

*Alvin and Grace*

After they left, Alvin thought about what Effie said, concerning him looking at her behind, and wondered, ‘How did she manage catch me looking when I thought, I was being so careful? I guess I’m not as careful as I thought. Well, that ended that, because from now on I’ll be working the night shift, which is opposite of her shift.’

In the pantry, Toby was already prepping for the night’s business, when Alvin joined him. They both got their stations all set up and ready to go. As they stood around, talking about different dishes, Toby told Alvin how to put them together to make them look appetizing. As they worked, a young white girl came up to the counter to pick up napkins and silverware to finish setting up the station for the night servers. She spoke to Toby, and then she looked over at Alvin, asking, “Now who do we have here?”

Toby answered, “Oh, Alvin – this is Miss Grace, the dining room hostess.”

“Hi, Miss Grace,” Alvin said.

“Hi Alvin,” she said.

Alvin was genuinely impressed with the sweetness he heard in her voice, no less than the way she looked. He watched her as she walked away and said to himself, “Now, there goes a girl with a name that’s fit her perfectly. She’s elegant, she’s charming, and she’s self-assured. The downside for me is that I’ve let my stupidity override my common sense . . . again. She’s only a woman and the color of her skin doesn’t matter as long as I stay clear of those good old boys. On the other hand . . . an attempt to pursue a woman as white as Miss Grace would be the same as trying to tame a wild crocodile. But . . . on the other hand, isn’t it strange; I’ve seen thousands of white women and many of them were very pretty. And not once was I ever attracted to any of them, until I met Miss Cassie and now Miss Grace. Two women who just happened to be white and I’m colored and just happened to be in love with the two of them. I wonder – if I were still seeing Bobbie Jean, would those two still be attractive to me? Probably not,” he concluded, “Because as busy and dog-eared tired as she kept me, most likely I couldn’t even attract flies.”

By that time, he and Toby were so busy; he had no time to think about Miss Cassie and Miss Grace. Toby told Alvin that his job called for him and a person from the dining room to go to the warehouse for supplies, and bring them back, every night just before closing. The person they chose

just happened to be a girl, and the girl just happened to be Miss Grace. About a half-hour before eleven each night, Alvin would take a flatbed four-wheel cart, pull it across the parking lot, and into a building where they kept all of their paper goods and cleaning supplies. Then he and Miss Grace would load what was written on their requisition list and cart it back to the hotel.

During those trips to and from the warehouse and across the parking lot every night, they never had very much of anything to say to each other, except for Alvin making sure that there were about ten feet of space between them, while they walked to and from the supply house. If not, he could've been reprimanded for walking too close to a white woman, throughout those silent walks he took with her every night across the parking lot. He suffered wordlessly, worrying that if he were to say something sweet to her, there would inevitably be complications. But each time, he'd see her beautiful face glowing beneath the lights that illuminated the parking lot; he'd feel even more inspired to say those sweet words he wanted to say to her between the kitchen and the storage room. Finally, one evening, he ventured in a whisper, "I hope I don't embarrass you with what I'm about to say, but I just have to tell you – there hasn't been one single night since we've been walking across this parking lot that I haven't wanted to tell you how sweet you smell."

She acknowledged by showing a big grin, but nothing in words. Alvin's next question was, "Did you go to the movies over the weekend?"

If her answer was "yes" and they had seen the same movie, then they had a few things in common. Otherwise, that was about the extent of their conversations, which only took place Monday nights. They normally went to the movies on weekends – which gave them something to talk about on Monday. Until one night on their way to the warehouse, Alvin made up his mind that he just couldn't take it anymore. He had to say something to let her know that he was going to explode if another day passed, without hinting to her that he was head over hills in love with her. He awkwardly ventured, "Miss Grace."

"I'm listening," she said.

"Uh oh," he thought. The instant he heard the sound of her voice, he felt sure that she wasn't going to be least bit interested in what he was

*Alvin and Grace*

about to say. However, he had opened his mouth, so he figured he might as well go on with it. “Your boy friend must be very handsome.”

“Who told you that I had a boy friend?” she asked sternly.

“Well,” he said, “no one told me anything, but I thought if you did he’d have to be very handsome because you’re so beautiful yourself. If I was a girl and I was as pretty as you are I wouldn’t date an ugly boy – unless I don’t know the different. Except I know you are smart and I know you know the difference.”

She smiled, a wry and strangely bitter smile, and answered dryly, “Thank you for telling me about something that doesn’t guarantee me any more than it does an ugly woman. If that were so, then my mother would be living in a wonderland. I think she’s one of the most beautiful women I know. But she hasn’t bought her contentment; she drinks, and I’m worried about her becoming an alcoholic. My father is a heavy drinker, and my mother’s boyfriend is a nice man, but definitely an alcoholic. With all of her good looks she still hasn’t gotten anything better than alcoholic men.”

“I am so sorry to hear that your mother drinks too much and all,” he said, “and her boyfriend, also. It worries me to think about him being the kind that drinks a six-pack and uses being drunk as an excuse to try to become physical with you. Just tell me one thing, Miss Grace . . . in that event, who would you run to for your defense?”

“Are you asking me if my mother’s boy friend molested me?” She asked,

“Now,” he said, “I hope my curiosity about you and your family hasn’t pushed over a line . . . and you have my utmost apology if it does. In my wildest dreams I could never imagine me going so far to say anything to make you angry. So maybe I should’ve just kept my mouth shut and minded my own business. But,” he said, “being that I’ve gone this far . . . I would like an answer, if you don’t mind.”

“You’re right,” she said. These questions you’re asking are really none of your business. But since you were bold enough to ask, I’ll be courageous enough to answer you . . . just this once. The answer to your question is no! I’m still a virgin. My father and my mother have only been separated for four years. I was almost fourteen then – old enough to take care of myself. My mother wasn’t always a drinker. She started after my

father left her and my brother, and me for this other woman. And she doesn't drink so much that she can't go to work every day and watch after my brother and me."

"Miss Grace," he said, "I know I shouldn't be saying this, because it shouldn't be my concern at all – But by you telling me that you weren't molested, I feel as if a load has been lifted off my shoulders."

"There was never any need to worry about J.D. – he's a decent, good man, even if he doesn't have any a speck of ambition." She answered, "But why would you be so concerned about me, to the point of worrying about what happened to my virginity? You hardly know me, and even if I were having that kind of a problem, what could you do about it? Not much. I can just see a colored boy like you coming to our house, trying rescue me from J.D. You'd wind up the victim yourself, instead of the innocent party."

"Well," Alvin said. "You are absolutely right about that. I guess I just got carried away asking so many stupid questions about your personal life. I suppose I sound as if I was some reporter putting a story together for the six o'clock evening news. So – if you don't mind me saying, if your answer had been different, I would have felt different about you."

"Now, Alvin," she said. "Why are you saying all of these things, what make you think that I'm concerned about the way you feel about me?"

"Ma'am," he said, "it's not so much about your feeling as it was about mine, and how disappointed I would've felt to hear that some no-good-for-nothing dog had violated your beautiful body, having no intention whatsoever of caring and protecting you to the fullest. It's apparent that a girl as pretty as you are should never be without those things I'm about to mention – unconditional love, gifts of appreciation, and to live in ecstasy with a boy that's sees no end in sight."

Miss Grace smiled and said, "Boy, you sure do have lots of nice things to say . . . but I find to be unimportant to me. It was you – and not me – that got the impression that I'm incapable of taking care of myself."

"But . . ." Alvin started.

"Please," she said, "I don't want to hear anymore, I've heard enough of your fatherly advice for one night. She smiled, though, as she added, "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you have a crush on me. Come on," she said,

*Alvin and Grace*

“you need to hurry and help me put the supplies away, so I don’t miss my bus home.”

Alvin kept silent as he pushed the loaded cart across the parking lot to her station. He helped her to unload the dining room supplies, then rolled the cart into one corner of the storage room and parked it.

On his way home he thought to himself, ‘What I wouldn’t give to be a white boy along about now. One thing for sure, I wouldn’t be trying to explain my feeling to her in riddles. Instead I’d be speaking to her in plain English, but since I’m not white, it might be to my advantage to keep speaking to her in illustrations. Just in case I happen to go a little overboard and anger her, then I could always laugh and say that I was just kidding.’ He did worry a bit that she might start to remember those graphic questions he kept asking and refuse to let him initiate another conversation with her again based on her beauty.

After that he turned his attention to Effie; recalling her warning him not to let Ralph catch Alvin looking at her behind. It seemed that Effie didn’t mind him noticing her beautiful hips – as long as it was kept from Ralph’s line of vision. It was a waste of her time to warn him about her husband; Alvin knew the penalty for sleeping with Effie would be the same for sleeping with Miss Grace. The only difference, Ralph would kill him over Effie, and some good old boy would kill him about sleeping with Grace. ‘Now on the other hand, Miss Grace isn’t married. And not only what other people have told me about what takes place between the colored and the whites after the sun goes down, but I’ve seen it with my own eyes; white men holding onto to the colored women and the colored men were hanging out with the white women. So with all of what’s taking place, here in this state, I’m optimistic that the ban on interracial marriage in Texas could soon be outdated.’ He figured if he were allowed to pursue Miss Grace in the manner in which he’d seen other mixed couples do after dark, he felt that their chances of coming together would be very promising – providing he got a little help from her.

The next morning, the first thing he did was start in on his book report and worked until early afternoon and went to his job. He looked through the dining room impatiently, searching for Miss Grace in every corner. Finally, he saw her at the far side, straightening and setting up tables for the night shift.

*James E. Williams*

At last, she was within speaking distance and their eyes met. “Hi, Alvin,” she spoke in a sweet tone of voice, “Does the excitement of being on your new job have you rearing and ready to go to work tonight?”

“It’s not my job that has me so animated,” he said, “but beside that, you’re absolutely right. I am excited about being here tonight.”

Toby was listening to the tone of her voice as well as he noticed her facial expressions. In a low voice, he asked Alvin, “Have you noticed how that little white gal keeps watching you?”

“What white girl?” Alvin asked.

“Now, don’t play crazy with me.” Toby said. “I’ve been around the block a time or two. If you think you’re fooling me, you ain’t – you’re only fooling yourself. My common sense tells me that that little old white gal likes you, and I don’t think she cares who knows it either. I tell you one thing; y’all better keep things like that to yourselves around here. They’ll do it to our women, but don’t you be caught doing it to theirs. That is – if you don’t want one those old dumb peckerwoods to catch you and kick your ass all over Fort Worth. And don’t think that you’re the only one that’s piercing them cute little bitches. There is a lots of them niggers out there, that’s just as busy spiking them sweet little white devils as much as the white men spikes the colored women. The only different is the colored man can’t afford to get caught. I’m just warning you, so don’t come crying to me when they hear about you putting the sausage to one of theirs. They’ll wind up doing to you like what I heard my daddy tell me they did to a colored man, back when he was a boy. He told me that some old dumb peckerwood caught this colored man dunking his attachment in a white woman. He went and brought back a bunch of his friends, and took this colored fellow out in the woods, tied a string around his nuts, attached the string to a rope, and threw it over a tree limb. Then they started to hoist him up, and the nigger’s feet never cleared the ground before they had to cut ‘em down. The reason was the poor man died out of pure fright, over the thought of loosing his balls to a bunch of dumb peckerwoods.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Alvin told him, “but I have a girlfriend, so there won’t be any need for anyone to toss a lasso around my balls and hang me from a tree.”

“All you got to do is tell me that she ain’t colored,” Toby said, “so I don’t have to disbelieve you’re laying black ass.” He clasped his hands

*Alvin and Grace*

together and gave a hard five-second laugh. It was funny the way he had phrased that part of his conversation, except Alvin didn't want to laugh. That might encourage Toby to keep talking about him and Grace to the point of overdoing it, so Alvin just kept a straight face.

As usual, around seven o'clock the dining room at the Graystone began to fill up with customers. Toby never had wasted a single minute, worrying about Alvin not being prepared to show off his creative skills; those skills he had learned from watching Toby. A lot of his own pride went into his decorative work, in which he also took delight – in his attempt to be the best that he could. After working eight hours, five of them very hard ones, Toby reminded Alvin that it was time to go pick up the supplies that he had requisitioned. Alvin went ahead of Grace, seeing that she had other things to do before she could leave.

He had half of his supplies loaded when Grace walked into warehouse. "You're late, where've you been?" he asked.

"You were there – you saw how busy we were!" she answered. "I barely had time to do one thing before they called me to do another."

"Well," he said comfortingly, "if you need a shoulder to cry on, use mine it's available . . . as long as you're very slow to return it."

"Alvin," she said. "I think I liked it better when you didn't have very much to say to me. Now, you've done nothing but manipulate me when you think I'm at my lowest point. Last night, it was that long drawn-out love affair you think you have with me. If I was a gambler, I'd bet that my crying on your shoulder isn't for my sake – as much as it is for yours. All the same," she added, "because you have been so persistent – I'll rest my head on your shoulder for five seconds. That would be enough to pay you back for the nice compliments you paid to me, last night." Instantly, he caught her hand, led her out of the light, and gave her a hard squeeze for at least twice the five seconds she allowed him to hold her.

"Please," he whispered, as she pulled away. "May I hold you . . . just until the reality of holding a white girl kicks in?"

"No, Alvin you may not," she said. "You remind me of boys I know, who come to our house with their parents for a visit, who are always asking for a hug. And if you let them, the next thing they'll ask is for a kiss, and the next thing they'll want you to do is undress for them."

“Did you?” he asked.

Not me,” she said. “I haven’t reached that point yet. I’ve heard what they say about those girls who let those boys fondle them. They can never make the same comments about me as I’ve heard them say about those girls that let them. On the other hand, I feel just the opposite about you. I’ve known for some time that the crush you’ve had on me was sincere . . . even more so last night. I caught you looking at me, and the look I saw in your eyes gave me a measure of your honesty. Maybe mine doesn’t go as deep for you as yours does for me, but the little I have, I’ll quickly dismiss it and so should you. We’re both smart enough to know we’ll never break the color barrier. It’ll take another hundred years – if that – before people will realize that they’ve been uncivilized for all of those years. Think of all of the innocent lives they’ve made miserable. Some of those people will have lost their chance to learn how to get along with those who have different ways. Now this next thing,” Miss Grace continued, “I promised myself I wasn’t going to mention this to you – I’m afraid it might go to your head. But I’ve changed my mind in order to make my point – you’re a very handsome colored man. You shouldn’t have any trouble at all finding a nice colored girlfriend who would fit into your life. Now, if I were a colored girl, and knowing the way you feel about me, you wouldn’t be around five minutes before I’d scoop you right off your feet, take you home to Mama and tell her, ‘This is the man I’m gonna marry.’ That’s what I’d do if I was colored, but I’m not – and you need to forget about trying to make a relationship out of nothing but trouble.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anything I could say to persuade you to change your mind, is there?” He asked.

“Alvin, listen,” she said. “I’ve said all I have to say on this matter. You need to stop thinking about me in a way that causes you to desire me and your crazes will soon fade away!”

“I respect your thoughts, Miss Grace,” Alvin replied, dolefully. “But by you doing so you’ve left me very little room to express my ideas – before I go, I want you to think about this: If you think life is gonna be difficult for you and me for no other reason than I’m colored and you’re white, then you’re right. If you think we won’t be happy for the same reasons, then you’re wrong. Living a life of solitude isn’t that bad – if you’re living it with someone you really love, the way I love you. The only basis for that style of living – as you well know – is the law. The law makes it illegal for black

*Alvin and Grace*

and white to be married, and walk around out in public like normal people. There isn't any other way except to live a life of isolation – if we want to continue to stay alive in this state of Texas. As far as the good things a man is supposed to provide for a wife? I can work and manage my money just as well as any white boy you may think you need to marry in order to be happy. He might have all of those opportunities that I might not . . . but you could still wound up living a life of seclusion, especially if he doesn't have the motivation to take the advantage of all of those prospects that's available to him. In that case you might as well be married to someone like me. At least you'll have nice house, money to spend, and most of all you'll have a man that loves you. I'll promise you – the only disadvantage between marrying me and a white boy would be solitude. Other than that, I have the incentive, the will, and the staying power to make you the happiest woman in Fort Worth, not matter how much discrimination that I'll be expecting to be placed against me.”

“Oh Alvin,” she answered sympathetically. “I would be lying if I said I didn't think about you a lot. But I never said or did anything deliberately to give you any reason make you believe that I was in love with you. You brought all of this on yourself. You need to be like me, when I have thoughts about you and me – and see that there was no chance for the two of us. I've made up my mind – I'll keep any sentiments about us having a relationship to myself, and release them out into the atmosphere while I'm sleeping at night. And you should do the same.”

Hearing how adamant she was about ending his fascination with her, Alvin felt discouraged for a while, but soon he regained his confidence. He decided he'd give her until the weekend to think about it. Maybe by Monday evening, when she saw him again, she would have reconsidered.

They didn't exchange any more words that evening, except Alvin saying, “I'll see you on Monday,” and Miss Grace answering, “Bye, Alvin. I hope you'll have a good time this week end.”

“I'm sorry I can't say the same for you,” he answered honestly. “I hope you'll be as miserable as I'll be all weekend thanking about me, as I'll be thanking about you.” She smiled and gave a feminine wave as she headed for the bus stop.

He stopped at a liquor store on his way home, and picked up his weekly ration of beer. While he sat sipping on his beer, he kept going over

*James E. Williams*

their conversation in his mind, wondering if he had said anything different than what he told her, wondering if better words might have inclined her to say “yes” instead of saying “no.” ‘If not, then I was a fool to think that I could persuade this beautiful virgin white gal to let this black boy be the first to gorge himself on her affections. Like she told me, the time I wasted pursuing after her, I should’ve spend trying to find myself a colored girlfriend. Who knows – we may’ve already found each other acceptable, to the point of setting our wedding date.’

The one thing that stuck in Alvin’s mind was when she said that she had thought about him a lot, and in a positive way. He meditated on it for a while, concluding that there was still room for negotiation . . . and he would definitely talk it over with her, on Monday night.

At that, he heard a knock on the door and thought, “Who could that be?”

He opened the door and there stood Bobbie Jean. Alvin stood stock still, hardly believing his eyes. “What in the world are you doing in my neighborhood, this time of night all by yourself?”

“Can I come in please?” She asked, in a despairing voice. Before he could answer her, she walked in with extended arms and locked them tightly around his neck.

“Um hum,” he muttered with an unhealed heart. “You feel just as good as you did the night you walked out on me and made me cry.”

“I came here tonight just for that reason,” Bobbie Jean answered, “But this time – not to make you cry but to make you happy. I can’t begin to count the times I’ve regretted not letting you get to where you tried so hard to go. And I thought about me, denying a man I loved a few minutes of pleasure, in order to reserve it for a man I never really loved in the first place. I had only one thought; wait for the first opportunity to make up for what I didn’t do, the last time we were along together. I owe you this hug, and anything else you think I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” Alvin replied. “Did you forget that you were standing there, wiping the mess I made in your hand off on my shirt – and then letting me get my pleasure and access?”

“It was only after you had spilled into my hand that I still let you into to my thingy.”

*Alvin and Grace*

“That part I didn’t like,” he said. “But it was you whom I loved standing there, holding me and making it feel like teamwork – the way you’ve done so many times before. I was only disappointed, when you managed to maneuver it away from its intended target which caused me to spill into your hand rather than where I wanted it to go. Yeah, I understood you not wanting to take my stuff back to Curtis, for him to whisk around in. I certainly wouldn’t if I were him. Anyway – don’t you think you’re little late for that?”

“I was told that it’s never too late to correct a mistake provided the other party is willing. That’s why I want you to take me and make me feel the way you used to. Remember the first time I took you dancing and afterward? I drove us to Mama’s house and parked behind the garage. And I don’t think I have to remind you about what happened after that!

At that instant, he found himself in an upright position, followed by rapid heartbeats as he reluctantly permitted her to unzip his fly. At the same time as she probed his mouth with her tongue, which weighed very heavy on his vulnerability – but not so heavy that he couldn’t catch her hand in time to prevent her one second away from piercing what should’ve been called “screened-off-area” . . . but she wasn’t wearing panties. When she realized he wasn’t interested, she suddenly stopped and stared into his eyes. “Why did you do that? Is it because you have yourself a girlfriend?”

“No,” he answered. “It was because I didn’t want to start, until I ask you to tell me where will Curtis be, while you and me are doing all of this.”

“Oh,” she answered. “He and his brother and nephew drove down to Summerville to go fishing with his uncle. I’m staying at Mama’s until they get back Sunday night, a week from now. If that’s what’s worrying you, don’t let it. I’m so free that I can spend the entire weekend with you, and you can do it to me as many times as you wish.”

“You can’t promise me anything, Bobbie Jean, honey. Everything you own belongs to your husband. I was doing just fine, until you came and stirred things up for me – to the point of me look for an excuse to go into you, and convince myself that it’s my getting revenge for stealing you from me. Except my sense of right and wrong won’t allow me to behave like an animal.”

“Don’t feel guilty, honey – I don’t.” Bobbie Jean replied, “And if my conscience is clear, yours should be too – since I’m the person who’s