

# ***INSCAPE***

**Fall 1998**

*A semi-annual magazine for literary and visual arts at Morehead State University.*

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### Easy Loving

People do not call just to say hello; they always want something. I have come to believe that after answering countless phone calls from stubborn voices trying to sell me newspapers, phone companies at war dragging me in the middle of their brawl, or distant relatives or acquaintances trying to make some remote connection, so they could borrow my truck. I am no a pessimist; I am a realist.

"Hello," I slurred half resenting the call since my attention was called away from Seinfeld.

"Henry?" He quizzed.

"Yeah." I got out of the Lazy-boy and walked toward the refrigerator, opened it, grabbed a Miller Lite, and popped the top.

"It's Terry." There was a brief silence—the type of quiet where you become acutely aware of the fact that old friendships do die. "I bet you're surprised to hear from me."

"Yeah, I am." Sipping the Miller Lite and tasting the coldness of the beer on my tongue, I knew it had been at least ten years since I had heard from my old college roommate. After painting the exterior trim of our house all day, the beer tasted like a drop of water would to a man in hell.

"I'm selling insurance now in Atlanta," he said.

"Well, I've got all the insurance I need," I quickly replied, watching Kramer skid into Jerry's apartment.

"Nah," Terry said. "I didn't call to try to sell you something. I'm gonna be up around Nashville tomorrow and thought I might stop by. It's been too long."

"Sure." I was a bit surprised. It must be a new sales technique, but I figured I had to see him; it was the least I could do. "I'll get home from the dealership 'bout six. Come on by, and we'll cook a hamburger or something."

"You still with that Ford dealership?" Terry asked.

"Been ten years," I said.

"Has it been that long? Time sure does pass by fast. Well, can I bring anything?" Terry asked.

"No, that's all right."

"See you then," he said.

"Okay." I pushed the button on the portable and laid it down on the end table. Bliss walked through the kitchen and into the den, removing her straw hat and soiled gardening gloves.

"Did I hear you talking to someone?"

"Yeah," I said, "it was my old roommate from college, Terry."

"Oh," she said, "What did he want?" She was sitting on the church pew, removing her tennis shoes.

"He's coming by tomorrow. He'll be in Nashville on business." Kramer's apartment was glowing red from a Kenny Roger's restaurant sign across the street.

"When is the last time you heard from him?"

"Ten years," I said.

"What did you say he wanted?" Bliss cocked her head a little.

"Just wanted to stop by. I thought I'd grill a hamburger or something." I knew she didn't understand. Quite frankly, I didn't either.

"Well, you need me to do anything?"

"No, that's okay."

"I do have a teacher's meeting after school tomorrow with some of my kids' parents, but I ought to be home around 7 p.m."

"That's fine," I said. Kramer and Jerry were swapping apartments.

After Seinfeld went off, I read the newspaper. I should say I stared at it, wondering why Terry would call after all this time. When I went to bed, I dreamed Terry came into the house, opened his briefcase, and shot me. I wondered why he would shoot me, I guess I tossed and turned a lot that night, and it was probably due to the Benadryl I had taken. Bliss even said I snored, although I think she was listening to her own snoring and blaming me for it. Women will do that.

When I got to the dealership, we had cars lined up, waiting to be repaired. I was really tired of listening to people complain about their cars not running the way they should, talking about noises only they could hear, and bitching about the warranties running out just as they needed something. Service with a smile, I thought. That's why I'm the manager. And while I wanted to knock the hell out of them, I didn't. A mortgage, two car payments, insurance, taxes, student loans, utility bills, phone and cell phone bills kept my mouth shut. In a way, I thanked God we didn't have any children. The paychecks helped, but just as soon as they came, they were gone. Once a week, I felt good till the money was gone; the rest of the week, Miller Lite consoled me.

While filling out an invoice for a retired army sergeant, who thought he knew more about his car than the Ford company since he had worked for the motorpool, I heard a song on the radio. I stopped writing and laid the pen on the countertop. I looked at the speaker on the wall, and when I heard Freddie Hart singing the chorus, "Easy Lov-in," I knew why it had been ten years since I had not talked to Terry and began laughing.

"What's the problem?" the sergeant asked. "You laughing at me?"

"Nah," I said. "That song brought back a memory."

"Yeah," he boasted. "reminds me of all the broads I picked up in Nam." He laughed like a Pillsbury dough-boy who had smoked for thirty years.

Hart was on the second chorus as I finished filling out the invoice. I told the sergeant to take it to the cashier and to call me if he had any more problems. He ambled away, his plump body swaying to and fro as if he had been drinking. Though Terry was not fat, or had not been back then, he, too, had swayed when he was drunk, and that was the last picture I had of him in my mind.

It was Terry's birthday, and we wanted to celebrate, so I got a group together from the dorm. Normally, we hung out at The Break, a bar at the Sheraton, because one of our friends gave us a few drinks on the house and stiffed the older tourists on their tabs after they had too many to remember. That night, however, we went to Paradise, a country bar, because we wanted something different, and we had been there since George Jones had made an appearance. After several rum and Cokes and half a pack of cigarettes, I was feeling good, and while some drunks get sluggish, I would expend every bit of energy, acting the fool.

Terry, on the other hand, had been drinking Captain Morgan spiced rum with Dr. Pepper, and he sat, grinning and all red in the face. I had danced several fast dances, but Terry had not danced with anyone, and I got the notion to set him up with an old bar fly named Ethyl. She was about as drunk as a person could get, and she was about as unattractive as a person could be. Her nose was S-shaped, looked too big for her mouse-like head, and hung down to her top lip, which consequently drooped since she had no upper teeth. She wore her yellow-gray

hair pulled back in a ponytail. Ethyl chain smoked True cigarettes, wore Wrangler jeans and a flannel shirt, and had a reputation of being the quarter champion at Paradise. When she walked by, you would forget you were in a smoke filled bar because Ethyl bathed in Channel No. 5. She uncontrollably cursed like she had Teret's, but I liked Ethyl. I didn't know if it was the liquor that made her so upbeat, or if she naturally had a great personality. Surprisingly enough, I saw her as a role model because age had not slowed her. Of course, I had not seen her in the morning either.

I followed the scent through the haze, seeking Ethyl. When I spotted her playing quarters with a D.O.T. crew, I bent and whispered in her ear. "Ethyl, I want you to do me a favor."

She turned, her red eyes glared at me. "Sure honey," she croaked.

"See that guy over there in the white polo?"

Ethyl's head bobbed.

"It's his birthday," I slurred. "He ain't danced with nobody tonight, and I know he wants to dance with you because you're the best. Would you go get him and make him dance with you?"

"I love a young one," she growled.

I slinked through the maze of tables and hid behind a group to watch Terry's reaction. Ethyl bulldozed her way through the crowd to Terry and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and looking surprised, he was reluctantly pulled out of his chair and toward the dance floor. Terry's face was apple red, and his eyes darted back and forth like a paranoid person, scanning the crowd for me. I could see the anger and embarrassment.

Just as Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line" stopped, the DJ played Hart's "Easy Loving." Ethyl pulled Terry close and on the first chorus, her hands moved from his hips to his butt cheeks, where she gently rubbed them, then, she clamped down on them like a dog's teeth on a ham bone. Terry's eyes opened wide like an owl. "Damn," I said. "I didn't know his eyes would open that wide." His eyes rolled like marbles till they spotted me and he mouthed, "You asshole." Terry was too much of a gentleman to run away from the dance floor. But when the dance was over, he walked out of the bar. Our friends were hee-hawing and I went outside to let him know it was a joke. His Volkswagen Jetta squaled tires leaving the parking lot. That was the last time I saw Terry, and it had been ten years. I tried to call him and left him a couple of messages apologizing, but he had never returned my calls.

Bliss had thawed, pattied, and refrigerated the hamburger for me. I lit up the grill at 5:30 p.m., and Terry's avocado green Lumina pulled in the driveway about fifteen minutes later. I stood on the deck and threw my hand up in the air. Opening the door, Terry stood. His hair had thinned on top leaving wisps of hair, which he smoothed. His abdomen protruded like he had a rapidly growing tumor, and when he grinned, I noticed that his teeth had yellowed with age. Terry picked up his briefcase and walked up the deck steps; we firmly shook hands.

"Have any trouble finding the house?"

"Nah."

Clearing my throat, I stared at the cow skin briefcase and remembered I had not given Terry directions. "I didn't give you directions."

"I had the address from the phone book and a map. Actually, it was really easy to find." He looked around at hickory trees. "Nice place."

"Thanks, we like it."

"Your wife home?"

"Nah, she had parent-teacher conferences at the school." The coals were fairly white, so I placed four hamburger patties on the grill.

"Sorry, I'll miss her," he said, clicking two buttons on his briefcase.

-Making my voice stern like I was scolding the dog, I asked, "What in the world do you need your briefcase for?"

"Oh, I've got a little something for you." Terry deviantly grinned.

I saw the look on Terry's face across the smoke-filled bar as Ethyl grabbed his butt cheeks, and I could hear Freddie Hart singing, "Easy Loving." "You didn't have to bring anything," I said.

"I had to bring this."

As usual, my heart thudded from anxiety. Not even prosac had suppressed the thuds I often felt when under stress. Terry pulled a black pistol, aimed it at my head, and pulled the trigger. I threw my hands in front of my face and screamed. "No! No! I'm sorry about Ethyl. It was just a joke." I could feel the luke warm liquid on my hands and uncovered my face. Terry was hysterically laughing; in between laughs, he coughed. There was no blood on me, only water. I was confused. The gun was a plastic water pistol, and I felt a sense of relief like a person on trial feels when the judge reads, "not guilty."

"I told you I'd get back at you one day for tying me to the bed with tube socks and pouring all that beer on me to get the answers for the lit. test you had to make up because you were drunk!" He chuckled and coughed.

I smiled and felt my heart sputter to calm like a car with a bad exhaust system. "I don't remember that."

"Well, I'm not surprised." He laughed. "You were always drunk."

My facial muscles were tight, and I had to strain a smile. "I thought you were mad about Ethyl."

"I wondered why you said that a minute ago. Who's Ethyl?" Terry's busy eyebrows angled up.

"Never mind." I flipped the burgers. I reckoned what Terry didn't know wouldn't hurt him. The cooking meat smelled good like the road after a summer rain. "Terry, why didn't I ever hear from you?"

He looked down. "You know, I had to go home, and I was embarrassed. I got my old high school girlfriend pregnant, and I should have known better. We ended up getting married. Then, the baby was a still born. We divorced shortly after."

"Man, I'm sorry. I didn't know." All these years had passed, and I was mad at Terry for holding a grudge over a practical joke. He didn't even remember. I felt guilty like a child in church who has thought bad things but has not actually done anything wrong.

"Oh, that's okay." Terry smoothed his hair.

"Burgers are almost done. Want a beer?"

"That would be great," he said.

I knew we would talk over good times, and even though I wanted to change my belief that friendships die, I wouldn't because at some level, I knew it would be a long time before I saw Terry again. People just get busy.