



*In Search of
Aimai
Cristen*

In Search of Aimai Cristen

By Phillip Good

56,000 words

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Research

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1. The Ad

Young attractive girl, 24, searching for love,
compassion, joy from a man who can provide financial
security. Write Aimai Cristen, Box 3689, Barb Office,
1234 University Ave, Berkeley CA 94709.

2. Dino

My dad and I have had our ups and downs over the years.

When we were younger, he spent a lot of time with my older sisters and not very much with me. He would play catch with them or challenge them to races, but "because Dina couldn't keep up," he wouldn't play those games when I was around or would announce he was "tired" when I came out to play.

This isn't quite true, Dana tells me. Dana says our family also had another game called "Roll the Ball." We'd sit in a circle with Dad at the center, our legs separated so as to make a 'V', and he'd take turns rolling the ball to each of us. Dana's got a photograph of the four of us sitting in a circle on the floor of our family room—the house back in Michigan; my back and Dad's back are to the camera, and Dad, still with his long dark hair, is rolling the ball to Dana, so I guess it must be true.

"And what about 'Sardines,' and 'Puss in the Corner'?" Dana would probably ask. And we did go cross-country skiing in the winter and swimming together as a family in the summer: "Marco Polo." O.K., but I still think Dad spent more time with Dana and Donna.

About two months ago, I came back home to live with my father. I'd dropped out of school for a while. Done some things I wasn't particularly proud of. I got a job when I was only sixteen: telephone soliciting. And I had a job with one of those 900 numbers—"Intimate secrets," my seductive voice promises, "What do girls really think about when they're alone? You can listen for just \$2.35 a minute. Ten-minute minimum." But mostly my friends

and I sat around in crummy apartments and talked. Talked all morning and all afternoon. Talked some more and partied in the evenings.

I came back home because I know now what I want to do. Go to college. Get a teaching credential. And work with kids that have problems. Of course, I have a few things to get out of the way first, like getting the high school diploma I never quite got around to completing.

Well, why not? I need just algebra and a semester of Spanish to get the diploma. It has to be done sometime. And like my dad always said, "you're bright enough."

Dana lived a year alone in the house with Dad in her last year of high school. (Never mind they no longer speak.) Now, it is my turn. (She says she came up to him once after a lecture he gave at her college and he looked right through her like she was a total stranger. He says he did try to talk to her, but her politics are so extreme she just won't listen to anybody. They're both partly right.)

Since I came back, Dad and I have been part of a tight domestic scene: Breakfast together in the mornings if I get up on time, dinner together in the evening. Nothing really special for dinner. Dad knows how to make spaghetti—he gets real excited because he uses fresh cheese and grates it at the table. I'll fix a salad or sometimes he'll have one already made. Dad also fixes roasts. He's very particular about how they are cooked; he steams the vegetables separately and only adds them to the meat at the very end. I know how to make stuffed peppers and almost any kind of dish where you start with rice and then stir in your leftovers. For dessert we both like ice cream.

I'm not sure what else we are supposed to do together, talk maybe?

"How are those math courses coming?" Dad will ask. He reaches up a hand and absent-mindedly scratches his scalp; I wish he wouldn't.

"O.K. I know most of the stuff... Seriously, I got A's in my last three assignments."

"I believe you. Seen this in the paper about the retards on the school board?"

"It's a shame." I reply, wondering why we aren't talking about anything meaningful.

He shakes his head, takes off his reading glasses and looks at me. I meet his gaze. Though his cropped hair is shot through with gray, his eyes are still dark and penetrating. "You've got to read the newspaper more, read books they don't assign you in class."

"O.K." I say to pacify him. And that's our evening's conversation. A wall sits between us, and I can't push through it, yet.

There isn't much to night school: a couple of evenings a week in the classroom with other lowlife dropouts, a couple of mornings doing the assignments and reading. College, I know, will be a lot harder. But right now, I'm left with a lot of time on my hands.

I don't need to work—at a job I mean. Dad says as long as I live at home and am going to school, he'll pay for everything. I'm not going to hang out—no, not for me, not any more, not with a bunch of guys going no place. (Though I might stop back to talk with them later, when I have my teaching credential.) So what do I do when I'm not in school? Stay at home? Go shopping at the mall?

When I moved in with my dad originally, I thought I'd be really domestic. Cook, clean, take care of everything for him. But he's learned a lot in the two years he was apart from Mom. He cleans up now as he goes along. You know, he wipes off counters and puts the dishes away in the dishwasher as soon as the meal is over. So there isn't much mess left for me to clean.

I could do the vacuuming—"I'll do that, Dad."—unless he's already done it himself. Our house is so small. Well, not small, small, but it seems tiny to me sometimes with Dad holed up in his study all day long and me tiptoeing around trying not to disturb him.

I've cleaned my own room a dozen times over. I've thought about putting up pictures but I haven't quite got around to it yet. Maybe, because I don't know who my heroes are, whose photos I want on my wall.

Which leaves me what: A chance to mow the grass (once Dad is through in his study and the noise won't bother him) or clean up the garage.

"It's a mess out here, Dad," I say, though I know he is inside in his study and can't hear me. Cobwebs and a wasp nest have to be cleaned up first. Lots of boxes, the same boxes he's lugged around with us since I was a kid. "Can I throw this out?" Children's clothing in a box marked "Give to Goodwill" years ago by my mom. After a parting squeeze for my last pair of Dr. Denton's, I put the box out on the curb and see that it goes off to Goodwill, finally.

A paper bag full of crumpled envelopes and computer printouts goes into the garbage where it belongs. Here is a second bag, this one filled with white Styrofoam pebbles—"Don't throw that out," Dad hollers, appearing from nowhere.

One box contains all the memos Dad wrote or had sent to him when he worked years ago for a pharmaceutical firm. Its contents include the minutes of the Technical Library Committee: "Janet Henderson has volunteered to look into the possibility of microfiche." I leaf through both the report from Janet Henderson and a caustic memo from my dad criticizing her report. Ah well, let him keep his memos a while longer.

At supper—the entire house smells of the garlic that went into the sauce—I asked him about the garage, "Dad, I've started looking into the boxes. All your old manuscripts and memos. Is it O.K.?"

A broad smile lights up his face, first the left side of his mouth, then the right, the smile extending finally past his dimple to the crinkles in the corners of his eyes. "Sure, it's O.K. I'm flattered. I guess that's maybe why I keep the stuff. In case one or the other of you kids might want to know what I was up to in the old days."

Is this a conversation? Not yet, but I think we are getting closer.

The next afternoon, I put aside the company memos—they are as boring now as they were then—and seek out the older boxes—the ones that are pre Dina, even pre mom. I found one box that is really old; the tape holding the cardboard together has almost rotted away. I sneeze each time I disturb the dust on the outer surface. At the top of the box is a book of course notes from McGill University: Calculus 223 is dedicated in my father's uneven handwriting to a Miss Jan Davenport. Four more course notebooks lie beneath the first, each dedicated to a different girl. And yellowed newspaper clippings: "Street Car Fares to Rise a Dime. Students Protest." Here is a page from the Sunday Book Review Section, 195_ something: "Too Many

Penguins" reviewed by Phillip Good, Willingdon School, Age 10. Oh my goodness, little Phillip Good of Willingdon Elementary School, father-to-be of Dina Good, high school student in perpetuum. Little Phillip likes the book and is anxious to read something more by the same author.

I switch to a box of more recent vintage. The outside is water stained and the contents are partially but not completely faded: Letters from Uncle Steven in green ink, letters from Uncle Pete in an almost undecipherable ballpoint. Uncle Pete had been in the Peace Corps. I didn't know that. A collection of Dear John, oops, Dear Phil letters:

"Dear Phil. I cannot go with you to the concert tonight. I am sorry but..."

"Phillip: I like you, but as I told you when we first met, I already have a commitment..." "Dear Mr. Good, my father says that only fast girls will accept..."

And, as if to offset these letters, a note that reads, "Phil. I don't understand why you haven't called. Please. Jan."

The note still holds a faint scent of lilacs and I press my nose against the writing.

But it is the next and largest box that is the real treasure trove.

Psychedelic posters—notebook size—advertise concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium: The Grateful Dead, Clear Light, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Yveshenko reading from his own poetry. (Yveshenko sounds Russian: did they have translators?) I put on a pair of glasses with multi-faceted colored lenses, one side yellow, one side pink; through them, everything looks the way it did to Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. And then—but will I have time before supper to read them? —a dozen brown manila folders,

each containing an ill-assorted mixture of newspaper clippings and manuscripts, letters to the editor, poems, three columns of want ads, parts of a diary. These clippings may have had an order once; perhaps each folder corresponded to a different year or a different six-month period, but now they are all mixed up.

"Has anyone else seen these, Dad?" I ask about the envelopes, meaning has one of my older sisters seen them.

It is spaghetti evening, smelling of garlic again and Parmesan cheese. Dad got out his razor before the meal so the dining room smells a little, too, of shaving soap and Aqua Velva.

"Oh, I've been through them a couple of times." Dad says, "And I tried to get your mother interested. Have you read any of the stuff?" He tries to appear casual in asking, but something, a restless movement of his fingers, gives his need for recognition away.

"Just bits and pieces," I remark, trying to act equally laid back. Actually, I hadn't read any of the manuscripts, yet. I'm still depending on conversation to give me the glimpses of him I need. "Something else I wanted to ask you, Dad: You have this collection of letters that are still in their original envelopes."

"The ones from Uncle Steve and Moo Grandma?"

"No, the letters I'm talking about aren't addressed to you. They're to an Aimai something or other."

He takes off his reading glasses. "Aimai Cristen." His voice is muffled. I wait for him to explain who Aimai Cristen is but he doesn't say anything more, just sits and stares off into the distance.

"O.K., if I look at them, too?" I ask.

He nods, still not speaking. I can't tell from the nod if he means, "sure, the letters would be a good place to start," or "sure, I can't stop you." O.K., Dad, keep your mysteries. I can be cool, too. For awhile.

The next afternoon, I am back in the garage early with the contents of two of the boxes spread out around me. I've made a stack of the card-size posters to put up on my wall. My dad was a fan of the Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company. So am I now, whoever they were.

A manila folder holds clippings from the Berkeley Barb; copies of this same newspaper, neatly folded, line the bottom of the box. I unfold the newspapers and read the articles, one by one. A number of the stories are outlined in red as if Dad were planning to cut them out. Articles by Number Six, the Grass Prophet, Shiva, and Peter Wood.

The folders also contain a number of short stories. The heroes are named Rafe or Peter or Jim, but I think they are really about episodes in my Dad's own life.

Stories, clippings, extracts from his diaries. It's hard to believe, I tell myself each afternoon I sit cross-legged on the floor of the garage reading: All of my father's life is there in the box. Like coming home, all I have to do is reach out and say, "Hi Dad."

3. The Replies

Dear Aimai:

My name is art gentry. I am 33 yeras old, live in stockton. I am divoiced, two chilkdren both boys. I have my own bussiness, I am tired of living alone. My hight is 5' 9", I am a member of the volunteer fire dept. My position in the comunity is on the up swing so to say. A woman with a warm and plesant personalty is needed. One who wold help me with my bussiness, and becum an esential part of my life.

As you can see my typing is terrible. A swift replky would be ppercaited, any nesssary arrangement to meet is heartly acceatable.

Western Union Telegram

IF YOU ARE A VIRGIN, CALL BILL CUMMINGS COLLECT AT 916 644-7156. LETTER TO FOLLOW

Dear Aimai:

You sound fairly interesting; I'm sure you'll find someone who thinks you're terribly interesting.

You shouldn't have much trouble finding someone to support you around here even without the ad. Parties are rather free and open, though I think you'll find too many otherwise interesting and hip people who like me are ridiculously self-centered. There's nothing wrong with self-enjoyment but too many people can sit all day at the table eating ice cream and never get sick.

I've found it fairly easy here to share my differences with others, rather than let them become blockades. I'm 24, also, bearded, athletic, and am given to most sexual activities except those involving pain and/or a lack of consent.

Now comes the interesting part. If you'd like to get together sometime and talk, even if you're doubtful of an eventual friendship, fine.

Anyway, reference time. To be sure I won't rape you, you may contact Charity Millar (red-haired, drug-oriented—I'm not married and could have screwed her, but declined because of her marriage, Catholic upbringing, now strictly non-Christian, unless changed recently. (Cristen and Christian, is there a connection?) Charity will vouch for my goodness/honesty. Call her at 555-3447 in SF.

Also Les Barber, 883-1991 office or 551-8339 home, a good friend of mine, active with the Campus Crusade for Christ. Two more distinguished and diversified references would be hard to find. Anyhow, I think my relationships with them mirror what I said about sharing differences.

Tom

The next letter is stuck to the envelope and rips when I try to unfold it.

Dear Aimai:

I am a divorced male, early fifties. Shortly after I got married, in my early twenties, I discovered my wife was not a virgin, although she had told me she was. I put up with it for years and divorced her finally.

Since then, I have met a number of women who said they were virgins and were not.

If you are a virgin, I have plenty of money and am well able to support you and give you all the things that you need.

If you are a virgin, call Bill Cummings collect at 916 644-7156.

We had a fire going in the fireplace that evening. The weather was just on the verge of being cold. I liked the fire as much or more for the aroma of the burning wood as for the warmth.

Dad was grading papers. I'd rediscovered the box containing the replies to Aimai Cristen's ad and had brought them inside from the garage determined that Dad and I would have a meaningful conversation. "How'd you get these letters, Dad?"

"She gave them to me."

I waited for him to say more, but he remained silent, ruminating about Aimai Cristen, perhaps, or merely deciding whether to give an extra half-point for an especially good answer.

"Can I read them?"

"Be my guest."

He smiled as if he knew a secret I didn't know. But he didn't say another word, then, about the letters.

Dear Miss Cristen:

Things haven't gone well since my wife left.

She took all the furniture. I use just the one room where the bed was and of course the kitchen to keep canned goods and such.

It is quite a large house but it is empty now. I usually don't stay in it much except when I sleep. It is very lonely. You probably won't want to write to me.

Dan

I thought about Dan's letter and decided I wouldn't have sent him a reply. A lot of my friends have gotten involved with guys like Dan, thinking, "He just needs motivation." It doesn't work. I want someone who believes in himself.

"Who would want to write to a guy this empty?" I say to my Dad.

"Mother Teresa, maybe. Or some girl who's decided to devote her life to healing the sick."

"Not me."

"Really? Is that why you learned sign language when you were thirteen?"

"That's work. And the deaf aren't pretending to be sick. 'Oh, it's so very lonely.' The deaf have got real physical problems. I can help them. This guy, you can't help."

A slow smile crept over my Dad's face. He looks really handsome when he smiles. "I agree with you. Dan would be the wrong guy for you, for any girl really. He says he's lonely, but it's really because he is totally into himself. If he wanted to meet somebody, he'd be out there looking—a bar, a grocery store, someplace. But he's at home, whining. The man you love should be capable of loving you in return."

"There isn't any self there," I said.

Dear Aimai:

You sound like a very interesting girl. I would like very much to meet you.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I am a Negro man, 32 years of age, 6'2" tall, weight around 165. I am not a professional man, but I am a business man. I have a number of business ventures going. As a matter of fact, too many, though I still find time for love.

I do not look for a wife as yet, but I would like to take you out some time. I don't care very much for night clubs, but I will drink a little with the girl I am with. I love to go to movies. I am a well-known business man around town. (If you have any talent in entertainment, tell me about it. I'll get you in the next big show I bring to town.)

I love to pick up my date and get out of town, like Sacramento, Vallejo, Stockton, or some place. Write and tell me about yourself.

Steve

I turn to my dad again and discover he has stopped grading papers and is watching me.

"When were these letters written, Dad?"

"1968, '69"

"Where would a black man and a white girl go in 1969, especially in a small town like Vallejo or Stockton?"

"Where would they go today?"

Dear Aimai:

I do not know exactly what kind of answer you want, nor what intangible hopes you have for the future; so if this letter seems not to be the type of reply you want, I hope you realize that I wrote it to you as best as I can not knowing exactly what you had in mind. I write, hoping I will be the kind of person if not the exact kind you would like to have reply to your ad.

I love children and I love women. In general, I love being alive. Perhaps, then, it will be no great surprise to you that I am married, as this is the normal thing for one who loves life, women, and children. I will say more of my marriage in a little bit.

I am an engineer who graduated with honors from San Francisco State. At present, I am practicing my trade programming for an electronics firm and spend part of my time building sound equipment. I am twenty-seven. I like music, bowling, movies, and people.

In my first paragraph, I mentioned your intangible hopes. If one of these hopes is to be married, you would have to find someone who is marriageable. If your ad has been run in the

hope of eventually finding a full-time father for your children, that is good. But

Alternative #1: If finding a full-time father is your immediate goal, I know I can never fulfill your needs and your children's needs, as I could not be that father as I have my own children to raise.

However, Alternative #2, if finding a full-time father is your long-term goal, and what you wish now is for someone to fill in the gap for a few years until you find him, then perhaps I could be this person.

There is a third possibility, Alternative #3, which I will now present. Simultaneously, I will try to explain the relationship between my wife and myself which makes it possible for me to write this letter to you.

Sarah and I were married five years ago when I was still going to school. Since we were both young at the time, we did not realize how much each of us was going to change. We had many arguments, but we learned to talk with each other and remain in love. Let me explain further:

During the initial five years of arguments, I became most upset when I could no longer have sex with my wife during the period she was pregnant with our first child.

Being very frustrated at this time, I found a girl of my own age who was willing to be my mistress. I grew to love her a great deal although I could only visit her occasionally. Sarah never suspected what I was doing with my spare time. Perhaps for some marriages, this would have been the end.

After consideration, I decided to tell Sarah about the fact that I had a mistress. Almost a year of talks ensued and, in the end, martial success reigned for us. I continued to see my friend until, sometime later, she found someone who could spend more time with her.

At present both my wife and myself are interested in finding a married couple who like ourselves has discovered it is possible to love more than one person. However, we have found it very difficult to find a married couple that we both can admire that much, for if the wife is a nice person, the husband turns out to be "so-so." And if the husband is okay, the wife is a "rat-fink", etc. Thus, our progress has been poor with married couples.

So now, I would like to mention the third alternative:

Sarah and I could help you find a husband. We would naturally hope that you and your new husband would be interested in wife swapping and husband swapping. However, if neither of you cared to swap partners that would be your own business.

We know a person (male) who is 28 and is recently being divorced by his wife. This experience has caused him to grow up in many ways. Although the divorce was not wholly the fault of either person, the divorce was the result of immaturity by both husband and wife.

He is a mechanical engineer like myself and has just completed his work on a masters degree in mechanical engineering (after taking a leave of absence from work). He is basically a decent and down to earth person.

I will not mention this letter to him since I do not know if you will reply or not; I do not like to raise false hopes.

I do not know many things about you, but I feel that it took courage for you to run your ad. I know that I would love to meet you whether you wish me for the temporary companion or not. I admire your spirit, wishing you luck.

Bill

"Was there an Aimai Cristen?" I asked my dad one day. "I mean is she a real person or did you just make her up?"

"She was real." His tone suggested he wanted me to go on and ask him more about her.

"Well what was she like?" I asked, using my hands to indicate he should keep talking and not depend on me to prompt him.

"Sort of a scatterbrain," he replied, "Like you were for a few years before you got your act together."

"Oh sure. A scatterbrain?" I twisted my face up as if I'd been sucking on a lemon. "But it says in the ad, she was twenty-four?"

Dad looked at me with those dark penetrating eyes of his. "Aimai may never have got her life organized. I barely knew her, but she came across as if she didn't have any real purpose. You need purpose as much as food and water to keep yourself going."

"If you barely knew her, then how come you've got all her letters?"

"Oh, that." Dad's eyelids fluttered, a sure sign he was hiding something.

"That," I persisted.

"There's a big story behind these letters."

"Try me."

"You got all week?"

I smoothed the letter in my hand and put it back unread on the stack. "Sure do. That's why I moved home. To be with you, to have long father-daughter talks, remember."

"I remember. Sometimes, though, I wish..."

"You wish I hadn't come home."

"No!" My dad sat bolt upright in his chair. His sincerity, the vehemence of that single "No!" was undeniable. For a moment, I felt guilty for having challenged him.

But just for a moment. He's never really told me that he loves me. If he has, it's been under the cover of darkness, sneaking into my room after I'm asleep, checking on me each night before he goes to bed himself. All right, maybe it's me that has something wrong with her, who needs constant reassurance her father really loves her. No real harm in getting my father to say he loves me, over and over, is there?

"I never wished you hadn't come home! Not for one moment, sweetheart. I treasure every minute you've been with me. And I missed you so often when you were gone. No, I wish you and your sisters could have been around at other times during my life. The exciting, crazy times. Like when I met Aimai Cristen."

"Be there? I was minus six when you met her."

"Lighten up, will you. Be there in spirit. Inside my head. Share my feelings. Maybe, you were there. You could have been the man across the street, the one we didn't see, who fell on a banana peel and slipped under a moving car. Just an innocent passer by who got reincarnated as my daughter. Maybe you were the rock and roll drummer who stepped on the patch cord and electrocuted himself."

"But Aimai Cristen," I said impatiently, "Are you going to tell me her story? How did you meet her? Who introduced you? What was going on in your life?"

That strange expression came over his face, the one he gets when he's inside his head. For a moment, I thought I'd lost him and then, whoops, he's back.

"I responded to this ad in the Freep, the Los Angeles Free Press." He quoted from memory, "'Young attractive girl, 24, searching for love, compassion, joy from a man who can provide financial security. Write Aimai Cristen, Box 5689.'"

"I was living in L.A. then, yo-yoing up and down the Pacific Coast like most aerospace engineers. From L.A. to San Francisco and back again. The

remarkable thing was that whatever city you were in—Burbank, Sunnyvale, or San Diego, Missiles and Space had a branch there. If you got laid off in one place, you just applied to another. At best, you'd miss a day's pay. At worst, you lived off unemployment for a few months. I hear it's pretty much the same today. But a life like that is O.K., sort of, when you're single.

"Say I actually wrote something, part of a diary, during that period. You want to read it?"

"Sure. Glad to."

He looked away for an instant trying to conceal his feelings. I could tell he was pleased. I said, "Well, you read my stuff."

He looked puzzled. "Your stuff?"

"Remember, all those papers I did in school: 'My summer vacation,' 'What I like about second grade,' 'The Pineers'—I really thought 'pioneers' was spelled that way because they cut down pine trees to build their houses. Wait. Remember the long essay I did in junior high school about teenage suicides."

"Do I? You got so depressed thinking about those kids that had killed themselves. We began to get worried about you."

"About a year too soon."

"Or maybe we didn't get around to getting worried soon enough?"

We weren't talking any more, my father and I, just sitting, looking at each other. I don't know who I saw sitting in his chair, my dad as he is now with all his gray hair, or that younger Dad, the one with a beard and the ripped pants he wore when he worked around the house, or the Dad, my dad, who came home from work in a business suit and tie and put me on his shoulder and carried me around the house

while he looked for Mom. I wonder what he sees when he looks at my chair.

Which of the many Dinos?

We have a wall between us. Momentarily, we pushed it aside; we touched, however briefly. He didn't tell me the story of Aimai Cristen that night, but I knew that sooner or later he would get around to it.

4. The Apartment

The manager had told Phil he could expect to find girls sitting around the pool in the evenings, and so, when evening came and the lights went on in the courtyard, Phil cocked his ears listening for sounds from below. All was silent apart from the complex's Muzak, on continuously, which played "Barefoot in the Park," and something that might once have been "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

He peeked out the window finally, turning his back on the empty apartment—empty apart from his rented bed, his stereo, and the endless rolling contours of the sprayed acoustic ceiling—only to see a deserted courtyard and the safety lights reflected from the surface of the still, green pool.

"I'm not going to stay here and be alone," Phil said, addressing no one in particular. Shutting the apartment door firmly behind him, he stepped out on the landing that ran along the three long sides of the deserted courtyard. He knocked first on the door to his right. "Yes," came a girl's voice.

"I'm your next-door neighbor."

"I'm busy right now," she said, "could you come back later?"

"Sure," he said diffidently, then added a confident "I'll be back," to the closed door.

Phil repeated the same procedure at the door to the left of his apartment. No one responded. He stood for a moment in the silence, listening. From below, he heard a man's voice call, "They're not in." Phil

walked to the edge of the landing and looked down to see the manager of the apartment complex looking up at him. "What are you doing?" the manager demanded.

"I'm just checking with my neighbor," Phil replied.

"Well, they're not in," the man said and stood, hands in his pockets, waiting for Phil to go back inside his own apartment.

"It's a quiet evening," Phil said conversationally.

The manager was unresponsive. "People are trying to eat their supper," he replied as if to suggest he would be inside eating his supper if he did not have to be on guard duty policing Phil.

"Thank you," Phil said, feeling that perhaps a thank-you was expected.

The manager glared, his face bright red in the reflections from the pool light. "Well," he said after a pause, "Aren't you going in?"

"Uh, yes, yes." Phil scurried inside his apartment and waited just inside the entranceway until he heard the manager's door close below. Then, he walked outside again, and tiptoed down the length of the long motel landing. When he felt he was out of earshot of the manager, he knocked on an apartment door.

"Yes?" A man came to the door, bare-chested, carrying a can of beer. He stood blocking the doorway, the sweat shining on his muscular body. Phil could see past him to where a slim blond was setting plates on the table. She did not look up. "Yeah?" the man said again.

"I just moved in," Phil said. "I was trying to meet people in the building."

"What's he want honey?" Phil heard the blond girl call.

"Nothing." The man swiveled his head so he could talk to his wife (girlfriend?) but his muscular torso continued to block the open doorway. He turned back to Phil: "We're going to eat, O.K.?"

"Later," Phil said. The man shut the door.

Phil continued down the landing. Sometimes he knocked, sometimes he just waited expectantly outside a door as if trying to feel out the character of the people inside. Most weren't home. Some called through the closed door that they were too busy to talk or they didn't want anything.

One man with a bushy mustache opened his door just as Phil was about to knock. He pushed by Phil quickly with a "Hi" and a friendly nod, and clattered down the stairs. As the man passed the manager's door, it opened and the manager came out. "Hi Al," he said. "Hi Arnie," Al called as he disappeared from the courtyard.

Arnie the apartment manager remained outside. His head turned slowly in an arc around the courtyard as if searching for Phil hiding on the landing above. Phil shrank back in the shadows and held his breath. Then Arnie went back into his apartment.

A woman came to one of the doors, finally. Phil talked to her, making up what he was going to say as he went along. "I'd love for you to meet my husband," she said after a pause. The couple stood in their doorway chatting with him. "An awful lot of single girls do live here," they both acknowledged, though they didn't offer any suggestions. The man thought kind of a cute blond lived back in the direction from which Phil had come. When he said this, his wife, a brunette, gave him a long slow look. They didn't invite Phil inside.

At last, he risked crossing to the opposite side of the courtyard where he would be in full view of the manager's searching eyes. A small card table stood outside the manager's office with a deck of cards and three glasses sitting on it. Phil knew he did not have long to continue his quest before the manager reappeared.

"I'm new to the apartment," Phil told the tall angular brunette who answered his next knock. For a while, they talked through her partially closed door. She shut the door for an instant while she fumbled with the chain, but opened it again quickly to invite him in.

"I'm a nurse," she said, after she'd brought two cups of coffee and a slice of cake to the table.

"I work as a computer programmer."

"That must be interesting," she said.

"Oh, not really, though it's fun at first."

He studied the girl closely. She was not attractive, but her smile was warm and friendly. The friendliest person I've met in LA, he thought, the only person I've met really outside of work.

"Do you read your Bible?" she asked, unexpectedly.

"Uh, sometimes."

"I've got one right here. We can read together."

She got up and fetched a very large Bible to the table. Her hips, he saw were slim and unformed, their movement almost sexless, though she still carried the same warm smile that had first greeted him in the doorway. She can't have many friends either, he thought, but I bet she's nice if you

get to know her. He started to undress her in his mind and to touch her small breasts.

"You don't believe in evolution, do you?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," he said, his mind still not entirely on the conversation.

"That's not what the Bible says."

"Some of the things, the Bible says, I believe and some I don't," Phil persisted.

"You've got to believe them all," she said firmly.

She's serious about all this, Phil thought. For a moment, he had a vision of himself in a long patriarchal beard, a Bible-bearing Christian with a thin, angular brunette wife trailed by three angular brunette daughters. .

The diary entry ended abruptly in the middle of the page.

"That's it?" I said to my father, "That's all you wrote?" He nodded his head.

"Well, you got the number of daughters right in your dream anyway. But I'm the only one who's angular."

"You're O.K." he said, his eyes sparkling, "You're more than O.K. This girl was drab. You've got personality."

"So," I persisted, "what finally happened between you and her?"

"Nothing. She followed me out on the landing as I was trying to slip away, still carrying that Bible—it must have weighed a ton. Made me promise I'd come back and read it with her some more."

"Well you got to touch her breast, anyway."

"Touch her breast? What makes you think that?"

"You wrote it in the story."

"No. I wrote, 'he *thought* about touching her breast.' I never even got to put an arm around her. She wasn't my type. The worst part is that while I'm saying goodbye to her or trying to, the manager and his wife are outside playing cards. And they watch me as I walk back to my apartment, all the way around the U. I'd planned to knock on the door of the girl who lived in the apartment next to me, the one who said come back in half an hour, but with the two of them listening downstairs, I just went back inside my apartment, turned on the stereo to drown out the Muzak, and went to bed. Eight-thirty in the evening."

" For three weeks afterward, I pretty much did nothing except go to work and sit in my living room staring at the swimming pool. That's why I replied to Aimai Cristen's ad: sitting alone in that apartment at night like to drove me crazy."

5. The Appointment

The initial phone call from Aimai Cristen was interrupted. He could hear the slap, then the sound of a woman crying, and then someone hung up her telephone.

She phoned back the next evening at about the same time. She didn't mention the slap or the crying, but she did apologize for having to break off the call. Then she said she would like to meet him.

He began to describe how she could get to his place up in Chatsworth—he was new to the Southern California area then and had little or no idea how to get around himself, but she said no, she didn't have a car. "I'll drive down to see you," he said; "this evening?" he asked hesitantly.

"No, tomorrow night." They settled on the steps of the Santa Monica Public Library, the next evening at eight. From there, they would walk and talk, and then they'd see.

By the next night, he'd had plenty of time to worry. While he was out seeing Aimai Cristen, what was to prevent her and her accomplices from coming to his apartment and robbing him? For once he was grateful that the concierge, Arnie the apartment manager, lived in the apartment below. "Arnie," my dad said, "I'm going out this evening. I have a date with this girl I met through a want ad. Could you keep an eye on my apartment? And on me if I don't come back."

"I think you're crazy," Arnie said, "Going out with a girl you don't know."

Inwardly, my dad had to admit he probably was a little crazy. What sort of girl would you meet through a want ad?

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