

About that time, Linda emerged from the bedroom hallway with an extremely tight pair of jeans on and a lavender tank top with no bra. And, although her breasts were small, I began to get worked up as her nipples, hardened by the beer or the temperature in the room, punched two perfect little mounds in the cotton fabric.

I caught myself staring and quickly returned to my conversation with Marnie. But as I spoke about the band and the bowling alley and Trish, I found myself measuring Marnie. She was taller, dark haired, kind of plump like Krista, and had a decent tan. Linda went into the bathroom and closed the door.

"She's cute, huh?" Marnie was smiling at me.

I agreed.

"Those pretty little tits just stare at you, don't they?"

I was surprised that a woman would not only notice, but comment on the attributes of another.

"That they do," was all I could muster.

"Well, Virgil, what do you think of these?" And with that she lifted her white tee shirt and displayed her own, which were straining against the white bra.

I adjusted my seat to allow room in my Levi's for my enlarging penis and breathed a nervous "Verrry nice." Her husband, I reminded myself, was a fellow crew-member.

Marnie dropped her shirt as Linda came out of the

bathroom, the sound of the tank refilling following her.

"How's the pizza," she asked to no one in particular as she headed for the kitchen. "Where's my beer?"

Marnie and I followed her into the kitchen as she was removing the pie from the oven with one hand, and pouring a can of Budweiser into a glass with the other. After she set the pizza on the counter to cool, she took a long swig, swallowed, took another which drained the glass, and spoke to Marnie.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think," was all she said, and the two exchanged a smile and a head nod, women's cryptology.

"Think what?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," answered Linda.

"Yes, nothing," added Marnie, and this time they laughed together.

"What?! Tell me."

"Should we tell him?" asked Marnie.

"I don't know, what do you think?"

"Maybe. Do you think he can keep a secret?"

"Somebody better tell me something, dammit."

"Okay, you want to tell him, or should I?"

"Why don't you, you're better at these things."

"Okay, I'll tell him."

Linda took my arm and led me into the living room, sat me down on the couch and took the place next to me

while Marnie sat on my other side. She looped her arm under mine and held my hand.

"Virgil," Linda began, "have you ever had sex with two women at once?"

I sat with my mouth open, my eyes swinging back and forth between the two smiling ladies.

"Because Marnie and I have always wanted to do just that," and here, Marnie slipped her shirt over her head as Linda followed suit. Linda removed her eyeglasses, leaned forward and kissed me while Marnie worked at my jeans.

Something leaned over me and grabbed me by the shirt collar and yanked me upright, right to my feet.

One of them spoke.

"Virgil, what is the matter?" I don't know which one it was because now they had both blurred together into some naked heap.

"Na--na--nothing. I'll--"

"You'll what?" They were both laughing and the shorter one, who looked like she was whispering to the taller one said, "I think it HIT HIM."

Then the taller one pointed at me and suddenly her finger was right in my face although she was seated and I was standing, several feet away. I became aware that I was stumbling all over the place. Four beers, four lousy beers, I kept telling myself.

"HOW DO you FEEEEEEEEELLLL?" More laughter.

A swarm of bees surrounded my head, and the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing had me spinning around the room. I finally saw the door, and headed for it.

"Now JUST WHERE do you THINK you're GOING?"

I tried to speak, but just the sound of my breath entering my lungs was too much for me to bear. That and the buzzing. I lunged for the handle, but my legs wouldn't move. I looked down to see a naked woman, Marnie, wrapped around my ankles, trying to tackle me. In an instant, her legs, which were sprawled behind her on the floor, became a snake's tail, coiled, the tip of rattlers rattling, rattling, rattling.

And the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing.

I only know that I raised my hand high above my head and brought it down upon hers, and she let go. I got the door open and ran, fast as I could, away from there.

Over my shoulder I heard them screaming.

"Hey FUCKHEAD, you DIDN'T have to HIT ME!"

"HEY VIRGIL, what ARE YOU, some kind of ACID FREAK?"

I awakened in a used car lot not far from the house. It was still dark outside, but the highway was coming to life with commuters, some of whom actually made the drive to Boston each day.

I reached for my head, which was in agony, and when

I took my hand away, it was bloody.

It became obvious that the women had laced my beer with something, Acid? Is that what she said?

As I came to, moments from my past started randomly entering my consciousness, and I saw the man at the airport, and the horse that kicked me in the thigh, and that super ball bouncing over and over, high up in the air at the worlds fair, and then I saw my childhood friend, Wade, and he was climbing into my sleeping bag at scout camp because it was so cold.

In a flurry, I saw every girl who I had a crush on in the fourth grade. What had happened to them?

I found my legs and replaced them underneath me as my head throbbed. At a service station, I went into the mens room and looked in the mirror. It wasn't so bad. I must have fallen. I washed up and urinated, not in that order, and looked back into the mirror. Behind me was that woman, what was her name? Hester? No, Hanna, Hannaaaaa Wakeman! She was standing in the elevator on the top of the world trade center and I was staring at her, in her pale blue sundress and sandals. And she had her sunglasses on while she waved, "Gotta go, gotta go, gotta go-----Virgil!"

Whoa. This was so weird.

I got back to the station and started my car, went to the Seagull Diner for breakfast. A cup of coffee

never tasted so good, nor felt so therapeutic. Real eggs and real bacon and real milk, it was too much for me.

And the morning air blowing in over the harbor was intoxicating. After I ate, I got some paper out of my car and began to write in the booth. I thought about the images of Wade and the girls on my class I'd had earlier, and couldn't shake the feeling of what had happened to them. I thought about the wives who would have fooled around on their husbands for me. And I remembered thinking that I had met Hanna somewhere before.

Then the idea hit me. Again, it was as though I wasn't even there, the words flowed so easily. It probably needed to be re-written, but I couldn't do it.

This time, I selected a single piece of paper and, somewhere about halfway down the page, I wrote:

"The Zookeeper"

by
Virgil Isaac Peal

The year was 1966 and my best friend, Ruth, was really a boy. She had to have been, because I didn't like girls. Oh, I noticed that she was pretty, blonde hair and eyes that were sometimes blue, sometimes green, sometimes grey, depending upon the weather. And she wore dresses to school. But, when we were together, which was most of the time when we weren't at school, she acted more like a boy. Sometimes she acted more

like a boy than me.

"Look, Edward, look,!" She called out me one day when we were exploring behind our houses, near the creek.

"What is it?"

"It's a great big snake. Look." And she held the huge reptile behind its head, between her delicate thumb and index finger, and proudly displayed it, grinning broadly.

"Mmm," was all I could muster. I now believe that my phobia of snakes has something to do with a former life. "A former life." I wouldn't have even thought those words back then. But life does funny things to you.

"What's the matter, Edward, don't you think he's beautiful?"

"No, not really. Put him down, Ruth. He might be poisonous." And she did, but I could see the disappointment in her eyes.

We did a lot of exploring, both at that creekside, and over by the North River, which was across the street and into the woods from our houses. Ruth and I would race along the concrete guard rail on either side of the bridge, seeing who could get to the other side first. I usually won. Oh, hell, I always won. I was the fastest. But Ruth kept trying.

Ruth's biggest flaw was that she hated baseball. I had been consumed with the Boston Red Sox when I was eight, the previous summer, but she just couldn't embrace my enthusiasm.

"It's just a bunch of men throwing a ball around. It seems foolish to me."

"But Ruth, you don't understand, they got Tony Conigliaro. And Yastrzemski. Guys that hit the ball a long way."

"Big deal. They got nothing on the Bruins." And I had to agree with her that Ice Hockey was a terrific sport. You see what I mean? She was often more boy than girl.

And we clicked.

Over at her house, I would sit for hours and watch her create anything. She painted pictures of queens and dragons, or made a mobile out of a coat hanger, yarn, and pictures that she cut out. She had clay, and she would just fiddle with it for the longest time, never getting bored. The amazing thing was neither did I.

"I'm going to be a great sculptor someday, Edward," she told me once. "And I'm going to sculpt a whole zoo of animals and put it in my front yard. And I'm gonna have the monkey riding on the elephant's back, you'll see. And I'll be the zookeeper." I knew

that one day she would, too. She was zany, off-beat, I guess, and I really liked her.

"Ruth," I asked her on the Saturday before we were to begin the fourth grade, "do you think there's a Heaven?" We were down at the creekside, catching crayfish to bring to school for show and tell.

"No, my Daddy says that Heaven's just a made-up place that grown-ups tell their kids about so that they will behave."

"That's not true! There is a Heaven, I think. At least my mother says there--"

"See? Your mother says there's a Heaven so she can keep you from being bad."

Sometimes Ruth would hit the nail right on the head, and I never knew whether to get angry and hit her, or start crying and hug her, but I always went home and thought about what profound thing she had said. It was almost like sometimes she was more adult than kid.

"You know," I told her, "I really like you, Ruth."

"I like you too, Edward," and she smiled and held my hand, and I thought I would burst as we walked the trail that led to our connecting backyards.

My family and I went to church the next day, and in Sunday school they told us about Lazarus, the poor man that Jesus raised from the dead, and I remember thinking I just don't believe this stuff. I knew it was written in the Bible, but I never heard of anybody else being raised from the dead. What about my Grandpa? Or my parakeet, Perry, that I had for six years who died and I buried him, wrapped in some paper towels and stuffed in an empty Maalox box? They both stayed dead. Heck, the graveyards were full of people who died and just stayed there.

On the way home, I asked Mom about these things.

"God works in mysterious ways, Edward, you have to believe in Him that He is doing everything for a reason." Oh.

We stopped at the bridge over the North River because there was a fire truck and a rescue van in the middle of the bridge. I thought there must have been a fire at the little market on the other side, but, no, the men were not really working around it. They were hurrying around, this way and that, and there was a small crowd gathered around them.

"Must be a car accident," said Mom, but I saw no cars.

Finally, they let us pass, and I craned my neck to see what was going on, but there were too many people crowded around, and I saw nothing. My Dad drove us

home in silence.

The solid blue police cruiser in the next driveway looked ominous, and, though I think it's silly now, I didn't make any connection between the commotion on the bridge and the cruiser for a few moments. But my parents did. They exchanged this controlled-petrified glance and it was only then that I realized that something was terribly wrong. But I still didn't think "Ruth."

We stood at the hedge for a few moments, then Mom decided to start dinner, and of course Dad had his paper, so they went in while I stayed and watched. Soon, the policeman came out with Ruth's parents, her dad with his arm around her mom, holding her up really. She was clutching a Raggedy Ann doll that I had seen in Ruth's room a hundred times, but had never seen her touch or heard her mention.

"YOU!" she screamed when she saw me, and she pointed, sobbing while her husband tried to get her into the police car. "You did this to my little girl!" I felt the tears welling up behind my eyes as the two men wrestled her into the car, then her father raised his eyes long enough to look at me as if to say "She's right, you did this," then he got in beside her.

The car backed out of the driveway, and they drove past my house toward the bridge, and I was thankful that the policeman didn't look at me, but I ran anyway, to the creekside, knowing that Ruth was there waiting for me, knowing that her parents were all wrong. And I arrived, out of breath, to our favorite place, a high bank with a perfect tree for sitting, and I called out "Ruth? Ruth?" but there was no answer.

I leaned against the tree, wanted to beat my head against it, but just rested it there instead, and when I did, I looked down at the base of it and there, right where she had left it so that it wouldn't rust when she was catching crayfish, was the whistle ring that I gave her for her ninth birthday two months before. I picked it up and tried to blow through it, but I didn't have the control.

It was my fault. Ruth was practicing to beat me across the river, I just knew it, and she had lost her footing and fallen into the water and drown. It was my fault.

Just once I should have let her win.

My father got laid off and we couldn't afford to live in the Boston suburbs anymore, so we moved away before the end of the school year, and I did my best to put the house, the town, and my best friend behind me.

Spring, 1983

When I first met Caroline, she was a meter reader and I worked in the Operations department of the local electric company. I thought she was trying to prove something by being a female meter reader, the first in the district. She wouldn't look at me when she walked by me in the hall, but she said "Hi" just the same. She was tall and slender with big, Robin's-egg blue eyes and a perfect smile. But she was so stand-offish at first that I didn't think about her much.

But she got transferred into my department as a secretary, a clerk, really, and it happened that we became friends. And, even though we were both married, we got even closer. It was something in those eyes that made me feel good. In the years since Ruth's tragic death, I had never forgiven myself for what had happened, but Carly, that's what Caroline wanted me to call her, had something about her that eased my pain.

We spent a lot of time together, both at work and after, often sitting in one of our cars talking, drinking, laughing, kissing, making love, and I don't think she ever felt guilty. Until one day a couple of years later.

I asked Carly to meet me at one of the local parks for lunch, and she seemed hesitant, but agreed. When she arrived, I got into her little Datsun and reached for her, but she pushed me away.

"Edward, this has got to stop. I've got a husband to think about, and you have a wife. We've got our own lives to lead, we've made our choice, and we have to live with it." She was beginning to cry. "I love you, Edward, more than you'll ever know, but it's over."

Now I was crying too. "But how will I ever come to work every day, wanting to be with you, hold you, touch you--"

"I'm getting transferred," she wasn't looking at me, "to another office."

"Where?"

She just shook her head. "I've got to go."

I asked for one last kiss, and she gave it to me.

"Bye, Eddie," and she laughed through her tears, knowing that I hated being called that, and I closed her door and she was gone.

I pulled into the office early that afternoon, I didn't feel much like working anymore, and Carly was just getting into her car to leave for the day, forever, and I stopped in the parking lot next to her.

"Why now, why all of a sudden like this?" I asked.

"Please, Edward, don't ask me that."

"Please, Carly, why?"

She stood there, next to her car for a long time,

then looked at me, then her eyes fell slowly down to her belly. She placed her hand on it and rubbed it, "I'm going to have a baby." Then she started crying again, jumped into her car, and took off down the road, dragging my heart right along behind.

It didn't take long to find where she had been transferred to, the office wasn't far away, but I didn't try to contact her. I knew that the child was not mine; my wife and I had been trying to have a baby for seven years, and I just knew that God was punishing me for what happened to Ruth by not letting me become a father. But still I hoped.

Three years passed as I tried to put the woman out of my mind. I felt tormented every day; tormented by the loss of the two women who had meant the most to me in my entire life. First Ruth, now Carly. What was it, I wondered, that I had done to deserved this punishment. I began to drink more and more. I raged at my wife daily, and I knew that I needed something soon, or I was going to explode.

I got home from work one day, and, in the mailbox, was the usual bunch of junk mail, bills, etc., but there was a catalogue from a camping store that was addressed to "Resident," (I always joked that they left the "P" off) and I thumbed through it. That's it! I thought, I need to get away and go camping.

Quickly, I packed my gear and left a note for my wife, and hit the road. An hour away from home, headed for the mountains, I realized that I didn't have any food, so I pulled over at a Safeway and went in for a few provisions.

That's when I saw them. The woman I had so dearly loved, and a little girl who couldn't have been three, were choosing produce. I didn't know what to do. I raced to my car, I was afraid that if she saw me, she might freak out right there.

When they left, I followed them. I know it was a strange thing to do, but I did it.

They pulled into the driveway of a pretty nice townhome not far from the grocery store, and I parked at the corner about a half-block away. They went inside and closed the door.

For a full hour, I sat there, wondering what I was supposed to do. I even decided once to just drive away; she had the life she wanted, and I had no place in it. But something made me stay. Then I figured What the hell. I walked up and rang the bell. The only thing she could do was slam the door in my face, and even then, I'd have the address, I could write. Or call. And I would.

The door opened, and it was like no time had

passed. She was as lovely as ever. Motherhood had only made her glow even more.

"I didn't expect that it would take you this long to find us."

"I wasn't looking."

She smiled. "Come on in."

I wanted to hug her, but the child was running over, wondering who was there. When I saw her, I immediately recognized the big brown eyes. I'd seen them in the mirror every morning of my life. I looked at Carly, and she smiled as the tears came to her eyes again. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Just like her Mom," I said.

"Like her Dad, you mean."

And I laughed as the little girl smiled broadly and spread her arms out to me and I reached down to pick her up.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Her mother piped up, "Elizabeth. Elizabeth Diane. I call her 'E.D.'"

I put the child down, and said "That's a pretty name," and I pointed at her, "and that's the truth." Her eyes riveted on me as I said this, and I looked deep into them as she just stared.

Carly sent Elizabeth to her room to play while the two of us went to the kitchen for coffee.

"It would have been nice" I began, "to have known before now."

"What was I going to do? Call you and say 'oh, by the way, the kid looks exactly like you'?"

"Well, it would have been nice to know, to know the truth."

"What?" The little girl's voice called in from the other room.

"What, honey?"

"Did you want me?"

"No dear."

"So," I continued, "how's Brian taking all of this? He obviously knows that it's not his kid."

"Well, he's gone, if that answers your question."

"When?"

"Well--" She didn't have time to answer before I heard the distinctive sound of a whistle ring from the other room. I laughed.

"I had one of those when I was a kid. Well, it wasn't mine, really, it belonged to a friend of mine."

We got up and walked into the room where Elizabeth was playing. The girl had a Raggedy Ann doll in her hands.

"Now, Elizabeth, you put Ruthie back where she belongs on the shelf."

"Who?" I was taken back eighteen years.

"'Ruthie,' it was Elizabeth's idea to name her that, instead of 'Ann.'"

And every feeling fell over me, and I studied the face of the child. In my mind's eye, I saw the mother carrying the doll, and heard her saying "YOU! You did this to my little girl." I wanted to get out of there, run away and hide, but the voice was screaming, and then the father was glaring at me, and I started to breathe hard. I looked around the room and I could hear Carly saying "Edward, Edward? What's the matter?" but all I could think was to get out of there.

But as I turned to leave the room, Elizabeth was standing there saying "Look, Edward, look!"

And I stopped and stared, then started crying as my eyes fell upon the figures that the toddler had in her equally tiny hands. I fell to my knees and burst out crying as she proudly displayed them. I grabbed her and hugged her so tightly, I couldn't believe it. I let her go and followed her eyes to the set of zoo figures on the floor, a giraffe, a zebra, a bear, and a hippopotamus, set up on the front lawn of her doll house. And I watched as she replaced the two she had in her hand:

A little plastic elephant with its trunk raised high in the air, and a scruffy little smiling monkey perched squarely upon its back.

I drove back to the station and was surprised to see the "Aggressive" tied up at the pier. I parked and took the long walk to the gangway and up, aboard the ship for the first time in almost a year.

I found Lieutenant Commander Crowley, the executive officer in the mess deck, and he saw me.

"Well, what happened to you?"

"Which time?" I tried to smile.

"You missed the movement, and it is my duty to place you under arrest."

"I understand."

"You are restricted to the ship until zero-eight-hundred hours tomorrow. At that time, there will be a captain's mast to hear your case."

He said it in front of the whole crew.

Hurley, who was listening the whole time, shrugged his shoulders and said, "See, you should have stayed in New York. I know I would have."

One by one, as I headed to my quarters, I spoke to the other members of the crew. Romano, who had shaved his beard, was genuinely glad to see me. Tom Bruner patted me on the back, solemnly, and Callabrice was standing there, his hair slicked back, listening to Elvis on the tape player, gyrating his hips as though the entire rest of the world did not exist.

I painted for three days straight. The Captain's

mast went okay, they docked me some pay and restricted me to the ship for two weeks, but I was ready to accept that.

Darren Carruthers, the yeoman, pulled me aside one day.

"He Peal, did I ever tell you what an absolute fuck-up you are?"

I didn't understand.

"You left this goddam ship after your boyfriend jumped over the side--"

It was all he got out before I was kneeling over him, my knee in his throat, pummelling him to a severe and bloody pulp. So, Hurley's story had made its way around the ship already.

There was another Captain's mast, and I got busted a grade in pay and rank, and confined to the ship for another month for beating up Carruthers. Oh, how I wished I had fucked his wife.

I hated being cooped up on the ship, but it was quite peaceful, actually, especially at night when most of the crew was on liberty. I had extra duty, cleaning the bilges, but I didn't care. Late at night, I wrote.

We were scheduled to go back out to sea for two weeks of fishery patrol in two days, but I had already decided that I would not go. September was just around the corner, and I had decided to leave the ship, the

guard, the whole thing, and go somewhere to college. I had some friends in Tennessee who attended East Tennessee State, and figured that was as good a place as any.

The next night, I had Matt Hurley carry some of my things to my car, my clothes, my guitar. And, the following night, after evening muster, I hopped over the ship at neap tide, onto the pier, into my car, and down the road.

Freedom. The taste of freedom is so exquisite, I promised myself never to forget it. My only problem was cash-flow. I had about forty dollars to my name, but decided that it was enough to get me somewhere.