

Happily Ever

By R. A. Conti

“Jeffy! Oh, Jeffy!” Jefferson cringed when he heard his old nickname. He wanted to ignore it. He turned instead and saw Aunt Beth smiling at him.

She was five years older than Jefferson. It had been several years since they last saw each other. He noticed her face still had soft child-like features although she was almost sixty. Her hair was long and gray and flowed to her shoulders luxuriously. Jefferson smiled and hugged Aunt Beth. They talked a few moments and then drifted apart.

Jefferson felt uneasy at Aunt Ellen’s funeral and avoided saying hello to many people because he didn’t know who most of them were. He had been out of touch with the family since his parents’ funerals ten years earlier. Many of the aunts and uncles looked familiar but the cousins were tough. They were all grown up. He did not know which adult used to be which little cousin.

Jefferson thought about Aunt Beth as he drove home. He recalled feeling attracted to her every time he saw her over the past forty-five years. It seemed strange that he forgot until now. It also felt strange that he could not decide what it was about Aunt Beth that attracted him. He thought it might be something in her face or maybe her eyes. Then he realized he felt something when she called out his nickname.

Aunt Beth had a vulnerable hopefulness in her voice. Jefferson did not know why that struck him. He had felt curious about her in the past but never acted on his curiosity. When he got home, he admitted she had infatuated him once again.

He went to visit Aunt Ellen’s husband two weeks later. Uncle Jason had invited some family members to look at Ellen’s things. He wanted help deciding what to do with them. Several relatives, including Aunt Beth, were already there when Jefferson arrived. Uncle Jason brought out several bottles of liquor. As they drank, everyone reminisced about Ellen.

When it was time to leave, the guests discovered it was snowing. The others did not have far to go and said they would be okay. Aunt Beth walked toward her car. Uncle Jason called out to stop her. “Beth, you can’t drive. Stay here tonight.”

Beth shook her head. She did not want to spend the night with her widowed brother-in-law in the house where her sister recently died. It was too creepy. She shivered in the snow. Jefferson offered to drive her home. She objected a few times but then accepted and he helped her into his SUV. They waved goodbye to Uncle Jason and drove away.

Jefferson began talking after he felt comfortable navigating the snowy roads. “It was great seeing you again at the funeral. In fact, I thought about you all the way home.” Aunt Beth sat quietly in an alcohol haze watching the snow falling outside the toasty SUV. It felt safe riding in a big car that went over snow instead of through it.

He interpreted her silence as an invitation to continue. “Afterwards, I remembered the strangest things. You know, I’ve always hated that nickname Jeffy. But when you said it I just about melted into a puddle on the floor. Later I recalled the same thing happened to me every time I’d seen you in the past forty-five years.”

“You melted in a puddle?” Aunt Beth replied. “Wasn’t that messy?”

He ignored her wisecrack and went on. “I would be unable to get you out of my thoughts for weeks. Then I would get angry with myself for daydreaming about you and force the feelings to go away. They did for several years until I saw you again at the funeral.”

Beth turned to look at him. "Jeffy, why are you telling me this?"

"You're the only person that's ever had that effect on me. I'd like to find out why."

"You know I should probably slap you right now," she snapped, although she was not angry.

"I feel something when you say my name. I think have feelings for you. I've pushed them away before but I don't want to now. Since we're not kids, and we're both unattached, I want to find out why I feel the way I do."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know. But the only way I can ever understand it is if I can share it with you."

He fell silent. She sat quietly confused. *How much did I have to drink?* she thought. *Am I hallucinating? He's my freakin' nephew!*

Jefferson wondered if she was thinking about him or just lost in a pleasant alcohol fog. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes. Well, no. I'm very embarrassed. You're my nephew! You shouldn't be saying this stuff to me."

"I know. But I had to. Are you mad at me?"

"Well, I really have no idea what you're talking about. I never looked at you the same way."

"I know. I'm not asking you to feel that way now. Just trust me. There's something in you that does something beautiful to me. Maybe it's love."

I must be hallucinating! Beth thought, close to panicking. "Did you just use the word *love*?"

"Yes I did."

"You didn't have anything to drink at Jason's, did you?" she asked. He shook his head. She fell silent and he concentrated on driving.

They arrived at her house. The snow was almost knee-deep. His SUV had difficulty entering the steep driveway.

"I think it's too dangerous for you to drive home, Jeffy. You should stay here tonight. You can leave tomorrow when the storm's over and the roads get plowed."

"Thanks. That might be a good idea. I'm tired anyway."

Her house was small and cozy. He complimented her décor although she did not have much furniture. She mentioned that she liked things to be simple.

"Hang your coat there and put your boots near the radiator." He took off his boots and set them aside. His thick gray socks insulated his feet from the cold floor. She offered a hot drink but he declined.

"I'm really tired," she apologized. "I'd like to stay up but it's been an exhausting day. I don't mean to be rude."

"Oh, don't worry about it. This is a cozy place to be in a storm. Thanks."

"You'll find blankets and pillows in that closet. Take what you need. The couch is comfortable so you should be okay." She headed toward the bedroom. He thanked her as she closed the door. The living room felt cold. He would need extra blankets.

A moment later, the bedroom door opened and Aunt Beth stuck her head out. "Did you actually say all that stuff in the car?"

"Yes."

She mumbled something he could not make out and closed the door. He started toward the linen closet. She opened the door again and peeked out. "That's the coldest room in the

house at night. It's always been that way. I have twin beds in here. You'll be warmer. You're family, right?"

Jefferson had not expected her to react to his confession in the car by inviting him into her bedroom. He did not know how to respond. She noticed his hesitation and felt delighted she had surprised him. *Let's see how he likes crazy talk*, she thought.

"Are... you... sure? I don't want to put you out. I'm used to sleeping in the cold, anyway." He smiled awkwardly and could not look directly at her.

"Yes, I'm sure. Let me put on my pj's and slip under the covers. I'll call you. Put the light out when you come in, okay? Oh, the bathroom's right there."

He nodded and went into the bathroom. He heard her say it was okay to come in just as he finished. The bedroom felt warmer. Aunt Beth had pulled the covers up to her neck and smiled at him. "You can sleep right there." She pointed to the other bed.

"Thanks." He went to the bed, switched off the light, undressed, laid down, and settled in. "Good night," he whispered. She was already asleep.

Jefferson smelled coffee the second he awoke. He got out of bed, put on his clothes, and then went to the kitchen. Aunt Beth wore a heavy ugly bathrobe that covered her from neck to feet. Her hair looked disheveled. He wondered if she deliberately tried to make herself unattractive.

She yawned. "Radio says the roads are still not cleared. They're asking people to stay home."

"Well, I'm in no hurry to get back but I don't want to impose on you."

"Oh, you're not. There's not much breakfast food around. How about some toast?"

"Yes, thanks. That would be fine." She got bread, butter, and jelly from the refrigerator, made toast, and put it on a plate.

Jefferson felt uneasy about his awkward confession last night.

"All yours" she gestured toward the counter. "Coffee?"

"You bet." He took care of his toast and sat at the small table. She sipped her coffee. A cup waited for him. Jefferson took a bite of toast.

"You really did say all that stuff last night?" Beth asked.

"Yes. Yes, I did" He thought she might expect him to apologize but hesitated to say more.

"You know, I was sort of drunk, so I wasn't sure. Did you *mean* any of it?"

"All of it"

"You're attracted to me?" she asked.

"Yes. I always have been."

She stared at her coffee a few moments. "Always?" Jefferson detected a doubtful tone in her voice. He nodded. "Well, what do we do now?"

"We talk... if that's okay."

"Of course we talk. I mean... do we start dating?" He wondered suddenly if he was really awake. Maybe he was still dreaming in the bed next to hers.

"We could," he replied. He did not know what else to say. "That would be nice."

"You didn't plan for this, did you?" Aunt Beth asked. They had already gone beyond what he anticipated.

He munched his toast. She sipped her coffee.

"So, Aunt Beth, tell me about yourself. I know so little about you. What's been happening in your life for the past forty years?"

"Let's get something out of the way first. From now on I am not 'Aunt Beth.' I'm just Beth. Comprendo?" He smiled and nodded.

Jefferson was amazed at how hard her life had been. Beth had numerous boyfriends, three marriages, four kids, and survived precariously from one year to the next. There were hard times with crummy jobs that barely paid the bills. She seldom had any stability. When a relationship or marriage felt secure and she felt confident enough to let go of her fears, something always happened. She got pregnant and her husband took off, a different one came back, or a marriage just fell apart. One of her children died. Catastrophes always happened just when she thought it was safe to relax and stop worrying.

Beth cried when she finished her overview. "Life hurts a hell of a lot, doesn't it?" Jeffy said, deeply moved. She nodded through her tears.

She stopped crying and looked at him. "Could you hold me?" she asked, softly. He stood up from the table, went to her, and touched her for the first time in his life. She needed a man to hold her. He understood. She put her arms around his waist and held on tightly for a while.

"I never told anybody my whole life story before. I would just tell little pieces. I felt people didn't care and I didn't want to bore them."

"I wasn't bored. Thank you for telling me."

"Do you feel like lying down? All this crying has drained me."

"Sure, whatever you want." Beth took his hand and led him to the bedroom. She lay down. "If you could hold me again, that would be nice." He settled next to her and enfolded her body with his. He was afraid she was going to cry again. Instead, she began to talk.

Beth told Jefferson about her childhood. She was the youngest of twelve children. There were five years between her and her closest older sister. She had no happy childhood memories. Beth had been in the way, mostly. Her older siblings did not mistreat her; they just let her know she wasn't worth bothering with and told her to get lost.

Sometimes her mother was happy to have Beth's company. Other times Beth got in the way. She was not a mean mother but she always had to run off to do something for someone else. As she grew up, Beth waited for somebody to do something special for her.

Beth grew old enough to understand no one in her family was ever going to do anything special for her. She would have to get a family of her own where she could be the center. Her first husband Ray fell in love with her the first time they met. Her innocence charmed him. Beth realized this was what she longed for. They married as soon as she graduated high school, stayed together through several hard years, and had two children.

Beth was never the center, however. She came to understand that mothers are invisible. They exist, but unobtrusively. The husband and kids took priority. They were the center, and it would always be that way.

"So, you don't remember me at all?" Jefferson asked.

"I didn't pay much attention to my relatives. You were just one of the nephews. I had lots of them. And you were five years younger than me."

"We must have seen each other sometimes."

"Of course- at family gatherings," she replied and then paused to reflect. "I do seem to remember you, now that I think of it. You were kind of quiet. You would often just sit and watch things."

"I guess *you* were one of the things I watched. A lot!"

Beth giggled. She turned to him. "Well, maybe now you'll get to watch me all you want." He was not sure if she was flirting or hinting she had already decided to keep him at a distance. He frowned. She noticed. "What's wrong?"

This was the first time he needed the courage to speak to her. He did not know what to say. She looked puzzled. "Loss for words?"

"Beth, I don't know what's happening, or how far it might go... but I want to let it." He seemed nervous.

"Wait, Jeffy. Don't panic. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just want you to understand that I don't know where this can go either. And, I don't want to hurt you."

"Oh, thanks. I guess I did panic. I'm not asking for any kind of commitment. I just want to get to know you."

"Okay," she said. She smiled sweetly. They settled into calm silence. Jeff felt awkward lying next to her.

"It's almost noon. The roads must be better by now. I should go."

Beth did not respond. She remained silent a minute or two longer. He thought she fell asleep. "Okay, if you have to," she replied.

They got up and walked into the living room. Neither said anything. He put on his boots and coat. She stood watching him. He turned to her when he was ready.

"Thanks. Really. You've been very understanding," he said.

"And, thanks for holding me and listening to me. It was nice." She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll call you tomorrow. Maybe we can get together."

"Oh, no! Not until this snow is gone," she cautioned. "Call me later in the week." He nodded and then left. She watched as he backed out of the driveway and drove down the street. Then she poured herself some coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. She stared into the cup a moment and then began crying softly.

Jeffy awoke feelings long buried inside her. Those feelings had nothing to do with him. Beth liked the way he held her. It brought back sweet memories of other loves in other times. She recalled feeling secure in the arms of someone who loved her, and of the way, whenever she surrendered to happiness, chaos seemed to follow.

Beth thought she had put all that behind her when she gave up trying to be happy just to avoid the suffering that inevitably followed. Jeffy almost made her want to try again for happiness. The more she considered how vulnerable she felt the sadder she became. She sat at the table, wept for an hour, dried her eyes, and got up to shovel snow. Maybe the cold outside would bring her to her senses.

Jeffy and Beth started seeing each other and several weeks went by. Milly, the self-appointed family matriarch, called her younger sister Chrissy after dinner one night. "Did you know they're *dating*?"

Milly's vagueness annoyed Chrissy. "Who are you talking about?" she asked.

"Beth and Jeffy."

"Oh. Beth and Jeffy." Chrissy paused as she tried to ascertain who Milly meant. Then it dawned on her, "Our Beth and Jeffy? My sister and my nephew?"

"Yep" Milly replied, pleased she shocked Chrissy. She got ready to launch into a tirade. Chrissy interrupted before she began.

"That's sweet."

“Sweet? She’s his aunt!” Milly’s voice was as stern as she could make it. Her outrage didn’t trouble Chrissy.

“Yeah, but she’s only five years older than him.”

Milly sensed she was not making her point. “Still, it’s not right,” she argued. Chrissy frowned. As the oldest sister, Milly thought she ought to run the entire family. However, their extended family was so large- with siblings, nieces and nephews, children, and grandchildren- no one could be the boss. Their mother gave up long ago just as grandchildren started being born. She found it easier to let her kids take care of their own lives.

Milly did not agree. The family let her have her say whenever she got excited about anything and then did what they wanted anyway. Nevertheless, she could stir up things and come down hard on someone if she decided to. Chrissy felt this could be one of those times.

“Why? Neither of them is married. It’s not like they’re cheating.”

“This has nothing to do with cheating, Christine! They’re family!”

Chrissy refused to acknowledge Milly’s judgment and authority. “So?”

“They’re blood relatives!” Milly shrieked. Chrissy felt guilty. This could only be bad for Milly’s blood pressure.

“Oh, do you meanince-”

“Don’t say it!!!”

“They won’t be having any children so what difference does it make?”

“Well, Jeffy’s my *nephew*. I don’t want him becoming my brother-in-law, too.” Milly did not realize how trivial that sounded. Chrissy grinned, glad Milly could not see her.

“Well, I think it’s nice that they’re spending time with each other although it surprises me. They always seemed so different.”

“Well, they must have found *something* they like about each other!” Milly used her best lascivious tone-of-voice to suggest what she thought they liked about each other.

“Yeah. I wonder what it could be,” Chrissy mocked.

Milly grunted. She gave up on Chrissy. “It’s not right!” she barked and hung up.

One windy March evening Jeffy and Beth lay cozy in bed. They watched the shadows of tree branches that swayed just outside the window. The streetlight made the shadows seem huge and they teased each other by pretending there was a boogeyman creeping outside.

“So, is this your teenage fantasy come true?” she asked.

“What?”

“Well, you’re in bed with your older auntie. That must have been what you wanted when you were a teenager.”

Jeffy recalled a distant memory. He was eleven and she was sixteen. Aunt Beth was the most beautiful creature he ever saw. He watched her at family gatherings hoping she might notice him and feel curious about the quiet boy who sat all by himself. Jeffy heard music whenever she spoke. He did not know then but he was in love with her.

“You know, I’m not sure what I wanted.”

“It wasn’t sex?” Beth asked.

“I don’t recall knowing very much about sex at that age.”

“But, you felt something?”

“Oh, yes. But the feelings were so deep that I’m only understanding them now. I guess I had a crush on you. A really *big* crush. I don’t know what else to call it.”

“Really? *Me*? You’re sure about this?” Beth said.

“Yes. I can see you right now in my mind the way I saw you back then. My God, you were beautiful. You were radiant, glowing with a light I could not name. I not only saw it but felt it deep inside me.”

“But, when I was sixteen I was a gawky, clumsy girl who couldn’t do much of anything. My mother was always telling me how useless I was.”

Jeffy smiled, lost in his memories. “You were the most beautiful creature I ever saw. An angel or a goddess.” She began to blush. “Your voice was melodic and sweet, tinged with romance, excitement, and hope. It was the voice of a dreamer. It enchanted me then. It enchants me now.” He sat up, looked down at her, and repeated, “It enchants me now.” Jeffy kissed her.

She did not believe what he said. Back then, whenever she looked in the mirror, all she saw was a pimply girl with unkempt hair. She never saw a goddess. Nevertheless, she liked his description. She snuggled closer to him as if trying to share his vision of her, trying to see what he saw.

“You seem to remember it all so clearly.”

“Yes. I see everything now.”

“But that was a long time ago. Why did it take so long for us to get together?”

“Because you were so magnificent that I couldn’t even imagine myself with you. I guess I just buried the vision,” he paused, “and all my feelings. And, besides that, we were relatives.”

“Yeah, we still are.”

“But it makes no difference now. We’re free. We can be happy together. Maybe even get married if we want to. And all because of your voice and the buried love it awoke in me.”

A week later Uncle Jason called Jeffy. “Been hearing stuff about you and Beth.”

“Who told you?”

“Your Aunt Milly. She used to call Ellen all the time with family gossip. Now she calls me. I can’t figure out how to get rid of her.”

“So what’s she saying?”

“She thinks it’s wrong”

“I was hoping nobody would care,” Jefferson explained.

“I don’t care, Jeff. Neither do the others. I always liked Beth, myself. She’s had a rough life. Maybe you can bring her some happiness.”

“Thanks.”

“So what do you two do?” Jason asked.

“Beg pardon?”

“When you’re together? Do you like sports? Movies? Sex?”

“Uncle Jason, what *else* has Aunt Milly been telling you?”

“She noticed Beth seemed very happy lately and asked her what was happening. Beth told Milly you two were dating.”

“I’m guessing she told Aunt Milly a bit more than that.”

“Um, she did. I guess that’s what’s got her upset, although I’ve never known Milly to be prudish before. Beth told her the two of you were sleeping together.”

“Oh, God!”

“Yeah. Now everybody knows. Milly doesn’t waste any time.”

“Have you heard from anyone else?”

“Not yet. But I want to tell you how I feel about it.”

“Uh-oh.”

“It’s not like that. If the two of you want to be together, it’s okay with me. Just don’t hurt her. She’s had enough of that.”

“I won’t hurt her. I love her.”

“That’s what I told Milly. I don’t think she believed me.” Jason said goodbye and then hung up.

In the early spring, Jeffy helped Beth plant a backyard garden. They were outdoors often and he met her neighbors. They assumed he was her new boyfriend. Nobody knew they were related. Everyone liked him and wished them well.

Milly remained distraught. As the oldest sister, she thought she held sway over the rest of the family, except for Beth. She had married and moved out of the house before Beth was born and they had little contact. None of her sisters could influence Beth, not that they wanted to. They did not see anything wrong with Beth and Jefferson. Of course, they did not tell Milly their true feelings.

Milly decided to set a trap. Her husband Jay was about to turn eighty. She planned to hold a huge family picnic for him. She knew Beth would come because Jay was her favorite brother-in-law. Beth would not stay away and hurt his feelings. Jefferson urged her to go. He volunteered to go out of town. Then he worried that if Beth went by herself she could face Milly’s disapproval alone and he would look like a coward. Jeffy did not want anyone to hurt her.

The aunts decided on a plan to protect Beth. One of them would always be with Beth and Jefferson. The uncles got in on it too. They all agreed that under no circumstances should Beth be alone and that she and Jefferson should always have a chaperone to shield them from Milly.

It worked until Milly figured out what they were doing. She sat down in one of the big garden chairs and summoned them. Chrissy and Rachel went along. Their brother Max also followed.

Jefferson and Beth stood before Milly. She shook her head and muttered, in her husky voice, “The two of you. Tsk, tsk.”

Beth looked straight at Milly. “Milly, you’re my oldest sister, and I love you. But this is my life, not yours, and I’m free to live however I want. If we want to be together, it’s no concern of yours. I’m sorry this upsets you, but this is the way I want it to be.”

Milly started right in. “Beth, he’s your *nephew*!”

They had prepared themselves for this argument. She replied, “Yeah, funny, isn’t it? My own nephew!”

“What about me?” Milly complained. “What about the rest of the family? What are people gonna think? What are they gonna say about us?”

“I don’t know, Milly. I don’t know what anyone’s going to say. Jeffy and I have discussed this and we feel no one’s gonna say anything because it’s no big deal. No one is gonna care. Probably nobody will even notice.”

Milly was unyielding. She had yet to play the respect card. “My friends know. Can you imagine how embarrassed I am? Do you want to see my feelings get hurt?”

Jefferson spoke up. “Don’t be mad at her, Aunt Milly. It’s all my fault. I came on to her.” This silenced Milly for a few seconds. He realized that she assumed Beth initiated the relationship because she was older.

“Well, Beth, you could have said *no!*” Milly argued. Beth shrugged. It was true. She could have resisted but she had not. It had nothing to do with anyone else. Milly fell silent. They assumed she was trying to decide what else she could do to berate them.

“I want to talk to these two alone,” she ordered. Chrissy started moving away. The others looked at Beth and Jefferson for guidance. “Go!” Milly shouted. They walked away slowly, afraid they were leaving the couple at the mercy of Milly’s wrath.

She gestured for Beth and Jefferson to come closer. They feared this was the end and looked at each other for strength. In a few seconds, one of them would surrender and it would all be over. Jefferson reached for Beth’s hand. Milly noticed him do it.

She glared at them. “I suppose you two think you know what you’re doing,” she began. It was a statement, not a question. They nodded weakly. “Well, you’d better... because if one of you hurts the other, you’ll *both* answer to me.” She almost whispered the last part; they were not certain they heard her correctly.

“Now help me up. Let’s go back to the party.” Beth and Jefferson stood there stunned. Milly had to ask them to help her up again. She felt quietly pleased that she said her piece and gotten through to them.

Their first Christmas together found them snowed in at Beth’s house. Jeffy thought it was great but Beth felt unhappy. She did not like missing the family holiday parties that she both loved and dreaded. It was wonderful to see everyone but she knew they all were growing older. She always wondered which family member might not be there the next year.

Beth did not share her concern with Jeffy. Although they were only five years apart in age, his attitude toward life was the direct opposite of hers. Jeffy was an optimist. He kept looking forward as if he felt the best was yet to come. Small events in his life delighted him because they brought him variety.

Beth had stopped looking forward many years ago. Their love was a refuge for her. Jeffy was someone to cling to in the darkness. Their love was a celebration for him. She did not understand this but played along and pretended to celebrate with him.

One day he asked her to marry him. She realized he’d forgotten most of what she told him the first time they spoke. Her mind flooded with memories of times in her life when she surrendered herself to happiness. Disaster soon followed. He should have known she could not marry him. She said no without explaining why.

Their relationship changed even though they made an effort not to allow it to change.

Despite her fears, Beth did want to marry Jeffy. She struggled within herself and tried to find a way to do it. Jeffy noticed that she seemed preoccupied. When he reminded her about something she enjoyed when they first met, she became provoked and accused him of acting superior to her. He backed off. She was hurting but did not tell him why.

He decided to ask her again. It was more than she could bear. “Don’t you know what will happen?” she replied. “Don’t you remember what I told you the first day we talked? The answer’s no!”

“Beth,” he spoke quietly to calm her. “You’re going to have to tell me what’s wrong. Now! If you don’t, both of us will go crazy.” She heard firm reassurance in his voice. “So, why do you keep saying no?”

Beth decided to be honest.

“Jeffy, we can’t get married. We’ve been acting as if we were young lovers, caught up in our private ecstasy, looking forward to a blissful life together. But that’s not what’s ahead for us.”

“You make me feel like a young lover. I like it,” he replied. *He’s missing my point*, she thought.

“Look at me. Listen carefully.” Her voice was firm and direct. “If we get married, we won’t have a long blissful life ahead of us.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve been happy before. But, every time I thought everything was perfect something terrible happened. My whole life came apart. I can’t let that happen again.”

“Sounds superstitious to me.”

“It’s *not*. If we want to go on being together, we can’t go any further. We can’t get married.”

Jefferson consulted his aunts. Maybe they could help him understand her attitude. They told him Beth’s history of falling in love and then later watching helplessly as her life unraveled. “She’s always been fatalistic,” Chrissy told him. “There’s no way to change her. If that bothers you maybe you should just let her go.”

Jeffy believed what they told him but felt confident this time would be different. To him, Beth was perfect just as she was. He did not want to change her. Jeffy wanted to marry her. He felt certain he could make their happiness last and there would be no disaster this time.

He decided to arrange a surprise wedding and set it up for a Saturday when Beth was coming over for a date. None one tried to dissuade him. They all hoped this time would be different for Beth and she had found her Prince Charming.

Jeffy invited the family, arranged for a preacher, and bought lots of food. Beth drove to his house to meet him. She turned onto his street and noticed several cars parked along the block. *Somebody must be having a party*, she thought. *How nice*.

Beth pulled into Jeffy’s driveway and shut off the engine. She had looked forward to their date for days. They last saw each other a week ago and she’d missed him.

Beth walked to the front door, turned the knob, and found it unlocked. She pushed the door open and called out, “Jeffy. Jeffy. I’m here!” He called from the kitchen. Beth walked toward the back of the house. He stood in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room and smiled as she approached. Her heart leaped with joy at finally seeing him again. He kissed her, took her hand, and pulled her through the doorway. She smiled, wondering what he was up to.

“Surprise!” a chorus of friendly voices cried out. Beth looked around. She saw her entire family. Milly beamed at her.

The attention embarrassed Beth. “Jeffy, my birthday’s not for another three months,” she protested.

“They aren’t here to celebrate your birthday,” he explained. She looked puzzled. “Today’s your wedding day.” It took a while for Beth to grasp what he meant. She looked at her sister Chrissy and noticed she was standing with a clergyman.

Beth gasped. “My... wedding?” She looked at Jefferson. He smiled. Sadness and rage tore at her insides. “My *wedding*? Jefferson! How could you fucking do this to me?”

Beth turned and ran back outside. Jefferson looked at everyone, apologized for the delay in getting the wedding started, invited them to eat, and hurried after Beth.

He found her next to her car, crying. “Beth?” She did not look at him.

“I *told* you we can’t get married, Jefferson! Didn’t you listen to anything I said? Didn’t you believe me?” Beth collapsed in his arms.

“Actually,” he spoke softly, “I did believe you. But, I thought you were just nervous about getting married again. I thought if I surprised you, you wouldn’t refuse and after we were married everything would be wonderful.”

She stopped crying, and looked into his eyes, “It wasn’t nervousness. It was fear. Couldn’t you tell?”

“Yeah, but I still thought it was fear of *getting* married rather than being married.” She shook her head vigorously. “But, I guess I was wrong.”

“So you decided to trick me?”

“It seemed like a good way to get you to overcome your hesitation.”

“You thought I’d be so shocked that I wouldn’t be able to say no?” she asked.

“Something like that,” he admitted. Jeffy hung his head. He feared he was about to lose her forever.

“Jeffy, we can’t get married.”

“I wish we could. I love you.”

“I love you, too. And don’t want to leave you, ever; but I know what will happen if we get married.”

“Tell me again.”

“We’ll be happy for a while. Then things will start to change through no fault of yours or mine. Something serious will happen, a real crisis. Maybe one of us gets sick or something else happens. Finally...”

“Finally?”

“It will all come apart, just like all the other times. And I don’t want it to.” She began crying in his arms. He hugged her as tightly as he could. Beth winced in pain. “Easy.” she whispered, “I’m breakable.”

“Actually, Beth, I don’t think you are.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I think I finally understand why your voice has always affected me.”

“Oh? Why?” she asked through her tears.

“Because you sound the same to me now as you did forty-five years ago.”

“So?”

“When people suffer as you have they usually build defenses to protect themselves. The more life assaults them, the deeper they hide inside their walls until they’re not alive anymore. They give up. Their voices grow old and tired. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“No.”

“Your voice sounds as sweet to me now as it did back then.”

“So?”

“Don’t you see? It shouldn’t. It should be old, weary, and full of pain. But it’s not. Your voice still has all the innocence and charm I heard when I was eleven. I’ve been in love with you for decades. That sixteen-year-old Beth who was looking hopefully ahead to a wonderful life? *She’s* here right now! All the stuff you’ve lived through hasn’t destroyed her. Don’t you see what miracle this is? What a miracle *you* are?”

She began to cry louder. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Why are you crying now?”

“Because I finally remember who she was!” Beth paused to wipe her tears. “And I think *she’s* fallen in love with you without me even realizing it.” They clung tightly and looked into each other’s eyes for several minutes.

Beth wiped her tears. "Let's go inside," she said. "Everyone's waiting. Besides, if we *don't* get married, Milly will kill both of us." He pulled back. There was a huge smile on his face.

Jeffy and Beth walked calmly back into the house, married, and lived happily ever after. (Really!)