

**Golden**

**By C J Nolan**

“When?”

“Tomorrow. Early.”

“Oh. Okay”. He looked down, shuffled his feet. The sensation matched the movement he saw. He was awake.

She said, “Is there a problem?”

“No. No. It’s just . . . soon, you know”.

“Jeff, it’s better as soon as possible. We discussed this”, she said. She was trying to be reassuring, but her condescension was exposed.

“Sure! I know that”, he said curtly.

“It’s time to move on. We agreed.”

“I know!” He could gain no ground, but the reflexes were still active.

She ignored his tone. Her response was final. “Good. I’ll see you tomorrow then. ‘Night’”.

And the phone clicked off.

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His shoes clacked loudly on the marble floors, making him even more self conscious. He walked slowly. He walked faster. All the same. He wanted to turn and run but, of course, he was already late. Lost time going back for a tie. He needed to wear a tie at the very least. If not, she would give him that look and then he would get angry and defensive and... well now he was late and she would give him that look anyway.

The elevator arrived. The Catholic Center was huge. It spanned an entire urban block in great black marble. Twelve floors of religious charities, education and administration. The inner workings of an ancient religion required more than a simple belief system. It required

infrastructure. This was New York Catholics' Pentagon. As the doors of the elevator opened upon each floor, a wall-sized crucifix greeted the occupants.

“Jesus never smiled”, Jeff thought. As he stood on his appointed floor, with its life-size crucifix, he saw every painting, every drawing of Christ he had ever encountered and realized the truth. Jesus was never happy. Is that ultimately the message the Church wants to convey? Life is painful – get used to it?

The receptionist, too, had been waiting for him – repeating the time of his appointment distinctly for his benefit. She led him from the dense fluorescence of the hallway to a more austere inner office. The two current occupants both stood as Jeff stuttered in. Lynn was dressed in her sexiest, conservative suit – the tight cotton number with a high necked blouse that both concealed and accentuated her breasts. She kissed him politely on the cheek. So polite and belittling. She and the Bishop exchanged secretive smiles. Maybe they had screwed wildly across the big, mahogany desk while they waited for him to arrive. Who knows?

“Let's get right down to it”, said the Bishop, his huge hairy hand shaking him into a chair. “As your wife has informed me, you are a useless retard with no feelings and no hope of improvement. And your stunning wife deserves better. Right, boy?”

Well, maybe he didn't say that exactly. He did talk, though, in deep, soft tones that betrayed cigarette use. He spoke at great length stressing phrases like “values” and “judgement” and “understanding”. He talked as if to children or the insane. After a while, the words themselves seemed insane. And vacuous. It was a dumbshow with oratory. Lynn and the Bishop tipped their heads to each other and smiled.

“Yeah. Fine. Great.”, was all Jeff could muster. Please God, let it end, he thought. They had separated over a year ago, waiting for the state to grant a divorce. Now the marriage would

be erased in the eyes of God. Because God wouldn't remember this marriage anyway, right? Wouldn't remember their first date, the night after he threw that "Hail Mary" pass that beat St. John's. Wouldn't remember her pouncing on him in the LTD when he won Class President, losing her virginity in the process. Wouldn't remember the honeymoon in Aruba where every moment not spent in bed passed holding hands, watching sunsets and sharing secrets. And God certainly wouldn't remember how much he loved and adored this woman. Nope. God's book had Lynn's post-it notes all over it in her perfect penmanship. That ugly blue marker she used spoke of his inability to secure a job on Wall Street (he hated New York). This led to his inability to secure a house like her friends on the "right" side of town. And worst of all – with God's searing endorsement to her impoverished tears – the blue marker condemned him because he could not secure for her a child. Something about the scarlet fever he had at twelve. No one ever told him. It wasn't even his fault. But that was the last straw. Five years later. Obviously, this could not be considered a marriage.

They all signed forms. They all shook hands. They smiled those smiles. Then Lynn and the Bishop walked off into the light and Jeff slunk into the shadows and went to work.

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Flourescents hurt his eyes. Jeff drummed a No. 2 pencil on the desk while staring at... what? Sales figures? Yes. That's what they were. It was all plotted out on a graph. The red line was doing better than the green line. The blue line wasn't great, but better than last year. And the yellow line just sucked. That was his job in a nutshell. As manager of Caruso Toyota, Jeff had to make sure sales were good and all the pencils were "number two". It wasn't difficult. Toyotas sell themselves. And the pay was pretty good. Well, at least he thought so.

His office had a window cut into the gray panel walls. The window looked outside onto the blacktop, which amplified this afternoon's searing heat. Inside the AC worked at full throttle. Therefore, the window – caught between extremes – became opaque with condensation. It was as if he worked in a hothouse. Or a fishbowl. The light that did filter through was as stagnant as the air around him; cold, dry and limp. Jeff rubbed his eyes. He could hear the industrial clock on the wall keep time, even over the AC. Three o'clock on an August Friday. Sad and bored, he shut off his computer.

As he looked around, his eyes fell on the familiar. Thumbtacks in cork. Photos in cheap frames – mostly of him and Lynn. Cheery slogans laminated by an old employee. The odd birthday card. But to the right, on its own shelf above his computer, stood a trophy. Actually a monument. A historical landmark. Tall and sparkling and impossible to miss when customers walked in to sign papers on that new Camry or SUV. It was made of solid crystal, the facets catching every stray ray of light. It drew your eye and caused you to forget, for a moment, where you were. At the base, engraved in gold, was a plate that bore his name. Above his name were the letters "MVP". Why – one could ask – does something so special, so ornate sit here amongst the flotsam and jetsam of a simple nine to five job?

Of course to sell customers. Some people still come in to meet Jeff Bauman – MVP of the Citrus Bowl. A senior college quarterback leading his school to victory. That game made him a local hero. Everyone watched. Everyone remembered as if they had played the game themselves. There were parades and t-shirts and nights of celebrations at fifty local bars. There were speeches at the high schools and grade schools and visits to hospitals and radio stations. His Mom still had all the newspaper articles and pictures in four binders –labeled by month and year – on a shelf in the family room.

And they still come around. Old friends and strangers. Men and women. “What a great game!” they say. “Made us real proud around here”, they say.

“Damn shame about that knee.”

They say.

Jeff didn't mind. He understood his position. He wasn't bitter or resentful. He appreciated that people remember, that they cared. It's more than some guys got in their entire lifetime.

But his memories – of when he was the golden boy – these were harder to put on a shelf. On August days like this, in the dullness of an hour, those feelings just come too easily. There was a time he couldn't walk through town without someone calling out to him. Guys admired him. Wanted to hang out with him, hoping some of the gold would rub off. And Jeff couldn't stand still without some girl sliding up to him and pressing herself against him. Anywhere – anytime. Gorgeous blondes. Curvy brunettes. Redheads. It didn't matter. There she was - breasts swelling, lips moist. Heat rising from her eyes. And she would look at him as if to say – ‘It's all yours. Just ask. I want to be yours.’

But Jeff was spoken for. Lynn had done that a few years back. She always knew what she wanted. And she *was* a catch. Popular, beautiful and smart. Everyone wanted her. Even his teammates were envious. She was a great partner. He felt proud with her on his arm. He loved her. Loved her...

But the women and the adoration were nothing compared to the crowd. The crowd was sex. The crowd was drugs. The crowd made him feel like a god. So few people understood. His friends? Yeah, they nod their heads and show respect. But they don't get it. That feeling was just too visceral to explain. When the crowd was with him on the field, he could throw that bullet into the end zone in a blizzard, as if his arm went with the ball and placed it lovingly in the

receiver's arms. He could take it himself on fourth and goal with seconds before the gun and score. And the crowd would explode! The sound was beautiful! Their faces – ecstasy! The hard-on from these moments would last for hours.

“Jeff?”

Jeff momentarily focused his attention on a five foot five brunette in his doorway.

“Yeah. Come in, Trish”, he said as he sat down. “What’s up?”

“Um... Look, it’s none of my business, but I just wanted to say I’m... I’m sorry. About you and Lynn.” She played with her hands. “It must be really, really hard for you.”

Jeff thought it was pretty funny how fast and far news about him still traveled. “Well, we’ve been separated for a while. You know. So... Thanks.”

Trish made her play. “Listen, some of us are going out to Mad Hatters tonight. Around eight? If... you felt, you know, up to it? You could come hang out. Have a beer? Talk?”

“Yeah?”

“Sure! It could really be good for you, you know? Just get out for awhile and relax. I haven’t seen you out since. . . you know.” Trish smiled and blushed sweetly. Jeff figured she was referring to the night they spent together about a month ago. She had been after him for a while, since she started working the front desk. And she was very cute, no doubt about it. A very warm, attractive girl.

But that one night had not changed anything for him and he rarely thought about it. Jeff liked Trish a lot. But she was just another girl.

Jeff said, “Eight o’clock, huh?”

“Yeah. It’ll be fun!” She tried to read him. “I’ll make sure you have a good time.”

“Well, eh, I’m not sure. Some buddies of mine and me are going night fishing tomorrow.”

“So, you’re free tonight”, Trish said, uncomprehending.

He tried to explain. “Well, not really. I have a lot to prep – set out my gear and fix my lures, re-spool my reel, check the tides and see what’s running where. It’s a big deal for us. Probably the last trip of the summer. The stripers are on their way out, you know.”

“Oh”. She was totally flattened. “Okay. That’s okay.”

Jeff felt bad. You just can’t leave a girl like that - with no hope. Especially when you have to work with them.

“Now, maybe I can make it. Yeah. Eight o’clock? We’ll see. I’ll see how I feel, okay?”

Trish smiled. “Great! Great. It’ll be fun, honest.” She backed awkwardly toward the door. “And, Jeff? Honest – if you ever need someone to talk to or a shoulder, you know? I’m here, okay? I’m right here.”

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Jeff always felt that “WHOA NELLY” was a stupid name for a boat. To everyone who asked, Skip would always explain – “Dude, it’s because of all the HORSE power! Get it?” Then he would piss himself laughing at a joke that was old the first time he told it. Skip is Danny’s brother and his real name is Darren- but he hates that name to the point of violence. So, Skip it is and “Nelly” is Skip’s boat – a twenty-six foot, 255 horse-power Aqua Sport with full gear. A beautiful boat for fishing, with a captain and co-pilot’s seat, a bench/storage area in the back and plenty of room to move around. And since Skip lived in an apartment, the boat lived at Danny’s house. Jeff had just finished washing down Nelly and returned the hose to its rack. He then picked up an old, green plastic tool box that he had unearthed from Danny’s cellar and went to work on the motors. This was their division of labor – Jeff prepped the boat and Danny and Skip made sure the cooler was filled with beer.

He pulled off his shirt and wiped the sweat from his eyes. It was pretty hot. The sky was clear and bright. They could probably fish by moonlight later. The spoons would pick up the light and the fish would fall. Jeff used his tank top to absent mindedly dab the pools of sweat from his chest. For a moment, he looks. He was always happy he never had surgery on his shoulders. He didn't have any of those ugly scars, like most other quarterbacks and pitchers have. He kept himself toned. His stomach was still flat. Both guys and girls always seemed impressed. And Jeff could still play. He knew it.

Just his knees. His fucking knees. He threw the shirt aside.

As he cleaned the contacts on the carburetor, he thought about other boats. Other summers partying on the water at the Shore, around LBI and other spots. Sometimes just with Lynn on her dad's sailboat, but more often with other couples. Good times in the sun. Everyone had a good time, right? Drinking and laughing. The guys talked about cars and girls and sports and the girls talked about clothes, movies, books and other people... and maybe guys. Very simple rules. Very easy. He saw their faces – those other couples. Some he knew, but hadn't seen in years. Some he never knew and now would never get the chance. Jeff hated some of those couples. But they were Lynn's friends so he never bitched. Not once.

He did a lot of things he hated just to make her happy. For example, he thought of all those "art" films he sat through. Or slept through. More often slept, his head buzzing from words and images he didn't understand. Subtitles didn't help because he really couldn't read that fast and she grew angry if he asked "What happened?" or "What did he say?" too often. So he learned just to watch intently until he dozed off. After just a few counseling sessions he learned that pissed her off more than him asking questions. Go figure.

But she still kept asking him to go with her, so he tried his best. To this day, Jeff can not remember a single one! They are all a blur of fast talking French accents, angry women, naked bodies and bad music. It gives him a headache to even think of the titles of this “art”. Well, there was one he remembered some of. This film was in English, but black and white. Very dark. Very creepy. It was all about this ugly freak who was taken from a sideshow carnival and became the darling of British society. Because, though he was an ugly freak – he was smart. People couldn’t even bear to look at him, but royalty and the wealthy would trot him out for all their fabulous parties. Jeff couldn’t remember the point of the movie, but he felt for the freak. Like he understood him, understood his position in the world.

Anybody could be a freak.

He heard the back porch screen open and glanced up to see Laurel, Danny’s wife, came out.

“Hey, sweetie”, she called to Jeff. The two had not been high school sweethearts. Laurel met Danny at his first job in the city. He was a junior account rep and she worked in PR at the same downtown firm. She had lived in and around the city all her life. A very smart girl. But the two of them were all over each other from the start. The wedding soon followed and, when Jeff asked why, the response from both bride and groom was, “Why not?”

He could think of a few reasons...

“How’s she coming?”

“Nelly’s looking good,” he offered. “If we drown, it won’t be the boat’s fault.”

Laurel smiled as she came toward him. She wore a blue, iridescent two-piece bathing suit covered by an oversized Yankees t-shirt. Her auburn hair, streaked by the sun, was pulled back to show her face. She was beautiful and tanned. Laurel never smoked so she didn’t have that

hard mouth some women get. Her lips were full. Her eyes green in the light. Danny was a lucky man.

“So how are you, hon?”

“Good. I guess. Just waiting for Skip and the Danster to get back and...”

“No, babe”, she said, touching his shoulder. “How are you making out? I mean, after yesterday and all this other... CRAP she’s put you through?”

“Oh. Well ... you know ...”

“I mean – Jesus! An annulment!? She’s such a bitch! I’m sorry, but I have to say it. I have never heard of anything so gutless. So cruel!”

“Oh.”

Jeff looked blankly around, trying to avoid her eyes and the heat coming off her. He settled his attention on the screwdriver in his hand.

“Well, we’ve been separated for a while now, so ... you know ...”

Laurel wasn’t buying this. “Look, babe”, she said, moving in front of him close. “I know you’re hurting. I can feel it. It kills me to see you like this.” She put her hands on him, gently. “You need friends now. I care about you. You know that, don’t you?” Her perfect nails, recently painted with tiny blue stars trace the curves of his chest.

“If you need anything – and I mean anything – call me. Okay? I’ll be there for you.” Laurel looked back for a second and then took his face in her hands and lightly pulled him down to meet the fullness of her lips. She held his head and forced him to meet her eyes.

“Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Sure”, he said. Jeff had not let go his grip on the screwdriver. “Thanks, Lor. I mean it.”

“Good. You deserve to be happy. We all deserve to be happy.” Finally, she backed off. “OK - I’ll let you get back to work.” Near blushing, Laurel spun back toward the house. She turned again and waved to Jeff sweetly. “See ya later.”

Jeff watched her sashay slowly – for his benefit – back to the house. When she was out of sight, he turned to the boat and went back to work.

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“So – this bar we were at? The bartender’s name was Stella, right?”

“The guy’s name was ‘Stella’??”

“No! A girl! All right – a bartendress. Happy? I told ya.”

“Oh! Right! Right! Jeff, you gotta hear this. This is great.”

Jeff smiled back at the guys. They had just settled into the calm part of the bay. The brothers stopped fishing about a half hour ago, just as it got dark.

“So all night, me and Gary are yelling – ‘Stella! STELLA!’ – ya know? Whenever we wanted a drink.”

Danny’s laughing. “What did the girls think?”

“They thought we were retards,” said Skip. “And the chick was getting pretty steamed. But we tipped her damn good.”

Jeff had just cast into the still, moonlit surface. He was trying a new jig he had picked up that morning. So far, it had been a good night. Netted four good sized keepers and only threw back two.

“So – all right. We’re done. Getting ready to leave. And Gary stops and goes – ‘Wait! Not yet! We haven’t done Jäger!’”

“Christ! Jäger!”, laughs Danny as he opens another can of beer.

Skip gets larger and more flamboyant with each beer and with the approaching climax. “So. We go back to the bar and start yelling – Stella! We’re pissing ourselves laughing.”

Jeff laughed and shook his head. He may have been two or three beers behind the brothers, but he felt good. It was easy to laugh.

“So she lines up four shots on the bar. And we all throw ‘em down – even the girls. And I wave to her to bring more, but the girls aren’t interested. So – it’s just Gary and me.”

Danny grimaces. “After everything else you drank, you do TWO shots of Jäger?!”

“Not me”, says Skip. “I hate that shit. I poured mine out on the floor. But here’s the thing – just as Gary drinks *his*? I get behind him and scream – STELLA!!!!!”

Both brothers double over laughing.

“Gary shoots the Jäger right out his nose!”, Skip cried at the top of his lungs. He was beating the deck of the boat with his feet. Jeff figured Skip had frightened all the fish away for the next twenty minutes, so he reeled in.

“I bet that stings”, said Danny.

“It burns like hell! His fuckin’ nose was on fire.” Skip emptied his current beer and tossed it. “Christ, he tried to stick his head under the faucet in the men’s room. Too fuckin’ funny.”

Danny looked at his brother. “So, did you still get laid?”

“Oh yeah”, Skip said standing. “Tiffany was good to go. She’s all right. Not as hot as Deb, but...”

“Beats the Band of the Hand.”

Skip faced the water, unzipped his shorts and started to pee into to an empty beer can. “Hey! Don’t say anything bad about the Band of the Hand. We are very close.”

Jeff looked on as he opened his first beer in an hour. “Be careful, Skip. You don’t want to confuse your open cans.”

“Don’t worry about me, bro”, he said as he zipped up. “I’m a pro. I have a system.”

Jeff and Danny both laughed. Skip sat back down. They all took a minute to look up at the stars.

Danny looked at Jeff. “So? How are you doin’, son? Feeling better?”

“I feel great”, Jeff said. “No complaints”.

“Yeah, I knew you’d be okay. Laurel – She said you might be... I don’t know... Hurt or somethin’.”

Jeff looked down at the deck. “Yeah? She said that?”

“Yeah”, said Danny. “I told her she was crazy”.

“Yeah. Nuts”, Skip added.

“Yeah, but you know how she is. She’s just got this mothering impulse, ya know? To her – anyone can be like some stray animal that she’s just got to take in and save.”

“She’s nuts, I tell ya”.

Danny went on. “But I told her – it’s no big deal, right? Come on, we’re talking about Jeff Bauman here, right? He’s totally cool on this.”

Jeff stared at the can in his hand. “I’m good. Really. I mean, we’ve been separated for almost a year now, so...”

Skip drained his beer and jumped in. “It’s crazy! How could you possibly be upset about getting rid of that cunt? I mean – good riddance! She was a bitch and she’s gone! That, my friend, is cause for celebration”.

“Come on”, Jeff murmured.

“Honestly, bro”, said Danny, “I never liked her. I mean, I was nice to her and all but I never liked her. She was one stuck up bitch.”

“Danny. Come on....”

“Her shit didn’t stink, right?” Skip chimed in. “Wrong! It stunk bad. Every minute of every day.”

“Okay. Just stop, all right?” Jeff’s chest was feeling tight.

“Stop what?” Danny said standing. “In my book, she was scum. She sucked the life out of you! All it was was ‘I want, I want’. Well, she’s gone now, man. Out of your life forever! Skip’s right – this is a celebration!”

Now Skip was standing. “Damn straight! And the best thing of all, my man, is all the pussy out there that is just waiting for you! I mean, they are going to beat down your door! Chicks who won’t fuck you over. Who won’t bust your balls. Who just want to be with you and that’s it.”

Jeff didn’t look at the two brothers. His face felt flushed. His heart was pounding.

“They’ll care about you, man”, said Danny. “Isn’t that what you want? Isn’t that what we all want? Come on, man. Fuck Lynn. She is gone.”

“Jesus, guys, just....”

“Right!” Skip offered a toast. “Fuck Lynn – that evil, worthless twat! And may God – in his infinite benevolence and wisdom - strike that bitch dead!”

“Shut Up!!!”

Jeff screamed. In one fluid, powerful motion - he had dropped his beer, leaped up and, with both hands, grabbed Skip by the shirt and lifted him off the deck. “You Shut Your Fucking Mouth!”

Danny stood stunned. Skip – scared by the sudden realization of Jeff’s size and strength – stammered, “Be - Be cool, man. Ok? I’m – I’m sorry. Be cool, okay? Okay?!”

As Jeff stood seething, holding onto Skip, he suddenly could not see clearly. There was a mist or something. He dropped Skip and wiped his eyes. But they clouded over again.

Jeff stepped back from his friends. “What the...?”

He wiped again. And again. And again. But he could not stop the tears that kept forming.

“Dude. Relax,” said Danny. “Just calm down...”

“Oh shit.” Jeff stumbled backwards, surprised. A torrent of tears grew with every passing second. “Oh Shit!”

He struggled to breathe. His nose began to run. The brothers – having never seen this from their friend before – sat in stunned silence.

Jeff stumbled along the edge of the boat making tortured, incoherent sounds. He couldn’t stand it any more. Rivers ran unabated down his face. His cheeks were on fire. Everything hurt. Feelings seemed to burst from his chest. He was terrified.

Jeff jumped into the water.

For a moment, all was chaos. In the water, in his head. He wasn’t even sure what he had done. But he knew what he felt and it scrambled to the surface with him. As he gasped for air, he screamed:

“I AM NOT AN ANIMAL! I AM NOT AN ANIMAL! I AM NOT AN ANIMAL!”

Then Jeff let go and starting crying with abandon. The frightened brothers just stood motionless, watching.

Exhausted, Jeff just floated in the moonlight. Soon, his sobs subsided and the last ripples scraped slowly across the surface of the water. And with them, even his tears were lost and forgotten.

THE END