

Living for You

by Con Chapman

She was as ironic as me, which I thought was great. We'd get going, and it would be like one of those Marvelous Marvin Hagler, Thomas "Hit Man" Hearns fights. If you were trying to judge it, you couldn't even keep score. I'd say something I didn't mean, then she'd say something *she* didn't mean, and on and on until one of us came up dry and would be forced to—take exception to something the other had said, to take it seriously. It was like doing the dozens, except we weren't trying to insult each other, we were just trying to prove we were more sarcastic than each other. I was in love.



We wouldn't end up laughing, though, just sort of exhausted. It was the good kind of exhaustion, like you figured old married couples felt when they'd had a great time together and were in for the night—just riffing on each other because your spouse was the source of your greatest joy in life. I figured people like that, they didn't need stimulation; they didn't need movies or TV or going out to dinner because they had each other. I wanted to marry her.

It was about that time that she told me she was moving back to Louisville, back to what her life had been before we met. She said there was something back there she needed to finish, something she'd run away from and that she'd decided she'd been a coward and had to go back and face it and fix it. I knew she was talking about another guy—she didn't have to tell me—but she did,

and we just let it drop. I didn't need all the details. I'd been through that before—the boy you left behind you before you ventured out into the world, then when you got nervous or scared about putting down roots a thousand miles away, all the familiar things started to look better.

Fine, I said. What could I say? She said she didn't want her kids to grow up talking like people in Boston—"I hod ta loff," she said, thinking I'd think that was funny. Any other time it might have been, but I just said "They don't have to talk that way, it's who they grow up around that matters," but I didn't feel like getting into it. Christ—who said anything about having babies?

Any chance you'll ever come back? I asked, and she said "Sure, yeah," in that off-hand manner that she had. Some people found it irritating, but it was part of her attraction for me. Maybe I like challenges, not the women people would introduce me to who you could see had things figured out. They'd tell you about their jobs, what kind of work they did, how many hours they put in and so on. If you got involved with them just a few steps and you'd fall over a cliff into adulthood, which I didn't want, not yet.

So we arranged for one last date, the night before she was going to leave. We'd go into Harvard Square, have dinner, then go see some jazz. I figured I'd show her what she'd be missing back in Kentucky—make it all very poignant. I was rubbing it in a little, but I was bitter.

Dinner was pretty matter of fact. We didn't have much left to say to each other. She just had one glass of wine--it wasn't like other nights where she'd get going, get a couple drinks in her, then go into character as her parody of a Southern belle. That always cracked me up, but she was nice enough not to act too happy our last night together. I hope it was in part for my sake, and not just because she had to make her flight the next day.

When we got to the club we got a table against the wall with a clear sight line. It was spring and I think a lot of the students had already left for the year. It was Stan Getz playing with some sidemen, not my favorite necessarily like I was trying to introduce

her to the greatest living tenor sax or something, but I figured it would be enjoyable. I wanted her to have a good time so she'd feel bad about it later, after she was a thousand miles away.

We were squeezed in next to the table next to us, a girl with long brown hair and a young guy with a beard and glasses. He had a cassette tape recorder out on the table but the waitress saw it and said he couldn't make a recording. He said he was a reporter, as if that made a difference, but finally he gave up and just took out a pad of paper and a felt-tip pen and the waitress went away.

The club wasn't so noisy that you couldn't have a conversation, and I guess I was hoping for one last shot with her. I don't know what I would have said to make her change her mind, but I figured if I was going to do it, I had to do it now. I'd seen her apartment when I picked her up, and everything she had was already in boxes. She'd sold her couch and her bed and all she had left was a sleeping bag. It wouldn't have been conducive to anything but a "Best of luck."



I thought maybe if I told her I loved her—which I did—it might have made a difference. That's the problem with being ironic all the time. You never get close to the important stuff, you're always going at it from an angle. Maybe the guy in Kentucky had said *he* loved

her and scared her away back when she wasn't ready for it. Maybe she was now and I'd just waited too long.

Getz opened up with a fast number and the guy started taking notes. I saw him reach down into his backpack where he'd put the tape recorder and I heard something click. Great—my lover's plea was going to be recorded for posterity. I leaned a little closer to her, but she turned around to watch the music. I was about to say something when the guy tapped me on the shoulder with his pen.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Do you know the name of this song?”

I wanted to act annoyed, which I was, but I couldn't stop myself. “It's ‘I Want to Be Happy,’” I said with a look that was an attempt to express my supreme condescension. You're the critic, I said to myself—aren't you supposed to know this stuff?

“Thanks,” the guy said and scribbled in his notebook.

She had turned around when I spoke, thinking I was talking to her. I just smiled and she gave me a little smile back. It wasn't quite a “We'll always have this night smile,” more like a “He's good” smile.

Everybody applauded when Getz finished his solo and it got quieter as the bass player took his turn. I tried to scoot my chair around closer to her, but I was hemmed in on the right by another couple, and I didn't want to get any closer to the working press. I put my hands in the middle of the table hoping that when the song was over she'd turn around and we could sort of play pinky pals at least.

The guy was scribbling away on my left, probably coming up with some killer figures of speech that nobody but people like me would read the next day, if that. His girl was turned around, her hand under her chin. She looked to me like she was really experiencing it, taking it all in. She didn't need to be cool—she had innocent eyes—and he was probably going to Explain it All to her later, since he was the expert.

The song ended and everybody clapped, the critic a little too loud if you ask me. Wanted to show everybody that they may

have enjoyed it, but he *appreciated* it. Since there were guys in the audience old enough to have seen Getz when they were the kid's age, I don't think he heard anything anybody else didn't.

She turned around and said "That was good." I was glad—it seemed she'd finally dropped her guard, so I just said "Yeah," as unaffected as I could be. Maybe there would have been some hope for us if we hadn't been who we were when we first met. Maybe if we'd met someplace else, or if we'd both gone to the same college and had known each other better. I didn't know. She put her hand on mine without even looking down at the table. We squeezed and it was like being back in eighth grade. Funny how stuff like that can be pretty intense if you've got no other prospects.

The band started up again and she turned around to watch again, which was fine. I didn't want to sit there like stupid lovebirds all night, I just wanted things to end on the right note. I didn't know how I was going to get in touch with her after she left. I figured I'd ask for her address and send her a suitably facetious postcard at some point. We'd done that when we were separated before; she'd pick out something really tacky, like women riding on the backs of alligators in Florida, and write something clever on the back. That's what I'd do—so it wouldn't be like I was afraid for her new/old boyfriend to see what I'd written. We'd be just good friends, keeping in touch in a really light vein. If he got mad about it maybe she'd see he wasn't such a prize after all.

I sipped at my beer and watched her profile. She wasn't a precious little thing, she was a woman who wouldn't end up spending her life consumed by decorating and bullshit like that. I used to take her to Red Sox games and she'd keep score as well as me. That was a hell of a lot better than the woman I dated before her, who would bring needlepoint to the game.

No, she was it. Only twenty-six, and I knew what I wanted out of life was sitting across the table for me. She's only twenty-three, I thought to myself, and she's going to make the biggest mistake of our goddamned lives.

She clapped at Getz's solo—the most enthusiasm she'd shown for anything in a long time as best as I could recall—and the other players took turns until it was time for them to wrap it up together. Everybody applauded when it was over and she turned around again, her face full of happiness. Why didn't I do this a long time ago, I said to myself, then remembered she hadn't been very easy to pin down. We were always going somewhere in a group, never alone, and when I'd ask her out she'd always say great, I'll ask my roommate if she wants to come.

"This is great," she said. No irony, no sarcasm.

"Yeah," I said. "I thought you'd like it."

I was thinking better than "20-20 Vision and I'm Walkin' Round Blind," an old country string-band tune she'd break into sometimes out of the blue when we were just walking down the street. "We could have made something for ourselves," I said before I thought better to stop myself.

She looked down and took my hand again and said "I know." Then "I'm sorry."

I couldn't say anything at first, and the band started playing again, a slow ballad. "You were just being you," I said, squeezing her hand a little tighter. "I guess I wouldn't want you to be anybody else."

"Thanks," she said.

"You wouldn't anyway," I said, and we both laughed, but it came out sounding funny because we both had stuff in our throats. I wanted to lean over the table and kiss her then but she turned around to watch again, and our only connection was her right hand to my left. It was okay, though, because I was crying, and I didn't want her to see. I took a cocktail napkin in my right hand and was wiping my eyes when I felt another tap on my shoulder.

"Excuse me again," the writer said. "What's the name of this song?"

"It's 'Living for You' by Billie Holiday," I said, then realized I was wrong—that's just the first line. It's "Easy Living," but I didn't

correct myself. I didn't want to talk, and I didn't care if he got it wrong in the paper.

