To be a Blue Squirrel

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Abstract

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TIME had stopped for her. Here it was again—the old argument made of so many little ones—it had been gathering momentum for weeks. It batted its head against a brick wall and then plodded back for a fresh start. It had started the day after they had come to the city to spend the summer working together-away from home-away from their friends—to be alone together.

Say something, Jean.

But what?

Bill, beside her on the park bench, stared blankly through the grass, deep into the sod and through as far as his thought would carry his vision.

Jean stole a glance at the man of her heart. The damp air had twisted his short curly hair into uncontrollable kinks. Big protective Bill, Jean thought. My Bill—the biggest spendthrift in the world—and he's engaged to me, the most Scotch person on earth. This thought tormented her and she raced on. To herself, "I'll bet I couldn't stop loving you if I tried—but, Bill—how can we make it work?"

A squirrel scurried across the grass in front of the bench and scooted up a tall elm tree several yards away.

Squirrels run away, she thought.

But you're not a squirrel, Jeanie.

But I'd like to be a squirrel—a blue squirrel—I'd chew French-fried acorns all day and play hide and seek with the wind and
everything would be free. I'd laugh at two-legged creatures who saved real nickels.

How many thousands of times had she sat on the wide wall of old cement at home and thought about the many things 1,000 nickels would buy? Her feet had dangled high off the ground as she kicked her scuffed oxfords back and forth—beautiful scuffed oxfords, the rage of the kindergarten crowd. That was yesterday when she was only five.

Jean looked at her feet. Today she was four times that old and her toes were tucked carefully into sleek business pumps. The young years had molded her plain small features and figure delicately. Bill was proud of her figure. And he liked her eyes because they were grey-blue. She ran her hand through her soft brown hair thoughtfully and as her arm dropped, her silver bracelet clinked on the park bench slats. Sounds like nickels, she mused. Nickels be . . . . . . —why must she always think of nickels?

Say something, Jean.

Oh yes, must say something.

Something inside her fought back as she spoke to the broad-shouldered fellow beside her. "Honey, I’m sorry." She moved closer and slipped her arm through his. He took her hand.

She continued—"I really want to go. I only object because it will cost so much."

"Yeah, I know. Mustn’t forget the piano!"

She detected the note of sarcasm in his voice. But the piano is important—it will be the first extravagance. Music is our second love next to each other—"Please, Bill, you know—"

"Sure, Funnyface, I know — — " He turned his eyes to meet hers. "Look, sweetness, what stupid reasoning says we can't go to a dance because two years from now when we're married we want to buy a piano? A few dollars more or less —"

"Bill," she interrupted. "It's not a few dollars more or less—it's $4.20—and that's too much for poor people like us to spend."

His expression betrayed his thoughts. He was angry. The smile wrinkles were gone from his eyes and his mouth was drawn into a thin line of disgust. He started to say something—then didn't.

Ominous silence.

"Bill,"—why did she feel she must keep talking,—"name bands are smooth—and we love to dance—but for a dollar we can dance
to half-a-dozen of them from the juke box and still have enough to buy hamburgers.”

He was too quiet—he made no attempts to strengthen his argument. This was unlike Bill. She felt the need for convincing him further. “It’s not tonight especially, Bill—what worries me most is—it’s fast becoming all the time.”

She took her arm from his and opened her purse to get a handkerchief. She could think better if he wasn’t holding her hand. “Last week it was a play instead of the movies.” Poor play, too. “Tuesday you insisted on steaks when a plate lunch would have filled the bill just as well.” Her hand fell heavily on her lap. “Now it’s a name band—for $4.20!”

“OK, OK—so it does cost money!” His tone was an edge of blended anger and disgust. “Jeanie, that’s all you ever think about anymore—how much does it cost?—we can’t afford it—don’t forget the piano—”

That hurt. He knew it had hurt. They had met at a piano and had their first date because of their mutual interest in Debussy. She watched him kick the grass with the toe of his shoe.

“Confidentially, Honey,” his voice was softer now—“I’m getting a little bit tired of it.”

She knew he was getting tired of it. She was too. What girl wanted to heckle her fellow constantly? But who was going to watch the purse strings if she didn’t? Obviously, not Bill. Oh darn these arguments—working hard today—we’re both irritable, she thought. Why must we always—

Bill turned toward her. She could tell he was sorry for being curt with her. “Jeanie, we’ve got money—why not enjoy it now?” That pleading puppy look, always fortified with strong reasoning, got her.

Her eyes fell away from his to the scalloped edge of her white gloves. “Because I keep thinking what it will be like to be broke tomorrow!” she replied. She had said it and there was more—much more. She turned the glove over in her hand—the scallops went on and on around and always came back to where they had started.

Oh come now, Jeanie,—after—”

Her glance stopped whatever it was he was going to say.

“Wait, Bill.” She squared her thoughts and jumped in with both feet—not knowing what words would tumble out next. “For
two people just around the corner from their wedding date we don't have enough of a bank account to sneeze at.” His expression was cool—he resented that remark. Bill was very seldom angry—always carefree—had an extremely contagious I-love-life attitude—smiled constantly and with his whole face. When he was angry, he said little. Jeanie was never quite sure what he was thinking in his quiet anger. Now she feared his silence. But don't stop now, old girl, she told herself.

“IT won't ever be enough to sneeze at if we don't stop spending it and start saving.” She twisted the silver band on her left hand. A blue-white sparkle peered around her finger and swung into place.

He was silent. Her head felt empty. A light breeze woke her. In one glance, she took the man beside her into her heart. Her heart dealt the first blow—a light one. Bill, you lovable spendthrift, when I'm in your arms the old world can do loop-the-loops for all I care. Then her common sense jumped in with his nickel's worth—but there's the practical side to this thing, too. We just can't get married and live from day to day. Me—I've got to think ahead in not only matters of money—but in everything. —that's what I'll say. —that's what I feel. —she turned to speak.

He had bent forward on the bench—his chin resting in the cup of his right hand. Jean's thoughts strayed—what a beautifully shaped head you have, my darling. Suddenly she had the urge to throw her arms around him and bury her face in his shirt. She wanted to say—"This is so silly, Bill. We love each other so much. Money is stupid—I'll forget money—all I want is you.” But instead she sat in silence. Her heart battled briefly with her head—her head won.

She remembered that day over the dinner dishes at home. Mother had said, “Bill's brothers had college educations and neither of them amounted to much. Now Bill's quitting at two years. That's not good, Jeanie dear.” And Dad had jokingly predicted, “Looks like you'll have to wear the pocketbook in your family, Honey.” And he had meant it.

These other things shot like arrows toward one whirling target. Jean knew what the target was without looking. It had two sides. One read "Give in.” The other—“Give up.”

That's silly, Jean told herself. I'm being dramatic—making
mountains out of mole hills. But she knew she wasn’t. A big blue ball, boldly lettered “DECISION” bounced frantically in front of her.

A little black goblin had been sitting back in her brain these past weeks adding and subtracting and dividing. Subconsciously she had an answer. It wasn’t the answer she wanted. But it was the answer she had. It just wouldn’t add up any other way.

Bill leaned back and relaxed heavily on the narrow green slats. Jean expected him to take her hand. He didn’t. He’d say something now—something to make things right. But there was only silence. His eyes were far away—they were searching the distance.

A strange hollow feeling hit her. She felt as if she were caving in on herself. True—the little goblin upstairs had computed an answer for her—but maybe he was wrong—maybe talking—maybe bringing in Bill’s side of the ledger would change the answer. But Bill’s side of the ledger was already figured in—and the little goblin was angry to think she’d considered him so stupid as to not figure it in. The little black one ranted and raved—then suddenly started a happy little jig, holding the answer high above his head and giggling gleefully. But maybe Bill wants to make some changes on his side of the ledger, Jean argued with the goblin. Well?

“We’re terribly different, Bill.” Her eyes sought his—but he was looking past the trees into the greying sky. She followed his gaze. Usually there were rosy clouds—so close she could touch them. Tonight they were dim and beyond reach. And the sun was sinking too quickly.

He snapped back to the present and reached for her hand. He held it gently. She forced herself to continue. “You want to enjoy yourself today and worry about tomorrow when it comes. It’s the opposite with me—I want to worry about the future now so when tomorrow comes I can enjoy it.” Silence. “And there is more, Bill.” The little goblin was snickering and tugging at her brain. “You love luxuries and nice things—and it’s often those very things that seem so unimportant to me.” It was nearly dark and the park lights flickered dimly, soon giving a steady stream of weak yellow light. He turned her hand slowly, catching the light on the blue-white stone on her finger.

He smiled sadly—“I never stopped to think how really differ-
ent we are. But we are different, Jeanie—so different that—” He didn’t finish the sentence.

He didn’t want to make any changes on his side of the ledger. She couldn’t make any changes on her side. The first answer had been the right one.

Suddenly they were both very old. Neither said a word but they both knew the answer. He put her hand back in her lap and slipped his arm around her shoulders. She was twisting the ring thoughtfully. There’s no special reason why the books have to balance, she told herself. But she knew they had to balance. Her books always had to balance. She was never truly happy unless they did.

“The ring is always yours, regardless, Jeanie,” he said it quietly and tenderly.

That isn’t why she had been twisting the ring. That isn’t what she had meant. A frantic feeling tore through her—but it lasted only a moment. She felt empty and lost. His voice had sounded resigned and sad. For one long minute he held her closer, the why in his eyes deeply searching her eyes for a sign. She knew that with one gesture, one word, even the smallest sign, she could erase the answer they’d found—they could begin again. The little black goblin took a few sharp pricks at her tormented brain to remind her of his existence. She tied her heart in knots and held it back while she returned Bill’s look of desperate longing with a steady gaze—and not a sign.

The ring was heavy on her hand. The ring—the one thing that held this scheme together and yet didn’t. A picture of her future—of Bill and she in a little house—had always gleamed from every plane of blue light in the stone. Tonight there was no clear picture—each plane of blue was hazy. Goodbyes are so stupid, she thought. Don’t say goodbye—run away. Squirrels run away. Those flashes of blue are blue squirrels running away. Oh to be a blue squirrel!

—Charlene Stettler, H. Ec.