

Higher Education

Marla worked hard, grimly determined to get the hell out of her dead-end job at Abel Glass. She'd already spent over a year at her desk with the bottle cap wedged under its one too-short leg, listening to the office manager, Nedda, and the accounting clerk, Trudy, give the play-by-play of their weekend fun—usually full of beer, line dancing and men. Nedda was so unmindful of Marla's interests and goals that she still invited her along on Friday nights. "You're *nineteen*, kid. Kick up your heels!" she'd say, ruffling Marla's heavy auburn hair, which fortunately lay right back down.

Marla was not about to be blown off course by partying or romance. That had happened once before and look where it landed her. She could afford no more detours. The last one, getting knocked up in Teddy Dardino's rumpus room, is why she carried *Ace the GED* and *Crack the SAT* study guides in her blue canvas tote.

Naturally, a job at a place like Abel Glass would bring Marla the wrong boyfriend. "Landed him!" is how Nedda would put it. Casey came into Abel Glass a couple of times a week, wheeling a dolly full of boxes, his khaki uniform shorts ending just above his smiling knees, "Casey" machine-stitched in red cursive on a white oval patch above his shirt pocket. If Nedda wasn't there—she was often out in the shop flirting with the guys—Marla signed for the packages. One morning, when she handed Casey back his clipboard, he handed her a tissue-wrapped lump.

"What's this?" Marla asked, cocking her head.

"For you," Casey said.

"For me? Who from?"

Casey stood in front of her desk with his arms straight down at his sides like a third grader. “Me,” he said.

Inside the nest of white tissue was a glass hummingbird. Casey had noticed Marla’s theme—her stack of work orders anchored by a hummingbird paperweight; pictures of *National Geographic* hummingbirds, their beaks buried in exotic flowers, scotch-taped to her dented file cabinet; ruby-throated hummingbirds trapped beneath her plastic desk protector. The glass bird grew warm in Marla’s cupped hands. She looked up at Casey, whose eyes had always seemed a bit too close together, reminding her a little of a collie. She noticed for the first time that he had lovely dark eyebrows. His smile showed that he took good care of his teeth, and that he was both terribly pleased and terribly shy.

After that day, Casey would have exactly one thing to say to her per delivery, as if he’d made some kind of resolution. Something about Marla’s earrings, or the word that was up on her word-of-the-day calendar, or some bird he’d seen on his route. Robins, blackbirds—he couldn’t distinguish what was rare from what was common. Still, since Marla could have been sitting at her desk wearing the Pope’s robes and Trudy and Nedda wouldn’t notice, Casey’s small attentions had an effect, even if his look of open-faced devotion made Marla feel a little embarrassed for him.

At noon every day Marla carried her sack lunch to the balding park across the street where blue jays fought in the trees and bums snoozed in the sun. She hunched over vocab and math problems while she ate. *Gestation means: A) this B) that C) the next thing D) none of the above. If the average baby quadruples in weight in three years, how much will a seven pound three ounce infant weigh at age three?*

If Marla kept at it, she could meet the admission deadline to McWhorty, the only college in the county. Come fall, Marla would be a busy college co-ed barreling her way toward a professional degree in *something*—she'd pick later—that would insert several protective layers between her adult life and her sprawling family of mechanics, plumbers and chain smoking housewives.

On the day Marla was to take the GED after work, Casey happened to wheel his packages up to Marla's desk just as she was discovering that she'd left her test registration at home. He stood by while she dug through her blue tote and dumped her purse on the desk, pawing through breath mints and grocery receipts and actually *swearing*. Nedda walked in and stood with her hand over her mouth in mock horror, then waved Casey over and took the clipboard from him while he kept his eyes on Marla.

“Can I help?” he asked, once his dolly was emptied.

“Shit, shit, shit! What am I going to do?” Marla dropped her face into her hands. If she missed this test, she'd have to wait another *year* to apply to McWhorty.

“Try retracing your steps,” said Casey. “That's what my mother used to say.”

“I *know* where it is!” Marla cried. “No bus can get me home and back to the test center by 5:30!”

Casey's eyes went to the glass hummingbird perched airily atop Marla's Post-it headquarters. “Maybe I can help.”

That's how Marla came to arrive at the test center in a step van with a lightning bolt on its side.

“Would you mind riding in back?” Casey had asked, wrinkling his forehead in apology. “There's a rule about passengers and I want to keep my job.” This is his *career*,

Marla thought, thinking a little less of him as she leaned through the turns, her eye on the shelves of boxes surrounding her. Still, she was grateful, and that made her think a little more of him.

Plus, Casey was now one of the only people she knew, family included, who'd seen where she lived. She'd stepped on a Greyhound and moved to this town right after she'd given up her baby at the hospital, a year and a half ago. It was the closest far away big town she could get to.

Casey had idled his green van by the littered steps of her downtown apartment building while she dashed upstairs to grab her test confirmation, and somehow that made Marla feel closer to him, almost as if she'd read him a page from her diary. So, it was easier to say yes when, the next week, he asked if she'd like to go to the zoo on Saturday. He'd done his research too. "They've got a walk-through aviary with birds from all over," he told her.

It turned out Casey didn't have a car. He's like a kid, Marla thought, forgetting that she didn't have a car either.

"I could come over to your place and we could take the number 26 together," he suggested.

But Marla didn't want him getting ideas. "I know what," she said. "I'll meet you there. How's 12:30?"

Saturday morning, Marla spread a beach towel over the aqua shag rug whose limp pile hid God-knows-what, and commenced her exercise regime. Doing crunches to tighten her stomach muscles was the only time she allowed herself to think of the baby, the fuzzy-headed red-faced infant herself—and not her mother's sour look at her

expanding girth, or how Teddy Dardino's father had offered her \$300, or how she'd dropped out of school. Marla pictured the tiny fists and the wrinkled brow and miniature lips of her baby and wondered what it would be like if at this very moment there was a little girl sitting at the kitchen table behind her, coloring. At such times, Marla felt the sweet and painful passage of possibility, with its cargo of hope and regret, as if she were rocking in a dinghy, looking up at the towering side of a gleaming ship as it slid by. It was thrilling and unsettling, and a relief when she let the notion go and was alone again at sea.

Marla heaved her shoulders up from the floor; elbows touched knees. And again. And again. She reminded herself that she'd done the right thing, recalling her mother's grudging suggestion that she squeeze a crib next to her teenage twin bed at home. "What're you gonna do that's not a bigger shame than what you've already done?" her mother had said, laying out a game of Solitaire on the coffee table. But Marla managed to produce more shame—by giving the baby away and escaping.

In the shower, she analyzed her weekend plan. Going to the zoo with Casey, where would *that* get her? She had the SAT to study for. The warm water flowing over her gradually lured her into thoughts of the sun, then the zoo with its strange mixture of sounds and smells, the shrieks, the roars, the scent of cotton candy and animal cages (she hadn't been in *years*), and Casey walking beside her. How tall was he anyway? He was always standing up and she was always sitting down. Well, she'd find out when she got off the bus at the zoo. The *bus*!

Marla twisted off the faucets hard and snatched the towel off the shower rod. *McWhorty* was on the 26 line! If she hurried, she could stop off and visit the campus on the way.

Two pillars held the arch that formed the main entrance to campus. Beneath the school's name, Latin words were chiseled into the granite, the O's angled like diamonds, the Us formed as Vs.

Students ambled across the quad, or lolled on the lawn, with books lying facedown on the grass. In the campus bookstore, Marla inhaled the back-to-school scent of cedar and vinyl, and wandered aisles stocked with equipment for the student life. She scanned lists of required books for various classes, then browsed bumper stickers, coffee mugs, even bibs imprinted with the *McWhorty* logo and mascot—a bagpipe player wearing a graduation cap. She was handing the cashier three dollars for a key ring when she noticed the clock on the wall: ten minutes to catch the bus.

As she came out of the Student Union, Marla spotted a stone building with wide steps and Roman columns. She *had* to have one quick peek.

Her hurried footsteps echoed in the empty hallways, which smelled of old coats and floor polish. The classrooms and offices were dark. Along one corridor, professors' names were painted on the frosted glass of each door. Marla bent down to peer at a card that listed office hours.

Before she could straighten up, a shadow appeared on the other side of the glass. The door was yanked open and a middle-aged woman stood there in stocking feet. Her

rumpled blouse had come untucked from her tweed skirt and her short hairdo was mashed flat on one side. On the couch behind her lay a plaid blanket and a bedroom pillow.

The woman squinted at Marla, then found her glasses hanging on a chain around her neck. “Let me guess,” she said. “Your midterm grade?”

Marla was still marveling at the floor-to-ceiling books, the oriental carpet beneath the polished desk, the framed diplomas and gilt-edged certificates.

“Talk to your TA on Monday, would you?” said the professor, tugging her skirt into proper position.

As Marla opened her mouth, the phone rang. The professor sighed and waved Marla in, shutting the door behind her. “Yes?” she said, picking up the receiver. “Oh,” her tone soured as she heard who it was, and she turned to scowl at a framed photo on her desk. In the picture, the smiling professor stood at a waterfall with her arm around a very tall man with red hair and a mustache, her head tilted toward his armpit. “No! I plan to stay right here, thank you very much! No, I assure you, I am *quite* comfortable.” She slammed down the receiver. Almost instantly, the phone started up again. The professor winced, opened a drawer and shook two Excedrin into her hand. When the ringing stopped, she sighed and brought her attention back to Marla, who had just noticed the clock tower through the window. Bus in five minutes. Last one until two o’clock.

“Okay, so what’s your story?” the professor asked.

Marla gushed out her dream about going to McWhorty in the fall. Was she talking so fast because she thought she might still make the bus and not disappoint Casey? Or because someone was finally listening? Once she started, she couldn’t stop. She told the professor that she was the first person in her family to even think about

going to college. “I’ve had to work hard just to get where I am and I *hate* where I am. I’m looking for opportunities. I want to find out what I’m capable of.”

“Well, isn’t that refreshing,” said the professor. Marla looked at her uncertainly, trying to match her tone with the words. “And what kind of work are you doing now?” the professor continued. “How’s your typing?” The huge metal hand on the clock face outside the window ticked to the twelve, releasing a chorus of bells.

Back home, Marla sat in her most comfortable chair with her hands in her lap, waiting to feel the gusto in her good fortune. *Come on! A McWhorty contact!* The afternoon sun was interfering, making her squint. It streamed through the third-floor windows ridiculing her progress—the art poster hung next to the beat-up doorframe, the bright throw pillow on the sagging couch. Sounds of laughter and conversation from neighboring apartments reached her through the thin walls and open windows. If there was a word for what that made her feel, she might choose *So?* After all, companionship, and more, were *available* to her. Casey, the zoo, the walk-through aviary, birds flying from one point to another according to their bird purpose. She had made a choice.

On Tuesday when Casey wheeled the dolly in, Nedda was for once at her desk. She had a thumpin’ hangover, as she put it, and wasn’t up to moving around much.

“Have Marla sign, wouldja, hon?”

The dolly wheels chirped as Casey rolled over to Marla’s desk. “Sorry about Saturday,” Marla said, noticing that Casey had lost the good posture that was one of his best features. “If I’d had your phone number I would have called to explain.”

He jotted down his number and handed it to her.

“I suppose we could try again,” Marla said.

Casey didn’t ask what happened. He stood a little straighter and said, “I’ll call for you at your apartment. Friday at seven?” He sounded positively old-fashioned. It struck Marla that he seemed both much younger and much older than she was.

So Marla started going out with Casey. He didn’t interfere with her forward motion, and besides, she was a little lonely when she stopped to think about it. Casey was nice and almost pleasant looking. She wasn’t swearing off men, after all.

On their third date, Casey showed up with two surprises—an old Valiant and a 16-year-old brother. “This is Borden,” Casey said, introducing the gangly kid. “He lives with me.” He paused for Marla’s reaction, which was just, “Oh?” Casey went on, “Borden wants to work delivery one day and now he’s old enough to learn to drive. Besides, we could use a car, don’t you think?” he smiled at Marla when he said we.

That Saturday the three of them went bowling. While Borden stood with the heavy ball lifted to his bony chest, getting ready to step down the lane and let it loose, Casey filled her in a bit. “Our folks died, so I take care of Borden.” It sounded far too simple, Marla thought. Borden knocked down half the pins and came grinning back to Casey.

That night Casey took Marla out to dinner and she had a glass of wine. Ever since the Teddy Dardino debacle, she promised herself she’d stay away from alcohol, but the warmth of the restaurant, the lively buzz of the other diners, and Casey’s unexpected “and a glass of Chianti, please,” changed her mind.

Soon she was finding new things to like about Casey—the way he looked at her with a kind of nervous pride, and how he paid attention when she talked, as if he expected it to be important. And she *was* talking—babbling, in fact—without caring much if she'd be embarrassed later. “I need to be challenged. I need to grow. I need to get out of this dead-end job and see what's out there.” She paused, wondering why what was so personal and important to her suddenly sounded so corny. “I mean, how will I ever know what I can do if I don't keep moving forward?” Casey nodded and lifted another ravioli to his mouth. Was he just nodding, or did he really understand? Marla decided to find out. “Know what I mean?”

“Well, kind of,” Casey said, looking cornered. “Every day is sort of a test.” When Marla didn't say anything, he added, “I mean getting my route done on time and remembering everything and trying not to yell at Borden when he screws up at school—that's enough for me right now.”

Marla sighed and wadded her napkin in her lap. Clearly, she needed to break things off with Casey. And to think that she had considered (okay, distantly, but with the wine, more seriously) inviting him back to her apartment that night. His tentative goodnight kisses had gotten her thinking, naturally. Now she congratulated herself on figuring this out sooner rather than later, when things could get complicated. What she needed was someone to urge her forward, or march alongside her, not champion the status quo.

“And you, Marla. You're really something just the way you are,” Casey said, sealing his fate.

When Casey came into Abel Glass the next week he told Marla he was looking forward to their trip to the flea market on Saturday. And did she maybe want to show him how to bird watch on Sunday? Hummingbirds weren't out this time of year, Marla thought, and anyway she was planning to give Casey the break-up news over coffee after the flea market. It would be hard on him, she knew, but at least he wouldn't have to see her at Abel Glass anymore. Earlier that week, the lady professor who slept in her office had phoned to ask if Marla wanted to interview for a clerical position in the department. "Here I go," thought Marla, envisioning the gleaming halls and how hobnobbing with the professors would help ease her way into academic life.

"I'm guessing you'll be a big improvement over those students who take advantage and try to do all their studying on the job," the professor had said. "Just make sure you're here by 1:00. The office manager is coming in especially to interview you and, frankly, she's a bit of a Nazi."

"Oh, I'll be there," Marla promised, brimming with gusto.

Since it was the flea market, Casey assumed it was okay to bring Borden along. It would have been, but how was she going to have "the talk" with Borden there? But when Marla made up her mind to do something, she saw it through. So when Borden was off getting a snow cone, Marla said, "Let's sit down a minute."

On the bench she sat a little further from Casey than usual. "We just don't have much in common. We're two different kinds of people. We want different things out of life," she told him, as if she were reading a list. As she expected, Casey looked stricken. This new expression made him look older and for a moment she reevaluated him,

factoring in this new Casey, trying to imagine him in a suit, or giving a speech.

Unfortunately, here and now he was inarticulate and his case unconvincing. “But I just really care for you, Marla,” was the best he could do. “I know that you don’t feel the same way about me, but I guess I was hoping that over time you might.”

“There is someone out there who will be perfect for you,” Marla told him, imagining a sweet, pretty enough girl, someone untroubled by future plans “And she better count her blessings.” Marla suddenly felt the sincerity of her words and leaned forward to kiss Casey on the forehead. His blue checked shirt gave off the scent of laundry soap, which made her picture him doing the wash. Did he do Borden’s laundry too? What did it matter!

Then she told him that she needed to get going because she had a job interview and couldn’t be late. “A job interview?” Casey wanted to know all about it. So she told him. Why not? “I’ll drive you,” Casey said. “Come on, I’ll get Borden.”

Marla argued for the bus, but Casey was determined. “Please. You need to let me do this.”

As they drove, Borden in the backseat knowing nothing of recent events, Marla was rehearsing answers for the interview. What if they asked how her hours would change once she started classes? How would she handle it? Could she count on Nedda to give her a good recommendation? Then a pinch of panic: How many words-per-minute did she type, anyway?

A distant whining grew closer and louder until it became unbearable. A motorcycle shot past them in the fast lane, causing all three of the occupants of Casey’s car to cry “Geez!” The biker wore leathers and one of those barely legal beanie helmets.

When he caught up to other cars in the fast lane he didn't compromise his speed. Instead he wove through the other lanes and back to the fast lane to move ahead two cars.

Suddenly, he tore across all three lanes to make the next exit. Marla held her breath as he tried to make the turn onto the exit ramp. The motorcycle leaned too sharply and skidded into the curb. The rider, pitched off like a rag doll, slid along the road, while his bike spun up the ramp on its side raising a shower of sparks.

Casey moved over a lane and swung his car to the shoulder. "Borden, the call box," he pointed, leaping out of the car. He sprinted to where the black form lay in the middle of the ramp. Marla remained in the passenger seat, the small car rocking as vehicles barreled by on the highway.

Borden hung up the receiver and returned to stand alongside the car. They watched as Casey kneeled beside the man, who had somehow wound up on his back with his jacket over his head. Casey unzipped it and Marla could see his lips moving as he bent down to say something to the man. A breeze lifted Casey's blue checked shirt, exposing the pale curve of his back and the white elastic band of his underwear. Marla looked away, staring at the highway shrubbery at the side of the road and picturing Casey bent over like that taking care of ordinary things, tying a child's shoelace, fitting together a train track, planting a rose bush. The car rocked and settled again.

In the years to come, that stretch of pale skin, the slope of Casey's back, had a certain staying power. It was an image that would appear to her at unlikely moments. When Marla stood before a burnished conference table giving a presentation about benefit packages, for instance. Or when she looked at the framed photo on her desk and wondered what expression appeared on her face when she answered calls from the man

pictured with her. At such times, she tried to confine her thoughts to employment, wondering what jobs required hero's credentials and if Casey would have thought to look for them.

But now Marla sat in Casey's Valiant reminding herself that she could not afford to revisit decisions. Not unless she was willing to replay those agonizing weeks of pregnancy when she paced with a hand pressed to her aching back, thinking and thinking and finally deciding, in secret and all alone. And then cramping and screaming and delivering her girl and handing over the one person who was in it with her. In it to the end, if Marla had so decided. Marla raised a hand to her breast, remembering the aching press of milk that had come, regardless.

A few other cars had pulled over and people stood outside their open doors, watching Casey. Someone had set out a few flares. Borden took a few steps in Casey's direction, then loped a bit and stopped halfway. Then he walked slowly to stand beside his brother.

It was hard-hearted to be thinking about her interview at a time like this, but she was, so why deny it? It was almost 1:00. Marla yearned for the people who were trained and certified to handle situations such as this to arrive and save them *all*. Where were they? Marla twisted in her seat hoping to see flashing lights. There. Finally, in the distance, she heard a siren.