

Sketch

Volume 30, Number 1

1963

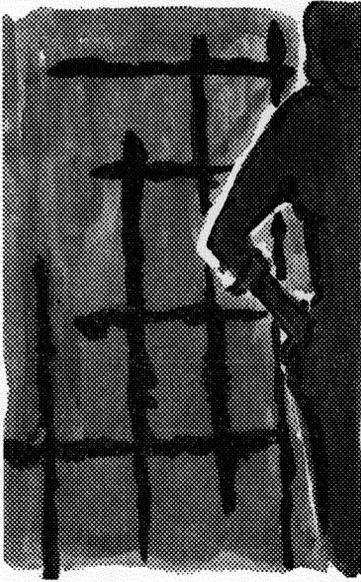
Article 4

Just One Thing

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Just One Thing

by Diane De Vault

“**M**ARTY, you going down to dinner now?”
“No, go ahead. I want to get ready to see my advisor so I won’t have to come back up and change later.” She reached down feeling for her zipper.

“Why do you have to see him?”

“He wants to see me about my schedule for next quarter.” *Guess I don’t have to tell you or anybody else the reason.* She turned away. *Go on, Patterson, go down and eat. Leave me alone.*

“What are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know yet. You better hurry or there’ll be a long line.”

“Well, you can wear my neat blue sweater if you want. You’d look sharp in that.” Then she was gone and there was a soothing silence.

Got to hurry. She tossed the skirt on her bed, nearly ripped a button off her blouse, and kicked her shoes across the room in the general direction of the closet. She paused a moment to open the window. The breeze roughly pushed its way into the room, chasing the heavy perfume that clung

to the dresser. *Goddamn, someday, I'm going to throw out her hair spray, her sachet, the perfumes. Someday . . .*

She reached into the drawer and carefully took out a pair of levis, worn to a thin whiteness. She even sighed a little as she felt their tightness bind her hips. She moved her legs and the familiar feel was welcome. She turned to the closet and took out her blue shirt. It needed ironing. She hesitated, then put it on. One of the more conspicuous wrinkles drew her attention and she tried to smooth it out. She looked into the mirror at the troubled eyes and unhappy mouth, the tousled hair. Quickly she ran her hands through her hair; the short strands dropped back in mild disarray. She felt better now, reassured and natural. The uneasiness settled a little.

She grabbed her coat and closed the door. It was four floors down but she ignored the elevator and the laughing girls. She beat the elevator. And she felt a warmth that was spoiled only when she imagined that damn man shaking his head and looking at her with those stupid, reproving eyes. She broke into a run, again.

"Hey, no running in the halls."

She slowed to a walk and started unconsciously to count the cracks, striding as fast as she could without actually running. *Someday, someday I will run when I want to run. Say just what I want to say.* Her thoughts swung back to her advisor. She tried to decide what bothered her about him; then gave up.

She entered the dining room, and the nauseating smell of cheese souffle overpowered her. Damn steam table always made everything soggy and putrid. She didn't watch as they dished the slop up, didn't look at the plate when they handed it to her. She hurried through the line, glancing sideways at the cheese when she reached for the milk. *Oh, ordure,* she thought pragmatically. The burned top, the crack showing the mustardy insides. Mushroom sauce mixing with the stewed tomatoes. She walked out into the dining room. She stopped, standing between the tables. The figures blurred and their voices blended, rising higher and higher. The fetor of the cheese reached her. For a second she smelled it and then she threw the tray. She watched the cheese

splatter. The red and yellow mixed in a lumpy, brackish orange. The pieces of lettuce stuck in the muck unable to get free. She followed the spreading river of milk as it curled around a chair leg. The hostess reminded her of a fat sow, lumbering, unable to run. By the time she reached Marty, the hostess was wiping the sweat off her face.

“What happened here?”

With a look of amazement Marty turned around to her.

“I guess I must have dropped my tray.” With studied casualness she turned and walked out of the dining room, ignoring the uproar. Then she broke into a run.

“Hey, no running in the halls.” But she kept going. Grabbing her coat off the floor by the stairs — no coats allowed in the dining halls — she raced out the door.

She bumped into people, nearly falling, to race on — across the ice, through a red light, heedless of cars. She ran until the rebellion was gone and only the weak, exhausted body was left. Then she stopped to ease her burning lungs, stopped to wonder at her trembling hands and the thing she had done. But the image of the lounging figure in the swivel chair interfered. *The Hell you say. Yes, the Hell I say. To Hell with the whole damn business. You, sitting so smugly in your chair. Got no damn rights on me — no claim. No claim on me.*

She turned from the sting of the cold, feeling for the first time the lightness of her jacket. She still had a few minutes before the conference. She mounted the stairs of the oldest building on campus, attracted by the staid gloom. And then on the third floor she turned to an empty room. She slipped into a chair by the window.

Oh god. Oh god, damn them all. Oh damn them, I am enough. I don't need them. Oh god, I'm afraid, afraid of him. Let me be free of him — of them all.

The tears came quietly, slipping out unwillingly, burning in their shame. And she prayed.

*Oh, god of earth and sun and sky,
give me just one thing,
a heart bold and brave and free.*

The reassurance came back and the determination. *I will serve the wild winds and restless clouds; the warm sun and*

groping trees. I will find my way back to the earth of tall trees and humble grasses. And I will be free.

She hurried down the stairs, the harsh concrete stairs, her frayed tennis shoes soundless. She caught the scream of the wind as it saw her, and rushed at her in mock anger. She welcomed it as she would a playful child, shaking her head back as it ruffled her hair and tugged at her coat. Then her eye caught the shadow figure of a cat slipping behind one of the trees in front of her. She went around to the other side and found it sitting there, a splotchy, dirty gray. It had a peculiar mocking look in its eyes as it sat on its throne — a twisted root. She took a step toward it, wanting to have its thin body in her hands. The mockery turned to contempt and the cat jumped lightly down and ran across the dirty snow, its crooked tail erect. Uneasily she looked after it, a mixed feeling of despair and fear creeping over her. She thought again of the man, and turned reluctantly toward the English Office Building.

It wasn't that she was afraid so much of him; it was just that he seemed to be more than one man, but in another way only one man, unique and disturbing. She didn't really understand it, just the uneasiness she felt.

She knocked boldly. Then that voice telling her to come in. She feared that voice for the warmth it held — not a false warmth, but the real thing. And the restraint.

She slouched in the chair, disturbed that this man could make her feel uneasy in her faded levis. Some how he stripped her of her rebellion, leaving her immature and ineffective, and most of all lost.

He doesn't understand. Can't see what I'm doing. Damn man making judgments just like the rest. Then she almost moaned to herself. *If only he were like the rest. Oh my god, if only he were like the rest.*

"Marty, tell me why you got an F midterm in English. You aced it last quarter."

"I don't like the instructor." It was so simple to her. Couldn't he see it? She wanted him to understand then, so badly. How else could she assert her freedom? Make them see that she didn't need anyone, not anyone, ever? She sat up and looked into his eyes. Those damn, knowing eyes.

“He’s a crappy teacher. Makes you do a lot of Mickey Mouse. He don’t let you do anything neat.” But she had a feeling her advisor knew something she didn’t. She needed the protection of the chair and she slipped back down, feeling the wood bite into her back; the pain reassuring. She wanted to know what he was thinking. And yet feared him.

“Marty, it’s no good to be like this. It hurts you and no one else. You’re just going to have to take this course over. And how is an F going to look in your major subject?” He was frank and she liked that. She liked his strong, youthful figure and worried gray eyes; the low voice. *He doesn’t understand, but maybe he could. Maybe of them all he is the one. If I could have one person know me. All of me. And then maybe he would tell me this thing I see in his eyes and don’t understand.* Then she realized what she was thinking. How close she had come to losing the vital part of herself. The one thing that kept her going. The blasphemy of it. And she hated him for it; for taking the one thing she had left.

Damn him. Goddamn him. Got to get out of here. Away from him. Won’t let me be free. Won’t let me be happy.

“Marty, listen to me. You can’t make it on your own. People aren’t that way. People can’t live alone and be happy. It just doesn’t work. Marty, listen to me. I want to help you. Let me help you, please.”

But she wasn’t listening. *God, god, I gotta get out of here.* And the fear was there, and the blindness. *Got to get away. Got to be free.* She stood up, “Have to go,” she muttered and ran from the room.

Streets

by John T. Mellors

Streets are where I lie.
Streets are where I crawl.
God, those curbs are high!