

FROM

# Only Love Can Break Your Heart

BY ED TARKINGTON



**I**sat with Paul listening to records while we waited for Anne to arrive: side A of *After the Gold Rush*, over and over again.

On the wall above Paul's bed hung a black-and-white image of Neil Young sitting on a bench backstage, legs crossed, an open bottle of beer beside him, eyes downcast and hidden, strumming on his big Martin guitar. His hooded brow and bisected long, dark hair made him look like Geronimo in patched, tattered jeans and an untucked oxford shirt. *Neil Young*. To my ears, the very name was sublimely evocative, like a line of terse, elegantly understated poetry. The exaggerated percussion and practiced sloppiness of the guitars and the barroom piano and that strange, keening, almost childlike voice made the sound seem at once ancient and otherworldly.

The lights of the Old Man's car appeared in the driveway. Paul sighed and lit another cigarette.

"Go on," he said. "Have a look at her."

Downstairs, my mother sat in the living room with her Bible open in her hands—presumably seeking some last-minute spiritual fortification. She stood and smoothed her skirt as the door opened. The Old Man entered, clutching a pea-green suitcase, followed by a small woman in a gray coat.

"I never thought I'd be darkening this doorway again," she muttered.

The Old Man grunted in agreement. When she saw me standing at the bottom of the stairwell, she smiled.

"Hello there," she said.

"Hello," I replied.

"Hello, Anne," my mother said.

To my knowledge, the two women had never met face-to-face before.

“What a healthy-looking boy,” she said to my mother. The Old Man’s forced grin looked far too painful to be worthwhile.

“Paul’s upstairs,” my mother said.

Anne slipped her coat off her shoulders and handed it to my mother.

“Would you mind bringing me a drink, Dick?” Anne asked.

“What’ll you have?”

“A rusty nail, if you can manage it.”

“I think we’re out of Drambuie,” the Old Man said.

“Just a scotch on the rocks, then.”

“I’ll take you to Paul’s room,” I said. Then I remembered: Anne didn’t need me or anyone else to show her the way around our house. I stood by silently as she crept up the stairs. The Old Man hurried to take her coat from my mother’s hands and hang it in the hall closet.

“Why don’t you come help me in the kitchen, Richard,” my mother said.

She was preparing a London broil and a broccoli casserole. The Old Man came in behind me. He took a highball glass from the cabinet and opened the freezer for ice cubes.

“I could use a drink myself,” he said.

“Don’t you dare,” my mother said.

“Christ almighty,” the Old Man muttered.

I followed him out to the dining room, where he kept the liquor and wine. He opened the lock on the cabinet and removed a bottle of scotch and poured the glass full to the lip. Glancing back at the kitchen, he slurped down about half the contents. He turned toward me, his brow furrowed.

“If you tell your mother,” he said.

I nodded.

The Old Man replenished the glass to the brim.

“Here,” he said.

He handed me the drink. I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to do with it.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ve waited on that woman enough in my life.”

I walked away, holding the highball glass out in front of me as if it were the Holy Grail, brimming with the priceless blood of the Savior—so full that it was impossible not to spill.

I tiptoed around the hall to the landing of the staircase. I was still visualizing the blood of Jesus inside it—not the figurative communion wine, but

the actual, syrupy stuff, dark and sticky and tasting of iron. This sacred elixir couldn't be squandered, I reasoned. To let it spill to the ground would be a sacrilege. So I decided, in the way children do, that the one solution was to slurp off the top layer.

The whiskey was still lukewarm and almost completely undiluted. Alone at the foot of the stairs, I marveled at the heat in my throat. I felt as if my whole body and brain had been cleansed with fire.

I managed to slide the glass onto the hall table in time to muffle the cough in my elbow. When I recovered my breath, I picked up the glass. Cradling it with both hands, I teetered up the stairs and into Paul's room.

Anne sat across from Paul in the chair next to the open window, smoking a thin white cigarette and tapping her ashes into the sill. Paul was smoking also. He stared off out the window as if he expected someone else to show up. The room felt uncomfortably quiet without Neil Young and Crazy Horse ringing off the walls.

I had never seen a picture of Anne; Paul didn't keep one in his room. What had she looked like before? Had any of Paul's beauty come from her? Had she ever been beautiful at all? She certainly wasn't alluring, as I imagined a "fallen woman" should be. She had an ugly mouth, with thin, angry lips. She wore too much makeup, or maybe not enough. It looked as if it had been applied with the express purpose of appearing careless. That air of indifference was the only way, really, in which Paul resembled her at all.

"Come into my parlor, darling," she said.

I walked toward her and handed her the drink.

"Did you taste it to make sure it isn't poisoned?" she asked.

"No," I stammered. "I just spilled a little."

"I'm teasing you, child," she said.

She held her cigarette aloft with one hand and sipped her drink with the other, taking her measure of me. I rocked back and forth from my heels to the balls of my feet, contemplating the numbness of my lips and the sudden thickness of my tongue.

"So," she asked, "am I as monstrous as you've been led to believe?"

The question confused me.

"I don't think Rocky here has an opinion, Mom," Paul said, his eyes still fixed on the window.

"How would he?" Anne said. She sipped her drink. "You all prefer to behave as if I don't exist."

"He's five years old, Mom."

"Almost six," I added.

"When's your birthday?" Anne asked.

"July twenty-ninth," I said.

Anne's mouth fell open. She gaped at me for a moment before turning to address Paul.

"You never told me that," she said with a dry chuckle. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Why would I?" Paul said.

"What?" I asked.

She aimed her small, cold eyes at me as she stamped out her cigarette.

"We have the same birthday, young Richard," she said.

"You and me?" I asked.

"That's right," she said. "How could this have escaped me, Paul?"

"Maybe somebody told you and you just forgot," Paul said.

"Maybe," she said, still chuckling. "Maybe. Well, young Richard, I won't forget this time."

"Thank you," I said, assuming she meant to send me a present.

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