

The Perfect Gentleman

She couldn't remember when or how she first met him. It was the sort of experience she didn't want to remember very well. It was probably at one of those drunken Ivy League mixers during her freshman year. They'd gone out later, one New England fall weekend, and that she remembered. All the trees had been blazing with color, and the air had a cool, smoky tang to it--the kind of weather she'd remember every October for the rest of her life. She wouldn't have thought about him now, except that she saw him and his wife, both looking very WASP and proper, on Madison Avenue, and all her old anger came back. He was standing by the window of an expensive boutique, dressed in a beautifully cut silk suit and Gucci loafers. His blond wife, also impeccably dressed, was pointing to some bauble on display, and it was clear that life had been good to them. He didn't see her, but if he had, she wasn't sure what he would have done--probably pretended she wasn't there, and walked on.

That fall semester her roommate had come running in one afternoon breathlessly.

"Marian, it's that guy Randall on the phone for you!"

She ran down the hallway in a great, sliding rush and picked up the receiver. "Randall?"

"Hi, Marian. I was wondering if you'd like to come out with me next Saturday? I'll be in the area again visiting my mother. I just bought some land--it's where I plan to build a house this summer after I get my M.B.A. We can drop by Mother's first, and then go over there for a picnic..."

She was delighted but could feel all her old insecurities surfacing. He was older, he was rich, he was gorgeous. She was too skinny, had no money and had come to this school on a scholarship. She hadn't even dated anyone yet, she'd been working too hard.

"Uh, okay," she murmured, still unsure.

"I'll come by for you at noon," he said, laughing, "and don't worry--I'll take care of everything..."

By the time Saturday came, Marian was completely exhausted, so thoroughly had the other girls in her dorm gone over various scenarios. By then, she was practically married to the poor guy. She'd gone out and bought an expensive skin cream, which she hadn't really been able to afford. She'd put it all over her body after her shower so she would be soft. Her roommate had insisted that was the key word: soft. The night before, she had slept with her head wrapped in a towel, hair soaked in thick conditioner, skin masque on, creamed hands in gloves--just to be able to look the way her roommate said she should. But by 11 a.m. Marian threw the skin cream down and glared at her roommate.

Her roommate, Gail, put down her *Cosmopolitan* magazine and rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Relax, Marian, you'll look fabulous and it'll be worth it."

"Well, maybe it'll be worth it this one time, but then what?" Marian said, crankily. "I can't possibly keep up this charade on a daily basis if that's what these kind of guys want. It takes too much time! I have better things to do."

She looked in the mirror at her body and her long blow-dried red hair. "And now what, Gail?" she said sarcastically. "How does one look 'weekend casual' but well-off financially? You know his family would never let him date a pauper for very long."

She stood in front of her clothes closet gloomily. Unlike her wealthy roommate who had several closets filled with clothes for every occasion, she'd come to school with only three suitcases. Sighing, she decided on a gold turtleneck, a hand-made floral sweater from her grandmother and a pair of dark orange corduroys. Then came a little gold wrist chain, imitation

Tiffany tank watch, cameo ring, and gold shrimp earrings. She began to put on her old beat-up sneakers.

"What are you doing?" her roommate said, horrified.

"Look Gail, I'm not about to wear your Topsiders and cave in completely!" Marian said emphatically. "I've prepped out as far as I will go." She was most comfortable normally in a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt.

The hall phone rang. Her roommate leapt off the bed and peered out the dorm window. "Look, he's got a red Mercedes sports car! Do you know those things cost more than four year's tuition here?"

Nervously Marian fled into the bathroom for one last primp. God, all this pressure! The idea that his car could pay for her schooling was unsettling. Shit! she thought. She suddenly had serious misgivings and all her insecurities surfaced again.

"Ok, ok," she nervously said to her roommate. "I'll cave. Give me your Topsiders!"

Walking downstairs into the reception area, she saw him sitting by a window in a white Brooks Brothers shirt, green Polo sweater tied loosely at the neck, green Polo slacks, the gold family signet ring, and yes, Topsiders. For people like her roommate, wearing those particular brands represented a rigid kind of WASP code of economic privilege. He certainly looked like "a good catch," as the girls would say.

He took her arm a little too tightly as they walked to his car, but she was so excited by the Mercedes that she accepted it. Her family had never even owned a new car, much less a fancy one. "How long have you had a car, Randall?" she asked, as they got in.

"Oh, I've always driven Mercs," he said casually. "Got my first one at sixteen." To impress her, he downshifted and picked up speed. The car was great.

"So, what are your plans once you're done with school?" she asked, trying to make conversation as they sped along.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm going river rafting in Colorado for a while, and then maybe head on over to Bangkok again. It's a fun town but I've already been there a lot, so maybe I'll go to Paris or something," he said. "Eventually I'll come back and work." He seemed like a nice guy, she thought, but not too intellectual, and definitely spoiled. She wouldn't have minded being spoiled like that herself.

He exited onto a small road, and he did he put his hand on her leg. She stiffened. It was so early in the date. He smiled and put his hand back on the steering wheel. "We're almost there. Are you hungry yet?"

"No," she said, tensely. "Let's eat later."

The narrow country road was lined with trees, which formed a processional of sorts, escorting them further and further from the main road. As they drove quickly around a curve, gravel flying, she saw the house looming up from a perfectly manicured, very green lawn. It was a large brick building with fat white columns, the exact opposite from the little cottage she and her brother and mother all lived in on Long Island, with its unkempt garden. What an ugly hybrid of architectural styles, she thought. A black Cadillac sat in the circular pebble driveway, which was lined by a low white wire fence. There wasn't another house around as far as the eye could see, nothing but rolling hills.

"Mother must be inside," he said, parking the red Mercedes next to the Cadillac. A white toy poodle with a diamond collar ran barking across the lawn as they walked around to the back door. Nearby was an old, empty horse barn that had a Pennsylvania Dutch emblem nailed to its front wall.

"We always go in the back way," he said with a grin. "The front is much too formal. You see...I already think of you as one of the family!" She smiled back at him uncertainly.

Abruptly, the back door opened and a very tall, thin woman with a thick head of carefully coiffed white hair strode out. "Regana, oh Regana...come back here!" she said. This, apparently, was the toy poodle's name, Marian thought.

"Oh dear, you've got to go and get her. We can't have her running into the woods." After quickly introducing them, Randall walked away, leaving Marian and his mother alone.

"I'm very proud of Randall, he's a wonderful boy," she said. Her very real jeweled bracelets clinked as she tapped her hair delicately.

Marian looked at her with interest. What an odd woman, she thought. She was so made up she looked like she was wearing one of those Japanese masks she'd seen in her art history class.

"...Yes, we've just met. He's very nice." Marian said, trying to be as charming as possible. "We had a lot of fun driving here. The day is so beautiful, just perfect!"

"Yes, it is," the old woman said, eyeing her critically again. Randall came around the corner of the house carrying the toy poodle.

"What would you both like to drink?" he asked, handing his mother the dog. "I'm having a Bloody Mary."

"So will I," his mother answered, "and you, my dear?"

Marian didn't feel like drinking this early in the afternoon, especially when it was so nice out. "Oh, a Pepsi is fine."

His mother took her arm, a custom Marian wasn't used to, and walked with her towards the old barn, where there were several benches. "Let's have our drinks here," she said, sitting

down carefully and smiling at Marian.

Randall came back with the drinks and leaned against one of the barn posts. "Pretty nice, isn't it? My father died when I was ten and left this for us, all 400 acres, completely paid for." He grinned.

How callous he seems, she thought. It's almost as if gaining the money had been more important than losing a father, something she knew all too well, when her own had died of cancer when she was twelve, leaving them nothing. He had been poor, but he had been creative and educated. She missed him every day.

"Hey, why did you put rum in this?" she said angrily after she'd taken a sip of her drink.

He waved his hand airily in dismissal and said, "Oh come on, Marian, loosen up, it's the weekend!"

"Now, now, you lovebirds mustn't fight." His mother got up slowly and extended her hand to Marian. "It's been nice meeting you, dear. Have fun. Sorry to leave but I've got a dinner to go to tonight, one of those boring fund-raisers, you know." Her hand lingered on her son's shoulder as she smiled at Marian. "Don't worry, my Randy's the perfect gentleman."

As she walked out, Marian turned and asked him, "Did you go to business school in the East to be near your Mom? It must be lonely for her most of the time here."

He left his drink by the barn post and slid onto the bench next to her. "She does fine for herself. Most of the year she's not even here--she's down in Palm Beach. So no...I went to school in the East so I could stay around pretty girls like you." He leaned forward and tried to kiss her.

Marian pushed him away but he held on to her tightly. They tussled briefly and he released her. "Hey, you're a wildcat! Only joking...Boys will be boys, you know."

Marian stood up and straightened her sweater. "I don't think that was very funny. I wish you'd back off a little, or else take me home!"

He chugged down his drink and said, "Okay, okay. Don't worry, I'll behave. Let's go have our picnic now. I'll show you the land I bought."

He drove down the road carelessly, sending the gravel splintering off into the dusty roadside grass. As he turned onto a small bumpy road and drove into the woods Marian's hands began to sweat. The area was so remote.

"You really want privacy, don't you?" she said jokingly. He just smiled and pulled into a large clearing that overlooked a river.

"Isn't it great! What did I tell you? Perfect place for a picnic!" He opened the door and got out with a bottle of Margaux in one hand and a wicker picnic basket in the other.

The grass was thick and sweet smelling, dotted here and there with pink wildflowers. The buzz of insects and the occasional crackle of a leaf were the only sounds. "Let's sit here," Marian said, pointing to a smoothed over area. They were surrounded by a fabulous view of thousands of trees covering the low hills near the river. She was beginning to relax.

They spread out the blanket and the picnic. She eyed the food hungrily as he poured the wine. Leaning toward her in a mock Don Juan voice he said a toast in Spanish: "Amor, Salud y Pesetas."

She laughed politely as their glasses clinked together. She had no idea what he had just said.

He filled his glass again, and drained it. He filled it again and looked at her. "This is a good wine, isn't it, and what a day to drink it!"

"Yes, it's lovely," she smiled. "You picked a great spot for your house. When did you say

you'd be returning to build it?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said, "one of these days." He reached over and grabbed her arm.

"I like your smile. Come here."

She pulled back, resisting. "Randall, I told you before I'm not comfortable with this. I just met you. Maybe we should just forget about the picnic and go now, okay?"

"Oh come on, the party's just beginning!" He pulled her to him, hard. "You're a big girl, Marian. Loosen up. What did you think we were going to do off in these hills all by ourselves? Go on a picnic?" He was breathing excitedly into her face and his musty breath revolted her.

"Stop it, Randall. Get up and let's go! I want to go home!" she said angrily.

He rolled on top of her. "No way," he said, shifting his weight. "I'm not being disappointed."

"That's a very amusing statement coming from a spoiled mama's boy like you," she said, struggling under him. "Get off me, you creep."

He began to slap her face, shouting, "Shut up, you little whore!" He fumbled with one hand on his pants as she squirmed and punched him. "Get off, get off me, you bastard!" she shouted. But he was so big and heavy that she was pinned. She began to cry out of exasperation. The sound drifted into the vast speckled forest around them.

"Stop it, stop it! Get off of me!!" she screamed again. The blue sky bore down on her like a fist.

Pinning her with his chest, he used both his hands to rip open her pants and push them down past her bucking hips. But then her body became rigid, his breathing became faster, and soon the only sound heard was the wind rustling the fallen leaves around them.

Marian continued to look at him and his wife as they window shopped. The blond looked like one of those Park Avenue types that spent half her day at Bergdorf's and the other half at Le Bernadin. But no matter how good she looked he probably cheated on her anyway, he was such a pig. On a perverse gamble Marian shouted out his name and they turned around; his wife didn't see her but he did, and she watched as his face became a cold mask. So he did recognize her. Well, don't worry, asshole, Marian thought, it's not worth it now. But let's keep you worried. And she turned and walked away.