

Originally published July 2, 1995

# Stolen afternoon must last a year

By SUSAN AGER

Free Press Columnist

*Reader comments: "For 17 years I had a similar relationship. I always hoped that, if I could hold on long enough, it would become something more. Finally, I just walked away one day and never looked back." (The requester, a man, asked for anonymity.)*

Every year about this time, when the Earth is lush with summer, a man places a call to the office of a woman he has known for 40 years and, with trepidation, asks if she might join him again for a picnic.

They meet once a year, no more, for half an afternoon between noon and 3 at a picnic table near the Huron River. They meet to commemorate her birthday, and have been meeting this way for seven or eight years.

This year she turned 53. He is 58. Each has been married for more than two decades, but not to each other, although he would have liked that, because she is the love of his life.

He never says it in quite those words, but they both know it. Every year he tells her she is beautiful, even if she has gained 20 or 30 pounds. He reminds her what a fine human being she is, and it's surprising how much she needs to hear that.

She is a woman of high professional achievement, but she rarely hears words as ripe with emotion as his. Her husband, whom she loves very much, is a reserved man who, for her birthday, might give her a card and underline a word or two.

## Heart to heart

I will call them Allison and Lloyd because, while her family knows and respects that she reserves one day a year for Lloyd, and even teases her gently about it, his wife does not know about his annual picnics, although she has heard Allison's name.

Nothing clinically sinful ever happens on these outings. They talk heart to heart, and split a couple of sandwiches, and finish off a bottle of wine and show off pictures of their kids. Sometimes they walk through the woods, or she kicks off her shoes to dangle her feet in the cool river while he watches, shoes and socks on, smiling at everything she is.

Lloyd thinks no loving God could possibly deny him a three-hour picnic with a woman he has loved for so long. Allison is like a polished stone he keeps in the pocket of his heart.

He doesn't want to pull it out and analyze it.

He never calls or writes to her in between their picnics. He knows her boundaries, and his own, although in his subconscious, which he cannot control, she is always present.

Even as the minutes of their picnic tick by, Lloyd never asks for more time.

He is a man of strict routine and habit, and his family expects him home at the same hour each afternoon. When they part, when she drops him back at his workplace, before he steps out onto the sidewalk, he leans over and kisses her. For a few seconds, their lips touch.

And that is all.

That is enough.

### **Like night and day**

She doesn't remember the day they met but he, of course, does. He was 17, a senior in a high school in the mid- Michigan town where they both grew up. She was 13 and had been invited to his English class to read her poetry aloud. He can still see her: "She wore a blue calico dress with a black patent leather belt, and her hair was cut in a Prince Valiant style, that lovely black thick hair of hers. That set all my emotion in motion."

As they grew a bit older they went out some, usually in groups, but sometimes alone. He was never as central in her life as she was in his, and they both knew that. She was outgoing and gregarious and daring and witty, and he was shy and timid and unsure of himself.

"Her assets are a litany of my weaknesses," he says. "I never even wanted to be No. 1, but she has always been No. 1. I am funny only because I am not funny."

Each went on to marry someone else, she a tall and strapping man of few words, he a woman who would have him, a good and kind woman but no one as

stirring as Allison. Allison did not invite him to her wedding -- "I think it would have hurt him too much" -- but he sent her a gift, a pepper grinder she still uses.

Over the years her life expanded. She had three children, and earned five degrees, and took on bigger challenges at work, and learned to feel at ease speaking to hundreds or talking intimately to one person over lunch, charming them with her stories and her laughter and her zest.

He, meanwhile, deliberately shrank his life down. He quit a stressful job for an easier one, and kept to himself at work, arriving and leaving at the same time each day. Having fun was hard work for him. Laughing was rare.

But when he remembered Allison, he remembered how fun and laughter felt.

He kept track of her as she moved about the country, and kept note of her birthday on his calendar.

A decade ago, when he and his family landed in a spot near her town, he summoned his courage to call and ask if they might have lunch. The first time they ate in a Holiday Inn dining room where he felt edgy and watched.

In the following year he scouted out parks, and found an isolated place where he would not be distracted by joggers or other picnickers from the beauty of her face, and the pleasure of her company.

They have met there ever since.

### **Mixed feelings**

This year, as usual, Lloyd called her office in early June. As usual, he told her it had taken him almost a year to summon the nerve.

As usual, that made her smile. What's he afraid of? That she will say no?

That is exactly what he fears, that he will shrink in significance and fall off the chart of her life. So he asks her for very little, and enjoys it enormously. "It is precious time," he says. "And will I dream about her every night for the next six months? I might for the next year, yes."

They picked last Monday to meet, a few days past her birthday, but the only time they could manage. She told him when he called that she was being courted for a bigger job, 1,500 miles away, and flying back and forth for interviews.

He got up at his usual time on Monday, just before 5 a.m., and gathered the props for the picnic: The red-and-white checked tablecloth he bought special for it many years ago, and which he keeps on the bottom of a pile in the linen closet. Two tulip-shaped wine glasses. A corkscrew. A cooler. Together with a glass vase from work, which he fills with wildflowers, the props help make a perfect stage, he thinks.

"It's almost like Casablanca, like a romantic little cafe along the Huron River."

But on this Monday he felt a little discombobulated, pretending, too, that maybe she wouldn't leave, refusing to think this might be their last picnic.

### **Braced for change**

By the time he got to work he realized he had left all the props in his room in the basement. So he had to improvise: borrowing a cooler and some water glasses from work, buying a cheap corkscrew and a blue paper tablecloth.

Worse, the park where they normally meet was closed for maintenance.

They had to go someplace else, where joggers kept coming by and where the view was different, and even the air. Not dry, crisp and bright, as always in the past, but this time sodden with humidity, threatening rain.

As they settled in opposite each other on the rough benches of a picnic table, though, it was as if they had picnicked just last week. He asked about her sister, and she showed him a beautiful new picture of her daughter, and she told outrageous stories about herself, and he found himself laughing.

And when she told him about the job she might take, halfway across the country, he teased her about sneaking away for the weekend this time next year, and spending three days with her, instead of just three hours.

They both knew he'd never do it. If anything, he might place a birthday phone call, or send a birthday note.

She thought: "If these picnics end, I think I'm going to feel like I finally got old." And she thought: "Everybody needs a Lloyd in their lives," and felt herself swell with gratitude that Lloyd had stuck with her.

### **One minute more**

They finished the bottle of cabernet. She drank most of it, and what he did drink made him feel a little tipsy, a little out of control.

The sky darkened as they gathered up the props. As usual, she kept the wildflowers to take home. They tossed out the sandwich wrappings and the wine bottle and, this year, the tablecloth, too.

When they got into the car, though, and she turned the key to start it, he broke the routine. He said something he had never said before. He said, "Turn it off for a while," and she complied.

He leaned toward her and put his hand behind her neck and pulled her face toward him and kissed her. Kissing her while they were still in the park, a full 10 minutes before their time was over, was not in the usual order of things. But at that moment, there was nothing he wanted to do more.

Startled, teetering herself on the edge of her emotions, she said something dumb: "Please don't do anything either of us would regret." As if Lloyd ever would.

"I'm really going to miss you," he told her, looking into her eyes and seeing, despite her age and her success, a pretty 13-year-old girl reading poetry in a calico dress.

Then as he settled back in his seat, she started the car again, and dropped him back at his work where they kissed once more, this time in the usual spot. Within 15 minutes each was on a different road home, as the clouds released their rain.