

Cheryl Meets Mike

August 1975, Maryland State University

He came to me as in a dream—a shining example of loves I'd seen—out of the haze of my work routine, the man spoke.

“I want that.”

He was standing in my line, the express checkout at our campus bookstore. Students returning from summer break were gathering class requirements and shopping for an entire semester's “bare necessity” shopping. Most spent over \$700 by our estimates, and their one concern was ending this last “to-do” my checkout line represented so they wouldn't miss another moment of their precious few days before classes began.

He pointed at the football jersey I was holding but looked at every inch of my face, studied my features so hard I blushed.

“Sonny don't come cheap,” I said.

He was after, though his eyes fixed on mine, a special edition Washington Redskins Sonny Jurgenson football jersey. The customer before had decided to put it back, swayed by the doubts stirred from idle time in long lines.

“I decided my *friend* ain't been that good for me to spend all that on him,” she'd told me.

“That's a special edition,” I told my new would-be purchaser. “Don't see one of those every day.”

“Tell me about it,” he said, eyes never dropping below my neckline.

His gaze was so intense I blushed more, then, to break the tension, I turned the jersey inside to expose the hefty price tag.

That's when he looked behind. Two guys in fraternity jackets gave what looked like a “cut it” gesture. He paid for the jersey.

“Friends of yours?” I asked.

His eyes said our conversation wasn't over, but he took his change, grasping my hand gently as if he'd caught a lifeline made of sand. As quickly as I warmed to his touch, he withdrew those massive hands, gathered his new prize and other school supplies and left.

That was my introduction to the secretive world of college fraternities and sororities.

Maryland State University was now home. I'd come from Chicago with the expectation my college experience would feel like home. It didn't. I felt a million miles from dad and even auntie who lived less than an hour from campus.

I grew up with Dad, the man neighbors came to resent for his after-midnight, hundred-proof concertos, sung loud and off-key to the wildy barking canines, bouncing like dolphins as they leapt over and over, fixed on clearing their fenced barriers and fulfilling the neighborhoods' collective prayer that someone would finally shut Sam Fields up.

Dad never found his keys. His drunken homecomings usually ended with me talking him inside and waving apologies to the few onlookers. No one shouted back. The dogs were the only ones who didn't know Sam Fields may have been a terrible singer, but he was a crack shot.

I spent many a summer in Washington, D.C. My aunt, Dad's sister, lived there. She loved me and my dad, but knew his lifestyle. Navy life was Dad's love. When we lost Mom, he and I had only each other.

I learned quickly Dad's way of handling me was not Mom's. He trained new recruits every day and wanted to treat me the same. It was all he knew.

Aunt, I call her, "auntie," Rose was my savior. When Daddy couldn't understand how a little girl thinks or what she needs, auntie stepped in.

"Sam, this girl is doing your laundry, ironing military creases, cooking you breakfast, dinner, and filling a lunch pail for you before she goes off to school, and you're going to slap this six-year-old? I'm not having it. I will take her out of this house and back with me so fast your head will spin. The way we got beat was wrong, Sam. I won't see you do this child like that."

Aunt Rose stood in the middle of my father's kitchen, folded her arms across her chest, stuck one foot out, flung her head back, and dared her brother to move. I stood behind, peeking out, fingers locked in her belt loops, blood still oozing from the gash over my eye where I'd hit the corner of the bathroom sink, falling face first after my father's slap. He thought that was appropriate punishment for getting out of bed twenty minutes late.

I don't remember ever seeing Daddy show emotion except that day. He knelt down beside Aunt Rose, pulled me around from behind and said, "Rose, never say you're going to take my Cheryl. She's all I have."

He brushed aside the tear forming in his eye, held me tight, his head shaking the "no" he was thinking, and said, "She's all I got now. This little soldier is the only Fields left."

Dad winced at the blood I let flow towards my eye as I maintained what he'd taught me of standing at attention. My father dropped his head, pulled his starched, just-cleaned, spare dress whites off the table, and gently wiped blood from the gash over my eye. I stood still, not knowing what he wanted.

"You help Aunt Rose today. OK, Cheryl? You go out shopping with her, OK? She knows what to buy you. OK?"

"OK, Daddy."

"OK."

With that, he grabbed the empty lunch pail and walked out the door. I worried he would be hungry.

Auntie tried to explain people mix anger with love sometimes. I was more concerned with the gray, Mercury sedan pulling out of the driveway and the man steering carefully around my dolls.

“Thanks for not hitting my dolls today,” I shouted. “Barbie told me she loves you *and* Ken.”

Dad smiled.

I spent every high school summer in D.C. Aunt Rose had connections on K Street through her paralegal girlfriends. I was always good for a summer job. Some of the most powerful attorneys in the world, that is the high fliers who don't have offices there already, call K Street's law firms to help gain influence over congress.

There were no skyscrapers on D.C.'s streets. Other than the missing towers and the deep police presence—D.C. Police, Park Police, Capitol Police, and it seemed a police force for every government building—I felt like I was home.

My Aunt Rose worked the night shift. That left me free to get into a lot more mischief than I ever chose. I was home most nights, just like back in Chicago.

With only myself to take care of, my prayer for peace had been answered. Sam Fields was free to roam the streets with no one keeping him in check.

No matter how good that peace got, no matter how many attorneys, bellboys, grocery clerks or cute guys told this skinny, awkward, tomboy teen that something I had made them come over and say nice things to me, my nights didn't end until the phone rang.

“Home, baby.”

“*Your* home, Dad?”

“How's Rose?”

“Working.”

“You get some sleep, Cheryl.”

“Love you, Dad. Get some sleep.”

“Way ahead of you.”

“Night, and thanks for remembering to call.”

“This is why I come home.”

He always made me smile.

“Call me tomorrow, Daddy.”

“OK, songbird. Dad misses that beautiful voice of yours at breakfast.”

“I'll be home before long.”

“I promise I'll be right here.”

“I know. That's why I come home.”

“Night, Cheryl.”

“Night, Daddy.”

September

She had coarse, close-cropped hair, her Afro a sharp contrast to the freckles dotting her anxious face. My unexpected roommate, Susan, had finally—though our entire time at that university would be linked—overcome her dread of cramming herself into the single room I enjoyed as a Resident Assistant. I volunteered to share in order to ease the

swell of unhoused freshmen. School officials weren't prepared for the forty extra students who would choose Maryland State's housing than we had dorm beds readied.

"Come on in," I said. "I got two or three ideas cooking for this space. I see you like red."

Susan brought two suit jackets, a bag of her favorite red velvet cupcakes, two pairs of dress shoes, size 6, one suitcase, and a red gift-wrapped box.

"For you," she said.

"Oh," I said, "that was so nice."

She would, over time, melt my daddy-taught formality with her thoughtfulness. I learned kindness from Susan over our two years as roommates. She taught me faith in sisterhood and broke through my fear of disappointing Daddy's high standards. Our room soon became home.

Most of our classes were the same, though our schedules differed. Susan was a night owl. She had been raised in Baltimore less than an hour's drive from campus, but snuck her underage self into nightclubs as far away as New York.

We struggled to understand the same subjects. Our public high school educations didn't include the level of Math, Chemistry, or general science Maryland State demanded. Half our study time was spent catching up on material other freshmen considered review.

Susan started from the position that nobody gave her anything. If she didn't know, for example, how to solve a problem in College Math because her Geometry skills were weak, she studied until she got it.

I knew when I saw her kiss the nose of the Betty Boop doll she'd gifted me that first day, our study time was over.

"Gotta go, Boo," she'd say, and my roomie was out the door. Susan didn't study after dark. She had too many places to go.

I stayed up for Daddy's midnight call, slept until sunrise, and was done with classes by 2 p.m. Part of me wanted to dress up, hop in the car, and find myself in the middle of one of Susan's "flirting almost got me in serious trouble" stories.

I chose to stay on call for our floor. I didn't mind. As Resident Assistant, I had to be prepared to talk my girls through the most harrowing experiences, from red dye in their clothes to rape.

October

"Why do you keep running into the hall to answer the phone, Susan? Are you OK?"

The flood of emotional swings my and Susan's relationship took that first semester entered through the hallway phone.

"It's nothing," Susan said, hanging up as she hid a list she'd scratched off. She sat on her bed, back to me, and wouldn't discuss any detail of the whispered call.

It started as a trickle—a few hushed conversations, late night phone calls that always left Susan in a panic over some suddenly all-important task. She wanted to let me in.

“Don’t be mad at me, Cheryl,” she said. “I can’t talk. People would get hurt.”

After two weeks, during which the girl who’d become my first sister became almost impossible to bear, she seemed to come back to our normal life, the openness we’d shared. Then Susan brought some guy she said wasn’t her boyfriend to sleep on our floor. He was in the hall when she peeked through our half-opened door to ask.

I didn’t blink.

“Not happening,” I said.

That set our relationship back to, “Hi,” and, “Bye.”

November

This continued—phone calls, food being prepared and taken by rushed women to whom I was not introduced, secret meetings terminated when I walked in our room—for another two weeks.

When Susan left her Chemistry exam in plain sight on her bed—a “45-F” circled in red—ran into the nearest shower stall in the bathroom across the hall, curled herself into a ball, and began to wail like someone died, I decided for her.

Enough was enough.

“This whatever-it-is has to let you sleep and study,” I said, cradling Susan in my right arm as I lifted her left over my shoulder and helped her out of that dirty shower stall.

“You can do anything you want except fail your classes, Susan,” I insisted. “I learned so much watching you, how smart you are and how you don’t let problems beat you. My professors don’t even know how much it took for me to catch up with the rest of the class. You were my friend, Susan. You need a friend.”

We stopped at the door so Susan could straighten her shoe. We noticed at the same time. Susan stared in disbelief at the broken girl in that bathroom mirror.

“Let’s get super-Susan back on her feet,” I offered.

She fastened her tennis shoe heel and burst out in laughter.

“That’s bad,” she said.

I thought she felt I was taking things too seriously until I followed her eyes. We almost fell back onto the floor laughing at the sight of her one red and one off-red mismatched shoes.

“You were so out of it when you blew out of here this morning, you’re lucky your socks match,” I said.

She seemed to release a whole month’s tension laughing at those shoes.

“Help me?” she asked.

“Give me my sister back?”

“Deal,” Susan said.

We walked out of there arm-in-arm and had one of our longest talks.

“Wait til one of those fools shows up,” I said, pacing back and forth in the six step, arm’s-length space that masqueraded as our living area.

I convinced Susan to spend all night studying her Chemistry in the library. We'd catch up with her other classes over the weekend.

That was the night that changed my life.

The banging on the door started in my dream. I was re-living the times my father and I had gone to the Naval base bowling alley. That's where he taught me how to hold a walking stick and twirl it around like a miniature Fred Astaire.

In my dream, Dad and Mom were dancing on the bowling lanes. They jumped from lane to lane as if the whole alley was a cloud. Each lane became a gold piano key that rose to meet their footsteps.

Dad wore a black topcoat and hat, the stove-pipe kind he tipped each time he held Mom's hand, leaned back, and gazed into her eyes. Mom's white dress became the cloud under the bowling alley, settling each time they touched cheek-to-cheek and nestled in one another's arms.

I sat in a booth, my voice capturing the tune the gold keys played, happily serenading the two young lovers.

Some man with a gun began to bang on the bowling alley door and call my mother's name. I turned to look, and Susan's empty bed came into focus. I rolled over and pressed my eyes closed to recapture the dream.

I had to stop that man.

"Susan! Let me in. I need your help. Come on. Susan!"

I buried my face in the pillow and clutched the blanket over my head like it was a soldier's helmet during a bombing raid. I lay still, hoping to recover my dad and mom.

They were gone.

"I don't believe this," I spat at the barking door.

I started to yell, *Susan's not here, idiot*, but I wanted to see my enemy face to face. The same fury surged that had welled in my gut as I listened to Susan's story of spending time, tears, her last dollar, and all her other friendships on a group of young men stupid enough to let someone they called, "Big Brother," beat them up.

Now one of them was at my door.

As I reached for the door, the tip of my white bra shown despite the checkered wool pajamas. I decided to wrap a hastily plucked bed sheet around me like a toga to avoid giving the wrong impression.

I snatched our door open and just as quickly moved my entire body to block the opening. Susan's friends popped through just-opened doors like they'd been naked in a snowstorm.

"Don't you know what time it is?" I asked the stranger who stood and stared like he was the one awakened from a dream—mouth wide open, body leaned back like he'd shown up at Snow White's door and King Kong answered.

"They told me Susan's roommate was pretty," he recovered, "but now, seeing for myself...wait, weren't you the one at the Bookstore? That smile...Sonny's jersey. Oh, I

remember you. Those teeth...Egyptian eyes, smooth, almond skin. I'll never forget. I said that day I'd never forget. What's your name?"

There was something in the way this one saw me—like he saw *me*, beyond what others see, into who I was.

My anger melted. I remembered him. It wasn't because of some line. God knows I've heard enough. It was where those eyes went when I first met him. Their gaze didn't race, like so many men's, below my chin, but twinkled round my nose, jumping from eye to eye and back again, resting on the corners of lips forming first my grin, then surrendering a smile as the trial judge in my heart found him genuine. My guard came down as his appreciation settled in.

I was blushing again.

"Cheryl. And don't let the smile fool you. It's terrible the way you people have been treating Susan."

"Cheryl, you can't tell me this wasn't meant to happen. We've been on social probation—no outside contacts—since the pledge program started. I was going...can I come in? No telling how many women in this dorm have reported a Black man in combat boots and army jacket running around at 3 a.m. I hear you don't take kindly to visitors. Make an exception?"

He got a chuckle.

"Get in before you get me fired."

He entered, and I motioned towards the wall.

"I gotta stand in the corner?"

I turned, stepped over Susan's bed, and sat on mine. He was still in the doorway when I looked up. I nodded towards the corner.

"Go on," I said.

He threw his hands up, drooped his shoulders, and dragged his feet like he was walking a prisoner's last mile. He stopped short of the corner, dropped his head, and snapped his fingers.

"This may spoil my chances," he said, remembering, "but if I don't get back with two six-packs of beer, there'll be hell to pay. I'd stay, but my Line Brothers are back there paying the price for every second I make the Brothers wait. You are so like no woman I ever met; I forgot why I came."

I started to ask where "there" was but laughed when I realized what was happening. This Negro wanted money.

"If I give you...?"

"Five dollars," he said.

I shook my head, cutting my eyes at him and flashing a smile of appreciation for the show I was starting to believe he'd put on.

"If I give you five dollars; will you let my roommate have her nights back so she can study and not fail out of here?"

He looked me in my eyes and pointed his finger at my door knob.

“I was about to tell you my first stop after I finished the pledge program was going to be your checkout line at the Student Union. I don’t want your five dollars. That ain’t right. Don’t confuse what I’m after. I don’t want your money. I want you.

I’m going to keep turning that doorknob and asking to talk to you. I just needed to have this happen again, to have the whole world melt away when I’m with you. Just tell me you feel it too. Don’t you? Don’t leave me hanging. I know you do.”

He cupped a fist over his mouth to stifle a smile, knowing what I was thinking but wondering what I’d do.

“Do you?” he asked.

The few seconds I took to decide between admit and hide enjoyed every emotion his face supplied: joy, horror, hope, pride. We’d both leaned forward, he waiting for my answer, me trying to keep it inside. I was so caught off guard by this whole thing I didn’t have the sense to lie.

“I do,” I said. “I feel it too.”

He extended his hand.

“Mike.”

He waited for me to come to him. I held out my hand.

“Mike Johnson,” he said quizzically, with the surprise a man used to ease gaining women’s attention experiences when it don’t come that easy.

I stepped over Susan’s bed, and he walked to meet me halfway.

“Cheryl Fields,” I answered.

We shook.

He turned to leave, and I held our handshake, yanked him back towards me, and raised my index finger.

“Hold on,” I said. “I’ll make you a better deal.”

I let go of his hand and reached into my bottom drawer.

“Hold your hand out,” I said.

He did, and I slipped a five in his palm.

“I’ll be your Sweetheart if you promise to treat us better. Can I count on you, Mike Johnson?”

He wrapped those strong hands around mine, more firmly this time, and pulled me towards him. His expression begged my heart to surrender its doubt. Our heads tilted, eyes filling with the taste of one another’s lips. My palm caught his chest just as I was losing my head.

“I’m a long-term project, Mister,” I said. “You got that type of time?”

He put his hand over my palm, slid his grip to my wrist, and brought my outstretched hand to his lips. My body shivered as his kiss moistened the inside of my palm as lightly as the dance steps he’d intruded on. He slowly guided my trembling palm until it was placed firmly over his heart. Mike Johnson looked into my eyes, then over his shoulder at my door knob.

“That door knob—”

He stopped when he noticed I'd begun to listen to the steady rhythm of his heart beating as hard as mine. He closed his eyes, I closed mine, and he spoke.

"Every..." He said each word on his heartbeat. "day...I'm...going...to...try...to...make...you...mine."

I opened my eyes.

He opened his at my next line.

"Take your time."

"Every day," he said.

"I'll be here. Don't lose your way."

"I won't."

I opened his hand, neatly folded the five inside, and motioned towards the door.

"They're waiting," I told him.

He let out a long breath and walked to the door.

"So, you'll be our Sweetheart?" he asked as fingertips touched the knob.

"I don't know what I'm getting myself into, but I trust those eyes. Can I trust you?"

"Cheryl, trust what you feel," he said, blew me a kiss and left.

Three days later, I was a Kappa sweetheart.



The image shows an Amazon product listing. At the top is the Amazon logo. Below it is a small image of a woman, Cheryl, smiling. The text below the image reads "Cheryl's Song I: Revised..." in blue, followed by the price "\$3.99" in black. At the bottom of the listing is a yellow button with the Amazon logo and the text "Shop now".

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