

Chapter 8

Love Lessons

Phil took over the ownership and management of Buckingham's Gulf Station in the late nineteen thirties, after his Daddy, Ezra Buckingham, retired. I started working for him on Saturdays as the winter of nineteen and forty-eight turned to spring. Momma and Daddy encouraged me to take up what Daddy called serious part-time work. William White liked the idea too, "Gives me a good place to hang out on Saturday afternoons," he said.

My first Saturday on the job I even beat Phil to work. In a bright early morning sun I walked across what Phil called the apron, an expanse of concrete in front of the old two-story brick building and its two gas pumps, high test and regular, and peered through the plate glass window. The large room had a wood and glass counter and on a shelf on the wall behind it sat a cash register with a crank on its side. Beyond the counter stood tall metal bins of small parts for cars and trucks. Oil filters, windshield wiper blades, spark plugs, that sort of thing. Beneath the glass counter were Hershey and Clark Bars, air fresheners shaped like fir trees, pipe tobacco in tins. But no cigarettes. Phil had already told me that cigarettes would bring in every kid in town. "Pipe tobacco is for a different kind of smoker, such as me and Hartford Wilson," he said. Hartford owned Wilson's Dry Goods.

On the left front side of Buckingham's a tunnel-like driveway with the public restrooms passed through the building into the garage in the large rear section of the building. My duties included pumping gas, sweeping the tunnel, as well as the apron, and keeping the restrooms clean.

Just beyond the apron stood a large old oak tree that shaded a small patch of lawn and one side of the building. In warm weather Phil and his friends would take chairs from the front end, put them under the tree, and sit and talk.

A few weeks later we had a spell of warm weather and that Saturday everybody in town seemed to be out driving around. Phil had gone to Huntington to pick up some truck parts. Shortly after noon cars had lined up on both sides of the gas pumps. The horn on a muddy old Chevy truck began blowing, at first short beeps, then they got longer and longer.

A man leaned his head out the drivers window of the truck and a familiar, good-natured voice said, "Git them cars movin', Freddy. We got business to do." It was Ferlin R. Kintzmilller, a.k.a. Froud R. Kaltenborn. A woman sat alongside him in the cab of the truck. The sunlight reflected off the windshield and I couldn't see her face.

Phil Buckingham once told me that Ferlin R had to be about fifty-five years old, for he'd attended Kettle High School with him. But Ferlin R dropped out of school the day he reached age sixteen. "Got to admit, he looks good for a man his age," Phil said.

Ferlin R had the build of a basketball player, tall and athletically trim. He lived on his family's farm up on the Sour Apple River Road. Although he had a mop of gray hair, his face remained unlined, and his smile had the look of a younger man. When he walked, Ferlin R dragged his heels, slumped his shoulders and rolled with each step, a distinctive shuffle, some people said. William White called it a drag-ass way of walking. Other folks said he learned to walk like that while in jail. A substantial chunk of Ferlin R's adult life had been spent off and on in the county lockup along with one brief stint in the state prison up at Moundsville.

The first Saturday I worked at Buckingham's, Phil asked Ferlin R about having two names. Ferlin R's face lit up with a smile and he said, "I took me a second name in nineteen and twenty-nine, and to this day I keep two delivery boxes at the Post Office. I don't git me a lot of mail, but what I do git is about equally divided between Ferlin R. Kintzmiller and Froud R. Kaltenborn. My second name, and I always say to folks you can guess which one it is, I took after an unfortunate misunderstandin' between me and the government about the makin' of alcoholic beverages. I got to say, though, that women seems to like me havin' two names. They often have fun guessin' which feller they're with. To tell you the truth, sometimes I ain't so sure myself."

After the customer in front of Ferlin R's truck pulled away I motioned for Ferlin R to drive forward. In the bed of the truck stood Chappie Goodman, a man Ferlin R called, "My quick-movin' friend." A woman stood beside Chappie but had her back towards me. Kettle folks knew Chappie well, for he made a living doing chores around town. Other than his ever-present khaki shirt and matching ball cap, the speed with which Chappie did everything distinguished him from normal-moving folks. When Chappie mowed somebody's yard he pushed the mower so fast that he ran behind it. When he talked he spoke so fast people often had to ask him to repeat what he said. His high-pitched and squeaky voice didn't help any. And Chappie could slip his hand into a fellow's hip pocket, lift his wallet, and be halfway to Kentucky before anybody knew what happened, a skill that led him to attend every parade in Huntington. Folks who knew Chappie gave him a wide berth or put their wallets in their front pockets when he approached them. Chappie's lifting habit landed him in the county jail from time to time,

“where,” Chappie squeaked, “fate placed me and Ferlin R in the lockup at the same time. We became close friends and business partners, yessir, that’s what fate done for us.”

One time when Chappie came in to buy some candy, he said to Phil, “Other than my speed, I’m about average in most anything you can measure, except for two outward adornments, and one of ‘em is my nose,” then he laughed his high-pitched laugh that sounded like an old screen door blowing back and forth in a strong wind. He got it right about his long nose. I didn’t know about his other outward adornment.

When Ferlin R’s truck pulled up to the pumps I took a closer look at the women, maybe I should say girls, with Ferlin R and Chappie, and recognized the Posey twins, Lovey and True. They lived up on the Sour Apple River near Ferlin R and had been members of my class at Kettle High School. They dropped out our sophomore year. Shortly after they turned sixteen, their Daddy died after his truck got hit by a train at a grade crossing. Not long afterwards their younger brother, Horace, woke up one morning with his legs paralyzed, polio. The girls had to go to work to help support the family. They first got jobs at Gruber’s Department Store, though they didn’t last long. William White told me they talked to customers so much that nobody got waited on. After that they began waiting tables in the coffee shop at the Daniel Boone Hotel in Charleston. William White said they made a lot of money in tips from the politicians that hung out in the coffee shop. William White figured that the politicians valued talking more than they valued eating – and the Posey twins fit right in.

Although I had a hard time telling the girls apart, it looked like Lovey sat with Ferlin R and True stood in the truck bed with Chappie. Their faces looked so much alike,

and both of them had blond hair and they usually dressed in identical outfits. Today they had on light blue blouses and dark blue skirts.

At school I once asked the Lovey and True how I could tell the difference between them. One of them took a half-step towards me and said, "I'm Lovey. You'll always know it's me once you connect my face to my special mole. It's in a secret spot that I only show to people I want to know me real well. That might include you, Freddy." She paused and batted her eyes. "Maybe me and you could get together and share my secret. Then you'd know the difference between me and my sister." She looked into my eyes and added, "From now on and forever."

About then William White walked up and poked his face in between us with raised eyebrows and a big smile. Lovey and True walked away. I told William White what Lovey said and added, "If you hadn't showed up I might've learned about Lovey's secret mole."

"You might've learned more than that," he laughed.

By the time I started filling the tank of Ferlin R's truck with gas I couldn't see Chappie and True. They'd disappeared below the sideboards around the bed of the truck. In the cab of the truck Lovey sat with her arms around Ferlin R. When I asked, "Fill 'er up, Ferlin R?" she unbuttoned a middle button on his shirt, put her hand inside it and pulled the hair on his chest.

"Cut that out, Lovey, and yes, Freddy, fill 'er up."

When I walked over to take the gas cap off the neck of the tank, Lovey said, "What about me, Ferlin R? You want me to fill 'er up? I'm not sure I can. Do you think maybe you could fill me up?"

I put the nozzle into the neck of the truck's gas tank. Chappie's voice came from inside the wooden slats around the bed of the truck. "Oh, do that. Do it again."

True giggled and said, "Chappie, you're a-tirin' me out. Do it yourself," then they both laughed, or maybe I should say, Chappie squeaked and True laughed.

I squeezed the handle of the gas pump as hard as I could and blasted gasoline into Ferlin R's tank at top speed. The unprivate sounds of Chappie and True's private activities, no more than three feet away, got to me. Part of me wanted to get Ferlin R's truck out of here, right away. Another part of me wanted to jump up into the bed of the truck. I imagined what True might look like undressed, and felt myself getting aroused. That's when gasoline sloshed out of the top of the gas tank on to my pants' cuffs and shoes.

May arrived, and with it came the nineteen and forty-eight Kettle High School Prom – I would go with Beverly Shade. I couldn't believe it. We'd been dating off and on since tenth grade, but I'd admired her since long before that. Beverly's family had moved to Kettle when I entered fifth grade. During that summer her parents bought the old Cavendish place, a white frame three-story home with gables. It had a wide porch that extended across the front of the house then wrapped half-way around each side.

The first day Beverly came to school William White put a thumbtack on her seat, but she saw it before she sat down. When she picked it up William White waved at her. Even though he was my best friend, I thought he did a dumb trick. After I got to know her better, Beverly told me she thought the same thing.

The next day during lunch hour we chose up sides for a softball game, William White's team against mine. While we picked players, Susie Mac walked up and asked, "Can I play?" On his very next choice William White said, "Susie Mac." Susan MacLendon, had been the first girl to develop a chest, a bust. Sometimes William White and I would stare at her. Well not at her, at her front. One day she wore a tight-fitting t-shirt to school and all day long William White kept elbowing me in the side saying, "Hey, look at that."

A boy on William White's team said, "If we got to have a girl on our team, you got to have a girl play for you, Freddy. Make it even."

Beverly Shade had watched us choose up sides. She stepped forward and said, "I'll play."

No other girls stood nearby, so I said, "OK, Beverly's on our team."

Right away she picked up the softball and tossed it to a member of our team. I noticed her height and long arms, as well as her dark brown curly hair and sky-blue eyes. I had no idea if she could hit or catch. In part because of her height and reach, I asked her to play first base. I'm a little ashamed to admit the other part, but I figured if she couldn't catch the ball and we lost the game, we could always blame her. I needn't have worried; she caught the ball. Every time.

Near the end of noon hour we had a tie game, nineteen to nineteen, and our team came to bat. We got a couple of singles and a walk, and then Beverly Shade stood at the plate, bat in her hand, bases loaded. On William White's first pitch she swung hard and connected, driving the ball past the outfielders. It rolled all the way up to the school just

as the bell rang to end noon hour. Everybody on our team jumped up and down and cheered as base runners crossed the plate and scored.

With the school bell ringing and the ball still rolling, William White waved his arms and yelled real loud, “Game over, game over. According to the rules, the school bell ends the game. This is officially a tie game, nineteen to nineteen.”

Everybody on our team started yelling at William White. Beverly Shade stood nose to nose with him, her face all red, and she said in a challenging way, “What rules? Show me. I hit a home run just before the bell rang, William White Wallace, and you know it.”

William White stubbornly held his ground. “Sorry, Miss Shade, you probably don’t yet understand the official rules of elementary school softball. Game called on account of the school bell.”

Most of William White’s players had begun to walk towards the school, but he gathered three of them around him and spoke in a voice that reminded me of a teacher talking to upset kids, “Tie game. Tie game. School bell rule.” They looked at him and then put their heads down and started walking towards the school building. Junior Don Kincaid, who played in center field and had watched Beverly Shade’s hit whiz past him, threw his softball glove on the ground and kicked it along in front of him all the way to the school building.

Beverly turned to our team, smiled, and started shaking our hands. “Good game, good game, nice to win,” she said. We all smiled back at her and did the same thing. I liked Beverly Shade.

In the summer before our freshman year, during our town picnic at the Kettle Fourth of July Celebration of nineteen and forty-four, Beverly's Mom had baked a raspberry cobbler pie. Beverly saw me walking by their picnic table and invited me stop to eat a piece of cobbler, which I did. In the process I promptly spilled raspberry juice down the front of my shirt. When Beverly stepped up with a wet cloth to help me remove the red stain she stood very close to me. I found myself looking straight on and deep into her eyes, pools of blue. Her dark brown hair and suntanned face made her eyes seem even brighter. I ate two more pieces of her Mom's pie while Beverly and I laughed and talked. I thought about inviting her to go to a movie, but decided against it. At the time William White and I still had feelings for Lorna C.

Since then, most Saturday nights William White and I've gone to a movie at the Dixie Palace and later hung out at Bertha's Place. On occasion I've asked Beverly to go to a movie. Maybe the reason I didn't ask her more often grew out of a fear she'd say no, though she never did. One Saturday night during our junior year, halfway through the feature film, I put my arm around the top of her seat, and then slowly let it slide onto her shoulders. William White told me how to do it. He called it "A good move. Smart."

Beverly didn't think so. She reached up and pulled my arm down on to the armrest between us. "That's not nice in public," she whispered, but she then reached over and held my hand. That started us holding hands in the movies. Maybe William White got it right after all.

One afternoon at the beginning of our senior year, William White and I stopped at Bertha's Place for RC Colas. He gave me an odd look and then said, "This may sound a little weird, but I've been thinking about it, and believe it's true."

I never knew what would come next when he started out like that. “Believe what is true?”

“About you and Beverly Shade.”

“What about me and Beverly Shade?”

“Well, strange as this may sound, when I think of the two of you I think of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the movie, ‘Casablanca’.” William White often cast himself as something of an authority on Hollywood. After Ginger Rogers’s visit to Kettle, he often talked of moving to Hollywood. One time he said, “If I do move there I plan to go out with Ingrid. It’s possible that in time I may propose to her. Of course a lot depends on Ginger.”

We stood near the mirror behind the back booth at Bertha’s Place. I looked at my reflection – tall, skinny, still some freckles, brownish-red curly hair, no Humphrey Bogart. I said, “You must know something I don’t,” and then I rolled my eyes.

But I had to admit that Beverly did bear a resemblance to Ingrid Bergman – those high cheekbones, beautiful eyes and an inviting trace of a smile that suggested something more to come. Her face carried a beauty that positively radiated. When we talked I felt like the only person in her world. At that moment she became my world too. When Beverly laughed, her eyes, her whole face, seemed to dance. We laughed a lot, too, not always at jokes, just at little things, often when nobody else understood our humor. We ended our dates with a kiss, a light peck on the lips. When we said goodnight after we had seen the movie ‘Gone with the Wind,’ I tried to kiss her the way I saw Clark Gable kiss Vivian Leigh. Beverly jumped back away from me.

“Did I do something wrong?”

A sheepish little grin spread across her face and she replied, “I thought you were going to bite me.”

Late on a warm Saturday afternoon at the end of March, Phil and I sat under the oak tree. He asked, “Freddy, what do you plan to do after graduation?”

“I don’t know. Momma and Daddy talked with me about going to Marshall College. I’d like to do that. My grades are good, mostly A’s and B’s. Daddy said if I decided to go to college he and Momma could help some, but they couldn’t afford to pay my way. I’d need to earn some money first.”

Phil said in a soft voice, “Well, I never went to college.”

That surprised me, though I’d not thought about Phil’s education after Kettle High. “And even if I went to college this fall,” I said, “I wouldn’t know what to study. College is supposed to prepare you for something, and I don’t know what that something is.”

Phil said, “I began working here at the gas station for my Dad, and took some correspondence courses to learn things like bookkeeping that would help me in the business.”

I had begun to wonder if maybe that’s what I should do when Phil popped a big question on me. “Freddy, after you graduate, how would you like to come to work here full time?”

That day Phil wore his blue and gray striped coveralls with the orange Gulf insignia stitched over the left front pocket and “Buckingham’s” stitched just below it. With his wide shoulders, coal-black hair, and big grin he looked impressive. I imagined

myself dressed like Phil and working here with him every day. I enjoyed my work on Saturdays and, in my mind's eye, I liked the future I could see for myself working for Phil. At the same time, I wondered if by not going to college I might be avoiding something important, not stepping up to a challenge. Beverly planned to go to the West Virginia University in the fall and study to be a teacher. Would I risk losing her if I kept working and didn't go to college?

Phil went on, "Here's what I've been thinking, Freddy. You could be in charge of the front end. I'd offer you a salary of thirty-five dollars a week. That divides out to just under a dollar an hour, though when you're on salary you really don't figure things by the hour. Still, if you did, it would be almost double what I'm now paying you on Saturdays." My heart skipped a beat. "You'd be in charge of the gas pumps and products in the front end, consumable products, items from behind the counter, candy, air fresheners, fan belts, generator belts, oil filters. Things like that. Now if a customer wanted to order a new fender, that would be a durable product and fall under my area of responsibility."

Down at the bottom of my mind I recognized that I'd never heard things like candy and fan belts called "consumable products" and fenders called "durable products." In the rest of my mind I didn't know what to say to Phil. Life after Kettle High seemed like an unknown road, and Phil had just put fork in the road. If I turned at the fork and took the path that had now opened up, working at Buckingham's, I knew I'd enjoy the work. If I turned down the fork's other path, I couldn't see far ahead. It appeared dark, I didn't know where it led.

"I appreciate your offer, Phil," I said. "I'd be real proud to work here, but I'll need a little time to think about it. And I'll want to talk to Momma and Daddy."

Phil wrinkled his forehead and a real serious look came over his face. “Well, that’s the right thing to do.” He paused. “Now there’s one more thing, Freddy.” Then he hit me with the first real honest-to-God business deal of my life. “As part of your pay, in addition to your salary I’ll give you a commission of five cents on every quart of oil you sell. The commission is for oil sold at the gas pumps, and doesn’t include oil changes done back in the garage, or bulk sales of oil across the counter. Some folks, for example a farmer like Pappy Roosevelt, will come in and buy oil a case at a time. It’s a commission on oil sold at the pumps and poured into an engine.” I did a quick mental calculation. Every twenty quarts sold meant I’d earn an additional dollar. Not bad.

“Think about it. I don’t need to know right away,” Phil said. “Like you said, talk to your Mom and Dad. I can wait until graduation. After that, if you decide you don’t want the job, I’ll need to start looking for somebody.”

I thought of a plan to boost oil sales and told William White about it. “I’ll keep a little tally sheet in my pocket and count the number of cars and trucks that come in for gas. I’ll tally up the number of customers that ask to have their oil checked, and the number of customers that buy a quart or two of oil. Then I’ll calculate the percentage who actually buy oil.”

William White canted his head sidewise, “Is that it?”

“No. After a couple of weeks of counting, every time I put gas in a car or truck I’ll check the oil without the driver’s asking me. Just pop the hood and check it. I’ll wager that oil sales will jump up. And I’ll know how much they’ve increased.”

“Sounds like too much work to me. What about this? Does Phil care if you read magazines when there are no cars at the gas pumps?”

In the weeks that followed I tested my plan to boost oil sales, did what I described to William White. People often thanked me for the quality of service I gave them. I always returned their thanks but never mentioned the possibility of a commission on my oil sales, that stayed private, a business arrangement between Phil and me.

From time to time I wondered if my attention to oil sales took me away from thinking about my choice of paths at the fork in the road. One evening I spoke with Momma and Daddy about Phil's offer and whether or not I should go to college. They told me I had good health and a long life ahead of me. If I wanted to, I could take another year to two to decide about college. Daddy reminded me that if I wanted to enroll at Marshall College next fall, they could help me some financially but I'd still need to work part-time.

The Saturdays rolled by and graduation came ever closer. We prepared for the junior-senior prom at Kettle High. During the week of the prom we decorated the gym with crepe paper and banners, and the day of the prom kids brought in lilacs, tulips and six dozen white roses. We placed them around the gym. Lots of kids brought in their favorite records, mostly for dancing but some just for listening.

The night of the prom the girls in the junior and senior classes dressed up in gowns that billowed and flowed with layers and layers of something I heard them call crinolines, beneath the skirts. Each girl had done something special to give her hair a distinctive look – some of them had their hair curled, others flattened out their curls. Some fluffed their hair and piled it on top of their heads. They all wore makeup and

different shades of pink and red lipstick. At moments I imagined I'd been transported to a land filled with beautiful women.

The guys wore white shirts, ties and suits. My suit was dark blue. I wore it to church sometimes. Daddy said, "Freddy, with your white shirt and a red and blue striped tie, you look right smart." I agreed with him, though I didn't say that out loud, except to myself when I looked into my bedroom mirror.

William White wore a blue suit too. And a white shirt. He liked my tie so much he bought one identical to it. I didn't much care for his doing that, since we planned to double date at the prom. "We'll look like a couple of bookends," I whined.

He broke into that little grin he always got when he thought he had pulled a good one. "Best-looking bookends in Kettle."

William White and I decided not to drive the old twenty-nine Chevy we bought at the beginning of the school year with the income from our yard-mowing business. With its torn seat covers and moldy flooring the old car didn't meet the standards of an event like the prom. Daddy said I could borrow our family's nineteen and forty-one black Dodge sedan for the evening. It had four doors and a large back seat with plenty of room. William White and I had the car as clean and shiny as the day it came out of the factory.

On prom night, William White and Susie Mac sat in the back seat while I went in to get Beverly. They'd had two earlier dates this spring, and William White had admired Susie Mac since fifth grade.

I handed Beverly a white orchid corsage and helped her pin it to the front of her gown. Her Mom told us how nice we both looked. Beverly wore a gown of pink and the bottom of her skirt extended wider than her shoulders. Her tan skin complemented the

light pink of the dress. Beverly's blue eyes sparkled and her dark brown hair curled around her face like a soft picture frame.

Beverly's Mom said, "Well, Freddy, I suppose you know about Beverly's plans to go to the university in September."

I nodded my head. Beverly had mentioned that she'd been accepted to attend the university up in Morgantown, but until that moment I didn't know for certain that she would go.

"We're very proud of her," Mrs. Shade said. Then I thought I heard her voice harden just a bit as she asked, "And what about you, Freddy, what are your plans?"

I felt like a teacher had just announced a pop quiz and I hadn't studied. I stiffened. Somebody turned on a garden hose in my armpits.

"Well, Mrs. Shade, I'm not sure what I'm going to do." I thought about the fork in the road. My heart picked up a faster beat. I cleared my throat but my voice sounded squeaky. "I've talked with my parents about going to Marshall College, but money's a little tight right now." I paused and Phil's offer popped into my mind. I gave her a big smile. "And Phil Buckingham has made me a very attractive offer to work full-time for him."

Mrs. Shade looked at me for a few seconds. Then she squeezed out a little half-smile, the kind I'd seen people at church put on when they talked about some guy who just got out of jail for the fourth time and told everybody he'd stay on a straight and narrow path. "Isn't that nice. Phil seems to have a very good business."

“Oh yes maam. Only last Saturday one hundred and thirty-seven cars came in for gas.” I paused and thought for a second. “Actually that number includes both cars and trucks.” She held her half-smile and nodded.

Before we walked out the front door, Beverly’s Mom said, “Don’t forget, honey, tomorrow morning you’re going with me to the meeting in Huntington.”

When I opened the car door for Beverly, I glanced towards the back seat. William White sat with his back towards the front seat and Susie Mac had wrapped her arms around him. I yelled, “Hello!” probably louder than I should have, for they both jumped. William White popped around, face forward. Susie Mac too. Her lipstick extended in wide bands around her lips and William White wore quite a bit of it. On the drive over to Kettle High, Beverly sat near the passenger side door and didn’t say much.

That night the Kettle High gym looked like a make-believe ballroom. Soft dim lights, along with the mums and roses among the crepe paper decorations, gave the old gymnasium a warm and festive, yet soft, atmosphere. A special place that would last for only a few hours, then disappear. When we walked in the door, a Glenn Miller record, “Sunrise Serenade,” played. William White took Susie Mac in his arms, swept her up might be a better way of describing it, and they danced across the gym floor.

I asked Beverly, “Would you like to dance?”

“Just a minute, Freddy, I need to tell Mary Sue something,” and then she walked over to a group of girls. Mary Sue had been Beverly’s best friend since grade school. They always seemed to have something private to share.

A bunch of the guys stood on the other side of the room. I walked over and said, “Hey.” George Boy Roosevelt answered, “Hey, Freddy,” and punched me on the shoulder.

William White and Susie Mac danced and held each other so close it looked more like one person dancing, not two. I wondered if they practiced, then remembered they’d only had two dates.

Susie Mac looked pretty in her blue gown. She had her curly blonde hair cut short in what William White said her Mom called her “summer style.” William White, always thinking ahead, told me, “I really like Susie Mac’s new haircut. If we neck and make out, her hair will look the same afterwards as it did before we started.”

“Lucky you,” I replied with some sarcasm in my voice.

“Seriously, though, there’s something about her. I don’t know what it is. It’s like I’ve been waiting and waiting for somebody, and I just found out that it’s Susie Mac.”

Beverly looked my way, and I walked over to her. “Ready to dance?”

I put my arm around her and right away could feel her pull back, enough to put a few inches of distance between us. I arched my arm around her to allow for the space between us and we danced through Bing Crosby singing, “Now is the Hour.” I thought about the words, “Now is the hour, when we must say goodbye...” Our class would soon graduate and say goodbye to each other. From the way things had been going, I wondered if Beverly applied the words of the song to me. After the music ended everybody walked over to the punch bowl, except for William White and Susie Mac who stood motionless near the center of the dance floor. They nuzzled their faces into each other’s necks, their eyes closed.

During the last dance I held Beverly close, but I could feel stiffness in the way she held me, and the mechanical movement of her dancing. When the music ended everybody began to leave. We met up with William White and Susie Mac. “Hey,” I said, hoping I sounded surprised by the wonder of what I would say, “I got an idea. Let’s go to the East End Diner in Huntington.” Actually, the idea hadn’t just occurred to me, though I had tried to make it sound that way by rehearsing the way I would say it. William White and I had planned this move for quite some time. First to the East End Diner, then to Gobbler’s Knob, a place on a hilltop in Ritter Park in Huntington where late at night kids went to park and neck.

“Sounds good to me,” William White said. Also rehearsed.

“Me too,” Susie Mac added. Purely spontaneous.

Beverly got a most serious look on her face and said, “I don’t know. It’s now nearly ten-thirty. By the time we go there, eat, and then drive back, it’s likely to be well after midnight.”

Inside me, a little voice said, “She got that right.”

“My Mom told me I’d have to be home between eleven-thirty and twelve. Mom said she’d be waiting up for me.”

We drove up Main Street and parked in front of Bertha’s Place. Bertha had kept the restaurant open late because of it being prom night. She even put a sign in the front window, ‘After-Prom Party Tonight.’ Bertha wore a black lacy dress, though her large size stretched the dress. I had never seen Bertha out of her blue uniform.

Lots of the kids from the prom had already arrived. Bertha put a small bowl full of nickels on the table beside the jukebox, so we had continuous music. Somebody kept

selecting Hank Williams's "Your Cheatin' Heart." Some of the kids moved the tables away from the center of the restaurant and danced.

Whit Saunders sat in the back booth. He said, "This is a first – dancin' at Bertha's Place." He laughed, "Better pull down the shades, Bertha."

Whit had no sooner said, "Pull down the shades," than the front door opened and in walked Ferlin R, Lovey, Chappie, and True. They looked around the room at everybody all dressed up in suits and gowns, and then Chappie squeaked, "Ferlin R, we didn't git ourselves dressed up proper."

The little group turned to leave, but True pulled on the back of Chappie's shirt and said, "Chappie, I want to dance."

"I ain't no dancer, True."

I had walked over to the counter to order two RC Colas. "Your chea-ea-tin heart, will tell on you-ou..." Suddenly True stood at the counter in front of me with her arms extended. The next thing I knew we had begun slow dancing. She pressed against me, laid her cheek against my chest, and I inhaled the sweet scent of her. Her legs touched mine as we moved to the music.

True turned her face upwards to me and her lips parted ever so slightly. I stared into her blue eyes and at that moment the world contained only True and me slow-dancing in Bertha's Place.

True's body jerked away from me as Chappie pulled her left arm. Lovey stepped in between us and put her back to me.

"Quit your lollygaggin' with Freddy," Lovey yelled. "He ain't got time for you."

Ferlin R grabbed Lovey's hand and yanked her towards the door. She pulled Chappie, who pulled True, and the little group went out the door.

William White, Susie Mac and Beverly sat in the booth laughing. My face felt red-hot. "Let's...let's order some food," I sputtered. We ordered hamburgers, French fries, and RC Colas. When I placed my order I asked Bertha to hold the onions.

About the time I finished my hamburger Beverly looked at the round "Drink RC Cola" clock on the wall beside the door to the kitchen. Eleven-thirty. She said, "I should be getting home."

Beverly and I climbed the steps to her porch and stood by the front door. Beverly said, speaking slowly, almost as if she wanted to hear herself say the words, "Thank you for the corsage, Freddy. And for a nice evening. It was very special."

"You're welcome," though I wondered if in truth she'd had a nice evening. I'd felt uncomfortable through most of it.

Beverly stared at a spot on the floor of the porch for a few seconds, and then looked into my eyes. In a voice that broke and sounded like she might cry, she said, "I know I wasn't much fun tonight Freddy, and I'm sorry."

"No, you were fine. I enjoyed our dancing and talking," I lied.

"It's OK." Her voice took on a soft, sad tone. "You don't have to be nice about it." She had tears in her eyes. I wondered if I had said something to make her cry.

"Remember when you picked me up this evening and my Mom asked you about your plans after graduation?"

"Sure."

“Well, she talked to me about all that before you arrived. She had heard from one of her friends that Phil made you a job offer and it was likely you wouldn’t to go to college. I guess she just wanted to hear it from you. All afternoon today she talked to me about how important it is to get an education, and how Daddy missed the boat by not going to college. I said, ‘But Mom, Dad has done well working at Union Chemical.’ She told me, ‘It could have been different, and better. Don’t let that happen to you.’ All that talk with her kind of derailed my thoughts this evening. I’m sorry Freddy.”

I didn’t know what to say. During the prom I knew something had been wrong, but didn’t know what. All of a sudden it felt like somebody had loaded heavy weights on to my body.

Beverly stood there with a long sad face, but even when long and sad her face carried grace. She looked again at the porch floor, and then turned her face towards me. “This is hard for me to say, Freddy, but I don’t think we should see each other on dates any more.” Suddenly Bing Crosby sang, “Now is the hour...” Tears ran down Beverly’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Freddy.”

“I don’t want you to have a bad time with your Mom, Beverly. But, don’t you think...I mean, couldn’t we date some this summer? You know, go to the movies just like we have.”

“I’d like to do that, Freddy. But I know if we date, I’ll not be able to live with Mom. She’ll make my life miserable. I like you a lot, maybe too much. I enjoy our time together.” She gave me a little half smile. A tear rolled down her left cheek. “I’m sure

we'll see each other once in a while at Bertha's Place or around town." Her half-smile disappeared. "Anyway, come September everything will end. I'll be gone."

End? I couldn't believe it. Not just the prom, everything – softball, raspberry pie, holding hands in the movies.

Beverly looked at me ever so softly and we held each other's gaze for a long time. Then she said, "Good night, Freddy."

"Night, Beverly, I muttered." An enemy torpedo had struck my heart.

I began to turn to walk off the porch, I mean I got ready to turn but had not actually turned, when Beverly's hand touched my cheek, "Freddy?"

I would have said, "Yes?" but her long arms wound themselves around me and she pulled us close together. I put my arms around her, though I hadn't figured out what I should do. Then her lips touched mine. So soft. Through her gown and crinolines, she pressed her body against me. I returned her kiss. It became a slow and long kiss. Her lips moved ever so gently, and then parted just a little, something new to me. I did the same but wondered how far I should open my mouth. Her tongue played along my lips and then moved lightly inside them. My heart raced and my breath came in short gasps. I pulled her towards me as tightly as I could. She pulled me towards her. I'd never held anybody like that. And I had never been held or kissed that way. Her body moved back forth, rubbing and exciting me. Her hands slipped under my jacket and moved gently up and down my back. Our kiss went on so long I wondered if I would be able to breathe.

Though I didn't want that kiss ever to end, it did. As I touched my lips to Beverly's neck she whispered, "You'll have to go now," and gently pushed away from me.

“Are you sure? But...” She placed her fingers against my lips.

Then Beverly put one hand on each side of my face and looked at me. “I’ve wanted to hold you like that for a long time, Freddy.”

We looked into each other’s eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Mine too.

Beverly said, “I care about you so much, and I think of you every day. But I live with Mom and Dad. And I’m going to the university in the fall. That’s my life.” She gave me a quick hug. “Good night, Freddy.”

I turned away, confused. This time she didn’t stop me. What had happened? As I walked down the porch steps I felt filled with love, yet empty.

When I pressed the starter on the Dodge I looked in the rear-view mirror. I couldn’t see William White and Susie Mac, though I could hear the rustle of crinolines and giggling. I wanted to go somewhere and be alone.

Susie Mac giggled after William White said, “Oh, chauffeur, to Miss MacLendon’s house, please. By the way,” he added, “this is one wild lady.”

A light thump of a hand against a body sounded and Susie Mac said in a low voice, “If you want another one of those just keep talking like that.”

At Susie Mac’s house the place looked dark except for a light on the front porch and a table lamp shining through the living room window.

“Looks like everybody’s gone to bed,” I said to the rear-view mirror.

Two heads slowly rose up in the back seat. Susie Mac said, “Mmmm, William White stop it.” She looked out the window. “My parents go to bed early.”

William White laughed, “Well, I guess it’s just us and a dark house.”

“Dream on, William White. Come on, let’s go in.”

William White told me he would walk home. He and Susie Mac strolled up the sidewalk to Susie Mac's house with their arms around each other. On my drive home I lightly touched my tongue to my lips and tasted Beverly's lipstick. I pretended that she sat in the car beside me. "I love you," I whispered.

After I went to bed I thought about the prom and our goodnight kiss – then her words that put an end to everything. I wanted to hold Beverly. I felt an empty place inside me, one only she could fill. My stomach gave a little jerk, then another one that rippled up through my chest. And another, this time a big one. Then tears came and I cried a deep cry that rolled down into my guts and pulled my stomach muscles tight. I turned face down and pulled the covers over my head.

* * * * *

Two weeks later in the auditorium at Kettle High School our senior class had its graduation ceremony. Seventy-two of us graduated, many of us in school together since first grade. Families and friends filled the auditorium. Before the ceremony we lined up for our procession, wearing our black gowns and flat square mortarboard caps with one corner pointed forward just above the forehead. The orange tassels on our caps were all on the left side of the cap's forward point. My heart jumped a beat when I looked at Beverly, smiled, and she returned my look then broke into a smile.

Our principal, Mr. Lawton, gave a speech about citizenship. I only half-listened for I had my attention on Beverly, seated a couple of rows in front of me. Mr. Lawton lowered his voice to a serious tone and said, "Above all else, as you enter the world you should commit yourselves to the struggle against Communism, at home and around the

world.” The only commitment I had involved keeping my gaze focused on the back of Beverly’s beautiful shoulders.

Holbert Holcomb, class valedictorian, spoke next. Holbert may have been the smartest kid in our class, but he couldn’t hit a baseball if his life depended on it. His round shape and triple chin said to me he should drop some weight. I half-listened to his speech. It was just a matter of time until Holbert got around to the question he had talked so much about in our problems of democracy class. Sure enough, once again he asked, “Is it right for there to be Negro players in major league baseball? Last season there we had the first one in the National League. Now they’re in the American League. Soon they’ll infiltrate every team, both leagues.”

About the time Holbert asked if the Communists put the Negroes up to playing in the National League, Beverly turned to talk with Mary Sue, sitting beside her. Mary Sue planned to go to the university in the fall. She and Beverly would be roommates. I had a clear view of Beverly’s profile. I imagined her cheek against mine and remembered how, after the prom, our lips, our bodies, had touched, pressed. And our kiss. When people felt the kind of longing I felt at that moment, how could they go on with their lives without fulfilling their love? Would I live my life without Beverly? Could I live my life without her?

When Holbert finished his speech everybody gave polite applause until George Boy Roosevelt, sitting right behind William White and me, stood, put his hands in the air and clapped and whistled like he did in Kettle High assemblies after somebody made a boring speech. George Boy’s actions prompted others folks to do the same thing, and the next thing I knew Holbert received a standing ovation.

Then came the time to give awards to graduating seniors. Even though my grades put me near Holbert in the academic ranking of our class, I hadn't excelled in anything. I had no reason to expect an award and didn't receive one. William White received the award for creative writing. When he returned to his seat I shook his hand and we shared big grins. The Daughters of the American Revolution history award went to Beverly. She'd often told me how much she liked history, particularly American history in the period of the Civil War. Beverly knew the names of all the generals and units that fought at the battle of Gettysburg. As she walked across the stage to receive her award she held her head high and walked with grace.

Finally we came to the awarding of diplomas. William White punched me in the ribs with his elbow, "We're gonna be out of here," he whispered all too loud.

One by one Mr. Lawton read our names and each member of our class walked across the stage to be handed a diploma. Mr. Lawton wore a sober look on his face, and in a deep voice said, "Congratulations" to each of us. The quiet of the ceremony got disrupted when I walked across the stage and William White cut loose with a loud whistle, the kind you get when you put your fingers in the corners of your mouth pull down and blow hard. Everybody jumped, and then laughed. Mr. Lawton's head snapped around and he gave William White a dark stare. Later, William White asked, "What's he going to do, expel me?"

After the ceremony, outside on the lawn I walked towards Beverly but before I reached her a large bunch of relatives surrounded her, shaking her hand and talking with her. I got close enough make eye contact and we smiled at each other.

Two weeks before graduation I had again talked with Momma and Daddy about the fork in my road, and whether I should go to college or go to work. Daddy took out a pad of paper and showed me a method he said Ben Franklin used to weigh decisions. “For each alternative in a choice,” Daddy said, “Mr. Franklin would create a list of positive and negative features. He’d study and weigh them, and then select his alternative.” Daddy and Momma helped me list the positives and negatives of going to college or accepting Phil’s offer, and then told me they knew I’d make the right decision. By the time I went to bed my uncertainty about what to study in college, along with limited finances, led me towards full-time work for Phil.

On Wednesday of the week before graduation I told Phil I would accept his offer. Phil gave me a big grin and we shook hands. He pumped my arm up and down with enthusiasm. It felt good to know he wanted me to work for him. Phil gave me three sets of what he called our warm weather uniforms, light blue cotton trousers and short-sleeved light blue shirts. The round orange Gulf insignia with the word Buckingham’s stitched just underneath it had been sewn above the left pocket of each shirt.

The Monday after graduation, my first day of full-time work, I got to Buckingham’s bright and early. I jumped right into my program of cleaning each customer’s windshield and popping the hood to check the oil. That day eighteen percent of all gas customers made oil purchases. Easy extra money, I figured, and good for Phil too. I decided I’d put my oil commission earnings into a little fund I’d use for college. Or maybe I’d use the money to set up an apartment of my own.

That evening I called Beverly. I told myself I wanted to tell her about my first day of full-time work. In truth, we hadn't spoken since the prom and I wanted so much to hear her voice. Her Mom answered and in a polite but matter-of-fact way said, "Beverly's out. I'll tell her you called, Freddy." A couple of days later, when I hadn't heard from Beverly, I called again and her Mom said the same thing.

I went through this a couple more times before I began to get the picture. Beverly Shade's house had been sealed off, at least for me. It made me think of the Russians sealing off part of Berlin. Her Mom might as well have put a big sign, "Freddy Lemley – keep out" in the front yard, or maybe posted some armed guards around the place. Maybe the Russians could send over some sentries to help her out. With my work each day at Buckingham's I couldn't go places during the day where Beverly might be, like Bertha's Place or the Kettle Public Library. One night I dreamed that Beverly drove her family's car to Buckingham's for a tank of gas. I jumped in the car and we drove off together. We just drove on and on. The dream seemed so real, but when I woke up the car and Beverly had disappeared. I tried to go back to sleep, hoping another dream would bring her back, but it didn't work. I tried to fix the images of the dream in my memory, but by the end of the day they had faded.

Every once in a while William White brought me news about Beverly. One day he approached me with some hesitation, started to speak then stopped a couple of times. Finally he said, "I don't want to tell you this, but you ought to know.

"Beverly went with Holbert Holcomb to a band concert in Ritter Park. Susie Mac told me Beverly's Mom thought she should go. Pushed her into it."

I had to sit down. “Damn him,” I said. My face flushed. From what I’d learned about Mrs. Shade, William White’s report made sense. I took a couple of deep breaths. Although I felt jealous, I had to admit I felt a little relief that Beverly had a date with fat boring Holbert, one guy I doubted she’d ever fall for.

Once in a while Mrs. Shade drove their family car to Buckingham’s for a tank of gas. When I saw her coming I would start stocking the shelves and Phil would wait on her. On a couple of occasions when I had to wait on her she surprised me with her pleasant manner.

One morning I told William White about how Mrs. Shade acted towards me.

He said, “Mrs. Shade reminds me of a picture I saw in the newspaper of a Russian soldier guarding the border of West Berlin. The soldier held a rifle and at the same time smiled at a little German kid. Sure, Mrs. Shade smiles and acts nice, but you can’t cross the border.” Then William White looked at me most seriously and added, “Maybe God is teaching you a lesson. About how folks can seem nice on the surface and all the while work against you.”

“I may seem to be a little slow in these things, William White, but I got it. He can end the lesson.”

After lunch our business slowed down. Phil left to make a couple of service calls – a fellow had a dead battery and Miss Hattie McClintock had a flat right rear tire. Mid-afternoon I put a lawn chair under the old oak tree and sat for a spell. What might I have done differently towards Beverly? I suppose if I told her Mom I intended to go to college this fall we might still be dating. I thought about Beverly preparing to go to college. Did she continue to think about me each day?

How do people come to care about each other so powerfully that they share their lives? Get married? I again imagined our passionate kiss after the prom, and how I wanted that moment to last forever. I wanted to feel her, every part of her, next to me.

What's it like for a couple to love each other so powerfully that they shed their clothes and fall into bed, and then do it? In the movies after a couple kisses with passion the screen fades to black. Then it's the next day. Will I ever get to point with Beverly that the screen will fade to black? And if did, would I know what to do?

About then Ferlin R's old truck rolled up to the gas pumps. Lovey sat in the front seat beside Ferlin R. He smiled and said, "Gimme two dollars worth of regular, Freddy."

I put the nozzle in the neck of the truck's gas tank and squeezed its handle. In the bed of the truck Chappie began squeaking and True laughed, and then the bed of the truck gently rose and fell as they bounced around. I squeezed the handle to speed the flow of gasoline.

By the time I finished putting two dollars' worth of gas in the truck, Ferlin R and Lovey stood alongside me. Ferlin R opened his wallet. Lovey placed one hand inside the right front pocket of Ferlin R's pants and ran her other hand through his hair. Then she nuzzled her lips against his neck and whispered, "You remind me of Froud R.

Kaltenborn. Ain't it time to go, Froud R? Ain't it?"

In a whisper Ferlin R said, "Just hold on, darlin'. We'll be done here in a minute. Then we'll head up Sour Apple River and git down to business."

A trail of blue exhaust drifted behind the old truck as it drove away. The people in the truck never finished high school. But I knew that they knew what happened when, in the movies, a couple kissed with so much passion the screen faded to black.