

WILLIAM SANDERS

JENNIFER, JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT

IT WAS JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT when Graham saw the woman at the bar. Or rather that was when he noticed her; she had, he realized, been standing there for some time, and his eyes must have picked up her presence repeatedly, but only as another figure in the human swirl around him. She was young and pretty, but that was true of most of the women in the room, and, as far as Graham had noticed, of those attending the convention in general. The con scene had definitely undergone major evolution in that regard in the last decade or two. Either that, Graham reflected sourly, or the advancing middle years had affected his perceptions. That sounded eminently plausible.

Be that as it might, the hotel bar had been lined all evening with bright-faced, trim-haunched young women -- you weren't supposed to call them "girls" anymore, though if some of the ones drinking here tonight were twenty-one he was H.P. Lovecraft -- flashing perfect teeth and displaying, from beneath severely abbreviated ensembles, a great deal of smooth, uniformly tanned skin. Graham had admired them in a vague distant way, as he might have admired the lines of a fast sports car without feeling any real desire to drive it. They seemed almost an alien species; their reality barely touched his.

This one, however, was looking straight at him.

There was no doubt about it. She had turned clear around, to stand with her back to the bar, and her gaze was full on Graham. It was hard to read her expression from across the dim and smoky room, but he thought she was smiling.

And here she came now, pushing off from the bar with her elbows, moving gracefully through the crowd, holding her drink carefully in front of her with both hands. As she passed, men turned their heads to look -- one large young fellow in a Klingon costume spilled beer on his lap, watching the motion of her hips, and got a blistering look from the little redhead beside him -- and, the con scene having evolved in more than one respect, so did quite a few women.

But Graham's primary reaction was to groan silently, and then to raise his drink and down a large and hasty swallow of bourbon. Not now, he thought and wanted to scream, Christ, not now of all times, I knew I shouldn't have come to this stupid thing --

"I don't even want to go to the stupid thing," he had said, Wednesday morning. "I hate conventions."

"You used to love them," Margaret reminded him. "You know you did, Keith. We had some good times at the cons."

"That was a different scene. Nowadays -- " He shook his head, a little angrily, a lot tiredly: He hadn't had much sleep the night before. Or any other night, for longer than he could recall.

"It's not the way it used to be," he told Margaret. "Now, most of the cons you go to, it's wall-to-wall Trekkies and role-players and costume freaks. And New Agers, and grown men and women whose lives peaked the first time they saw The Rocky Horror Picture Show -- "

"Oh, come on. The cons always did attract oddballs and misfits. That was half the fun, wasn't it? And," she added, "I'll not mention how a certain elongated young Nebula nominee was dressed the first time a certain promising young illustrator laid eyes on him."

"Sure." Graham had to grin briefly at the memory. "But no matter how silly we got, there was always the basic premise that this was about certain types of written fiction, and the people who wrote it and read it. Nowadays, half the guests at the average con don't read at all and don't see why they should."

He stopped, wondering why he was ranting like this. He sat down in the uncomfortable chair beside Margaret's bed and took her hand in both of his, feeling the bones through the frighteningly thin covering of flesh. "I'm sorry," he said. "But really, I don't want to go."

"But it's something you need to do," she insisted. "You already promised the committee -- "

"They'll understand. They know about you. I already explained that I might not be able to make it."

"Bullshit," she said distinctly. "There's no reason whatever that you can't go. Either I'll be all right or I won't, and if I'm not there won't be anything you or anyone else can do about it."

She raised her head an inch or so from the pillow. "God damn it, Keith, I'm not going to let you waste any more of your life haunting my bedside. You know what they said -- it could happen any time, or I could still be lying here this time next year. You're fifty-four years old. You don't have that kind of time to throw away."

Her head fell back; she breathed deeply for a moment, looking up at the ceiling with pain-widened eyes. Those eyes, Graham thought with a bottomless sorrow, those wonderful violet eyes. Nothing else remained of the Margaret of years past; her face was now no more than a pallid mask of lined and taut-drawn skin, and beneath the kerchief on her head was only bare scalp where that dense red-brown mane would never grow again. The wasted shape beneath the stiff white

hospital sheet was a cruel caricature of the magnificent body Graham remembered.

"I've got this damned hideous thing inside me, and it's killing me." Her voice was very weak but her words came out crisply clear. "I'm not going to let it kill you too. Or let you use it as an excuse for refusing to live."

She turned her head on the pillow, looking at Graham. "Besides, you need this professionally. You haven't had a book out in two years, only half a dozen stories and nothing at all since last winter w you've all but quit, haven't you?

And I suppose that's natural, it can't have been easy for you to write or even think while you had to deal with what's been happening to me...but you've got to get back to work, and soon. The longer you wait, the harder it'll be."

She glanced about the hospital room. "And you do need to take care of business.

The insurance isn't going to cover all of this." Her lips pulled back in a crooked smile. "Not to mention what those ghoulisb bastards are going to charge for hauling my ashes."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Why not?" she said. "You may write fantasy, but it's reality time now. You better learn to deal with it."

She reached across with her free hand and patted his forearm. "Go to the convention, Keith. It'll do you good. Consider it a refresher course in having a life," she said. "God knows you need it."

GRAHAM BLINKED; his hand jerked slightly, almost spilling his drink. He looked up at the girl -- the woman -- from the bar, who was now standing on the far side of his table, one hand resting on the back of the other chair.

"Hello," she said.

Not, "Hi," Graham noticed, but a genuine hello; give her a point there, anyway.

He saw now that she was even prettier than she had looked from across the room:

long legs, slender waist, fine-boned features that came very close to qualifying

as authentically beautiful -- even despite her efforts to spoil them with over-the-top makeup; her lipstick could have stopped traffic in a Seattle fog. Thick taffy-blond hair hung to her bare tanned shoulders. Quite a lot of her was

bare, in fact; the little denim skirt barely reached below her crotch, while the

skimpy matching top exposed many square inches of flat smooth belly and served to advertise, rather than seriously conceal, a really impressive chest.

She said, "You're Keith Graham, aren't you? I recognized you from the dust-jacket photos. Mind if I sit down?"

A reader? Have to be reasonably nice, then; as Margaret always liked to point out, the readers were the ones who paid the rent and kept you from having to get

a real job. This one might look like a reject from a Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders tryout, but what the hell. At least she wasn't decked out in fake medieval costume, and she didn't appear to be packing any quartz crystals.

Hastily, a bit clumsily, he got to his feet, pushing back his own chair and rising to his full rangy six feet three -- Big Stoop, Margaret had named him on their first night together, after a character in the old Terry and the Pirates comic strip -- and reaching for the other chair, before he remembered you weren't supposed to do that anymore either. But the blonde didn't object; in fact she seemed to take the old-fashioned courtesy for granted, and she stepped back and stood waiting while he pulled the chair out for her. "Thanks," she said, sitting down and setting her drink on the table. "I hope I'm not bothering you. It's just that you look as if you could use some company. And I've really enjoyed your work."

Graham sighed. "Actually," he said, resuming his seat, "I'm afraid I'm not going to be much company to anyone. You see -- "

"Oh, I know," she said quickly. "About your wife. I'm sorry."

Graham frowned. There had been nothing in any of the publications about Margaret's condition; she had insisted on that. He said, "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I heard from -- somebody I know on the committee. Never mind," she said. "I don't imagine you want to talk about it. I just wanted you to know that I understand."

Graham was filled with a sudden terrible anger. No you don't, he shouted inside his head, you understand nothing. How can you understand what it means to love and live with someone for a quarter of a century, until you become almost components of a single whole, and you find yourselves answering each other's questions before they are asked? And then to see her body, that you know so well you could find her blind in a crowd of thousands by her private scent alone, turn into a death trap for her splendid brave spirit; and to stand helplessly while one door of hope after another slams shut in her face...how, you flawless nitwit, could you possibly understand?

"I'm sorry," she said then. "I shouldn't have said it that way. Of course I can't understand what it's like for you." She picked up her drink and turned it in her hands without tasting it. "I don't suppose anyone ever really knows what anything is like for anyone else."

Astonished, Graham could only stare at her.

She extended a hand across the table. "I'm Jennifer."

Graham took the hand, which was pleasantly soft and cool.

"Jennifer," he repeated stupidly. Thinking, oh my God.

"They're all Jennifers. Even the ones who aren't named Jennifer."

Thus Margaret, three years ago -- was it? -- at the last convention they had attended together. A colleague of long acquaintance, and approximately their age, had just disappeared into an elevator with an edible-looking young fan in buttock-high cutoffs and a Star Wars T-shirt; and Margaret had remarked that old Roy seemed to have found himself a Jennifer.

"You didn't know?" she said to Graham. "All women do, at least in our age bracket. You get a bunch of middle-aged women sitting around dishing, somebody asks what's happening with so-and-so, somebody else says, 'Oh, you hadn't heard? Her husband's got a Jennifer.'"

"A kind of code?" Graham asked, interested. "Like in a certain type of joke the gay guys are always named Bruce?"

"Something like that. Only it's not a joke, at least not to the woman whose husband has gone Jennifer-crazy. Never mind booze, gambling, even drugs -- there's nothing in the known cosmos that can make a middle-aged man throw all judgment to the winds, trash his own life and those of everyone around him, like a willing barely legal girl."

She looked about the crowded convention floor, which, now Graham noticed, seemed fairly alive with Jennifer material. "I can understand it," she said. "They are lovely. And I imagine they can do a lot for an older man's ego. We menopausal women have no sense, you know. Just when we need to hang on to the men we've got, when our chances of replacing them are in freefall, we miss no chance to bust your asses. Then we wonder why you run off with the Jennifers."

"I don't," Graham pointed out.

"No," Margaret said, laughing, "you don't, do you? I may have the only truly monogamous man left on the North American landmass. But that's just because I keep you too tired to get up to any extramural antics. Come on, Big Stoop." She pulled him toward the elevators. "You're starting to look a little too fresh and rested. We'd better do something about that before a Jennifer gets you."

Graham downed the rest of his bourbon in a single shaky swallow. About to signal to the waitress, he looked at Jennifer. "Anything you want?"

She raised her drink, a horrible-looking blue concoction, and took a tiny sip. "Ooh," she said, making a face. "Yes, something besides this thing. In fact I think I'd like to have what you're having."

"Are you sure?" Graham asked dubiously. "It's straight bourbon on the rocks."

"Sounds perfect. Please."

Graham caught the waitress's eye, pointed to his empty glass, and held up two fingers. The waitress nodded and hurried off through the crowd. Jennifer was

looking at her drink. "Looks like some kind of toilet bowl cleaner, doesn't it?"

she said. "Tastes like it, too."

"What is it?"

"A blue kamikaze, they call it. I don't know what's in it. Somebody bought it for me." She pushed the drink away. "I wonder who thinks up these weird drinks."

Bored bartenders, according to Margaret. "Bored bartenders," Graham said.

"I believe it. You know," Jennifer said, "I remember that story of yours about the invisible bartender -- "

The waitress reappeared with two bourbons. Graham signed for them and stood up.

Much as he hated to interrupt -- no one had mentioned that story in a long time, and it was one of his favorites -- certain pressures had become critical. He said, "Excuse me," and headed for the rear hallway.

The men's room was deserted when he got there, surprising considering the crowd

in the bar. But then, as he was finishing up, a familiar nasal bray said, "Well, well. How's it, Keith my man? Getting any?"

Graham zipped and turned. Lenny Devlin grinned at him from the doorway, flashing slightly yellow teeth beneath a graying mustache. "Saw you there," Devlin said, coming in and heading for the urinals, while Graham washed his hands. "Got yourself something young, huh?"

He hunched his stubby frame closer to the target area, leaned an elbow against the wall, and looked over his shoulder at Graham. "So Straight Arrow Graham finally joins the dirty old men's club. About time, too. Haven't I told you all

these years, the cons are where the young pussy is? Never did understand you guys who brought your wives along."

Graham suppressed a desire to upend the little bastard -- a degenerate Munchkin,

Margaret had called him -- and shove his head into the toilet. He said, "Let it go, Lenny. I'm not in the mood."

"No? Then let me have a crack at her." Devlin's guffaw filled the confined space. "I tell you, Keith, the biggest breakthrough of my life -- next to getting the Hugo -- was finding out that the young ones aren't just hotter-looking, they're actually easier to nail. They're still open, you should

pardon the expression, to a little adventure. Like a one-nighter with a noted author." He turned around, yanking at his zipper. "After they hit legal drinking age, they start looking for commitments and relationships. Fuck which."

There was no use trying to responds the little man's ego was impenetrable even to direct insult. Graham dried his hands and left, hearing behind him Devlin's

moist laugh and a shout of, "Once more into the breach, Sir Keith! Give her one for me!"

Re-entering the bar, he looked toward his table, half expecting it to be empty.

But Jennifer was still sitting there, hands folded on the table, waiting, evidently, for him. To his faint disgust he found he was very glad to see her; and he hurried back across the room, trying to ignore the stirrings of an old excitement.

Some time later, Jennifer set her empty glass on the table and said, "Enough. It's getting late."

Graham was amazed to see that it was going on one o'clock. Time, the old wheezer had it, flew when you were having fun; and he had to admit that he was having something very close to a good time.

Jennifer had turned out to be remarkably good company, and not merely for the obvious reasons. For all her bimbo-Barbie appearance, she clearly had a first-class mind; she actually spoke English, too, and so far she had not once said "totally" or spiked her sentences with meaningless interjections of "like."

She also possessed a near-encyclopedic knowledge of Graham's published work. Being in this respect no different from any other author, he took this as a sign of outstanding intellect and taste.

With real regret, then, he said, "Calling it a night?"

"Oh, no." She pushed her chair back and stood up, smoothing the little denim skirt over her golden thighs. "I want to dance. Come on."

There was no dance floor as such, but there was a small, more or less clear area near the back wall where a few couples were moving minimally about to recorded music. Graham said, "I don't think -- "

"I don't want you to think." Jennifer grasped his hand firmly and tugged. "I just want you to dance with me."

Reluctantly, he got up and followed her. The music was loud and fast and he wondered what he was supposed to do; but then as they reached the dance area the record ended and a slow tune came on, Billy Joel's "An Innocent Man." Jennifer turned to face him and he took her hand and put his right arm lightly about her waist. The top of her head was barely level with his chin.

"I haven't done this in a long time," he confessed, moving his feet tentatively, trying to find the step.

"It's like riding a bicycle," she said. "Some things you never lose."

"I've heard that expression all my life," Graham told her. "But you know, last summer I tried to ride a bicycle and nearly killed myself."

She moved closer and rested her face against his shoulder. His hand at her waist registered the rhythmic sway of her hips. "You're doing just fine," she assured him.

Her perfume was a little on the heavy side but he inhaled it greedily. "You smell good," he said after a couple of minutes.

"You feel good," she replied, and emphasized her words with a quick light thrust of her pelvis against him. Then, as his body involuntarily responded, "Oh, my ...." She looked up at him, eyes widening slightly. "My, my. I think I'm impressed."

Graham felt the blood darken his face. He stopped -- the song was almost over anyway -- and stepped back, still holding her hand. "I'm too old to play games," he said more harshly than he had intended. "What's happening?"

She tilted her head and smiled. "What's happening?" she repeated. "Not much of anything, that I can see. Not at the moment."

Her hand tightened suddenly on his. "What I think is about to happen, though," she said in a lower voice, "I think we're about to go up to your room and more or less screw our brains out. Is that all right with you?"

Graham opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. The second time he heard himself say, "Why not?"

But up in the room, sitting still fully dressed on the edge of the bed, he said, "I'm sorry, Jennifer. I really don't think this is a good idea."

She paused in the middle of the room, barefoot, one hand on the single button of her denim top. "Feeling guilty?" she asked quietly. "Because of your wife?"

He nodded. She came over and stood before him. "Listen," she said, "you've got to stop thinking that way. How long has it been, now?"

"You mean since --" He had to think. "A couple of years, I guess. Closer to three, really."

"Then don't you think your wife would understand? Don't you think she knows you have needs?"

"That's what she said," Graham admitted. "The last time I saw her before leaving for this convention, she said something like that. Said I should go ahead and find someone to take care of my needs."

Actually Margaret's words had been, "Get out there, Big Stoop, and find yourself a Jennifer." But there was no way Graham was going to repeat that, let alone explain it, to this one or anyone else.

"Then," Jennifer said, "for God's sake show her some respect and quit second-guessing her. You don't have the right." She made a little gesture at



her

body. "Do it with me, do it with somebody else, do it with your right hand or not at all, but don't lay your own failure of nerve at her feet. She doesn't need it right now."

Graham thought it over. "Yes," he said finally, and nodded. "You're right. Thanks."

He toed off his shoes without untying them and began unbuttoning his shirt. Jennifer took a couple of backward steps, still facing him, and undid the top and let it slide off her shoulders. She did something at her waist and the skirt dropped to the floor, leaving her standing in tiny, almost transparent powder-blue panties and a lacy little matching bra.

Graham's hands seemed suddenly to belong to someone else.

Her eyes on Graham's face, Jennifer popped the catch between her breasts and slipped out of the bra. There had been no engineering trickery at work; everything stayed high and firm and full. Her nipples were unusually large and bright pink.

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her panties and eased them down over her flanks. The blond hair proved to be original; a fine flaxen spray decorated her pubic mound. Her skin fairly glowed in the light from the bedside lamp.

"Well?" she said, and put her hands on her hips. "If you're too old to play games, you must be old enough to undress yourself."

Hurriedly he got to his feet, shucking out of the shirt and reaching for his belt buckle. Jennifer moved past him and stretched herself luxuriously on the bed. "All right," she said approvingly, watching, as he got out of his pants.

Naked, he stopped beside the bed. "Ah -- just remember, it has been a long time."

She laughed, making everything bounce and ripple. "The way it looks from here," she said pointedly, "it's definitely been long enough."

She held out her arms and opened her thighs. "Come on, now. Time to get back on that bike and start pedaling."

Heart hammering, he mounted her. At the first warm sliding contact she clutched at him and shuddered. "See," she whispered, "you haven't lost it. Haven't lost a thing -- "

THE REST of the night was a scented blur of couplings and uncouplings, of humpings and pumpings and ridings and bestridings, all over the big bed and then at various locations around the room and even once in the shower. Jennifer was an agile and imaginative partner with, it developed, no inhibitions whatever as to techniques, positions, or orifices. She was also able, somehow, to cause Graham to tap into unsuspected reserves of stamina, so that he found himself

doing things he had not dreamed of for decades.

Gray light was beginning to filter through the window curtains when Graham finally fell asleep, feeling Jennifer's breath on his neck and the soft flattening of her breasts against his back. From the rhythm of her breathing he thought she was still awake, and he wanted to speak to her, but the thought got away from him and he slipped away into the darkness.

When he awoke the room was brightly lit and Jennifer was no longer beside him. He sat up, after a confused moment, and looked around, just as she came padding naked out of the bathroom.

"Oh, wow," she said. "I didn't want to, like, wake you up."

He blinked as she crossed the room and began picking up her clothing. "Man," she said, "I must have been, like, totally shitfaced, you know?" She glanced at him and grinned. "Because, like, I don't remember anything."

She bent, stepped into the powder-blue panties, and hiked them up over her hips. Her movements were entirely unself-conscious; she might have been tying a shoe or brushing her hair.

"I mean, like, don't get me wrong," she added quickly. "I'm sure you're a cool dude and we had a good time and all." She grinned again, and this time she did look a little embarrassed. "It sure feels like we had an awesome time, know what I'm saying? But it's just, like, totally gone. Those fucking blue kamikazes, I guess."

She hooked the bra over her shoulders and fitted her breasts into the cups. "Don't be, like, offended or anything," she said, "but I don't even remember who you are."

His mouth felt very dry. "For God's sake, Jennifer -- "

She giggled. "Jennifer? Hey, dude, sounds like you got pretty wasted yourself. My name's not Jennifer," she said, hooking the bra's catch. "I'm Stephanie. Guess you can't remember either."

She pulled the skirt on. "Hey," she said, "are you, like, on TV or anything?" She zipped, buttoned, and made a small tugging adjustment. "That's right," she said, "they're having some kind of, like, Star Trek convention or something, aren't they? At, like, the hotel? I think I heard about that." She shrugged into the top. "Are you, like, into that? I don't know anything about it. I just went there for a drink because they're not too careful about checking ID."

Wonderful, Graham thought. An underage psycho with multiple personalities. If only I can get her out of here before she turns into Greta the Axe Murderer.

She bent again and picked up her shoes, looked at them, and made a dismissive face. "Well," she said to Graham "like I say, it must have been pretty decent."

Sorry I can't remember. But hey, have a good one, okay?'

Picking up her purse, carrying the shoes in her other hand, she opened the door.

"Shit," Graham heard her mutter, "what fucking time is it, anyway?"

The door closed behind her. Graham lay back and, after a moment, laughed softly to himself. It wasn't a very humorous laugh.

That was when the bedside phone rang. He cursed, rolled over, and grabbed up the receiver. "Yes?" he said.

A small timid voice said, "Mr. Graham? This is the front desk. I'm afraid there's been some kind of mistake." Graham heard apologetic throat-clearing sounds. "Apparently there was a phone call for you last night, but for some reason you were never paged. We're very sorry -- "

"Never mind," Graham said quickly. "Where was the call from? Is there a message?"

"Yes, in fact, you're to call St. Andrew's Hospital at -- "

"I know where it is," Graham interrupted. "You've got the number there, don't you? Go ahead and ring me through."

A few minutes later Graham was listening to another faceless voice, this one a woman's, cool and efficient-sounding but softened by an obvious sympathy. "Mr. Graham," it said, "I'm afraid Margaret passed away last night, just before midnight."

He bent forward until his face almost touched his knees. His mouth opened without making any sound. For an instant it felt as if all his skin had been stripped away.

"For what it may be worth," the voice added after a moment, "it was very peaceful. It happened in her sleep and she never woke up. The nurses say she actually appeared to be smiling."

Graham sat up as the voice talked on. He hardly heard, let alone paid attention to the words. The telephone receiver hung all but forgotten in his hand as he stared across the room, at the bright-red lipstick message printed on the mirror:

SO LONG

BIG STOOP

DAMN

WE WERE GOOD