

I

The scene

SOME PEOPLE THINK Providence puts couples together for their own good. Other people think Providence is just a town in Rhode Island. Poor Jim didn't have an opinion.

It was a warm spring Friday night in June, 1998, and Jim and Bob were ambling out of the bar and down among the silent hulking cars of the parking lot, singing snatches of "A Wandering Minstrel, I" and other such incomparable nonsense, and enjoying themselves as only young men with few cares can do, when they spotted her sprawling in the driver's seat of an open yellow Jeep.

And we do mean sprawling. She was mostly in but not all the way in. Her body did not seem to know what all the way in was. Clearly she was incapacitated. This was almost as interesting as the fact that she appeared to be rather well put-together.

"Do you see what I see?" Bob said.

"A star, a star, shining in the sky," Jim sang beerily.

"No, over there, you idiot. The Jeep."

"I'm not sure what I see. Is it real?"

"What are you, Bishop Berkeley? Of course it's real. The real question is what are we going to do about it."

"I don't see why we have to do anything about it. She appears to be having a nice nap."

"I guess your cold, hard heart is not moved by the sight of a damsel in distress. I'm going over there and see if she's all right."

"Help yourself," Jim said in the full bloom of ambivalence, since he doubted that his friend's intentions were entirely pure.

Bob meandered in the general direction of the Jeep but stopped when the mystery maiden raised herself up with a

mighty effort and promptly slid out onto the pavement, whacking her head with a soft crack.

They looked at each other in amazement. She was lying on her side with her face flat on the still-warm blacktop, as if it were comforting somehow.

Bob went to her, bent over, and touched her tentatively with his fingertips. "Are you alright?"

"Bug off!" she barked in a disconcertingly commanding tone, waving him away with her free arm, or attempting to. A moment later she was sobbing. Then she mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"I said take me home!" she shouted blue-faced.

"Uhh, we'd be happy to. But we don't know where 'home' is."

"*Your* home, then," she said, waving her free hand again with a dramatic flourish. She tried to raise herself up. She collapsed with a moan. She passed out cold.

Bob looked at Jim with wide eyes. He shook his head no.

"Come on," he wheedled. "She told us to."

"We are not taking her home. That's kidnapping."

"No jury would convict you. At least not a jury of your peers. Besides, we have to do *something*. We can't just leave her lying here."

"Why not? We found her lying here."

"Are you crazy? A woman alone at night?"

"Oh yes, it's very dangerous here in the middle of Westport. She'll be lucky if Frederick and his band of merry rogues don't come along and abduct her. Oh—wait."

"Come on; be serious. She can't spend the night passed out on the bloody pavement."

"Okay, then why don't we put her back in the Jeep?"

"You can see what that leads to. Or worse, what if she tries to drive? She could kill somebody."

"Then that's their fault for going out at night."

"Oh, come on. We have to do *something*."

"What did you have in mind, other than calling the

police?”

“The police! A fair maiden asks you for help and you send her to jail. It will go on her record.”

“Okay—an ambulance then.”

“They’ll charge her a thousand bucks for the ride. Look, why are you being so dense about this? She told us what she wanted us to do. She can have my room.”

“That’s crazy. She doesn’t even know what she’s saying.” But then he had a brilliant idea. “All right, let’s do it. Help me get her into my car.”

“Really?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“It’s not what *I* want. It’s what *she* wants.”

“Yeah, yeah; right. Let’s just do it.”

They could not get her to stand up. She was completely out. Finally Jim picked her up and carried her to his Acura coupe. Maneuvering a completely limp body into the back seat was trickier than he realized. They accidentally whacked her head on the door.

“Oww!” she groaned before returning to the shadowlands.

“Oops!” Bob said.

Jim looked at the completely limp body in the back seat of his car and suddenly had a very bad feeling. But it was too late. He couldn’t drag her out and put her back on the pavement. Besides, he had a plan. He was going to drop her off at his parents’ house. They were on the Cape for the weekend with his sister.

Somehow he managed to get a seatbelt around her. It was not easy—he had to reach under her, and she was not helping. Then he gave Bob his house key. “Go get the door unlocked so we can carry her in. I’m going over to that Coke machine for a bottle of water. She may need it.”

“Oh—good idea,” Bob said, feeling remarkably cooperative now that he had prevailed. “See you there.”

Jim laughed inside. This was just what he wanted. The plan was to let Bob go on ahead and then whisk the fair

maiden out of sight on the back roads. He took his time getting to the vending machine and making his choice. A wide grin spread over his face when he heard the black Porsche roar to a start and saw it zipping toward the exit. Then things got complicated. Bob stopped. Apparently he was waiting for him. Now what was he going to do?

He got into his car and drove up behind him reluctantly and blinked his lights. To his relief, Bob took off. He did not want to be in the lead. Now he just had to figure out a way to disengage himself. It wasn't going to be easy. He knew he couldn't outrun the Porsche. He tried the opposite strategy and slowed down to the speed limit, figuring this would be too much for the Impatient One to bear, but Bob must have had his eyes glued to the rear-view mirror because he slowed right down with him.

They crept northward for almost an hour. It was unbearable. What was he going to do? Finally they reached the road to Bridgewater. Jim waited until Bob was already half-way through the intersection—and then peeled off abruptly toward the bridge. The Porsche zoomed on into the dark night.

“Yes!” he said with a fist pump. But then jubilation gave way to other feelings as he heard moaning from the back seat indicative of gyroscopic dislocation, probably caused by going too fast on winding country roads. Sure enough—there was the tell-tale sound. A few moments later there was the tell-tale smell.

He opened his window as he made his way to his old house, thinking how happy he was to see the familiar forsythia bushes. In fact he had never been quite so happy to see them. He drove up to the back door and commenced the formidable task of extracting the limp form from the back seat.

It was exhausting. He was trying to be polite, which precluded a surprising number of useful holds. He carried her to the porch and put her in a chair while he searched for the key under the flower pot. It wasn't there! He panicked.

What was he going to do? Then he remembered. They put it under the bird-bath bowl now.

He unlocked the house, picked her up again and carried her upstairs to Grace's room (his sister). He did not know why he didn't take her to his own room. It just seemed like the right thing to do. He pulled back the covers and laid her on the bed. He slipped off her shoes and pulled up the sheet. It was hot—no need for a blanket.

Now for the first time Jim looked at her in the moonlight. He gulped. She was beautiful. There was a sweetness to her resting countenance that made it surprisingly hard to tear himself away.

It may not quite be accurate to say he was smitten. The circumstances were too strange. Besides, she had just thrown up in his car. But he was definitely affected. He made it halfway down the stairs but stopped and went back for another peek. Next time he made it all the way down before he went back. He wasn't sure why. She wasn't going anywhere. Not for a while anyway. Finally he had to throw himself out of the house.

He drove home with the sweetness of that face filling his soul. It was all he could think about. It was still foremost in his mind when he opened the door and greeted his friend with a blank look.

"Where is she?" Bob demanded.

"I took her to Bridgewater."

"You did *what*? I thought she was staying here. I was planning to sleep on the couch."

"Good idea. Then when she wakes up she can have us both arrested. This is better, believe me. She has her own space. She can take her time. There's nothing to accuse us of—or at least not *that*. You'll thank me when you sober up."

"I doubt it. I wanted to see her in the daylight. Didn't you think she looked a little like—oh, never mind. Like that would ever happen. In any case it will be fun to see how she reacts to waking up in a strange house with no one there

and no idea of how she got there and no cell phone.”

To tell the truth, Jim had not fully considered this. His parents’ house was home to him, but not to the comatose girl. “She’ll be fine,” he said with more confidence than he actually felt. “She’s in a safe place. There’s a landline she can use.”

They had a nightcap or two and chatted for a while and listened to music and eventually wandered off into irrelevance. Jim went to his room and fell into bed and thought he was about to fall asleep when all of a sudden he was wide awake. Wide, wide awake. It was two in the morning and it was two things. First it was that face in the moonlight. He thought he might be in love. But it was also Bob’s comment. It was true. He had deposited a complete stranger at his parents’ house. Hopefully she wouldn’t burn the place down.

Okay, so that didn’t seem very likely. But there were other possibilities. Bob was right. She would have absolutely no idea of how she got there. She was thirty miles upstate, as the crow flies. If she happened to walk outside she would find herself in the middle of nowhere with a lot of stars overhead and no neighbors in sight.

She did not have a car. She did not have a phone. He and Bob checked the Jeep, but they didn’t see one or a purse or anything else of a personal nature. Even the glove compartment was clean. Would she panic if she woke up in a strange place and realized she didn’t have any way of getting in touch with anyone? There was a landline in the kitchen, as he said, but would she even think to look for such an anachronism?

He did not know how she was going to react. The more he thought about it the more it rattled him. She seemed to have a bit of a temper from their little interaction in the parking lot. What if she decided to trash the house? His parents would love that. He would have a grand time trying to explain it.

But no, he would not believe it. She wouldn’t do any

such thing. He had seen her sweet face in the moonlight. She looked like an angel. A dark-haired angel, but still. He went over the train of events again and again—finding her, Bob's transparency, falling out of the Jeep, getting her into the car, carrying her up to Grace's bed.

Carrying her to Grace's bed! His own little epithalamium. What ancient love poet ever had such an adventure? They wrote about other people's adventures. Most of it was bald-faced lies. She was no figment of someone's imagination, however. Jim could still feel the impression of her limp body in his arms.

He did not know whether to be afraid of what might happen or excited. He was a little bit of both. He lay there almost all night thinking about it before finally drifting off to sleep...