The Seducer

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NICK washed off the last of the shaving lather and carefully patted his face dry. His neck stung from razor burn, but it would go away soon and tonight he wanted a good, close shave. He put the razor away and stood staring at the mirror. There was an uncertain feeling in his stomach, a feeling that had been absent for so long that he had almost forgotten what it was like. When Nick had been eight years old he had played in a piano recital, and he had felt this way waiting in the audience for his turn on stage. And when he had called a girl for his first date his stomach had begun feeling strange a full two days ahead of time. His mother had found him with six digits dialed, staring at the phone. But he wasn’t a little boy anymore; he was a senior in high school, and he told himself that he shouldn’t be nervous now. His stomach still felt funny.

He studied the face in the mirror to take his mind off his midsection, analyzing the little things he ordinarily passed over. The hairline was lopsided, and his eyebrows grew darkly together above his nose. Four years of braces had straightened his teeth, but that nose; noses were pretty
ugly if you considered them by themselves. Well, there wasn't anything to be done about his face, and he was putting off getting ready for his date. It wouldn't do to start out tonight by being late.

On the way back to his room he started to whistle, but the lonely feeling came back while he dressed. He seemed a complete stranger even to himself. There wasn't any reason to be nervous; everything was all planned out. After the first show he would drive down by the river with Sue and, he didn't know exactly how to put it into words; "intercourse" sounded too much like one of his mother's talks on sex, but it wasn't quite what the guys at school talked about, either; he wasn't going to "screw" her or "lay" her, it wouldn't be like that at all. He finished dressing and paused to check his appearance in the mirror, admiring the effect of his black tie against the yellow shirt. He poured some after-shave lotion into his hand, hesitated, then slapped it hurriedly onto his face, wincing as it stung the razor burn.

Nick's parents were still sitting at the dinner table when he walked into the kitchen. His father pretended to be surprised to see him dressed up. "Oh, are you going out tonight?"

Nick could play games, too. "Yeah, thought I'd do a little work in the yard."

"Sure, sure. Who are you honoring with your company tonight?"

"Sue, of course. You know we're going steady."

"I keep forgetting. Well, have a good time." He turned his attention back to his coffee.

"Uh, Dad. Sue and I are going to a drive-in movie."

"Hmmm? Oh, well, that's fine, son, just fine."

"Dad, they like it a little better if you come in a car."

"A car? Why I didn't know you had a car."

Nick rocked back on his heels and concentrated on the ceiling. "Well, I don't, but I thought maybe I could borrow yours."

"You think I don't give it enough exercise? Well, I guess it could be arranged." He laughed and dug the keys out of his pocket. "Do you need some money, too?"
"Maybe I should have five dollars; just in case there's an emergency of some sort."

"Yeah, I know you. When you want a pizza, it's an emergency."

Nick ignored the remark and took the money. "Thanks, Dad. Well, I guess I better be going. Bye, Mom."

"Good-bye, Nick; be careful. Oh, what time do you think you'll be in?"

"Well, it's a double feature, and we might stop for something to eat afterwards." Nick had no intention of staying past the first feature. He felt like the lie was floating in front of his mother and waving a red flag at her, but she just said, "Well, be quiet when you come in."

Once in the garage Nick grabbed the sack he had fixed and slipped it into the back seat. In it were two sheets and some old towels. He had read that a girl bled the first time, and he couldn't take any chances on getting blood on the car. That would be pretty hard to explain to his father.

He put on his sunglasses, checked the effect in the rearview mirror, and backed out of the driveway, being especially careful because his father would be watching. Driving along, he looked at the empty seat beside him and pictured Sue sitting there. Sue was a great girl; it was hard to imagine what life would be like without her. She was the first girl he'd taken out that had left him feeling as though he were in control. Even he had been able to tell she hadn't dated very much, so he'd suspended the rules and kissed her the first night. Then he'd worried all week for fear she would be mad. She'd gone out with him again but he hadn't kissed her again until five weeks later.

The drive to Sue's house took almost ten minutes, but Nick didn't feel nervous now that he was underway. When he arrived, Sue's father was trimming weeds around the front steps. He was a minister, with a dignified manner and a habit of intoning everything he said as though it were part of a sermon. Nearly every time that Nick came over he was puttering around the yard, and they always discussed the weather.
"Good evening, Mr. Harcourt; nice evening, isn't it?"

"Why hello, Nick." He stood and pulled his green-thumb glove off to shake Nick's hand. "You're right about the evening. In fact, the weather's been real good all week."

Nick didn't feel like inquiring after the begonias, so he forged ahead. "Is Sue about ready?

"I should think so, she's been getting fixed up since five o'clock. Would you like to go inside and wait? Her mother is in the living room."

"Thank you, sir." He opened the door and walked inside. Sue's mother was seated in an island of light in the corner of the somber living room. Sue came down the stairs just as Nick greeted Mrs. Harcourt. He whistled softly. "Wow, do you look good tonight."

She pirouetted, her skirt swinging about her legs. "Like it?"

"You look as good as, as . . . you look great." Nick had forgotten the line he had prepared.

Sue laughed. "Bye, Mom. Don't wait up for us, it's a double feature tonight."

"All right, Sue, have a good time."

Nick opened the door on the driver's side and Sue slid through, stopping just short of the stripe near the middle of the seat. He didn't let her sit tightly against him because it might hinder his driving, but he paid close attention to just how near she chose to sit. Nick prided himself on taking good care of her when they went out. He didn't put his arm around her until they had reached the show and he had put the speaker in the car. About halfway through the first show, he turned her head and kissed her. She cuddled up next to him and smiled. So far, so good. Nick was sure this would be the night.

As the lovers on the screen embraced for the last time and the music swelled to a stirring climax, the lights at the top of the screen came on, nearly blinding them. As Sue reached out and lowered the sun visor, a cultured voice issued from the speaker, "During intermission, we invite you to visit our snack bar for delicious pizza, or enjoy our hamburgers
and french fries.” Sue laughed. “I think they turn those lights on to drive people to the refreshment stand.”

Nick was preoccupied with the problem of how to broach the idea of leaving. He decided to appear casual. “Sue, this next picture’s just a western. What do you say we leave and go for a ride? It’s a beautiful night.”

“Just a western! Nick, it’s a John Wayne picture, and I happen to like John Wayne.”

“Aw. Sue, I thought you liked me.” He pretended to pout.

“Compared to John Wayne? You’ve absolutely got to be kidding.”

“So that’s the way it is.”

“All right, have it your way.”

Nick started the car and drove slowly toward the exit. He spoke in an offhand manner. “Have you ever been out to Coal Valley Hill? There’s a beautiful view out there.”

“Sure, our family used to drive out that way every Sunday afternoon, but my mom started having trouble with hay fever so we had to stop.”

“Oh.” Nick searched for another approach. “Maybe we could drive out by the river; it should be pretty in the moonlight.”

Sue considered this; “I’d rather go to ‘The Burger Manor’ and get a hamburger.” She fluttered her eyes at him and smiled.

Nick checked his watch. There would still be time. “‘The Burger Manor’ it is.” He hoped there wouldn’t be many people around.

No such luck. Sue was out of the car as soon as he had it parked. “There’s Gertrude and Bert. Gertrude! I’ve been trying to call you all day.” She ran across the street, and Nick strolled over to talk to Bert Davis, who wasn’t very happy to see him either. Bert and Gert, ugh. Sue and Gertrude were talking pep council when he arrived.

“Hi, Bert.”

“Hi, Nick.”

“Nice night, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”
So much for conversation. He turned to Sue. "What do you want?"
"Why don't you get me a hamburger with the works."
"Onion?"
"Sure, why not?" Bert was snickering in the background as Nick went in and ordered: two hamburgers, no onion, french fries and a coke—to go. Sue walked in just as Nick finished paying the bill. "Here," he handed her the sack, "I got it to go."

He hurried her out the door and over to the car. Bert and Gretrude were still standing in front of "The Burger Manor," but at the last minute Sue called to them. "Hey, Gretrude, why don't you and Bert come for a ride with us."
"Sure," said Gertrude.
Cripes, Nick thought, now how am I going to get rid of them? "Sue," he whispered, "I wanted to be alone with you tonight."

"It won't hurt you to socialize a little bit." She patted his hand.

When they were all in the car, Nick started driving up and down Main Street. Sue opened her hamburger. "They forgot to put any onions on it." Bert laughed loudly in the back seat.

Nick slowed down and pointedly checked his watch every time he drove past "The Burger Manor," but Gertrude was oblivious to his hints and Bert was enjoying himself immensely at Nick's expense, especially when he found the sack.

"Hey, what's this, Nicky-boy?"
"What?"
"This sack back here." He rattled it. "It's got sheets and stuff in it."

"The sack? Oh, it's just, that is, it's . . . it's some rags that I have to take to a friend of my mother's."

Bert was going to pursue the subject, but Gertrude finally decided to get out. Nick let them off and decided it was still early enough if he hurried. He drove out the west side of town. Sue was riding next to her window, letting the wind
blow her hair. Better get started, Nick thought. "Gee, it's lonesome over here."

She leaned out of the wind. "What?"
"I said, 'Gee, it's lonesome over here.'"
"Oh." She didn't move.
"Aw, Sue, have a heart."

She wasn't listening to him, so he spoke louder. "There's a place I want you to see out by the river; Dad and I go fishing there every once in awhile." He turned off onto a side road just before they reached the river. The car bucked and gravel spit and banged against it. Trees grew on both sides of the road, and their branches arched over the car, creating a cloistered effect. Nick turned onto a dirt road into the trees. The silence was a welcome relief. Then he turned a bend and parked the car. Through an opening in the trees the river lay before them, silver in the moonlight. Faint night sounds drifted through the open windows; crickets, a frog, and the murmur of the water.

Sue was quietly gazing out the window. Nick took a deep breath and dampened his lips. This was it.

"See what I mean, Sue. It's a nice place, isn't it?"
"Ummhmmm."

Nick checked his tie and rubbed his hand across his face; it was still a little sore. He took another deep breath. Yes, this was the big moment. He looked around outside. "Sue, look down there. See the squirrel?"

"Over there? Oh, I see him. Gee, Nick, I like it out here. Everything's so peaceful." She leaned back and closed her eyes.

Nick dried his palms on his pants and wet his lips again. Then he slid over and put his arm around Sue. There weren't any rules anymore; on the second date you could hold hands, and a goodnight kiss was all right after the fourth and at least by the sixth date, but nobody had ever mentioned how to proceed at times like this. It was relaxing just to sit beside her and share the peaceful night. He listened to her breathing; she was so wonderfully soft and warm and alive. Then she looked up at him and there was that prolonged second before they kissed. She tasted like
hamburger and pickle with mint mouthwash in the background. Nick began to relax; there wasn’t going to be anything to this.

“Sue, I love you.” He kissed her neck, getting a stray hair in his mouth.

“Nick, oh, Nick, I love you, too.” He pulled her close to him. As he prepared for the next move he felt his stomach growl faintly; Sue didn’t seem to notice. She began to rub his back and he kissed her lightly on the cheek. His stomach was building up again and he tensed himself and took a deep breath, but it growled anyway. She must have heard.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing.” He pulled her close again. Somehow he had to get her undressed. He tickled her back and toyed idly with a button on her blouse. His stomach was going to protest again, and he gritted his teeth and held his breath. It didn’t help; his stomach snarled loudly into the stillness. Sue giggled. Nick cast an annoyed glance in the direction of his midsection. “Darn stomach anyway.”

“Oh, Nick, I shouldn’t laugh. But you look so funny when you’re embarrassed.” A new fit of laughing shook her and she buried her head in his shoulder, trying to control herself.

Nick was getting desperate; time was running out.

“Nick, I’m sorry, really I am.” She cocked her head at him. “Forgive me?”

“Yeah, sure I do.”

“Nick, maybe we’d better go back now. I don’t want my parents getting worried.”

This wasn’t working out at all. “Yeah, I expect you’re right.” He thought vaguely of swooping in on her, but she was already busy straightening her clothes and fixing her hair. He tried for one last kiss, but she had a bobby pin in her teeth.

Nick started the car and began the job of backing out of the lane. He was going to have to remember to take the sack of rags out of the car. That would be pretty hard to explain to his father.