

A Simple Plan

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Headed home to visit family for the weekend, I stopped at the traffic light just within the city limits. A young woman, sitting at the bus bench, captured my attention. The scene reminded me of Rosemary, my first day of senior high school, and things forgotten; memories held deep within my heart, shrouded beneath layers of time. In the face of heartbreak, they tell you everything will be fine, time will move on, and the sun will rise the next day. In truth, each day melts into another, until one day you realize, a lifetime has passed.

The halls echoed the last bell, remnants of our first day in senior high school. I met up with Billy. “Man am I glad to see this end of this day,” he said as we walked to the bus stop. “Yeah buddy!” I said. “That was one long day.” Billy being Billy said, “Let’s hit the beach.” I tried to instill the virtues of responsibility in Billy explaining we had jobs and needed the money if we were ever going to get to college, but of course, his response was always the same.

“Work?” he said, as he slipped on his sunglasses.

“Yes. Work. Do you want to stay in this town forever?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Billy said as he ran to the corner.

I caught up with him only because he stopped and was leaning against a utility pole across from our bus stop.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Check out the babe.” He nodded toward the other side of the street.

I looked at the bus bench. “This high school gig—,”

Billy interrupted, “ain’t so bad after all.”

“I haven’t seen her in any classes.”

“Yeah. Not mine either but we gotta catch the bus.”

“So let’s go check her out.”

“Not so fast dude. We need a plan.”

“Well, make it a simple plan. We don’t have much time.”

Billy mumbled something about being cool about it. I wasn’t listening. I stepped off the curb as the sound of a screaming car horn jolted me back into reality.

We edged up behind her only to discover, we had no idea of what to say. Cool was on vacation, so we stood there like nothing was happening. My mind whirled with the hope of finding something clever to say but I felt like the teacher had asked me a direct question, I had no answer, and everyone in classes was looking at me and giggling. I was hoping she would say something and then I could respond with something witty and cool. In what seemed an eternity, she turned toward us.

“What does it take to get a hello out of you guys? Are one of you going to say something, or just act like children.”

The minute she turned, Billy and I recognized her. Her hair was longer, streaked from the summer sun, and no longer the skinny girl from the park. She had she grown up. We fumbled.

“Hey it’s me, Rosemary. Hello! What’s wrong with you two?”

“Oh yeah, Rosemary” Billy said, as if he knew all along. You’re the girl that played on our softball team.”

Billy was acting so cool about everything like nothing had happened. I was, in fact, breathless as my heart raced, but stared at Billy and thought, *We’re talking about the love of my life, not the third baseman* as I blurted out, “We shot hoops!”

I forgot my embarrassment as the number six metro bus arrived. Billy and I raced to the back seats. Rosemary sat upfront, glancing at us out of the corner of her blue eyes. Billy slouched down, placed his feet on the back of the seat in front of him, pulled his cap down over his eyes and I fell in love with the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life. My option of wanting to, could there be another, and all the other validations I could go through during the courting rituals of youth were over. I knew what I wanted. I knew what I had found. Not thinking, I nudged Billy.

“Do you think she’ll marry me?”

“What?”

“I said, do you think she’ll marry me?”

“You’re an idiot. And besides, she’s going to marry me.”

“I don’t think so,” I said under my breath.

Billy responded, “Dude, neither of us would have a snowball’s chance in hell.”

Each day the ritual repeated as I, the boy from the lower side of town, fell in love with Rosemary Bennet, daughter of Howard Bennet, the mayor of Cedar Creek, and the most powerful family in the county. Everyone knew Rosemary Bennet would marry into wealth, and not into a family like mine. Still, we sat at the bus bench each day, and I would try to build my courage to tell how I felt.

She was like the setting summer sun—you could see it and feel the warmth, but it was going away fast below the horizon and out of reach. I had to say something; I knew I did, but each time I opened my mouth it was as if the wind took my words away. I thought about her day and night and wondered how someone could change so much in a short summer break. Asking her to a movie should be easy. We had played ball, we walked home, and I knew her family. *What’s the big deal?* I thought. *Why is my stomach jumpy?*

For weeks, I practiced my approach in front of my bathroom mirror but each day I sat next to her without speaking.

One day after school, Billy said, “Are you going to ask her out or what?”

“Don’t rush me. I will.”

“Dude. If you don’t, somebody will.”

“Yeah. I know. I just don’t know what to say.”

“Are you serious? Just ask her dude.”

With Billy’s encouragement, I decided I would try. With all the bravado I could pull from the depths of my soul, I took a deep breath, and closed my eyes for a quick prayer.

“So, Rosemary, did you have a good day?”

“Great,” she said. “How was yours?”

I knew exactly what I wanted to say, but my mind went blank, and all I could muster was, “Good. Yep, good.” If a boulder were nearby, you could have found me under it. How brainless I must have sounded. Billy just shook his head in disbelief.

It didn't take long before she filled the void in the conversation. She talked—and talked some more—about everything. “I love school,” she said, “but I miss summer. I mean school is great, but on vacation . . . My dad told me about . . . my mom said . . .”

Lost in her words, I watched her lips, her expressions, and the breeze pushing her hair across her perfect freckled nose. I mean, seriously, I totally didn't hear a word she said. It was like in slow motion like on a shampoo commercial I saw on TV, until she said, “and, I don't want to date anyone else for a long, long time.”

Jerked back to reality, I said, “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You said something about dating?”

“Actually, *not* dating is what I said. After breaking up with Sam, I don't want to date anyone for a long time.”

Actually, she said long, long time, and in girl talk, two longs meant not a chance. To Rosemary, this was an innocent proclamation, but it crushed my hope and my dreams as I discovered the girl I needed to marry wasn't interested in a simple date.

The ride home was quiet, my mind in replay of Rosemary's decree, and I swear, I could no longer feel my pulse. The bus stopped. Rosemary stepped off, waving goodbye.

I asked Billy, “What was all that about?”

“What do you mean?”

“The not wanting to date thing.”

“Oh! She's a girl dude, and girls are confusing. Don't try to figure it out.”

“I think I really like her.”

I wanted to say I loved her, but Billy wouldn't have understood.

Several more embarrassing weeks passed as I met with Rosemary in the hallway between classes. Billy saw her walking ahead of us one day and elbowed me in the ribs.

“Now would be a good time.”

I took a deep breath and sped up to be next to her. My hands were damp, and I felt like I was going to blackout. Instead, I blurted out, “Hey Rosemary. I was thinking, how about a movie this weekend?”

“No thanks,” she said.

“Maybe a pizza?”

“No thanks.”

She turned the corner toward her classroom. “See you at the bus stop?” she asked.

It looked like we would be just friends, and that would have to be okay. If I could only walk with her, talk about the day, I would be fine, I told myself. Just standing near her, I felt like blue skies and ocean breezes.

Summer break arrived, and we shot hoops at the park, I walked her home in the afternoon. We were a common sight together in the neighborhood, but near the end of summer, things changed.

One afternoon, in which I was feeling particularly brave for no apparent reason, I said, “Hey Rosemary. What do you think about going to a movie this weekend?”

“What's playing?” she asked.

I could have touched the moon.

We remained close through the following year. Not as boyfriend and girlfriend, but friends. I wished for more and hoped love would quietly find a way into her heart as I waited for our first kiss.

One afternoon at a matinee, she reached over and touched my hand. It was a scary movie, but I didn't care of the reason. We shared popcorn, and funny stories, but more important we laughed and became best friends. Slowly, like the rose in your garden blossoms, so did our friendship, so did love.

Her family acquiesced, giving blessing to our union. We worked our way through college, found good jobs, and in the sunset of a perfect day with blue skies and ocean breezes, we walked the shoreline of our favorite beach. I stood behind Rosemary, and wrapped my arms around her, as we looked toward the horizon.

"How far can you see," I asked.

"I can see forever," she said.

"Will you stay with me forever?"

After a year of marriage, creating a family eluded us. We scheduled our physician, and he contacted a specialist, which provided a series of tests. Months later, we returned for the final visit.

"I am sorry," he explained. "Your chances of having children are maybe one in a million."

Rosemary's eyes fell to the distance, damp with disappointment. We picked up the pieces and moved forward.

Another year passed, but the emptiness in our hearts remained. We sold our house and purchased property on a small lake just outside of the city. We moved into an apartment attached to my parent's house and lost ourselves in the design of a new home.

Not long after we started construction, Rosemary began to complain about everything. I thought the worst and considered that our marriage was teetering. I couldn't understand why. Perhaps the stress of work, moving from our comfortable home to a tiny apartment, along with the pressure of building a new house? It seemed I could not do anything right, or wrong, depending on the hour or day. She would weep over nothing, and then everything. I thought, perhaps it was too soon, or I was pushing her too hard, causing anxiety.

I made an appointment with our family doctor, but she decided to go alone, saying, "I don't need you trailing along."

She returned a few hours later; a puzzled look defined her face.

"Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"What did the doctor tell you?"

"Well," she said exhaling a deep breath. "He said it looks like I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant," I repeated part happy, part shocked, and part confused.

"Yes. But he said he would call Saturday after the test comes back."

I held her in my arms and said, "I guess we will have to wait."

My dad and I sat at the dining room table on Saturday morning, enjoying the morning cup of coffee, talking about the progression of the house. Rosemary sat at the kitchen bar next to the telephone, complaining about something smelling, looking, or tasting odd, when the phone rang. She answered and listened for a moment.

“Okay. I’ll see you on Wednesday.” The room was silent.

Now, when I close my eyes, I see Rosemary, my sandy haired, blue-eyed beauty; her face flushed red, tears streaming down her ruby checks. She was smiling the kind of smile that touches your ears.

Within a few months, we finished our new home. Rosemary chose a bedroom with a southern exposure. “It will stay warmer all year round,” she said. The ultrasound showed the baby as a boy.

On a cool evening, as the time drew near, we sat on our porch overlooking the lake and planned his future.

“Can we name him Matthew?” she asked.

“Matthew? Any particular reason?”

“It means, Gift from God.”

I held her in my arms as she rubbed her slender hands across her swollen belly. Her skin, almost translucent, I traced the blue vein lines with my fingers. Matthew kicked and she jumped. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I stroked her hair thinking of her gentle nature, and our future. I thought about a simple bench where I first fell in love with a girl, and quietly thanked God for placing her in my life.

“Uh oh,” she said, interrupting my thoughts.

“What wrong?”

“I think it’s time.”

“How can it be time? Aren’t you supposed to have contractions?”

“Look,” she said, pointing to the floor. “My water just broke. The contractions will be here soon enough.”

I lifted my delicate Rose and carried her to the car, ran back into the house to retrieve our pre-packed bag, realizing we kept it in the trunk. We arrived at the hospital; the nurse examined her, and then tossed me a set of hospital scrubs.

“Get these on and follow me.”

“Now?”

“Now!” she demanded.

The labor was difficult and by the end, Rose’s hair stuck to her forehead, and her eyes were red from tears—my hand hurt from her squeezing. It was the perfect moment of elation, love, and relief all in one precious package. She held our son in her arms. I left her and Matthew to find our parents.

We met Rose and Matthew in their room a few moments later and celebrated the arrival of our miracle. Soon afterward, she said she would like to get some rest. She apologized and asked everyone to come again. I chased the family from the room and placed Matthew in the crib.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay. Just tired and I have a little headache.”

I held her hand and started to ask if she wanted some water when, in an instant—those seconds you can only recall in slow motion—everything changed. I felt her body tense.

“Something’s wrong,” she said.

“What is it?”

“I’m so dizzy. The room is spinning.”

I yelled for the nurse as my world fell apart and she pulled me close.

She whispered as her eyes closed; her body fell limp. I held her until someone touched me on my shoulder. There were people talking, noise in the background.

Sometimes she returns at night when I close my eyes. Standing at the edge of our world, an ocean breeze carries her hair across a perfect freckled nose, and I remember.