

## Sweet Is the Night Air

*“But I’m mistaken if ye whew yer sperrit lang. Will Hathecliff bide such bonny ways, thing ye? I nobbut wish he may catch ye i’ that plisky. I nobbut wish he may.”*  
— Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, Ch. 13

D arrived home first. The week behind had been brutal; her school and Marcus’s both had passed the quarter mark with all the papers, projects, grading, and conferences that that time entailed. Well, Friday, she thought. And little in store for the week-end. Calm was welcome.

Marcus should turn in the drive soon. D looked to the street while she checked the mailbox on the front porch. She turned the key and pulled the circulars, the ads, and the few bills from inside. Nothing of note, she reflected.

Soon Marcus would pull his bag from the back of the car, grab his empty lunch box, and come up the side porch steps. She’d greet him in the kitchen. She’d welcome him. He’d like that.

D would like that. She knew his kiss would put the whole week behind for her and leave their time together ahead. She hoped her kiss would leave him feeling the same. And, perhaps there would be more.

The past few years of Fridays in the fall had been pleasant for D and Marcus. Their three children were growing, leaving the nest. Their oldest, William, had completed college, an engineering degree at Cal Poly, and was parlaying an entry level job with graduate work toward a masters in structural engineering. He lived out in Riverside. Their daughter, Madison, was in the midst of pursuing her degree in nursing at the University of San Francisco. That left their youngest, Mitchell, at home. But, a varsity defensive end, fall Fridays found him with the team, an early dinner, the bus ride to the stadium, then the long warm-ups that playing at the top level of high school football required. D and Marcus would go to the game; they hadn’t missed one since Will had played. But they had hours before the 7:30 start.

On Fridays, they’d meet at home, check the mail, go to dinner on their way to the stadium. D smiled at the thought; she anticipated the time together, their closeness, the intimacy of discarding the week behind as they would later discard their clothes and go to bed.

But the week had been brutal. And, his car, their ten-year-old Expedition, parked, Marcus came up the drive. And D could see the week had not ended well for him, not yet.

Marcus closed the door, left his lunch box on the counter, crossed to the side chair in the kitchen, and put his bag down.

D reached her arms around his neck, stretched to kiss him. He responded. She could feel his smile forming around her lips.

“You have to believe that’s been what’s kept me going today, knowing it was Friday, and knowing I’d be with you.” Marcus spoke softly as they broke from their kiss.

“Um, yes,” D spoke back, still a bit lost in their reverie. “Hard day?”

“Hard week, but you’ve had one too.”

“Glass of water? a coke?” D hoped her question would demonstrate her concern, perhaps open his conversation.

Marcus responded, “No. I’ll...wait till dinner. Do you need to freshen up? We should leave in a few minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later she sat a passenger, Marcus driving and still quiet, probably still mulling over whatever had happened during the day. She reached over, turned the radio off.

"So," she asked quietly. "Do you want to tell me?"

"Hmm?" Marcus sighed.

"About your day?" D touched his thigh.

"Wednesday? I told you about Trevor Connelly?"

"The boy whose parents are both psychologists? The one who told you about his friend?"

Wednesday, in the middle of everything, Marcus had been approached after school by Connelly, one of his favorite students. D had met his parents at some school or church affair. She remembered, Mom was a psychologist in family counseling, Dad specialized in pediatric psychology.

"That's the one. I'm still shaking my head at what he did."

D felt the tension begin to release. She felt concern at the chagrin in her husband's voice.

As Marcus had told the story Wednesday evening, Trevor had asked if they could speak after school.

Marcus had said, "Certainly," his usual answer.

When the boy had come in after school, he'd waited patiently until other students with other questions had left.

Marcus had considered that odd; Trevor Connelly worked towards the top of the class in most subjects. He had never been embarrassed to seek help or clarification before; the most he usually sought was Marcus's opinion (usually high) on some draft of a homework paper (usually better than the final draft of many of his classmate's papers). But Marcus had said he had known something was up, something was wrong.

Finally alone with his teacher, sitting on a student desk opposite her husband's teacher's desk, a big, oaken thing, hand-me-down from some college's refurbishment, some parent's business's bankruptcy, Connelly began. "You know Claire Dumont? She's been dating Bryant Healy?"

"Healy? The senior? He plays soccer? Our Claire, your classmate?"

Claire, Trevor, Paul Toomey, a few others. They were a group of students Marcus delighted in. Bright, intelligent, caring, "the hope of the nation, young people like them," her husband called them.

"Yeah. Our Claire," Trevor responded, his eyes not leaving Marcus's face, her husband had told her.

"They've been...dating for some time, haven't they?"

"Our Claire. Yeah, they have been." Trevor paused a moment, uncomfortable, seeming to reach for words. "Well, that bruise on Claire's forearm this morning? You've probably noticed Claire's often got bruises?"

Marcus had told her he had been the one silent then, staring even. "I...always...assumed, I mean, she's a cheerleader and all. Their routines. They practice?"

"Most think that. Well, the truth is, Bryant hits her, squeezes her arm until she cries. Only when no one else is around." Trevor spoke clearly, softly, audibly, as though he were making a recording on some very sensitive machine.

"That would be...abusive. How do you know this?" Marcus had asked.

"Kristi, Mary, Claire told them. Made them promise not to tell," Trevor continued.

"And they told you?"

"Honestly, Kaufman, they felt they had to. They told me because of Mom and Dad, because the girls thought my folks might know what to do. They...wanted me to ask them." Trevor continued looking straight into her husband's eyes, Marcus had told her.

"And did you? Ask them?"

Trevor had nodded.

"What did they say?"

Trevor, softly again, had continued, "Dad said it was complicated. That he and Mom barely knew Claire. That a report from them wouldn't carry much water."

"So...what did he suggest? What did he tell you?"

"Well, see, that's where you come in, Mr. Kaufman. State law says you have to report, even a suspicion? Of child abuse with your students?"

"Yes. That's pretty much it. If I don't, even a suspicion, I can be fined thousands of dollars, spend months in jail."

"That's what my dad said. Well, Mr. Kaufman, Claire's sixteen, a minor. This started when she was fifteen, we think. I think you have a suspicion now?"

Kaufman had nodded.

"Like I said, I'm sorry to do this to you. I...didn't know who else...to tell. Now you have to file a report?"

Kaufman had nodded again.

"Anyway, sorry to...complicate your afternoon, your evening. Hope everything else is good. See you tomorrow." And Trevor had walked out.

And Wednesday night, Marcus and D had talked a long time.

Marcus had turned onto Harbor Boulevard, the restaurant up ahead. Just a bare moment had passed.

D picked up the conversation. "So last night you told me, you'd talked to Bell, your vice principal, and filled out the paperwork?"

"Yep." Marcus put on the turn signal.

"So what happened today?"

"Let's get dinner. We can talk more in the car. It wasn't a bad thing. Just interesting," Marcus stammered. He turned into the parking lot.

"So, Mr. Mystery - 'it wasn't a bad thing' - you're gonna keep me wondering? That it?" D smiled.

"Yep. Don't wanna be late for the game."

D chuckled, opened her door, got out to go into Mi-Mi's.

Marcus closed his door, locked the little Ford that D normally drove. "Mi-Mi's okay?" Marcus asked.

D nodded. "I feel like a beef dip," she explained.

"Funny," Marcus said. "You look like something more exotic. But you are delicious." He looked at her and smiled.

D knew her husband was doing better. Bad jokes were a good sign. She smiled back.

D reached over, touched his arm. She looked at him. "I'm still waiting to hear what happened today?"

Marcus smiled. "You will. You'll, uh, have to wait; the thought of football and later a week-end with you always makes me hungry."

She took his arm, shaking her head, looking down, smiling.

As Marcus opened the door, he stopped her and said softly, "Really, I need to tell you, but in the car after we eat. It's, uh, too tricky to tell all here, too many people."

D nodded, smiled, acknowledged the truth of what Marcus said.

Seated quickly in a comfortable booth, D ordered her beef dip, Marcus a bacon-cheese burger, both cole slaw, no fries.

"So," D started, "the game? Gloria Dei's really good?"

"That's what the papers say, what Mitch says. A bunch a' players, as usual, headed to d-one schools. Mitch faces off against a line including a guy headed to Oregon, another to Notre Dame; they average over two hundred forty pounds."

D sipped her Diet Coke, put it down. "Should I be worried?"

Her husband smiled, shook his head. "Nah. You know Mitch, says 'He's fat, I'll go around him.' Mitch stopped by at lunch, said to expect a sack, said to tell you he loves us, will see us after the game."

"That was sweet," D smiled. "I'll still worry."

"And you...we'll...cheer like crazy people, especially after his sack."

"Yeah, we will."

D continued as she enjoyed her sandwich, "But, uh, well, just in general, about your, situation, not to get into details..."

Marcus chewed. He looked up, "Unh?"

While Marcus taught English, D had continued at the Catholic girls school she had been with for so long. She had, some years back, earned her degree and then her certificate as a counselor, and moved into that position, working with students on academic and, all too often, personal issues. Her high school, far less affluent than Tustin Christian Academy, TCA, Marcus's employer and their children's school, struggled with a different ethos, a much more male-dominant culture. Seton Hall often proved something of a refuge to its girls that way.

"These issues of, uh, dating abuse, they're more common than people think. One researcher posts as high as one in three high school students suffer physical abuse, date rape, in their relationships. Of course, he includes boys whose girlfriends slap them."

"Sometimes that's deserved," Marcus nodded and smiled. He took another bite from his cheeseburger.

"Exactly," D continued. She had put her beef dip down. "But a lot of studies show one in four, one in five, conservative studies one in ten, a lot of high school girls, some boys, are physically abused at least once by someone they're dating during high school. It's, uh, something I talk to the girls about, in the Bible study I do with some of the girls on Tuesdays."

Seeing they had finished, their waitress brought the check wallet. Marcus paid. A little later D and Marcus were back in her car.

"Thanks for dinner," D said as Marcus drove out of the parking lot, turned right to head towards the freeway. "I enjoyed that."

"You're welcome. I've enjoyed the whole afternoon, just being with you, talking." Marcus's hand gently squeezed D's thigh. "You know," he continued, his voice almost abstracted, "this whole abuse thing may have had its beginnings with me."

"I...don't understand."

"I said that badly. It may...have gotten started with something I said, something we talked about in class."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Apparently, Claire made her whole confession to her friends, Mary and Kristi, about a week after we had a discussion about *Wuthering Heights* in AP."

"I don't understand."

"Actually, we were discussing Heathcliff."

"I think I read the book in high school, but...?"

"Well, to make it brief, Heathcliff is a scruffy street kid, possibly illegitimate, brought back by the elder Mr. Earnshaw to his estate, Thrushcroft Grange. Heathcliff's badly abused by the legitimate son Hindley, possibly his half-brother, but he's loved by Cathy, possibly his half-sister, and grows up to finagle the property away from Hindley, who becomes an alcoholic. By then, Cathy is married to Edgar Linton, a neighbor, and he treats Heathcliff like an inferior."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is. But the point is, Heathcliff is this dark, mysterious figure, charismatic, and he's abused."

"And abuses others in return?"

"Exactly. He comes back, wins the estate from half-brother Hindley, marries Isabella, Edgar's sister, and abuses her to get back at Edgar and, I don't know, maybe get back at Catherine as well. He's absolutely brutal."

Marcus had transitioned to another freeway and was a few miles from the exit for the stadium.

D picked up on Marcus's statement, "And?"

"And the girls love him. 'He's misunderstood,' and 'if only someone would show him kindness.' Not just now. We should watch the Olivier film from the thirties. His background's clear enough, and I get it, he's angry and wants revenge for his ill treatment, but he's horrid."

"And his abuse of others comes out of that?" D responded.

"Yeah. But that's no excuse. I...don't understand the girls' reaction, their attraction to him."

"It's the little mother in them," D explained. "They want to heal him, make him better."

"But they can't..."

"They don't know that. Not yet. But what does this have to do with whatever happened this morning?"

"I'm sorry. I sort of got carried away," Marcus apologized.

"You do that. That's okay, but this morning?"

"When I went down this morning for my prep period, there was a police car outside."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And I spent most of my time talking to an officer and a woman from child protective services. They'd done some work already, talked to the two girls."

"And?"

"And that day about Heathcliff? I went off. I lambasted the girls for facilitating abusers like Heathcliff, making excuses for them. And later that week, Claire told Mary and Kristi. Days later they told Trevor. Then later, Trevor told me."

"So, what happens?"

"Well, that's just it. Not much."

"Not much?"

"The officer explained that at this age, they need a complaint from the girl. The social worker thanked me, said I'd done the right thing, and they felt they owed me an explanation."

"So, nothing happens?" D felt her outrage creep into her voice.

"Not exactly nothing. The officer said they would talk to Claire and her parents, that that sometimes ends the relationship right there. The social worker went over some of the same statistics you mentioned. I find it appalling. They said they wished there were more friends like Trevor, more people like me."

They'd pulled into the parking lot. Marcus parked and turned off the car.

D looked at her husband. "I'm glad there's one man like you. And I'm glad he's mine."

Marcus looked back at her, looked down. "Thank-you," he said. "Do you remember that poem I told you about? 'Dover Beach'? Matthew Arnold?"

"Not really. Remind me."

"The last stanza begins 'Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!'" Marcus began. "And then Arnold concludes,

'And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.'

"I...need...you...to...get me through things like this, things that show the brutality of this world." Marcus looked to her, something of a small child in his eyes.

D squeezed his hand. "I think...we need each other."

Marcus opened his door, turned back towards his wife. "So, Mrs. Kaufman? Are you ready for some football?"

Out of the car, D looked at her watch. "Absolutely. We'd better hurry; I'll miss my chance to pray with the other football moms."

They could hear the growing roar, the crowd in the stadium.

"I mentioned, Claire's a cheerleader? I'll point her out to you," Marcus stated.

"A shame the boys aren't playing your soccer team. I'd like to see Mitch smear some abusive boyfriend."

"And he would," Marcus laughed, "if he knew."

And they walked past the lines to the faculty gate.