

CHAPTER 12

had ever kissed. When I moved my lips away from hers, we just looked at each other, and somehow we were not acting anymore.

"I think we'd better go downstairs," Lorraine said.

"All right."

"Dinner is served," she announced, carrying this big plate of congealed spaghetti. We each sat at opposite ends of the table with the candles burning away. I poured us some wine in these long-stemmed glasses, and for a few moments we just sat looking at each other—her with the feather in her hair and me with my moustache.

"To the Pigman," I said softly.

"To the Pigman."

She lifted her glass, and she was lovely.

"I wish this one would hurry up and croak because her husband has been getting a little too friendly lately."

"Yes, Mother."

"Any man who can even think of flirting with another woman while his wife is on her deathbed deserves to be shot."

"Can I have seventy-five cents to get my blue dress out of the cleaners?" I asked, though I could tell by the way she was fidgeting with her hairbrush that she was not finished with her own topic.

"Get it out of my pocketbook, and hand me my compact while you're at it." She loosened the knot on her bathrobe and sat down at the kitchen table.

"He calls me out into the hall and asks how his wife is doing, and all the time he's got his hands in his pockets and is giving me this wink. I don't know what he heard about nurses, but I think I set him straight."

I went into the bedroom and started straightening up, hoping she'd stop repeating herself.

"I looked him right in the eye, and I said, 'Mr. Mooney, I think it would be a nice gesture if you went in and held your wife's hand. It might help her forget the pain from her cancer.'"

"I have to leave for school now, Mother," I said, wondering what she'd do if she was taking care of Mr. Pignati. "Give me a kiss."

"Be careful. . . . Lorraine, don't you think that skirt is a little too short?"

"It's the longest skirt in the sophomore class."

"Don't be fresh. Just because all the other girls have sex on their minds, doesn't mean you have to."

John wasn't at the bus stop that morning, but we finally got together during third-period lunch. His hair was combed for the first time in months, and he actually had on a clean shirt. I could tell he was still charged up over our having the Pigmans' house to ourselves.

"I didn't get in until the start of the second period."

"How come?"

"Bore wanted to know how I could be missing *forty-two* homework assignments in Problems in American Democracy, and I told him it was because I can't concentrate with the vacuum cleaner

going all the time. Then he went off on this big new plan where he's going to check my homework every night, which will last for a day or two until he's too tired or busy."

As he spoke he dragged me to the pay phone in the hall near the principal's office.

"Operator?"

"Yes, sir."

"I just lost my dime trying to get St. Ambrose Hospital. I got some saloon by mistake."

"What number did you want?"

"Sa7-7295."

"I'll ring it for you."

"Thank you, operator." When the hospital answered, John passed the phone to me and stood in the hall to watch for any teachers, because the kids aren't allowed to use the public telephone at Franklin High unless they get a special pass. And even then it's got to be to call your mother to say that the school nurse has just diagnosed leprosy or something.

They gave me the head nurse on Mr. Pignati's floor, and she told me he was going to be in for at least seventy-two hours—the danger period when a lot of people take that second attack and die. She sounded very nice when I told her I was his daughter, and she tried to explain something about this

high-voltage machine they've got which is supposed to come in handy if a second attack does come. "Saturday would probably be the earliest he should leave."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"But don't you worry about your father. We're taking very good care of him."

"Thank you."

"As soon as he wakes up from his morning nap I'll tell him you called."

I hung up.

"Is he all right?" John asked.

"Fine." I smiled.

John had the idea it was going to be great fun going over to that house by ourselves, but it didn't work out that way. Monday when we had the spaghetti dinner and put on those costumes was a lovely evening. It really was. I think when we looked at each other in the candlelight, it was the first time I was glad to be alive. I didn't know exactly why. It was sort of silly I suppose—him with his moustache and me with the feather in my hair—but somehow it was as if I was being told about something, something wonderful, something beautiful waiting just for me. All I had to do was wait long enough.

Tuesday night I made TV dinners in the oven

and burned them. They were supposed to be pork chops, but John said they looked like fried dwarf's ears. Wednesday after school we stopped by the house for some beer and pretzels, but I knew I wasn't going to get out that night because my mother was on the warpath over antifermenting the kitchen. Thursday we didn't go over there at all because we really had to go to the library for this report for Problems in American Democracy:

Read the amendments to the Constitution and condense the meaning of each into one succinct sentence. Also answer the following: 1. Which amendment is most important in your life? 2. Which amendment is least important? 3. What amendment would you make to the Constitution if you were President of the United States?

On Friday we cut school since that was the last day before Mr. Pignati was due home. We got to the house around eight forty-five in the morning, and I went right into the kitchen and started making breakfast. John wanted scrambled eggs with Sloppy-Joe sauce, and that's what he got. I just had scrambled eggs with pizza-flavored catsup. I burned the toast a little, and that was the first of a long list of complaints from Mr. John Conlan.

"*Ohhhhhhh!*" he groaned.

"I'll put some more bread in."

"It's too late now. My eggs'll get cold."

Then he didn't like my coffee. I tried to explain to him that you can't ruin instant coffee, but he kept insisting I did. I showed him the directions on the label—how you take a level teaspoonful and just add boiling water—but he insisted there was some kind of skill involved.

After breakfast I asked him very nicely to take the garbage out, and he refused.

"Why should I put out the garbage when you're the one who makes it?"

"You make just as much as I do."

"I do not."

"Your beer cans take up most of the space."

"Shut up and do the dishes."

That's the kind of day it started out to be. I wanted to put the place in order so that when Mr. Pignati got back, he wouldn't find a pig house, but the way John was acting I was beginning to feel sorry for his mother if he was always so infantile at home.

"Could *you* do the dishes?" I asked.

"No."

"You could at least do your *own* dishes!"

Every now and then I'm startled at how good-looking John is, but he glared at me from under the shock of hair that fell across his brow and scared me a little. I knew something was bothering him—and I don't mean the dishes or the garbage. If I

didn't know how maladjusted John is at times, I would have simply walked out of that house and not spoken to him again as long as I lived. But I let him pout in front of the television and watch a rerun of Doris Day's called *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*.

This particular mood in John had been building up ever since the night that he kissed me in the bedroom. I don't know whether he had just started thinking about our relationship—that I might possibly be something more than his straight man. I really don't know. But suddenly we had become slightly awkward in front of each other. Of course, I had always been clumsy around him, but at least I knew I had been in love with him for months. I also knew he liked me a lot but only as a friend or a dreamboat with a leak in it. But now suddenly he was wearing shaving lotion, combing his hair, and fighting with me. There was something about all that which made me smile as I scraped the Sloppy-Joe sauce off his plate.

"I'll take the garbage out now," he said, appearing in the doorway.

"I'd appreciate that very much."

"I'm only doing it because the Pigman's coming home tomorrow, and this hovel better look good."

"Of course."

We really went to work on the house and fixed it

up better than ever before. The only room we didn't touch was the one with the pigs in it. There was something almost religious about that room, as though it contained a spirit that belonged only to Mr. Pignati, and it was best left alone.

Once I had a nightmare about that room. I was walking down a long hall and saw the curtains on a doorway at the end. Even though I was dreaming, I knew exactly where I was, and I felt an icy chill run through me. I wanted to run away, but something was pushing me toward the curtains, and I started to scream for John.

"Help me . . . help me . . . please."

I couldn't stop my legs from moving closer and closer—as if large hands were fastened to them.

The room was very dark though I could make out the shapes of pigs all around me. But instead of being on a table the pigs were arranged on a long black container, and as I started to realize what it was the fingers propelling my legs tightened and moved me closer. I felt the same horrible force taking control of my arms, and I couldn't stop my hands from moving down to the lid of the box. When I touched it my hands went cold, and I knew I was about to open a coffin. I started to cry and plead and call to God to stop me as the lid began to rise.

Then was when I woke up screaming. Right there and then I should have known the dream was an omen of death.

"Lorraine!"

"What's going on in there?" I called from the sofa where I was admiring how clean everything looked. I heard John rummaging through the closets in the kitchen and a banging of bottles. I went to see what he was doing, and he had the kitchen table loaded with all the beer in the house. It wasn't enough to keep the Stork Club in business, but there were a few quarts of beer and some wine.

"John, what are you doing?"

"Is there any more beer in the icebox?"

"What's going on?"

He opened the refrigerator himself and counted about nine loose cans of beer. Then he slammed the door and went into the living room to the telephone.

"We're going to have a few friends over for drinks tonight."

"Are you crazy?"

"Just a few intimate friends for a quiet little drink. Don't you think Mr. Pignati wants us to have a social life?" He smiled, his great big eyes glowing.