

DEAR BILL,

Dear Bill

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—*Deb Noll*

That night when you came for dinner was like the three years since I had moved away from home didn't exist. Being with you was so relaxed. We laughed and talked about the silly things we had done when we were in our teens—like your asking me to go for the first ride in your brand new 1974 Firebird Trans Am instead of your girlfriend, Cindy. She was so mad at you, and pretty ticked off at me! Or the time I drank so much and got sick because the guy I was crazy about, Dan, had taken another girl to Nick's 4th of July party. And Kathy—another of your girlfriends—was so jealous because you would leave her house and stop by to see me on your way home. Remembering the jolt from the blown out tire while driving to your favorite make-out spot with anticipation of taking our friendship to the next level really brought the laughs—the timing wasn't perfect that night; another year would pass until, on a cold November night, we would finally have our first kiss...

We each remembered that kiss differently. I remembered you saying, "Wow!" as if you didn't expect it to be that good. Then we had laughed, because I said to you, "I said I hadn't had *much* experience, not that I hadn't had *any*!" The more we kissed and tried to make out, the more something happened that interrupted the mood—like rabbit fur from my coat tickling your nose, causing you to sneeze—or the other car that pulled into the lane behind us. We thought it was the sheriff, but it was only another couple of would-be lovers. We ended up laughing more than kissing, and kissing was as far as it went that night. That was when

we decided not to ruin *a good thing*—our friendship—for a physical relationship. It made sense then...but this night you were in my apartment eating dinner, and I wondered, “*Had fate brought you back to me?*”

I hadn’t realized how much I had missed you until you were there sitting across the table from me. Being with you was so easy, just like it had always been since we met when we were 15 years old at Farm Bureau Regional School. Sitting across the table from you, I realized that you were a part of me that had been missing. Being apart from you had been like taking the “Funk” out of “Grand Funk Railroad”—your favorite band. You used to crank the volume up so loud playing *We’re an American Band* on the 8-track in the Trans. *You* were my *funk*—the music that stroked my every nerve. Sitting there eating, laughing, touching, gazing into your eyes, I felt an energy that had been missing from inside of me. All of a sudden I wasn’t homesick anymore.

That night I didn’t tell you that I was seeing someone; his name was Rich. Rich and I did not have the same type of bond, of kinship, of friendship, or of knowing everything about each other that you and I had. The first night I met Rich, I was

instantly attracted to him; he and I talked for hours just getting acquainted. Between the two of us there was a connection that I prayed would grow into a lasting friendship, and just maybe a lifetime relationship. That was what I thought I wanted until you returned to me. Your being here confused me...

You and I had spent our teen years doing the same things, hanging out in the same groups, helping each other with 4-H projects, telling each other about our experiences and our dreams. We both had our first jobs at Elder-Beerman Department Store together—you worked in receiving and I worked in the men’s clothing department. You and I knew each other intimately through our shared life experiences. You were my rock when Mom and Dad got divorced. Without your strength, encouragement, and broad shoulders on which I cried and cried, I don’t know to whom or where I would have turned during that devastating year of my life. I thanked God every day then for allowing you to be a part of my life. Now you were here and our conversations were continuations of the journey we had taken together.

Rich and I were in the exploratory stage of our relationship when every conversa-

tion had me hanging on to his every word, always learning something new about him, and looking forward with eager anticipation to any common bonds we shared. I sometimes lost my breath seeing how his life and mine somehow meshed together despite his being from a small town in eastern Pennsylvania and me from rural southwestern Ohio—he and I had so much in common.

I loved you both. With you, I felt at home—warm, cozy, relaxed. With Rich, I was on a safari—new, exciting, and adventurous. I didn't know which I desired the most.

As you got involved in your course work at the Ohio State University, we saw less of each other. During that time, Rich and I were seeing more of each other. My feelings for each of you were strong. I was confused, not knowing with which of you I wanted to explore the possibility of having a future. I didn't know if fate had brought you here to me, but if it had, shouldn't I at least give us a chance? Were we meant to be with each other forever? I knew you so well; a part of me hoped so. I had to know for sure... You thrived on obtaining things you thought you could never have. You had my friendship and unconditional love, but

you had never had me—not in that way. I was confident you thought you never would, unless we got married, and at that point in time, marriage wasn't on your mind. I was certain you wondered, as I did, what our making love to each other would be like. I was sure we both felt the tension pulling us together. I knew it would be easy to seduce you. I wanted my first time to be with you.

I invited you to dinner as I had done many times before, only this time I had a very different agenda. Instead of a comfortable evening together, eating, talking, and watching a movie, I wanted this evening to end with us making love. The entire evening was planned out in my mind. I went to my hope chest and took out the silk gown that I had been saving for my wedding night. I planned a menu of finger foods that we could feed to each other bite by bite. I even thought through some dialog that we might exchange...and then I thought of the ramifications that our making love could have. I knew you'd have protection. After the scare our sophomore year that you could have been the father of Leann's aborted baby, I knew you'd never be without protection again. I wasn't on the pill, and I knew I had a responsibil-

ity to protect myself against pregnancy as well. I went to the drug store feeling every bit as nervous as I had been at age 18 buying a *Playgirl* magazine. I felt as if all eyes were on me as I read the information on the boxes of spermicide. Fearful that I would have to explain why I was there, I hoped no one who knew me would come into Rite Aid. With sweaty palms, I took my selection to the counter along with a box of Kleenex and a pack of Dentyne gum—as if those two items would camouflage the real purpose behind my purchase.

The fears I had in the pharmacy were minor compared to the nerves that swelled up inside me as I waited in my apartment for you. I had set the table with candles. I had a bottle of wine chilling. I had made my bed with new sheets. I was pacing the floor, going in and out of the three rooms that made up my small apartment, wanting everything to be perfect. I was nervous because I knew this evening could change things between us...I was about to change my mind and change into jeans and t-shirt, but then I heard your knock...

I greeted you at the door, dressed in a flowing, pink negligee; I wasn't disappointed in your reaction as you smiled

and said, "What's this!" We drank the wine with our dinner of cheese, trail bologna on crackers, and strawberries dipped in chocolate. We didn't eat much; you kept telling me how pretty I was. You fed me a strawberry, and with one continuous motion, your finger slid from my lips down to the cleavage between my breasts. My body shivered from head to toe with anticipation. You kissed me and excused yourself from the table. I cleared away our few dishes. You went to the bathroom. I was standing in the living room waiting when you came out. You took me into your arms. You kissed me gently on the lips, then you kissed my neck. You smothered me in your arms, and you asked me, "Are you sure?" In a quivering whisper, I said, "Yes." You led me to the bedroom. You kissed my lips. You stroked my hair. Your fingers traced my face, my neck. I returned your kisses. I melted with each caress of your gentle fingers. We made love that night with the light on. You took me on a journey to places I had never been. We fell asleep in each other's arms. You stayed with me through the night. I never asked if you loved me, and I never said that I loved you. Your gentleness, your passion, your experience—this experience—

engraved a life-long memory on my heart. You had given me a gift I would keep for a lifetime...

When daylight came, I never offered you breakfast, I never asked you to stay, and I never asked when I'd see you again. I watched you get dressed, I slipped into my jeans and t-shirt, and I walked you to the door. Before I opened it, you took my face into your hands and lifted my face up to yours and kissed me. Then you asked in a soft and tender voice, "Are you okay?" It was probably the nicest, most sincere thing you had ever said to me. I smiled. Through tears, in a whisper I replied, "I'm fine." The tears were because of your gentleness; the tears were because I knew making love to you was something I had wanted for a long time and I wasn't disappointed. The tears were because I knew I would never be closer to you then I was at that moment, and the tears were because I knew we would never be that close again. I couldn't explain what I was feeling. You had made me so happy, but in that moment standing at the door, it wasn't you I was thinking of—my thoughts had moved away from you and me; they had jumped ahead to Rich and a strong desire to be with him.

You and I continued to

be friends; we frequently got together for dinner and a movie. During the blizzard of 1978, you called to see if I was okay. Then you told me you were going to drive home—a two and a half hour trip in good weather. You asked me if I wanted to ride along with you; I told you that you were crazy, and I tried to talk you out of risking your life. You didn't listen, and promised to call me when you got to your mom and dad's house. We cared deeply for each other, like family cares for one another. We never let that night get in the way of the specialness that was our friendship. Rich and I got engaged after a couple of years passed; you seemed distant and suggested that my marrying him was a mistake. If I hadn't known better, I would have said you were jealous. One weekend when I was gone from my apartment, a neighbor said that a guy had come knocking at my door demanding that I shouldn't get married. Her description of the guy fit you; but you never came back or called after that. When you graduated, you went back home, became an investment banker, and got married. I married Rich and moved to Delaware. You and I completely lost touch with each other.

On a football Saturday in late October, 1985, while stand-

ing at the corner of Fyffe Road and Lane Avenue on the OSU campus I looked up and saw you crossing the street, coming toward Rich and me. My heart skipped a beat. Our reunion was brief, echoing the customary "How are you?" "What's new?" I told you about my son. You told me about your wife, whom you had just put on a plane for a business trip to Japan. We were both very happy. We exchanged our addresses and phone numbers. We laughed and talked—like old times—as we walked to the Horseshoe where we parted with a hug, and a "Let's keep in touch..."

A few times I went to the phone to call you, but for some reason I never did. Several months passed. Then spring came. One evening I received a phone call from your mom. In a rasped voice between sniffs caused by floods of tears, she said, "Our Willy is dead." She and I cried trying to comfort each other. *You hadn't told me you had cancer...I felt so hurt...we knew each other so completely...why hadn't you called me to tell me...I (Rich and I) would have come...* She told me the details for your burial. I wrote them down.

*You never told me good-bye.*

Rich and I went to Hamilton for your funeral, I had

hoped to see you one last time, to say my good-bye, to put closure to you and me. Waiting in the long line of grief-stricken friends and relatives, I suddenly was overwhelmed with a feeling. I told Rich, "He's not here. He's been cremated; I won't be able to see him." It was true, when we got to Cathy, Frances (Mom, as I had called her, since you and I had become friends years ago) and Ernie (who is like a dad to me...) were standing by your urn. Rich and I shared our condolences and took our seats for the service. I felt so cheated. I wanted to see you one last time; I wanted to tell you just how much I loved you and always would. I love Rich very much; but you never stop loving your first love...

On the long drive back home, as Rich quietly listened, I told him about all the silly things you and I used to do—like my giving you a stuffed lamb to remind you of your grand prize winning lamb—just as you and I had done on that night in 1977 when you came to dinner, it was as if the nine years in between didn't exist.

I miss you,

Love Forever.