WAITING FOR MELINDA

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The cold rain told a sad story in a soft voice, and I was listening.

I'm a good listener; always have been. Especially out here in the woods, in the rain, inside this small cemetery. I sit in the cab of my old truck, listening to the rain tell the story, and wait for Melinda.

We don't have nice winter weather around here. Seems like it's always cold, cloudy, and raining. About all it's good for is hunting, mostly deer. Only I don't hunt—not anymore.

But this became my favorite time of year because of Melinda. I was driving home after wasting most of a Saturday down in the bottoms trying to get that big buck just about everybody, including me, had seen at one time or another. Truth be told, I'd have still been there, wasting more time, except a big storm was coming

I'd barely gotten started when I saw this raggedy-ass old Plymouth Fury stopped across from the Barnwell cemetery, just about in the middle of nowhere. A women was out in the rain trying to change a flat. I stopped to help.

That's when I met Melinda. She was going somewhere to see somebody who was some sort of relative. For the life of me I don't remember where or who. What I do remember is that, even in an old raincoat and soggy cap, Melinda, she said her name was Melinda Carter, was about the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. She had big brown eyes, long wet eyelashes, and a cute, upturned little nose. I noticed it because there was a raindrop right on the tip. And even though her lips were blue from the cold, her smile could start a forest fire.

I said she was welcome to wait in my truck, out of the rain, while I changed the flat. But Melinda stayed and held an umbrella over me. That’s when we got to talking. She lived a couple of hours away and was a senior in college. I told her I'd just graduated and was teaching English at the local high school.

With all the rain and mud, it took longer than usual to change the tire. That was okay with me. I didn’t want her to just drive out of my life. But I’m no ladies man, and couldn’t figure what I should do. After I put everything away and slammed the trunk shut, she insisted I get in the car with her and share some hot coffee she’d brought along.

It had stopped raining. While we talked, she took off her tan raincoat and the cap and pitched them into the back seat. Even in a bulky sweater and jeans, you could tell she had the type of slender figure most men like and every woman seems to want. So I said coffee sounded good to me and crawled into the passenger seat of her old Plymouth.

God, but that was great coffee. Black with a little sugar and still nice and hot. We talked about the weather, and school, and then the forest around us. She said, a bit shyly at first, that she loved the woods and felt a sense of reverence when surrounded by a forest of tall trees. They were the perfect church, the holiest of sanctuaries.

As she spoke, her eyes seemed to sparkle. Those once blue lips were now an inviting red. It was all I could do to keep my hands to myself. So I told her a bit about me, how I loved to hunt, had lived around forests all my life, but that maybe I’d taken them for granted, had not understand how, to some folks, they could have an almost sacred appeal. I said that while listening to her, I’d begun seeing them through her eyes, seeing how they were more than just a bunch of trees.

We talked on and on that way until the coffee was gone. By the time she finished putting things away, it had started raining again. That earlier one had been little more than a shower. This was a deluge. Swirling sheets of water pounded the car. Trees bent, as if in obeisance to the storm. Until this blew over, driving was out of the question.

It was too noisy inside the car to talk. At first, we just stared through the fogged-up windshield at nature’s onslaught. Then we both turned and looked at one another. It was no casual glance. Somehow, we’d become more than just strangers in a storm. Those soft brown eyes seemed to search my soul, my heart. I watched, mesmerized, as she bit her lower lip, started to say something, hesitated, looked away, then back. On her face was a small, tentative smile.

That’s when my brain stopped working and instinct took over. As I reached for her, she slid over beside me.

We made love to the sound of the rain drumming on the car's roof. It all seemed so natural, so right. One moment she was dressed, the next she was nude, her smooth, warm, beautiful body in my arms. The taste of her lips, neck, the hard nipples on her small perfect breasts was intoxicating.

As I tore off my clothes, I could feel her watching, and thought I'd burst. With the languid grace of a dancer she lay back on the seat while pulling me after her. We kissed, and then, with a soft, little moan, she marked the moment our two bodies became one.

I'd fooled around with a few other girls, but that was just screwing. What happened inside that old car, in the rain, in the woods, was much, much more. I wanted to possess, not just Melinda's body, but her heart and soul. I wanted to protect her, to make her happy, and to be with her forever. Somehow I knew that, from then on, there could be no happiness for me without Melinda.

She was late getting to her relatives. I know because she called to say she made it okay. We talked every day after that, by phone or on dates. When I asked her to marry me, we both knew it was a formality. In every way that mattered, at least to us, that rainy afternoon we met was our wedding day. The tall pines and old oaks were our witnesses. The entire forest was our chapel.

Now, those woods are nothing to me, except the place where I lost Melinda.

It was another cold, rainy winter day and growing dark by the time she came to pick me up. I'd lost track of time and was still hunting. Maybe she was in a hurry or wanted to be with me in the rainy woods she loved so much. I'll never know. Anyway, she put on her old, tan raincoat and walked into the bottoms heading for my deer stand, the one she'd helped me build the summer before. There, just for a second, I thought I saw that big buck in the fading light, and then…. And then, that's when I killed her.

Since then I come out here to the Barnwell cemetery and listen to the rain and the voice that tells our story, and wait for Melinda. I keep the motor running so the cab will be warm when she comes. And she always comes.

We cuddle together inside my old truck, and talk about the weather, the forest, the good times, and listen to the rain. I'm never sure how, but our lips meet and we kiss, and touch. There's no rush, though it's hard not to hurry. The woods feel like our eternal sanctuary. When our two bodies become one, I once again hear her soft, little moan and it's almost like it used to be.

Of course, nothing in life is eternal, nothing is just like it used to be. Later, when it starts getting dark and we both know she must go, we cry, hold each other tight, then say, not goodbye, but till we meet

again.

But now she's late, or maybe I got here early. I'm not sure. Time doesn't mean much anymore. Nothing does. The thing is, I'm getting a little sleepy. So I'll keep the motor running but close my eyes, but just for a minute. Because Melinda will be here soon and then we'll be together, just like we always should be, here in the woods, in our sanctuary, in the cold rain.