

Sweet Talk

Alice Bolstridge

Why didn't I ever get married? Eliza's Lizzie has pestered me with that question all her life. When she was little, it was easy. I answered her like I did so many of her questions, like, "Why can't we fly to the moon?"

I said, "Maybe some day we will. Maybe someday the scientists will learn how, and we'll be able to fly to the moon. Now you go ask Justin to tell you about gravity and the oxygen on the moon." And she'd go find Justin and talk to him. Justin was only about nine years old then but already reading science books and Mama's science fiction, and he liked to talk to Lizzie better than anybody except Mama.

Before she grew up, she got an answer to that question about flying to the moon, but not to the one about why I didn't ever get married. Not really anyway. After a while I couldn't keep telling her anymore, "Maybe someday I will." I started telling her, "I was shy." Which is true, but not the whole truth. I couldn't ever tell her the whole truth.

It wasn't that I never thought of getting married or didn't want to. And it wasn't that I never had the chance, or thought I did. At least once. But I suppose I'd ought to have known, all that sweet talk in Norm Dennison's letters, ought to know it was just sweet talk, didn't mean anything. I was shy with boys though, so shy they never stayed around me to talk much. So I hadn't ever heard any sweet talk like that before except in stories I read, and I was thirty-one when Norm stopped by that afternoon of July 11th, 1958, attracted by my strawberries.

I picked all that morning to catch up. Ripening so fast, they'd got ahead of me. I had the counter on my roadside stand covered with baskets, and they were piled up three tier deep on the ground in front, fifty-six baskets of the prettiest berries you'd ever want to find anywhere, warm from the sun, red-red ripe, and so clean—because I mulched them with sawdust—they shone. I could just see what a pretty sight that must be to drive up to, all unexpected like that. All the strangers that stopped by said how they couldn't just drive by a display like that. I took time to arrange them, and then rearrange as they sold to keep the whole scene picture pretty. Mama used to say when I'd get going on making something look pretty, "Why don't you fix yourself up picture pretty, attract yourself a boyfriend."

I was just sitting down at my stand that day, glad to get off my feet and straighten my back, when Norm drove up in his powder-blue Buick. With a car like that I knew he wasn't from around here. I suppose I was taken by that car first thing. I used to daydream about having me a car and riding all around the country to see them pretty places—deserts and mountains and seashores—I liked to look at in the *National Geographic*. I knew it wasn't any use to daydream about going outside the country, except to Canada which was just thirty-five miles up the road, and I got to do that some after my pictures started making a little money. Got my brother Thurston and Jane to take me once in a while on Sunday afternoons. Their kids loved those trips.

Norm Dennison stepped out of that Buick and walked toward me. In my mind I can see him right this minute, all these years later—over six feet, lovely dark hair blowing in the breeze, blue sky around his head sparkling like it does on a clear day.

With hair long enough to blow like that, I knew for sure he never had been from around here. I was afraid I couldn't breathe, and I knew not to try to talk to him, I wouldn't get through one word. Right then I was taken sure, but I didn't know it.

He looked straight into my eyes and said, just like everybody else, "These strawberries are so beautiful, I couldn't possibly drive past." But not exactly like everybody else. Nobody else I ever knew could talk the way he did, so musical his voice was. He had just the slightest hint of a foreign accent. He told me later he was born in Quebec. I was taken by that voice too, so taken I forgot I couldn't talk without stuttering. I wanted too bad to say, Thank you. So, without thinking at all, I tried, "Th, th, th. . . ." And then of course I remembered and stopped trying and blushed like I always do when anybody hears me stutter.

He reached out his hand and said, "I'm Norm Dennison, pleased to meet you. Do you pick these strawberries?"

I nodded, grateful not to have to try to talk to answer that. And, honest, I don't remember touching his hand right then, but I suppose I must have. I wouldn't have been so rude as not to. He said, "Do you grow them too?"

I nodded again.

"And do you paint those pictures of strawberries behind you, framing you so pretty."

I nodded again and blushed. My face got all hot. He bought five baskets of my strawberries and two of my pictures. I made change, careful not to touch his hand. Then he asked if I painted any other kind of pictures.

I nodded and pointed to the barn where I kept all the pictures I wanted to sell. He said, "May I see them?" I nodded again.

He stayed in there a long time. Old Glen Fossgate from down in the hollow came by. He asked me whose was the blue Buick. I told him and he was looking that car all over, kicking the tires and all, like men do, when Miss Lawrence walked up. To the day she died, she always bought fresh strawberries from me every day during the season. I knew them both all my life, Glen retired from janitoring down at the schoolhouse, and Miss Lawrence from teaching. We talked about the weather. Glen said, "This is a weather breeder sure, too good to last more'n one day, thunder storm tomorrow."

Miss Lawrence said, "Amelia, I remember clear as though I could hear her this very minute, your mama telling about that ball of lightning coming into the house that time and rolling across the floor, scared the life right out through her hair she said." She always said how her hair didn't fall back down around her shoulders until she washed it again. Hester was such a story teller.

"I hope you remember to unplug everything like your mama always said to do. You know how lightning strikes this place, not only that ball of lightning, but that huge old pine across the road split right down the middle in the summer of '42, biggest tree left in Maine your daddy always said. Melted and curved that iron stake your cow was chained to so's it looked like a cane after, killed poor Lily dead. And your daddy's first barn that time before you were even born, killed all the animals in the fire. Mind, you unplug everything."

“Yep,” Glen said. “Lightning strikes fast and dangerous around this house.”

Right then Norm came out of the barn with three more of my pictures, all ones I’d painted of the old furniture in the house. He introduced himself to Glen and Miss Lawrence, held up the big picture of one of my Holy Families with the faces of Eliza, Maxwell, and little Lizzie, Eliza sitting in the old rocker. I painted that picture after I’d stripped the old paint all off and before I put any varnish on it. Eliza is rocking Lizzie, and Maxwell is behind in the shadows. Eliza got a kick out of thinking how her family was titled *Holy Family* and hanging on some stranger’s wall. It was my first numbered *Holy Family* I painted to sell. After I titled that one *Holy Family*, Eliza made me title the one I gave her *Holy Family*, too. That one doesn’t have a number. And I’d sold another one, unnumbered, that looked like a stained glass window. I have 26 now. I’m working on 27, a big one.

Norm said, “Now, isn’t that a beautiful picture? Who are your models?”

Miss Lawrence said, “That’s her sister Eliza, oldest in the family.”

I was surely taken by his flattery, too. People said my pictures were pretty, said that regular, but beautiful, I don’t think anyone had ever said that before. Though people would say it later on, after Norm Dennison started getting more money from them.

That day, he said, right there with Glen and Miss Lawrence listening, “I tell you what I’m going to do for you. . .” He looked down at the corner of the picture he was holding where I always write my name, just *Amelia*. “Amelia, I’m going to make you some money on these pictures. I’m going to take them down to this place of mine, and I’m going to sell them for you.”

Glen spoke up. “Oh no, you don’t. You want those pictures, you got to pay for them. Amelia, don’t you let him out of here with those pictures without his money in your pocket.”

I started blushing again, just when I was beginning to feel like I could start talking to Norm, since he already knew I might stutter. But with that about money, it took a little longer.

Finally I did get it out: “It’s all right, Glen, I’ll take care of it.”

But Glen wouldn’t let it be. “No, it ain’t all right. By God, Amelia, you know your daddy would never let nobody off this place with nothing without he paid every cent it was worth. Now don’t you neither. I won’t stand for it. Miss Lawrence, you tell her. Don’t let her do it.”

Miss Lawrence was staring at Norm. “Now, Glen, Amelia’s a grown woman. What’s the matter with you? We can’t keep on telling her what to do. I swear, you’re just a suspicious old fool sometimes. Don’t I tell you that often enough? Anyone would think you’d learned it by now. You mind your own business. Amelia, tell Glen to mind his own business. Tell him there’s nothing wrong with selling something on consignment. I know about that consignment business. People do it that way all the time. I know for a fact. That’s how Thurston’s Jane sells all her quilts right down to Big Bear. She told me all about it. Tell him, Amelia. Glen, you need to understand what’s going on in the modern world. You just don’t understand. You never did. Amelia, tell him he doesn’t understand a thing about the modern world.”

I said without stuttering one bit, “Oh, it’s all right Miss Lawrence. Glen don’t mean no harm.”

Norm said, "Of course, he doesn't. I can understand him wanting to look out for Amelia. And you're perfectly right too, Miss Lawrence. You certainly are a woman of the world. That's just how I mean to do business, on consignment. Now, Amelia, this is how it works."

I said, "I know . . . I know what consignment means. I understand things." I hated blushing worse than stuttering.

Glen said, practically shouting, "And so do I. I ain't neither no fool, Miss Lawrence. How many times I need to tell you I won't stand for you calling me no fool."

Norm said, "Why sure you know, Amelia. I can tell you know. I will make out a contract right here for these pictures, and if the arrangement works satisfactorily, as I know it will, we can talk again about possibly mailing some more pictures to me. How's that? We'll sign right here before witnesses. And sure you're no fool, Mr. . . . uh, sorry, didn't catch your name."

"Fossgate," Glen said.

"Mr. Fossgate, I can surely tell you're no fool. I can tell you have Amelia's interests at heart. And that's perfectly right. I assure you I mean to make this transaction a legal contract. Here's my card, phone number, address, name of my place. See right there, *Rockcoast Arts*. Everything you need to check my credentials. Here, I'll even write the phone number of the Portland Chamber of Commerce. You can call and check on me. There now, how's that? Surely that should take care of your concerns about Amelia?" Oh, he was smooth.

I knew it wouldn't satisfy Glen. Ever since Daddy died, he'd been coming by regular to see how things were, to remind me how Daddy always did things. He worked for Daddy sometimes in the summer when school was out, trading his work for strawberries, apples, and vegetables. He figured he knew Daddy's work habits better than maybe anybody else ever did. He thought Daddy was just the greatest farmer in the whole world, said often, "Nobody knew farming better than your daddy." And he'd go on about what he saw me doing, always insisting I had to do just a little more manuring, or use just a little less sawdust mulching because too much of the pitch from that cedar sawdust could leech into the ground and spoil the strawberries. I figured it wasn't any harm to let him think he was helping me. He hadn't much to do after retiring, with no more potatoes growing on our farm and his arthritis getting worse and worse, so he liked to come around and tell me how to grow the strawberries. Sure enough he said, "Well, *Mr. Dennison*, you just remember me, I keep an eye on this place and on Amelia, and if she don't get her money for them pictures, I'll know about it, and you'll hear from me. You just remember it."

Norm had his pen out and some paper on a clipboard. He leaned against his shiny Buick and wrote, reading out loud as he wrote, "*I, Norm Dennison, agree to pay Amelia . . . What was the last name?*"

Glen said, "Last name's Harding. Been Hardings in Little Bear ever since Eighteen-ought-two. Came here and settled after the revolutionary war, when there was nothing but Micmac Indians and woods and bears. Kin on my mother's side."

Norm said, ". . . *pay Amelia Harding her selling price plus 50% for three pictures, priced respectively at \$5.00, \$10.00, and \$15.00, upon the sale of said pictures.* How's that Amelia? Does that sound like a fair deal?"

Miss Lawrence was staring now with her mouth open. It hadn't been but a few months before that I sold her one of my big pictures for twelve dollars when she told me she wanted to buy one for her grand-niece, getting married in June. "Don't you think," she'd wanted to know, "those big pictures are just a mite overpriced?"

Glen didn't say one word either. He was looking hard now at Norm.

"Oh," I said, "I don't think those pictures are worth . . ."

Glen recovered and interrupted. "'Course they are. They're worth that and then some. No sir, Amelia, don't you for nothing give him those pictures for less than the asking price plus 60%." He moved over beside me while he talked and poked my arm with his elbow. "Take my advice, think what your daddy would do."

"Oh, Amelia," Miss Lawrence said, "take the 50%."

"Don't you listen to her Amelia. Just like a woman, she'll fall for a pretty face and a line. You hold out for the 60% like I said." He poked me again, harder.

Norm said, "I tell you what. If these sell as fast as I believe they will, I'll want some more, maybe I can sell all you've got, all you can paint. If they sell fast, I'll give you your selling price plus 60% plus the cost of shipping them to me. How's that? Here, I'll include all that in this contract, just to show you my good faith." He wrote it all down. Glen poked me again and winked. Miss Lawrence stared at Norm, a funny smile on her face. Norm handed me the contract.

Glen grabbed it and read it out loud and said, "Now I think that might be OK, Amelia. You can go ahead and sign that, but mind, I'll be keeping an eye on this here transaction. I'll be wanting to know if he keeps his word."

Then we all signed: me, Glen Fossgate, Miss Lawrence, and Norm Dennison.

That's how I got to know him. It wasn't any time it seemed before I had a check from him for \$56.00 and a letter saying send him three more of each size, nine in all. I showed the letter and the check to Glen when he came by. And to Miss Lawrence when she came along behind him. I used to think she must watch for him to go by and then follow in about ten minutes. That's about how long it always took for her to get here after Glen showed up, just about every time. I showed that check to Thurston and Eliza and even Justin. I thought I might even hang on to it to show my other brothers, Willard and Carl, when they came home the next summer, but Miss Lawrence said, "You better not keep a check around long, better cash it, or it might not be any good." So I did, started a savings account with it, first savings I ever had.

I didn't show Glen the whole letter. The business part was written on business stationery with *Rockcoast Arts* across the top, but there was another page written on dusty pink paper that smelled like roses.

My dear Amelia,

I hope you won't think I am being too forward, but I must tell you how pleased I am to make your acquaintance. You are quite unlike anyone I have ever met. I remember how pretty you looked surrounded by your strawberries, your golden hair shining, little curls around your face pulling out of your braid, and your green eyes, ahh, your green eyes. Even in overalls you were prettier than the pictures you paint, and you already know how beautiful I think they are. I hope I can see you again before too long. In the

meantime, maybe you would write a few lines when you send me some more pictures? Please don't think me out of line for writing this. If I am, just tell me, and I will apologize.

Very truly yours,

Norm Dennison

Well, then I was really taken. I think maybe then I even knew it. I had never been talked to like that in all my life. Because I was shy, no boy ever talked to me much at all while I was in school. And then, Thurston and Eliza both already moved out when Daddy died, I stayed home here and helped Mama, getting Willard and Carl through high school. And tending to Justin. Not right in the head like he is, he always needed a lot of tending in those years before we knew what was wrong and got medicine to help. So I stayed shy with boys, never had much attention from them. Mama used to worry about it. She'd tell me, "You're pretty when you fix yourself up. There's no need for you to stay home all the time in pig tails and overalls and flannel shirts. Boys don't care that you're shy. They only care that you're pretty. Show them how pretty you are.

I never argued with her, but I kept on staying home wearing overalls and flannel shirts to work in the garden and walk in the woods, keeping my hair braided out of the way, thinking there would be plenty of time after I got over being so shy and blushing all the time. After I learned to talk more easy.

Then Mama died, and Willard and Carl both gone, so only me to take care of Justin. I stayed on here growing and selling strawberries, painting pictures, cooking for Justin and me, making him take a bath, cleaning out the potato pickers' shack so he could go out there and play his music loud. The years go by. Everybody around got married or moved away. That's why I hadn't got married, because I was so shy, and because everyone married someone else before I got over it.

And because it always took all my time to make enough money for me and Justin to live on. Even after he started getting that little check from the welfare, I kept on feeding him. I knew he wouldn't eat right if he was left to himself. Money's another reason I never got married back then, so I was sure glad to start a savings account. I got me a TV set, too, that winter, first TV I ever watched much. I love those nature programs, the ones that get real close up and show the mating and eating habits. I watch and wonder at how quick the capture always is, no matter how long the hunting and stalking goes on. The hunter always seems to catch its prey by surprise. Except the ones that get away. And then sometimes if they are not very hungry, they play with it a while before they kill it and eat it. I watch and try to predict if and when the prey will get caught. All these years I been watching all that on TV and in the fields and woods around here. I watch storms too and try to predict where lightning will strike in the sky. But I can't predict any of that better than a wild guess would be.

Norm Dennison wrote a dusty pink letter with every check, and each one got sweeter. Or so it seemed to me. Maybe I should have showed those letters to Glen. I bet he could have told me. But I didn't. I liked them too much I guess and didn't want Glen to tell me what he thought. I did show some of them to Miss Lawrence though. I showed her the first one. She said, "Oh Amelia, that's lovely. He surely does have a way with

words. Wouldn't it be lovely to have someone like that around all the time?" Miss Lawrence never did get married either.

I showed her some of my letters back to Norm. My first one didn't say much.

Dear Mr. Dennison,

Thank you for the check. I surely am grateful for that. I'm going to put it in savings. I'm sending you nine more like you asked for. It took me all morning to pack them up, and I hope I did it OK. I used three different boxes for the different sizes. Please tell me if they are all right when you get them.

Sincerely,

Amelia Harding

When she saw that, Miss Lawrence said, "Amelia, he's going to be looking for something different than that. Don't you know he's flirting with you? Don't you want to flirt back.?"

I blushed, and stuttered again, trying to say yes, but I didn't get it out. Instead, I said, "How do you know about flirting?"

She said, "I read a lot." I remembered being in her house a few times right after I'd got done the sixth grade down to Little Bear where she taught all six grades. I remembered thinking how funny that a school teacher like her had all those romance books just like I was reading all the time then. When I remembered that, I blushed again.

But I let her help me pretty up my words some. She took a pen and crossed out my greeting and wrote, *Dear Norm Dennison*. Then she crossed out my closing and wrote in another paragraph. *And thank you for your lovely letter. It is more lovely than strawberries, more lovely than my pictures. more lovely than roses that grow in any garden.*

Very truly yours,

Amelia

"There now," she said, "that's flirting. You've got to flirt back if you want to keep him interested." Blushing really bad, I didn't say anything. She said, "You go buy yourself some pretty pink paper that smells of roses, and you copy your letter over. You flirt back. Your letter is just too business-like. He'll think all you're interested in is the money."

The next time I went down to Big Bear with Thurston to buy groceries, I bought some creamy white stationery that had a rose embossed on each sheet and on the seal flap of the envelope. I bought two boxes. It took me a long time to finish that first letter to Norm Dennison. After what Miss Lawrence said, I kept practicing what I wanted to say on scrap paper. Finally I got one written I could send without blushing too bad.

Dear Norm Dennison,

I am very grateful for your lovely letter.

I sent the nine pictures you asked for in three different boxes. Please let me know if these are all right when you get them. I've never mailed my pictures any place before.

Packing them up made me remember old times that gave me ideas for the

pictures. I hope you like the ones of the fawns. When fawns are real little, if you come up on them, they are not scared. But it's hard to see them, so camouflaged they are. I only ever saw one. I snuck up pretty close before the mother snorted nearby, scared me. I was only about ten then, so I left. I had to look at other pictures a lot to paint the littlest one. I wanted to show how hard it is to see them. I think that picture is sweet, but I like the other one better, the bigger one that seems like it just learned to be shy, so surprised and afraid it looks. The first time I saw one like that, just before they lose their spots, I went right home and started that picture. I've seen many full-grown bucks with head and antlers high, but I never painted any yet. Maybe I will.

I think your letter is lovely like real roses.

Yours truly,

Amelia

I didn't tell him all about that first time I saw one of those deer just learning to be shy. I was with Daddy hunting, late summer, not yet hunting season. We were hard up that year, no meat in the house for weeks. I didn't even see it at first. Daddy had to nudge me and point. I hardly got a good look at it, standing and staring at us, just curious it seemed. But suddenly I saw it get scared, I saw it in the eyes. Right then Daddy's gun boomed. The deer leaped, staggered, and fell. I never went hunting again. After that, he would tell people I was a good gardener and fisherman but wasn't worth nothing as a hunter.

I showed Miss Lawrence other first copies of my letters to Norm Dennison. She'd tell me I wasn't flirting enough. She'd cross out and add in, and then I'd write and write on scrap paper until I wasn't blushing too bad, and I'd copy it onto the creamy white stationary and send it.

Writing to him like that, I learned to talk about what I was doing with painting the pictures. I'd never talked to anybody about that before, never tried to explain what I was doing. And I'd thank him for the nice things he said to me. I wrote, *Your talk is sweet, sweeter than my strawberries, sweeter even than wild strawberries in a summer when there has been lots of rain.*

Norm told me in every one of those letters through that winter how he remembered I looked pretty. Early spring he started telling me how much he wanted to see me, how he was looking forward to coming up here again, so we could really get to know each other. But I never did write real sweet talk back to him until the letter from him that finally captured my heart completely. I remember the exact words that did it: *I think of nothing any more but when we will see each other. I long to touch you, to hold you in my arms, to smell your hair warm from the sunshine. I imagine you smell like sweet hay and wild roses. I imagine you taste like strawberries. I want to love you, gently, tenderly. I want to love you eternally. Amelia, my sweet darling.*

Then I learned to talk my own sweet talk. I didn't wait to show Miss Lawrence. I sat right down that very minute and wrote him. I hardly used any scrap paper. I hardly blushed.

Dear,

Your talk is so sweet, Norm Dennison, I swear, it's real hard not to be taken by it. No one ever talked to me like this. It's as pretty as the sun setting on the lake. Sometimes I walk down there and sit on the shore and watch it. The sky gets redder and redder as the sun goes down, and sometimes there's green and purple in it too. As the color gets brighter and darker, it gets quieter and quieter. Crickets stop chirping. Birds stop singing. Water stops lapping on the shore. There's a time after the sun drops out of sight when it seems there's not a sound in all the world. And then the loons start to call across the water. That always gives me chills no matter how often I hear it. Later when the bright color has all gone from the sky and the stars are shining. I sometimes hear foxes howl to each other. I have sat there sometimes on a clear night until the moon has gone down and I see the billions and billions of stars. Once I lay there and stared at the milky way until I thought I saw the whole thing whirling, and myself whirling with it. That's something like how I'm feeling right now about all your sweet talk to me. Dear Norm Dennison, I remember how you looked, your hair blowing in the breeze, your dark eyes looking right into mine until I thought I'd die with blushing. I want you to come see me.

Love,

Amelia

Yeah, I'm sure if I had showed those pink letters to Glen, he could have told me that was nothing but sweet talk. But I just showed him the checks and the business letters asking for more pictures, and then the changed contract when he raised the price to \$20.00 for each painting plus 70%. Because by then he had sold all my pictures I had on hand, and he said don't bother to paint any more of the five and ten-dollar pictures because he could sell all the twenty-dollar ones I could paint. So I sure was kept busy then and wondered how I was going to get time to grow my strawberries come summer. But I did anyway, never could stay inside all that much once the weather started to warm up.

Justin was spending more and more time at the old potato picker's shack. When I knew for sure what day Norm was coming, I asked him, "Want me to have Thurston help us move your bed up there? You can live up there, have it for your very own house. You can play your music as loud as you want all night and won't bother me."

When I talked to Thurston about it, I said, "Justin, wants to live in that picker's shack so he can play his music all night. We need help moving his bed."

Thurston didn't think it was a good idea, I could tell. He said, "I'll come talk to you about that when I got time."

He was busy with planting, and I knew he wouldn't get to it in time, so I went up there every night for a week, tried to catch him at supper time to ask him to do it the next day. He kept saying he would talk to me about it the next day, but every day he had something more important to do. Finally the day before Norm was coming I went up to ask him one more time. He hadn't gone in to supper yet, was standing with his back to me doing something with a wrench to the John Deere's engine. I said, "I'm going to move that bed myself tomorrow morning whether you help me or not."

His hand stopped in mid turn, and he just stood there for a minute, silent. Then he turned and said, "What you in such an all fired hurry about?"

I said, "It's what Justin wants, and I need . . . I need . . . I need . . ."

He put the wrench down on the tractor seat, leaned against the tractor facing me, and said, "All right, take time to breathe and then you can tell me what you need."

So I breathed, and then I could say, keeping my head down, "I need privacy. Norm Dennison is coming to talk business. Tomorrow." Then I could look at him.

He was silent again for a minute, but then he grinned and said, "Well, why didn't you tell me? I'll come down first thing in the morning after breakfast."

So Justin was sleeping his first night in the shack when Norm Dennison came in the night, late June before the first strawberries ripened.

I remembered what Mama used to tell me about how to look pretty, and I wore my white graduation dress. I was leaner and harder by then than I was fifteen years before at graduation, so I didn't fill it out so much. But it was full-skirted with white eyelet around the hem and neck, and I thought it made me look rounder and prettier. I washed my hair and let it hang down my back. I put white roses in it and one over my heart. I got out some of Mama's old rouge and lipstick and put just a delicate touch of color on my cheeks and mouth.

I watched him drive in and went to meet him out under the pine tree. We didn't talk. He took one of my hands and put it to his lips. We stroked each other's hair. We looked in each other's eyes, moonlight shining through the branches of the old pine tree. I don't understand it, but I hardly felt shy.

That night I got to know what Mellors and Lady Chatterly knew. It was the loveliest night of my life. I've never forgotten, I'll never forget. Times right after it was all over, I wanted to forget. I put all his letters and all my scrap-paper trials in the trunk in the closet at the head of the stairs and locked them up with a padlock. But then, after a long time, I was glad I didn't forget. Since I've gotten out those letters to read sometimes to remind me there are moments in life that are purely beautiful.

We were still awake when the dark was turning gray. We heard the door knob turn. Norm said, "Who's that?"

I said, "Justin, is that you?"

He said, "Is it breakfast time yet? I'm hungry."

I said, "No, it's only four o'clock in the morning. You get yourself a doughnut and go on back to bed and stay there until I come get you."

So I had to tell Norm about Justin. I felt shy then, stuttered a lot. He asked me questions until I'd told him the whole story of how Justin needed tending, hadn't ever taken care of himself. It broke the spell. I felt it break.

Norm slept until about the middle of the morning while I got Justin his breakfast, sent him back to the shack, and cleaned up the kitchen. We ate breakfast without saying much. Then he said, "Amelia, now we know what is really important between us, words are no longer necessary. We've gotten beyond words." He said he'd call, said we'd get together again soon. And he left before Justin came in for his lunch. Maybe I knew right then that was all I'd ever have. Maybe I did.

Maybe that's why I tore open the envelope of the next letter the way I did. There was no letter on dusty pink paper, just the business one and a note on plain white paper

that said he was sorry he couldn't write more right then, said his mother died and he was too upset to write but would soon.

I never saw him again, no more sweet talk. I kept on hoping for a while, with every letter. He kept on saying he was sorry he wasn't feeling up to writing much but would soon. I kept hoping until Glen came by and said it was time we took a good hard look at how Norm Dennison was cheating me, said he'd passed through Portland on his way to visit his brother in New Hampshire and stopped at that place of Norm Dennison's. Said he was going to pay his respects but when he saw my pictures there in the window with a price tag of three and four hundred dollars, he thought he'd better just keep his silence. I was still just getting \$34.00 for my twenty-dollar pictures. Then I knew I couldn't fool myself any more.

It took a while for me to get out of that contract, and before it was all over I had to hire me the lawyer, Robert Spevey. Thurston helped me with it. I had to tell him the whole story Glen told me about seeing that price and all. After that, I never had to worry any more about money. Not that I ever got rich, but I don't need much, never did, and so I felt rich after Thurston started managing my money. He said, "You got to treat your pictures like a business, same as I do raising potatoes, if you're going to make that kind of money. I'm going to manage your money, Amelia, and you won't have to worry any more about that. Just keep on painting your pictures." He would have done it from the beginning if I'd asked. But instead I let old Glen Fossgate and Miss Lawrence think they were helping me.

I only got one more letter from Norm Dennison, not too long after he heard from Robert Spevey. He said how disappointed he was that I broke the trust and the beauty of our love with my greed about money, said he was heartbroken that our love meant no more than that to me, said it wasn't bad enough he was filled with such sorrow about his dear mother, but now he had to deal with this too. And he sent back all the letters I'd written to him.

I never could figure out what it all meant to him, all that sweet talk in his letters for nearly a year. And that night. Coming all this way, over three hundred miles for just that one night. And then no more sweet talk. He could have cheated me without doing all that. Because I never could figure it all out, I never really gave up believing in his sweet talk.

I should have given up believing in my own sweet talk. Then maybe I could have married someone else, even after him. When the chipping mill started up, a lot of new people moved into town. Some of them I got to know. Some of those men tried to talk some sweet talk to me when they'd stop by for strawberries. Not like Norm Dennison's sweet talk, but it might have been good enough. Sometimes I'd even flirt, just a little, but my heart was never in it. Maybe I could have married one of those, had babies like Thurston and Eliza. I might have lived life like they did. I doubt there was ever much sweet talk in their lives, but likely they wouldn't say if there was, no more than I did. I know for sure though that even if there was sweet talk, neither Thurston nor Eliza would ever believe it, not really believe it, like I did, like I still do.

I think about Glen and Miss Lawrence too, how they wrangled with each other all those years at the schoolhouse, how she used to show up here just about ten minutes after he did and wrangle with him some more, how neither of them ever got married but they

still, in a funny way, had each other without ever any sweet talk between them. Sometimes it seems to me they might as well have been married. But she had an appetite for sweet talk, too. I could see that.

And I wonder about Lizzie, now years older than I was when I first met Norm Dennison and still no closer that I can see to getting married than I ever was. Never had boyfriends that I know about. Stayed in school for years and years. Works all the time as an anthropologist studying families. She and Justin were good friends when they were little, until the time I caught them in the barn with Justin's hands where they'd no business being, and I slapped them both. Did that spoil it all for her? With Justin being mentally odd all his life and needing tending, it's a good thing he never got married, but Lizzie is a different matter. No way I can think to make it right.

I think how beautiful it all is, all the mating and eating habits I watch on TV and in the woods and fields. How beautiful, and how terrible.