

44. FRIENDS

If Donna wanted to share her life with me, I was open to learning about her ideals. She was a very committed student. I wish that I had her zeal. It was clear that she had to work a great deal to achieve at a level that pleased her. She was an intelligent reader. She asked good questions. She had good motivation. In some ways, we were a lot alike. For the time being, she could be my double. It scared me to follow my thoughts any further. It wasn't as if I was going to take over her life. I only wanted her to share with me.

She had taken a few sociology courses before. She also liked to write. She did some painting and drawing. But she didn't think that she was that talented.

She had already told me about her creative writing class. Since we last talked, she had met with her instructor. He agreed to let me sit in the class. I felt as if I was filling up my schedule. This would be enough for now. But who knew?

Donna enjoyed having me around. I was almost like the sister that she never had. I felt completely at ease hanging out with her. She showed me her notes for Dr. Coleman's class. They were very conscientious. But Donna thought of the class so differently than I did. She had none of the critical bent that I brought to the class. It was all very straight-forward. I wonder if she really understood what Dr. Coleman was talking about. It was almost like a Disney movie to her. There were bad people, and they did bad things. That was that. She had trouble understanding the deeper motives for people's actions. She was just awakening to the world. She was three or four years older than I was. But she seemed almost like a baby. I wanted to take her hand and lead her into the real world. Fortunately, that wasn't my job.

Like two kids, we could talk about food or clothes. We would listen to music. I loved hanging out with her. Why couldn't we be roommates? Why couldn't I share my secrets with her? How was she getting credit for her work, and I was just hanging out here without a real plan?

I needed to enjoy my new friend and not be too critical. I wanted to learn more about her writing. She had done some poetry. But she spent most of her time working on short stories. She had become quite confident about her writing. She had a couple of stories that were printed in the school's literary journal. I thought that was pretty cool. I had loads of ideas. But I never dared put anything on a page. But June was no longer around to monitor my thoughts. I was free to pursue my dream.

Her stories were about young women with the basic problems of growing up. They seemed to mirror Donna's own experience. She still lived in the cocoon. I hadn't come here to help her escape. Everything would probably happen in good time. I was only here to observe. I never intended to rescue the girl. That was all fine. I didn't want to meddle. She was a friend not a client.

She had taken her share of literature classes. There was some maturity to her reading habits. She read to help her with her writing. She still had a limited vision of the world. She was not meant to be Nebraska's saving voice. Her aspirations were quite modest. She had thought about teaching writing. If she was lucky, she might even pursue a graduate degree. This was all very new to her. That was why she loved college life. It gave her the opportunity to develop without extraordinary pressures. She enjoyed having me around because I took a real

interest in her progress. I felt that she could teach me a great deal about relating to other people. This was so different than the world of high school. There was none of the gaudy competitiveness. Donna had carved a place for herself where she could feel self-assured.

Donna was nothing like Rose. She respected my life. She never made me feel embarrassed because of my lack of experience. She never took unnecessary risks. I had no reason to criticize her. I wanted to learn.

She told me about her other classes. She had a biology requirement. And she was in a statistics class. She also was taking course in American literature. She had quite a lot of work to do. This was so much more serious than high school. If she got behind, then she would really be swamped.

I wanted to know more about her personal life. She told me about her high school years. She had been with one guy for quite a while. They had recently broken up.

“When we were juniors we did everything together. But as I started to get more serious about school, we started to drift apart. Brian didn’t have any real direction for his life. He wanted me to give him a purpose. He just wasn’t that committed to school.”

That seemed real severe. I wondered if she couldn’t have made it work anyway.

“He had decided to stay in Omaha and work for his father. He was going to college there.”

“You didn’t want to go to school there.”

“No way! I’ve been dreaming about NU all my life.”

“What happened?”

“I needed to get away. If Brian wasn’t going to come with me, I needed to go off by myself. We broke up just after we graduated. There were no hard feelings. It was simply fair to both of us. “

The next day, we went to writing class together. This was so different than the antiseptic lecture hall where Dr. Coleman conducted class. Everyone sat around a large wooden table. The room itself echoed with all the inspiring discussions of great literature. This was going to be a blast.

Donna had taken some time to talk to Dr. Briggs about me. He invited me to participate in one of their writing assignments

“Chloe is a friend of Donna’s. She’d like to check our program. If it’s Ok with all of you, I’d like her to share one of her short stories with you.”

Everyone in the class was excited to have me join in. This was going to be a big deal. I couldn’t just sit in the back and take notes. I was going to be part of the action.

“Do you know what you’re going to write about?”

I had no idea. This wasn’t some silly high school assignment. I was playing with the big kids. Some of them seemed old enough to be one of my parents. Of course. I was exaggerating. But it all seemed like such a deal.

When I was in my room by myself, I started to make some notes. I realized that I didn’t even have a computer here. So it would be a little harder sharing with the rest of the students. Donna told me that I could use her computer. When we were finished the story, we were supposed to email a copy to the other students. Then we would all get together and talk about the each other’s work.

“It’s nothing to worry about. We’re not there to criticize each other.”

I decided to tell Cody’s story. But the story would be narrated from his point of view. Of course, I was going to leave out Lee and Helen. Nevertheless, it would still be quite a dramatic story.

Ted Davis had written a story about a small town near Omaha. It used to manufacture truck parts. Now the inhabitants had to find jobs as mechanics. They could barely make ends meet.

They are all hanging out at the local bar after work. In walks, a kid who has just recently graduated from college. He was making it big in the city. And he had been in town to meet a client. He was in the bar shooting his mouth off about how he was such a hot shot. How he was cleaning up in the market. He showed off his new Rolex. These were guys that were struggling to feed their. They didn’t want to listen to shit from some smart ass kid. So they followed him out to the parking lot and gave him a good beating.

“The story’s a little harsh,” said Janet. “Do you think that you’re trying to teach us a lesson?”

Ted answered, “I didn’t make it up. It really happened.”

“That doesn’t justify what they did to the kid.”

“These are real emotions.”

“But you’re not offering any alternative to the characters. They all live according to their type.”

“This is not a self-help story.”

Elaine agreed, “I thought that the story was very authentic. The way that Ted described each worker seemed so realistic.”

Janet countered, “You’re feeding your own male fantasy. You wants to be the tough guy.”

Donna tried to walk a fine line between the two interpretations, “It’s one things to use an incident from your own experience. But you need to frame it more clearly to make your point. You don’t want to advocate just beating on someone for stating his opinion.”

Ted developed his point of view, “The kid wasn’t just stating his opinion. He was belittling the people around him. He had the chance to tone down his statements. But he only became more venomous.”

I thought that Ted had been a little rough in his portrayal. The story created little sympathy for the young businessman. But that was also the writer’s intent. There was really no sense of altruism on the kid’s part. He only created a great deal of resentment in other people.

After such a heated exchange over Ted’s story, I felt afraid to share mine. I had also based it on my experience. Although no one knew that.

Sylvia complemented my approach, “It gave me this sense of claustrophobia. The patient wanted to communicate, but he felt so frustrated.”

Ted added, “Even though the story was based on an apparent contrivance, it seemed very realistic. I could sense the man’s isolation.”

Janet continued her critical bent, “The story didn’t seem plausible. Why would the girl waste her time reading to the man. It’s silly to believe that he could understand what she was doing.”

Elaine disagreed, "That's the charm of the story. There is this sentimental connection between the two of them. But neither of them can really express what they feel. It is utter helplessness."

Dr. Briggs added. "I like the maturity of the authorial voice. It never moves out of character. The man is reaching out to the girl, but she is unable to react to anything that he feels. It is the ultimate sense of entrapment in the self. As Ted noted, this is all about personal isolation."

Janet still wasn't convinced, "The premise seems fake."

Dr. Briggs defended my story, "It's a lovely metaphor for the human condition. If Chloe hadn't have used that literary device, it wouldn't have had that poignancy."

I felt accepted in their midst. I wanted to celebrate my initiation into the group. Donna shared my joy. She was impressed with my story. She was also excited that everyone had been so accepting of my ideas.

That evening, Donna took me to a party. It was nothing like the events that Rose frequented. I didn't fear for my life.

Ted approached me and wanted to talk about my story.

"That was a very adult story. Did you ever work as a nurse?"

"No, I just have a good imagination."

"Sometimes my imagination scares me. It almost takes me over completely."

I could tell that he liked me. He had no idea how old I really was. He told me that he was from the small town that he described in his story. His parents had moved there because they wanted to get out of Omaha. He never felt that comfortable there. A lot of the kids made fun of him.

"Janet was right. There was this whole macho thing there. If you were a little bit different, they would just gang up on you. I was lucky to have escaped.

"You look like you can take care of yourself."

"I'm not really a fighter. I did what I could."

"You don't see yourself as a hard-drinking brawler. Someone who views life as a contest. And lives to write about it."

"I'm more of the observer. I watch other people crash and burn."

"Really.!"

He was flirting with me. I felt a little strange playing along.

"You look like you've seen a lot."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He was afraid that he had said the wrong thing. He wanted to revise his sentence. But it had already been spoken.

"I'm not putting my foot in my mouth again."

"You're OK. You're just assuming that I have these experiences."

"For one thing, I know that you're not from Nebraska."

"What does that tell you?"

"You're not like a lot of the other girls here. You're kind of mysterious. Like you know some deep truth."

"And how can you tell that?"

“I don’t. It’s a feeling that I get. Something about your eyes.”

He tried staring in my eyes. I looked away.

“Are you afraid of me?”

“It’s not that. I feel that I’ve been through a great deal. And I’m not sure if anyone would understand.”

This seemed like some kind of challenge. And he wanted to get me involved in some kind of game. His intentions were honorable. He just had no idea what I was about.

“I want to learn about you.”

“I’m not going anywhere soon.”

“That isn’t what I mean.”

He was pressuring me, “Don’t you have a girl. I thought you and Donna were together.”

“She doesn’t even like me that much.”

“Is that just an excuse on your part so you can do whatever you please?”

“Ask her.”

“You know that I will.”

I told him that I was going to get something to drink. He watched me as I walked over to the table. Later, I saw him talking to another girl. She wasn’t in our class. When I looked over at him, he would look back.

“Ted was coming on pretty strong.”

“He does that. He’s harmless.”

“I think that he wanted my number.”

“Did you give it to him?”

“I just told him that we’d see each other soon. I hope that I didn’t break his heart.”

“He’s a big boy. I think that he takes all his crushes seriously. He thinks that he’s a romantic poet painting the sky with his emotions.”

“Should I ignore him?”

“He’s a good guy.”

I had to ask her, “You didn’t go out with him, did you?”

“We’re friends. When he meets any girl for the first time, he makes a real effort to get to know her. He’s really very shy.”

I still wasn’t sure what to make of his advances. I had no idea how long I was going to be in Lincoln. I didn’t want to make my life any more complicated. I also didn’t want to jeopardize my friendship with Donna. I wasn’t going to make her feel uncomfortable. She had invited me to the party. I wasn’t going to go off with some guy.

Ted was quite an intriguing person. If I had met him years ago, I would have really taken to him. But then I would have really been a baby. For all his experience, he was very naive. There were so many things that had happened in my life. It would be difficult trying to explain them to him.

I didn’t come to Lincoln to get involved with a guy. That was the last thing on my mind. I wasn’t going to make things more difficult for myself. I didn’t believe that life just presented its own necessities. That I just needed to adjust to reality. I wanted to create my own life. I wasn’t pretentious enough to believe that I could create my own Ted. But I didn’t like his rough edges. He wasn’t that adaptable to new situations. I needed to be more of a chameleon because,

ultimately, in my heart, I knew who I was. Ted didn't have that kind of wisdom.

Not only had I been trying to escape Lee, I was on my own mission. I hadn't realized this until recently. Even my short story was only a weak attempt to express my understanding. I was looking for something to unify all these unusual experiences that I was having. From day to day, I had no idea who I was going to be when I woke up.

Ted would only complicate things more. This wasn't about giving in to my feelings. Love couldn't conquer all. His story told me what he was about. He had his own vulnerability, but he wasn't even close to sounding that depth. In the end, he would only take it out on me. I'd reveal something about him that he wouldn't want to acknowledge. We needed to stay friends.

As I was about to leave, Ted came back to talk to me.

"It was great meeting you."

"Likewise."

"I'll look forward to reading more of your stories."

"I just started writing."

"I'm patient."

I smiled back at him. He reached over to give me a hug.

Donna and I walked home from the party. Neither of us lived that far away. And I felt pretty safe.

When I woke up the next day, I felt excited. I was making friends. I almost had a plan for myself. I wasn't about writing any more stories yet. I had a great deal to think about. I really wished that I could spend more time in Lincoln. Maybe I could work on a GED. I could find my way into college. Maybe Dr. Coleman could help.

I went to another one of her lectures. Donna was sitting next to me. We both made notes. Today, the lecture was on seduction techniques. Dr. Coleman was examining how involved the audience becomes with media. She was trying to measure the degree to which people viewed their personal satisfaction through the images from television and movies.

"Admittedly, we can tell the difference between what we see in a movie and our actual experiences. A romantic comedy isn't going to help you pass your math test. You live a reality that had nothing to do with the stories that you observe on screen. But there is a point that you use these images as your reference point.

She was trying to explore the analogies between romantic love and political allegiance.

"The most interesting part of our reaction is what we aren't aware of. These feelings seem to creep up on us and affect who we are. A lot of our response is based on what we find comforting in these images. This feeling can go hand in hand with out revulsion. The political candidate makes us so afraid of his opponent that we turn to him in the hopes of rescue."

Dr. Coleman was exploring what we take for granted. Even Donna was somewhat mesmerized by her life. I couldn't see her following some outlandish political doctrine. But she had no idea what was happening right before her eyes. If I tried discussing some current event, she would act interested. But she had little idea what was happening. She had developed a concern for environmental issues. And she also had knowledge about alternative energy sources. But that's where her awareness ended.

It would only take a small group to manipulate the rest of the population. In a lot of cases, the real changes were so complex that a person would have to keep up constantly to know

what was going on. Dr. Coleman kept talking about the dangers of these political movements. And her students continued to make notes. It wasn't as if they were distracted. The ideas hardly registered with them.

"I think people believe that they have enough freedom. They don't want things more complex."

Donna tried to explain what was going on in class.

"But everyone is just too accepting."

"You're talking conspiracy theory. It's just too far out there."

I had to admit that I was confusing her. I didn't want to convert Donna. I only wanted to open her eyes.

She added, "Dr. Coleman is a researcher. She sees things at a deeper level. That doesn't mean that we have to see them in the same way. There's not going to be some kind of revolution tomorrow. That's why we have the government."

"But what if one of these crazies becomes part of the government?"

"They're all pretty out there as far as I'm concerned."

"They could do all kinds of things to screw with our lives."

"I can't worry about it."

I smiled back at her. I didn't want to think of her like a child. But she couldn't understand what was going on.

I had to let it go. I didn't want to share my full story with Donna. Without more evidence she would never understand. I thought about the novel with all these ideas in it. It only comforted people like myself. To the rest of the world, it just looked like paranoia. No one wanted to hear that they were brainwashed. In fact, people usually believed that their accusers were themselves victims of mind control. I guess no one could understand how potent these ideas were until they faced them for real.

The writing assignment convinced me that I could do so much more. I wanted to write all the time. Perhaps it would allow me to cast off these demons that were pursuing me. But I needed to put it all away for now. I wasn't in school. Donna was. I didn't need to prove anything to anyone. I just needed to enjoy the rest.

Donna had invited me into her world. I wasn't here to upset the apple cart. Kids at college love discussing various issues all night long. It's a way of letting off steam. It didn't mean anything. They probably weren't going to change the world. It just made them feel better. It wasn't my role to try to convince Donna. I had seen so many weird things in my life. I couldn't explain them to her. I didn't even want to tell her that I hadn't even finished high school. She wouldn't have sent me back to my parents. But she wouldn't have been that sympathetic. Her life was too set to allow that much uncertainty. She couldn't even stay with a guy because he lacked her drive.

I could tell that Donna was becoming a better writer. I wished that she could tell my story. But she had only a partial understanding of people's maliciousness. I wondered how long it would take for her to develop a more acute social conscience. For someone with as much background in sociology, she seemed reluctant to apply the lessons to real life. The University of Nebraska created this wall that protected its students. But it also restricted the data that they could use to form their opinions. It didn't make Donna closed-minded. But her options seemed

somewhat limited.

How would she handle herself on the streets of Saint Louis? She'd be on the phone to her parents in a matter of seconds. She never had to let go of the umbilical cord. It was surprising. She was so independent. She always did her assignments on time. She had few complaints about school. She was at the library first thing that she had a project.

When she had her own family, everything would be in order. She would never be a mother like June. Her college classes had taught her tolerance. She would be conscious of her children's needs. She looked out for her friends. She did all that she could for me.

Did she think that I was a little reticent? Did I hold back too much from her? I hadn't told her about my life. Was that important to her? I hoped that she didn't think that I was holding back. I needed a degree of honesty. I just felt as if I was hiding from her. It had to be that way. There were things that I didn't want to admit to myself. I certainly wasn't going to share them with her. She had enough trouble making sense of Dr. Coleman's theories. And most of them were abstract.

Things had been going so well with Donna and me. I was afraid of some kind of falling out. But even when she became busy with her school work, she continued to make time for me. She invited me along to her study groups. I got to know more of her friends. I never experienced any petty jealousy. Everyone was her to get things done and have a good time. Socializing meant getting rid of some of the stress. No one was about binge drinking.

I knew that the campus wasn't perfect. There was loads of crazy shit. Donna had simply learned how to stay clear.

I wondered if any new guys had struck her fancy. She had been here quite a while. Brian was in her distant past.

"I'm not sure what's wrong. I'm just not that attracted to anyone. It could be all the work that I have to do. I've made good friends. I just don't feel the pressure."

Again, this seemed so different from my high school years. I could never imagine Rose without some new guy on her arms. That's how she measured progress in her life.

"I've put so much effort just to get here. I don't want to destroy it over something silly."

I loved her confidence. She was complete. She was looking for someone else to make her feel whole. I guess her family really gave her the support that she needed. Maybe I could meet them one day.

"I'm going to a party this evening. Come along!"

This party was a little different than the last. The music was a little more boisterous. People were acting a little crazier. But it wasn't insane.

"Who are these people?"

"Friends. And friends of friends. One of the guys works in a record store. They sell a lot of old vinyl. And new CD's"

"Pretty rad!"

She smiled back at me.

This party seemed a little harder to navigate. There was no one like Ted around who wanted to discuss literature. There were a bunch of kids dancing in the living room. Donna pulled me in there.

I started hopping up and down. She laughed.

“You dance like a bunny rabbit.”

I used my hands to form bunny ears. I started to shake my head up and down.

“You dance pretty well. You have good rhythm.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

I pointed over to the corner of the room, “I think that guy is staring at us.”

“Take a picture!”

“What?”

“He’s staring at you.”

“Do you know him, Donna?”

“Never seem him before.”

“He thinks that he’s hot shit! Do you see that jacket?”

It was a biker jacket. He tossed his hair away from his forehead.

“I think that he practices at home.”

“Do you want him for your collection,” I asked Donna.

“No, you can put him in your killing jar.”

We both glared at each other and giggled.

“I think that you scared him off, Chloe.”

“He had eyes for you.”

We both went to get some drinks. Motorcycle boy was nowhere to be found. The quest of the evening had just vanished.

“What do we do now?”

“Go home and die!” I said.

I stayed at Donna’s place that night. By the time that I walked her back to her house, we were both worn out.

“You can sleep on the sofa.”

“Great!”

When we woke up, we made French toast.

“That guy was really dreamy.”

“Donna, I think that he was some kind of serial killer.”

“You don’t trust anyone.”

“Yes, I do!”

Was she right? Had I become a mistrusting sort. I had had so many bad experiences that I wasn’t about to open up. I was doing my best.

I left Donna to work on her math homework. I had some ideas for stories. By the time I made it back to my place, I just wanted to loll around. The French toast made me tired. And the party had kept us up late. I just passed out on my bed.

I didn’t have any strange dream. I woke up well-rested.

My life seemed a lot more stable. Donna had helped me get direction. If she was so serious about her plans, I needed to get something going for myself. The school idea sounded great. But maybe there was just too much involved. I hadn’t been here long enough for in state tuition. This wasn’t a picnic. As I began to work out the practical details I felt a little crestfallen. I couldn’t figure out what to do next. The GED idea wasn’t that appealing. I was already reading advanced material. I didn’t want to waste my time filling in the gaps in my education.

I really liked the idea of becoming a writer. I just didn't have the discipline at this point. After I wrote down my ideas for stories, that was that. I just didn't feel motivated enough to develop them. I didn't come to Lincoln for the parties. But I hadn't come for school either. I was completing the puzzle. But there was a long way to go.

College seemed too remote from actual life. I wanted to be a good student. I wanted to spend my days in the library. But the end result didn't turn me on. I didn't want to become a Dr. Coleman. I loved the writing class. But I couldn't see myself as a writing teacher. I wanted more action. Unfortunately for me, action had only meant trouble. I had enough of that. I didn't want to be the rabbit for some ravenous hound.

If I wasn't careful, things were going to get out of hand. I enjoyed visiting the two college classes. And Dr. Briggs invited me to share more of my writing. I wasn't about to get published. So I didn't have to worry about perfection. This was just something to pass my time. I needed to take a deep breath and let it all come in time.

I met Donna after Dr. Coleman's class. I didn't try to get her involved in a deep discussion. If she wanted to talk to me about something, that would be cool. But class was class.

"No more parties tonight?"

"I have a stats test tomorrow."

"Good luck with that!"

"I've studied enough. I need a little bit of a break. I'll look at my notes this evening. It should be OK. If you want to come over, I wouldn't mind a study buddy. We could make hot chocolate."

It sounded inviting. It wasn't as if I had anything else to do. I could bring a book over and read. I just wanted my own life. I didn't want to feel as if I was just accompanying Donna's solo.

More and more, I thought that my own reserve was preventing me from making real progress. I didn't want to be too chatty. But I needed to learn how to get out of myself. I just had problems coming up with a good background story. No one wanted to be lectured by a runaway. And I couldn't keep telling people that I was thinking about going to college next year. Maybe I was losing my tolerance for Lincoln. There were other places that I could go.

I loved hanging out with Donna. Our study session was so much fun. I kept reading my novel. And I made notes. She worked on her statistics. I enjoyed having someone around.

After the test, Donna and I got together for coffee. She had a lot of biology work. She'd be in the library all evening. So we'd have to catch up the next day. I valued our time apart. It convinced me how much I valued her friendship. Our time together had enriched me a great deal. I wanted to hold on to what we had.

Donna's next story was sort of about our friendship. It talked of two girls who fall for the same guy at a party. They both do what they can to get close to him. Soon they realize that it is all about their rivalry. Neither of them care that much about the guy. When they spend time with him, they realize that he's a bore.

"Maybe we're setting our standards too high."

Donna replied, "I don't have standards. I just want a real man!"

We both laughed. It was a good thing that we could laugh about things like that. I didn't want to do something stupid and have Donna hate me. No guy was going to ruin our friendship.

My story was hardly as revealing. I pursued the tale of the girl on the streets of Saint Louis. I was very graphic in my presentation. I didn't spare any details. The girl's attackers were portrayed in very stark terms.

Many people in the class were freaked out. They had some exposure to parties and drugs. But none had ever seen the seamy side of life. They wanted to hold it at a distance. It was almost the same things as with Dr. Coleman's class. No one wanted to leave the protective bubble.

Dr. Briggs complemented my story. He recognized that I was drawing on a more realistic experience. It disturbed him a little.

"Anything that I can do to help."

"I'm OK. It's fiction. Things that I made up."

"Pretty potent stuff!"

"Yeah."

"Our imagination reveals a great deal about our reality."

"Don't I know it."

Donna asked me what Dr. Briggs had told me.

"He was talking about my story."

"Did it freak him out."

"He just found it very real!"

"I think that you scared some of the kids."

"Not in a bad way."

"You're some kind of celebrity now. Girl, can I have you autograph."

We both laughed.