



Faith

Kelly, James Patrick

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About Kelly:

James Patrick Kelly (born 1951 in Mineola, New York) is a Hugo- and Nebula-award winning American science fiction author who began publishing in the 1970s and remains to this day an important figure in the SF field. Kelly made his first fiction sale in 1975, and has since been a major force in the science fiction field. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Notre Dame in 1972, with a B.A. in English Literature. After graduating college, he worked as a full-time proposal writer until 1977. He attended the science fiction workshop, Clarion, twice; once in 1974 and again in 1976. Throughout the 1980s, he and friend John Kessel became involved in the humanist/cyberpunk debate. While Kessel and Kelly were both humanists, Kelly also wrote several cyberpunk-like stories, such as "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1985) and "Rat" (1986). His story "Solstice" (1985) was published in Bruce Sterling's seminal anthology *MirrorShades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*. Kelly has been awarded several of science fiction's highest honors. He won the Hugo Award for his novelette "Think Like a Dinosaur" (1995) and again for his novelette "10¹⁶ to 1" (1999). His 2005 novella, "Burn," won the 2006 Nebula Award. Other stories by him have won the Asimov's Reader's Poll and the SF Chronicle Award. He is frequently on the final ballot for the Nebula Award, the Locus Poll Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. He frequently teaches and participates in science fiction workshops, such as Clarion and The Sycamore Hill Writer's Workshop. He has served on the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts since 1998 and chaired the council in 2004. He is a frequent contributor to Asimov's Science Fiction, and for the past several years has contributed a non-fiction column to Asimov's, "On the Net." He has had a story in the June issue of Asimov's for the past twenty years. Most recently, his stand-alone novella, *Burn*, published by Tachyon Publications, won the 2006 Nebula Award for Best Novella. Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Kelly:

- *Burn* (2005)
- *Itsy Bitsy Spider* (1997)
- *The Pyramid of Amirah* (2002)
- *Monsters* (1992)
- *Barry Westphall Crashes The Singularity* (2002)
- *Luck* (2002)
- *Men Are Trouble* (2004)

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Faith was about to cross Congress Street with an armload of overdue library books when she was run over by a divorce. There was no mistaking Chuck's cranberry BMW 325i idling at the light — except that Chuck was supposed to be in Hartford. The woman next him had enough blonde hair to stuff a pillow. The light changed and the BMW accelerated through the intersection. Chuck was crazy if he thought he could get away with hit and run. The blonde looked suddenly ill; she folded down in her seat like a Barbie doll in a microwave. Without thinking, Faith hurled the top book in her stack. Whump! It was the first time she had ever appreciated Stephen King's wordiness; *The Tommyknockers* bounced off the passenger door, denting it nicely. Chuck raced up Islington and out of her life. The book lay open next to the curb. Its pages fluttered in the wind, waving good-bye to fifteen years of marriage.

She had a long convalescence, during which Kleenex sales reached an all-time high. Chuck got the Beemer, the bimbo and the freedom to be himself — poor bastard. She got the cape on Moffat Street and their teenager, Flip. By the time the divorce was final, she had lost her illusions about love, half of her friends and twenty-three pounds.

She realized she was healing one day during her lunch hour. She was in a dressing room at Marshalls and had just wriggled into a size 10 bikini.

"Maybe I should write a book," she said. In the next stall her best friend Betty grunted in frustration. "The Divorce Diet, what do you think?" Faith spread her fingers across her tummy. Her mother's bulge had receded until it no longer resembled the front bumper of a pickup. "You too can cry those extra pounds off." She turned and eyed her backside in the mirror. "Stress: the key to tighter buns."

"Hell of a way to lose weight." Betty remained behind the curtain; she usually avoided mirrors like a vampire. "Liposuction is cheaper. Jesus, my thighs look like water balloons." She stuck her head out to admire Faith in the bikini. "You look great, Faith, you really do. When are you going to do something about it?"

The question nagged at Faith. What was she waiting for? Women were supposed to take what they wanted these days, not wait for men to offer it. At least, that was what the cigarette ads said. All her friends wanted to fix her up — Betty, in particular. Betty was hungry for vicarious thrills; she was married to Dave, who spent too much time on the road selling excavation equipment. As Faith rebuttoned her blouse, she wondered if she was ready now to go out.

But not with friends of friends. Not yet. Better to start with something she could abandon, if necessary, without making too much of a mess. She had been following the personals in Portsmouth Magazine; she thought she might run an ad.

She wrote it that afternoon at work, where it was easier to see herself objectively. After all, writing ad copy was her business. DWF. Faith hated that acronym. In her mind she could not help but hear DWF as dwarf. Who wanted to go out with Sneazy? Or Dopey? DWF 35. Now she needed some adjectives. Attractive professional. Okay, but there should be more. Attractive, slender, witty, secure professional. No, no, overkill. Delete slender. Now she needed something about her interests. What were her interests? Napping came immediately to mind. After working all day at the agency and then coming home to cook and clean and vacuum and do laundry and scrub toilets, she did not exactly have the energy to train for the decathlon or plow through *The New York Review of Books*. She made herself concentrate; there had to be something. My favorites: the flowers at Prescott Park, jazz, the beach in the winter, candlelit dinners anywhere. Yes, she liked that; it reeked of romance. Last came specifications for her ideal date. The problem was that she was not exactly sure what she wanted. Chuck's shabby betrayal had left her utterly confused about men. Seeking an intellectual and emotional equal. No, too pretentious. She was looking for some guy to split a pizza with, not applying to the University of New Hampshire. She scanned some other ads; what were her fellow dwarfs searching for? Compassionate, warm, honest, gentle, non-drinking life partners to share soft music, moonlit walks and a lasting friendship. She was horrorstruck: these women all wanted spend the night with Mr. Rogers! That decided her. She batted out a last line. Two deft keystrokes brought the brochure copy for Seacoast Cruises onto the computer screen and Faith was back in business. She pushed the ad out of her mind until just before quitting time, when she printed it without looking at it, wrote a check for a two week run and mailed it.

DWF 35, attractive, witty, secure professional. My favorites: the flowers at Prescott Park, jazz, the beach in the winter, candlelit dinners anywhere. Looking for someone completely different. A little generic, perhaps, but it would do for starters.

When she got home, Flip, also known as *The Creature From The Eighth Grade*, was conducting SDI research in the back yard. He was directing photons at a nest of communist tent caterpillars with a magnifying glass he had borrowed from Faith's Oxford English Dictionary.

"Flip, I'm home. Please don't do that; it's gross."

"Ma, I'm zapping them before they go into launch mode."

"Forget it."

"Can I set them on fire with lighter fluid then?"

"No. Was there any mail today?"

"You got a check from Dad. No note, though."

"Flip, I've told you before. Don't open my mail."

"He's my father, you know."

"Yes, I know." She bit back an insult and confiscated the magnifying glass instead. "Look, I'm expecting some letters soon, okay? Addressed to me. Faith Pettingell. Open my mail again, sucker, and I'm taking a hammer to your TV."

"What the matter, ma, you got a boyfriend or something? About time you started going out."

Sometimes Flip had all the charm of a housefly. Actually, Faith loved her son dearly and would not have hesitated to rush into a burning building after him, although then they would probably both die of smoke inhalation. Betty, who substituted at the middle school, liked to say that there was really no such a thing as a thirteen-year-old, that inside every eighth grader were a ten-year-old and a sixteen-year-old locked in mortal combat. Given enough time, the big kid would win and ask to borrow the car. Meanwhile, according to Betty, the best Faith could do was to silently chant the mother's mantra: "It's only a phase, it's only a phase."

It would have been easier if only Flip did not remind her so much of Chuck.

She got seven replies to her ad. Two she tossed immediately. One guy had handwriting like a lie detector chart; she was not even sure what language he had responded in. The other was only marginally literate. Faith considered herself a tolerant woman but she simply could not see herself with a man who could not get his subjects and verbs to agree.

She also heard from two lawyers, a plumbing contractor and a computer programmer. Both of the lawyers played tennis; one had a sailboat. The programmer claimed to have eaten at every restaurant in Portsmouth. The plumber seemed to have had the most interesting life; he was a skydiver and had once lived in Thailand. Everyone but the programmer had been married before; the plumber was in the middle of divorce number two. They all seemed harmless enough, which left her at

once pleased and vaguely disappointed. She felt like a little girl on Christmas morning just after she had opened the last present.

There was one other — strange — reply. It came from a man named Gardiner Allan. He did not offer a chatty autobiography or, indeed, any information about himself at all, other than a Post Office box number in Barrington. Instead he sent poetry.

Somewhere a stranger
is sleeping alone,
dreaming of gardens.
Roses breathe poems,
sweet sonnets of scent.
Leaves stir like green hearts.
The sun's caresses
inflame her bare skin.
But the cruel breeze sighs,
it isn't enough.
Where is the lover,
tender of flowers?
Then she spots someone
drowsing in shadow,
reaches to rouse him
and uproots herself.
Your dreams can't come true.
Until you wake up.

Faith was intrigued. After all, she had advertised for someone completely different. But all this stuff about inflaming caresses and bare skin and lovers. Faith had steeled herself for many things; love was not one of them. She no longer believed in love. And what kind of name was Gardiner Allan anyway? It sounded like an alias — maybe he was an escaped pervert. He had not even given a phone number. Still, no one had ever written her a poem before.

She ended up sending a post card she had bought at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. On the front was a reproduction of Mary Cassatt's painting, *The Letter*. On the back she wrote

"Dear Mr. Allan,
I enjoyed your poem. Is there more to you?"

She signed it "Faith" but gave no last name or return address. Let him get in touch with her through *Portsmouth Magazine*. If mysterious and artsy was his game, she could play too.

She began conducting what she described to Betty as experiments in dating. The results were inconclusive. She saw the lawyer with the sailboat just the once, for lunch. He was five feet one. They had not said three words to each other when he started making announcements.

"I should tell you up front that I can't stand people who smoke."

Faith smiled politely. "That's okay, I don't."

"And I don't drink either."

Her smile shrank like cheap jeans. "Oh?"

"And I don't eat red meat or refined sugar."

"You do breathe?"

"Breathe? Breathe? Everyone breathes."

She liked the other lawyer better. He had a voice like an announcer on National Public Radio. He was also a great kisser; he could do things with his lower lip that were probably against the law in Alabama. He stopped calling, though, after she beat him in straight sets: 6-4, 6-2. The programmer wore plastic shoes. He took her to dinner at the Seventy-Two but then ordered for both of them without asking her first. In a moment of weakness, she went out with him once more. This time they went to Luka's. They danced after dinner, but he never made eye contact while they were on the floor. He was too busy shopping the meat market around the bar. On the drive home he took off his shoes. His feet smelled like low tide.

The plumber was gorgeous; the only problem was that he knew it. He had a lion's mane of tawny hair and biceps the size of a meatloaf; he looked and acted at least fifteen years younger than he was really was. Faith knew it was shallow of her but she could not help herself; the closer she stood to him, the tighter her underwear felt. He seemed to have been everywhere and tried everything. On one date they stood outside of Rosa's for almost a hour waiting to get in, but she hardly noticed because he was telling her how he had once had a mystical experience while on psilocybin at the Temple of Dawn in Bangkok. By the time they had reached the door, most of the women in line behind them were eavesdropping shamelessly. Faith glanced back at them in amazement; the competition was oogling her date. She kept fantasizing that Chuck would drive by and see them there.

But somehow their relationship never got out of the shallows. The more Faith did with him, the more she realized that, with this guy, what you saw was all you got. He could tell some wonderful stories, yet he seemed not to have learned anything from them. And his boyishness got old fast. Not only did he know the lyrics to Teenager in Love but he sang

them with conviction. He did not have much use for Flip; she suspected it was because her son made him feel his true age. What ended their affair, though, was his explanation of the Zen of seduction.

"Yeah, I learned it from this cartoonist I used to know in Singapore. The trick is not to want anything." He traced the line of her jaw as he spoke. "Empty the mind of all desire. If you absolutely don't care what happens, it drives them wild. They start throwing themselves at you."

"Is that what happened with us?" Faith propped herself up on her elbow.

"Maybe."

"And you don't want anything from me?"

He grinned then and kissed her. It was a perfectly good kiss, but it left a bad taste in her mouth afterward. She started using her answering machine to screen his calls, which she never returned. Eventually he got the message.

By summer, the experiments were completed. Faith had begun with low expectations and they had been met exactly. At least she had proved to herself that she could date without getting involved. Now she was going to give men a rest. The weeds were choking her garden and the house needed cleaning and she had been neglecting her son.

She worried that Flip was lonely now that school was out. Usually he would bike over to swim team practice in the morning and then maybe visit his best friend Jerry, but Jerry's family went to their place on Lake Winnisquam in July. She had put Flip on a television diet of three hours a day, so he spent most afternoons either doing chores or fooling around with his computer or reading an endless stream of comics and trashy science fiction. She left work early a few days so that they could go to the beach but that was very hard for Faith. Flip kept staring at girls' breasts like they were cupcakes and he wanted to lick the frosting off. He's perfectly normal, she told herself as she ground her teeth. She had always assumed that Chuck would provide the necessary parental guidance about sex once Flip reached puberty. Chuck, however, was hardly a role model.

She decided it was better they should go someplace where people wore clothes. "Hey, Flip," she said one night, gallantly trying to compete with Star Trek; Captain Kirk was smirking at some space bimbo dressed in high heels and aluminum foil. "I just got the schedule for the Arts Festival at Prescott Park. Guy Van Duser and Billy Novick are on next Friday. How about we fry up some chicken and check them out? We could stay for the play."

"Boring." At the commercial he ran for the bathroom.

"Come on." She pulled the schedule from her purse. "I thought you'd like the play. Little Shop of Horrors.

"Saw the movie." Flip called. "Both movies."

"How about this? Mondays they're having a science fiction film festival at the library. When Worlds Collide." She read from the schedule. "Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Plan 9 from Outer Space."

"Plan 9? Jerry says that's the worst movie ever made. I heard it's awesome. I could see that. Yeah!"

Flip had been a science fiction fan since the third grade, a vice he had picked up from Chuck. Betty had been telling Faith for years not to worry. She claimed that science fiction was only another phase.

"Well, his father never grew out of it," Faith said.

"Live with it," said Betty. "It's better than girls, believe me. You can't catch a disease from science fiction."

"It's easy for you to say." Faith twirled the phone cord impatiently. "He's not dragging you to Plan 9 from Outer Space. Say, what are you doing Monday? Isn't Dave in Worcester?"

"Yes, but really, there's this Newhart rerun ... "

"Come on, I'll take you for ice cream afterward."

About a dozen people turned out on a hot Monday night to see the worst movie ever made. It was about stodgy aliens in silver tights who zoomed around in an art deco frisbee raising the dead. The only actor she recognized was Bela Lugosi, who looked as if he had just been raised from the dead. Betty wanted to go after the first reel but Flip was staying. While the librarian changed reels, Flip struck up a conversation with a friendly man who explained that the reason Bela looked so feeble was that he had died two days after shooting started. The director had then enlisted his wife's hairdresser as a stand-in. While her son listened, Faith idly sized the stranger up as a potential date. She had been doing that a lot lately; she was still trying to figure out her type. This one was tall, skinny and thirtyish and he had very blue eyes. Handsome but not tastelessly so — too bad she did not trust men with glasses. Betty caught her looking and raised an inquiring eyebrow. Faith pursed her lips slyly and scooted around to face the screen. No way a Bela Lugosi fan could be her type.

After the movie, they window-shopped up Congress Street and down Market Square. When they got to Annabelle's, Faith was surprised to see

the stranger already there, working on a sandwich and a bowl of soup. He grinned at her. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

Faith smiled back. "Small town, isn't it?" It was an absurdly trite comeback, but he did not seem to mind.

She was not quite sure why, but the smile stayed on her face. It felt comfortable there. She ordered a small crunchy chocolate cone while Flip and Betty settled at a table. They left her the chair facing the affable stranger.

"What did you get, Faith?" Betty nudged her. "Faith?"

The stranger made eye contact.

"Uh, fine." Faith's cheeks were warm. "Lovely." It was eerie, but she knew he would get up. She knew he was going to come over to talk to her. The surprise was that she wanted him to do it.

"Excuse me for eavesdropping," he said, "but is your name Faith?"

"Yes," she said.

"I think we may have corresponded." He extended his hand. "I'm Gardiner Allan."

"Uh, Gardiner Allan, right. The poet. You never wrote back."

"But I did. You never answered my second letter."

"I never got it."

He grimaced and made a crack about raccoons running the Post Office. She wanted to say something clever but Plan 9 had turned her brain to cottage cheese. Meanwhile, Betty was practically twitching with curiosity.

"Why don't you pull up a chair, Gardiner?" said Flip.

He glanced at Faith. "I wouldn't want to intrude"

"Yes, please sit." She scooted her chair to make room. "It's no fun eating alone. I know. This is my friend, Betty Corriveau. My son Flip."

Betty shook his hand; Flip waved. Faith could not think of anything to say so she licked her crunchy chocolate ice cream, which was already melting. Gardiner spooned up some soup. The silence stretched. Faith realized the man was probably thinking about all those damned adjectives: witty, secure professional. So much for truth in advertising.

"Well, this is a coincidence." Betty to the rescue. "So you're a poet, Gardiner?"

"It's a hobby, actually. Nobody earns a living from poetry — unless they work at Hallmark."

"And what do you do when you're not writing?"

"I breed plants."

"Are you with the university?" said Faith.

"No, I'm not affiliated with anyone. I guess you'd call me a freelancer."

"That must be interesting." Betty sounded skeptical. "What kind of plants do you breed?"

"Oh, different kinds." He shrugged. "I've just developed a tetraploid *hemerocallis* I'm pretty fond of."

"*Hemerocallis*," Faith said. "Daylily, right?"

"That's it." He nodded approvingly. "Tets have twice the number of chromosomes, you know. Gives them vigor, clearer colors, better substance. But they don't breed true so you have to propagate them by division, which is slow, or tissue culture, which is expensive."

"What's that you're eating?" Flip had a low tolerance for adult chitchat. "Looks pretty nasty."

"Tomato dill soup and a vegetarian sandwich."

"Oh, are you a vegetarian?" Betty was grilling him as if she were doing an FBI background check.

"No, I just have to watch my diet." He waved his spoon vaguely. "So Flip, what did you think of the movie?"

They soon got to comparing favorites. Gardiner kept mentioning films that even Flip had never heard of.

"I just don't understand the attraction," Betty interrupted. "Sci-fi ... it's just too weird for me."

"Weird, right," said Gardiner. "You know, weird comes from the Saxon: *wyrð*. Means fate or 'what is to come.' That's why people like science fiction, I think — kids especially. Their fate matters to them. They're still interested in what's coming. Other people bury their heads in the here and now, as if it was the only reality. Change spooks them and the future scares them silly. Since they don't understand it they refuse to believe in it. But it's just plain wrong to pretend that 2001 is some impossible fairyland like Oz. Weird or not, it's coming."

Betty was momentarily speechless.

"I didn't know anyone took science fiction so seriously." Faith said.

"Not just science fiction. Fantasy, horror — I don't know. I'm strange, I guess. Different, anyway. Some people are afraid of that." He chuckled.

"Hey, Flip, how about *Forbidden Planet*?"

"Is that the one with the robot?"

"Yeah. Did you know it's a remake of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*? Robbie is Ariel and Morbius is Prospero. Read *The Tempest*?"

"Shakespeare? You've got to be kidding me. They made us read *Romeo and Juliet* in English and I just about barfed."

"Flip, you've got to give Will a chance. Great fantasy writer. The Tempest has magicians and monsters — it's awesome. Or read some of his horror, Macbeth or Hamlet."

Faith liked the way this man's mind worked, but she was not about to let him know that. Not yet anyway. "I'm not sure I see Macbeth as a horror story."

"Oh, sure. There's even a curse on it; ask any actor. They're afraid to say the name; they call it 'that Scottish play.' People have died mysteriously. They say Shakespeare used real spells for the witches' dialogue."

Flip gazed at Gardiner as if he were the second coming of Rod Serling. Betty glanced at her watch — he had lost her back at Forbidden Planet. Faith wiped drips of crunchy chocolate ice cream from her fingers.

"I'm sorry." Gardiner looked sheepish. "I get carried away sometimes."

"No, no," said Faith. "It's fascinating. Really. Problem is that it's almost ten and I've got to be at work early tomorrow." She pushed her chair back.

"Would you mind if I called you some time?" The way he said it suggested that he did not expect her to say yes.

"Why not?" She patted his hand. "I'd like that." He had rough skin. "I'm in the book."

"See you, Gardiner," Flip said.

"Nice to meet you."

Faith could not sleep that night. Her bed seemed very big. Very lonely. The way Gardiner had guessed her name bothered her. How many other women named Faith had he accosted? She replayed their conversation in her mind. Something was wrong.

"Damn." She sat up abruptly. "Damn." How was he going to get her number when she had never told him her last name?

Flip was upstairs reading and Faith was making dinner. The phone rang. "Flip, can you get that?" She heard him bound across the upstairs hall and held herself poised for a moment, but he did not call, so she went back to her chicken salad. She chopped some leftover white meat, a stalk of celery, a thin slice of Bermuda onion and a sliver of red pepper. She found the mayonnaise in the refrigerator but did not see the relish.

"Flip, where's the relish?" she shouted.

"I needed it," he shouted back.

"You needed it? A whole jar of relish? What for?"

"Ma, I'm on the phone if you don't mind."

She wiped her hands and picked up on the kitchen extension. "We interrupt this conversation for an important announcement ... "

"Ma!"

"Tell your friend you'll get back to him after we settle this relish crisis."

"Ma, I forgot to mention that I ran into —"

"Hello, Faith. This is Gardiner Allan."

" — Gardiner today at the library."

"Gardiner." She felt as if she had just swallowed a brick. "Hi."

"I was going to say something at dinner."

"Flip, hang up." Click. "Well, Gardiner, you sure have a knack for surprising people."

"I've had years of practice. I'm sorry, is this a bad time? I could try again later."

"That's ok." She caught the handset between her chin and shoulder as she checked the corn muffins in the oven. "Just puttering around the kitchen. So, how are you?"

He chattered for a while about how Park Seed was interested in exclusive rights to his new daylily for their Wayside Gardens catalog and then she babbled about the direct mail campaign she was doing for the Fox Run Mall. They complained about the muggy weather. They agreed that Flip was a wonderful kid. She made a comment about how lucky it was that Gardiner had run into him at the library.

"Maybe it wasn't luck," said Gardiner. "Maybe it was fate."

"Weird," she said. It was the first time she had made him laugh.

The preliminaries out of the way, he asked her to dinner. However, as soon she said yes, they seemed to run out of things to talk about. They agreed on Friday night at six and then he said he had to go and hung up.

"Flip, let's eat!"

As Faith listened to her son thud downstairs like a bowling ball, she wondered whether she had done a good thing in agreeing to see Gardiner Allan. Flip set the book he had been reading beside his plate.

It was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Gardiner seemed edgy; he walked Faith out to his car like a man on his way to an audit. The back seat of his Ford Escort wagon was covered with a plastic dropcloth. On it squatted an enormous plant with blue-green leaves the size of dinner plates.

"Gardiner, what a beautiful plant!"

"*Hosta seiboldiana*. A new cultivar."

Faith arched an eyebrow. "I've never been out with a perennial before."

"There's a perfectly good reason why I had to bring it, which I'd rather not go into just now." He turned the ignition key; the engine grumbled and caught.

"Does it have a name?" she asked.

"23HS."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. S." She twisted around in her seat and touched one of the big leaves.

Gardiner said nothing.

"So where are we going for dinner?"

"We've got reservations at Anthony's for six-thirty."

"Great. I love Anthony's." She teased him again. "But I didn't know they served hostas there."

Silence.

"Is something wrong?" she said. "I don't bite, you know. Or at least, not until after dessert."

"Everything's fine; it's my problem."

"I see." She considered. "You know what an oxymoron is, Gardiner? Because what you just said sounded like one."

He pulled off into an empty lot. "Faith, I like you, but there's something I've got to tell you."

She sagged against the passenger door. "Okay, I'm listening." She hated it when men started confessing things on the first date.

"I don't just blurt this out to anyone, you know. People get the wrong idea. But I like you."

"You said that already."

He grasped the steering wheel as if to anchor himself.

"I talk to plants."

She waited. "That's all? You mean, you don't deal crack? You're not involved with a sixth-grader?"

"No listen, I really talk to plants. Hostas, daylilies, hibiscus — you name it. I don't understand myself exactly how I do it. But I'm not crazy, believe me. Just a little different. And I get results: I'm successful at what I do. There aren't that many independent plant breeders left in this country, you know. Most of them work for universities or corporations or else they specialize in just one species. I've registered more than twenty different cultivars in the past ten years. Anyway, sometimes I wait to tell people — women — about this. I wait until they get to know me better. But when they find out, I end up getting hurt."

"Gardiner, I ... "

"It's all right if you want to go home. I understand; it's happened before. Sometimes I don't even know why I bother. Look, I don't ... I certainly don't expect you to talk to plants. I'd be pretty surprised if you did. You can think whatever you want — but just don't humor me. Okay? Because first they always say 'oh, isn't that cute, he talks to plants' and then it's 'poor guy, maybe he's been alone too long,' and the next step is 'Gardiner, have you ever thought about getting counseling?' I don't need counseling! I just need someone to trust me for a change."

Faith hesitated, then reached over and gently squeezed his arm. The muscle was knotted beneath his sleeve, as if he were ready to hit someone. But she knew, somehow, that she was not the one he was angry at. It was the same spooky way she had known at Annabelle's that he was going to introduce himself. Maybe it was body language or the crack in his voice, but she had a good feeling about this man, despite his tirade. She could not say why she trusted him, but she did. "I'm sorry I teased you." She let her hand drop and checked her watch. "Did you say our reservations are for six-thirty? Come on, let's go before they give some tourist our table."

He nodded and pulled back onto Islington Street. "I thought about saying that all day."

"I'll bet."

"That wasn't the way I had rehearsed it."

She sensed he was cooling off, so she grinned. "It's all part of the agenda for a first date, you know. You need to figure out whether you're with a human being or a chimpanzee, so you make up these tests — we all do."

"A test? Maybe so." He grinned back. "So what's your test?"

"Oh, I stick to the basics," she said. "Does he show up? Is he wearing shoes? Can he speak Lithuanian?" Once she got him chuckling, she met and held his gaze. "But as long as we're being disgustingly honest ... I guess I need to tell you something too. I'm glad you like me, Gardiner. But when a man keeps saying things like that, I hear something else."

"Okay." He sighed. "I understand."

By the time they reached Anthony's, the crisis had passed. With the help of a bottle of Valpolicella, they

laughed their way through the antipasto. For the main course Faith ordered her favorite, the cunningly spiced fettuccine carbonara. She warned Gardiner that garlic was another test. He had eggplant something. She finally tried asking him about himself over the cappuccino.

"I grew up in Hollis," he said. "Mom taught math at Nashua High and Dad owned an apple orchard. I went to UNH for a couple of years; I was going to major in plant science and help run the orchard. But it was the sixties, you know. I took a detour and never got back to the highway. I inherited some money when dad died so I bought the land in Barrington. I wanted to raise pot but my girlfriend at the time was paranoid, thank goodness. So I tried my hand at growing legal stuff." He lifted his cup. "The rest is horticultural history."

"You're lucky to be doing something you're good at," Faith said. "Then again, you do have the name for it."

"Gardiner was my grandmother's maiden name. Hated it when I was a kid. I thought it a bad joke my parents played on me. Now I see it more as an omen. Turns out lots of people have names that fit. The guy who took my appendix out was Dr. Cutts. The archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Sin. Grace Kelly. We once had a governor named Natt Head."

"George Bush." Faith giggled. "Dan Quayle."

"There you go."

After dinner, they strolled through town. She told him about growing up in Philadelphia. She hated discussing her marriage because of the whine that always crept into her voice, so she told Flip stories instead. Flip and the lost ant colony. Flip meets Governor Sununu. Flip and the barbecued cat food. She talked about the agency and how she was going to ask for a promotion.

"Does your work make you happy?" he asked.

"I don't know what happy means anymore. I thought I was happy with Chuck and he was cheating on me. Isn't happy just our capacity for self-deception?"

"That's a dumb question." He took her hand. "As long as we're being brutally honest."

"Oh." She thought about being offended. She thought about letting go of his hand. She decided not to.

They wandered through the park at twilight. Gardiner went straight for the All-America Selection trial garden. "Front row seats for the plant play-offs. Check out the celosias." He knelt to touch some spiky flowers that looked like burning feathers. "You're gorgeous," he said.

She folded her arms. "Well, thanks."

He glanced up at her, his face bright with pleasure. "Yeah, you too," he said.

Faith had long since decided that men were born compliment-impaired. "They smell nice, anyway."

"No, that's nicotiana. The white trumpets. Another old-timer they've overimproved. They bred for more flowers and gave up most of the fragrance. In your grandmother's day you would've been able to smell that bed in Maine." He straightened up. "Ever hear of Luther Burbank?"

"No." She took his hand again.

"He introduced over 800 varieties of new plants way before anyone understood genetics. He had an instinct. They say he could walk down a row of seedlings, deciding what to thin at a glance. He knew just which ones would bear the fruit he wanted. How could he do that?"

She shook her head.

"He developed a spineless cactus. Afterward he said, 'I often talked to the plants to create a vibration of love. 'You have nothing to fear,' I would tell them. 'You don't need your defensive thorns. I will protect you.' That's a direct quote. 'You have nothing to fear.' Try publishing that in a scientific journal."

"This has something to do with your hosta."

"Here's another celosia," said Gardiner. "Cockscomb."

"Looks like a brain made of red velvet," she said, "and don't change the subject."

He stopped and faced her. "It wasn't only the words that Burbank said. It was his vibration." He looked uncomfortable. "You see, 23HS is forming gametophytes, getting ready for sexual reproduction. I'm telling it that I love it and making a ... friendly suggestion about the offspring. A matter of a few chromosomes. It doesn't take all that much focus; it's like driving the interstate."

"Telling it? Right now?"

He nodded. His eyes seemed to get bluer and for a moment she felt that she could see inside of him. He was afraid.

So was she. "Are you saying you're using telepathy? On a hosta?"

"Telepathy? I didn't say anything about telepathy. I said suggestion, Faith." He shivered in the gloom. "I hate explaining this. It always comes out wrong. So why am I telling you?"

"I don't know." She squeezed his hand. "Because you want someone to trust you?"

He stared at the lights across the river. "Would you consider coming out to the farm? I could show you there."

"I might." She surprised herself. "I just might. Promise not to sacrifice me to the corn goddess?"

"He's a mad scientist."

"He's not a scientist. He never got his degree."

It was late on a Saturday night. Betty and Faith were at the kitchen table, drinking Carlo Rossi Rhine out of coffee cups. Flip was with his father and Betty's husband Dave was in Toledo. There were only three brownies left in the pan.

"He talks dirty to plants."

"You promised to withhold judgment until I finished the story." Faith wondered if she should have said anything at all to her. "Don't you ever talk to your plants?"

"No."

"Well I do. Millions of people do. It's perfectly acceptable behavior." Faith was keeping Gardiner's vibrations a secret for now, which was hard because they were what worried her most.

"All right, I'm withholding. He's got wonderful compost. I'm totally impartial."

"So I went up to his place in Barrington. He owns sixty acres off Route 9. The farmhouse was built in 1834; there's an attached barn, a big greenhouse. And gardens, amazing gardens."

"Is the house nice?"

"He doesn't live in the house. He could, but it's too big for him. He has a trailer, an old fashioned aluminum Airstream. Sort of retro. When he was a kid he thought they looked like space ships and he always wanted to live in one when he grew up."

"When he grew up," Betty repeated, writing on an imaginary notepad.

"I met his staff; he has an older couple, John and Sue, full time and three kids from UNH for the summer. Everyone was so friendly and enthusiastic — reminded me of summer camp. They whistle a lot. And it's contagious. As we walked the grounds, I felt glad just to be there. Like I wanted to stretch out on the warm grass and make the afternoon last the rest of my life."

Betty refilled Faith's empty cup. "So when he talks to plants, what does he say?"

"He's a shameless flatterer. 'How's my jewel today? You're smothered with buds. And your lines are so graceful. What, are you reblooming already?' He uses Q-tips to cross-pollinate. 'You'll like this one,' he says, 'he blooms for weeks.' And he stuffs things in his mouth like a toddler. Bits of leaf, blades of grass, thinnings — he ate a flower. Well, so did I: rose petals in the salad. But while we were in the annual garden, he ate a nasturtium. He claims it helps him stay connected. He has this theory

that plants like to be consumed. They want us to make better use of them. But the worst was when he ate a Japanese beetle."

"Ugh. Kind of scratchy going down."

"He said he didn't do that very often but that it reassured the plants and discouraged beetles. I think he was showing off."

"Men'll do that — don't ask me why. In college, a rugby player once swallowed a guppy for me." Betty sounded wistful. "His name was Herman."

"Oh, and he named a flower after me."

"What!"

Faith grinned. "He's been working on a new daylilly and apparently it's a big deal. He just sold propagation rights to this seed company and they've been pressing him to name it because their catalog is going to the printer. So now it's going to be called 'Faith.' In the morning it's a dusty salmon but as the blossom catches the sun, it gets brighter and pinker. 'Improves with age,' he says. And fragrant too. I mean, it was so beautiful, I wanted to cry."

"He named a flower after you on the second date! Forchrissakes, did you go to bed with him?" She said it so that Faith could take it as a joke if she wanted.

Faith's grin stretched to a smile. "After dinner, everyone else went home and we talked for a long time on the porch swing at the house and then he said, 'I'm going to kiss you now unless you stop me.'"

"I take it you didn't."

"Are you kidding? I wanted to applaud." She dissolved into laughter and then pounded her wrists against her forehead. "Betty, I don't want to do this. I can't be falling already. It's too soon ... I'm still rebounding from Chuck. Aren't I supposed to wait two years or something?"

"Next you'll be drawing up a flow chart! You're allowed to feel whatever you feel."

"Who's side are you on, anyway?"

"Yours."

"I didn't think you liked him after the way you acted at Annabelle's. You couldn't wait to go."

"The only reason I acted any way at all is because I was attracted to him and wished I could do something about it." She snatched up the last brownie and squinted at Faith. "Did I just say what I thought I heard myself say?"

"You don't think he's too strange?"

"Sure he's too strange." She shrugged. "Everybody is. It's a wonder we can stand one another at all, much less fall in love. I think you already know what you want to do, Faith. But if you're asking me, I say good for you."

Faith was at a loss. She had expected Betty to try and talk her out of seeing Gardiner again. Betty's approval only made her feelings for him more credible. And more scary. She wished she could have told Betty about the vibrations — or whatever the hell they were — but that would have been too reckless a violation of Gardiner's trust. Bad enough that she had blabbered as much as she had. So she was left with what seemed to her an intractable dilemma: her new boyfriend was telepathic. How else could he have recognized Faith at Annabelle's? Or found Flip at the library? Or waited until precisely the right moment to kiss her? It was not only plants that he connected to; Faith believed Gardiner had read her mind. She doubted she could be with a man who would always know what she was thinking. How would she be able to tell if she were being manipulated into doing things that she did not really want? Maybe he did not care at all, maybe he was just using his power to seduce her. When they filmed her life, they would have to call it *Passion Slave of the Mutant*. God help me, she thought, deep into yet another sleepless night, I'm sinking to Flip's level. I'm starting to see my life in terms of "B" monster movies.

Flip and Jerry were in the back seat practicing burps. Faith had never understood why rude noises should strike such profound harmonies in the souls of thirteen-year-old boys. Soon they would move on to farts. She pulled into Betty's driveway and parked next to Dave's Taurus. Something was wrong. Betty never went out when her husband was home.

"You okay?" said Faith.

"No." The screen door slammed. "Where's Gardiner?"

"He had to work late; we're meeting him at the park. Look, are you sure you want to come? I'll call him and cancel. We could go at my place and talk."

"I don't want to talk." She marched from her house as if she never intended to return. "I've been talking ever since he came home. I'm sick of hearing myself."

"Problems?"

"No problem. All I have to do is accept the fact that I have a drive-through marriage. Just take me someplace where people are having fun, okay? The more the merrier."

A dense groundcover of blankets and lawn chairs had already spread around the outdoor stage at Prescott Park Arts Festival by the time they arrived. It had been a wet summer and many of the performances had been rained out. The penultimate show of the season had drawn a big crowd on a warm Friday night. A harpist and a science fiction writer were the opening acts for Little Shop Of Horrors.

They spread the blanket on the lawn between the whale sculpture and the stage. Flip and Jerry wandered off to snack, ignoring Faith's protest that the cooler was full of fried chicken and fruit salad. As the crowd filled in around them, Betty steadfastly resisted Faith's efforts to draw her out. She was about as much company as a land mine. "I'm going to stretch my legs," she said finally. "I'll be back."

Faith was sympathetic; however she could not help but resent Betty's timing. Faith did not need to be worrying about her friend when she had to decide what to say to Gardiner. One reason she had brought Jerry and Flip along was to protect herself from a serious conversation if she lost her nerve. Now she was alone.

"What's with Betty?" He snuck up behind her, stooped and nuzzled the back of her neck. "I saw her on the way in."

"I don't know exactly." She held out her hands to be helped up. "Funny, I was just thinking of you."

He took her weight effortlessly. "I can't stop thinking of you."

She almost came into his arms but then pushed away. "Let's take a walk." He made her feel too good.

He veered toward the garden but she maneuvered him around it as she explained that Betty was having trouble with Dave, but was not talking about it. They passed over the bridge and past the parking lots on Pierce Island, strolling in silence while Faith worked up her courage. "What am I thinking right now?" she said. "Take a guess."

He put fingers to temples and affected an air of deep concentration. "You're thinking ... let's see, you're thinking that if we don't turn around soon, we'll be late for the harpist. No, no, wait — that's what I'm thinking."

"Gardiner, what kind of vibrations do you get from me?"

"Good, good, good, good vibrations," he sang in a surfer falsetto.

"Be serious. I'm asking if you can read my mind."

He made a rude noise that Flip would have loved. "Everyone asks that, sooner or later. And I always tell the truth. Which is, I don't know."

"How could you not know something like that?"

"I can't tell what you're thinking, what your cat thinks or what a rose thinks. If anything. Sometimes I sense emotions. Anger, fear, desire; the strong ones. But so what? We all give unconscious cues to one another and it's not that hard to understand them, if you pay attention. Lots of people don't. They're so locked up inside themselves that they never see anyone else. But just because I look people in the eye doesn't mean I know what's in their hearts. I'm a sender, not a receiver."

She slipped an arm around his waist. "What does that mean exactly?"

"I have no secrets because I broadcast what I feel. The stronger the emotion, the broader the cast. If I'm happy, I'm the literally life of the party. When I'm sad, people want to cry. It's a curse, really — which is why I'd rather be with my plants. It's all so much simpler with begonias. I mean I can't hide it if I don't like someone. And when I love someone ... "

"You don't love me."

"No? Think about it, Faith. I'm the one that's naked. When you're close and I brush your face like this. Can't you tell? When I whisper your name? Faith."

Their lips touched.

After a while, he pulled back. "Do you know what a feedback loop is?"

"Gardiner, we're kissing!"

"When sound from the speaker gets picked up by the microphone, the system howls. It feeds on itself, increasing with every cycle to maximum output." He sifted her hair through his fingers. "Maybe that's what's happening to us. My love is reflected by you back to me, which makes me think you love me, which makes me love you more, and on and on. It's happened before."

"Doesn't leave much room for my feelings, does it?"

"I wish I knew what they were, Faith. Can you tell me?"

"No. I don't know. Now I'm really confused."

"So maybe it is feedback. What you need to do is get far away from me so you can decide what you feel without my interference."

"We'd better go back." She poked him in the ribs. "You sure know how to ruin a kiss."

They missed the first few minutes of the harpist, who was very good. The boys were restless so during the break before the science fiction writer read, she sent them over to spit off the pier. Gardiner was restless too; he went in a different direction. Faith was afraid she had hurt him.

She knew that was wrong. She was afraid of hurting him. Hurting herself. She was too damn careful; if this kept up she would never be with

anyone again. She needed to take some chances. She spotted Gardiner over by the vertical planting of impatiens. He was cruising the wall of bloom like it was the salad bar at Wendy's.

"Faith, he's here," Betty hissed.

As Faith watched, Gardiner picked a flower and then surreptitiously popped it into his mouth. Nobody saw but her. She grinned and shook her head. The man needed someone to watch out for him or he was going to get in trouble someday. And she wanted him — no question about that! He had brought her back to life; now she was ready to blossom. Why should she care how he had done it?

"And he's with someone new! I can't believe it."

Faith wondered if she were far enough away to be out of Gardiner's feedback loop. Because, from this distance, he looked very much like someone she could love. "What are you mumbling about?" Even if his kissing did need work.

"Chuck."

"Chuck?" Faith was dreaming now. "Chuck who?"

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