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HALF-HOUR NIRVANA

BY MARILYN BROCK

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I don't think he loves me. I mean, I think he does but I think he is scared, the way so many boys are scared of love and happiness. Maybe he is just sixteen and doesn't want love. I can't imagine that, but I am a fifteen-year-old girl, and we are very different from boys.

My favorite class is biology because my lab partner, Brandy, tells me all these stories about her older sister who's getting married, and the sister's fiancé keeps coming on to Brandy and she doesn't know what to do. And there's Brandy's four-year-old brother, who gets all the attention, and her parents are adoptive and reek like marijuana all the time in the little east Los Angeles box they live in (I went inside once and did smell smoke, but I couldn't tell if it was marijuana or just plain cigarettes). And one time her older brother and sister got in this fight, and her little brother was just clapping while they screamed and kicked and pulled hair and her big brother tore a piece of her sister's cheek off with his fingernails. This was the part where my mind kind of made a still of the story, like in a film where you can freeze the frame, or when you swallow something that stops in your throat. I guess I just couldn't imagine someone's cheek actually coming off and then I felt more comfortable with Brandy because I knew she had something to hide. Maybe she was afraid of someone not listening to her. I sometimes make stories juicier just so people will listen.

I tell Brandy all about Chase and I don't think the teacher even cares about our talking because he never looks over. I tell her all about how he took me home from play-rehearsal one night and I breathed his heavy cologne that I thought maybe he put on for me. Chase talked a lot while he drove to my house, mostly about baseball, and I felt thankful because I was heady and couldn't think of anything to say. I kept praying to God and Jesus and asking that this be the one. I didn't want to wait anymore for someone to love me. And I thought he was perfect. I looked at him while he was driving and he was so beautiful, all black hair and eyes and long crooked nose. I think it was his nose that made me fall in love with him, because I don't like guys that are too perfect.

I've told Brandy all this in biology; about how his skin gets dark and shiny when the moonlight falls across the planes of his face. I don't understand what more there is to want than lying in a truck cab, blouse open, breasts exposed, his bare chest rubbing across mine, my face bathing in wet kisses and neck stinging from hickeys. It was like my half-hour nirvana.

Chase breathed heavily over me that first night, making my chest tingle, making my heart swell, and nothing mattered in the world. It didn't matter that at home everyone thought I was no one. That Mom didn't want me (she had me too young, never found herself--I've overheard her yelling this at Grandma late at night). That some other lady stole Dad years back. It all

faded into perspiration that fogged up the back window. I wrote Chase + Paige in the fog. He smeared it accidentally with his elbow when he rolled off me. We had four more times after that. Five times in two weeks. Two and a half hours of nirvana.

Brandy listens to all these details. She sends me notes when the teacher starts talking, sometimes gross ones with pictures of penises on them, all different sizes, with arrows pointing, "Like this? This?" I have to laugh, but to tell the truth (and not to Brandy because I don't want her to know) we really never did it; I mean, I saw it and it was out there, but he didn't go all the way. I loved that because I thought it meant he respected me, and that's so important. I know Brandy sleeps with a lot of guys, so I don't tell her this. I don't know why--I just circle the biggest penis and leave it at that.

Brandy knows that he showed up at my next play rehearsal and for three more and I have memorized everything he wore (the first night he was in a black flannel shirt and jeans--he always wears jeans). The first night when he took me home is how it happened, he showed me his hand with its calluses from playing baseball, and I kissed the palm and then his arm reached around the back of my neck and he kissed my face, and in a husky voice he said, "Hi," just after he kissed me, which was funny.

I went inside my house, a few blocks away (and definitely in a nicer part of town) from where Brandy lives, and I felt so wonderful and lay in my bed and couldn't sleep. I just relived that half-hour in his truck parked down the street, across from the golf course, where no one could see. I lay in my bed and could still feel the damp from the outside air, made wetter by the sprinklers going around the course a few feet from us. It was cold outside, and that makes making out so much better.

Brandy tells me she has to do the assignment in class today because she's getting all Ds and Fs. That shocks me because I think if you go, you can at least get Cs. I mean, it's not like understanding the universe. She tells me her parents are pissed because she's always ditching classes, and she tells me that her boyfriend comes over all the time while she is feigning sickness, and screws her in her parents' bed. I would think that was really sick except I know they are adoptive parents. When I went to Brandy's house for the first time, she walked in her room a few steps ahead, and with sly eyes dusted with the brown fringe of bangs that fell across her lashes, she raised her sleeve and showed me how she'd carved her boyfriend's name into her forearm.

"What'd you do that with?" The uppercase printing was blackened with scabs. Around the "N" in Julian's name a half moon of redness had fanned out over her skin, looking infected, maybe.

"Safety pin." She lifted her blouse, and I saw a heart drawn into her belly.

"You could just get tattoos." I sat on her bed and looked at her collection of colored safety pins in a Hello Kitty box on her dresser.

"You have to be eighteen, and I can't anyway. My mom," Brandy shrugged.

"I'll do it." I picked up a purple pin.

"Here, get it hot." Brandy held out a lighter and flicked it. She burned the edge of the pin's pointed tip, and I held my breath while trying to cut a "C" for Chase into my thumb.

"I can't do it." I exhaled and put down the pin, then rubbed my offended hand.

"We could be blood sisters, then." She offered her arm to me so I could cut her with the safety pin and mix our blood together.

"That doesn't work." I knew that wouldn't make us blood related and remembered about her grades in biology. I heard the front door shut and thought Brandy's mother was home. She was strict, an Amy Grant freak like my mom, and I knew I should get going. I didn't want to deal with that lady's crazy complaining—the way Brandy described her.

Brandy had overheard her mother talking to her father about remodeling plans for their '70s style decor.

"I want, I want, I want," Brandy had mimicked her. I squeezed Brandy's hand goodbye before exiting the front door quickly.

On the walk home, I just wanted to think about our times in Chase's truck. Ever since it happened, I've hardly been able to concentrate on anything else...not the school plays (so tired of not getting the good parts, anyway), not my regular best friend Tammy (she has a boyfriend and never calls me anymore, and she thinks Brandy is trash). Chase feels like the meaning of my life, when I feel meaningful in the world, in his truck, you know. My mom and grandma always said this would happen to me; they said when I grew up I'd meet a boy and move in with him. At six o'clock Grandma brought out Mom's wedding dress and tried it on me, telling me stories of beautiful boys and prom dresses and chocolates. Amid her rosewater-smelling perfume she put ribbons in my hair that fell veil-like down my back, and she smiled when I walked around on tiptoes trailing Mother's skirt three feet behind me. Grandma told me God had someone in mind for me, and I thought that's who would make me feel purposeful in the world, someone to love, you know. That's why I was on earth, right? That's why it's so bad that Chase has stopped coming around, because really, I think it's the first time I was ever happy. Even for just a half hour, I just was completely freaking placid. And I can't get over that. It's weird; but no matter what, I just don't want to go back to the way it was before. Just being invisible, I guess, being a listener, waiting for this God-given person to show up and make me worthwhile. When I took the dress off, it was time to recite the Bible verses, the book with gold-lined pages that told stories of sacrifice and pestilence and suffering, all for the love of a higher power.

Grandma told me the stories before supper. "With Jesus in our hearts, there is nothing to fear, Paige."

I was thinking of the one God had waiting for me. Where is he now? Does he think of me?

"We are comforted by faith because paradise is before us. All our sins are already forgiven."

What is he doing, Grandma? Why do I have to wait until I grow up to meet him, if he is why I'm here?

"And we are to forgive others as we would want God to forgive us for our own transgressions."

I'll be a good girl. I'll love everyone unconditionally, you and mom, everyone. Just let him find me soon, God. I'm tired of just waiting. Grandma, can you help me?

Grandma told me to have patience and to pray. And so I have, but it's been a long wait, you know, and those times with Chase were so fleeting, hardly satisfying. That's why I can't get over it. I can't stand being alone and waiting all over again. Chase rolled all over me and I felt human and more happily in my skin than I ever was around my family. You know, this is my love story.

But part of the reason I want to dwell on that happiness is because I haven't seen Chase now in two weeks, which is even longer than the period in which he was picking me up from rehearsal. And I can't stand to think of that for one second; I can't even tell you how much that

hurts.

I have been fantasizing about confronting him and asking him why, which is hard, because I don't want to make him uncomfortable in any way, because I love him, you know. I love him so much, and I don't want to be anyone that might cause him harm. But I keep praying, and Jesus and God aren't making him call me any faster.

That's why during biology class, when I look over at Brandy and she's doing her assignment with lab goggles on, I decide to go up and ask for a pass. I just want to get out of the classroom, move around outside; I walk down the hallway and swing my arms to the side so they cut through the air, and I remember that Chase has geometry class, so I walk to the math building and stand outside the open door in the hallway. The teacher can't see me; I can hear him lecturing from the chalkboard, and Chase looks up and I wave for him to come outside. I hate to say this, but I know he isn't too happy to see me. I can tell by the look in his eyes. I've seen it in my Dad's eyes, when I went to visit him last summer after I finally found out from my mom where he was. I knew there was someone out there for me, because I hated the boring world I lived in with my mom and my grandma, and I thought my dad was really who I was supposed to be with. But he didn't want me there. He had another woman living with him, and I think he thought it would be too crowded. The world is only for couples, you know, just like Grandma and Mom believe. There's nothing to do but wait. Dad lived in a small, smoky condo, and I left and discarded my dreams in his house, I think. They aren't worth mentioning. Really, I don't even remember what I wanted to be.

I am starting to get really nervous because Chase is standing here and he looks so gorgeous and it just kills me. He is in his baseball uniform for an after-school game and even has his catcher's mitt, which I think is funny. He walks with me down the hallway, and I playfully punch his mitt, which he kind of pulls away. I can tell it is real important to him.

"I miss you," I drawl in this voice I've heard from Julia Roberts.

"I have to get back to class."

It's a beautiful, clear day--hot and dry and perfect for being in love. I was so in love with him, I was almost drowning in it.

I take his hands and gaze into his eyes and continue to pretend I'm southern. "I can't live without you, darlin'."

"I gotta go." He pulls away.

His voice felt so terse, and suddenly I was mad; it was amazing like as much as I loved him I was just as pissed at him and I felt like his fist was clutching my heart so bad I couldn't speak; and I knew that if he walked away there was no way he was ever going to talk to me again, and I just couldn't survive like that, not like the way it was before he was there, and so I just blurted out, "Chase, I'm pregnant."

I think I kind of smiled when I said it, but he wasn't looking at me. He stepped back and put the catcher's mitt over his face.

"What?" he said through the mitt.

"I'm pregnant."

"Are you crazy?"

"It's yours. You're the only one I was with."

"I didn't ejaculate."

"What?" I asked.

"I didn't ejaculate. We didn't have intercourse. I didn't get you pregnant."

"Yes, you did. It doesn't matter if you did or didn't or even if we had sex or not, because even if you get close or not and just a little comes out, you can get pregnant. Ask the bio teacher...I learned it in Mr. Ramos's class."

"Bullshit."

"That's what happened."

He lowered the mitt a couple inches and walked away from his class, down the hallway, still not toward me. I followed. He covered his face again when I walked beside him.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know." My head was spinning. I loved him, and I knew I was hurting him. I hated lying. I thought of Brandy, and all the lies she tells me (her sister's cheek coming off? Please). Her lies don't hurt me; she just wants someone to listen to her. Lying felt horrible for me, maybe worse than him just walking away. I couldn't stop now. At least now he was talking to me.

"I gotta go," he mumbled and started walking off campus. I stopped at the edge of the school's property and watched him get into his truck. I wanted to leave, too. It wasn't like I could go back to class. I felt like crying and strangely powerful at the same time. As much as I loved him, I was feeling that I'd gotten some kind of retribution for feeling so lost after he abandoned me. He was listening to me now, and maybe he would even stay with me.

But now I had a huge problem, because even if he decided to stay with me, I wasn't pregnant. And there was no way I could fake that—I was a mediocre actress at best. After Chase disappeared around the street, I started walking toward home. I only live a couple blocks from Chase, and I fantasized about going to his house at night and seeing what he does. I wondered what his life was like when he wasn't around me. I felt comforted for a while, even planned to possibly go by there that evening, and then I felt horrible again, because I'd ruined everything by saying I'm pregnant. We had never actually done it. How could he have believed me? I was pissed at God and Jesus and wondering why he didn't just love me and then I wouldn't have had to do that. I passed by my old church and dropped my school pass on the lawn. I don't know why I left it there; I just was sick of carrying it and wanted to be a litterbug, I guess.

After the church I just had a few more blocks, and I wondered if Chase was home yet. By this time I was crying. I wasn't embarrassed. All hell had broken loose because I was evil to the person I loved, and now he would always hate me. And if he talked to anyone they would tell him I was lying; it was so obvious. I was crying so hard I had to stop walking and went between two houses and sat at the base of the wall of one and cried until my stomach felt like it was inside out. My arms were wrapped around my waist, and I almost peed my pants. I sat there for a long time, hoping the stupid people that lived in their box houses wouldn't come out, and I was conscious of the prickly spackled paint that was digging into my back through my T-shirt. I felt like nothing because Chase didn't love me. I was worse than nothing. Now I was this horrible person, too. I felt like the person my Mom always thought I was—someone unworthy of living in her Christian house. Now she could throw out her pregnant teenage

daughter...if I was.

I heard something like dishes being put away from a window above my head, and since I couldn't sob anymore, I stood up, feeling dizzy and tired, and starting walking again. My cell phone rang, and I dreaded to answer it. I thought it could be the police or something saying I'd violated Chase. I don't know if what I did was illegal...maybe it is. My head was hurting so bad. I was approaching the golf course. The phone kept blinking, and I checked the display. It was Brandy.

I thought she was going to ask why I left class and never came back. Instead, she was screaming and crying, and I had to lean against the chain link fence and cover my ear so I could make out what she was saying.

Her parents had come to school and taken her out of class and were putting her in a mental hospital, she was yelling. She said she had told her parents that she was killing herself, so they were committing her that moment. I told her not to kill herself. I found it curious that I couldn't hear any traffic; it actually sounded silent, like she was in the girl's bathroom or something. But I worried about her, and I could hardly talk because I was so hoarse, but I told her again and again that I loved her and that she shouldn't kill herself, even though I'd only known her in biology; I knew that if she was calling me then she needed my help. I asked what hospital they were taking her to and she told me, and I told her I would call her soon and visit. She hung up, and I put the phone in my pocket. I was going to wait by the fence but then I wanted to get home before my mom did, in case I could call Chase and explain.

I was thinking again how wonderful it would be if I were really pregnant, and even dared to think of marrying him, because then I would be happy for the rest of my life. I knew that I was kidding myself, but I didn't care. I did that a lot, all my life, because it was nice to sink into a fantasy, no matter how unrealistic it might be.

My house looked so bleak and average, and I wondered how long ago that golf course was built, because no one around here was the golfing type. There was a large house on the same side of the street as mine, next to the course. I'd always imagined an old, old lady in there seeing me walk past every day on my way home, and that someday she'd leave me her house, and then I could see green from every window.

My house smelled like German shepherds because we had three. They ran up to me as I entered, and I collapsed on the carpet and let them all lick me and slobber on me and then I thought that I would never try to kill myself, no matter what. It's funny--I was not even really aware that it was in the back of my mind, or that Brandy might have been having the same fears that I was, that we were unlovable girls, unworthy, and even that her call helped stop me from killing myself as much as I'd stopped her by saying that I loved her, but even then, I think I was still halfway considering it until the dogs loved me, because then I knew for sure that I couldn't do that to them.

I wanted to call Chase and explain, but I knew he would hang up on me. I baked cookies in the oven and bread in the bread maker and nibbled on the loaf while I cut out a pattern for shirts I thought of making for me and Brandy. I thought of some slogan, maybe "Never underestimate the power of a woman," which was on a T-shirt I wanted at the mall back in junior high and my grandma wouldn't allow it. Or else we could call ourselves "The Undead," because we'd barely survived our suffocating families. I called Brandy to tell her about it, but there was no answer, so I went into my bed and let my dogs climb in with me and pant all over my face and crinkle the paper patterns over the ratty blanket I'd kept since I was a baby. One was moaning, and I think I fell asleep because I was still sad and I missed Chase so much it was unbearable. I fell asleep thinking about that glorious first half-hour.

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Marilyn Brock has a PhD in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Cincinnati, where her studies focused on Victorian literature, Psychoanalytic, Feminist and Race Theory and 20th Century American literature with an emphasis on the Gothic. She has published short fiction in *Miranda Literary Magazine*, *Planet Magazine* and other literary journals. She presented "The Vamp and the Good English Mother: Female Roles in Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*" at the 2004 NEMLA conference. Brock is the author of a forthcoming short story collection and is the editor and a contributing author of a literary anthology titled *From Wollstonecraft to Stoker: Essays on Victorian Gothic and Sensation Fiction* that will be published in 2009. She lives with her son in Huntington Beach, California.