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Love Repossessed

by Ray Johnson

She was not the most important girl in my youth, but she was definitely the first. Her name was Sandra Dawkins and she was spending the summer with my grandmother, who was ill. She was helping out on my grandfather's farm, in Madison County, Arkansas, doing the chores my grandmother normally did. It was my first trip to Arkansas and the first time I had ever seen my grandfather and grandmother, from my father's side. I had seen photos and heard stories, but that was all. It was the summer between the eighth grade and my freshman year in high school.

The farm was far larger than I imagined and the cows and pigs smelled different than they did at the Los Angeles County Fair. We lived in Orange County, but my father took us to the Los Angeles County Fair every year and made a point of touring the animal barns. Horses, pigs, cows, goats, we saw them all. I guess he was preparing my brother and me for that day when we would eventually visit the farm where he grew up.

My grandfather's farm was interesting, but nowhere near as interesting as Sandra. She was sixteen and the only time I had ever been with an older woman was in my dreams. I was mystified by her blossoming bosom and she had a million questions about California.

"Have you ever seen a real movie star?" Just talking about movie stars caused her eyes to grow big.

Obviously I lied. "Sure, lots of times—when we go to Hollywood."

We were only going to be at the farm for three days and time was zipping by like waiting for a root canal appointment with a bad-breath dentist. I didn't know anything about slipping away because I had never had anyone to slip away with. But Sandra seemed to know everything and we ended up in the hayloft. The hay on the barn floor left a lot to be desired, but the hay in the loft smelled

fresh and sweet. I was certain I had died and gone to Heaven.

"You're sure you've seen a real movie star?" she asked as she coyly fingered a button on her blouse.

I told her what she wanted to hear and she taught me what I needed to know. I wasn't exactly sure what we had done, but I knew it was magnificent and I wanted to do it again. I planned on marrying her right then, but my mother stormed up the ladder and caught us before I could ask her. My mother dragged me by the ear to my father, who went through the motions of being furious. We left that very afternoon, headed back to California. I'm sure it was my mother's idea to leave early. My last vision of Sandra was my grandmother swatting at her behind with a broom.

I was a junior in high school when I fell in love again. Her name was Shirley Pharris and her father had the strangest job in town. He traveled throughout the West dismantling old buildings. He would number every board and then haul them back to Knott's Berry Farm. Once there, he would reassemble the buildings. That way every building in the Ghost Town was authentic. In those days Knott's was still a berry farm and not an amusement park. Shirley's father was a tough one and would have tried to kill me if he had ever caught us.

She was more than pretty. She had brown hair and brown eyes and liked to wear beige skirts, the kind with lots of crinoline slips. She would have to hold her slips down when we were riding in my Pontiac or they would rise as high as the dashboard. After a dance or a football game we would go out to Steen's Reservoir to park. Those slips were always a problem. Charley Haas and Jill Foster parked there also, both friends of ours, but we never double dated, for obvious reasons.

"You really do love me, don't you?"



At the moment I actually did love her. As yet I had not connected love with children or mortgages or responsibilities, so I heaved a resounding "Yes."

I had a Pontiac convertible, a black one, with five coats of lacquer. The back seat was not as comfortable as the hay in the loft, but the upholstery didn't stick you or cling to our clothes. It was actually Shirley's younger brother who caught us and related every lurid detail to her mother. He and some of his rat friends were at the reservoir, peeking in car windows. Rather than tell Shirley's father and get me murdered, her mother pointed to the curb and told me to never darken her door again. That was a common admonition in those days, normally reserved for young men with no principles or vacuum cleaner salesmen. I was heartbroken, certain that I would soon die a tragic death.

Fortunately I lived until my senior year. LaVonne Foss was a cheerleader, which gave me some added status. Usually only football players went with cheerleaders and I played basketball. She was the first blond in my life, at least as a girlfriend. She had a famous relative, a governor I think, in any case everyone said he was important. And this would make me important, too, because I was definitely going to marry her.

She had long blond hair and beautiful cheerleader legs, the kind that can kick high after a touch-down. Her family was well off financially and my family's situation seemed to be one of her major concerns. We usually parked on Old Eucalyptus Road after a basketball game or a movie. In the wintertime the windows would get all steamed up and we couldn't even see the towering eucalyptus trees, but we could smell them. The scent reminded me of those amber-colored cough drops that taste so horrible, but work pretty good. Our conversations always seemed to circle around to financial matters.

"You're certain that your parents have money?"

I always lied. "Sure. My father makes me drive this car instead of a Corvette to fool people. He doesn't want me to get kidnapped by some bad

guys who'd hold him up for a big ransom." The story worked and the windows continued to fog.

I thought I was in love before, but this time it was real. I was going to marry LaVonne and get a job as a bag boy at Safeway. By then she'd be in love too and wouldn't care that I wasn't rich, like her dad and uncles.

I devised this flawless plan where we could spend Saturday night together, I mean all night. I asked my father if I could go to the mountains with LaVonne and her parents. They had a cabin at Lake Arrowhead. Her parents were Lutherans and mine were Baptists, but my father agreed anyway.

"What the heck, son, Lutherans are almost Christians. Sure, go ahead."

Now came the slick part. LaVonne asked her parents if she could spend Saturday night with me and my parents at our cabin. Obviously we didn't have a cabin, but who knew. Her father agreed without much of a protest.

"What could possibly go wrong? Those Baptists don't even dance. Sure, go ahead, darling. Just don't let them try to convert you."

We decided to stay in her folk's cabin rather than mine. I convinced her that my father was having our cabin fumigated, for mice. She turned up her nose at the thought of a furry little mouse scurrying across her toes and we went to her parents' cabin. The real estate agent told her parents that their cabin had a marvelous view of the lake. It did, sort of. All we had to do was stand on one of the deck chairs and we could see the far shoreline.

What a night. This time I really was in Heaven. Paradise came to an early end on Sunday morning because we promised our parents that we would be back in time for church. I knew that my brief, but happy, life was over when we pulled up in front of her house. My father's car was waiting for us. I tried to run away, but LaVonne made me go inside with her.

You can imagine the scene. LaVonne's mother was holding back her father, who was menacingly waving a crowbar in my direction. My mother was





Photo (detail) by Chad Martin

screaming at me, something about eternal damnation. My father was shouting about me being on restriction for twelve years, maybe more. Even her dog, a golden retriever named Tad, who was normally rather friendly, was barking at me.

I just barely escaped that nasty crowbar. My mother and LaVonne's mother were shouting at each other and the two fathers were getting ready to fight. I drove away faster than the Lone Ranger chasing an outlaw.

My restriction only lasted four weeks. I think my father shortened it because LaVonne's parents were Lutherans. Love had escaped me again. But I recaptured the little rascal before I graduated.

By now I was becoming more cautious. I met the most beautiful Mexican girl in the entire world, well, at least Orange County, which was my world. It was too dangerous to go into downtown Los Angeles because they shot at people from Orange County. The City of Angels was not named because the residents *act* like angels. It got its name because they *send* people to be with the angels.

Back to Gloria. Her name was Gloria Puentes. Her father was huge, a picking foreman for a big orange packing house, navels in the winter and Valencias in the summer. He ate roofing nails for breakfast and bent horseshoes to calm his nerves. The only thing he hated more than White boys were pickers who tried to claim more boxes than they actually picked. If you picked fourteen boxes and turned in a chit for sixteen, he would smash you twice in the face. If you tried to tell him you picked twenty-two boxes and you only picked nineteen, he would smash you three times in the mouth. One smash for every lie. He refused to learn English, fearing he might actually make a White friend.

Enough about her grumpy father. Gloria was so beautiful that my teeth hurt whenever I thought about her. She had long raven hair, haunting eyes and skin the color of sage honey. This time it was love eternal. We had to be careful because in those days masturbation, interracial dating and bank robbery were all tossed into the same rowboat—hopefully to sink.

We would park up on top of Cowan Heights,

where no one could find us. The view was incredible, if you liked lots of colored lights. Dinah Washington was singing at a Saturday night school dance and I took Gloria. Actually we didn't go inside because Miss Attleburger would have had us arrested, but we did stand outside the back door so we could hear the music. Anyway, after a trip to Cowan Heights I took Gloria home and then went to my house.

Bad news. The preacher's car was parked in front of our place. Maybe somebody died. I went in through the front door, expecting the worst. Things were graver than I thought. Reverend Hawes and his wife were on their knees, along with my father and mother, all praying about some disaster. My brother must have crashed his Ford and finally killed himself. His Ford was chopped, sectioned, channeled and had eleven coats of candy-apple red lacquer, but the brakes were bad. I got down on my knees, sorry that I had not paid him back the five dollars I borrowed last week.

Reverend Hawes looked at me as if he knew about the five dollars and then began praying again. "Lord, forgive this sinner who has flaunted the unnatural."

Naturally I assumed my brother had either died while drinking or dancing, both of which Reverend Hawes considered mortal sins and therefore unnatural.

"Forgive him for disgracing his family and fellow church members by . . ." he paused and again glared at me.

I never thought the five dollars would cause such a ruckus. Sure, I bought beer with it, but how would the preacher know?

"By disobeying your commandments and . . ." again the pause and another withering glower.

The silence was deafening.

"And going steady with a Mexican girl—a Catholic at that, Lord."

Now everyone stared at me. I was trapped like a rat on a sinking ship, with nowhere to hide. My mother began telling me that I was doomed to a

life of tacos and enchiladas, both of which were greasy and fattening. My father began painting graphic pictures of the rundown duplex I'd have to live in because no self-respecting banker would ever allow an interracial couple to purchase a home. To make matters worse, the tumble-down duplex would be south of the railroad tracks, where decent people only went if they wanted to buy oranges by the box.

My father violated my parole and I was again out on restriction, to serve out the remainder of the twelve-year sentence for the LaVonne fiasco. I would have died on restriction if my mother had not talked my father into sending me off to California Baptist College, where everything was illegal. Goodbye Orange County, hello Riverside.

Mothers rarely make mistakes, but mine had made a whopper. California Baptist College did not have their own basketball gymnasium and we had to practice at the local YMCA, which was located in a somewhat suspect area of town, south of the railroad tracks. I noticed there were lots of duplexes in the area that were in serious need of repairs. Anyway, that's where I met Pam.

Pam Henderson was Black and she lived with her grandmother in one of those duplexes near the YMCA. One day her car had a flat and I stopped and put on the spare tire for her. Well, one thing led to another and the next thing I knew I was in love. This time it was real love. She was so beautiful that I stopped dreaming about movie stars and dreamed about her instead. Her skin was the color of hot chocolate and she had a smile that would stop a Spanish fighting bull.

Obviously I couldn't take her to my room in the dorm. California Baptist was so strict that they wouldn't even let us have *National Geographic* magazines in our rooms, for fear of us seeing pictures of nude women in Borneo. Nipples ranked right next to blasphemy and high treason in their eyes. But the Gods of Youthful Liaisons blessed us. Pam's grandmother worked at Riverside County



eyes. But the Gods of Youthful Liaisons blessed us. Pam's grandmother worked at Riverside County Hospital, on swing shift.

Now, curfew was 7 p.m. in the dorms, unless you signed out to go to church. I became the most church-going guy in the whole college. Monday night, Bible study. Tuesday night, choir practice. Wednesday night, mid-week service. Every night I was signed out to some church. I didn't feel guilty about lying on the sign-out sheet because I was in love, true love. Obviously the services I was attending were held at Pam's grandmother's. I was the pastor and she was the choir director. No one could hit a high "C" like she could.

I wasn't as slick as I thought because the dorm master got suspicious when he saw all those church services I was attending and then discovered I was a pre-law major. He nodded slowly and muttered to his weasel assistant, "Somethin's fishy here, Jim Bob. Lawyers never go to church. We best check this out."

Well, we were caught in the act, or close to it anyway. The dean arrived in the college van, along with Pam's grandmother; both shared the same views on interracial marriages. The basketball coach and the college chaplain came in separate cars. It looked like a SWAT team converging on two bank robbers. They probably would have brought the Riverside SWAT team to arrest us if they hadn't been afraid of the adverse publicity, bad for soliciting those precious endowments.

Pam's grandmother shipped her off to Texas, to live with a maiden aunt, and I was restricted to the dorm until I could demonstrate that the sexual demon had been purged from my soul. I moved up to number one on the prayer list, passing R.W. McWorter, who had been caught playing with himself while reading a copy of *National Geographic*, and Chester Dabney, who wrote a term paper questioning original sin.

It took me two years to get off that damn prayer list, at least out of the top ten. That was when I met Hilda. Hilda McCarty. She never so much as spoke

to me until I dropped out of the top ten on the prayer list. She would look at me when we passed in the hallways, but she never said anything. She was the student body vice-president and it was sort of an unwritten rule that class officers couldn't cavort with list sinners. But on Friday, when the top ten list came out and I wasn't on it, her whole attitude changed. Her smile was as coy as a used car salesman trying to unload a lemon.

Being on the prayer list didn't mean that I couldn't play basketball, so that part of my life went on pretty much normal. Hilda suddenly took an interest in basketball. I think she saw me as a fallen sinner, in need of womanly salvation. She was one of those women who feel their mission in life is to save the backslider, to rescue some poor soul and bring him back into the fold, even if he's screaming that he doesn't want to come.

This time I wasn't certain if it was true love or not. But when she asked me to drive her home to Niland Acres to meet her parents, I thought this might be the real thing. Her father owned a service station—in those days they actually serviced your car at the gas station—and was a down-to-earth fellow. He filled up my car with gas and began calling me "son."

Her parents were going to a revival in Ventura and wanted us to go with them, but Hilda told them that we had to study for a big test that was coming up in Old Testament history. The subject was too important to leave unstudied so they agreed to go without us. This left us alone on a Saturday night, a mistake only religious parents would make.

Well, it was magnificent. I had captured true love at last. Afterwards we were sitting in bed, with the lights off because Hilda thought it would be a sin if I actually saw her nude before we were married.

"Darling, our life will be wonderful." She sighed, obviously content.

I couldn't have agreed more.

"I'm so happy that we saved ourselves for each other. Aren't you?"



I wasn't sure exactly what I should say. I was trying to figure out my answer when she pressed the issue, rather vigorously.

"You *did* save yourself for me, right?" The loving tone of her voice had changed a tad.

That was when I made my big mistake. "Well, precious, there *have* been a couple of blips on the radar screen of life." I was certain she would understand, what with me being the captain of the basketball team.

Boy, was I wrong. The dean never actually acknowledged why I was at the top of the prayer list, but rumor had it that I had taken a drink of beer, during an unnatural fit of backsliding. Since I was on shaky ground already, I did nothing to deter that thinking. Well, Hilda could forgive a teensy sip of alcohol, but never the mortal sin.

"Couple?" she blurted, clutching the sheet to her bosom.

I thought she was going to sniffle a little and then forgive me, so I told the truth. "Actually, there were five."

"Five!" She screamed so loud that her dog started barking, a mongrel that was half-collie and

half-St. Bernard. He was a hairy one and snarled like he hadn't bitten anyone all week.

Well, I had a better chance of teaching that dog to speak Spanish than I did of calming her down. She leaped from the bed and ran into the bathroom. The next thing I heard was the shower, going full force.

Obviously she couldn't tell her parents what had happened, so instead she told her dad that I had tried to drink a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer while they were away. You would have thought I'd been accused of white slavery. Her dad stopped calling me "son" and started calling me "you." He informed me that a drunkard could not spend the night under his roof and that I owed him \$4.17 for the gas. Needless to say, it was a lonely trip back to the dorm.

That did it. I swore off looking for love forever. Forever ended when I was stationed at Ft. Stewart, Georgia. I was a second lieutenant in the army. That was when I met Kham, Kham Sivongxay. Her father was a colonel in the Royal Laotian Army and he was attending the torture school at Ft. Stewart. She was the most beautiful girl in Georgia, probably in Laos too.

Her black hair hung clear to her waist and she had almond eyes that could make a Laotian rebel drop his AK-47.

We had to be careful because her father hated Americans, especially second lieutenants. He was in charge of interrogating Communist prisoners in Vientiane and would have stuck bamboo slivers under my toenails if he suspected foul play. I thought we were as wary as possible, but I was wrong.

This major, a guy named Wild Bill Grimm, cornered me in the tank motor pool. He was assigned to ASA, Army Security, and I knew I was in big trouble.

"Listen, Lieutenant, I know all

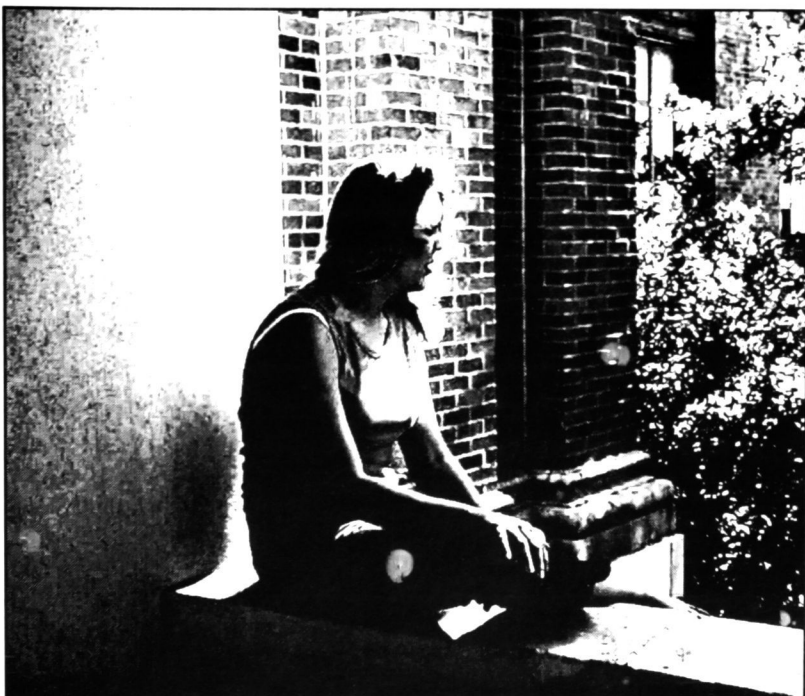


Photo by Alanna Bradley



about your little Viet Cong girlfriend.” He blew cigar smoke in my face. Probably a trick he learned at the torture school, which was euphemistically called IIRT, Involuntary Information Retrieval Training.

I respectfully explained that Kham was Laotian, not Vietnamese.

“Hell, son, what difference does that make. Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, they all look the same to a Republican congressman. Jesus H. Christ, for all we know she might hate all round-eyes and have a frag grenade in her purse.”

Ah . . . sir, her father is a colonel in the RLA. Legally I could take her to the Officer’s Club.”

“Good God Almighty, son. All you’d have to do is put her in black pajamas and give her one of those goofy saw hats and she’d look just like a VC guerrilla. The wives at the “O” club would be afraid to go to the ladies potty for fear of stepping on a claymore mine or running into a punji stick.”

“Sir, she’s a loyal . . .”

“Let me put this another way, Lieutenant. If you *don’t* stop seeing your commie girlfriend, I’ll have your butt shipped off to Korea. You’ll be spending your nights up on the DMZ, looking down the barrels of NK regulars. One misstep and you’ll find yourself in a Pyongyang prison, eating fish heads and starchy rice.”

I knew he was serious because the North Koreans planted Blue Rose rice instead of long grain and it was always starchy. Anyway, the pushy major contacted Kham’s father and told him about us. I guess her father almost had a stroke. I found out later that they shipped him back to Laos before he could complete the bomb. They found a diagram of the bachelor officers quarters in his house with a big red “X” marking my room. There were some Laotian words scrawled next to the “X” and I was certain they weren’t an Amway order.

My life was devastated. Love had abandoned me and left me with ill fortune as my only companion. I left the army, heartbroken. I planned on joining the

Foreign Legion, to forget, like in those old movies, but I had to give up the idea because I couldn’t speak French. Instead I joined law enforcement, perhaps hoping to get shot by a jilted lover.

That was when romance came to my rescue. I was working the San Juan Capistrano car, I had returned to the days of my youth in Orange County, when I met her. Her name was Bola Stanfield and she was the most beautiful woman in Capistrano. She was the reason the swallows came back every year. Her mother was a Mission Indian, with a checkered past, and her father was a German drug dealer. She had the best of both worlds, not the drug dealing part, but appearance-wise. She had dark skin and haunting hazel eyes that bored deep into your soul. By then mine had been bored quite a bit.

I met her while she was double-parked in front of the Father Serra Liquor Store. Rather than write her a ticket, I told her to follow me to the nearest open parking space. How was I to know that her husband was inside the liquor store, holding a gun on the clerks? Anyway, while I was getting to know Bola, this guy comes running out of the liquor store. He’s holding a paper bag full of something and looking around frantically, like someone had stolen his car. I could hear him screaming and wildly waving his arms, but I just assumed that he had got some out of date beer and the clerks wouldn’t give him a refund.

Well, both clerks came charging out of the liquor store and beat this guy to a pulp. He tried to shoot them, but all he accomplished was getting water in one of the clerk’s eyes. Apparently it was a low-budget robbery and he used a water pistol. It was a messy scene. I had my hands full with a double-parker and a bumbling robber. Obviously I had to arrest the husband, who at the time I thought was just some common thug. He kept screaming at Bola in Spanish and threatening to kill me in English. Since he knew her name, she meekly confessed that he was a distant cousin, twice removed. Her explanation caused him to scream even louder.



I didn't find out about the husband bit until the court appearance. You know how crowded the courts are, a case can take forever to get in front of a judge. In the meantime, Bola had moved in with me and I was going to be true to her forever. This was real love at last, passionate, eternal. My plans for everlasting bliss were shattered on the day of the trial.

What a morning. The husband, whose name was Ruhulio, told the judge that I was part of his gang and we had planned the robbery together. Some jail-house snitch had told him that Bola was living with me and he threatened to castrate me as soon as he got out. I guess he changed his mind and accused me of planning the robbery instead. What a mess. Nobody knew what to believe. The judge called Bola to the stand, trying to find out if she was also part of the newly infamous Ruhulio Gang.

"Your Honor, I really don't know either one of the guys too well. My mother was dying of the clap and made me promise to marry Ruhulio—on her deathbed. We never actually lived together."

"What . . . what about the deputy? You were certainly living with him."

Bola looked beautiful. She was wearing this innocent-looking white dress and had a frilly ribbon in her hair. She answered demurely, "Not exactly. I didn't have any money and no place to live and . . ." she paused and sniffled.

The judge ordered gruffly, "Go on."

"He said I could stay with him if I would . . ." she sniffled again, as if ready to burst into tears.

The judge was leaning forward, looking anxious. Everyone in the courtroom cocked their heads toward Bola, waiting for the juicy details.

"Go on. What did he force you to do?"

She whimpered, "He . . . he made me . . ." You could have heard a pin drop. "He made me clean his house—and even do windows."

"No?" The judge was stunned.

"Yes," she nodded convincingly, "even after I told him that I didn't do windows."

Well, it took a team of high-priced lawyers to keep me out of jail. Naturally I had to leave law enforcement. Bola's husband was sent to Folsom Prison for five years and the judge sicced the IRS on me for having a housekeeper and not paying her Social Security tax. Cal OSHA arrived at my door with a search warrant. They wanted to check to see if it was dangerous to stand on a footstool to clean my windows. I tried to explain that the only thing that Bola ever cleaned out was my bank account, but they wouldn't listen.

Sure, there were others. There was Tippy, the topless dancer, but she ran off with the plastic surgeon from Beverly Hills. Then there was Pearl. We met at an AA meeting and went for a drink afterwards. But she left me for that TV evangelist from Mississippi, the one who later got arrested for DWI. I guess the last one was Wanda. She was a barmaid at the Red Dog Saloon, a beer bar on the wrong side of San Bernardino. Things were going great. We used to stop at this donut shop after the bar closed, a place called Donut Delicious. She loved those donut holes, the crumb ones. Anyway, she found out that the Cambodian guy who owned the donut shop was single. She left me faster than a Tijuana taxi speeding through an unmarked intersection.

So here I am in the old folks home. Oh, they call it a fancy name, Rolling Hills Retirement Center, even though the nearest hill is fifteen miles away, but it's still an old folks home. My life is ruined. Love evaded me at every turn and I have nothing left to live for. Here comes that young receptionist. What could she possibly want?

"There's a new lady who just checked in, a widow. Actually she's pretty attractive and very nice. I was wondering if you'd like to show her around?" She motioned toward a woman who was standing in the hallway.

Hmm, she looks pretty good from here, unless my glasses are dirty again. No, she looks real good.

