

## The Card

E. Hubert Bruton

### The Man

For the thirteen thousandth time he gently closed the card, returned it to its tattered envelop, and reverently laid it in its special place on the night stand beside his bed. Captain Richard Baker, a rational man, a man with all his emotions together, only had this one thing to remind himself that he was capable of love.

When he was a young man she had sent this card to him. It wasn't really anything so special to look at. Especially after all these years. But, all those years ago it had caused a profound shift in the way he thought of her. That evening she stopped being a little girl. Her choice of this card revealed that she knew him far more deeply than he had suspected. From that point forward he would know her as a woman.

He was not sure why he chose this ragged old card to keep. After all, their time together had really been rather short, as relationships go. Better to end whatever they had quickly than to endure the pain of their divergent futures. He knew Vietnam was his future back then, and college would be her destiny. One year from that evening he was on a naval destroyer in the South China Sea and she was packing for college at Charlotte. Was it self fulfilling prophecy or profound understanding of reality.

There had been many ladies in his life and he had received hundreds of cards through the years. And, though he was sure she never thought of him; every now and then, he would pull the old card from its sheath and let it take him back to an evening when she became a woman in his mind and he fell in love.

He did not know back then that no other woman would fill him with the same warmth and tenderness. The evening of the card her voice was music and her touch was as gentle as a warm spring Carolina breeze. When she smiled his mind was branded with the tender grace of her lips as they spread happily on her young face. And the kiss, the kiss was slow and soft at first, but somehow the moon light, the sound of the waves

pounding then running with a swish upon the beach, and the feel of spring in the air all conspired to build that little kiss into a fire of great passion in them both. It was the first time for them both and it was innocent and pure.

They dated often as the school year drew to a close, but he knew their lives would take different tracks.

He had not seen her since he graduated from high school. Once he called her from the airport in Charlotte as he made connections to another ship. She was happy to hear from him and offered to meet him at the airport. But, he knew the time would be too short and their lives too far apart. She had said she missed him as they talked and it made him smile. He told her he still had the card and she remembered that night. He promised to stay in touch then got on the plane for his new adventure. After that, she moved, but the card remained in his briefcase.

It is important to understand here that Captain Rick was not lonely. He had many girl friends during his life. His main love, of course, was his career on the sea. And, his cruise ship life allowed companionship whenever he felt the need for a gentle touch. He had worked hard, made very good money, and invested well. He was a very eligible bachelor and the ladies knew it. But, none of the companions filled the void in his heart that she had left.

He reached over to the lamp and turned out the light. As usual, it had been a long day for him. Now he settled back for a short but hopefully refreshing nap. As the captain of the Caribbean Star he did not have to stand watches like the other officers. Yet, the captain is always on call so this meant that he kept very irregular hours. As he pulled the sheet over his chest he thought about the next trip to Nassau. Over five hundred times he had docked this ship and others at the cruise ship berths there. And, then there were all the other ports he had called in during his career. How many thousands of dockings had he made. Tomorrow morning he would dock the ship again in Miami, and a day later a new group of passengers would board for their dream cruise to Nassau. That would be his retirement cruise.

## The Lady

"Miss Cole, did you say to read pages 24 through 28 for home work," the little girl asked. Laurie Ann Cole had been a teacher for over 30 years. It had been a good career. Of course the wages were low, but she was good at teaching and felt the true rewards of the profession. Fifteen hundred children had sat in her class room. Nine hundred fifty of them had gone on to college. Four hundred fifty had achieved a masters degree. Of those, one hundred and eighty had gone on to become physicians, and another two hundred were Phds, teaching at the college level. But she knew her greatest achievement was the 25 very special students who decided to follow in her footsteps in public education. Laurie had a sense of accomplishment but now on the eve of retirement, she strangely felt unfulfilled.

At home in the evening she graded papers until eight o'clock. Her supper was always small to fight her resent trend to add pounds and inches. Then, just before bed she sat at her piano. So many times her fingers had caressed those keys to form the melody that she heard in her heart. "Born free.....," she sang and let her memories roll back to a time that can never be relived.

She lost touch with him many years ago, but his memory was still sweet in her heart. She tried to call his parents but they had passed away. Even their old friends did not know where he was, so she just held his memory and played his song. She had given him this song long ago because he reminded her of the lion. He was wild and free then but tenderness was his nature as he held her.

She sang the last syllable of the song then sat there listening to it go out into the world, hoping that the song would find him where ever he might be. When her thoughts returned to her room she sighed deeply through her broad smile. The room was quiet as she turned off the lamp by the piano and walked into the bedroom. She put on her night gown and sat down on the bed.

She picked up the envelope from the night stand beside the bed and took the papers out from inside. One more day at school and then she would be off to Miami for spring break and the vacation cruise of a lifetime. She opened the pamphlet that had come with the tickets and read, "Let your dreams come true on the cruise of a lifetime."

### The Man

At four thirty the next morning aboard the Caribbean Star, the captain's steward gently tapped on Rick's stateroom door. The captain always liked to be awakened an hour and a half before docking. It gave him time to have coffee, confer with the officer of the watch and prepare to greet the Miami bar pilot when she came aboard.

This morning as he opened his eyes the old card was the first thing he saw. Never before had he wanted to look at it in the morning but now he was driven to caress it again with his mind. He withdrew it from its envelope and traced with his aging eyes the outline of the stylized lions on the front. Again he smiled as he opened the card and read the words her hand had placed there so long ago. "I've been learning to play Born Free. It reminds me of you."

### The Lady

This Friday at school was the longest of the year. All day she did the best she could to be the quality teacher her students deserved, but the excitement of spring break effects students as well as teachers. When the bell rang she was ready to go.

Her bags were already in the trunk of the car. She had a fast food supper on the way to the airport, found a place to park then dashed from the check in counter to the gate in time to find her window seat aboard the evening flight to Miami International.

The sun had set as the plane was pushed away from the terminal gate. In the west a color show of orange, red and yellow reached up into the sky from where the day had disappeared. As the plane taxied out to the active runway the old sailors proverb came to mind. "Red sky at night, sailors delight." She sensed the truth of the words.

Finally cleared for take off the jet began to roll down the runway. She peered out the window and watched the lights of the terminal accelerate past. The plane lifted its nose in the air and took to flight. Below her seat was a rumble and thud of wheels stowing routinely in there place. She sat back in her seat and let the images of the airport lights race by below. The plane made a graceful turn to the south and she smiled as she wondered, "will I meet anyone interesting aboard the Caribbean Star."