

THE GROANING BOARD

When Robbie Kirkendall's mother died of a cerebral hemorrhage, strumming her guitar on the front porch swing while composing one of her hurting songs, Robbie wondered if anyone would ever love him again. Certainly not his hard-bitten old man, who'd loved his older brother Conrad— a chip-off-the-old-block Marine killed in Vietnam—so much his heart seemed unable to squeeze in an extra love.

Truth was, Robbie wasn't sure the old man even liked him. More than once he'd told Robbie with a show of teeth that he was a spoiled momma's boy. Robbie's mom had treated him well, that was a fact; no one could ever take her place. And he looked more like his mom, with his fair skin and blond hair, whereas Conrad, swarthy and chiseled, had looked more like the old man. But what did that have to do with love?

Then Robbie turned sixteen, got his driver's license, and found someone who truly did love him. Emma Sawyer. At the drive-in outside Asheville every Saturday night, Emma was eager to demonstrate her love. What happened in the backseat of the old man's Oldsmobile felt so good Robbie was sure it had to be love. All Emma asked him to do was yank it out in time. Which he always did. At least he thought he did. Until Emma informed him tearfully one night that apparently he didn't.

Robbie told Emma not to worry, he'd come up with the money somehow.

"*Money?*" she shot back. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"That old woman who lives just outside town," Robbie said. "Janelle Honeycutt. She's been known, I hear, to fix problems like this."

"The only thing that can fix *our* problem," Emma said, "is a wedding ring."

Robbie pointed out that Emma was fifteen and he was less than two years older and they were both still in highschool. Emma argued that she had two cousins younger than them over in Boone who got married under similar circumstances. And being a God-fearing Southern Baptist, there was just no way she was going to murder her baby. No, it wouldn't be hard to fix this problem at all: they could move in with her parents until Robbie graduated, then her dad could get him a job at the same Swannanoa blanket factory where he'd worked for over thirty years, and they could live happily ever after.

Robbie's mom had impressed on him at an early age the need to take responsibility for his own actions, so he gave this some serious thought. On the plus side, Emma was smart, a good cook, a great blow job, and a real looker, you might say voluptuous. Emma's mom, Robbie had heard, had once been voluptuous too. Only now Mrs. Sawyer had gone way beyond being voluptuous, Emma's dad the same. And Robbie had to believe Emma would look like them one day. Skinny as a weed was Robbie—it ran in the family—as did several other less favorable traits, leading him to decide that he'd likely be just as sorry a father as his old man had been.

"I plan on becoming a Green Beret," Robbie told Emma. "Once I'm earning a steady

paycheck, I'll make my support payments religiously. That's a promise. And we Kirkendalls always keep our promises.”

That's when Emma told her father, who then told her two older brothers Butch and Canady, who waylaid Robbie one afternoon as he walked home from school. Butch held Robbie's arms as Canady punched him in the face and gut. Robbie might've been skinny but he was in no way puny. He managed to twist free of Butch's grasp just as Canady was aiming his size-13 steel-toe at the source of Emma's problem. Deflecting the shoe with his elbow, Robbie hit the ground rolling and came up running. Butch and Canady, both porkers in the family tradition, could manage only a token effort in pursuit.

By the time Robbie got home Mr. Sawyer had already called Robbie's old man and promised—not threatened—to shotgun Robbie on sight if he didn't do the honorable thing by his daughter. Hanging his head and rubbing his swollen arm, Robbie fully expected his old man, who owned the Gulf station in town and was a Baptist deacon, to side with Mr. Sawyer, who happened to be one of his best customers. But instead his old man told Robbie to wash the blood off his face, take two aspirins, and pack a suitcase. Before the next dawn he drove Robbie to the bus station, handed him a twenty-dollar bill, put him on a Greyhound bound for Wilmington, Delaware, and walked away without looking back.

Robbie was to stay with his Aunt Heather until he finished his senior year in highschool. Aunt Heather was an eccentric old maid, a tall, gawky, teetotaling vegetarian who lived in a trailer park and managed the drapery department at a W.T. Grants store in a nearby shopping center. She'd never owned a car—just riding in one made her nervous. She paid for her

neighbor's gas to take her grocery shopping once a week. She rode her three-speed Western Flyer back and forth the two miles to work.

Robbie and his aunt had never been crazy about each other, though they managed to be cordial enough. With a wistful smile Aunt Heather told Robbie that she felt obligated to lend her younger brother a helping hand in his time of need, seeing as how he'd helped her out more than once in her wilder days. All she asked was that Robbie stay out of trouble, keep his fly zipped around the local girls, and her trailer looking spick and span. Robbie could hardly imagine his aunt being in any way "wild," but he promised to abide by her rules.

Robbie didn't like Delaware. It was hot and humid, flat as a sidewalk. The marshlands along the eastern shore were a prime breeding ground for squadrons of DDT-conditioned mosquitoes the size of MiGs. He didn't like living in a fifty-by-ten trailer. He felt hemmed in by the closeness of the neighbors. He missed the North Carolina mountains. He missed the climate. He missed his friends. More than anything he missed his old man's Oldsmobile 98. Cruising around town, honking at everyone he knew, playing the radio loud, burning rubber at red-lights, making out in the backseat with Emma Sawyer—life had been good. But this new life felt a lot like a prison sentence.

Robbie enrolled in his new highschool the day after he arrived and soon discovered that some of his teachers, who were all male, didn't care for Southerners. They treated Robbie like some sort of redneck. They made sarcastic remarks to his face and watched him warily around the black kids, like he might try something racist. The black kids, on the other hand, didn't seem to notice anything different about Robbie and treated him just fine. In fact, most of the

kids treated Robbie fine, especially the girls, who thought his wavy blond hair, dimpled chin, tiny butt and languid accent made a cute package.

Sitting next to Robbie at a long table in English class was a girl named Cecilia Piaquadio. Cecilia was in work experience and planned to be an accountant. A quiet, studious Italian Catholic, she was a straight-A honor roll student who was or had been involved over the past three years in nearly everything the school offered—Girls' Glee Club, A Cappella Choir, Dramatics Club, Symphonic Band, Dance Band, Student Government, the junior play. She had straight black hair, dark freckles and liquid brown eyes behind round horn-rimmed glasses. She wasn't nearly as pretty as Emma Sawyer—she was actually fairly plain—but she wasn't at all portly. Her best feature was her sweet smile that reminded Robbie of his mom. She wasn't the sort of girl to take up with a bad boy, as Robbie now viewed himself, trailer trash with, had she but known, a bastard on the way. So it came as a surprise when Robbie realized that Cecilia liked him. Though he saw her only once a day in English class, he was flattered that one of the smartest, nicest girls in school would go out of her way to befriend him.

One day in early December, as they were leaving English class, Cecilia asked Robbie if he had a date for the Christmas dance. When he shook his head, she wondered if they might could go together. Robbie was caught off guard. He could tell by the way Cecilia adjusted her books and averted her eyes that this was difficult for her. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her feelings. Believing he could be honest with Cecilia and hoping she wouldn't look down on him, he told her about his Aunt Heather's bike, figuring that should put the matter to rest. But the next day in English class Cecilia whispered that her dad would let him drive their car to the

Christmas dance. Robbie found the idea of driving a car again—any car—uplifting.

He'd been working Saturdays in the stockroom of the W.T. Grant store where his Aunt Heather worked and had saved enough money to rent a tux and buy a carnation corsage. When he got off work that Saturday afternoon, Cecilia picked him up in front of the store in her dad's white Chrysler. They drove back to her house to meet her parents, then Robbie drove to the trailer where he showered and put on his tux. When he returned to Cecilia's house and pinned the corsage he'd bought on her gown, her dad took pictures of them.

After that, Robbie and Cecilia were viewed as a "couple" around school. Robbie didn't mind all that much. Lacking wheels, he couldn't very well date other girls. When Cecilia asked him over to her house one Friday night to watch their new color TV, he shrugged and said why not.

Cecilia lived a couple of miles from the trailer park in a small, brown ranch house with a fenced-in backyard. Robbie borrowed Aunt Heather's bike and got there at eight sharp. Cecilia's parents greeted him in the paneled living room with unveiled affection. They were both small, shy, gray-haired Italians. Cecilia was their only child. Mrs. Piaquadio was a housewife, Mr. Piaquadio a supervisor at the Chrysler Plant. Robbie's mother had raised him to be respectful of his elders and he went out of his way to be nice to them.

Promptly at nine o'clock, Mr. and Mrs. Piaquadio got up from the sofa and said goodnight. Robbie suspected this wasn't their regular bedtime and no sooner had they left than Cecilia asked if he was hungry. Robbie was always hungry, since Aunt Heather's sparse vegetarian meals didn't exactly stick to his ribs. Cecilia cleared off the coffee table in front of

the sofa and began carting out an array of culinary delights. This set into motion a weekly ritual.

Cecilia seemed to take inordinate pleasure in watching Robbie stuff himself with whatever she brought forth from that cornucopia of a kitchen: meatballs, salami, pepperoni, lasagna, ravioli, spaghetti, pizza, Italian sausage, thick slices of ham, thin slices of provolone cheese, deviled eggs, assorted rolls, quarts of milk. And always a pie or cake—sometimes both—that Robbie suspected had been baked shortly before his arrival and specifically for that purpose. Cecilia rarely touched anything other than an occasional radish, olive or stick of celery.

While Robbie ate they made a pretense of watching TV. Mostly they talked. At least Robbie talked, mostly about himself, although he did make a sincere effort to draw Cecilia into the conversation. But she seemed to prefer to listen while never taking her eyes off his face. He told her about his mom and about his older brother and about his old man, Aunt Heather, and the Appalachian Mountains. He told her about his dream of becoming a Green Beret. He told her that after his mom died his old man didn't want him around and this was why he'd been sent to Delaware to live with his aunt. He added some made-up stuff meant to suggest that he was a misunderstood loner like James Dean. He never mentioned Emma Sawyer.

Rarely did Cecilia interrupt his pontificating, but when she did it was to say something like, "Where did you learn to jitterbug? You really do have rhythm. I had so much fun at the Christmas dance—I don't think I've ever had that much fun with anyone."

Robbie told her his rhythm came naturally from his mom, who'd taught him how to

dance, which opened the door for him to tell her about his mom in more detail. Cecilia sat there drinking it all in, offering a sympathetic nod here, an encouraging smile there. She sat with her knees together, hands clasped in her lap, her expression devout. With a full stomach and a rapt audience, Robbie felt at peace, more at peace than he'd felt with anyone other than his mom. Cecilia was a saint, he told himself. She should become a nun.

When it came time for the senior prom, Robbie needed no prompting to ask Cecilia to be his date. He bought her an orchid for her long white gown and once again her dad took pictures in the living room. And once again Robbie got to drive the big white Chrysler.

After that came the senior trip to Washington, D.C., where they toured the Capitol and the national monuments, visited the Smithsonian, took a river boat trip on the Potomac. And one night at the big amusement park beside the river they rode the roller coaster fifteen times in a row. The day after they returned to Delaware, Robbie turned eighteen and joined the Army.

When school ended he caught a train to Fort Knox, Kentucky. All through basic training Cecilia wrote to him regularly. Nearly every week she sent him a delectable care package that Robbie couldn't wait to dig into and share with his buddies. With his first pass into Louisville he shared a room at the Brown Hotel with his buddy Skip Hubbell from Lubbock, Texas. They were both too young to drink legally but room service brought them whatever they asked for. They got so drunk that the wee hours of the morning found them kneeling side by side at the third-story window, hanging over the sill to rain puke down onto the sidewalk below.

The next day Skip was too hungover to crawl out of bed. Robbie ate a late breakfast at a

diner down the street, where he was served by a statuesque blond waitress named Helga. In her husky German accent, which reminded Robbie of Marlene Dietrich, she told him what time she got off work. If he cared to stop by her apartment, she added, she'd give him some of the hair of the dog that bit him. To start with.

Helga was around thirty and liked being fucked long and hard, shrieking like a burnt wheel bearing as she drummed Robbie's ears with her bare feet. Although it disturbed Robbie that her husband was a G.I. serving in Vietnam, he managed not to let it break his concentration. He spent every weekend with Helga until the end of basic training.

A week before he graduated, he received a letter from Cecilia in which she asked, *What are your thoughts on getting married?*

Robbie was stunned. What might he have said or done to make Cecilia think he had even the slightest interest in marriage? He'd only kissed her twice that he could recall: once after the Christmas dance and once after the prom. Because he felt he owed her that. Not even once had he tried to feel her tits. He just wasn't interested in Cecilia that way. Saint Cecilia, that's how Robbie envisioned her.

It took him two different nights, slumped on his bunk trying to concentrate amidst the barracks' hubbub, to compose the rambling letter he wrote in answer to Cecilia's letter. He told her he wasn't good enough for her, which he believed to be true. He told her all about Helga, being sure to include some parts calculated to induce disgust. He told her about the child he'd fathered with Emma Sawyer, a child he felt financially responsible for and who was his real reason for being deported to Delaware. He told her Emma would always be an anchor around

his neck no matter who he eventually married—if he ever married anyone. Finally he told her that even though he liked her more than any girl he'd ever known, he didn't *love* her. And that was the crux of the matter.

After basic training was over, Robbie planned on spending his two weeks leave with Helga. But some of her neighbors, Helga told him, were starting to talk and she thought maybe they should cool it for awhile.

He called his old man and spoke to him for the first time since leaving North Carolina, asking if it was okay to come home for a couple of weeks. The old man made a familiar clucking sound and said no, that wasn't such a good idea. Emma Sawyer had a chubby baby girl by now, for which the old man was paying her a monthly stipend. She also had a new boyfriend who'd played center on the football team. No, it probably wasn't a good idea for Robbie to come sashaying home just yet. It could turn out to be a very bad idea, in fact.

Robbie swallowed his disappointment and told his old man to keep track of every cent he gave Emma so he could pay him back. That'll be the day, the old man said.

Robbie used the bus fare the Army gave him to return to Aunt Heather's in Delaware. Although his aunt didn't seem overjoyed to see him again, she didn't raise a fuss, seeing as how the trailer was due for a thorough cleaning. Robbie hadn't planned on seeing Cecilia again. He felt sure that after reading his letter she wouldn't care to see him either, but he decided it would be needlessly rude to ignore her and her parents. His mom would've agreed. He wasn't mad at Cecilia or anything, he just didn't want to marry her.

He rode Aunt Heather's bike to the Piaquadio's house and got there just as they were

sitting down to supper. Mrs. Piaquadio let out a whoop at the door and threw her arms around his neck. Mr. Piaquadio rushed out and grabbed his shoulders, kidding him about how skinny he was, about his sharpshooter medal, about his shiny brass belt buckle, nookying his short haircut. Treating him like a long lost son.

When Cecilia appeared, she gave him a demure hug, which made Robbie wonder if she'd even read his letter.

He enjoyed the sumptuous meal Mrs. Piaquadio had prepared and conducted himself as if everything was the same between him and Cecilia. When he got ready to leave, Cecilia followed him outside. She stood in the porch light with her arms crossed, watching him as he prepared to mount his bike. He had to know, so he put the question to her straight. Yes, she said, she'd read his letter and appreciated his honesty. Then she smiled and asked him to go to the drive-in with her the following night.

Sure, Robbie said, relieved to get past the sticky stuff.

Cecilia picked him up in the Chrysler the next evening, shortly before sundown. She didn't offer to let him drive. She drove straight to the Pleasant Hill Drive-in and parked in the middle of the last row away from the other cars.

It was a hot, humid August evening. The stars soon came out, along with a sickle moon. *Goldfinger* was the first feature, followed by *From Russia with Love*. During intermission Robbie went for Cokes and buttered popcorn. They finished eating around the same time and tossed the wadded bags and paper cups out the window. Then Cecilia reached over and took Robbie's hand. She held it in her lap for a time and seemed to be counting his fingers before

she used her other hand to ease her skirt up. Robbie was startled to discover nothing beneath her skirt except warm flesh and a fuzzy bush.

“Let’s get in the backseat,” Cecilia whispered after a time.

Robbie swallowed hard and whispered back, “I didn’t bring anything.”

“That’s okay,” she said.

“No, we’d better not.”

“But it’s what I want.”

“I’ve already got one girl pregnant.”

“Good,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’d like having your baby,” she said. “And you won’t have to marry me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Being a mother is all I’ve ever wanted.”

Robbie didn’t have an immediate response. He didn’t love Cecilia, that was true. She was a nice girl, a good girl, a virgin no doubt. But he just didn’t love her. Still, sitting there with his hand between her widening thighs made him ache with a desire that felt strangely forbidden to desecrate her purity. The sounds Cecilia had begun to make soon carried him over the brink. The next thing he knew they were in the backseat with their clothes off and Robbie was astonished to discover that Cecilia’s lust more than matched his own.

Cecilia was working full-time and taking accounting classes three nights a week. And yet they managed to get together daily for the remainder of Robbie’s leave, either at Aunt

Heather's trailer or in Cecilia's bedroom, while her dad was at work and her mom was conveniently out of the house. One night, when neither site was available, they strolled through a nearby park and did the deed on the damp grass beneath the shelter of a weeping willow.

After Robbie flew to Fort Gordon, Georgia, sent there by the Army for MP training, Cecilia's letters dwindled to about one a week. They were newsy letters, the sort you'd write to a good friend or a pen pal, not at all the sort of letters you'd write to a lover. It was like nothing remotely intimate had ever happened between them.

About this same time Robbie noticed a burning sensation when he pissed. And one day he was dismayed to discover a thick yellow discharge that the doctor he hurried to see diagnosed as gonorrhea.

That's when it dawned on him that he was likely just one of a parade of men who'd shared Helga's bed. He was ashamed to tell Cecilia. He fell back on the unreasoning hope that luck would be on their side. When she wrote to tell him she was pregnant it was like she was telling him about some distant acquaintance. No mention of marriage. Nor did Robbie mention the A-word when he wrote back, knowing that would be out of the question.

Then Cecilia's letters mysteriously stopped coming. Even though Robbie continued to write to her sporadically, he received no reply. He was trying to decide what to do about this, if anything, when he was summoned to the orderly room to take a phone call from Mr. Piaquadio. But it wasn't at all what he expected.

Cecilia's father was crying so hard that Robbie had to ask him to please stop and start over. What he had to say was fairly technical and Robbie had to listen carefully as Mr.

Piaquadio stammered between sobs about some sort of egg being implanted in Cecilia that instead of making its normal way into her uterus had attached itself to some sort of tube.

Mr. Piaquadio told Robbie that Cecilia had been suffering from severe stomach pain and when the impregnated tube ruptured she nearly bled to death before emergency surgery saved her life. There was no baby, of course. There was even a strong possibility that Cecilia would never be able to conceive again. Worst of all, Mr. Piaquadio said, her grief was inconsolable and she was sorry she hadn't died.

Is there anything you can do, he pleaded, to give my daughter some reason to want to live again?

With emergency assistance from the Red Cross, Robbie flew back to Delaware the very next day. When he rode Aunt Heather's bike to the Piaquadio's house, Cecilia's mom greeted him like a savior. Her husband was at work, she said as she showed him into Cecilia's bedroom and gently closed the door.

The small, neat bedroom brought back a host of steamy memories that only sharpened Robbie's guilt. Hanging at the window were sheer white curtains trimmed in pink. Various accouterments of female maintenance were neatly laid out on the dresser. A white Bible lay on the night-stand beside a white radio. Staring up at him from the bed, Cecilia looked pale and thin. Her eyes were hollow. When Robbie sat down on the chair beside her bed, took her hand in his and confessed to her about his infection, tears slid down her freckled cheeks. She already knew he must've had something like that, she said. She had it too, though she hadn't told her parents. According to the doctor, that was most likely the cause of her tubal pregnancy.

Hearing this, Robbie let go of her hand and buried his face in his own hands.

“Don’t,” Cecilia said. “Please. It was my own fault. You told me about Helga.”

“Please believe me,” Robbie said, “I didn’t know then that I had the clap.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Cecilia said. “I would’ve risked it.”

“But why?”

“You know why.”

During his plane flight, Robbie had given considerable thought to the sort of man he was and the sort of woman Cecilia was. He had decided that she was more woman than most men deserved. He also knew what his mother would say—there came a time when a man had to atone for his indiscretions, no matter the price.

He told Cecilia he wanted to marry her. But she said no, that didn’t make any sense.

“It’s what you wanted,” Robbie said.

She shook her head. “Why would you marry me now? Why would you marry me at all if you don’t love me?”

Robbie had known he’d have trouble explaining this. It was a fact that he didn’t love Cecilia, there was no way around it and he wasn’t going to lie to her. But it felt so good to *be* loved that he was banking on the enormity of her love to suffice for both of them. Cecilia rolled her eyes and turned away. And in a short time Robbie could tell she’d dropped off to sleep.

He continued to sit there. What else could he do? At some point Mrs. Piaquadio brought him a cup of tea and a platter of oatmeal cookies. She avoided eye contact as she set

the tray on the night-stand. Then she patted his shoulder and left.

He sipped the tea and studied Cecilia's face. Saint Cecilia was not a woman to go back on her word, he knew that. If she said she wouldn't marry him, that was exactly what she meant. He could get up and walk out right now and that would end the matter. It was what she expected; maybe even what she hoped for.

She was making it easy for him.

So what was the problem? Why wasn't he leaving? What mysterious force was holding him there?

And then he had a shocking thought: What if Cecilia *didn't* love him.

And why was his heart suddenly pounding so hard?

END