

"If I go outside to smoke me a cigarette, will you come with me?" Garret asked, half standing in anticipation for Louise's answer. Being twelve years old, and just having that day bought his very first pack of cigarettes, he was very excited to begin his ascent into manhood by smoking his first. Louise, it seemed, didn't share the feeling of excitement.

"Not if you're only goin' out yonder to smoke." She said, hoping her answer would keep him from going and thus keep him from smoking. "I'm fine right here, thank you very much."

"If you think you're gonna keep me from smokin', by lettin' me alone out there, you got another thing coming" he said.

"You can't smoke now, anyhow," Louise said, "momma's gonna be home any minute, and she'll be bringin' comp'ny on account o' it's my birthday. You don't wanna be smokin' up the whole house now do you?"

"Awww, heck! I ain't gonna smoke now! Quit yer bitchin'." Garret said, colorful language also being a part of his passage into manhood.

"Don't use that talk around me, Garret!"

Louise was eleven, turning twelve, and knew Garret through her family, the Neemans, who knew him through his family, the Newmans. She had become acquainted with him three years prior, and had this year, 1930, entered into a relationship with him that she--or he, for that matter--knew very little about. They only knew that they had agreed to be "going together" even if they didn't quite understand what the full meaning of the term was. Garret, still under the impression that kissing girls was a task for only the lowliest of lives, often found himself trying to wriggle out of the arms of an experimental Louise who was, being quite mature for her age, "just seeing what all the hub-bub is about smoochin'."

They were both sitting at the dark wood kitchen table, shadowed grain rolling under sheen of lacquer. Her house was, for the time, a moderately large one. It had been built in 1890, and seemed to possess the qualities of a barn. Were it not for the color, or if its setting hadn't been a farmless neighborhood, one might not fully commit himself to the idea that this in fact was not a barn, but an actual human living quarters. The front door led into the living room/kitchen, which might have also been considered a hallway if it weren't for the oven and sink. The living room/kitchen/hallway led to a staircase, wide and steep. The second story of the house was simply a hallway with three doors, each leading to a separate bedroom. There were no bathrooms, but a neighborhood outhouse just half a block down the south side of the street bypassed that problem. It was in this house where Louise and Garret sat in anticipation for the arriving guests.

Louise was wearing a yellow dress with white dangling beads at the bottom. Her parents had bought it for her when she was eight. When they first bought the dress, the beads could reach the floor, so the Neeman's arrivals at church were often associated with a sound much like the sound of someone dropping marbles onto a hardwood floor. Now, however, the beads only went midway down her shins. The dress was part of a set, sold with matching shoes and hat. Her socks, though not bought with the rest of her attire, matched as well. Being the only slightly formal clothing she had, the dress was saved for Sundays, holidays, and other special occasions such as birthdays.

Garret, obviously bored with his current situation, took out his pack of cigarettes and began opening and closing it, a nervous habit that would grow and follow him for the rest of his life; but for now the act was only carried through to pass time.

"Are they ever gonna get here!" Garret said.

"Hold your horses, now, Garret, I'm sure they're..." just as she was completing her thought the front door opened and a woman, wearing almost the same outfit as Louise, it's inherent childlike features tailored fit for an adult, stepped inside followed by about ten other people. Each of which was either a Neeman or a Newman, except for Bill Eagan, who was an Eagan and close friend of both families.

After about fifteen minutes, "Louise's birthday party" suddenly became nothing more than a gathering of adults not suitable for children, and the two children were sent upstairs to Louise's room. The room was decorated from wall to wall on every side with paper. Any little sort of flyer, or book page, or even chewing gum wrappers, Louise would tape up to her wall, usually not without drawing or writing something on it, first. The inside of her door, in fact, was dedicated to letters that Garret had written her.

"Lordy!" Garret said, looking around the room, "walls ain't no place to be strappin' paper to." The appearance of the room was nothing new to him; over the years it had become quite acceptable, if not pleasing. He said this only to get a rise out of Louise. "This place looks like the inside of a litter barrel!"

"Would you just hush!" She said, tears might have formed in her eyes if she hadn't have already been accustomed to Garret's teasing. "You're make me so angry sometimes! I'm fit to be tied!"

"Relax, willya?" Garret said, still looking, piece to piece, at her collection. "I was only tryin' to rile ya up. Don't go flappin' your wings so, you'll blow your nest away little birdy."

"Oh you!" She said, prepared to leave it at that until she had what was to her a brilliant idea. "It's not okay!" She yelled, pretending, and going all out, to cry.

"Aaah, Louise, I'm sorry." He said quickly, before anyone downstairs could hear the gigantic sobs. Not that any sound short of an elephant stampede could make its way through the laughter of the guests below. "I'm sorry Louise, anyway." He tried again.

"It's no use." She said, as her false sobs grew louder and louder.

"I'm sorry, I swear I am! Please stop crying. I really didn't mean it, I like your room. It looks good."

"Oh yeah," she said, "what's your favorite part?"

"I dunno, it's..." he started.

"You see!" she interrupted, "you can't think of one thing you like about it, that's because you hate it!" After saying this she added the finishing touch to all of her fake crying, which was the mother off all sobs. She inhaled as much as she could, then let rip.

The sound of the cry made Garret cringe. "I like your paper! I do!"

"Then what's your favorite thing?"

"I guess all of my notes to you." He said.

"They're letters, thank you very much."

"All right, my letters, but I still like 'em."

"I don't believe you!" She said. "You insulted my room, and I'm tellin' your daddy!"

"Don't! Please don't!" He said.

Louise, who knew at this point that she was the victor in this little game of hers, gave a slight, if not unnoticed, grin. "I'll tell unless you give me a kiss." She said, very slyly. As sly as a just-turned-twelve-years-old girl can be.

Garret, who throughout the past few months had already been warming up to the idea of, plainly put, "planting one" on Louise, wasn't as opposed to the idea as feared. "Okay." He said, after a moment of hesitation caused only by the fact that he didn't want Louise to know that he actually WANTED to kiss her.

"Really?" She said, excitedly.

"But only if you don't tell no one." He said, pointing towards the floor, possibly as a symbol of some sort of finalizing action to set his terms and conditions of the agreement of the kiss in stone; or the act could have quite possibly been to simply address the crowd downstairs.

"Alright, I won't tell a soul, Garret, I swear." She said.

"You swear?" He said.

"I swear."

"Alright."

Garret walked the few feet that separated the two and, putting both of his hand on her shoulders, leaned in. Louise had to raise herself up some two inches before meeting Garret's lips, but she did, slowly lowering herself back to her original stance as the kiss went on. Almost immediately after the kiss had ended, before either of the two had a chance to reflect, let alone say anything about it, Garret's mother swung the door open and informed him that it was time for him to say his goodbyes. Feeling as though he had already said and done enough to last ten goodbyes, Garret just raised his hand and said he'd see her tomorrow.

"Okay" She said, still in shock, "see you goodbye."

This kiss would become the first in a long line of kisses. None of them would ever come close to this one, except maybe one, but it was an act of marriage and was, therefore, acceptable.

Late at night, past eight o'clock that is, it was against army regulation to smoke because it might keep the non-smoking American men and women devoted to serving their country awake. But higher officials would, and often did, look the other way if enlisted me would sneak one or two cigarettes in the latrine. After all, no amount of smoke would find it's way into the nostrils of anybody who'd care, and if, by chance, it ever did, it would most likely be considered the least in a long line of offensive smells, which the latrine was known for. This was especially true after private Huckstable, who not only finished his second tray of food but most of the other guy's, had just dropped off his army regulation waste. So smoking in this case was considered a minor offense, at least in this latrine. And that's where we find a particularly lonely private-x, sitting in his stall of the previously described latrine.

He took out a box of rolling papers, used one to roll a cigarette, and used the rest, leveling them one at a time as needed to write a letter to his wife back home. The letter, in full and verbatim, read as follows:

Dear Lou,

First thing's first, I sincerely apologize for the stationary on which I must write to you.

As fortune would have it, I let one of my buddies—who also happened to be a higher ranking official—borrow a couple of pieces of the paper you sent me, not knowing that they were the only ones I had left. Incidentally, would you please send me more paper? I only ask because I happen to know that you are never in short supply. And please don't let my rolling papers fool you, I still don't smoke—

It should be noted here that, upon completion of the previous sentence, private-x took the final drag on his hand wrapped cigarette, and dropped it into the water below. Then he took out another box of papers to continue writing, he had five or six boxes, for the occasion.

--Getting that out of the way, second thing's second, how's little Jill? Has she said her first words yet? If so, and if she said "da-da" instead of "ma-ma", you owe me five bucks in case you have forgotten, those were the conditions of our little wager.

And now getting that out of the way, I can now talk all about me, and what's been going on up here, completely guilt free. There's not too much to say that has gone unsaid, so, needless to say, this letter will probably be nice and short. Next week a whole bunch of us are being shipped off to...God knows where. I'm not too worried about that, though, seeing as how I only have two duties up here. One is driving the sarge around base. And the second is a duty that I just made up myself. It's nothing much, but every day, around lights-out time, there's a period of about a half hour or so where no one has

anything to do. So I feel, being the entertainer that I am, it's my duty to amuse the company by doing, what I feel, is the keenest impression of the sarge. I button my shirt all the way up, which we're supposed to do anyway, but rarely, if ever, do. I do that and squint my left eye when I talk. It's nothing too special, but it's amusing and all, and everybody seems to enjoy it, except for the sarge, that is. Many a time I've found that this duty of mine leads to a third, less impressive duty, which, not so plainly put, involves cleaning the floor of the barracks with one or more of my many toiletries articles.—

Wanting to save at least one of his boxes of rolling papers, private-x decided to cut the letter short.

--I hate to do it, Lou, but it's getting pretty late up here and I had better wrap this up. Before I do, though, have I mentioned once in this entire letter how much I love you? If not, I figure this would be a good enough place as any to put it. I love you, Lou. You be sure to have the house nice and warm for me when I come home.

Love

Garret

P.S. As you probably have already discovered, there are no numbers in the corners, nor on any part of these many papers—43, as I've counted—I apologize for the fact that you probably will have a hard time figuring out in what order you're to read them. Also, knowing how much you like puzzles, I doubt I'll be able to keep myself from shuffling these papers together, so you'll probably end up having your work cut out for you, and



for that I apologize. My last apology is for my lousy handwriting, which I'm looking at right now, and I'm fully aware of its atrociousness. It's very cold up here, and my hands are shaking like mad men. Another reason for you to keep the house warm for me.

Well, I love you so much Lou. Please send little Jill my love as well.

Love

Garret

After finishing the letter, Garret read it, reread it, then put each page—making no effort whatsoever to keep them in any order—into a plastic bag, and shoved it into his pocket. Just then, he passed out, woke up thirty minutes later, and went to bed.

"Now Trip," Mimi said, "Where did you put the candy?" She was speaking to her six year old grandson, Trip Newman. He had his mother, Jill's, last name because her and Trip's father were never married. In fact, during her pregnancy, Jill began seeing less and less of him, and now, six years later, it had been a good five years since she'd last heard from him. Mimi, most likely because of the fact that she had a daughter only and yet her grandchild still bore her last name, had been very fond of Trip since his birth, offering weekdays while Jill worked to look after him. And that's where we find the two today.

"I'm only going to ask you one more time, Trip, where on Earth did you hide that candy."

Trip, trying more perhaps, to act devilishly charming than afraid said, with a mouth full to is capacity with homemade chocolate, "I forgot." Mimi, knowing full well where her chocolate was, was not going to give up trying to make the child confess. Asking him flatly had failed, she would now have to use guilt.

"Trip," she said, "Do you know what I think?" Trip, trying to sneak a lick at his fingers, asked her what she thought. "I think that Donohue stole the chocolates. Do you think that could be it?" Seeing this as a very easy way out, Trip very readily agreed to place the blame on the dog. "Hmmm, well, I think we've found the culprit."

"Okay," Trip said, "I'll make sure he stays away from the candy next time."

"Oh no," Mimi said, "we're going to have to kill him, to put him out of his misery, I mean. Chocolate kills a dog every time. Oh, and it's the most painful way a dog can go. Well, I'll go get the gun."

This was enough, needless to say, to get Trip to confess.

Half an hour later our two characters found themselves facing each other on opposite sides on one of the two couches in the living room. The television was uncharacteristically turned off, and Mimi found herself deep--as deep as she could get with a six year old child, that is--in conversation about a certain picture sitting on a table next to the couch.

"...Was he in jail?" Trip asked.

"Heavens no!" Mimi hastily replied, "No no, he was always a good kid growing up, he was in the army."

"Oh...How come you didn't get married again?" Trip asked.

"Oh, I'm not sure. I just think that I felt like he was the only man for me."

"Oh." Trip sighed.

"Oh well." Mimi, being very nimble for her age, had been sitting with her right leg tucked underneath her left, and was now pulling herself out of that position.

"How did he die?" Trip asked.

"Well," came her reply, "they don't really know what it was that did it. It was a disease, and it was probably caused from all the time he spent out in the cold in the army. But he just didn't get up one morning."

"Do you still miss him?"

"I still do, but it's not been too bad..." about that time Jill walked in the front door.

"Hi mom," She said, looking at Trip instead of Mimi, "are we ready to go?"

"Yes." Trip said, "Goodbye Mimi, love you."

"No wait just a minute!" Mimi protested, "I'll only let you leave if you give me a kiss."

Trip was very cooperative.

"There now, I'll see you tomorrow, Trip." Mimi said as Trip followed his mother out of the door.

After her daughter and grandson had turned the corner down the street Mimi closed her front door, walked back into her room and opened her closet door. It was covered, with almost no spare room whatsoever, with nothing but cigarette rolling papers, except for a five-dollar bill at the very bottom. "Hey Garret." She said, with a very weak voice, to the door, "It's me, Lou. You were always a good kid." Her eye's watered, "I was good too, wasn't I?"