A Time for Deciding

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... a blue-black night. ... a highway running away from the security of the city's bright lights ... an old Pontiac blindly following the highway out of town. ... The late fall rain, beating gently and steadily on the hood of the car, sounded monotonous, lonely, to the couple sitting at either ends of the front seat. The windshield wipers whispered a mournful chant as they flopped back and forth. "not yet... not yet... not yet" they seemed to be taunting. The atmosphere inside the car, heavy with the tension between the couple, grew more oppressive with each swish of the wipers. "not yet... not yet... not yet."

"Seems funny not to have anything to say to each other, doesn't it?" She meant to speak quietly, matter-of-factly, but after such a long silence between them her voice sounded loud, angry with him. He turned his head toward her, but his eyes were still fixed on the highway ahead and his thoughts, too, were out somewhere in the rainy darkness.

"Want to stop over there?" he asked pointing to the deserted parking lot of a shopping center. She nodded.

He left the motor and the windshield wipers running and reached over to turn on the radio — then changed his
mind and withdrew his hand quickly. Out the front window a huge scarlet neon sign on top of the shopping center flashed on. . . . and. . . . off in rhythm with the wipers. “MERRY MEADOWS.”

. . . rain pattering softly. . . the hum of the motor. . . the chanting of the wipers and the heavy silence between the couple. Neither wanted to be the first one to speak. She smoothed out the pleats in her plaid kilt and noticed that in the dim lights of the dash, the stone on her out-stretched left hand had become a deep pool of crystal chips. She frowned and hastily wound the stone to the other side of her hand. Now just a narrow gold band shone in the semi-darkness.

“Kind of a bad night, hum?” she heard herself mumble.

He nodded a yes. The cold hostility of their new relationship bothered him, too. He turned his body toward hers and extended his long legs over to her side of the front seat in an attempt at casualness. “Gee, Ellen, I’d say something if I knew what in the hell to say.” His eyes implored her to understand.

“Joe, what kind of a woman do you want?” The trembling in her voice made what she had intended to be a simple question into a caustic accusation. “I think it’s fine that you wanted me to come home from school for a talk.” She took a quick breath and her voice softened. “So, now that I’m here, let’s talk.” Her foot began tapping the floorboard of the car.

The question had seemed unfair to him. He squirmed and tucked his right leg under him and stroked the steering wheel back and forth — nervously — back and forth to the beat of the wipers. “not yet. . . not yet. . . not yet.”

“I don’t know, Ellie. Probably I’ll have to find her first and then I’ll know.” His hand stopped stroking the steering wheel and fell to his lap in a gesture of helplessness. “Don’t you see that it’s not that I don’t want you, but it’s I don’t know what I want for sure. . . . any more.”

“Joe, I know what kind of a woman you want,” she blurted out to stop him from speaking more of the words that made her heart wither within her. Her foot tapped louder and faster until it was controlling her. “You want a Dominique, don’t you? Like The Fountainhead Dominique:
intelligent, independent, beautiful, yes? But unattainable, too, Joe — unattainable?"

"Maybe," he sighed, "maybe you're right. I had never thought of it that way."

"Don't try to tell me that!" She started to shout, but then calmed momentarily while she forced herself to look at him for the first time since he had parked the car. Her throat tightened seeing him there with his head bent into his hands and his shoulders slumped forward. The old ache within her wanted to reach out and let his warmth and strength enfold her loneliness. Only his warmth didn't belong to her now and his strength was just enough to get him through this ordeal.

"Joe, will a Dominique fry your potatoes?" she shot at his defenseless body. "Will she iron your shirts? Will she bear your children?"

"NO!" he shouted back. "Ellen, let's get this over with. If you're going to be bitchy, I can be, too. Come on, tell me about all the guys you've been dating back at school."

"No one wants to go out with an engaged girl, Joe."

She turned away from the painful look in his eyes. Her foot no longer tapped the floor board. The wipers faltered a moment — "not... yet... not yet... not yet."

"Ann wrote me that you've been going out with Linda."

"Ellen, I told you in that letter that Linda and I had talked downtown that day. Well, since then we've had a couple of dates, I guess."

She opened her window a crack. The clean, damp air rushed in. It forced her to calm down a moment before. . . . She breathed in slowly, deeply. . .

"I suppose she's managed to get you to kiss her by now?"

The only sound in the car was the echo of her question pounding in her head. His silence was all the answer she expected.

Before he had time to stop her, she flung open the door and stumbled out into the night, sobbing a hideous moan-like laughter. Soon the cold air and rain roused her to the reality of the scene she was creating. Her moan rose to a hysterical scream. "MERRY MEADOWS... MERRY MEADOWS... MERRY MEADOWS." She wanted to take
that awful sign and fling it out across the pavement! She ran toward the scarlet mockery.

Her legs folded weakly under her and she fell. Face and shoulders and arms scraped the rough, wet asphalt. Behind her a door slammed. She heard the sounds of heavy feet sloshing through the puddles toward where she lay on the pavement. Soon two arms reached down and pulled her up. The arms chained her and then whirled her roughly around to face terrified eyes staring down into hers. "Ellen, Ellie, stop this! You'll get hurt. Get hold of yourself!"

A strong shoulder was pressed against her face. She wanted to be free of this unfeeling vise. She would be free! As his head dropped to bury itself in her hair she lifted her head and bit the shoulder hard.

The chains were released. She slipped downward to the pavement, backward — away from him. She was glad when her head hit the ground. Rain quickly filled her eyes. Her hands lay in a puddle on the pavement. Her fingers swirled the coldness. "I'll be all right, Joe," she shrieked into the night. "I can take care of myself!"

Freedom of the Mind

by Eileen Mericle

I can eat
babies' feet or
pickled pig's feet
as long as I don't know
that they are babies' feet
Or pickled pig's feet either for that matter.