

SUNFLOWERS

I didn't know too many people in Port Holling, so having Bert around was pretty important, he got me "in" to places. He'd arranged my interview with the construction company, my inexpensive room at the Emerald Arms, and most recently, my blind date with Marlene. That was what we were trying to fix. "Should be another couple of blocks," he said, indicating with a nod. "If I remember, her house is yellow and there's a swing on the porch."

Marlene and I had met outside the Rialto Theater for an early show and possibly dinner or dessert afterwards. I wore a red carnation in my lapel so she would recognize me, just like in the movies. It worked.

A white top, heels, a tan skirt, and lots of lipstick. That's what Marlene showed up in. She was older, I don't mean as old as me, but she was older and still looked pretty good. She used to work with Bert over at the cleaners one summer, and then she got a job as a receptionist in the Tower Building.

Bert and I were listening to some Hank Williams in his truck when he started talking about baseball, going on and on with this trivia question he'd read in the paper. I got restless and started fidgeting, looking out the window, reading the street signs, even arranging the money left in my wallet, while he just kept talking.

"Hell, did I miss it?" he finally asked, interrupting himself. We had stopped at a dead end. "This is Comanche Lane isn't it?" I looked around for a street sign, but there weren't any. It was hard to even see the road with the sun glaring off just about everything and sweat dripping down my forehead. Bert hung a wide U-turn and stepped on the gas. "Look for a porch swing," he said, rolling down his window. "I know Marlene's house has a porch swing. And remember, it's yellow." I could sense his frustration.

Marlene had ordered a steak sandwich that night. A steak sandwich with fries, cherry coke, and a side of garlic toast. I wasn't too hungry, so I just had the grilled cheese. This surprised her I think, because she said "Oh, I thought we were having dinner."

I'd gone over the whole date with Bert step-by-step to see if we could figure out what'd happened, where I'd blown it, so I couldn't help but replay it in my mind even now. Bert was confused and couldn't come up with anything other than "Hey, she's a woman." I'd left out the part about the girl in the sun dress.

They'd sat across from us at another table, this pair of younger girls. One had her back to me and the other was sitting straight ahead. Marlene couldn't see either of them, and that was fine. While the waiter brought over our food, I noticed the first girl, the one wearing a sun dress and facing me, trying to get a glimpse of what we'd ordered. I caught her eye and she looked away and smiled. Then she got up and headed towards the rear of the restaurant. Marlene was talking to me about something, but I wasn't really paying attention. My eyes were stuck on the girl as she walked back, beautiful in her sun dress.

Of course I didn't tell Bert about any of this when I reconstructed the date for him. Nor did I tell him about how I ended up catching the girl's eye four or five more times that night, or about how, after we had ordered pie, Marlene got her own idea about what was going on and politely asked me to take her home.

"I don't understand," Bert said, interrupting my playback. "I thought she lived right here." He seemed a little anxious because we'd spent the last five minutes in silence, both a little too confused to say anything. I looked down at the flowers sitting in my lap and at the card Bert had written for me, attached with a little plastic garden fork to the stems. The handwriting reflected the size of his hands.

"Let's find a gas station," Bert finally said. "We'll get the address out of the phone book."

I guess a lot of other guys would drive around for hours searching for something instead of just stopping to get directions, myself included, but not Bert. He liked things organized. I'd learned that about him one weekend last summer. We'd gone up to the mountains hoping to get in a little relaxation time, do some fishing, and maybe drink a few beers. But it turned out to be a real disaster. Bert had the whole trip planned out right to the very last minute, and there was no time left for anything spontaneous. Whenever I suggested something that wasn't on the agenda, he kind of got annoyed. "Maybe I'm too set in my ways and all, but hey..." he'd always say, fading out in a tone that let you know the subject was over.

Reading off the street signs, I couldn't help but think that we

were going to a lot of trouble for nothing though, driving around trying to find Marlene's house just so I could apologize. Bert had rehearsed the speech with me a couple times, trying to convince me that it'd be easy. She'd come to the door and handing her the flowers I'd say, "Hi, Marlene. These are for you. Listen, I'm really sorry about the way things went the other night. I don't know what came over me. I was hoping maybe sometime I could give you a call and make it up to you." Bert said that was the way to do it, be real formal and unassuming, that was the only way out of the dog-house.

It was all starting to give me a headache. There was Bert with his talking, and there was the sun beating down pretty hard, and then there were all these houses on all these streets, and everything looked the same. "Maybe it'd be easier for me to find it on foot," I said, cutting Bert off. "Besides, dragging you through this isn't really fair. You're not the one who's responsible." I lied.

"You sure?" he said, looking down at the speedometer, waiting for an answer. I turned off the radio and stared straight ahead, trying to put a blank expression across my face, an uncommitted look. I guess I wanted Bert to feel like he was making the decision, that the idea had been his -- after all, when someone's as big as Bert, your instincts tell you to take the safe route.

"Maybe you're right," he finally said, pulling over to the curb. "Me waiting in the driveway probably wouldn't help matters." I nodded, reached for the flowers, and hopped out.

I kept walking up and down the blocks, certain that it wouldn't be long before things came together. Certain that Marlene's signature porch swing would be staring me in the face at any moment. Fortunately, the sun was starting to fade and a little breeze was coming in from the mountains. I couldn't remember if her street ran north/south or east/west, so the only smart thing to do was walk up one block and down the next, over and over. That way I could be sure.

A ways down Enderlin Drive, I thought I saw a park that looked familiar. From a block away, I spotted some younger guys lined up against the backstop, adjusting their caps toward the sun. The tallest one seemed to be running the show, so in my dazed state I headed towards him, figuring he'd know the way. But before I had the chance to ask, he said they needed another guy -- could I play? I didn't really have an answer, he'd caught me off guard. I just kept thinking, "if I play, what'll I do with the flowers?"

"Grab a mitt, you're in left field."

Marlene had said a bunch of things that night, but only one of them really stuck with me. "I made the last payment on my house today" she'd whispered real loud-like as the lights dimmed. It was during one of those real long previews, the type that basically showed you the whole movie. Most of the people in the audience were cheering though, like they still might go see the thing despite the fact that they already knew what was going to happen. "I felt so great writing the check out," Marlene added, as the opening titles came up. "It's probably the first time I ever actually enjoyed paying a bill."

I could tell that this was important to her, like maybe she'd been waiting to tell somebody about it all day long, and I felt guilty that she'd picked me. I couldn't think of any appropriate response, something that might've matched her enthusiasm. "Wow, that's great," I should've said, but at the time those words just didn't come to me.

The baseball game went just like you'd expect: first they scored, then we scored, and so forth. It all felt really natural though, like if I hadn't shown up none of it would've been possible. For some reason, it didn't seem to be getting any later. The sun was just hovering in the sky, refusing to go down, like it knew we wanted to keep playing. I'd completely forgotten about how summer nights could go on like that, about how it could stay so bright for so long. Half-way through the third inning, I took off my shoes.

In the stands, I could see a couple of kids sitting with their dog, not really watching us, just using the benches to relax. Maybe they'd taken the dog running or had him exercising with a frisbee -- I couldn't really tell from way out in left field -- but they were the only ones, the rest of the place was deserted.

I think we were ahead by a run or two when we reached the bottom of the ninth inning, but I'm not sure. "This is it," the shortstop kept turning around to yell. "We just gotta hold them." One or the other he'd say before every pitch. He was a young guy, and really into the game, so all that talking didn't seem too unusual.

The first two outs went real fast, a pop fly and a grounder. But then they put a walk and a single together and had another runner standing on third. Our catcher headed towards the mound to discuss strategy, and I crouched over on my knees, waiting. One

strike, two strikes, and with the third, I heard a crack of the bat and knew the ball was headed my way. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see their guys rounding the bases and our infield just standing there paralyzed. Everything tuned out, and all I could feel was the grass below my feet, while the ball hung there, suspended in the air.

The centerfielder yelled "Yours!"

Once it came down the game would be over -- if I caught it we won, if I didn't we lost. Neither situation seemed very appealing. I kept gliding back, trying to figure out a way to stop things, but I couldn't. With each step backwards the ball moved closer, until finally I had to reach out and pull it down.

There were a few faint cheers as I held my glove up to show that I'd caught it. When I got back to the infield, everyone was standing around the bleachers getting their things together. I tossed the ball over to the captain guy, half expecting him to invite me out for pizza, or back next week for another game, or even next month, but he didn't. "Nice catch," was all he said.

I walked to the end of the bench where my flowers were sitting patiently, the note still wrapped around the stems. I sat down next to them and watched as everyone gradually filtered out towards the neighborhood. A couple of guys were talking about how dark it was going to get during the winter, when the sun fades earlier, and about how things would be so much better when park lights were finally installed. A half hour later, the sprinklers clicked on, and it wasn't long before the entire field was covered in the mist.

My back's to the road now, the ballpark behind me, and maybe I'm daydreaming, but I'm still listening. Somehow I expect to hear the sound of Bert's '53 Ford Pickup rolling around the corner. It's bright lime green and makes noise, or at least a vibration, that you can pick up from almost a half mile off. I have to admit that it's what I like best about Bert, the sound of his truck. It sounds like it could take you someplace fast, whenever you were ready, whenever you wanted. It reminded me of the first car I owned -- the first car I sold too -- and about how it seemed like a lot of money back then. I'd definitely pay double that price if I could have it here with me now.

Bert always said the truck had been his life's focus for the last nine years. "Been working on her since '84," he'd tell anyone willing to listen. "Hit every junkyard in Whatcom County at least once." This all surprised me at the time. Not that he'd been

working on it so long, or even that he'd probably spent his last hundred weekends off in those auto wrecker lots. I guess it was just the math of the whole thing. Had it really been nine years?

Still, I kept listening for the sound of his muffler, sure that I'd hear him turning the corner at any moment, the sun shining off the truck's polished chrome bumpers and the music creeping out the open window. I can see him unlocking the door as he pulls up, then giving a little nod as he lets me in. We'd probably take the long way home, Old Cathedral Road down through the canyon. I can see us cruising slow past Burger Island, the teenagers resting on their mopeds, fresh from a rally or some big game, all waiting for their orders to be called, or maybe just sitting there talking, not really paying attention.

From behind me, a strong breeze picks up and blows through the park. It's dark now, only the faint white glow from a streetlight cuts into the blackness, reflecting just a little off the backstop. The sprinklers have clicked off, probably some time ago, and in the distance you can hear the muted hum of traffic up on the highway. I don't know how long I've been sitting here.

Not feeling any vibrations from Bert's truck, or anything else for that matter, I stare at the flowers and think of Marlene and the date.

The memory sits in my head, like a useless fact frozen on a slab until that one moment during your life when you might need it. The birthplace of our 12th president, the conversion rate of gallons to liters, the date the great Sphinx was built, or the position of a constellation up in the sky. I have a lot of these facts stored up, pieces of information that are buried so deep I forget they exist. But then like I said, every once in awhile something clicks and you finally get a payoff.

When the girl in the sun dress left the restaurant, my eyes followed her all the way out the door, waiting to see if she'd look back, even just a little. With Marlene though, my mouth was going on about something else, the movie I guess. The main character had told these kids that they could do anything, just as long as they put their minds to it. But I didn't buy it, and I'm pretty sure that's what I could've been going on about, about how that wasn't always true, and about how some things just weren't possible for some people. I'm not exactly sure. After the girl in the sun dress had gone out the front door, climbed into her car and drove off, staring straight ahead the whole way, my mouth finally stopped.

"Oh," Marlene said, and then she reached for her coat.