

The Queen of the Prom

Scott Memmer

That morning at the stereo store business was slow. My co-workers and I sat at the front counter and watched the traffic pass on the street, listened to the screeching of brakes and the squealing of tires, and by noon only one or two customers had come into the store to buy anything. There were no major purchases.

It was autumn. October, to be exact. The sun slanted down through the eucalyptus trees across the street, and the air, filled with dust and haze and smog and whatever else makes October Southern California skies the way they are, filtered the sunlight and hid the San Gabriel mountains to the north, so that we seemed to be in our own little place in the world. We sat on the creaking wooden stools with the broken backs, smoked cigarettes, and listened to rock-and-roll. One or two hookers passed on the street, and we all pointed and laughed.

About two o'clock an older couple came in. They looked around at the walls and the displays and the equipment, and, frightened, retreated to a corner. I allowed them the time any good salesman knows he must allow his customers to adjust to their new surroundings (I allow old people an extra ten or twenty seconds), and then I moved in upon them. They were in their early sixties, a wizened and curious couple, the wife a smallish, slightly graying woman, the husband a short, angular, fidgety man. The woman leaned into her husband, taking hold of his elbow every now and then, and once or twice she tried to speak over the music but then apparently thought better of the idea. The husband patted his wife on the arm and pointed out the lights and buttons on the various pieces of stereo gear as if he knew what he was talking about. He didn't; I could tell. Didn't know a thing about stereo equipment.

My kind of customer. I approached them cautiously, circling them three or four times with the feather duster in my hand as if I really cared whether the shit was dusty or not. I didn't. After about thirty seconds the husband called out to me—"Young man!"—and I lifted my eyelids and bore in upon my prey.

Without going into all the details, I made the sale. It was easy. They lay down and I took all their money. Well, not all of it: I left enough so they could get gas to make it home. I'm a nice guy.

Actually they were pretty nice folks (reminded me a bit of my own folks). Halfway through the sale they invited me over for dinner (a good sign but an invitation I always refuse), and within an hour of the time they'd walked in the door, I had them up at the front counter, writing out an invoice for twelve hundred dollars. My fellow predators perched themselves on their stools and craned their necks to see what I'd done. They tried to look bored, but I know they weren't. I wrote out the invoice carefully, taking pains to check my figures on the calculator two or three times so as not to screw myself out of any commission; then I left my customers alone with the cashier and scooted to the back room to gather up their equipment, several co-workers in tow.

"You really boned them, Miller!"

"What of it?"

"Jesus Christ, you put the wood to them!"

"That's why they pay me the big bucks."

"Not a penny off. Not *one* penny off. Did you see that invoice, Perkins?—not a single, goddam penny off!"

"I saw it. It's enough to make a person sick."

"Full price," Reynolds groaned. "He even charged them for the goddam cartridge. You should be ashamed of yourself, Miller."

"Oh, I am," I said, "I am. Now will one of you social reformers help me with this box?" I lifted the box from the top of its stack and eased it down to them.

"Don't you have any principles, Miller? Don't you feel the least little guilty over givin' those old folks the bone?"

"They don't pay commission salespeople to feel guilty," I said.

I lifted the other box and handed it down to them.

"You make too much goddam money, Miller."

"You're right," I said. "And, you know, I feel terrible about it; I

really do. Someday I intend on giving all my money to charity.”

“Christ!”

“Somethin’ tells me ‘someday’ is a long way off,” Perkins said.

“You know what your problem is, Miller?” Reynolds chimed in. “It’s your goddam innocent–boy looks. You look like a friggin’ sixteen–year–old.”

“I wouldn’t hurt a fly,” I said, batting my eyelashes.

“Yeah.” Perkins said, “but only cuz a fly don’t have no money.”

I loaded the equipment onto the dolly and wheeled it out of the stockroom to the front counter, my admirers in tow. My customers had concluded their business with the cashier, and were waiting eagerly to receive their equipment.

“Where’s your car?”

They pointed outside (give me some credit folks), then walked out and led me to their Buick.

After I’d loaded the gear into the trunk of the Buick, Mr. Hale offered me a tip (which I refused), a second invitation to dinner (which I again politely declined); then they got in. They rolled down the electric windows to say goodbye, and I reminded them to be sure to call if they had any problems with the equipment. Mr. Hale started the car and drove off. I rolled the dolly around the corner and back into the store.

For the next couple of hours my chronies heaped as much abuse upon me as possible. They tongue–lashed me for being an un–feeling capitalist (a charge I did not deny), and swore that the next old decrepit couple to come through the door would not get within ten feet of me. They were right: no couple came.

I took their flak with as much good humor as possible until, around, five o’clock, the store began to fill with people, and they got off their pimply butts and made themselves almost useful. I took my little brown notebook out of my back pocket and calculated how much I’d made on the sale. Not a bad haul. Yessir, they were my kind of people.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” the cashier said.

“I’m horribly ashamed,” I said. I laid my head upon the counter and wept dry tears.

The phone rang and the cashier answered it.

“For you, Bill.”

She handed me the phone.

"This is Bill," I said.

No response. I waited a few seconds.

"This is Bill."

After a pause: "Is this Bill?"

"Yes it is."

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"Bill?"

"Yes?"

"This is Mr. Hale."

"Oh . . . hello, Mr. Hale."

"The man who bought the stereo?"

"Yes, Mr. Hale . . . How are you?"

"I can't get any sound."

"Pardon me?—What'd you say?"

"I said, 'I can't get any sound.'"

"That's what I thought you said."

"Nothing. Not a peep."

"Do you have it plugged in?"

"Yes I have it plugged in."

After three more minutes of this sort of conversation, I decided to make a housecall. Normally I don't make housecalls, but this, I sensed, was a delicate situation. I got off at five-thirty; and, crimpers and strippers and pliers in hand, headed off for Glendora.

There was plenty of light left. It was early October, and we'd not yet changed back from daylight-savings-time. On the way out I listened to the Dodgers lose a playoff game in Montreal. The drive took about twenty-five minutes. I found their trailer court and parked on a sidestreet. With the voice of Vin Scully ringing in my ears, I made my way across the asphalt to their door.

"Hello, Mr. Miller. Won't you come in?"

I entered, shutting the door behind me.

"We still can't get it to work," the wife said. "Can't even get static."

"We'll get it fixed," I said.

She led me through the kitchen and into the living room, which, being in a trailer and all, surprised me by its size: it was huge. I

found Mr. Hale kneeling on the floor in front of the receiver, pushing buttons and twisting knobs, cussing between his teeth every few seconds. He stood, straightened with a grunt, and held out his hand in greeting.

"Glad to see you, son. Sorry you had to make the trip out."

"No problem."

I got down on my hands and knees and looked at the front panel. Sure enough, they'd left the goddam tape monitor button pushed in. I turned the volume down, released the button, selected a station, then turned the volume back up.

Mrs. Hale's face lit up. "Sound!" she said excitedly.

"Sound!" her husband said, that same stupid grin on his face.

"It's heavenly!" his wife cooed.

"It's wonderful!" he echoed.

"This will change our lives," she said to her husband.

"Now where's those Mantovani records . . .," the husband said.

I got out of most of it, but I couldn't get out of the milk and cookies: I knew they were coming. I didn't mind: I like milk and cookies. I was hailed as an electrical wizard. Wizard, maybe; electrical, no. I looked up, gnawing on my third cookie, and canvassed the room. The old man was obviously retired. They were living well within their means. The sofa was slightly worn, the dining table a little out of the fashion, the paintings on the wall from one of those starving artists' sales. The hi-fi had definitely been a luxury. Probably had to beg the old lady to let go of the purse strings. There was a black and white photograph of an attractive little nymphet on the mantle above the fireplace. Their daughter? I didn't know, but she appeared, from this distance at least (my eyes aren't so good anymore), to be wearing a little silver crown. Miss America, circa 1952? I didn't ask.

"Tollhouse!" Mrs. Hale said proudly, holding one of her finer specimens up to the light. "Made them myself, Mr. Miller."

"They're wonderful," I said, wolfing down a fourth.

"Another?"

"If you don't mind . . ."

"Oh, there's plenty more where that came from!" she said.

A creaking sound came from the darkened hallway to my left. It lasted several seconds and stopped. I didn't know what it was.

"More milk, Mr. Miller?"

"If you don't mind . . ."

"Every body needs milk," Mr. Hale said.

"A-men!" his wife said.

I heard the sound again, a little louder this time.

"Excuse me, but—"

"Is that enough milk, Mr. Miller?"

"That's fine, thank you, but—"

"Builds strong bodies," Mr. Hale said.

"Excuse me—" but before I could say anything more we all heard the sound in the silence between our words; and for a while we just sat there and looked at one another.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That sound?"

"What sound?"

"That sound from the hallway there?"

"Oh, that!" Mr. Hale said, rubbing his bald spot.

His wife and he exchanged glances. She placed her cookie on the napkin in front of her. "You tell him, dear."

"That," Mr. Hale said, a light coming into his eyes; "that—is our only child, Marjorie."

"Does she creak when she walks?" I asked.

The wife flinched a little when I said this.

"Not exactly, Mr. Miller. You see . . . she doesn't walk."

"Oh . . ."

"It's her chair that makes the noise," Mrs. Hale said.

"Her chair?"

"What my wife means to say is—her wheelchair."

"Our only child . . . confined to a . . ."

"She's shy," the father said.

"She likes visitors," the mother said.

"Very fond of music," the husband said.

"Used to play the flute in the high school band."

I looked across the room at the picture on the mantle.

"That her?"

"Yes, yes, that's our Marjorie. Isn't she lovely?"

"Yes," I said, and I meant it.

For maybe thirty seconds no one said anything. There was no sound from the hallway.

"All day long she's sitting in that hallway listening to people talk," Mr. Hale said.

"An intelligent child," his wife added.

"Loves people."

"A wonderful child," Mrs. Hale said.

"Our precious jewel."

"The Queen of the Prom," Mrs. Hale said dreamily.

I refused my fifth Tollhouse and took a sip of milk instead. Mr. Hale looked down at his hands in his lap. "Multiple Sclerosis is not a pretty sight, Mr. Miller . . ."

There was a pause.

"Wouldn't you like to come out, Marjorie?" Mrs. Hale said. "Wouldn't you like to meet a young man?"

No sound.

"A very *handsome* young man. A most handsome young man!"

"She'll come out soon enough," Mr. Hale said. "She always does."

"Our beautiful child!" the wife said.

"Our wonderful angel!"

Mrs. Hale leaned forward and reached across the coffee table, gathering into her hands a tattered blue book with a faded cover and a broken binding. She flipped the pages of the book excitedly. "You simply *must* see the pictures of the Prom, Mr. Miller."

"Our tender darling!"

"Azusa High School, 1968. You simply must see. My daughter, my Marjorie, my little angel—Queen of the Prom, the most wonderful child, the most beautiful child, the precious, priceless jewel." She thumbed through the book until it just fell open to the spot. The pages were well worn here, and smudged by fingerprints. "Here!" she said. "My Marjorie!" Her hand began to shake as she ran it over the pages of the book. "Look! look!" I looked down the length of her finger and recognized the girl as the girl in the picture on the mantle. She had long brown hair, very white skin, a playful, mischievous smile with large, dancing eyes to match, and the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. She was lovely. I swallowed hard to catch my breath.

"Isn't she lovely?"

"Yes."

"Our angel," the husband said.

"And here's the dress," Mrs. Hale said. She rose and walked across the living room, which was, as I said, larger than you'd think it'd be for a trailer; and when she got to a closet on the other side of the room, she opened the door and leaned in. I listened to the rustle of plastic and fabric. "Wouldn't dream of throwing it away," she said; "just as I wouldn't dream of letting you not see it. It's a part of modern history is what it is." She leaned further into the closet, one leg dangling in the air for what seemed an eternity; then finally the leg came down and she came out of the closet holding a powder-blue, floor-length gown with little pink flowers all over the front of it. "I made it myself," she said quietly, "with my own two bare hands." She held the dress to her and looked at her husband. "I made it so our Marjorie could—so she could come down the aisle and be—"

"And you succeeded, Mother. Because she was more beautiful than she'd ever been that day. Because she—" but for some reason he never finished the sentence.

We all stood there, and I—for once—didn't know what to say.

Then, without any of us speaking, a voice filled the room.

"I was beautiful once."

"Oh, yes, Marjorie!" Mrs. Hale said to the hallway. "Yes you were, angel!"

"I was beautiful."

"Of course you were, child," Mr. Hale said.

"All the boys chased me."

"Oh yes they did! They couldn't keep their eyes off you."

"I had an attractive figure."

"That's our angel!"

Mrs. Hale sat down on the sofa, smoothed the dress over her lap, and adjusted her hair. "Won't you come out and meet our guest, Marjorie?"

"Come out, Marjorie."

"Our guest wants to meet you—don't you, Mr. Miller?" They looked at me; I nodded my head slowly. "He's nodding his head, Marjorie."

“Come out, come out.”

“I was the most beautiful angel,” the voice from the hallway said.

I looked around the room and at the picture on the mantle and at the pictures in the yearbook. Everything seemed to leap out at me.

“I really should be going,” I said.

“Oh, stay, *stay*” Mrs. Hale said. “She’ll come out soon enough—you just have to be patient.”

“Stay, son. Tell us about your life.”

“The stereo store is my life.”

“I have a stereo,” the voice from the hallway said.

“Marjorie has a hi-fi,” Mr. Hale said. “With *two* speakers. Bought it for her years ago.”

“I listen to the Beatles,” Marjorie said. “Do you listen to them?”

“One of my favorites,” I said.

“Paul McCartney is *such* a doll.”

“A pretty good bass player, too,” I said.

I looked over at the mouth of the hallway and saw the front of the wheelchair and one of Marjorie’s legs. Her parents saw it too.

“Marjorie, honey . . . Marjorie, won’t you come out?”

“Please, baby.”

“To meet such a handsome young man.”

For a moment there was no motion. Then Marjorie rolled out of the hallway and wheeled herself slowly to the center of the room. She didn’t look at me. She was very large—upwards maybe of three hundred pounds—and her face was pale and soft, and her hands fluttered in her lap like wounded birds. Her hair needed a good scrubbing. She was not beautiful.

“This is Mr. Miller,” her mother said. “From the stereo store.”

“Call me Bill,” I said.

“H-Hello, Bill.” She looked up at my eyes for a moment, then back down at her fluttering hands. “Nice shirt ya got.”

“Got it at Penney’s,” I said.

“My boyfriend used t’ have a shirt like that. I think he got his at Penney’s too.”

“It’s an old shirt,” I said.

I looked at her picture again in the yearbook.

"You can see that I was beautiful once," she said. "Everyone was envious of me when I walked down the aisle. I was perfectly angelic. I had many nice qualities."

"And you still do," her mother said. "*Many* nice qualities."

Marjorie looked down at the floor and put her head in her hands. "Only I fear I'm not attractive anymore . . ."

Mrs. Hale's eyes darted to her husband and I. "Wh-why, of course you're attractive. Wh-why, you're the most attractive person in this room—isn't she, Mr. Miller?"

"Am I?" Marjorie asked.

"Well, I—"

"Of course you are," her mother said.

"But am I, Mr. Miller?" She leaned forward in her chair.

"You can tell her, Mr. Miller . . ."

I looked down at her picture in the yearbook. "Yes, you are," I said.

"Honest?"

I looked across the room at her picture on the mantle.

"Honest?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Hale smiled.

"There, you see!" Mr. Hale said.

"It's what we've been trying to tell her all along . . ."

Marjorie wheeled herself to the picture window and looked out at the fading sunset. It was almost night. The last few shadows were leaving the room. Marjorie looked over her shoulder at me.

"Would you like to see my stereo, Bill?"

She winked at me.

"I don't think Mr. Miller has the time right now, Marjorie—"

"He's been looking at stereos all day, dear—"

"Mr. Miller looks tired, angel—"

"Perhaps another time, dear—"

She wheeled around to face us. "It's broken," she said. "My receiver's broken."

"Nonsense!" her mother said. "It was working fine this morning."

"It's broken, mother. My receiver won't receive a thing. You know that's the truth."

"It's a lie!"

"It's probably just your antenna," I said. "Have you played with your antenna lately?"

"Would you show me how?" Marjorie asked.

I waited for Mrs. Hale to say something. She didn't.

"Would you?"

"Marjorie . . . child . . . I don't think Mr. Miller—"

"It's alright," I said.

Marjorie wheeled maybe three inches closer to us.

"It'd just take a minute, mother"

"If it's the antenna," I said.

"I'm sure that's what it is."

A look passed between her parents.

"Well, I suppose—"

"Donald!" Mrs. Hale said.

Marjorie retreated the three inches she'd moved toward us, and turned her chair back to the picture window again. She looked out, her hands fluttering in her lap. It was almost completely dark out. I could see her reflection on the inside of the glass.

Mrs. Hale rose from the sofa, walked over to Marjorie, and placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder. She smothered Marjorie's filthy hair with her free hand and looked out into the night. Her back was to me. She looked very small.

"Go ahead, then," she said. She leaned over and kissed Marjorie on the forehead. "Go on."

Marjorie pushed off and made time for the mouth of the hallway.

"Hold your head high, Princess!" Mrs. Hale said, her voice trembling with an emotion I thought inappropriate to the occasion.

"They're all watching!" Mr. Hale said.

"Would you push me, Mr. Miller?"

"Where to?"

"In here," she pointed.

I wheeled her into the dark hallway. Suddenly I couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black. I squinted into the hallway. Where were we? I smelled Marjorie beneath me—the sour, vinegary smell fat people get when they don't take a shower for a long time—but I

couldn't see where we were going.

"Where are we?"

"Almost there."

Five seconds later Marjorie opened the door to her room, and a stream of light fell onto the carpet in the hallway. "In here," she said. We entered the room, and she closed the door behind us.

It was a small room. It had one window (the shade drawn), a row of bookshelves on the far wall; and on the nearer wall several starving artists' religious paintings and two or three Charles Schultz posters. The whole place stank. Already I wanted out. Next to the bed, below the bookshelves, on a little end table, sat the stereo. Marjorie wheeled out of my way and let me get past her to the stereo.

I turned it on. It was the old type, the kind that needs a few seconds to warm up. I turned the volume to three and waited for the sucker to kick in. After a moment it began to hum. I twirled the tuning knob until—surprised the hell out of me—I got sound! "Hey, there's nothing wrong with—!"

"You have a very nice ass, Bill."

"What the hell—!"

"It's so tight and firm."

Realizing too late what was happening, I spun around and tried to escape, but Marjorie ran her chair up against my shins and pinned them against her bed. Her face was inches from my crotch. I heard a click, looked down, and saw that she'd set the brakes on the wheels of her chair. She looked up at me and licked her lips. "I used to be pretty good at this sort of thing," she said, going for my crotch.

Christ! I tried to wriggle free, but it was no use. "You've got the wrong guy, Marge."

"Do you have any idea how long it's been?" she asked.

"I don't really care." I struggled some more.

She leaned forward and encircled my hips, burying her face in my crotch. Her hands came up and she began to fumble with my zipper. "Tell me I'm beautiful."

"Let me go, Marge."

"I'll do anything, if only you'll tell me I'm beautiful."

"I don't want to hurt you"

She clawed at my zipper and gnawed at my dick through my jeans, which had begun to stiffen almost against my will, maybe out of fear.

“Let me go!”

“Oh tell me I’m beautiful, tell me I’m beautiful!”

“Get away from me.”

“Tell me I’m the precious angel!”

I was fighting with her now, pushing her head back every few seconds and trying to slide sideways out of my entrapment, but still it was no use.

“Tell me I’m the precious, precious jewel!”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Make love to me.”

She got my zipper down about halfway and reached in, touching skin.

“Tell me you love me, Bill.”

“I don’t love you!” I said. “You’re repulsive.”

It was then that I smelled her body again, that horribly rank odor which reminded me of one of those garbage dumps in North Hollywood. “Get away from me,” I said.

“Don’t push me away. I’ll die if you push me away.”

“I’m warning you”

“Just let me please suck on you. It’s not for you. *Please.*”

“I’m warning you”

“At least tell me I’m beautiful.”

“You’re not beautiful,” I said. With my last ounce of strength I shoved her wheelchair aside and lunged past her. “You’re ugly and fat and you smell like shit and I wouldn’t touch you if they threatened to take my dick away tomorrow!” I stumbled to the door, threw it open, zipped up my zipper, and ran into the living room. Mrs. Hale sat there with the prom dress on her lap, her husband beside her. Marjorie wheeled in after me.

“Why, whatever is wrong, Mr Miller?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong: that goddam crippled daughter of yours tried to rape me!”

“Oh, Mr. Miller!” the wife gasped. She buried her face in her husband’s neck and clutched his shirt with both her hands. “Please . . . please don’t use that word.”

"Why not? That's what she is, isn't she—a cripple?"

"Oh, that horrible word!"

"She's a goddam ugly cripple and you keep telling her how beautiful she is."

"Make him stop, Donald. Please make him stop."

"Tell her the truth. She deserves to know the truth."

I looked over at Marjorie. She sat in her chair with her hands over her ears, her eyes closed, rocking back and forth, back and forth. Her parents clung to one another on the sofa.

Mr. Hale stood and walked over to the mantle. He picked up Marjorie's picture and looked at it. "I want you to leave, Mr. Miller."

"I'm leaving," I said.

Marjorie rolled halfway across the room to him, and stopped.

"Am I beautiful, Daddy?"

"Don't listen to him, Princess. He's lying."

"But am I beautiful!"

For a moment he said nothing. Then he turned around and looked at Marjorie, a look of incredible sadness in his eyes, the saddest eyes I'd ever seen. He turned back to the mantle and stared at her picture.

"Daddy?"

"To us," he said, "you're the most beautiful person on the face of the planet." His body shook.

"Mommy?"

"It's true," her mother said. She held the prom dress in her lap and stroked it like an angry cat. "You're our precious child."

"The Queen of the Prom," her father said. He stared at me. "Now you must go, Mr. Miller."

I picked up my tools and left.

*

Afterward, I stood in the driveway of the trailer park for the longest time and just looked up at the stars. I don't know why, but I've never learned to keep my mouth shut at the proper time. I felt like a fool. I looked up at the Milky Way and thought long and hard about what'd just happened; I couldn't come to any conclusions. I'll tell you one thing, I felt incredibly stupid.

I walked down the driveway and turned onto the sidestreet

where I'd parked. I crossed the street and walked in the dirt on the far side of the road. I wanted to kick myself.

When I got to the car, I opened the door, got in, and for a few minutes just sat there. I rolled the window down, took a few deep breaths. Of all the times of the day, the night asks the most questions. Right now I had so many questions running through my brain and heart—well, it was all I could do just to keep my eyes closed and breathe. I don't know what physical beauty has to do with love, but I wish I did. Maybe it'd make me feel better now.

I started the car, shifted it into first, flicked on my lights, and made a U-turn. When I passed their trailer I saw her image on the shade in her room, rocking slowly back and forth, and I thought maybe she could forgive what I said. Probably not. I drove to the end of the block, stopped, and turned left onto Grand.

I drove down Grand for a mile or so, then turned right onto the 210 Freeway heading west towards Pasadena. Accelerating up the onramp, I saw the lights of the city all around me, the headlights and the taillights of the cars ahead and behind—all sorts of lights—and I felt comforted somehow, shielded. Tomorrow was another day, another dollar—maybe two. I'd set my goal extra high, sell a lot of hi-fi.

Still, something gnawed at me, I couldn't tell you exactly what.

There were a million people on the road. They all seemed to be going somewhere—home, away, the beach, the mountains. I sped up a little, shifted into fourth, flicked on my turn-signal indicator, and merged with the traffic. A million voiceless faces, maybe more. I put my foot to the floor and became one of them.