The Passage of Time

An Honors Project (ID 499)

by

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since I can remember, teachers always told me I was a terrific writer, the best in the class. It got to the point that I never thought anyone else could write anything better than I could, but that high-horsed chain of thought quickly disappeared when I entered the college level. College taught me that it was easy to write, if a person wanted to write trash. Writing something good, something that people will want to read, is another story in itself. This collection of short stories written at the honors level is an attempt to discipline myself to write something good, and this has not been an easy task!

These stories are all fictional, even though ideas and settings have been taken from thoughts and feelings written in my journal. This journal has been one of my best writing tools. It was something I began writing in when I was seven years old and many of my best thoughts are hidden away in those white pages. Personal thoughts in that journal will never emerge in my fiction stories. I find it much too difficult to remain objective about something which I have experienced. Changing the situation a little, though, does help to make it workable.

Many ideas are hard for me to come by, but others just seem to flow. In "Happy Birthday" the idea was simple. I lived in a basement apartment for an entire summer, yet I never knew what was on the other side of a door directly facing my bed. My door turned out to hide only a vegetable pantry. With a little imagination, the door could have hidden about anything.

"Reality" is another story which seemed to come rather easy. I have always had vivid dreams which I quickly remember in the
mornings. I write many of these dreams in my journal, and sometimes I wonder what is actually the truth. Does the truth come as we sleep, or is the truth what we face day to day? Are we really who we think, or are our true selves hidden deep in our subconscious beings?

Rites of passage are always good things to write about since we all experience these times in our lives, one way or another. "Virgin Queen" is about one of those rites. This story is a combination of Harlequin Romances which I read as a child and personal accounts given to me by various friends. The story just evolved from notes in my journal. The scene was so easy to reconstruct. What was difficult was making the reader see herself or himself in that scene. Perhaps this story is something each of us thinks about in our deep, secret thoughts. This story was written to make each of us live our thoughts through someone else, someone we will never have to come face to face with.

Growing up is a hard time for all of us. It was especially hard for one of my younger brothers. I can remember one incident in particular where I swore my brother was angry enough to strike our father and I know he has thought about what it would be like if our father was gone for good. Out of this came "The End." This story is truly from my imagination, only the feelings of the child were taken from watching my own brother struggle with the pains of adolescence.

Each of us has times we will always remember. Writing them helps someone else live in a way they may never experience. Now that I have begun to write for others as well as myself, I fear I may be addicted. Writing is not fun when it has to be done with others in mind. It then becomes hard and sometimes tedious, but the end product, when completed to the writer's satisfaction, is
a reward to which nothing else can compare. That inner feeling of accomplishment makes the pain well worth it.
Happy Birthday
by
Diana Shaffer
Today was his 18th birthday. He had waited for this day for months. He thought of the nearly 200 red Xs on the calendar hidden in his closet. It was all planned. It had been for months. Tonight he would enter the cellar.

With head lowered, he peered at his parents. They sat in their separate chairs as they did every night, only tonight he sensed something was different. His father's eyes jumped from the newspaper held in wrinkled hands to the old grandfather clock in the corner. Even his mother could not seem to concentrate on her worn old bible. He thought she even was rocking quicker than usual. He wondered if they knew.

"Boy," yelled his father. "Git back to yar work. Watcha starin' at anyhow? Somethin' troublin' ya'?"

"No," he quietly lied. "I was just thinkin' that today was my birthday. I was, uh, wonderin' if maybe we couldn't do somethin' a little different this year, ya' know, like have a cake or somethin'."

His mother's head snapped up from her bible. He jerked his head around to meet her eyes, only to drop them as they met hers of steel gray. She was always so stern, always rocking in that damn chair of hers.

"Boy," she rasped. "Ya' know we don't mention that day 'round here. For years ya've behaved; now that ya're thinkin' ya're a grown man ya' start givin' yar folks trouble. I'll hear no more about such nonsense. Now ya' heard yar father--git back to yar studies!"

He lowered his head, but not his eyes. They glared into her silver hair, trying to open her skull, to seep into her brain.

"David!" he sliently screamed. "My name is David!"

The grandfather clock bellowed out eight chimes. The newspaper snapped shut and the bible was gently closed. Both parents rose. He closed his own book and quietly walked up to bed. It had been this
way for as long as he could remember. They never talked. They
just read and rocked. They never asked him about his days or
even what he was thinking. They just fed and clothed him. He was
like old Tippy, something that was needed to help with the farm, but
not needed to give or receive any love.

He scuffed into his cold room and turned back the sheets. As
he walked to the chest of drawers to get his flannels, it started.
That lonesome scraping and scraping, every night at exactly 8:30.
It used to terrify him, but not anymore. He knew what that scraping
needed and tonight it would get it.

"It's nothin'," his father would always lie. "Just the wind in
the old oak tree. Ya' just forgit all 'bout it. I'm beginning to
wonder if'in ya' don't have a problem with all these wild goin's
ons ya' have."

His mother was even better. "Rats," she would reply. "Those
darn toms don't earn their milk with all those rats they leave
roamin' 'bout this house."

He knew it wasn't the wind or the rats. Something was hidden
in that cellar. Something terrible. The door was bolted and only
his mother had the key. He knew where it was hidden. Tonight,
after his parents were in bed, he would slide back that shiny brass
bolt. He would give that thing in the cellar what it called for.

He crawled between the icy sheets and stared into the darkness.
The scratching went on and on and on. Something wanted him. He felt
it. The hairs on his neck began to prickle. Shivers ran down his
spine. He heard the swish of the bolt as it was slid back. Every
night that bolt was unlocked. Nothing was ever any different. Even
when the doctors had told his mother she might die, she still made
her nightly trips into the cellar. She never forgot.

He laid there staring into the darkness. The light of the moon
caught the whites of his eyes. They glowed a ghostly color in the complete blackness of the room. His heart suddenly began to beat faster. The covers rose in rhythm with his heartbeat. His palms became sweaty. Breathing grew more difficult. The scraping began to get louder. He could hear it echo all around him. Through the walls and the floor it came to him. It wanted him and went on calling him. Tonight he would finally answer.

He put his hand over the left side of his chest. It moved up and down. He could even hear the blood course through his veins; he actually felt it entering and leaving his heart. The scratching noise was everywhere. Then, the pounding began. Soon he did not know if it was his heart pounding or the thing in the cellar.

He couldn't breathe! Something was wrong! He started gasping for air. If only he could get the air off his chest! It was trying to push him into the cellar, but it wasn't time! The beating of his heart grew louder. He panted for air. His right hand clenched and his chest heaved.

The clock struck one. The scratching stopped. The pounding stopped. He jerked upright. It was time.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he quietly stepped onto the cold floorboards. He grabbed his flannel robe off the chair and drew it over his quaking body. He reached slowly for the metal doorknob. He grasped it, and waited. He sucked in a mouthful of air, held his breath, and slowly turned the knob. As he had arranged, the door swung open noiselessly.

He crept into the cold, drafty hallway and tiptoed past the door guarding his parents' room. He stopped and put his ear against the door. Nothing. He waited. His heart began to race. He moved away from the door.

He crept to the top of the stairs and paused to take a deep
breath. He placed his right foot carefully on the top step and slowly eased his weight onto that step. He moved his left onto the second step. He remembered to skip the third one, the one that made a horrid squeak if invaded. Finally at the bottom, he crept to the bookshelf in the front room. With help from the moonlight, he easily found his mother's tattered bible. Opening it to Proverbs 31, he took the key from its buried position beneath the verses. The key was always here, to remind her of something. Soon he would discover what was so very secret in her life.

The house seemed to have grown in the darkness. He counted out his footsteps. Eleven steps to get to the end of the front room. Turn left. Six steps down the hall. He skittered to the right to avoid the statue of Jesus. He had to be more careful! He had almost forgotten about that statue.

He slowed down for the 12 steps across the bare kitchen floor. He was almost there. The light from the moon illuminated the basement door like a spotlight. There it stood, brightly lit, guarding the life within. It beckoned him, called him to enter. Something wanted him. Tonight he would sacrifice himself to it.

He walked to the door and placed the small key in the shiny brass lock. The scratching began. Faster and faster it went. It was impatient to see him, to take him into itself.

The key turned easily to the right. His fingers were shaking so hard that he was afraid he would drop the key onto the cold floor. His heart was pounding. His ears were ringing. He had waited 18 years for this moment.

He slid the bolt back silently. His parents could never hear. The door opened into the basement, seemingly of its own accord. There he stood, his body exaggerated by the moon's harsh light.

The steps leading into the total darkness were well lighted.
He could see the very last step, but the rest of the cellar was nothing but a black void. There was absolutely no sound from the cellar. The air was deathly still. No scratching, scraping or pounding. He waited, ears fine tuned for the slightest sound. The clock chimed. It was 1:30.

Sucking in another lungful of fresh air, he took the first step plunging into the darkness. He took another. Still, not a sound. On the third step he paused. He waited for any sign of movement. Nothing. He continued his creeping walk into the dark unknown.

Near the bottom he was forced to stop again. He could barely stomach the stench that wafted from below. It smelled like rotting leaves mixed with the stench from his grandfather's old outhouse. The air was damp and clung to his skin. He could actually feel the air's wetness. He was surprised it did not drip onto him.

His eyes were open wide and his pupils dilated, only he could see nothing beyond the steps. He made it to the bottom and waited for his eyes to adjust to the pitch black cellar. He hoped the light from the moon would penetrate the thick air, only even it did not have the courage to enter the room beyond.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could make out the cause of the stench. His father had dumped the fall's remains of leaves and hay over in the corner. He briefly wondered why his father did not burn the clippings.

Suddenly, his eyes began playing tricks on him. He could swear the pile of mulch was moving, only everyone knows dead leaves don't walk! His skin began to crawl. The hairs on his neck stood on end. He felt his flesh squirm over his bones. The pile was beginning to rise.

He was frozen to the spot. The slime from the cellar floor stuck to his bare feet like glue. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. The pile began to move towards him.
Step, slide, step, slide, it came. It dragged one leg behind the other and one arm hung lower than the other. The creature tilted its head towards the bad arm and leg, seeming to favor the left side of its body. The moonlight caught the creature's eyes. The boy screamed! The creature's eyes were whiter than the bleached flour his mother sometimes bought. They were so white, so very white. There were no pupils.

As the creature approached, the boy retreated. Step for the creature and step for the boy. Slide for the creature and step for the boy. Suddenly, the boy's heel caught on the steps leading up to the safe kitchen. He lost his balance and landed on the bottom step. The creature moved steadily towards him. His breathing became impossible. His heart was grabbed by the icy fingers of terror. He yearned for the days of unknown and wondering.

He found his wits and scrambled to his feet. He could not see! Something was blocking the light of the moon! He turned towards the kitchen door and saw a shape in the light. Her silver hair glowed like a halo. He screamed. The creature had a hold of the sash he used to tie his robe. He felt clammy skin brush his as he scurried out of his robe.

"Ma," he cried. "Help me!"

He rushed up the first couple of steps to the refuge his mother offered.

"Ya' had to know, boy, ya' just had to know. Well, now ya' kin celebrate yar godawful birthday. Happy birthday, to both of ya."

And the door slammed shut.
Reality
by
Diana Shaffer

Thesis
Joanne was walking up the steps leading to her bedroom when she heard a knock at the door.

"Now who could that be at this late hour?" she asked herself.

"Who is it?" she hollered down towards the door.

No answer.

She turned and slowly walked back down the stairs.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

"It's Steve," came the voice from behind the door. "Aren't you even going to let me in? It's cold out here!"

"Wait two seconds! I have to grab my robe. I'll be right down!"

Joanne hurried up the stairs and grabbed her yellow robe. She knew Steve would love the purple nighty she was wearing, but tonight wasn't such good timing.

"Steve," she exclaimed, opening the door. "What are you doing here tonight? You weren't supposed to be in town for two more weeks!"

"I just wanted to surprise you! I couldn't stand being away from you one more second so I took a couple vacation days and rushed right down here! I know it's late, but traffic in Chicago was worse than usual. I did try to call, but your line is always busy!"

"It doesn't matter," Joanne answered. "The important thing is that we're together, but I do have some bad news for you."

"Go ahead," he told her. "After fighting rush hour traffic in Chicago, I'm ready to handle anything!"

"Well, you're not the only one that dropped in on me. My parents are asleep upstairs. That means that you'll have to sleep down here on the couch."

"Can you believe it? I drive 480 miles to see my lady and she banishes me to the couch! To top it off, she greets me wearing a yellow monk's robe that she knows I despise! Some gratitude!"

"I'm really sorry, honey," she said, wrapping her arms around him.
"You know how much I'd love to be with you tonight, but my parents would die! We'll survive one more night apart. Maybe tomorrow we can send them into town for some shopping!"

"Well, that's some consolation, I guess," Steve answered, pressing closer to her. "Let's send them into town for some breakfast shopping!"

"Oh, Steve," Joanne laughed. "I've missed you! Can't you quit moaning and groaning and give your lady a huge hug and kiss? I sure have missed you!

"Hey, what happened to your neck? Looks like some pretty long fingernails got a hold of you! And I thought I was your only tiger," Joanne said.

"You are, baby," Steve answered. "It's nothing. Now, what about that hug and kiss? Change your mind already?"

As his lips reached to find hers, Joanne became aware of the sound of fire crackling in the room. Jerking up in her rocking chair, she heard the clock chime.

"One in the morning!" she thought. "I must have been sleeping here for hours! I really need to get upstairs to bed! I have a long day in front of me!"

Closing her book and taking off her glasses, Joanne stood up to get ready for bed. Nights sure had not been agreeing with her lately! No matter how early she went to bed, she always felt so tired in the morning!

"Maybe I should see a doctor," she thought as she climbed into bed. As her alarm clock went off at 6:00 am, Joanne reached groggily over to smack the snooze.

"Give me a few more minutes," she told the smiling clock. "Just give me more minutes!"

The next thing she knew, it was 6:45!
"Oh my God," she exclaimed, jumping out of bed. "Only fifteen minutes to get ready! If I'm late again, Dave is really going to be after me! I don't know what's gotten into me lately!"

Joanne rushed around the tiny rooms trying to get ready. Wash the face, notice the bags under the eyes, brush the teeth, run a comb through the hair and scurry back into the bedroom.

What to wear? She grabbed a skirt and blouse out of her closet, briefly noticing the wrinkles in both.

"Oh well," she sighed. "No time to iron them now! The crew will just have to tolerate me today!"

She slammed down a glass of orange juice and touched up her blush, thankful she had been too tired to wash off her eye make-up from the night before.

Forty-five minutes later, Joanne was rushing into her first floor office, silently praying Dave was also a little late.

"Sharon," she whispered to the secretary. "Is Dave in yet?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he is, and I have some bad news. He said to send you in as soon as you got here. Joanne, I think he's in a really bad mood, so be careful!"

"Thanks for the warning," Joanne said. "Wish me luck!"

She walked the few steps to his ominous door. The brass nameplate made her stomach knot up once again, only this time in fear, not excitement. She briefly flashed back to the few weeks before when she could not wait to enter that office. Then it had meant a promotion; now it might mean her job.

Joanne quietly tapped on the door.

"Come in," barked the voice from the other side.

Joanne gently turned the knob and entered. Dave sat with his back to the door and phone at his ear. He motioned for her to sit down without even turning to see who it was.
Joanne pulled up one of the big orange chairs and perched carefully on the edge. She waited nervously for him to hang up the phone, twisting her gold necklace around and around on her neck.

"Damn," she cursed to herself as she felt the necklace fall through her fingers. "What a day this is turning out to be!"

Dave slammed the phone into its cradle and whirled around to face her. There she sat on the edge of her chair, trying to dig the evasive necklace out of the front of her blouse. Redfaced, she raised her eyes to meet his. She could not help noticing the fresh scar under his left ear.

"Sir," she said, breaking her stare. "You wanted to see me?"

"Joanne," he answered, "ever since I've given you the position of Account Executive you've been late for work. You haven't been on time for the past six days and even before you were lucky to make it on time two out of five days! I'm beginning to think this job is more than you can handle. Maybe both of us made a mistake."

"Oh, no, sir!" she exclaimed. "It's just that my alarm clock doesn't want to go off anymore. I keep intending to buy one on my way home, but something always comes up. I promise to get one over the weekend."

"Don't worry about it," he answered. "For the next couple of weeks I don't care how late you sleep. I'm suspending you until you can get yourself together. You're much too good of an employee to let go, but I can't have you working here unless you intend to give 110% of yourself to your job. Good creative people are hard to find, but I'm warning you, you can be replaced. This is your last chance and I must admit, I hope you get your head together!"

"Yes, sir. I understand. I promise that the time off will work wonders! Yes, I know it will! Thank you, sir! I guess maybe I have been under a lot of stress, but I promise to come back in top
form. Oh, sir! Thank you again. I promise to live up to both of our expectations!"

"Well, that's good to know," Dave replied. "I'll tell Sharon to tell everyone that you've requested some vacation time. There's really no need to say I've requested your vacation time for you. Tell Sharon on your way out that you'll be back in two weeks. Until then, I don't want to see you around this office. Now get home and get some rest!"

"Yes, sir!" Joanne replied. "And thank you once again. I know you won't be sorry for this!"

Joanne rose to leave and Dave turned his back on her to reach for the phone. She felt something fall on the floor and, looking down, saw it was her broken necklace. Stooping to pick it up, Dave glanced around to look at her. She thought she saw a strange look come over his face, but dispensed with the idea.

"Oh brother!" she thought. "He probably thinks that besides losing my marbles I'm also a clutz! Haven't I done enough already?"

She turned to leave. Looking once again at the back of his head, she decided he had already forgotten about her. Closing the door behind her, she stopped to lean up against it.

"Whew!" she sighed.

"Bad time of it?" asked Sharon as she came around the corner.

"No, not too bad. I just wanted some time off and I was really afraid to ask. You know how he can be!"

"Do I ever!" Sharon agree. "You look pretty pleased with yourself, though. You don't mean to tell me that he actually went along with you!"

"Yes, he really did! I'm leaving right this minute and I won't see you for at least two weeks! This time is really what I need!"

"Well, I sure can't believe it! Maybe I should start being late
once in a while! Greg and I could really use some time together!"

Joanne laughed.

"I'll be seeing you around," she called out as she grabbed her jacket. "Hold down the fort for me! See you in a couple weeks!"

As Joanne walked to her little Chevette, she began to feel her spirits lift. Two weeks off! Now maybe she could catch up on her sleep. She was always so tired anymore! Perhaps this time off was really what she needed. Maybe Dave was right; her new promotion just needed some getting used to.

Dinner time found Joanne lugging in package after package. She had decided to take advantage of her first day off and do some shopping. Her luck had to be turning because Ayres had been having a huge sale! She found so many things that she decided she just had to have! She laughed as she pulled out a slinky purple nighty.

"I've never owned anything like this before," she laughed to herself. "What will I ever do with it?"

After putting away her purchases, Joanne went into the kitchen to pop in a TV dinner. She felt too exhausted to mess with fixing a fancy dinner. Besides, there was no one there except herself. She certainly didn't need to impress herself!

Joanne went into the front room and lit a fire in the fireplace. It really wasn't a chilly evening, but something in her loved that old fireplace. She sank down into her mother's old rocking chair and stared into the fire. She began to think of her life since she had moved to Indiana. She had never been so tired while she was living in Wisconsin. Maybe it was just the change in her lifestyle.

Suddenly, she heard a noise downstairs. She jumped up to investigate the cause for all the commotion. Who were all those people in her living room?

"Steve," she called over the banister. "What are you doing
up at this hour?"

"I'm getting ready to leave for church. Just go back to sleep," he called up.

"Well wait a minute and I'll go with you! Why didn't you wake me up earlier? And since when do you get up to go to church? What happened to our breakfast plans?" she asked.

"I've always loved church," he retorted. "Why should I wake you up? You never want to go to church anyway. Why waste my time?"

Joanne grabbed the yellow robe she knew he hated and ran downstairs in time to see his back heading out the door.

"Steve, wait!" she cried.

He turned and paused, waiting for her to come nearer.

"Who are all these people?" she asked. "How did they get in here? Are they friends of yours? Why didn't you tell me you were leaving his morning? You know I would've gone with you!"

"Joanne," he answered, taking her by her shoulders. "you never want to go with me. You weren't even willing to sleep with me last night!"

"Steve!" she cried. "That's unfair and you know it! I wanted more than anything to be with you, but how could I? And how do you know I wouldn't have gone with you if you never even bothered to ask? And answer my question! Who are these people?"

"Steve!" one man hollered from the big, black sedan. "Hurry or we'll be late for the service!"

"I've gotta go, sweetheart. I'll see you later!"

"But..."

"Gotta go, honey," he said, giving her a peck on the cheek. "Be back for lunch. Say hello to your parents for me!"

Joanne stood there, bewildered, as she watched him run off to one of the four black cars. She strained her eyes for a better
look at the men in the cars. It looked like every man was wearing a black bowler hat. That was strange! She hadn't even known Steve liked hats, let alone owned one!

"Oh well," she thought. "At least now I'll have some time to get ready. I wonder what I can make him for lunch? Maybe steak and potatoes! Yes! That was always one of his favorites!"

Just then Joanne heard the timer go off.

"My dinner!" she gasped. "I wonder how long that buzzer has been ringing? I just can't seem to stay awake lately!"

She got up from her warm chair in front of the fire and went into the kitchen to get her dinner. She opened the oven door and reached in for her TV dinner.

"Damn!" she cried as the dinner fell to the floor. She stuck her burnt fingers in her mouth and stood staring down at the mess of salisbury steak lying on top of the foil cover.

"How could I be so stupid!" she asked herself. "Something is really messing up my mind! I know better than to grab something out of the oven with my bare hands! How could I be so dumb?"

Joanne grabbed the dish rag and stooped to clean up the mess staining the wooden floor.

"Well, there goes supper! It's a good thing I wasn't very hungry! God, what a mess! Potatoes never looked so awful!"

She wiped up the mess from the floor and threw the entire dinner into the trash. She grabbed a bottle of Tab from the refrigerator and headed into the front room.

She lowered herself into the big down-filled couch and reached for the remote control. Click and there was an old war movie. Click again to find lovers necking on the divan. Click and there was a rock band. Click again and, wait! What was this? A man running out to an old black car!
"That looks so familiar," she thought to herself. "Why does that man look like someone I should know?"

She watched as the man got into one of four cars. Each man in each of the cars was wearing a tall, black bowler hat!

"Must be something I've seen before," she thought. "I sure can't remember the ending or beginning, but I know I've seen this part before!"

She settled back into the couch and pulled the brown and white afghan over her. She sipped Tab and relaxed to enjoy the movie.

The men drove for what seemed like five minutes. Joanne sighed. "Why would someone sit through an entire movie like this?" she wondered. "Sure doesn't seem like much action!"

Just as the thoughts went through her head, the cars on the television stopped outside an old white church. Four men got out of each of the four cars. They walked in pairs to the entrance of the church.

"What a sexist movie! Not even any women! Must've been written before the women's liberation movement," she thought to herself.

She watched as the church door opened. Looked like a funeral, not a church service. Candles were lit at both ends of every pew. White orchids decorated the alter.

"At least they used my favorite flower in this movie!" she thought. "It can't be all that bad!"

She watched a man standing in front of an ornate gold cross hanging at the alter. His black robe shadowed his face. He stood facing the congregation, hands held in prayer.

The men from the cars entered and walked to the front of the sanctuary. The priest moved from the cross to bless each man as he entered the front pew. Joanne wished she could see the priest's face.
The entire church was silent. No one made a sound. Even the candles barely flickered.

"What a weird movie," she thought. "Everyone dressed in black and attending a funeral with no women! Must've been a chauvinist that died!"

Suddenly, everyone in the church turned to face the entrance. Five men blocked the double doors. They were bearing a black casket high above their heads. The casket lid was wide open and draped with black cloth. All the men in the congregation removed their hats and placed them over their chests in memory of the dead person in the casket.

The five pallbearers moved slowly up the aisle.

"Not much talking in this film, that's for sure! Must've not been that hard to write!"

As the pallbearers reached the front of the church, the entire congregation sat as one. The silence was deafening. The pallbearers silently sat the casket beneath the ornate cross. As the priest approached the casket, huge billows of wind blew wide the church doors. All heads turned. The casket lid slammed shut.

"Oh well," Joanne thought. "Guess I'll never see the man dead in that coffin. Just as well! Wouldn't want to see the old chauvinist anyway!"

Joanne clicked the remote control some more, only to find nothing better on any of the other stations. The clock chimed nine times.

"I know it's early," she thought, "but Dave said to take it easy so maybe I'll head up to bed. I better watch it, though. This relaxation could be contagious! I might decide to find a husband and stay home every day! Let him do all the work!"

She rose to walk into the kitchen. She opened the pantry door and felt a gust of cold air.
"I really should do something about insulating this old pantry," she told herself. "But think of the good side! At least this way I can save on refrigerator space!"

She put the empty bottle back into its carton and shut the door. She headed towards the fireplace and reached for the poker. The fire was just too pretty to poke out, so she decided to let it burn. It couldn't hurt anything by burning. Anyway, it should die soon.

She checked all the locks and turned out all the lights. She found her way up the stairs in the dark and reached for her bedroom light. She walked over to her dresser and pulled open the second drawer. Laying on top was that purple nighty:

"This is kind of silly," she thought as she drew it over her naked body. "I really should save this for someone who would appreciate it, but by then the threads might be rotten!"

She chuckled to herself and crawled into the cold bed. She drew the feather blanket up around her chin. Light from her little alarm clock caught her eye.

"I won't be needing that for a while," she thought and reached over to unplug it. "For the next two weeks time is not going to exist!"

She laid there for a long time, eyes white and staring at the ceiling. The moon shined bright through the glass doors of her balcony. The air was still. Only the crickets moved in the darkness.

Joanne snapped upright! That movie! She knew why it looked so familiar! Her dreams! They came streaming back to her. Those men in the cars! One was from her dream! That's why he looked so familiar! That's why she thought she should know him!

She jumped up from bed and ran to the phone. Switching on the light, she looked for the number of the television station.

"Hello," she said. "Could you tell me the name of the movie
you were just stowing? I think it started around 7:00 pm."

"One moment, please," answered the impersonal voice at the other end. "I'll put you on hold."

Joanne sat on the edge of the bed, feet swinging back and forth. Soft music played over the line.

"C'mon, c'mon," she thought. "This is urgent! Don't leave me with this music all night!"

"Ma'am?" came the voice. "Are you certain you saw the movie on channel 16?"

"Yes, yes," answered Joanne. "I just turned it off. It was about some kind of funeral. This is really important!"

"Well, you must be mistaken," retorted the smug voice. "You see, there was no movie on that channel tonight. We were showing highlights from last night's basketball game."

"Are you sure?" Joanne screamed. "I was just watching it! You've got to know the name!"

"Ma'am," came the voice. "I assure you that we were not broadcasting any movie tonight. You might want to check with the other stations. I think you have made a mistake."

Joanne slammed down the phone and dialed all the other stations. One gave her the name of an old John Wayne movie. The next gave her the name of a Humphrey Bogart movie. The last one told her they were showing last week's Earth, Wind and Fire concert. Not one station gave her the name of the movie she had watched!

She frantically dialed every person she knew. No one had seen the movie she had watched.

Joanne placed the receiver back in the cradle and wrapped her arms about herself. She rocked back and forth on the edge of the bed, arms hugging herself tight. Tears streamed from her eyes.
"I am going crazy," she whispered. "I'm losing my mind! Things have just gotten to be too much for me! I've got to see someone, tomorrow! I've just got to talk to someone! No more games with my head!"

She reached for the phone book again. Simons, J.P. Phone 24 hours. She picked up the phone.

"Dr. Simon," answered the deep voice at the other end. "Who is calling please?"

"Hello, Dr. Simon. I know it's kind of late, but I saw your number in the book and it said it was ok to call 24 hours. I just think, well, I really need to talk to someone. I think I've been working too hard. I'd like to make an appointment for tomorrow."

"Miss, us, who is this please?"

"I'm sorry," she answered. "My name is Joanne Pauly and I really would like to schedule an appointment for tomorrow."

"Well, Miss Pauly," replied Dr. Simon, "I'm afraid tomorrow is simply out of the question. If you like, I could squeeze you in for half an hour on Wednesday. As for the rest of the week, I'm afraid I have a rather busy schedule."

"Oh, Dr. Simon!" Joanned pleaded. "Are you sure you can't get me in tomorrow? I really need to talk to someone!"

"I'm terrible sorry, but Wednesday is the absolute best I can offer. Now, if you don't mind, Miss Pauly, I really do have a busy day ahead of me. If you like, I'll put you down for Wednesday at 10:30."

"If you're sure, doctor, that there is no time tomorrow. I just am afraid of staying by myself without talking to someone. There is something terrible haunting me and I need to talk about it with someone logical. Please, schedule me for Wednesday. I promise I won't be late!"
"Fine, Miss Pauly. I have you down for Wednesday. Now, if you don't mind, I really am rather tired."

"I'm sorry, doctor, and thank you, really. I do appreciate this!"

"Goodbye, Miss Pauly. I'll see you Wednesday," and with that the line went dead.

Joanne placed the phone once again in its cradle and slowly lay back against her feather pillows. She pulled the covers up to her chin, only this time she left the light on. She was afraid to close her eyes, afraid to enter the dream. It was just too real. It even had the power to overtake her when she was wide awake! What was wrong with her? Why had this never happened to her before?

She lay there for what seemed like hours. She turned to glance at her clock, only its face was blank. For a moment she faced panic, but then she remembered she had unplugged the clock in a moment of enjoyment. Nothing seemed funny to her at that moment.

She felt her eyes becoming so heavy, but strained to keep them open. The light beside her bed made the entire room bright, but she was so tired! If only she could close her eyes for just a few seconds!

The priest was standing over the casket and the pallbearers were reaching for the lid. She knew she was dreaming this time and struggled to open her eyes. They felt wide open, but she could see nothing but blackness! She felt rather than saw the casket lid open. Suddenly, the priest was standing over her! She stared up into black eyes and could see no life within those robes shadowing his face. What she did see made her heart skip with incomparable fright! He had a new scar under his left ear!

Joanne jerked up in bed! The sun was streaming into her room and her light beside the bed seemed much weaker. She could hear the
birds singing outside and could see the old willow tree blowing in the slight breeze. Everything seemed of much less importance in the light of the day.

She felt a shiver run up and down her spine. The hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle.

"That priest," she gasped. He had a scar under his left ear, just like the one Dave had the other day! And I thought Dave got his from shaving or something! I really am losing my senses. I've got to see that doctor! I can't wait until tomorrow! I'll sit out in his waiting room until he'll see me. He'll have to see me if I refuse to leave!"

She crawled out of bed and walked to her closet. She reached in for her yellow robe and threw it on the bed. Grabbing the bottom of her pajamas, she screamed! Looking at the hem she saw white material, not purple! She knew she had put on her new purple nighty last night!

She rushed over to her dresser and yanked open the second drawer. There were her purple pajamas, right on top. She straightened to look at herself in the mirror. She reached up to touch her face. The circles under her eyes were so noticeable now. There was no hiding them. Her hair didn't even seem shiny. Her eyes were lifeless as she stared at herself, as lifeless as her soul felt. Her skin was cold, so very cold.

She grabbed her robe and ran into the bathroom. She turned on the water as hot as it would go and stepped into the steaming shower. She stood and let the water run down her face, over her breasts and arms, across her stomach, and watched it trickle over her pubic area and down her legs. It then swirled into the drain and disappeared forever.

Joanne stood in the water until her skin was shriveled and clammy.
She shut off the water and reached for her big terry towel.

Stepping out of the shower and wrapping the towel around her, she walked to the steamy mirror. She swiped across it with her hand and once again looked at her face in the reflection. The dark circles were still there. Her eyes didn't seem blue to her anymore. They appeared to be a dull gray. She touched her face. Cold! She just walked out of a steaming shower! She couldn't be cold!

She touched her arms, her chest, her stomach—cold, cold, cold! Nothing was warm! This fear inside her had traveled all the way through to her bones.

Joanne hurried to get ready and ran out to her Chevette. She drove 20 minutes to the office of Dr. Simon. Pulling up to the curb, she noticed there weren't any people on the sidewalks. There weren't even any cars in the street!

"Where is everybody?" she wondered aloud. "Is today some kind of holiday for the workers downtown? Where is everyone?"

She slowly opened the door of her car and stepped onto the sunny pavement. She gently closed the door and made her way to the entrance of the ivy-covered building.

"Dr. J. P. Simon, Psychiatrist" read the name on the brass nameplate.

"Funny," she thought. "That nameplate is almost exactly like the one hanging on Dave's door! Well, at least I know I'm at the right place! Doesn't look to me like he has such a busy schedule!"

She opened to door and was overcome by the smell of musty air. "They really need to leave this door open some of the time," she said to herself. "This place smells like it hasn't been open for years!"

She walked slowly to the receptionist's desk. No one was there.

"Maybe she just stepped out to go to the bathroom," Joanne
thought. "I'll just sit here and wait for a few minutes."

Joanne sat on one of the orange arm chairs and picked up a magazine.

"This is really strange," she said to herself. "This magazine is dated 1942! But this is 1984! How in the world did they manage to keep it in such good shape?"

She picked up another of the magazines in the office. 1942! Joanne ran around the office, grabbing up this magazine and throwing it down for another. Everyone had the same date! She grabbed her head and sank into a chair.

"I am losing my mind," she cried aloud. "I'm going crazy! Isn't there anyone that can help me? Help me, anyone! I can't stand this anymore!"

The door to the doctor's inner office swung open.

"Finally," she thought. She scrambled to her feet and ran into the office without waiting for the first patient to leave.

No one was there with the doctor. He was alone!

"Come in, Joanne," said the deep voice coming from the back of the swivel chair. "Come in and make yourself comfortable. Whenever you're ready, I'll be here to listen."

Joanne fell onto the couch by his desk. Her entire body eased back. She felt the tension leave through her fingertips and toes. Finally, she had found someone to help her.

"Doctor," she began. "I hate to barge in here this way, but do you think a person can live his dreams? I know this probably sounds silly, but how do we know what is real? I mean, are we awake right now or asleep? How can we ever know for sure what is real?"

No answer came from the chair. His back still faced her.

Joanne kept silent, waiting for his answer. Suddenly, she felt her hairs on her neck begin to prickle. She snapped up!
"How did he know my name?" she asked herself. "My appointment wasn't scheduled until tomorrow. There wasn't even a receptionist to announce me! He's never even seen me before!"

She jumped off the couch and streaked towards the door. Six inches to go and the door slammed shut in her face. She panicked. Scream after scream came from her throat, only she could hear no sound. She compelled her hand to reach for the knob, only she couldn't move! It was another dream! She couldn't move and could not wake up.

"Wake up!" she ordered herself. "Wake up! Wake up and you'll hear your alarm and see the sun. WAKE UP!"

She heard the creaking of the chair behind her. Slowly, she was able to face the man in the chair.

"Welcome," said the doctor. "We've been waiting a long time for you."

Just before she felt herself sinking to the floor, she saw the scar under his left ear.
Virgin Queen
by
Diana Shaffer

Thesis
They laid, each staring at an invisible spot on the ceiling. Their shoulders did not touch. He smirked like a Chesire cat; she closed her eyes to stop the tears from falling. Beads of sweat dotted his chest and forehead. Spots of blood stained the sheets between her legs. He reached for a cigarette; she reached for a towel.

As the tip of his cigarette began to glow orange in the darkness, she arose, wrapping the towel around her reddened waist. She wafted through the haze of smoke. Her toes curled as they felt the matted and worn shag beneath them. She hurried onto the biting cold of the bathroom tile. The lock clicked behind her.

She eased down upon the bathroom stool, elbows on her knees, head in her hands. Light from the half-moon filtered through the greasy window and fell onto the cracked and chipped tile floor. She did not flinch as a cockroach slid across her bare toes.

Her eyes centered on something beyond the cracked blue tile, beyond the roach. No longer was she the last virgin queen as the crayoned sign above her door had proclaimed that morning. She had done "IT".

For months she had been the object of ridicule, of scorn, of gossip. She was an outsider in her all-girls dormitory. After the first weekend slumber party held to acquaint the girls, she was avoided. She had told no tales of his glorious size, her different positions, her multiple orgasms. These things were foreign to her. The title of "Virgin Queen" was immediately bestowed upon her.
She began to wonder what was wrong with her, why she had not done "IT". Everyone else had. It seemed they all had, even the homely girls with buck teeth and red pimples. "IT" was the topic of every meal, every shower, every bedtime story. She was looked upon as being queer, peculiar, a girl with abnormal tendencies.

Every weekend found her in another room, another abandoned bed. Her roommate made it clear that their room was not to be preserved as a shrine for the "Virgin Queen." Her loneliness increased; her self-esteem disappeared. Was she strange.

Gwen finally met Mike, the old girl-meets-boy story. She dressed in her sheerest, red, satin blouse for their first date. Cologne was dashed behind her ears, at her temples, behind her knees, between her breasts. Her pants clung to every curve. The movie was no more than fine, the dinner nice. She paid no attention to her surroundings. Her thoughts drifted to the end of the evening, the time when he would walk her to her empty room.

As he kissed her goodnight, she pressed her breasts against the hardness of his chest. Her back arched; her every curve matched his. Their pelvises became one, separated only by their pants.

He reached for her key and calmly unlocked her door, even though inside her stomach felt like jelly. They entered, he already unbuttoning his shirt. He refused her offer of a Coke and informally draped himself across her single bed. His entire body sprawled from end to end of the narrow bed. He beckoned her to join him. She kicked off her high-heels and stiffly sat beside him, perched as near the edge as she could be. Neither spoke.
He reached to pull her down next to him. They lay facing one another. His lips met hers. His tongue flicked inside her ear and then moved to her throat. She became rigid at his touch. His fingers groped for her top button. She snapped up, clutching at her blouse, hand shaking with fear.

His forehead creased and his voice became sarcastic, patronizing. He was not used to a tease. She explained that it was just the wrong time for her. He understood. Her excuse was nearly always the same. They usually believed her.

The next weekend found her afflicted with a severe headache. She was too exhausted the following weekend. Too much homework the Saturday after that. Gwen began to run out of excuses; Mike began to run out of patience. Their fifth date ended at the Moonlight Motel, $16 for a single night.

She slowly raised her head and lethargically picked herself up from the toilet seat. She stared into the mirror at her tangled mass of hair. She looked at her swollen breasts spotted with dots of red from his savage teeth. She looked at her pubic hairs matted with blood. She felt nothing.

She wondered where the excitement had been, the pleasure. She had not experienced the "Big O" that all the girls raved about. It had only hurt. What was the matter with her? Was she not normal?

It had not been beautiful as the girls claimed. It had been monstrous, huge, swollen with his lusting blood. Veins had
shown from all sides. It was a one-eyed snake groping in the darkness. Bile rose in her throat at the mere thought.

"IT" had been terrible, painful, but "IT" was finally over. She was not queer. She would no longer be an outcast. She would fit in.

She opened the door to the stagnant bedroom. Soft breathing came from the direction of the sagging double bed. She tip-toed over and quietly moved back the covers from her side. She crawled in. He turned, his arm landing across her breasts. She was pinned to the sheets, pinned to her own decision. He continued his constant breathing. She cried.
THE END
by
Diana Shaffer
Rays of light streaked brightly down into the near-barren cove. Whipped creampuffs melted slowly across the noon sky. Frothy waves broke gently over jagged edges of pink and yellow coral. The sand glistened, stark white. The blood seeped in rivulets, earthen red.

He stood over the man, the knife dangling from his small hand. Droplets of blood slithered down the cold metal, pausing for just a moment at the steel point, then falling to rest in a puddle by his tattered, blue sneakers.

The bald man did not move. His open eyes stared at the gulls swooping playfully above, yet no sight registered within his life-less brain. His fleshy body was still warm. The brown-spotted fingers of his right hand unclenched from its fist one last time. His leg stopped twitching.

"Finally, you're gone," he said as he stepped backwards.

His untied shoelaces were a hair's breadth from the man's uncreased Gucci's, newly polished just that morning. He could see a wad of grayish gum clinging to the black sole of the right shoe. His head reared back; hysterical laughter escaped from his cracked, swollen lips.

"You weren't perfect, either, were you?" he whispered to the man.

He turned to face the lapping water, knife still dangling. He moved slowly forwards as if in a trance, shredded shoelaces dragging in the sand. His eyes focused unwaveringly on the breaking waves. His body was rigid except for the bending of his knees as he scuffed through the sand.

He did not hesitate at the water's edge, but trudged in resolutely, sneakers rocking on the sharp cove-bottom. The
uneven laces floated for a few more steps, but were finally dragged under by the worn sneakers. He never flinched at the frigid touch of the cove's water, but waded in deeper, the waves shoving and banging at his knees. He plodded on. The crimson tip of the blade sliced through the turquoise water as his steps never faltered.

When he felt the icy waves smack the unbelted waist of his faded jeans, he halted. The blade was submerged to the top of the butcher's handle. The blood swirled away like oil on top of the water. He stood there, transfixed by the drifting blood.

He drew the knife out of the water and turned it over and over in his bruised hands. He dunked it once again, then withdrew it. He wiped the remaining blood from the edge of the blade and waved it high above his head, victoriously.

The boy turned again to the uneven shore, the man's body marring the smoothness of the sand. He cocked his head to the left as if in thought, straightened, and went towards the sand. The blade dripped clear beads of water onto his disheveled hair.

His steps were more sprightly as he headed towards the shore. With his left hand he absent-mindedly wiped at his swollen eye, being careful to avoid the cracking scabs surrounding the puffy bruises. His right hand remained high, brandishing its trophy to the sky.

Once again on the sand, he tried to match his footsteps with the ones leading to the water. Tiring of this game, he ran back to the quiet and still body. He knelt beside the diamond which glistened on the man's left hand and stared into the glazed eyes. His forehead crinkled in thought. With his left hand he brushed away the flies landing in thress upon the man's gaping throat. He lowered his right hand and calmly placed the silver
knife next to the golden ring. The ring had grown so tight on the man that the skin of the man's third finger bulged over the ring, but the boy remembered.

He looked at his scarred hand next to the smooth inert hand lying on the sand. He looked at the almost hidden ring and thought about the one that he knew used to match, only that ring had been buried deep below for many years. He could not help but notice that his scarred hand was nearly the same size as the man's.

His gaze traveled upward, drinking in the crisp leather jacket and the gold St. Christopher's medallion hanging below the man's second chin. He stared into the face, his one good eye darting backwards and forwards across the clean-shaven chin. He reached out to the man's lashes, but quickly jerked his hand back as if scorched by the mere thought.

He straightened, his shadow falling across the mound of the man's stomach. His shadow barely reached the outer-edge of the man's crooked, right elbow. The life lay quietly beside the body, shafts of light sparking from the pointed tip.

The boy turned to leave. He failed to notice the hands of the man, still clenching and unclenching.