

## Thirty-Three

by  
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She awoke the way she usually did, by her internal alarm. She glanced at the clock-radio by the bed. She had ten minutes left before the classical music station to which the dial was permanently tuned would begin to ease her into the day. She set the clock every evening against the chance that her own mechanism would defect.

She started thinking through the day to come, anticipating the high points and low points; she wondered momentarily when she had gotten into that habit. It seemed always to have been part of her. Even when she was an elementary school student she had liked to do it, to her mother's despair. Her mother would shout to her in her attic bedroom to "get going. She was, but in her own way. Her mother had never understood.

She had fresh cream cheese in the refrigerator, on pumpernickel bread, a good breakfast, quick but nutritional. She had a short teaching day today, another plus, although she liked her classes generally. There were no faculty meetings. That was a decided bonus any day. Oh, there was the P.T.A. meeting tonight, the first of the year, and the first for her in the new school, and then she remembered.

"What a creepy way to spend your thirty-third birthday," she groaned aloud. It wasn't that thirty-three was such a bad age to be, but there ought to be something better to look forward to on a thirty-third birthday than parents pathetically clutching their sons' timetables and a floor plan of the school, trying to follow them both at ten-minute intervals, listening to teachers explain (in seven minutes flat, the principal's directive had emphatically stated) the projected year's work and the educational philosophy therein. Parents were allowed three minutes (ONLY!) for questions about the teaching program.

"I'm the same age Jesus was when he got his," she said aloud again and then sat upright in the double bed as the music began to play. With careful tugging at the blanket and top sheet she had found a way to get the bedclothes into place from within the bed, thus avoiding making it except for placing on it the quilt now neatly folded on a chair in the room. She left the bed and put the quilt in place, surveyed the room, and was warmed and pleased by it. She liked living here. She liked coming home to the apartment at night with the place in good order. She hated unmade beds and wondered briefly how so many of her friends could so complacently leave unmade beds and unwashed breakfast dishes through the course of a day.

She moved through her bathroom needs efficiently and glanced at the pale yellow rubber bath mat that the latest male in her life had brought yesterday as a birthday present, knowing that she would be at school this evening. He felt he was being extremely sensitive to her needs because she had slipped recently in the tub, which she had mentioned to him in passing. And he was being sensitive in his own way. He was strapped for money, too, teaching only part-time and working on a doctorate otherwise. She had been waiting to find a deep purple rubber mat to match the lavender, white and purple decorations but there were none to be found as yet. He felt a bath mat was a bath mat and that was why she knew (among other reasons, of course) that they weren't going to have anything going for them permanently.

She had chosen today's outfit from the weather forecast last night. It was hanging neatly on the hook inside the clothes closet door. A glance out the bedroom window assured her it would do and she dressed and put on her makeup rather mechanically.

"It's funny how you know," she mused, and her mind turned back to her nineteenth birthday and the tears that had enveloped it from beginning to end, and for how many nights thereafter she couldn't remember. Today, for the first time, while spreading the cheese on the dark, heavy bread, she wondered if those were tears of grief or of relief. She had been expecting a diamond but knew it wouldn't come, and yet was hoping for it because she thought she ought to be hoping for it. The gift was a copy of Irving Stone's LOVE IS ETERNAL. She thought then it was probably a book club dividend that he had decided to give her as a gift. Still she was nineteen and her family had begun to wonder and her high school friends were marrying like it was the only thing there was to do. Perhaps for them it was. She had never read the book and didn't even know where it was now.

She owed him more than she ever realized then. She smiled, between mouth-sticking bites, at how he had introduced her to theatre and classical music, and occasionally even to profound philosophical

thought of which he was so capable, but so reluctant to do. When she was graduated from a small girls' high school, second in a class of fifty-two, he was the only one who said she should go on to college instead of secretarial work.

It took her seven years to find out for herself what he knew about her then. She had pooh-poohed the whole university scene as above her station; he had just smiled. He never asked her to marry him. He was probably wise enough to know that temperamentally they were too different. He was phlegmatic and melancholic but for brief intervals. She was pure choleric in those days, a bit more balanced now, she hoped. Occasionally they still had dinner together. He had not married and was a bank vice-president at the moment, heading ever upward. Where was she heading?

Dishes washed and carefully stacked to air dry ("Lazy women's way," her mother declared.) she went toward the open briefcase on her desk in the living room and glanced once more at her timetable for today which was still new to her since they were just about a month into the term and it was one of those tumbling varieties. This room pleased her, too, modestly furnished but in good taste. She felt it an extension of herself.

The two flights of stairs to the street were always too dark. They were a Second-World-War addition to the old house allowing it to function as a triplex in those housing shortage days. But she loved the dormer roof of the third-floor apartment she occupied and the price was right. The tree-lined residential street always brought her a kind of serenity. High rise, modern apartment living wasn't for her yet. She wondered momentarily if it would ever be.

The VW turned over immediately. She began the drive from these still all-white suburbs to the almost all-black sections of the city and then downtown into that part of it known as "The Jungle" where the still prestigious boys' school in which she taught was located. It had been built there 117 years ago when it was a grand part of the city. In those days Irish immigrants lived on its smaller back streets, working in the huge brownstones that were the then semi-suburban dwellings of the middle and upper classes. The city's bankers and jurists had lived there.

The Jesuits had built the school for the sons of the immigrants and they had come, and they had prospered. They were now the judges, builders, lawyers, doctors. Even one major government official was numbered among the alumni. The Irish, except for the very poor and very old, had left the area. It was now a black ghetto and one of the worst. But the Jesuits had decided to stay and as proof of their commitment to the inner-city were that very year opening a brand new school building.

Most students now were the brightest and the best from all over the city. They came as a result of a rigorous entrance examination. The fees were high. She did wonder at times to whom the Jesuits were actually committed. She had counted about fifteen blacks in the whole of the student body of nearly nine hundred. Her roll book still contained some of the names of the offspring of the Irish Catholic aristocracy, but not in great numbers. There was old money enough among them now for their sons to head to the New England preparatory schools and usually not of the Jesuit variety. Many of the present young men were of Italian heritage.

Once in the building, the younger students greeted her amicably enough. Upper classmen tried hard to be oblivious to her presence; they had been worked on well and knew the difference between male and female. They knew she was an interloper into this previously all-male domain and they knew her place even if she didn't. Well, perhaps it was getting trendy to have a woman on your staff, other than as librarian or secretary. It was, of course, still more necessary to have a black. Significantly, theirs was a Nigerian, not a local black. But she liked him immensely and was sure he made a contribution.

She found a corner to sip the instant coffee she made quickly and looked over the notes on what she had the ninth graders working on at the moment, a collage to answer "Who Am I?" The comments had come fast and furious from male colleagues when they heard about the project. They joked about show and tell and kindergarten cut-out sessions when some of the collages began to appear around the room which she and others shared for teaching purposes, but she was determined to go on with it. She avidly read educational journals on discovery methods of learning and was convinced that the days of medieval scholastic methods of lecturing were useless in this era of the wired village. Soon there would be a quiet teachers' room in the new building with individual carrels. She was going to hide in hers. She looked forward to that— and was saddened by it, too. She had anticipated that being a teacher would provide the fringe benefit of stimulating intellectual colleagues. She was wrong.

She had gone to night school for nine years because she knew she couldn't spend all of her life as a secretary. She wanted to be with intellectually alive people and since the most interesting persons she knew

(granted there weren't many) had been some of her teachers, she opted for teaching as her next career. Now, two-thirds of the way into a master's degree, and one other high school teaching experience behind her, she wondered if it would ever happen, that she would find herself part of an intellectual milieu in her place of employment.

Maybe she just wanted too much. Female friends accused her of being too passionate, too emotional, expecting too much of others, but especially of herself.

The males she knew thought she was dominant, aggressive, unfeminine or the biggest put-down of all, "love you for your mind not your body." What was it all about anyway? Did she expect too much, or too little? Did thirty-third birthdays made you go odd?

The bell for the first class rang and saved her from herself momentarily. She walked to her classroom with a young, not-yet-ordained Jesuit, with whom she had great rapport. She suspected he was trying to decide whether or not to stay in the Society but at the memory of yesterday's faculty meeting they both chortled. The major portion of time had been spent discussing the high cost of removing used chewing gum from desks, etc., and the faculty had been exhorted to bear down heavily on culprits especially since the move to the new building was imminent. Such were the concerns of this august body of college preparatory school educators – that and the current state of the football team.

Once into her classroom, the morning flew. She liked these no-longer-children-not-yet-men with whom she learned. She felt herself leader of a learning community and was convinced that they had as much to teach her about the business of living as she could ever give them. Together she wanted them all to be philosophers, to do philosophy, not to study it. Perhaps it would happen, perhaps it wouldn't, but she had to try.

At lunch time she couldn't face the faculty room with its sour air and sourer jokes although her salary included a mid-day meal. She walked hurriedly along the street to the coffee shop of a nearby hospital. She ate quietly and quickly, re-reading some sections of Confucius' *Analects* for a graduate class in Chinese philosophy later that afternoon. She bought Lifesavers for the little children who would be in the schoolyard asking for nickels from her as soon as they saw her going back into the school building. Where did they come from? Many were pre-school age, it seemed. Were they supposed to go home for lunch? Was there anyone there to feed them? Could they get a lunch at school? She ought to find out because perhaps she could help in the school cafeteria if there were a lunch program for them in the adjacent elementary school.

She gave out the Lifesavers, having to break some of the packages in half to meet the needs of the crowd. She decided to start bringing fruits; that would surely be better than candy for these little people. She caught herself short; there she went again with her middle white class ethos sticking out all over. Maybe candy was better than fruit for them. How the hell could she think she knew so much about everything?

The afternoon passed quickly. She thought she sensed some growing awareness of her intellectual potential among the tenth and eleventh graders.

Women are for more than romance, she wanted to tell them but knew she would never say it aloud. She chose instead to say it with her whole person. She expected soon to be dubbed a "women's libber" by those on the staff and among the students who found it simpler to stereotype than think, but she knew she had to keep on. Maybe thirty-three brought one some kind of self-assurance.

She got away quickly after school, but not before congratulating a skinny, acne-faced Grade 12 student who was out in the school yard trying to create awareness among students and faculty of the need to boycott grapes, and the whole Caesar Chavez farm workers thing. The boy had drawn, duplicated and was distributing a flyer about the boycott. She thanked him for his efforts and the young man glowed all over. She knew from speaking with him previously that he loved poetry and hoped to major in French at university.

"Poor guy," she muttered while getting to the car, "they probably have you tagged around here as much as they soon will me. I bet you're the resident fag for them so they won't take seriously anything you say or do. I wonder how long it will take for the sensitive ones in the world to get a hearing. "

She drove quickly to the university a few blocks away, found a parking spot but not so close as she preferred, and walked quickly toward the philosophy and religion library. She was conscious as always of her white face among so many black ones on the ghetto streets that edged the inner-city campus. But this was how blacks had felt for years, those who had walked into museums, art galleries, libraries, the white man's domain, at least so men like James Baldwin had written. This walk was a kind of purgatory which perhaps she had to endure to somehow make amends.

Her library plans were disrupted outside the building by a student whom she knew who was loudly

proclaiming the annoyance of a professor at a super paper of hers on the Gnostic influence on John. The student had just made the presentation in an early afternoon class and the professor claimed it was shoddy research and shoddier thinking. The girl was incensed.

She listened, nodding now and again and then asked, "Did you make an appointment to see him and to tell him about this?" The sputtering began. One's grade was at stake, that kind of thing simply wasn't done, at least this early into the school year, to get a professor's back up against you, etc., etc., etc. She replied, "Perhaps, and then again, perhaps not," excused herself and then went off to class. Women are their own worst enemies, she felt sadly. She had seen it so often. When the crunch was on, they backed down. How could they become respectable intellectuals without being willing to put themselves on the line for what mattered to them?

The seminar took off from the first moments of it. Everyone had done the reading assignments and more. They began to put things into historical perspective and then moved into the present, and she was glad. She was at home intellectually when roots and traditions were looked at for their strengths and weaknesses and contemporary relevance or lack thereof. She wondered why so many people were ahistorical. The Chinese philosophers brought her peace and hope. It was a great three hours, the best kind of birthday present. It was the stuff of living, these moments in this think tank.

She left class in a kind of intellectual ecstasy, but came back to earth quickly when she bought a soggy pizza and coke from a street vendor, ate it hurriedly and headed back to the car and to school for the P.T.A. meeting.

The meeting was everything she was afraid it would be. The Irish contingent slapped each other around, more like a reunion than much else. The school staff was composed chiefly of these kinds of alumni and the old boys' spirit was in the air. She wondered if this were the much lauded Jesuit spirit that the school administration boasted about but which she was finding so hard to comprehend.

A lone black woman appeared in one of the ten-minute episodes. When she spoke to her briefly at the end of that time and congratulated her on her son's excellent participation even this early in the year, the woman said, "Oh, no, Miss, I ain't his momma. I'm just the lady he live with now. But he did want me to come and said special like to meet you because he really like what you do and talk about in that class."

An Italian mother, looking terribly out of place, came late into her son's class section and hesitated long before taking a seat more toward the front of the room than she preferred. Her mourning clothes, shabby and worn, stood out among the precisely tailored cuts of the other men and women in the room. Did she scrub floors to pay tuition for her son? Some of them did, her Jesuit friend on staff had told her. And some students were there from the proceeds from the barrows operating in the Italian market area known as Little Italy. She didn't have a chance to talk with her because the dyed-red-hair types of mothers who gave the Annual Mother-Son Tea came up to her and were s-o-o-o-o g-l-l-l-a-a-a-d the administration had finally gotten around to having a "lady" on the staff, especially someone like herself.

The sinking feeling which she had been fighting throughout the evening took over then and she couldn't fight it any more. It deepened to a royal blue funk as she sat in the auditorium after the ten-minute classes, listening to the principal's hopes for the greater honour and glory of the school, its alumni, its students, and its faculty, of course. Gentlemanly reminders of building pledges due by the president of the Fathers' Club and the president of the Mothers' Club were given and refreshments were to be served in the cafeteria downstairs. She didn't stay.

Her mood enroute home was in inverse proportion to the gaiety of the milling ghetto people, the neon lights on the main streets, the young men with their fancy hats – why did they always wear hats? – the young girls enjoying the attentions and offers, or at least seeming to. It was still mild enough weather to be outdoors and everyone was talking to each other, communing, relating, enjoying, or so it seemed to her.

Her street was quiet. People sat on their porches rather than on the front stoops as they did in the ghetto, so interchange was unlikely and there were few people out this late in the evening in her part of the city. She groped for the mail in the darkened hallway. She recognized the handwriting in the crack of light from the opened door. There was a greeting from her parents, from a girl she had worked with last year, another from an aunt who never forgot anyone's birthday in the family, from her brother and his wife now living in Europe. There was none this year from the banker, nor one from the recently married girl-friend. She wondered angrily if the newly-married spent that much time in bed that former friendship could so easily be forgotten. Maybe some friends had tried to call, but she was out all evening. Maybe that was it. Maybe that wasn't it. She locked the outside door behind her. The last one in was supposed \_ to do that and since her

second-floor neighbour was always in by 9:00 p.m. at the latest. she did the ritual.

By the time she got into her living room, the tears were streaming down her face. It had been a day like so many others, this one that began the thirty-fourth year of her life. The high point of the class in Chinese Philosophy was when the professor suggested that "the answer to the quest is the quest." She was trying so hard to believe that now. She thought about Jesus again and then said out loud to him, "I'd like you to know that it took you only three hours to get yours and tonight I feel like I've been getting mine for thirty-three years. All I've ever really wanted is one other human being wholly in my corner. I want somebody who believes in me so that I can go on believing in myself. Is that too much to ask?"

She thought bitterly of the men whom she had loved who wouldn't or couldn't return that love; she thought sadly of the men who had loved her, but to whom she could not, or would not respond. She could work it all out in her head but it was her heart that was aching now.

It was all so emotionally draining, so incredibly confusing and nobody needed thirty-third birthdays to be spent crying in one's living room and not even a friendly beer in sight to cry into. Even her women friends, of whom she had many, all of whom she valued uniquely, hadn't come through. When men came into their lives, their female friendships seemed to go out the window. She didn't want a man like that in her life ever. All her friendships would have to be important to him because they helped make her what he loved.

She washed off the make-up and got ready for bed. She decided to skip any class preparation. She threw the quilt on the floor, refused to set the alarm, and didn't pick out her wardrobe for the following day. Once in bed she started crying again. What was it all for? She was sick of the insecurity and the loneliness and the everlasting trying again and again. Through the tears she thought she heard her name. "Now I'm hallucinating, too."

But she did. She sat up. Quietly, insistently, she heard it and even thought someone was throwing a pebble at her bedroom window. She looked out and sure enough there was Mary, a new friend from the university. Earlier that month, she had helped her to find an apartment. She had given her half her own wardrobe because Mary had recently left the convent. She had actually invited Mary to stay with her until a suitable apartment was found. They were enjoying getting to know each other this past month. Mary had been in the convent for about twenty years and was dirt poor having just arrived back in the country after two years of study in Europe and a decision to leave vowed religious life.

"The door's locked down here so I couldn't get in. I brought some champagne, domestic, of course, to celebrate your birthday. Come on down and let me in. I've been calling all evening but you weren't in so I decided to hop the bus and come over figuring you'd be here eventually." All of this was in a stage whisper which the landlady would remember word for word tomorrow.

"I'll be right down, Mary. Don't go away. For God's sake, don't go away. You'll never know what this means to me – champagne, not even beer."

She ran down the stairs, bedroom slippers flopping, crying now for different reasons. Tomorrow the landlady and the second-floor occupant would complain about the noise and talking and the unusual hours she and her friends kept, but tonight was her thirty-third birthday and she didn't care. She had just clearly experienced that bread cast upon the water doesn't always come back moldy. She knew with her whole self what the professor of Chinese philosophy had asked them to ponder earlier in the day, "The answer to the quest is the quest." Tomorrow at the age of thirty-three years and one day, she knew she'd be questing again ...yet.