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YOU WILL HURT ME

by Marsh Haris

Last night I dreamt of Jim.

My mind, swathed in a blanket of sleep, flew back over the many and eventful years, then alighted like a curious bird. I went back, all the way back to that memorial year when I was nineteen and he was nineteen. And yet, so great was the disparity of our maturity, our experience, that I must have felt at the time a full decade his senior.

In my dream, we had already met, we had taken an intense liking to one another, and were together frequently. Yet all the while we merely laughed and spoke of trivial things; we had fun just being together. But long this gentle, innocent relationship could not be, for I was wildly and insanely in love with him. And so, on a cool early-summer's evening, I looked across the room and studied his honest, lovely face.

«Jim—I want to say something. A simple thing; one short statement. I want to—I must tell you something.»

His innocent face smiled across to me, and yet faintly disfigured itself with uneasiness.

«All right. I'll listen.»

I felt the very mechanical action of my mouth as it opened; I heard the words, almost as though from afar, as they were pronounced, clear and deliberate.

«I am in love with you.»

His head dropped immediately. Then slowly he looked at me again.

«Yes. I know that. And—.»

«And what?»

«Nothing.»

«Were you going to say that you love me too?»

For a moment he did not speak. Then, «Yes, that is what I was going to say. But I did not say it—because I wish you had not said that you love me.»

«Why?»

«Because it frightens me. I am afraid.»

«Oh, no. No, you have nothing to be afraid of. What? What could you possibly fear?»

«I am afraid of you.»

«I don't understand.»

«You will hurt me. Will you hurt me, Dan?»

It was his sweet, morning-fresh innocence, his sheer saintliness that I was never quite prepared for.

«Jim, I love you; I could not hurt you. Please, please don't be afraid: I could not possibly hurt you, not ever!»

«Not—not even if you stopped loving me?»

«But I shall not stop loving you. How can you ask such a thing? Here, as I stand this very moment I love you more than anything else in all the world. And I shall always. Oh Jim, I want to hold you tightly, to worship the very nearness of you, to be able to breathe deeply late in the night with you by my side and say to myself, 'this precious thing, this loveliest of all creatures is mine. Jim is mine.'»

Tears came to his deep blue eyes and his hands reached out almost pleadingly. «Oh Dan, don't you see, it is because I love you so much that I am afraid, that I doubt, and dare not come nearer. If I loved you less, I would not hesitate to say sure, let us have our fun, even if it is only for a short while. But it is because I love you more. The pain would be too great—I could not—.»

«Then what am I to do? What do I say to kill your fear? Will you always go through life daring to love only those you love but slightly, killing the finest of all?»

He turned away for a long while, and when he again faced me, it were as though within that single painful instant he had grown up, he had seen the face of reality.

«You're right,» he muttered softly. «I cannot do that.»

I took him in my arms then for the very first time and knew a happiness I had not thought possible. I held my beloved Jim as one holds to life itself.

A full year went by and we were immeasurably happy. We lived in a glow of contentment, our own private little Utopia that seemed impenetrable.

Then my dream seemed to transform itself insidiously into a nightmare. All reality took flight, things were not what they were. Chairs swelled into amorphous shapes, then burst into the forms of people; cars, on second glance, were not cars at all, but trees. Smiles became frowns, music became piercing, unbearable cacophony. Piercing, piercing—.

Piercing!

Then with a painful abruptness reality returned. I was awake. The room was dark and I lay with the bed-coverings half thrown from my body. There was a movement beside me.

I opened my eyes feebly and watched my wife rise from the bed and cross the room to a pink and blue crib from whence came a piercing, unbearable cacophony.

My eyes closed again, but would not keep the silent tears inside. «You will hurt me,» came the sweet, gentle voice over and over. «Will you hurt me, Dan?»

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