

JOHN EVANS

## Nineteen

Jeff's hands were shaking and it made him smile. The neck of the tequila bottle clinked against the rim of the short hotel glass.

"I wish we had some more beer," she had said. "I really wish we had some Jagermeister too. You have to drink what you love, you know. Jagermeister is my favorite."

It was hot and the sticky vinyl straps on the lawn chair held his sweat. They were in North Carolina.

"I know you're hung over from your crazy time last night, but you really should have a beer. It'll make you feel better." She smiled. She was teasing him. Her hair was wet. Pool water dripped from the ends and fell to the cement. Droplets ran down her chest. There was a tiny pool in her navel.

Jeff finished pouring, corked the bottle and walked onto the balcony. He could see the pool three stories below: a few couples and their ubiquitous toddlers, a couple of girls—maybe fourteen, maybe sixteen—cousins of Kim's who, like the others, were there for the wedding and had seen them leave together.

"There's some tequila from last night up in the room: good stuff if you want to really drink."

"Uncle Trent's room?"

"Yeah, that's where I'm staying."

She had taken his hand and led him across the patio, in full view of the family, and he had been both elated and frightened, fast yet casual about pulling his hand away, afraid of being seen and still more afraid of revealing that he was not, in an older brother sort of way, completely at ease.

She put her arms over his shoulders and took the drink. Jeff could smell her shampoo, and sweat, and the chlorine from the pool water. Nineteen, he thought. She stood there beside him, firm and tan, with the strings on her bikini making slight indentations in her hips, a subtle curvature just beginning to show on the tops of her thighs. Borrowed time.

"What do you want to do?" She drank the third-full glass in one gulp and smiled.

"I don't know, drink a little more, maybe go back to the pool."

"I think you might be getting a little burned there, big guy." She slapped him on the chest and walked back into the room, then filled the glass half-full.

Jeff took it and drank it.

"That was for me."

"There's more."

He sat down on the corner of the unmade bed and faced the television. The Weather Channel logo striped a scene of wind-blown palm trees. The sound was muted. He let a minute pass in silence.

She grabbed the remote from the bed beside him and flipped through the menu options. "You know this place has pornos, don't you?"

Jeff leaned back onto his elbows.

“They don’t show previews, but there are pictures for each movie and a list of people who are in them. I’ve seen a couple of these before.”

He thought about playfully pulling her on top of him or making some comment about “getting into trouble,” but did neither.

“Your uncle would probably be a little suspicious if one of these turned up on his bill.”

“They don’t list what movie you watched, it says so in the ordering information.” She turned off the TV and poured another drink. “I wish we had some Jagermeister. I can drink that stuff like it’s water.” She faced him and drank another half-glass of tequila.

Jeff rose from the bed and stood beside her. Her arm brushed against his as he poured another drink.

“Feeling better now?”

“Yeah, I actually am feeling a lot better.”

“What was the big bachelor party like? Did you guys go crazy with strippers?”

“We went to strip clubs, but there wasn’t anything very crazy about it. One guy left and slept in the limo.”

“Were you bored or something?”

“No,” he lied, “It was fun to watch those guys get so excited.”

“You weren’t excited?”

“I enjoyed the fact that everyone else was excited.”

Kim made a look of disgust. “All of Uncle Trent’s other friends seem so old, but not you. I bet all the strippers hit on you.”

Jeff smiled and poured another drink.

“What should we do now?” He took a step toward her. He was worried about the time that they had been gone and about Kim getting too drunk from the tequila.

She smiled, but did not move. Her eyes had begun to droop.

“Should we go back to the pool?”

“. . . Yeah.”

They lay down on the lawn chairs on their stomachs and faced each other and shared a long smile. Kim’s eyes drooped, opened slowly, and then closed. Soon he could see her back rise and fall with the slow breaths of sleep. Tiny blond hairs shown against the dark tan on her lower back. They were alone. The tag from her bikini bottom protruded into the subtle curvature around her spine. He watched this for a long time and tried to imagine a time and a place where he could stroke her back with his finger tips—so lightly that he touched the hairs, but not the skin.

When he told her that he was going back to the room, she barely raised her head. Later, as he dressed for the rehearsal dinner, he watched her out the window as she awkwardly collected her things and walked inside.

When he saw her next she had on a black dress with a long slit running up her thigh that made her look vaguely like a salsa dancer. It was somewhere between just right and slightly tacky for the occasion. It made her legs look long and smooth and seemed to flavor the smiles she flashed in distant conversations with a faint air of mockery. He had missed her the previous night, both

before and after her mother had stood at their table and apologized to Trent, saying that Kim was not feeling well and that she was going to bed early so that she could make certain that she would be healthy for the ceremony. Twice she'd had the opportunity to say hello to him and had not.

"She's ignoring you."

Craig, the least stiff of the other groomsmen, handed Jeff a beer. He and Jeff had spent the late afternoon skimming beers from the reception bar and talking about everything but Trent and his soon-to-be-wife, Laurie. On the lawn in front of them a crew of effeminate caterers was struggling to position an ice-sculpture.

"Nah, she's just a little embarrassed."

"Embarrassed of what?"

"Shit, I don't know. I guess that without a friend to send across the playground to tell me I'm cute, she doesn't know what to do. I'll find a way to make it happen."

"I'll bet you don't."

"How much?"

"Fifty."

"We'll see."

To Jeff it seemed only just that it happen; the one guy without a career or family, the one guy who had ridden a bus to Charlotte and could not afford his own hotel room in some way deserved the girl that, on a variety of levels, every guy at the wedding had admired. It was his compensation for being different, a way of confirming certain choices.

"How about a hundred?"

*"I said we'll see."*

During the ceremony she sat in a corner of the second row, visible only as the procession entered and departed.

Afterward, she circulated on the other side of the room with her parents' friends and her small cousins. The one time he was near, she knelt to talk with an elderly relative in a wheelchair.

Their timing was off during the cake cutting as well, she breaking away to the bar for a bourbon and coke while he stood trapped in an inane conversation about the merits of different public golf courses.

On her second trip to the bar, he caught her.

"Hey little girl, your parents let you drink?"

For a moment she looked startled.

"I do whatever I want... What about you?" She tapped his chest.

Jeff looked around. "It depends."

"On?"

"The situation."

"Well, you're beginning to make me angry. Don't be such a wuss."

"You're the one who was ignoring me, little girl."

"I'm not ignoring you now." She patted him very near his butt.

"So what should we do?" He was conscious of the way she spoke in a normal tone, while his voice was almost a whisper. Goddamn, at her age he would have choked long before this...

"I don't know, you look pretty good in that tux... I think we should dance."

“Not here. Not in front of your family.”

“Come *on!* It’s just dancing. It’s not like I’m going to let you fuck me or something. They don’t care.”

She took his hand and pulled him to the dance floor, very near the spot where Trent and Laurie were having their majestic second or third dance—the one after Trent had danced with his mother and Laurie had danced with her father. She put her arms over his shoulders. The song was “Easy Like Sunday Morning,” Commodores’ version—a wonderful damn song.

Jeff surveyed the twirling couples around them. Everyone who had not already seen him with her would certainly see them shortly. Thirty-two and nineteen . . . He only looked about twenty-six or seven, but that made things even worse. As they turned he could see Craig, over by the bar, drink held high in the air. In the other direction, Laurie was waving to them. So much for being subtle. His mind raced like a huge war computer, exploring possible scenarios and their probable outcomes. Even the good ones looked bad.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want to dance with me?”

She pulled him close, conspicuously close, and Jeff could almost feel her cheek on his neck. The tension added something to the impact of her touch. It was getting to the point where he wanted to do it right there, right on the dance floor, just to have it over with. He pulled away, slightly, glad that he had kept his beer so that he only had one arm available to wrap around her waist.

“Sure I want to dance with you, but don’t you think we could figure out something a little less conspicuous?”

“Nope.”

“We could dance by ourselves, without anyone to bother us, outside?”

“Maybe later.”

An hour later they had danced to three more songs. They had walked to the bar together to get drinks. Most of the guys, including Craig, had asked him questions, prodded him with crude humor. What was happening was obvious, and, in Jeff’s mind, shameful given the occasion, but still he plodded forward in clear view, always being careful to avoid the eyes of the older relatives. He wanted Kim. He wanted to do it and he wanted to be envied for it. Soon he would find a way to get her alone.

He walked to the bathroom, urinated, washed his hands and tipped the attendant heavily after taking a handful of mints.

“You know, if you can’t help yourself, I’ll understand. It’s OK.” Trent stopped him coming out the door.

“No way, I would never do that,” Jeff said a bit too emphatically. “This is your day and I’m not going to mess it up.”

Trent smiled and patted him on the back. “She told me about you two drinking together in the room. In fact, I think she’s told everyone about it. It’s exciting for her. *It’s OK.*”

“Who’s everyone?”

Trent raised his palms toward the ceiling as he walked away. Neither of them had meant what he said, and both of them knew it. It had been less than sixteen hours since they had stood on Trent’s balcony, drinking and throwing bottles into the pre-dawn gray, talking about women and

timing and their mutual fear that, though very pleasant, marriage was like the terminus of something—the comforting nap in the snow while still three miles from safety.

“Do it!” Trent yelled back over his shoulder, before entering the ballroom.

Jeff caught her at the bar. He ordered his drink while she slowly stirred hers, then stepped toward her, brushed the hair from around her ear, and whispered, “Would you like to take a walk?”

She nodded. They slipped out through a side door.

Outside, until their eyes adjusted, there was only the hiss of garden sprinklers and the methodical chirp of crickets. The path was lit by tracts of dim, evenly spaced lights, and as they walked down it hand and hand, the music and light from the reception slowly faded behind them. Jeff was comforted as the darkness drew in around them; he had waited all night for it. He gave Kim’s hand an affectionate squeeze, hoping to pause for a kiss.

Kim tugged him gently forward. “Come on, there’s a fountain ahead I want you to see. It’s beautiful.”

And as they walked, Jeff could not fight off the grin that was spreading across his face. He looked down, away, anywhere but at Kim, feeling like a little kid, wanting to jump, or skip, anything to avoid the simple, plodding forward motion that suddenly felt like a celebratory stroll up the 18th fairway at Augusta.

They reached the fountain and, given the circumstances, it actually was beautiful. Jeff was happier than he could remember being in years. Kim was lovely, but there was something more. It was about the goose bumps he got on a Friday in third grade, sitting indian-style on the floor watching movies, when Christina Tyler brushed his arm. It was about the cool feeling of air and sweat on his temples, roller skating to a silly ABBA song with a girl from his YMCA soccer team. And a couch at a friend’s house, and a girl with braces, and the workman painting outside who sometimes looked in the windows and made them giggle. Maybe still, but a bit less, it was the taste of beer and the wandering noise in his head as he kissed the unobtainable high school valedictorian; the stitches from his wisdom teeth slowly unraveling in the back of his mouth. And also, but just barely, just in passing, it was about running down the center of a brick-paved campus lane at five in the morning, still drunk and sticky, after waking in a blond girl’s dorm room to the clock-radio-announcement that his sports hero had retired. After that, a few smiles, or smells, or funny moments as the years passed and the number of uneventful encounters found a way to slowly accumulate—an unannounced, creeping, lethargic sort of boredom. But those early ones! About them he could remember *everything*. A force driven by pure excitement had recorded every element, chronicled every sensate, so that the women he met now were mere compilations of the disparate female traits that precede them—products of the first few experiments with a drug who’s efficiency had slacked, slowed and nearly fallen despite a lifetime of attempts to recapture its original effects. But here, now, in front of him, holding her dress high and kicking water in the fountain so that a slight ring of reflected light shone silver on the wetted bottom hem of her dress, (he made a conscious mental note of this), was the drug incarnate, an uncertainty that would reappear again and again, and it was wonderful.

“Come on in!” She kicked water at him. A few droplets speckled his shirt and pants. “It’s only water!”

Jeff sat down on a bench near the fountain and watched as she spun with arms outstretched, dangerously close to the foamy columns of aerated water. He took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his rented tuxedo pants to the knees. Kim held her dress high. Jeff stepped into the water and walked toward her. He wanted to feel again the slight softness at the curve of her hips, slide his hand over the slickness of her silk dress, get close enough to put his nose near her neck and smell her shampoo and the faintly salty air of her sweat. Droplets shone on her bare legs.

Kim smiled and kicked water at him, completely soaking him below the waist.

Good, it was done.

He continued to walk toward her, kicking water high into the air, thrilled by the way her teeth shone an exaggerated white in the lights of the fountain as she bit her bottom lip, cognizant of the heavy, spherical sound of the falling water, the dimly lit, vine-covered columns that surrounded them, the heavy smell of honeysuckle and freshly trimmed bluegrass. She put her hand on his neck and drew it down toward his chest. There was an abrasion to her touch so slight, it seemed he could feel the individual ridges of her fingerprints. He lay his right hand on her back and let it descend until it found the curvature that hinted at the upper reaches of her ass, then let his fingers rest in the pair of near-dimples that only a chosen few girls have at the bottom of their lower back. She pulled him closer and their wet chests and legs pressed against each other.

He smiled, and then continued to smile, because she did nothing. She did not close her eyes or tilt her head or even smile back. She only stared at him, and he felt a chill of frustration, a vague consciousness of his age. Jeff pulled her closer and closed his hands behind her waist, then began to sway, as if dancing, though he could hear nothing over the sound of the splashing water. She moved with him, holding him tightly, her head resting on his shoulder. Her warmth and smell and softness remained as Jeff's thoughts drifted away and returned, drifted and returned. What was happening to him was very nice, but amiss, outside the current of what was real, and again, just as during their last few moments in the hotel room, it felt false. Jeff pulled his head back to look at her, to try to discern a reason, but received only the same, expressionless stare. Ever so cautiously he removed his hand from her back and moved it to her face. Using the lightest touch he tilted her chin, leaning toward her as he did so. Her eyes, clear and green, stared into his.

Nothing.

Jeff stepped away and started to speak, but decided against it. There was an unwillingness to let go, a last look, a final attempt at redemption. Kim managed something like a giggle. He picked up his shoes and socks near the bench and walked barefoot the length of the dark brick pathway, back to the reception pavilion, leaving her standing in the fountain.

Inside, the overhead lights reflected brightly off of the lacquered floor and into his unadjusted eyes. The space around him was silent. There was a distinct feeling of a celebration recently abandoned; the room held a warmth far greater than what could be produced by the few patent caterers standing beyond the periphery of cluttered tables.

Jeff sat down on a chair in the entryway and pulled on his socks. The shoes he tied slowly; there seemed to him nowhere else he had to go; there was nothing in the world he felt he had to do. Behind him there was the sound of the bathroom door closing.

"Well?" Craig sat down beside him.

"I think it was a game of some sort."

They were silent as Craig awaited an explanation. Jeff's pants dripped between the slats on the bench. A puddle formed on the floor below him.

To hell with Craig.

Jeff stood and walked to the window at the front of the hall. He stared at his own unsatisfying, light-streaked reflection for a few seconds, then stepped forward and peered into the dimly-lit scene beyond. It was the great moment. Trent and Laurie were ducking through a gauntlet of bubbles as they descended toward a gleaming white Rolls Royce. They were smiling, rushing forward with mock-urgency; the expressions that surrounded them radiated pure joy. Beside the chauffeur they turned and waved—searching the crowd for special friends or relatives to whom a shared glance would signify a unique confidence, a special thank you. Jeff leaned and pressed his forehead against the cool glass until his exhalation obscured the scene in fog. Somehow it seemed to him so very, very perfect, as if it could only occur in black and white, as if it could only exist as the image that fills the void inside a new picture frame, before you replace it with one of your own.