess you are past that. I think I stopped wanting to go places with my parents when I was in high school... when I had my license and my own car. You start to see how weird parents are then." She smiled as she added the last bit. But Bray only shrugged.

"You could have thrown some wild party knowing they would be away."

"Hmph" is all Bray offered in response.

The pizza was disappearing. Outside, the sleet was starting to pile up on the lawn. The atmosphere inside the warm house was becoming disconcertingly quiet. *I'm no good at this*, Natalie thought. Idle chit-chat was not her forte. Idle chi-chat with a moody teen was beyond her grasp. She was wondering how much of this teen angst thing she had put her parents through.

"They're splitting up." Bray's words jabbed the quiet. Natalie was unsure what he was talking about.

"They're at a couple's therapy thing. They've been having a lot of fights. They fight all the time. I thought with me working, out of the way, not causing them any trouble, they could fix things." His last words came out labored and heavy with emotion.

The news hit Natalie unawares. The Sterling's were the last couple on her street that was still together. Most other neighbors were into their second marriage or traversing through various boyfriends or girlfriends. A few of these new boyfriends had hit on Natalie at some point or another. This said loads for society these days. (One of the new HUSBANDS had hit on her as well!) The Sterling's were the envy of many broken marriages. That they were splitting was hard to believe.

"I'm so sorry," Natalie murmured. Then she thought of Bray's last statement. "Couples sometimes just drift apart. Something happens. The too familiar gets under the skin. The little things, life's 'trifles,' the things that maybe once seemed like cute, funny, and endearing quirks become a nuisance and grating. That initial love fades and a sort of contempt takes over. Distance builds. Love turns sour. It happens." *It happens all too often*, she thought this, but didn't say it.

"We were so happy when I was a kid." Bray spoke softly, looking out the window. "Then I started causing trouble." He went on to talk about having been arrested along with some friends. A car had been vandalized; a house broken into; 'kids' seen drinking in a dark parking lot. Nothing came of it for him; he'd just been at the wrong place, at the wrong time. But it had caused his parents some stress.

There was another incident that wrecked havoc at their home which now Bray saw as another reason for his parent's discord. "I'd never touched her, but Becky insisted I was the father." Bray drone on about this girl Becky and how she had accused him of impregnating her. She had force a paternity test and threatened a law suite if Bray (or Bray's parents, really) didn't provide substantial financial support.

"It tore my parents up to think I had been so irresponsible. They thought I lied to them. They accused each other of not teaching me between right and wrong. Mom said dad was sexist. Dad called mom irrational and over dramatic. They fought for weeks. Slept in separate rooms. Ate in silence." Bray didn't see the importance of his parents making up with each other and apologizing to each other once the test came back and proved Bray innocent. He didn't see how they rallied behind him and supported him in setting the "gold-digging" girl to rights.

"I ruined their marriage," he said, but in fact, the incident had reaffirmed his parent's commitment to each other, "I broke them up."

"Are you sure they are splitting?" Natalie inquired; puzzled by the direction Bray was taking the situation. "What makes you think they ARE splitting?"

"They argue. They go off on these secret... things." Bray answered with a forlorn longing rather than unshakable certainty.

"They argue... or they fight?" Natalie asked.

"Argue," Bray answered with a perplexed look on his face. Then he added, "...fight. Argue, fight. Same thing."

Natalie reached out to Bray, laying her hand on his forearm. She spoke on, calmly and tenderly, telling him how arguing was part of understanding. "They may be seeing something, some issue, from different perspectives. That sometimes makes it hard to realize that there are different ways to approach things and that just because something may seem right to you, it doesn't necessarily mean it is correct. There's a difference between not being wrong and being right. One person's right may not be right for another. The arguing, and I think it is the case with your parents, is a way to express your position... and learn about the other person's."

Bray turned his stony stare out into the gloomy world beyond and away from the window and, for the first time that evening, looked straight into Natalie's eyes. It did something to Natalie; something deep inside her. But the look on Bray's eyes said something had happened deep inside him as well.

"Not fighting?"

"Not necessarily."

"Why all the arguing? Why all the secrecy?"

"Bray, perhaps you should ask them. You know, you are old enough to talk for yourself. You are old enough to deal with adult things. Look what you do." Natalie was thinking of his burgeoning lawn business. "You've done that."

Silence crept back into the house. Bray returned his eyes and thoughts to the world beyond. *They are facing some tough decisions* Bray realized, seeing it a little clearer. They'd be loosing him. There was his move to college. There was the chance he would move out... move away. He would be on his own; a man, independent. For the first time he thought, *that can't be easy for them.*

"My girlfriend dumped me." The statement came as a surprise to the pensive Natalie. Silence had once again slunk back into the room. Natalie had been sipping what was left of her green tea; nursing it to make it last so she wouldn't have to get up to get more.

"Oh," she replied to Bray's random, out of the blue declaration.

Bray turned to Natalie and smiled. "She said I smelled like grass and gas." He shook his head at that. Apparently he had been spending most of his money on her. "Movies, dinners,... and stuff." The stuff included gifts that went past his means –and what was proper for their relationship. "And then all of the sudden she jilts me like a no-good-looser. Because of grass and gas?"

Natalie sat and listened. Bray reminisced on some of the better parts of the relationship. A few of the memories were pleasant and brought a curling to his lips. Not a full on smile, but a wanting twitch. They'd had some good times. Stuff one would expect from young lovebirds. The break-up was typical of what was becoming the norm for young relationships. And like that norm, Natalie learned that Bray's ex had hooked up with another guy before the day was through. Naturally.

The evening dragged into night. The storm outside lost some of its fervor, but the mess it created had built up quite profoundly. There was a mixture of sleet and hail stones littering the back lawn. On the warm, hard asphalt of the streets, some of that would have melted, only to freeze as night wore on. Natalie was looking at the very likely chance that Bray would have to spend the night. A part of her felt it was perfectly natural and safe. Another part of her, a part perhaps a bit jaded by the reality of a twisted world, gave her an uneasy sensation in her core.

With the TV, the conditioned warmth of the living room, and the full, satiated stomachs, Natalie and Bray passed the hours. The couch was large, yet Natalie felt as if Bray was right up against her. That was the twisted thought swirling in her head. Her body, however, was feeling a subtle tingling that reminded her of her dating days as a teenager. *My palms are sweaty*, she thought, letting a small smile curl her lips. *You're too old to be feeling like a silly school girl*, she told herself. But something about the rush, the exhilaration that was cursing through her felt good. There was a sense of living there. *I miss this feeling*, she mused.

Sitting less than three feet away, Bray fought to calm his nerves. He kept a very stout mien, or so he hoped, but inside, he was a jiggly mess. The stomach butterflies were feeling more like super-morphed mutant entities with wings trying to break out. A part of him felt a wonderful elation. He could hear many "you go boy!" in his head. His heart kept racing; beating crazily in his chest. *Can she hear it?* He wondered. *Can she see how freaked I am?* And he was freaked. *Why AM I freaked out?* He asked. He told himself that Natalie was just a nice person; a nice woman; an older woman who only saw him as a child. But somewhere deeper inside he felt that there was something more; a sweet, savory potential. A certain part of his body was reacting in a much more pronounced, optimistic, alive way. *Thank God for the pillow*, Bray thought, embracing a large throw pillow in his arms, and on his lap.

Like the weird late summer storm that brought sleet and hail, the awkward night between Natalie and Bray faded. Eventually both went to sleep. Natalie had stepped away during a commercial to prepare the guest bedroom. "Fresh sheets are on the bed and a new tooth brush is in the bathroom," she'd told him. "You know where the bathroom is," she said with a mischievous smile. She left Bray on the sofa with the warning not to stay up too late. She fell asleep reluctantly. Feeling unusually tired and weirdly sleepy, Bray followed suit not long after.

Morning brought a dry, warming day with clear blue skies. Breakfast was a quiet, but not an uncomfortable affair. The storm had made a mess of the yard –and probably the roads- so Natalie decide not to go into the office. The yard would need cleaning up. Not being able to outright reject Bray’s offer to clean her yard, Natalie decided to make it a combined effort. And so the morning passed, rather amiably, with the two of them collecting fallen limbs, raking leaves, skimming storm detritus out of the pool, and righting the wrongs of the previous night’s storm.

“Wendy’s for lunch?”

Bray answered with his sheepish boy-teen shrug.

“We’ll hit it on the way home... before gas.” Natalie remembered that Bray’s forage the night before was partly driven by a need to get gasoline.

Lunch turned into a subdued affair. Natalie enjoyed her overindulgence of two stacks of square meat and several thick cuts of bacon (with a little bread and “vegetables” added in to make it all look healthy –French fries are good too, right? A vegetable?). The vanilla Frosty helped her ease everything down. Bray mimicked Natalie, though he used his Frosty to add flavor to his French fries, then washed it all down with a large soda.

Full and satiated again the two continued on their way. They found Bray’s parents out in the yard, looking over at the carnage from the night’s storm. Bray rushed out, gas container in hand, and joined his parents. They ended up cleaning up the yard together, like a happy family. No, not “like.” They were a happy family. During the work, Bray talked. He asked about their secret trip; about their marriage and their love for each other. He brought up college and moving out. Little by little they dealt with the stress of their lives as a close, loving family. It was good for Bray; a growing experience.

Natalie felt good about Bray’s new growth and enlightenment; she met up with him and talked briefly a few days later. He had shared his experience with his parents and the talking that had gone on. He’d never talked WITH his parents like that before. He realized that in the past it had been mostly fruitless clashing of opposing perspectives, opinions, and rigid characters; lots of words, corrupting hot air, but no transmission of knowledge or diffusion of personal beliefs or positions; no understanding or gave and take.

“They aren’t divorcing,” Bray informed Natalie. “They went to a college open house,” he added with a wry smile. It turned out his parents were getting ready for the inevitable change that was coming. Bray would soon be on his own; a man. This reality was wearing on them, sometimes making nerves fray and patience wane, but no break-up.

“Thank you.” Bray’s gratitude melted Natalie to her soul. The broody, reticent, angst poster child attitude lifted, showing a warm soul underneath.

That gratitude carried Natalie along for days. Some time later, while thinking of Bray, he showed up.

“Hey,” he said.

“Bray, how are you?”

His answer was that familiar blustering shrug of his.

Natalie had just mowed the lawn in the front yard and was making her way towards the back. She just kept on pushing the lawn mower, figuring that if Bray wanted something or wanted to talk, he would just follow her. He did. And as he did, he took it upon himself to start picking up stray pine cones and maundering twigs.

Mowing the back yard was a brief task. Natalie had it done in minutes. As she finished Bray started skinning arrant grass clippings out of the pool.

“You have anything in your pockets?” The question threw Bray off for a split second, but then he answered Natalie with a curt “no.”

The spray of cool water hit him directly on the chest, soaking his t-shirt in seconds. The water kept coming so the water was soon soaking his shorts as well.

"Oh, oops!" Natalie looked at the drenched Bray trying to hold back a smirk. "How did that happen? This darn hose nozzle sticks sometimes." She said with a smile. "Hmmm, you may as well finish with the pool cleaning by jumping in and fishing out the twigs and pine cones out of the bottom." As these words came out she scolded her self. *What are you doing?* Whatever she was doing, it was working. Bray kicked off his shoes; peeled away his wet socks; and stripped out of the wet, clingy t-shirt. Shoes went one way. The socks were draped over the arms of a lawn chair and the t-shirt was flung over the same chair's back. And into the pool went Bray, diving head first into the deep end.

As Bray dove down, fishing out pine cones, twigs, and other yard litter, Natalie finished with her yard work. She met him by the pool side, grin embellishing their faces.

"You wear the wet look well," Natalie said smiling, looking at the wet-puppy look on Bray's face. Bray answered by sinking down into the water. When he came back up his muppy hair was matted down to his head, but away from his eyes.

"Thank you."

"You hungry?"

"I can eat."

"Ham and cheese sandwich with chips and a soda work for you?" Natalie was moving away from the pool as she asked (she didn't really expect an answer –and didn't get one).

They sat on twin pool-side lounge chairs, eating their sandwiches. The chairs were set side by side, angled inward, separated only by a small table. The little table held their drinks. Sitting off to one side of her chair, legs together, plate resting on her joined knees, looking slightly sheepish and meek, Natalie ate her sandwich and chips in bird like snips. Her mind was struggling with distraction. Bray sat within arm's reach straddling his chair, a leg draped over either side. His left leg, the leg closest to her, with its short, curly blond hairs, tone, son-tanned skin beneath, was tickling her own leg; rubbing against her with his every move, sending shock waves through her body. Natalie's eyes kept drifting towards that leg; the leg's curly hairs, the almond colored skin, the healthy muscle structure...

Natalie's eyes tried to unfocus; she tried to look beyond. But every movement from Bray brought her attention back... to him. His chewing was manly but not crude; no smacking or open-mouth chewing. She could see his muscles contract and relax as he chewed. As he drank, raising his arm, expanding his chest, Natalie took in the flexing biceps, the extending chest, and the tightening, corrugated abdomen. *What are you doing?* She scolded her self. All the staring was making her unsettled; giving her yearnings best not explored.

She's hot... for an older woman. This was one of the many thoughts cursing through Bray's own mind. He'd taken notice of Natalie's legs. Sinew legs. Tanned. *The color of melted caramel* Bray mused. Natalie's wore shorts, which as she sat, pulled up to about mid thighs. Her t-shirt was loose, but it still clung to certain body parts in a rather revealing way. To keep from looking at her upper body, Bray tried to focus down –only to lock on her legs.

"I'll take that." Natalie asked, reaching for Bray's plate. As she reached out and moved to stand, the lounge chair tipped sideways, throwing off her balance. Natalie struck her hand out, landing it on top of Bray's left thigh. "Oh, excuse me," she intoned in surprise. *You sound like a haughty school girl*, she thought. But the direct contact with Bray's warm body was making her giddy and confused. It was a sensation that both thrilled her and frightened her.

Then they were both standing. Bray's hand was on Natalie's elbow, steadying her. A second later their lips were joined together; a soft, brief contact. Warm lips exchanging heat. The taste of familiarity –ham, chips, soda- mixed with a foreign, erotic taste. This exchange lasted all

of but a couple of seconds, but it felt like an eternity; like time had stopped, just for them. To be jostled forward, whip lashed back into the reality of the constant-moving world, dragging them on, breaking them apart.

No words were said. Natalie simply went on with the task of collecting their plates and cups. She walked purposely to the house, not thinking or looking to see if Bray was following. The kiss was something that was too much like a dream. *It was my mind playing tricks on me*, she thought. She'd been caught up in an intoxicating lust thing that altered her reality. *Yeah, an altered reality*, she thought it though she knew how untrue it was. *I kissed him*. That she knew, deep down. The energy exchange of it was still coursing through her body.

For Bray, the contact left him foggy. *Why?* He wondered. He'd kissed girls before. He'd felt their warmth; touched their flesh. Now he was in a trance; unhinged. He was following Natalie into the house, like some sad, lost puppy, hoping for some food (or some love).

Few words were exchanged while Natalie took care of the dishes. What little went back and forth between them was simple, empty words meaning nothing. And that is how they broke apart. Bray going his own way, home, to his unburdened life, and Natalie picking up on her regular, familiar routine.

The sound of the car pulling into the driveway made her look up. Natalie was in the garage, checking the lawnmower, doing a minor maintenance tune-up in preparation for another morning of mowing.

"Trouble?" Bray asked, closing his car door and walking up to the open garage door.

"Hey Bray," Natalie gave the gas tank cap one last twist, and then looked up at Bray. "Oh, no, no trouble. Just getting it ready. It's that time again. I try to keep up with it or it'll get out of hand." She went on talking about mowing and keeping up with her yard work, trying to keep things light and friendly.

"I guess I got here just in time," Bray's smile was a mixture of snugness and kindness. "I can help you out... and still not get you to commit as a customer. The last hold-out." After a long pause he added, "but your ham sandwiches are better than cold cash. Cash is all fibrous and inky tasting. And not very filling" His smile was mesmerizing.

They worked on the yard together, occasionally sharing a few words, making quick work of the growing grass, leaving that patterned dark and light green patchwork on the lawn and the mixture of clipped grass and two-stroke engine exhaust in the air. Somehow it felt less than work for Natalie having Bray around. Not that she ever minded doing the work by her self. It was her time to unwind and expend frustrated energy. The companionship changed things. It gave it a heartening, energizing quality. It felt good. It felt right.

Another meal by the pool was followed by more light conversation in the kitchen. Bray would soon change. His world would see a refocus and restructuring soon. He was both anxious and excited. It was a milestone that offered great opportunities. "Great opportunities," he said, "but with some scary uncertainties." *Very mature thinking*, Natalie considered. She offered a listening ear but voiced little in the way of deep insight or profound opinions. She remembered her time of change at that age and although she could offer some pointers, she felt she was serving better as a sounding board rather than a source of direction.

The gravity of the conversation was a departure from their past interactions. Natalie felt this was a shift in their relationship; not a bad thing, but unnerving maturing. Some of that original, youthful awkwardness was fading. The seriousness between them escalated when it was time to depart. Natalie walked Bray to the door. They turned and met each other, close and

eye to eye. The kiss was less surprising. It was also more intensive. The embrace solidified their closeness. This was real. It was tangible and it was pure.

Another kiss came after an after-graduation dinner Natalie had prepared for Bray. It was a special but simple meal done to celebrate Bray's completion of a pivotal time in his life. The kiss included a long, sensual embrace and a knowing that something was right with their bodies joining together.

Time moved forward; a slow lava flow that moves ahead, hardening in places, leaving traces of its existence, yet ever changing. Natalie's and Bray's lives developed stronger threads binding them together. It was a pleasant time for both of them.

"When do you leave?"

"Monday of next week."

"Will I see you again?" Natalie tried to add some levity to the moment. New tension made the simple departure hard. *Nothing stays the same*, Natalie told herself. *He'll be back*, she thought, trying to hope for positive possibilities.

The door bell rang, breaking another day's silence of solitude. Natalie asked that common asked question to herself, *who can that be?* As she walked to the door, her answer came in the form of a very familiar (and soug after) Bray. She hadn't seen him in a while. She'd actually drove her route through the neighborhood hoping to come across him. That little nagging craving for his companionship kept picking at her shell, adding a sort of background noise to her daily routine. She missed him. Now, there he was.

"Bray, where you been?" The question was followed by a brief hug and a tug. "Come in. What have you been up to?"

"Hi Nat. I've been crazy with school and getting ready to go." He looked sullen and unsure. "I'm on my way now."

The news took Natalie's breath out from her. She knew the day was coming, but it still struck her unprepared. "Oh Bray, that's great." She only half meant it. "It will be wonderful. You'll see and experience so much." She felt empty; sad. "It will be a challenge, but you'll do fine."

"Thanks." He paused. His eyes kept low, avoiding eye contact. "I'll miss you."

Few words followed. They hugged again. A long, tight hug. The warmth of each other awakened their restrained desires. The hug was trailed by a passionate kiss; lips against lips. Hands roamed, gently tracing form and contours. Skin was slowly exposed; shirts being pushed away, up, so searching, hungry hands could feel direct, skin to skin contact. The sound of Bray's shirt hitting the floor was like a thunder crash to the otherwise quiet, tense atmosphere. Then it was Natalie's blouse. And the hands continued to roam; to explore the exposed, tantalizing person in their embrace.

Natalie's mind shut out everything other than the curves her hands were exploring; the muscles she was feeling; the warmth she was absorbing. Bray smelt so good to her. His breath was filling her with life through each second they were locked in their kiss. His hair felt perfect, tangled in her fingers. Every ripple, every undulation of his muscles, every cell of his skin felt perfect to her touch.

Bray was also in a state of blind ecstasy. Kissing Natalie was life itself. Her skin was so smooth, so soft, and so warm. It was as if her caramel colored skin was just-melted-warm. And her touching him was sending his brain into a frenzy that only fueled his desires. Only physical, carnal, tangible things registered in his mind. Where they were standing mattered little. What object might obstruct their shifting bodies simply didn't concern their merged world. The feel of Natalie's breast cupped within his hand felt like the very essence of life. The feel of Natalie's

tongue dancing with his, wrestling his into a sensual and sensational tangle, that was as vital as breathing. No, more vital than breathing.

And then he was gone. The kissing subsided. The embrace was broken. Shirts covered skin again. And Natalie was once again looking for Bray to invade her world, but not finding him. One day at a time, slowly, with a sort of deep rooted soreness or un-palpable, dull pain, the soliloquy of a life, her life without Bray, returned to normality. Work took over her thoughts again. Nothing else mattered. A day turned to a week. The weeks went into months. And before long, 20 months had passed. No Bray.

"That which we love will hurt us," Natalie's friend wrote during one of their online conversations. "I saw that somewhere. It sounded too profound and cliché. Never thought I would see an opportunity to use it."

"Who said anything about love," Natalie retorted, even though neither one of them believed otherwise. It was love.

"If you love something, set it free," Natalie added, trying to lighten the mood. "If it comes back, it's yours, if it doesn't, it never was."

"Cheesy."

"Right... but true."

"He'll be back. He'd be a fool not to."

"But do I NEED him back? I want him, sure. But NEED?" Natalie felt torn.

"If it feels right, do it."

The conversation did not lift Natalie's spirits all that much. She was feeling the pain of a new emptiness, like a cut over another not quite healed. *Paper cuts*, Natalie thought. Some days she scolded herself for getting so emotional. Other days she swooned over the idea of things that could come –once Bray returned, of course. He would return, she believed. No, she didn't think of it as believing it; she had an ache deep inside that said there was no other reasonable way things could go.

It was not that Bray had exited Natalie's life; he hadn't just moved on, forever gone from her life. He was still very much a part of it. But it was a part played out through distance. There were e-mails and phone calls. There was a brief hug and kiss during the holidays. But despite all that still was, it was not all that they both craved. It did not fill the empty space within each of them. There had been talk of going on with their own lives; of meeting other people. Natalie did renew her marriage-like union with her career. It filled her whole life. Bray wrote that he had gone to parties, met one girl or another, but nothing grew from there.

One Spring day, while Natalie did her pre-startup check on her lawn mower, Bray Sterling returned into her life.

"Bray?" Natalie asked in a surprised, suppressed voice.

His answer was an all-encompassing hug that nearly took her breath out. The kiss was electrifying. The feel of his hands on her sent shocks of sensual rapture through her every fiber. After their carnal wants were satiated, they talked. Bray had been in a two year certificate program. In his second year, while fine tuning skills and fortifying new knowledge, he had a chance encounter with a business owner. The meeting turned into a very rewarding venture. It resulted in a position with a strong, growing enterprise that gave Bray ample room for growth. With prudence, Bray accepted the offer, and now, nearly a year later, he felt confident and proud of his station.

"I have an apartment near the office," he told Natalie. There was a glint of pride in his announcement. He told her how the certificate program had given him a footing but the actual, hands-on work was awesome and satisfying. He never said the actual words, but Natalie could tell that he felt he was now a true man.

The apartment was Bray's home for the next year or so, but it saw less and less of Bray as time passed on. As for Natalie's work, it gradually saw less and less of her. She still worked hard, still was devoted to it, but it did not rule her life; it did not make up the entirety of her existence. Natalie felt a peace flow through her now, thinking of the choices she had made. Looking at the face of her youngest child, a beautiful baby girl, Natalie saw Bray's eyes looking back at her. *This is what makes life's trials and tribulations meaningless... and living awesome.* Natalie's thought was further exemplified when young Jaiden's arms came around her neck and she heard his perfect, youthful laugh. *Just like his dad,* Natalie mused, feeling a great peace grip her soul.

Natalie had often wondered about her situation with Bray. More than once she gave in to society's taboo and closed herself off. Looking at her home, seeing the wondrous gift in her children, she knew her choice had been right.

"Laws and rules are only one person's opinions that have not been challenged."

Natalie's friend had written that to her one evening. It reminded her of a thought she once read: "Laws are not a product of their [ancestors] wisdom but are the product off their passions, their timidity, their jealousies and their ambition." It had come from a book by Harry Harrison. Natalie and her friend had found that they agreed that someone's right was not necessarily correct for all. The warmth and love of Bray, sharing her life as much as her bed, supported that idea. They had challenged society's prejudice and won the best reward of all – love.

"I love you mommy," Jaiden whispered into Natalie's ear. He kissed her, and ran away giggling.

"I love you too," Natalie replied, then turned to her baby girl, kissing her on the forehead and murmuring to her, "and I love you too."

"What is this love stuff?" Bray roared as he walked into the room. A bright, larger-than-life grin enveloped his face. "What is going on here?" The question was answered with a tangle of limbs and a jumble of loud laughing.

"We love you too, daddy!" words echoed by kids and wife alike.

"And I love all of you," Bray replied.

THE END

Please yourselves, say I, and they
Need only look the other way.
 But no, they will not; they must still
 Wrest their neighbour to their will,
And make me dance at their desire
With jail and gallows and hell-fire.
 And how am I to face the odds
 Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.
 The laws of God, the laws of man,
 He may keep that will and can;
Not I: let God and man decree
Laws for themselves and not for me
 And since, my soul, we cannot fly,
 To Saturn nor to Mercury
Keep we must, if keep we can,
These foreign laws of God and man.

By **Ferrol Sams**, "*Epiphany*"

MODERN TABOO

Sometimes the right thing is not the correct thing.

