

A Funny Thing Happened on My Way to Work ...

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As I walked from the Tri-rail station to my office, my eyes froze on a homeless woman pushing a shopping cart, not some hag, but an attractive, younger woman. No, I'm not some creepy stalker. I'm a somewhat handsome guy, if I do say so myself, five-ten and reasonably fit, thanks to my gym membership. This woman caught my eye because she just looked different, you know, definitely not the homeless type.

The cart looked organized too. It didn't contain the jumble of junk usually collected by a homeless person, but an organized collection—books along the front in neat rows, a plastic milk carton that contained, among other things, toiletries, some folded clothing, blankets and a couple of blue-plastic tarps—all in a shiny, un-rusted cart that appeared to have been carefully maintained. She pushed her cart along the sidewalk, slowly but purposefully, as if she had a definite location in mind.

Her clothes looked a bit shabby, but clean, though they hung from her slender frame, obviously too large for her. She had a pretty face, no makeup, with a prominent, but not-too-large nose and full red lips that looked good even without the artifice of lipstick, spiky, almost crew cut short, blonde hair and large, glacial blue eyes noticeable even at a distance. I couldn't help but wonder what story she would tell me if, by chance, we talked.

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On one particular morning as I looked at her, she met my gaze, offered a small, Mona Lisa smile and moved on. That mental snapshot stayed with me all day. I even mentioned it to my buddy on our afternoon coffee break.

"Hey, Mike, have you ever noticed that attractive homeless woman outside our office?" I asked him.

"Not sure I'd put attractive and homeless in the same sentence, but no."

"Well, I have and, today, she smiled at me."

He gave me a sidelong glance. "I'd say you *really* need to get laid."

"Gee, thanks, pal."

"How long's it been since your second fiancée dumped you? Two years?"

"So ... that qualifies me to select my e-Harmony pick from the homeless dating pool now?"

"Hey, I'm just saying. You're the one said she smiled at you. Gonna take her to lunch?"

"Yeah, I might just do that," I shot back, miffed, and went back to my desk.

I had no idea how that quip would change my life.

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For the rest of the week, I saw her and we made eye contact. She made no move to approach me, but simply moved on. Friday morning, after actually *dreaming* about her—a curious mix of walking naked down main street and rolling in the grass, making love—I impulsively made a decision. When I saw her, I walked over.

"Excuse me, miss," I said, "may I ask you a question?"

She stopped her cart and looked at me impassively. "What do you want to know?" she asked in a lovely, alto voice, her smile revealing white, even teeth.

At that moment, I had no idea what I wanted to say. What *could* I say? Do you come here often? Is this your regular route? Why are you homeless? I finally gave up the effort.

"I'm sorry. I don't have the slightest idea why I just did this," I apologized as I turned to leave, but thought I should at least give her a few dollars. I fished out my wallet and pulled out the smallest bill in it—a twenty—and held it out. "Here, I'd like to give you this. Please take it."

She looked down at the bill as if it had six legs, but overcame her reluctance and took it. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Have a nice day." I tuned and walked toward my office building.

"I see you watching me," she said.

I stopped and turned. "Yeah, that. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

"I'm homeless. A rainy, cold, miserable night makes me uncomfortable. Someone looking at me hardly registers. I only mentioned it because you seem interested. Why?"

I swallowed hard, hoping I wouldn't make a total fool out of myself. "Well, you sort of stand out."

"Stand out? I'm practically dressed in rags. I look like any other homeless person."

The untruth of her statement made me bolder. "Oh, no you don't. For one, you have a *beautiful* face, honey-blond hair and the most amazing, blue eyes. You stand out all right."

"You looking for a date?" she asked, smiling that charming smile again.

What I said next surprised me, even as I asked it. "Would you like to have lunch with me?"

"Oh, sure. Should I wear slacks and a blouse, or one of my tea dresses?"

Her question made me feel like an idiot. "Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you."

"Look, if this isn't your idea of a prank, something you cooked up with your buddies, you could pick up some Chinese and we could have it at the park downtown. You can meet me there, say twelve-fifteen. I'll have curry chicken with egg drop soup, thanks."

"Okay, you're on. See you there."

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Feeling like a teenager on a blind date, I got the take-out and headed for the park. I worried that she wouldn't be there, but I saw her sitting on a park bench with her cart next to it. To my complete surprise, she had actually put on a dress, a nice, pale yellow floral sundress that left her somewhat bony, pasty-white shoulders bare. She may have been skinny, but she looked great.

I walked over to where she sat and smiled at her. "Hi. Is this the tea dress you mentioned?"

She rewarded me with a, heart-melting smile. "Hey, I'm a chick, after all."

I sat down, emptied the bag onto the bench between us and sorted out who got what. "I hope you like Coke."

"I usually like a white zinfandel with Chinese, but this will do."

"You have a wicked sense of humor, do you know that?"

"Should I just sit around and cry all day?"

"No, but ... oh, heck. Sorry."

"Ease up there, Charlie. I have a tendency to be somewhat tart. Let's eat."

Grateful for the respite, I prepared to dig in. My "lunch date" opened her plastic container of curry chicken and fried rice and, surprising me yet again, bowed her head to give thanks for her food. I waited and, when she had finished saying grace, dug into my Szechwan beef and fried rice.

"I don't even know your name," I said after a couple of mouthfuls.

"It's Mindy, Mindy Stearns," she said, surprising me with her candor.

"Mine's Garth, Garth Bowlen," I replied and, though I had a million questions, I decided just to enjoy a meal with the most interesting woman I had met thus far.

Mindy sighed. "Okay, go ahead. Ask."

"Ask what?" I replied, playing dumb.

"You think I can't see you're curious? Why else would you ask me to have lunch with you?"

Busted. I put down my container and let my head hang down. "For some reason, I can't stop thinking about you." *Oh, Lord, why did I just say that?*

"There are a lot of reasons people are homeless," Mindy began, as if she hadn't heard my confession. "Some are mentally ill, on the street because the institutions they occupied put them out due to a lack of funding. Some are wives and mothers who are fleeing abusive husbands, or widows with no safety net beneath them. Some are runaways, alcoholics and druggies. Some, like me, are there because they *want* to be, sort of modern day hobos."

"You *want* to be homeless? Why?"

"Look, can't we enjoy a nice lunch without all the questions? Would you be this nosy with one of your office colleagues?"

"No, I guess not."

Mindy reached out and laid her hand on my arm. She had long fingers and neatly manicured nails. “You seem like a nice guy, Garth. You asked me to lunch and I accepted. Can’t we leave it at that, for now?”

“I suppose so,” I said, picking up my container to resume eating.

With dozens of unanswered questions in my mind, I fell silent and we finished lunch.

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I thought about Mindy and her candid revelations all weekend. I couldn’t understand why she would choose to live on the street. Attractive, intelligent, she seemed to have had an education—all the ingredients for a normal life—but decided to live out of a shopping cart. Why would someone want that?

I dreamed about her every night. In one, she stood on a hill, the wind blowing her dress against her body, her long flowing-blond hair streaming out behind her. In another, she swam naked in a crystal-clear lake, the water doing nothing to hide her body. In still others, she walked along white, moonlit beaches in various states of dress. All of them ended with me meeting her and then I’d wake up. I had no idea why my dream life had become so active over a homeless woman, but one thing I *did* know concerned how much she intrigued me. No, that wouldn’t do.

To be honest, I wanted a *relationship* with her.

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On Monday, I spoke with her. “Wanna have lunch again?”

“You trying to fatten me up?”

“Always with the quips,” I said, smiling. “Do you or don’t you?”

“Okay, okay. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, if you wear that yellow dress from Friday, we can go to a restaurant, nothing too fancy, but nicer than a park bench picnic. I can drive to the park and pick you up.”

“You’re on. Twelve-fifteen again?”

“Right. See you then.”

At twelve, I pulled up to the park, pulled over and stood next to my car. Mindy came out of nowhere and startled me.

“Nice wheels.”

“It’s far from new.”

“Hey, new or not, a Flex isn’t some economy car.”

“Hey, it gets good mileage and I like its lines, sort of a modern-day station wagon.”

“Somehow, it fits you.”

“Should I take that as a compliment or an insult?”

“All I meant by it was that you’re an upwardly mobile, but practical, kind of guy.”

“I see. Well, get in and let’s go. By the way, where’s your cart?”

“One of my friends is watching it.”

Mindy wore the sundress again and, for the first time, I noticed she didn’t wear a bra, the prominent nipples of her smallish breasts poking at the fabric. She also wore new, white flip-flops and had painted her toenails bright yellow. She even had beautiful feet. *Get a grip, man!*

We had lunch at a little Italian place a lot of us from the office frequented and we both ordered lasagna. Mindy again bowed her head before she ate.

“I notice you say grace before you eat. Religious?”

“I don’t ‘say grace,’ Mindy said, correcting me. “I ask God’s blessing on my food. No, I’m not religious, I’m a born-again Christian.”

I began to regret trying to make small talk. “Oh, I see.” Since she didn’t mince words, I decided neither would I. “You said your boyfriend kicked you out. Why?”

“What? No questions about the born-again Christian comment?”

“If that’s what you believe, I’m cool with it. Did you expect me to make fun of you?”

Mindy sat back and fixed me with an appraising look. “You know, you seem to be an easygoing guy. You’re sensitive to others’ feelings and don’t take offense easily. I like that.”

She paused for a moment to think and I took a sip of my Chianti while I waited.

“My marriage broke up because my ex-husband cheated on me repeatedly and I had had enough. I moved in with one of my office colleagues, Scott, on the rebound. After the initial sexual thrill faded, we began to realize how little we had in common. We argued constantly and, finally, we broke up. It was a relief.”

“I see. Where does the born-again Christian part fit in?”

“I forgot to mention one more thing about you. You can be direct, too.”

“Do you like that as well?”

“Yes, I do. With a direct person, you know where you stand, no tiptoeing around the truth.”

“Score one for being direct. So?”

“Well, when I was married and, later, living with Scott, I had no real faith, but when you live on the street, you end up at a mission from time to time for a meal or a place to sleep. The first one I visited had a preacher who gave us a sermon while we ate ... price of a meal, I figured. I didn’t listen at first, but his earnest words started getting to me and I began to pay attention. Well, the second time I visited, I had nearly been raped and I—”

“You were almost *raped*?”

“Yeah, it was a close one. He was big, strong and overpowered me, but he just knocked me around some before my friends pulled him off me and beat *him* up. Anyway, it really shook me up and I went back and spoke with the mission chaplain. He’s a great guy and sat with me while I cried, got me medical attention and, when he asked me where I stood with Jesus, instead of blowing him off, I listened.”

“Yet, you still choose to live on the street?”

“For the time being ... yes.”

“Aren’t you afraid of someone trying to rape you again?”

“It’s always a possibility, but I leave my safety in Jesus’ hands. I also make sure I’m with friends, *big* friends, at night.”

Her answer didn’t reassure me in the least, but I didn’t want to badger her. We made small talk for the remainder of our lunch and I dropped her off at the park.

“Thanks for the lunch ... again. I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. Want to make it a regular thing, say a couple of times a week?”

Mindy threw me a look. “Is there an ulterior motive in there somewhere?”

I smiled. “I’m a guy. What do you think?”

“I think it would be nice to make it a regular thing. Any time a homeless person can count on a good meal is a good thing. As to your motives, you never know.”

With that, Mindy leaned in, kissed me on the cheek and opened the door. “See ya, Sir Galahad.”

I noticed sway of her hips as she walked away. I didn’t mind *that* at all.

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I visited the park on my lunch hour for a week, until I finally saw Mindy. I got out of the car and walked over to her. “Hi, I said.”

She smiled when she looked up at me. “Hello there, Sir Galahad. Why the visit?”

I gave her small box with a burner cell phone in it along with my business card. “I want you to have this.”

“What for?” she asked.

“If you ever find yourself in a jam, use this to call me. Is there a place you can keep it charged?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Are you okay with it?”

“Yeah, no problem, but why are you doing all this?”

She had me there, so I opted for honesty. “Because I’m worried about your safety ... and I ... well, I ... *care* for you.”

For the first time, I said something telling that stopped *her* cold. “I, um ... thanks for the phone,” she stammered. “I appreciate the concern.”

“Look, can we have lunch today? We need to talk.”

She pondered my request. “How about I pick the spot this time?”

“You know of a place?”

“Sheesh! I’m homeless, not dumb.”
“Sorry.”
“Don’t be, but how about tomorrow?”
“Okay. Pick you up here, then?”
“It’s a date,” she said with a crooked smile.

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When I arrived at the park for lunch, Mindy wore a different dress and had slicked her short hair back with gel, parting it on the side, making her look like a Bond Girl, albeit a skinny one.

“Wow, you look great!” I said. “You’ve got quite the wardrobe.”

“I borrowed it from one of my friends. Glad you like it.”

“Where to?”

“I know of this great seafood place on the Intracoastal called The Grouper Grotto. It’s why I gussied up some. Can we go there?”

“You bet and I know where it is.”

“So, you said you wanted to talk?” she asked when we got underway.

“Yeah, I do. Look, I’m going to come right out and say it. I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since the day we first made eye contact. I’ve even been dreaming about you. Mindy, I—”

“Wait. You’ve been *dreaming* about me?” she asked, smiling. “Were they steamy?”

Too embarrassed to answer, I just clammed up.

“Wow, they *were* steamy!” she chided.

“I know it sounds crazy, but ... I can’t explain it.”

“Look, I’m not stupid. There has to be an explanation and I think I know what it is.”

“What?” I asked.

“You’re falling for me, right?”

I sighed. She had nailed it. “I care about you, Mindy and I want us to be so much more than friends.”

I cringed at how pathetic what I had just said sounded in my own ears and waited for the drop kick to the curb. I risked a quick look over at Mindy and actually saw tears on her cheeks. *Is that a good sign?* At that moment, I felt as if my future hung on a string. I’ve never been the kind of person to let things lie, so I pressed on.

“I want to get you off the street, somewhere safe. If you’re okay with it, stay at my place. I own a house, something we got when I was, um, engaged. It’s too much, really, and I’ll probably sell it soon, but for now, just let me—”

“Garth,” she interrupted. “Stop talking.”

I shut up, waiting for the executioner’s axe to fall on my neck. As usual, Mindy didn’t mince words.

“I’m on the street because I’ve given up on the house with the white picket fence, a Golden Retriever and two-point-five kids. My homeless condition reflects my hopeless outlook. I know I’m saved, Jesus saw to that, but I’m a lousy Christian, too. I have no optimistic faith that things will turn out for the better. I’m one lousy candidate for a relationship.”

“I don’t think so,” I argued. “You’re beautiful and intelligent and, just for the record, I’m no prize, either. I’ve had two failed engagements and can’t seem to keep a relationship going for more than a couple of months.”

“So, you thought that the dangling carrot of a place to live with a down-and-out guy would appeal to the homeless, hopeless chick?”

“Oh, no! I didn’t mean to—”

“I was just kidding,” she interrupted. “Why do you think I went to the trouble to look good?”

She swept her hand over her slicked-back hair, a gesture I found endearing, but her question confused me. “What am I supposed to make of that?”

She sighed. “I wanted to look good because I have feelings for *you* as well.”

“You do?”

“Wow, for a good-looking, nice guy you sure lack confidence.”

“I guess I do at that, especially when it comes to women.”

By that time, we arrived at the restaurant. I called my office to let my secretary know I’d be back later than anticipated. I got us a table by the water and told Mindy to order whatever she wanted, cost wasn’t an issue. When we had ordered—the grouper special platter for her and the same for me—she took up where we left off.

“I’ve decided to take you up on your offer. I’m tired of living alone on the street. As housemates, we can see if we’re compatible, but I want a room of my own. Okay? If that’s too much, I— ”

“When do you want to move in?” I asked, my huge smile threatening to split my face in half.

“Whoa, there. How about you show me the setup, first?”

“Sure. I’ll swing by the park and pick you up after work, but, seriously, I’d have no problem with you moving in tonight.”

“One step at a time, okay?”

“No problem,” I agreed, not wanting to sound too eager ... or desperate.

“You know, this reminds me of an old Gary Shandling joke,” she said, “the one where he said he only dated homeless women because there never was an issue over whose place to go to after a date.”

Relieved, I laughed far too much, but she didn’t call me on it.

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I picked Mindy up at the park after work and drove her to my place. She oohed and aahed, starting at the front sidewalk and continued inside.

“Wow, this is such a nice place,” she said and then her eyes went wide. “Oh, my God! You have a *pool*, too?”

“Yeah, the house came with it.”

“Can I swim in it?”

“Well, I don’t have a suit for—”

“No problem,” Mindy said as she pulled her dress over her head, revealing only a pair of white, cotton briefs.

Stunned, I took in the sight before me. For a homeless woman she certainly maintained a high level of personal hygiene. She kicked off her sandals, slid the panties down her legs and stepped out of them. I stood transfixed by her sudden nudity. As she walked toward the pool, I realized, though skinny—with her ribs, pelvic points, elbows and knees prominent—how appealing she looked, like one of those slender, waiflike women in Maxfield Parrish paintings. She stepped into the pool and began paddling around.

“I’m not much of a swimmer,” she confessed, “but I love being in the water, especially like this. Care to join me?”

“Uh, not right now,” I demurred and took a seat at one of the patio tables. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, though,” I said, deciding not to make an issue over her nudity.

After ten minutes. she exited the pool, hugging herself from the chill. She looked adorable. “Um, do you have a towel?” she asked.

“No problem,” I said and hurried to get one, deciding on two, in case she wanted to do that turban thing women do with their hair.

I handed them to her and she wrapped one around her. Just as I had thought, she used the other to wrap around her hair.

“Why did you swim naked like that?” I asked.

“Well, I had no suit and I wanted to. I’m sorry if I shocked you. Homelessness tends to make you less concerned with decorum. I won’t do it again if it bothers you.”

“No, it doesn’t bother me. I’m just surprised is all. Is that a normal thing to do for a born-again Christian to do?”

“I guess I feel comfortable around you and trust you.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, is that surprising?”

“Well, you hardly know me, for one thing.”

“I know enough to see that you’re a great guy.”

“You think I’m a great guy?”

“Well, *yeah*. You saw a homeless woman like everyone else and, instead of passing by, you decided to do something about it.”

“I could have just given you that twenty and left it at that.”

Mindy grinned. “But you didn’t. You got involved.”

“Some people would say I’m taking advantage of you.”

“Are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Okay, but why *did* you get involved?”

She had me there. Swallowing hard, I decided on the truth. “To be honest, seeing you that day, I thought, *think* you’re attractive and I wanted to get to know you.”

Both her eyebrows rose in surprise and then she surprised me. She stepped forward, framed my face with her hands and leaned in to place a soft kiss on my lips. I just stood there, stunned.

“Well, I guess I should get dressed. Could I use your shower?”

“Uh ... um, sure thing. It’s the second door on the left, down the hall. Everything you’ll need is on the shower shelf.”

“Thanks,” Mindy said and sauntered to the bathroom with that familiar sway of her hips.

I could have watched her do that all night.

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She exited the bathroom a half-hour later.

“Wow, I was about to call the Coast Guard,” I quipped.

“Sorry, but I haven’t enjoyed the luxury of a long, hot shower in awhile.”

“Oh, sorry for not thinking—”

“Geez, Garth, lighten up. It’s okay.”

“Would you like me to order a pizza?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Ah, seeing my skinny frame makes you want to fatten me up, right?”

That time I opted for a smile. “You don’t like pizza, then?”

“I love pizza and you’re welcome to try to fatten me up, but I tend toward slimness and haven’t ever weighed more than one-fifteen.”

“So, have you decided to take me up on my offer and move in?” I asked, feeling a little more confident.

She thought for a moment. “You know, I’ve changed my mind. Can we get my stuff tonight?”

“You bet! In fact, we can pick it up and get the pizzas on the way back. Get dressed and we’ll go.”

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Two weeks later ...

Mindy worked around the house until it achieved a state of cleanliness I hadn’t thought possible. The kitchen and bathroom looked like hospital operating theaters. I told her she didn’t have to work so hard, but she said she wanted to repay me for letting her stay there. I decided not to argue with her.

When I got home from work, she would be busy in the kitchen, preparing supper. She proved to be a superb cook. I noticed, too, with regular meals, she had begun to put on some weight and looked “curvier.” After supper one night, when we sat around the pool, enjoying the cool of the Spring evening, I decided I’d like to learn more about my new housemate.

“Um, when you were homeless, how did you stay healthy?”

“I don’t mind you asking at all. I’d clean up in public restrooms, look after my teeth and kept to myself most of the time. I hoarded and hid my cash, and used some to wash my clothes occasionally. Yeah, getting enough to eat was a chore, but you learn tricks to keep going to save your cash: where restaurants that give out food are and, in a pinch, there were always the missions.”

“What if you got sick?”

“Hospitals have emergency rooms, you know.”

“You’re the bravest, most together person I know, homeless or otherwise.”

“Thanks, but the credit goes to Jesus if you see anything noteworthy.”

“I see you’re modest, too.”

“May I ask *you* a question?”

“Of course.”

“Where do *you* stand with God?”

“Well, I believe there *is* a God, if that’s what you mean?”

“Not exactly. Did you ever wonder if there was *more*?”

“Is this the Jesus pitch?”

“It’s not a pitch,” Mindy countered, looking miffed. “It’s an honest question. Do you know it’s possible to have a personal relationship with God, that he’s not some impersonal force out there?”

“I don’t get you sometimes,” I said.

“What don’t you get?”

“Sometimes you can seem so ... so cynical and, now, you’re going all religious on me.”

Mindy dropped her gaze to the floor. “You’re right. I’m a terrible role model for a Christian. I won’t bother you anymore.” She got up and went into the house.

“Mindy,” I called after her, but she kept walking.

Great. When will I learn to keep my big mouth shut?.

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A week later, Mindy still hadn’t spoken with me beyond “Good morning,” when we got up, “Hi,” when I got home and a little dialog over the daily routines. Mealtimes proved quiet, reflective affairs. If I complimented her on her cooking, she would thank me and not much else. I missed the frank informality of our previous conversations. I also worried that she might be gone one evening when I came home from work.

The tension between us came to a head one Saturday morning. When I got up, much to my dismay I couldn’t find Mindy anywhere. Her bed had been made and her room looked as organized as ever, but it seemed emptier, somehow, her “essence” gone. I felt a chill of regret and longing. *She’s gone back to the streets. Why did I act like such an idiot? What’s wrong with me?*

I saw Mindy’s Bible and took some comfort from the fact it still remained in the house. I went out to the pool, sat down with a mug of coffee and opened to the New Testament. When I got to the genealogies in Matthew, I nearly gave it up but skipped ahead and began to follow the Gospel narrative in a book I had known about, but never read.

When it got dark, I went inside, poured a glass of wine and read some more, skipping supper. I heard the sound of the front door opening and, when I looked up, Mindy stood there, looking impossibly beautiful.

“Oh, Mindy, I missed you!” I exclaimed, jumping up and sweeping her into my arms, my joy at seeing her overriding any sense of propriety.

“I went downtown to give some money to my homeless friends,” she explained, her voice muffled by my chest.

“I thought you had left me,” I said, releasing her from my embrace and holding her at arm’s length. “I didn’t realize how much I love you until I thought you had left.”

Her eyes widened at my revelation, but I stifled any further response on her part by kissing her, long and hard. At first she tensed, but soon she melted into it. I felt her arms go around me and I embraced her again, holding the kiss until we both had to come up for air. We stood looking at each other for a long time, not saying anything. Finally, Mindy broke the stalemate.

“Were you reading my Bible when I came in?”

“Uh, yes I was,” I replied, thinking, *Is that the first question you ask after a kiss like that?*

“Why?”

“Well, I became so distraught, thinking you had left me that I decided to read it.”

“And?”

“I almost closed it when I got bogged down at the beginning of Matthew, all those begats, but I skipped ahead and found it very interesting.”

“How far did you get?”

“I finished the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John and some of the Apostle Paul’s letters when you came in.”

“You read *that* far?”

“I told you it was interesting.”

“Do you believe any of it?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I do. Look, I’m sorry I gave you such a hard time about your telling me about Jesus.”

“You *believe* it?”

“Yes. I just said that.”

“As in, born-again Christian believe?”

I smiled, nodding. “After reading through the four gospels, I saw I was fighting a useless battle, so I surrendered and told God he could do what he wanted in my life.”

“Oh, Garth! I’m so happy to hear that and I’m sorry I shut you out.”

“Under the circumstances, you were great. I acted like a jerk and you did what you usually did, faithfully and without complaint.”

“But I didn’t communicate with you at all. I felt badly about it, but I didn’t want to annoy you further.”

“I deserved what I got. Forgive me?”

“Of course I will,” Mindy assured me and looked around. “Did you eat?”

“No. For some reason I lost my appetite.”

“Should I cook something?”

“By all means. Suddenly, I’m famished and we can talk more about what I read over supper.”

Mindy smiled. “That sounds like a splendid idea.”

Soon, she stood at the stove, busily rustling up a meal and humming a little tune.

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After supper, Mindy took a swim. She now wore a bikini and, though I thought she looked great in it, I missed the innocent charm of that initial skinny-dip.

I went into my room to put on some swim trunks and joined her in the pool. We paddled around as we talked.

“So much has happened and so fast,” Mindy said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, one day I’m living the homeless life and, now, I’m living in this beautiful house with a pool, yet! To top it off, we now share the same faith. It’s just ... well, too great for words.”

“Tell me about it. If I told Mike at work, he’d feel my forehead, see if I’m feverish.”

Mindy rewarded my crack with one of her rare-but-musical laughs. “Yeah, I guess not too many romance novels begin with a guy dating a homeless chick.”

“You have no idea how gorgeous you are. I even noticed it when you were bundled up in all those rags.”

“Camouflage, I assure you. It’s second nature for us homeless. People don’t notice you as much if you look like a ragbag and leave you alone. You know, I’m thinking you were seriously female-deprived to notice me at all.”

“Well, as my friend Mike pointed out, I’ve been single for over two years,” I said, leaving out the “You really need to get laid” part. “Whether you know it or not, you rescued *me*.”

“No, you swept in like a knight in shining armor on his white charger and whisked me away from my life of despair.”

“Except my white charger’s a silver Flex.”

“Petty details. Do me a favor?”

“Sure. What?”

“Swim over here and kiss me.”

I did as she requested and, while kissing, we sank to the bottom of the pool. When the urge to breathe forced us to surface, I still didn't want to come up.

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I left the pool after Mindy and as I looked at her slim, lithe body, a palpable longing swept over me in a hot, passionate wave. I realized that I loved this brave, enigmatic, beautiful woman. Not only that, we both now shared a born-again faith.

"Mindy," I gasped. She turned and the concerned look on her face nearly overcame me.

"Garth, what's wrong?"

I stepped forward and took her in my arms, crushing her slender, pool-cold body against me and kissing her. "Dear Lord, I love you so much, Mindy!" I confessed. I felt her hand on me and I broke it off. "Mindy, what are you doing?"

"Isn't this what you want?"

"Yes, more than anything, but is this okay for born-again Christians? The apostle Paul seemed pretty strict about that."

"You said you love me, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then, where's the harm? It's what we both want, isn't it?"

I took a step back. "No ... yes ... oh, I don't know, I'm so confused." I looked at her, standing impassively in her bikini, looking so adorable I wanted to sweep her up and carry her to my bed. "Mindy, do you love *me*?"

The look on her face stopped my heart for a second. I knew at that moment she couldn't answer yes. *What have I been thinking? Life doesn't work like a fairytale.* "I understand," I said. "Sorry to give you the wrong idea."

"Garth, wait," she said, but I kept going, my heart crushed.

Once again, love had passed me by.

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I took off my swim trunks and sat on the bed, feeling sorry for myself. I heard a few soft taps on my door. "Garth?"

"What."

"Can I come in? I can't leave it like this between us. We need to talk."

"What's there to say?"

"Look, can I come in. I don't want to talk through a door."

"Suit yourself."

Mindy walked in and saw me sitting naked on the bed. "Oh, I didn't ... I'll leave, let you put on a robe or something." She turned to exit the room.

"Why bother?"

She walked over to my bathroom and returned with my bathrobe, dropping it in my lap. "Here, put this on."

"Says the woman who swam naked in my pool."

Mindy's lips pressed together in a thin line and she sat on the far edge of my bed. "I realize you're saying that because you're hurt, but when did I become the enemy, here?"

I looked up at her and could see her eyes bright with unshed tears. "You're right. I'm just a bad Christian. I guess we have that in common."

"Touché. Look, all this is so sudden. On minute we have a platonic relationship and the next you're confessing this deep love for me."

"Do you think I didn't mean it?"

"No, no ... I *know* you did and I have feelings for you, but it isn't that simple."

"How? I asked a simple question. Either you love me, or you don't."

"You know next to nothing about me, Garth."

"I know enough to know I love you," I said, my heart laying in broken pieces at my feet ... again.

"Do you want me to leave ... move out?"

My head snapped up at her question. “No!” I said, far too emphatically. Truth be told, I didn’t want her to leave. “No, there’s no reason for that. A deal’s a deal.”

“Okay, I’ll give you some privacy.”

She got up and left the room, reaching behind her to unclasp her bikini top. The door closed just as it slid off. Seconds later I heard a splash.

It made me cry.

151

The next couple of weeks became a rerun of the first time, minimal conversation, only, this time, with Mindy trying to reach out. Aside from the frostiness that lay between us, an observer would consider our relationship the cozy assurance of a long-term married couple. One morning, Mindy made a request.

“Garth, can we go out to eat?”

“Yeah, if you want,” I said, not looking up.

“How about that little Italian place we went to?”

“Sure. When?”

“How about tonight?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Good,” Mindy said, a slight smile on her face.

When I got home from work, Mindy greeted me at the door wearing one of the sundresses she had bought, only with thin, red-leather sandals and her hair slicked back, Bond Girl style again. She looked amazing.

“Do you want to shower and change?” she asked.

“Nah, nothing wrong with my office clothes. Let’s go.”

We drove in frosty silence for a while, until Mindy spoke. “Garth, I know you’re hurt and I understand why. I want you to know that, even though I didn’t come right out and express my love for you, I care for you a lot. After all, you took me off the streets and into your home. I realize it may have been because you were attracted to me, but you agreed to take on an unknown quantity and I appreciate the gesture. So, if we’re going to go forward, I need to clear the air between us. I asked to go out tonight because I want you to know more about the homeless woman you think you rescued, but let’s enjoy a good meal, first and then I’ll come clean.”

I wondered at her “think you rescued” remark but merely nodded. After a great meal, great, except for the silence, we sat over our cappuccinos. Mindy slid an envelope across the tablecloth.

“What’s this?” I asked.

She smiled that enigmatic smile of hers. “Open it and see.”

I opened the envelope and my mouth fell open. I held a check in my trembling fingers, a check for the *entire balance* of the mortgage on my house!

“What the *hell* is this? It’s a check for over a hundred-thou, Mindy! I don’t understand.”

“You told me you might have to sell your beautiful house and I wanted to make sure that never happened.”

“But ... you’re ... I’m totally mystified, here. How can you possibly afford this? You’re homeless for crying out loud. How can you write a check like this?”

“Are you angry with me?”

“No, I’m just shocked. I don’t know ... maybe I *am* a little. What’s going on?”

Mindy sat back, rubbed her eyes, sighed deeply and shook her head. “I thought about this for weeks, prayed about it and decided to just do it, but now, this might have been a bad idea.”

“Were you even homeless?”

“Yes, I was really homeless. Everything I told you about my life on the street was true. I just never told you the whole story.”

“Then, perhaps, you should.”

Mindy took a sip from her cappuccino, put it down slowly and began her tale. I held my breath.

“My divorce left me well off, not that I needed it. I had amassed a solid portfolio from my earnings at the investment brokerage firm at which I worked. I’ve always had a head for numbers and performed well at the firm.”

She twiddled her empty wineglass. “Wow, this is harder than I thought.” She stared at the tablecloth, thought for a while, took a deep breath and continued. “When I broke up with Scott, I began to reassess my life. Another thing you should know about me is I tend toward deep depression. After a divorce and then a failed, live-in relationship, I considered the daily grind at the firm and it all fell in on me. What was it all for? I had money and position, yet my life felt so empty.

“Feeling down, I called in sick that Friday, got in my car and drove to a nearby casino. There, I went on a gambling and drinking binge, wallowing in my depression. Before you think I sold the deed to the ranch, that’s not what happened. I brought ten grand with me with which to gamble. I lost five playing roulette, but went to the blackjack tables.

“As I’ve said, I have a head for numbers and, by the time Monday rolled around, I was up to twenty-two thousand. Drunk and depressed as hell, I couldn’t even lose at blackjack. I went to my room and raided the wet bar. The next morning, with the mother of all hangovers, I checked out. On the way home, I considered my options, my *life*. I even contemplated suicide, drive my car off an embankment and end it all, but it never went anywhere ... too chicken, I guess.

Mindy refilled her wineglass and took a long drink. *Vinum est verum* and all that I supposed. Her revelations had me sitting in stunned, shocked silence.

“By the time I got home, I had made my decision. I quit my job, sold my condo, turned in my leased Mercedes, donated my wardrobe to the Salvation Army and, with a duffel bag of essentials, started my life as a homeless woman. In my depressed, confused state, I saw it as a way to start over.

“It was a completely boneheaded move. That first night, I was terrified, so I dipped into my reserve of cash and slept at a nearby flophouse. The next day, I found a spot in a park, away from people, and spent a fitful, sleepless night there. Then, Sam showed up. He looked like a college professor and spoke as articulately as one. He told me he had been watching me and decided to take me under his wing. I didn’t harbor any illusions of independence and gratefully accepted his offer. For six months, we were a couple.

“Sam *was*, in fact, a former professor. When his wife died, he gave up, lost tenure and hit the streets. Drunk most of the time, he finally decided to live and made a go of his homeless existence. He confessed that he took me on for companionship. Homeless people get lonely, too.”

Mindy looked up, her gaze sad and met mine. “Are you ready to run off, yet?”

“No,” I replied.

Mindy took another long sip of her wine. “One night, I crawled over to where Sam slept and offered him something ... *me*. He accepted with all the grace I knew he would and we became lovers. It was the happiest I had been in years. Not only did we enjoy the sexual bond, we connected on an intellectual level and he taught me so much. Ironically, it was Sam who kept me living on the street as a homeless woman. I probably would have found another alternative, otherwise.”

Mindy paused and I could see a tear trace its path down her cheek. “It didn’t last. Sam had been feeling ill and a visit to the free clinic downtown revealed he had pancreatic cancer. In two months, he was gone. I was devastated. Less than a week after his death, I was almost raped and ... well, you know it from there.”

I drained my own wineglass and picked up the check. “So, you sold your possessions, but kept your portfolio?”

She gave me a sardonic grin. “I’m prone to depression, not insanity. Will you accept the check?”

I looked down at all those numbers. “I don’t know what to make of all this.”

“Make of it what you will, but I *want* you to have it. It’s the least I could do under the circumstances.”

“The *least* ...? It’s the cost of a house! I never expected anything like this!”

“I know you didn’t, but you saw a woman you thought was in need and took her in. It means a lot to me.”

I looked up at Mindy as if she had just become someone else. I poured another glass of wine for myself, gulped half of it and sought Mindy’s crystal-blue eyes. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly and put the check on the table. I sat back in my seat, not looking up, but staring at the check as if it would slither away and vanish

under a plate or something. Mindy started to speak, but I held up my hand, miffed at the tears in my eyes all of a sudden. I cleared my throat and spoke.

“I love you and want to do the right thing by you, so here’s the deal. I’ll only accept the check if we live in that house as man and wife.” Mindy drew breath to speak, but I stopped her again. “If you can’t see your way clear to agree to my terms, I won’t take the check, but you can still live there, at least while I still have the house. If I have to take an apartment, I’ll make sure it has a room for you, too. That’s my deal.”

Mindy brought her hands up to cover her face and her shoulders began to shake. I had no idea what she might have been thinking, but seeing her tears nearly broke my heart. There we sat, both of us probably more than a little inebriated from too much wine, with a huge check lying on the table between us. What a perfect couple we made. After what seemed like an hour, Mindy got up and collected her check.

“Let’s go home,” she said softly.

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On the way back, I turned on the radio. A sappy love song from the Bee Gees came on. I went to turn it off, but Mindy stopped me.

“No, let it play.”

We passed the rest of the trip home with the Bee Gees as our counselors. My shoulders literally sagged from the weight of my thoughts. Finally, I pulled to the curb and looked at the house. For the first time, I really appreciated its charms.

“Okay, I’ll marry you,” Mindy said out of the blue.

“You will?” I asked dumbly.

“Will you accept the check?” she asked and I took a few breaths before nodding. “Good, but there’s one more condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to sleep with me. Tonight.”

“But—”

“Look, a marriage certificate just says we’re legal according to the state. Who do you suppose makes our marriage valid?”

“God?” I said giving the classic kids’ response to Sunday school questions.

“Got it in one.”

“Why do you want to do this?”

Mindy reached over and turned off the stereo. “I’ve lived such a screwed-up life and, from the little you’ve told me about yourself, you’ve had your moments, too, but from that first day when you actually took the time to notice the invisible homeless woman, I knew you were a great guy. Why do you think I did my little skinny-dip?”

“I have no idea.”

“Coming from you, it’s not a surprise. It was both an invitation and a test and you passed with flying colors.”

“I don’t understand. Would you have had sex with me if I came onto you?”

She nodded. “Yes, I would have and you would probably never have seen me again.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Of course you don’t. I told you I’m a lousy Christian. So?”

I pondered the implications of what Mindy had revealed. “You’re not a lousy Christian.”

“Aren’t I?”

“No.”

“Let’s agree to disagree on that. Well?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Wanna know what my ex-fiancée said when we broke up?”

“What?”

“She said I stunk in bed.”

“Ouch. I’d be glad she’s your ex, but let me be the judge of that. Do you think your bruised ego is up to it?”

To my surprise, I smiled at Mindy's unintended humor. "Yes, but we're going to go downtown first thing tomorrow, take out a marriage license and get married on the spot. That's *my* condition."

"Agreed," she replied and leaned in to kiss me, *hard*. When she broke it off, she flashed one of her heart-stopping smiles. "Let's hit that pool, sans suits and see where it goes from there."

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When we got to the pool, Mindy did a little striptease. She had filled out a lot and the painter, Maxfield Parrish, could not have improved on the way she looked. A natural blonde in every way, she looked positively delectable. I hurried to get out of my clothes, somewhat embarrassed at my eagerness south of the equator.

Mindy dove in and I followed suit. We paddled around some and she swam over to me, wrapping her legs around my waist. We kissed and sank to the bottom. When we finally came up for air, she didn't let go, so I struggled to shallow enough water to be able to stand and support us both.

"This is like a dream," I gushed, enjoying having Mindy wrapped around me.

"It's no dream, lover," she said.

"Dream lover. God, that was a bad pun," I said, feeling giddy.

"Then let's go to the bedroom and make it a reality."

Not bothering to dry off, we stood next to my king-sized bed. The moment had arrived.

"Do you love me, Mindy?" I blurted out, nervous as a schoolboy on his first date.

Mindy reached out and linked her fingers behind my neck, staying at arm's length, giving me a clear view of what she offered. My heart pounded harder.

"Honestly? Look, love isn't something you catch, like a cold. I'm counting on the fact that love will grow between us as time goes by. I know that's not the answer you want—"

"I don't care," I interrupted. "It's good enough for me."

Mindy, without another word, pushed me back and I fell on the bed. She straddled me, guided me to her center and lowered herself. I groaned from the sudden wonderfulness of it.

"Relax, Garth, this isn't going to hurt," she said, bending to kiss me.

True to her word, it didn't hurt at all.

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I wish I could say it lasted longer, but we soon lay together, with her snuggled into my side and I could swear she purred like a cat.

"Aren't you worried about my getting you pregnant?" I asked.

"Geez, Garth, so what? You *do* want kids, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Ah, ah ah, no buts. The clock's ticking for me. The sooner, the better."

"Say, how come Sam never got you pregnant?"

Mindy got up on one elbow, rolled her eyes and smiled down at me. "He was ever the gentleman and we never did it without protection, even that first time. He wasn't stupid and could see the complete downside for me, a pregnant homeless woman. Satisfied?"

I smiled up at her. "You are one piece of work, you know that?"

"No one's ever put it that way, but I think you have it right."

I sat up. "Well, I'm going to take a shower. Care to join me?"

She smiled. "*Just* a shower?"

"I'm open for whatever possibilities come up."

"Oh, brother, now who's making a bad pun?"

I jumped out of bed, headed for the bathroom, but before I could reach it, Mindy tackled me and we rolled around on the carpet, laughing like two kids. The laughter turned to more serious pursuits and we ended up delaying our shower.

We enjoyed more than getting wet there as well.

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The following morning, I woke up with a smile on my face and reached out for my bed partner only to find the spot next to me empty. A frisson of panic swept over me and I quickly left the bedroom to enter the living

room. My heart slowed when I saw Mindy sting on the sofa, still not dressed, with her Bible in her lap, her head bowed. I couldn't tell if she sat reading or praying. Though I didn't say a word, she looked up and gave me a wistful smile.

"Good morning, sweetheart," she said.

Sweetheart, how nice that sounded! "Were you reading or praying?"

"A little of both, I guess."

"I love your reading outfit."

"Ha, ha."

I sat next to her and put my arm around her bare shoulders. "Last night was wonderful."

She shifted her gaze from her reading to my lap. "Judging from what I see, Little Garth agrees."

"Little? I'm crushed."

"Aw, poor baby. That wasn't a criticism, by the way."

"I know," I replied, leaning over to kiss her. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever met."

"You haven't met many women, I take it."

"Stop kidding for a minute will you? You're beautiful, brave, a great cook and housekeeper, a financial genius ... did I say gorgeous?"

"I think it was beautiful, but thanks."

"Seriously, you triumphed over so much adversity in your life, not like wimpy me."

"Don't beat yourself up. You're sensitive, honest, a good companion—"

"And lover?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"Oh, man, my poor ego is lying on the floor, bleeding."

Mindy reached over and placed her hand in my lap. "You've got potential."

"Okay, I accept that, but I'm a fast learner."

"You got a solid B for last night."

"Wanna work on upping my grade, teacher?"

"You might notice I'm reading, here."

"Okay, I'll drag my wounded ego to the kitchen and make coffee."

Mindy took my hand and pulled me back on the couch, planting a kiss on my lips. She put her Bible aside and we began to work on my next lesson. "We're definitely going downtown to take out that marriage license and get married," I reminded her between toe-curling kisses, "before we actually get you pregnant."

She looked down at me from her perch on my middle. "Might have already launched that boat," she said, smiling.

"All the more reason to get married."

Mindy stopped my argument by bending to kiss me again.

| 6 |

Fifteen months later ...

"Is the chicken ready?" I asked, as I came in from the patio grill.

Mindy, who stood at the counter wearing only an apron, handed me the platter. "Yep, all precooked, basted and ready to go."

"Wow, I had no idea you were such a gourmet cook."

"Gourmet, huh? I'm no slouch in the kitchen, but I'm strictly a meat and potatoes kind of gal."

"As if. I admire your modesty *and* how great you make that apron look, especially from the back."

"You should talk. Are *you* planning to dress before everyone shows up?"

"Yeah, got my swim trunks ready and waiting," I quipped.

"And I have my bikini standing by, unless, of course you'd prefer I stay this way."

"You'd do that?"

“If you asked me, I would, but don’t ask if you don’t like surprises.”

“Nope, no skinny-dipping. That’s *our* thing.”

Just then, the baby started to fuss. “I got this,” Mindy said. “Go start the grilling.”

When I entered the kitchen for more meat, she had our daughter, Hope, in a sling, nursing contentedly, the epitome of organization even when dispensing nourishment *without* her hands.

“I love watching you work,” I said.

“I think you’re fixated on what’s sticking out behind this apron, as well as what our daughter is attached to.”

“Well, that, too, but aside from a very cute, dimpled tush and perfect milk dispensers, you’re a marvel of organization as well.”

“I guess I got it from my days on the street. People think the homeless are just these human wrecks, but, at least for me, it took a lot of organization to keep body and soul together and maintain *some* level of hygiene.”

I went to her and stroked Hope’s baby-fine hair, as blonde as her mother’s. “It never ceases to amaze me how well you did. I doubt I’d have done as well.”

“Maybe, but you’re a resourceful guy. It’s what I liked about you from the beginning. It’s why I agreed to that first lunch.”

“You’re one amazing woman, Mindy,” I said, punctuating my statement with a quick kiss.

“I know,” she said, smiling, “but let’s not lose momentum, here. Our guests will be arriving in a half-hour. And get some clothes on that studly body.”

“You, too, Mommy, though I don’t think any of our male guests would complain.”

“Is that a dare?”

“No, no!” I said hastily on my way out.

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“Hey, Grillmaster, how’re the steaks coming?”

“Hi, Mike. Be done in a jif.”

“You got a nice shack, here,” he said, looking around.

“A leftover from a failed engagement.”

“Well, at least you could drown your sorrows in that nice pool.”

“Har, de har.”

“There’s something I been meaning to ask you, good buddy.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, one minute you’re Mister Morose at the office, the next you’re whistling at the water cooler. Days later, you introduce us to your wife at an after work get-together. What’s up with that?”

“What, the whistling or the new wife, and I think it was more than days.”

“You know what I mean. Come on, out with it.”

I grinned. “Remember when I asked you had you seen that homeless woman in front of the office?”

Mike looked over at Mindy, tray in hand, making her modest bikini look like it *should* look. I could see the gears mesh.

“Oh, my G—! That bombshell was the homeless woman you asked me about?”

“Geez, Mike. It’s not like the homeless are another species and keep it down.”

“I know, but ...” he practically whispered.

“She’s not like any woman you or I have ever met, truly one of a kind.”

“Wow, and you didn’t waste any time getting the whole family gig started.”

“Well, we aren’t getting any younger, you know.”

“Man, you’re full of surprises. Now I know why Mister Button Down Suit got all casual at the office. You sly devil, you. Was she living here before you married her?”

“No, I rented the Presidential Suite at the Hilton. Of *course* she was. I wasn’t going to leave her on the street.” I saw Mike’s sly smile. “Don’t go painting any mental images of Hugh Hefner and Playboy Bunnies cavorting around the pool, either. Mindy lived in her own room and didn’t move into mine until after the wedding.”

“Oh, sure. Got it.”

“I’m being serious here, Mike. Mindy’s a born-again Christian and now I happen to share her faith.”

“Man, this is a lot to process. If I didn’t know the real Garth Bowlen, I’d chalk it up to a line of b. s.”

“Well, if you’re ever interested in talking with us about our faith, we’d be glad to sit down and tell you.”

“We?”

“Yeah, *we*.”

He smiled. “Hey, any excuse to talk with your gorgeous wife. I might just take you up on that.”

“Just name the time, bro.”

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Later on, Jeront, another of my office buddies, came over to talk with us. Mindy sat nursing Hope, something that caused its share of interest from the men at the barbecue. She had no problem with it, simply lowering one side of her bikini, since she considered nursing to be a natural thing and not something she had to hide.

“Great party, man, and a real nice crib,” he said. We did our “brutha” handshake and he bent to give Mindy and the baby a quick kiss.

“Thanks,” I said. “I should put my ex-fiancée on our Christmas card list. Not only did she prompt me to get this house, but she left me free to meet and marry this wonderful woman. Thanks again for setting up the church ceremony for us.”

“Glad to do it, m-man. Raised quite a few eyebrows on my side of the ‘melanin gap,’ but, now, we’ve had two more requests from white couples. Seems they like our style.”

“The best part is that we’ve gotten to be such good friends with you and your wife, Tanlee,” Mindy said.

“Yeah, she got on my case right after you tied the not. Thanks, bro, for ending my bachelor days.”

“Is that a complaint?” I asked.

He smiled, looking over at Tanlee, sitting with some of the other women. “No, man. I was putting her off and she deserved better. By the way, Tan tells me you have quite a little ministry going with the homeless downtown.”

“Well, since the Lord saw fit to have Garth here rescue me, I felt I owed my former homeless friends some spiritual as well as financial help.”

“Amen. Anyway, you’re doing God’s work and Tan, me and our church are behind you one-hundred percent.”

“Thanks, Jeront,” Mindy said.

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By the time the barbecue broke up in the wee hours, we had deemed it a success. A few of our friends helped do a general cleanup and Mindy and I decided to wait until the next day to do a thorough one. We sat next to the pool enjoying a few private moments after a no-suit swim.

“Man, I couldn’t wait to get out of my bikini,” she said.

“Amen to that.”

For a few minutes, we both lay on our lounges, looking up at the amazing display in the night sky above us.

“Let’s take a long honeymoon,” Mindy announced out of the blue.

“What brought that up?” I asked.

“Well, as much of a honeymoon living here in this nice house as man and wife is, we didn’t have one.”

I looked over at her. “Where do you want to go?”

“How about we go on a long tour of Europe, say for a few months?”

“Months? You do realize I have a job, right?”

“Take an unpaid sabbatical.”

“I might not have a job when I get back.”

“So? Look, I know how important having a job is to you. If you lose this one, go out, take your time and find another one. You know we can afford it.”

“What about Hope?”

“We can take her with us, hire a nanny once we get there, so we can enjoy time together.”

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around you being so rich and yet you lived as a homeless woman," I said, shaking my head.

"I told you it was a bad idea, but I made my choice and had to see it through."

"Why?"

Mindy shrugged her bare shoulders. "I suppose, since my life was so screwed up, I saw it as a fresh start, without any of the insulation money can afford."

"It's that simple?"

"Nothing's ever that simple, but facing life in the raw, so to speak, makes you think more clearly, take things seriously."

"I hear you, but it was still such a ballsy move."

"Wrong gender, there, fella."

"Huh?"

"Uh, you may have noticed I'm a woman."

I looked over at her and smiled. "No doubt about that and I take your point."

"There *are* lots of places in Europe where you can see me like this on the beach, you know."

"Oh? Where?"

"Let's see, the South of France, Greece and Eastern Europe."

"How do you know about that?" I asked.

"Let's just say it's part of my checkered past."

"You got naked all over Europe?"

Mindy's expression got serious. "In an effort to find out what was wrong with my life and my relationships, I tried many things. Getting naked socially seemed like a fun way to explore that."

"Did it work?"

"Well, it was fun, but not the answer I sought. I didn't find that until after I was almost raped and went to speak to that chaplain."

"And getting naked socially is still okay, then?"

"Being like this is just another way to be, physically. Being born again is a new *life*."

"In that case, when do we leave?"

"So ... you're onboard with it?" Mindy asked.

"Heck, why not? It's just that I'm not used to this. You have to admit that your being homeless and rich are hard to put together."

"Yet, you helped me without knowing that. It's why I grew to love you."

"Are you happy, sweetheart?" I asked after reflecting for a moment.

"Couldn't be happier."

"You were so together about being homeless, even after what you'd been through."

"Well, as I said, people are homeless for a lot of reasons. It actually made me a stronger person. In a way, I'm thankful for what put me on the street, even though actually doing it was such a bad idea, at first."

"You're truly amazing."

"As you keep reminding me, but Jesus gets credit for that."

"Amen, but I plan to keep reminding you as well as thanking God for bringing you into my life."

Mindy gave me one of her enigmatic grins. "Wanna know a secret?"

"Sure. What?"

"Hope's going to have a little brother, soon."

I sat up, stunned. "But I thought nursing prevented pregnancy."

"It's not birth control, you know, and we've been enjoying that king-sized bed of ours often enough."

"Oh, man, that's great news, but how do you know it's going to be a boy?"

"Women's intuition."

"Are you sure a long honeymoon's a good idea, now?"

"I don't plan on giving birth on a beach, if that's what you're thinking, but I'll be nice a round by the time we get back. Our son will be a world traveler, even before he's born."

“Who am I to argue with that?”

“I agree. Now, come over here and congratulate me.”

“My pleasure,” I said, leaving my lounge to join Mindy on hers.
Bedtime would have to wait.