No Boats To Wish On

Sue Clark*
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Abstract

"HI CAT. “ Liz pushed the welcoming Calico out of her way as she stepped into their stuffy third floor apartment. "Geez, is it ever hot in here! ” She dropped her satchel and pile of mail onto the sofa and walked across the room to crack open the only window.
"CAT." Liz pushed the welcoming Calico out of her way as she stepped into their stuffy third floor apartment. "Geez, is it ever hot in here!" She dropped her satchel and pile of mail onto the sofa and walked across the room to crack open the only window. "Better!" Grabbing a bottle of Tab from the fridge, she flopped down onto the weathered corduroy and began to toss the bills and Christmas advertisements onto the coffee table where she'd stretched her legs. "God, what a day!" Cat wasn't listening. Her gold striped fur was curled up next to the torn leather bag that was overstuffed with Liz's assortment of make up and sweet perfumes, attracting the feline senses. Satisfied that her master was home, and her blue plastic dinner bowl with the handscratched "CAT" on the front would soon be full, she had snoozed back into her interrupted nap. But Liz continued to ramble on out loud. "Electric bill? We just got one! Geez, no wonder they're always so high..." Another sip, the Tab tasted good. "What's this? A letter?" She didn't wait for anyone to answer; Matt wouldn't be home until later. He had his biggest project due on Monday, so it would no doubt be another weekend at the Design Center. And Cat wasn't the best conversationalist. "From Bec?" The return address stared back at her. She hadn't heard a word from her family, not even her twin, since Matt had moved in... months ago.

Liz slid her perfectly polished nails under the seal, ripped open the envelope, and then stopped. The crisp beige paper was obviously no more than an invitation, machine engraved. She should have known. Rebecca would be the last one to write her—she hated Matt, even though
they'd never met. This was probably for some sort of Christmas party, how thoughtful.

Finally pulling the disappointment out of its cover, she began to read the flowing script: "Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Sawyer request the honor of your . . ." She didn't have to read any further. "Geez, Cat!" Liz reached over and clutched her sole companion. "Bec's getting married!" She continued to stare blindly at the words, now frozen on her lap. "'Married!'"

Reaching for her Tab, Liz dropped the invitation on top of the unopened bills and junk mail, and walked over to the frosted window. From here, on a nice day, she could watch the thousand-dollar sailboats as they drifted along the lakeshore. She and Matt often perched themselves at that window, dreaming of a boat of their own to escape on. But, with Matt in his second year of grad school, their money was not only tight, it just wasn't there. Even with her model's pay, their renovated apartment, snuggled in among nicer brownstones just north of Chicago, was a strain. No boats to wish on today, but Liz suddenly wanted Matt there anyway. Cat was no longer enough company. "'Married!'" Her surprise was silent now.

She set the empty bottle down on the windowsill and headed into the bedroom to change. Just as she detested her job, she hated her stiff outfits—so many layers and odd lengths. When not on the job, she lived in her favorite levis. Overworn since high school, they were soft enough to diaper a baby. Unzipping her hip length tunic, she pulled it over her starched hair, tossed it on the bed, and then eased out of the body suit that clung underneath. Walking over to the dresser where Matt kept his shirts, she glanced into the oak framed mirror. Braless, she could see her ribs as they jutted out over her sunken stomach. Models had to be thin, "'Cameras put on ten pounds,'" but she'd been losing weight rapidly since fall. Her hip bones shoved forward under her bikinis. The only things that had remained at all shapely were her legs, long and sleek, even when covered with bagging denim. "'Just don't lose any more.'" Her agent's threats mixed in with her thoughts of Rebecca.
"They might still use you at this point, but if you get any thinner..." She buttoned Matt's faded workshirt halfway down and tied the tails around her whittled waist. "Oh wow, married!" Liz practically bellowed it this time, and then dropped down onto the bed.

"Hey..." A strong hand gripped her shoulder. "Hey, Liz! Wake up!"

"Ooooh!" She pulled away, still half asleep. "Hmm..." Liz began to drift off again. "Hey!" She jolted, afraid she'd slept till morning. "What time is it?" She grabbed his wrist and tried to focus on his watch.

"Settle down, Liz." Matt sat down next to her on the ancient mattress. Their bed was a prize, an antique from a local auction, kind of a "moving in" present to each other. "It's only about seven-thirty. C'mon..." Pulling her down to his lap, he turned her sculptured face to meet his. A quick kiss, and Liz released herself and walked out into the living room to gaze out the window again. Now covered with darkness, the waves were barely visible as they etched themselves in the distance.

"Well, that's some welcome after a long day!" Matt stretched out, expecting her return. Nothing. "Liz?" Still nothing. "Liz! What are you doing?"

"Hmmm?" She remained glued to the empty scene. "What?"

"I said," Matt was behind her now, circling his arms around her middle. "What are you doing?" The words muffled in her hair.

"Oh Matt..." Liz tried to relax, turning from the window to face him. "I'm sorry." She slipped her head into the niche between his chin and shoulder, her breathing now slow and warm against his stubbornly solid neck.

"Hey." His voice softened as he tightened his grasp, supporting her. "What's wrong?"

"I missed you today." Liz straightened up and kissed his bristly five o'clock shadow, now coarse and biting at almost eight. Without him bending his six-feet-four to meet her five-feet-seven, that was as high as she could reach.
"I know, I always miss you . . ." 

"Honestly, Matt. Sometimes I almost hate architecture! It just takes so much of your time!"

"I know, Liz, but after this semester, I've only got one more. It'll be worth it."

"I know." Her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten all day. "Hey, I'm absolutely starved! You ready for supper?"

"Sure. Now that you mention it, I'm a bit hungry myself." Matt followed her into the kitchen. "What have we got?"

"Not much. I have to get to the store tonight." She always shopped late Friday night; that way she never had to fight crowds. Brushing her hair from her eyes, she squatted in front of the open fridge and pulled out the bottom drawer. "Darn, no lettuce!" Disgusted, she reached for the chipped casserole bowl on the second shelf. Covered with saran wrap from the night before, the leftovers would have to do. "Here." She lifted it up over her head, still searching for something more. "Put this on to warm."

"Yay-ess, 'Lizbeth, m'am!'" He danced over to the stove, waiting for her patterned response. She hated being called that. She'd insisted, "I'm your lover, not your mother!" Nothing. "M'am?" He continued to clown. Still no response.

"Here's a little cottage cheese, and I can fix some soup . . ."

"Hey, you aren't listening to me. Just where are you tonight?" He lit the pilot light and set the dish in place.

"Oh Matt! Good grief!" Liz was quick to snatch the porcelain bowl before it started to heat. "You can't put this right on the burner!"

"Hey, what's the deal, Liz?" This was a totally new twist for Matt. He rarely saw her lose her patience. "What is wrong?" Now his patience was beginning to split. With his hands placed demandingly on his hips, he waited again. Liz gazed right through him. "Liz!" He broke her stare. "What's going on? What have I done?" She finally brought her eyes to meet his.

"Oh Matt . . ." Now he distracted her. Patched jeans,
matching jacket, and thermal undershirt hung loosely on his frame. His endless nights of projects and little sleep had hollowed him too. His skin showed an exhausted yellow cast under the new beard, and although she loved meeting his solid brown eyes, so full of warmth, she hated to see them glazed with bloodshot strain.

“Liz . . . hey. Talk . . .” Walking over to her, Matt folded his arms across the small of her back. She crumpled in his shelter.

“Oh, God!” She stiffened as her voice choked. “I got a letter today!”

“Liz?”

“From Rebecca . . .” her words trailed off. She leaned heavily into his protection. “Well, no . . . from Mom and Dad . . .”

“Oh.” Matt knew the separation had been hard.

“What’d they have to say?” A soft whimper came from inside his shoulder niche where she’d buried her face.

“Hey,” He lifted her chin. “That bad?”

“Oh . . .” A deep breath; she finally broke a smile.


“Rebecca?” Matt had never met her, and Liz rarely spoke of her family. “Your twin?”

“Yeah.” Liz grabbed a pot from the oven and continued to fix their meal. “Wow! I am absolutely famished! Grab the silverware and stuff, o.k.?” They didn’t have a table, the room was too small, but the pass-through counter worked just as well. The opened container of cottage cheese was ready, but she still had to make the soup and dish out the casserole.

“What kind of soup do you want?” She tiptoed in front of her pantry. “Oh, I guess it’ll have to be cream of mushroom, o.k.?” She faced him again, wide-eyed, as if she’d already forgotten her display just moments before.

“Matt? Set the counter, o.k.”

“You’re really something.” A soft mumble. He grabbed the silverware and slammed the drawer.
"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

"I just don't get it. Why are you so upset about Rebecca? I mean, people do get married sometimes!"

His last words stung. "Matt," Liz's tone mellowed into a plea. "I'd really rather not talk about it." Her imagination flurried with bridal showers, wedding cake and gold bands. "I don't want to talk about it!" Her voice almost reached a scream as she slammed the can down on the counter.

"Hey." A kiss pressed on the nape of her neck. "Take it easy. We don't have to talk about anything. I just thought you might want to."

"Thanks." She remained iced. "But not now."

Dinner, when finally ready, was simple and quick. Awkward silence was occasionally filled with Matt's questions about her assignments, the bills, and their plans for the upcoming holidays. Liz supplied the necessary "yes" or "no," but otherwise insisted on silently picking at her casserole, never touching the soup.

"I thought you were starved." Matt carried his dishes to the sink.

"Yeah." She followed him. "But, I don't like cream of mushroom."

"You always have."

"You do the dishes, I'm going to run to the store. You think of anything we need?"

"Yeah, get some fish. I'll cook this weekend." Liz hated to work with fish, she hated the smell, but they both loved the delicacy.

"Sure." With her leather bag tossed over her shoulder, she buttoned her suede coat and disappeared out the door.

Matt washed the few dishes they'd used, and then settled back onto the sofa to sort out the mail. He had to decide which bills to put off paying, and with their bank account, that didn't take long. They'd have to postpone them all. Matt's mind wasn't on the bills anyway. With the weekend already begun, he knew he'd have to shift into full gear to get his project completed on time. But he wanted to spend time with Liz, so tonight, he'd relax. It'd been too long since he'd been able to spend any time with her.
Straightening up the mail and magazines, he flicked on the stereo, his high school graduation present, and decided to set up the chess set for Liz's return. They often spent endless hours of mental combat over the game, and he hoped this might be just the way to get her mind off the wedding. Walking over to the stack of mail, Matt picked up the invitation to read the details. The wedding was only a week away. They hadn't given her much notice. Matt dropped the letter. What were they trying to prove? He'd have to help her forget the whole thing.

A loud kick on the door shook Matt from a quick doze on the couch. "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Matt, it's me! Get the door! HURRY! Ooooh, I'm going to drop this stuff . . ."

Matt opened the door and then jumped out of the way as Liz flew past. He followed her into the kitchen where she dropped the bags onto the counter.

"What'd you do, buy out the store?"

"No, silly . . . but there are bottles and stuff in here. They're heavy!" She was smiling again. "Help me put this stuff away."

"Sure." Matt began to unload one of the parcels. "I set up the chess board, care to take me on?" His chocolate eyes sparked with invitation.

"Oh, I don't know . . . I was thinking that maybe I'd do some needlepoint, or watch some T.V. . . ."

He laughed and picked her up in a squeeze. She hated needlepoint, and they didn't have a T.V. "Hey, I missed you." He echoed her complaint from before. His kiss followed, long and familiar.

"Ummm . . ." She nestled back into his shoulder. "You taste good."

"Yeah, who needs groceries?! Who needs chess either?" Matt continued to envelop her frail figure.

"Hey, cool it! We've got to get these groceries put away. Your fish'll thaw."

"You're no fun . . ."

"I know. Did you remember to feed Cat?"

"No, didn't know I was supposed to."

"Yeah, I forgot. She must be starved."
"I doubt it, she hasn't moved from that sofa since you left. Not even when I laid down for a nap."

Liz filled the plastic bowl. "You want anything?" She poured a glass of Tab for herself. "Thirsty?"

"Yeah. Any beer left?" He opened the fridge and found one last can in the door. "C'mon, let's go . . ."
Seating himself at the chess table, Matt waited for the contest to begin.

"Matt, I really don't feel like it. Not tonight."
Liz's eyes were focused on the beige envelope. "I'm so tired . . . it's been a bad week. You'd better work on your project anyway." She gulped down the rest of her drink, set the glass in the sink, and started towards the bedroom. Unaware that Matt's gaze followed her, she pulled off her clothes, folded them into the dresser, and went into the john. He continued to stare as the door opened again, and she climbed into bed. The light next to the headboard flicked off, and it was quiet. Matt still sat by the chessboard. The stereo drummed softly as he turned to stare out the window. The stars were bright, even with the Loop's thick cover of pollution, but everything else was dark. He could barely see the waves as they etched themselves in the distance.

About an hour had passed and she was still awake. Matt's cool flesh felt good against her blanket-covered body as he slipped in between the sheets, spoon style.

"Hey, babe." His voice was always low, but even softer now, as he pulled her hair off her back, replacing it with a kiss. She didn't answer, but he knew she was listening. "Liz . . ." His arms were strong, still muscled from state wrestling tournaments, as they wrapped across her bare shoulders and swiveled her to face him. "We've got to talk about this." He'd always been sensitive to her moods, and his persistent interest was reassuring.

"I know." Liz closed her eyes and pulled closer. He felt good, just what she needed.

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"Oh, Matt."

"Are you changing your mind?" He hated to say it, but he had to ask.
'What? Changing my mind?' She pushed back to question him straight on. 'About what?'
'I'm not sure. About us, maybe? Or just me?'
'Oh, Matt! No! I never want this to change! Never!'
'Yeah.' The words came out slowly. 'But you're beginning to think that it will. It has to.' He was a mind reader as well.
'Oh, Matt, just hold me.' Liz pressed as close as she could, afraid to let go.
'Hey, I love you, Sunshine.' Too late, she was already falling asleep.

The weekend, filled with laundry, special overtime modeling assignments, and Matt's final project, hurried by. With his first semester over on Tuesday, the rest of the week buzzed with handyman experiments around the apartment, and crisp holiday spirit. Friday commenced a vacation weekend for Liz, and they celebrated by sharing a snowflurried trip downtown, exploring the festive decorations and warming up on two mugs of hot chocolate in a cafe just off State Street. A fifty-cent splurge carried them each to the top of the Sears Tower, with the entire sparkling metropolis blanketed at their feet. Matt was a newcomer to the area, and he had never known such festivity. Liz was determined to show him everything, even if it took till dawn. But, by midnight, after miles of ice and slush, her moccasins could no longer keep out the cold, and the twenty minute bus ride seemed like the highlight of the evening. Until, traveling north along Michigan Avenue, they passed the First Presbyterian Church. The Sawyer's church. Rebecca's church at two the next afternoon. Liz pretended not to notice. Matt was familiar with some parts of the city, and it wasn't that long ago when she'd first taken him to her family church. He had talked about getting married; she had asked him to move in. Reaching down into her pocket, she made sure she still had the extra forty cents. Tomorrow, it would be too far to walk back.

'Matt?' Inside their apartment again, Liz was glad for the heat.
"'Yeah?' He turned from the closet where he'd hung his coat.

'Let's get a tree!' Her voice sparkled like a child's. 'A real Christmas tree. It won't be Christmas without one!'

'You're right. That's just what we're missing!' 'Let's get one tomorrow. Where should we put it? Oh, Matt! We don't even have any ornaments!'

'Slow down, we'll find something. We can make some. Homemade ones are the best."

'You're right. Oh, Matt! How exciting!' Liz eyed the corners of the sparsely decorated room. 'Where should we put it? Geez, it'll have to be small."

'How 'bout in front of the window?"

'In front of it? Oh, no! That would take away our view! Maybe to one side."

'Yeah, that would be better. We could just move the chess table.'

'Oh, Matt! This'll be the best Christmas ever! Really, it will.'

'Hey, who are you trying to convince?' He folded his arms around her from behind, settling his bristled chin on top of her head. 'I've already planned on that."

'I'm glad.' She shivered. The church would probably have their big tree up tomorrow. They did every Christmas, right by the altar, with glistening ornaments that the Lady's Guild had so carefully made. She could remember singing in the choir, and every Christmas, while squirming in the choir loft as Pastor Buckley gave his eternal sermon, she'd count the gold-sequined symbols so delicately placed among the fragrant branches. One year she'd even found one that had been made upside-down.

'You aren't listening to me again.' Matt's face peered around the side of her. He'd been talking, but she hadn't heard a word he'd said.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' She turned and reached up to meet his kiss. 'I was just thinking about what a wonderful Christmas this is going to be. Christmas has always been my favorite time of the year.'"
Liz woke up the next morning before her alarm went off. Flicking the dial so it wouldn’t disturb Matt, she went into the shower to wash her hair and shave. She had plenty of time; it was only shortly after eight. Hoping that Matt would follow his weekend pattern and sleep until noon, she pulled down the shades and brought her clothes into the bathroom to get ready. If she could leave before he noticed, she wouldn’t have to explain until later. Having carefully chosen a long-sleeved, camel-colored knit, in an attempt to cover her bony figure, she hung it on the back of the door and began to put on her makeup. As she followed the ritual she was required to perform every morning, the colors and contours went on easily, with extra blush on her cheeks. With her carefree hairstyle quickly blown dry into place, and her outfit awkwardly zipped and hooked at the neck, she was ready. Physically, at least. She gulped. A deep breath, one last approval in the mirror, and final peek at Matt. Thankful that he was still catching up on his sleep, she grabbed her coat and slipped out the door. No need to leave a note, she’d have enough explaining to do.

The walk to the bus stop was cold—she’d forgotten her gloves. But it was too late to go back. She could see the bus down the block, and besides, she didn’t want to wake Matt. Digging out the precious coins from among the used kneeex shreds, she planted herself on the curb and waited. The snow was beginning to drift heavily; everything was just like her Christmases as a child, and even though it was barely ten o’clock, she was glad she had hours to waste. The bus took her farther south, past the church, and she could see that it was still empty. The walks hadn’t been shoveled. A few more stops, and on into the north end of the Loop. Liz got off near a coffee shop where she often stopped on her way to work. Not at all hungry, she sipped on hot chocolate. Amused by the busy people as they bustled by, already laden with packages, she could see that a nearby bookstore was open. She left a quarter on the table, and dashed across the busy street to browse through their collections.

"Excuse me, sir?" Liz caught the attention of a nearby stockboy, clad in the identifying blue shirt. "Where is the
Sociology section, please? Juvenile Delinquency?"

"Ah . . . oh yeah."

He looked up from his squat where he'd been shelving new arrivals. He stood up to get the full view. "Over there, in section 3C."

He pointed behind her.

"Thanks."

She smiled. She was used to this kind of attention, and she knew he was watching as she walked away. The quick ego-boost temporarily took her mind off the wedding, and now she could lose herself among her favorite texts.

"You looking for something in particular?"

Liz turned to see the blue-shirted, pimply-faced stockboy. "No."

She smiled politely, holding back her chuckle.

"Just browsing."

"You a student?"

"Well, I graduated from the U. of C. last spring. Someday I hope to get my Masters."

He was kind of cute, tall and gangly, probably the star of his high school basketball team. "Right now, I'm working. Trying to save up the money."

"Well."

His wide blue eyes widened. "If you need anything . . ."

"Thanks. Have a merry Christmas!"

"Oh yeah, you too!"

Fidgeting, he obviously couldn't think of anything else to say. An embarrassed smile, and he was back to his squat, shelving again.

"Hey."

She did think of something. "Do you have the time?"

She never wore a watch; usually it didn't matter.

"Yeah,"

He pulled up his sleeve. "It's ten after eleven."

"Thanks again."

She still had plenty of time, and the Chicago Public Library was just a couple of blocks further south. She'd spend her time reading their books instead. Bookstores didn't appreciate browsers, especially those with no intention of buying. Besides, the library had chairs, and her legs were getting tired. She pushed through the revolving door and out into the snow again. It was falling in big, fat flakes now, and Michigan Avenue sparkled in a quiet brilliance. Even the heavily trafficked thoroughfare looked softly comforting.
Once in the library, Liz took the familiar stairs to the third floor and followed her old path to the section where she'd once spent so much time. The new books were specially shelved under the east windows and it wasn't long before she found a recently published case study from a nearby juvenile home. Interesting—she'd worked in a place like that the summer after her Junior year. She'd wanted a taste of her major before graduating without any firsthand experience, but had been greatly frustrated by the lack of attention and negligent treatment the so-called "delinquents" received. She settled down at a nearby desk to see what this report had uncovered. Absorbed in the crisp pages and attitudes that practically mirrored hers, she was still skimming through the first few chapters when the large clock on the wall read "one-fifteen."

"Oh, geez!" Liz knew she'd have to hurry. She'd wandered over a mile south of the church, and yet she wanted to finish the book. Checking to make sure no one was watching, she quickly slipped it into her leather bag. Her library card had expired on her last birthday, and she'd just never taken the time to get it renewed. No matter, she'd be sure to put the book back on her way home from work next week. No time to worry about it now. If she didn't hurry, she'd miss the wedding completely.

Liz walked briskly, carefully avoiding the slushy sections of sidewalk that had yet to be shoveled, and was in sight of the church within half an hour. As she stepped onto the last block, she recognized a few of the guests and could even hear the organ as it entertained those who waited patiently inside. Gripped by a last minute panic, Liz stopped, frozen in place. But, deciding quickly that it would be wiser to get seated before the mother of the bride came into the foyer, she pulled off her cap and hurried inside. She slipped down the side aisle to avoid the ushers—she knew her brother would be one—and sat down in the second to the last pew. It was a huge church, and with all the other guests and last minute confusion, she hoped she wouldn't be noticed. Unbuttoning her coat, she could recognize many backs of heads. She strained to see through the crowd and
up to the front rows where the family was beginning to gather. There was her favorite, Uncle Russ—his sideburns a bit longer, but still flashing that constant smile. Next to him, Aunt Meredith bent in prayer, with Liz’s three younger cousins wiggling to see the bride. And there, in front of them, a silvery couple—her grandparents. How good it was to see them still so healthy! She had hoped they’d be able to make it all the way from their retirement home outside of Tucson . . . fantastic! The summers Liz had spent with them when they still lived on the lake in Wisconsin were part of her fondest memories. She had been in grade school then, and her energetic grandparents were more like a second set of parents. So young in their ways. She wanted to sit next to them now. Another deep breath. She knew she couldn’t.

The organ music stopped, and then grew louder as her brother, Josh, escorted their mother down the red carpeted walk. She looked pleasantly calm as she nodded to friends as they turned to face the rear of the church. But she looked so different. So much older than Liz had remembered. Her hair was now almost completely greyed, offsetting the rouge that tried to cover her wrinkles. Even her walk seemed less stable, but she stayed perfectly in time with the music, and her smile never failed. Josh had gotten his hair cut. Liz chuckled, knowing the coaxing that must have taken! She and Josh had always been closer than most brothers and sisters. They never had to compete as she had with her twin, and they were close enough in age to have similar interests and beliefs. Somehow, she had never thought she’d lose him.

The traditional wedding march brought Liz’s attention to the back arch where Bec stood, veiled, holding onto their father’s stately support. He was such a strong man, both physically and emotionally—somewhat of a god in many ways. Liz was relieved to see that he hadn’t changed. His dark brown hair, slightly streaked with eye-catching grey, waved neatly into place, and his healthy stature was obviously well-exercised. As they began to parade majestically down the aisle, Liz could see that Bec had lost the ten
pounds she'd gained while away at school. Her hair was
even longer now, cascading in dark auburn waves onto the
delicate white lace that covered her shoulders. Watching
the two as they passed the pew where she stood, Liz sud-
denly felt dizzy. Grabbing onto the back of the seat in front
of her, she focused on the groom as he beamed with Bec’s
approaching innocence. Her boyfriend since freshman
year, he stood with his familiar, deeply-dimpled smile, and
greeted Bec with the glow of the long-awaited day. Liz had
always liked Steve, even though he was so opposite from
Matt. Of average height, with straight, mustard-blonde
hair, he was sensible, but set in his ways. Perfect for Bec.
After all, she and Liz were almost opposites too, in spite of
their identical appearance.

The small wedding party, mostly family, surrounded
the couple as they began to repeat their vows. In the
background, Liz could see the enormous Scotch Pine. It was
even decorated with the same ornaments. She squinted to
try and find the upside-down one, but needed her glasses
for that distance. The standard ceremony continued. Liz
shivered and buttoned up her coat. The next half hour faded
by in seconds, and before Liz knew it, Rebecca’s radiant
face, now unveiled, accompanied Steve’s as they flowed
back down the aisle. It had all happened so fast—Liz had
planned on leaving before the final vows, but now the
ushers were already escorting her family and friends out to
the receiving line. Too late. She’d have to stay glued in
place until the rest of the crowd filed out. She didn’t want to
face anyone, and she knew that if she waited long enough,
she could probably slip out the side door where the choir
made their weekly entrance, and not be noticed. Pulling her
hat back on, she eyed her parents as they walked ec-
tastically towards the back of the church. Liz was un-
comfortable and alone. She wanted, right now, to be on her
father’s other arm. It was he whom she missed the most. Liz
had always appreciated his genius, but even more than that,
had loved his gentle, caring ways. So sensitive, and, in so
many ways, a reflection of Matt. If only her father could
know that. If only they all could understand! It just wasn't fair; they'd never even met Matt, never even given him a chance . . .

Suddenly, Liz realized that the church was almost vacant. This was her chance. The wedding party would still be occupied with their "'thank-you's,'" and the many guests with their analyses of the new couple, now made "'one.'" Liz could slip out easily; she headed towards the door. Pushing her way into the older part of the building, the part that held offices and Sunday School, Liz knew it was over. She felt empty, but somehow satisfied. All she had wanted to do was see everyone, just one more time.

"'Liz?'" A familiar, husky voice startled her as she reached the outside door. Afraid to look back, she knew who she'd see. "'Liz! Is that you?'" His large hand reached her bony shoulder, cautiously. Liz hesitated at his touch, and then turned to face her brother. "'Oh Liz!'" He grabbed her other shoulder and whisked her up in an excited embrace.

Still startled, almost scared, Liz stiffly resisted his warmth. "'Oh, Josh!'" She couldn't hold it back. Her arms wrapped around his neck in relief, her tears moistening his rented shirt collar. "'Oh, Josh!'" Her words choked. It had been six months since she'd even seen him, and yet she couldn't find anything to say.

"'Liz! Why didn't you let us know you were coming?"' He set her back down and brushed off her tears. She hadn't realized how tall he'd grown, or perhaps how tall he'd been.

"'You got your hair cut.'" Liz flashed his favorite smile. "'What'd they pay you?'"

"'Scheez, nothing . . . I wanted to.'" He seemed older too. "'But why haven't you called? Why didn't you tell us you were coming?'"

"'Josh . . .'" She sighed with explanation. "'You know I couldn't.'"

"'Yeah, I know.'" His head tilted in understanding. "'I know Liz.'"

"'You've never called me either.'" She was still holding onto his hands, squeezing them, pleading silently.

"'I know.'" His expression told her what she already
knew. "I couldn't either." As long as he was still in high school, he was under their mother's reins. It was Mrs. Sawyer who most rejected Matt, and Liz knew it was their mother who kept the rest of the family from making any contact. It was her way of saying that she disapproved, and that as long as Liz was with Matt, she wasn't welcome in the Sawyer home. It was an ultimatum that no one dared change.


"Hey!" Overwhelming warmth continued to pour forth as he broke into his powerful grin. "Better yet, I'll come over."

"Oh, Josh . . . would you? Are you sure?!"

"Yeah, Sunshine." He echoed her childhood nickname. "I'm sure." Bending down, he kissed her forehead lightly.

"Oh, Josh . . ." She felt as though she was about to crumble. Her father always used to kiss her like that. "I can't wait! Hey, listen. Matt's got a beautiful stereo." She hadn't meant to bring him up, it had just slipped out. "I want you to hear the new albums I've got."

"Yeah." It was o.k., he understood. "I'll come over sometime, for sure. But I've got to get going now. You sure you don't want to come with?"

"I can't, Josh. But thanks." She let his hands go and started towards the exit. "I'll see you." She was out the door.

Liz took the long way home, stepping in all the puddles. Her leather boots had stretched and she hoped it would shrink them down to size. It was now midafternoon, and although the air was still quite cold, the sun had melted most of the new snow. Cutting west off Lake Shore Drive, she headed towards the zoo. She hated seeing animals behind bars, so helpless and confused, but this was virtually
the only way she could study all the different species. It was her way of escaping to Africa, another dream. Especially fascinated by the monkies, she would often sit in total amazement as she watched them for hours on end. She could almost lose herself as the vivacious chatterers sprang from one branch to the next, and temporarily forget about her job, her future education, and even her family. So today, she took the long way home.

The zoo was practically empty today; most people came in the summer, when the concrete burned bare feet and ice cream tasted good. All the better for Liz. Today was not a day for fighting crowds. Wandering past the Children's Zoo—now barren, with all the newborns protected inside—she rambled over to the Lion House. Pulling open the heavy metal door, Liz stepped into the hollow chamber, lined with dozens of separate cages. At the other end, a solitary custodian mechanically swept the peanut-shelled floor. Other than that, the click of Liz's boot heels was the only sound. Even the lions were quiet as they hibernated from the bitter cold.

Settling down on one of the concrete benches that usually supported aching mothers and overly-excited kids, Liz thought about the first time she'd seen Matt. He'd been over in front of the Siberian Tiger's cage, expertly photographing a new mother and her cub. Liz had been impressed with his manner, let alone his body, but had tried to remain inconspicuous. She was totally off guard when he decided to occupy the remaining portion of the bench. She had never had a chance to be anyone but Liz Sawyer, and when he had asked her to join him for an ice cream cone, she hadn't thought of anything to say but "yes." Even now, months later, when Liz pried him about why he'd sat down by her in the first place, Matt would just smile and wink his teasing wink. She still didn't know why.

One of the lions growled. Their feeder had come in with the evening's meal and automatically the animals were on their feet to greet him. It was later than Liz had realized, and when she walked outside, she was met by a lonely grey sky. Not unusual for their area. She and Matt lived too close
Sketch
to the Loop to ever see stars, and sometimes even the moon
remained hidden. Even so, she hadn’t realized that the
afternoon had slipped by, and she was getting hungry. Time
to get home. Matt would be wondering where she was.

Liz hurried down the familiar path to Belden Avenue,
down the two long blocks to their building, and jumped up
the cement steps two at a time. She hadn’t realized how
much she longed to be with Matt. To lie silently in his
protective warmth and quietly share all the thoughts that
were about to explode inside of her. Rebecca and Steve
were married now. Officially. Respectably. But that didn’t
matter; she loved Matt.

As Liz opened the door, her eyes caught sight of an
unfamiliar glow. “Oh, Matt!” It didn’t take her long to
realize what he’d done. “Matt, it’s beautiful!” Liz stood in
front of the brilliant tree. “Oh, Matt . . .” She dropped her
purse onto the couch and walked closer, not realizing that
Matt was sitting on the counter stool in the kitchen. It was
wonderful. He’d even strung popcorn and woven it in
between the healthy greens. And on the top, instead of a
star, he’d placed a dove. “Geez . . .” Liz stepped over to
the window and tilted her forehead onto the frosted glass,
melting a small oval as she breathed.

“Glad you like it.” Liz jumped as Matt’s arms en­
circled her.

“Matt . . .” Liz turned, blinking, but this time letting
the tears come. “I have never, ever seen such a beautiful
tree.” She gulped a deep breath and smothered her head in
the chest. “Oh, Matt.”

They stood there, just holding each other, until Liz
lifted her head, brushed the moisture from her cheeks and
looked back out the window. It was too dark to see anything
except for the lights that outlined the harbor. The sky was
still a lonely grey, but Liz was warm now, and comfortably
satisfied.

“Thank you.” She tilted her head, smiling, and then
pulled his face down to a long kiss.

“I love you, Liz.” He stared into her questioning green
eyes.
"I know you do." She shivered and pulled him closer. "I love you, Matt." Her stomach growled, obnoxiously loud. "Oh, geez..."

Matt chuckled. "C'mon, I'll fix our fish dinner." He took her by the hand and they walked into the kitchen. It was quiet, with only an occasional stirring or clatter of pots disturbing the silence.

"Christmas is the day after tomorrow," Liz stated the obvious as they sat down on the sofa to eat. The room was cozy, lit only by the lights on the tree and the overhead lamp in the kitchen behind them. "This year has gone by so fast." The fish tasted good. A rare delight.

"Hard to believe," Matt agreed between bites. "Matt?" Now was as good a time as any. "Hmmm?" He looked up from his plate. "I talked to Josh today."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I asked him to come over sometime. I want him to hear those new albums."

"Good idea. He'll like 'em."

"Matt?"

"Hmmm?"

"I went to the zoo today, too."

"Any new monkies?"

"I don't know. I went to the Lion House." She finished her last bite and set the plate on the coffee table. "You remember when I first saw you there?"

"'Course I do." He placed his free hand on her pointed knee and squeezed. Her face was radiant in the shadowed light, her perfect complexion aglow with a hypnotic warmth. Matt teached up and rolled a section of her auburn-streaked curls around his finger. A firm rap on the door interrupted them.

"Josh?" Liz was startled. She grabbed Matt's hand as he put down his plate.

"I'll get it." He acted cool, as if they always had Saturday night visitors. He turned the knob and opened the door. Liz couldn't see the stately, obviously well-exercised man who stood on the other side of Matt.

“Dad?” Liz was off the couch where she’d remained anxiously perched, and into his arms.

“Elizabeth.” The door shut behind the two as they embraced. “Oh, my Elizabeth.”

Matt had walked over near the tree. He stood there, gaping.

“Oh how I’ve missed you, my baby.” Mr. Sawyer’s strength rocked Liz from side to side. “I’ve missed you so!” His voice cracked, softer now.

Unable to speak, Liz remained in his arms. Now the view of her father that afternoon seemed miles away. Finally, she eased down from his grasp. “Dad, what are you doing here? Isn’t there a reception going on?”

“It’s over. Just a simple supper at home.” He gazed down at her narrow face. “I had to drive your Aunt Jen home. Just thought I’d drop in . . .”

“Oh, Dad! It’s so good to see you. I just can’t believe it! And I talked to Josh this afternoon too, did he tell you?” Liz suddenly realized that Matt was uncomfortably standing with his hands in his pockets, shifting from foot to foot, observing the reunion. “Dad.” She took her father’s hand and turned towards Matt. “I want you to meet someone.” She smiled at Matt. Even now, their similarities amazed her. It was like being in a time machine. She led her father over to where Matt stood, taking Matt with her other hand. She smiled again. It wasn’t going to be as hard as she’d thought. “Dad, this is Matthew . . . Matthew Alan Kelley.” How she loved that name.

Her father smiled.