

“Celeste”

By Dirty Dawg

*“We that are true lovers  
run into strange capers.”*

-Touchstone, “As You Like It”

William Shakespeare

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The phone call took me completely by surprise. I was working in the bedroom I had converted into an office when my personal line rang. I almost never got calls, and when I did, more often than not it was a wrong number.

Lifting the receiver, I kept one eye on the computer screen in front of me and mumbled, “Hello...?”

“Brad?” In an instant, the computer screen was forgotten, and I was thrust back more than a dozen years, to a time and place far away from San Diego, to a time when my life was full of promise and wonder and love. That's the way it's always been with Celeste; just the sound of her voice can bring the memories back with a rush, filling my head and crowding my thoughts.

Celeste, as the saying goes, is the one true love of my life. For me it had been instant. The first time I'd laid eyes on her, I knew she was the woman I wanted to marry. Full of life and happiness and joy and wonder, she gave off her beauty in waves. Watching her walk across a room was a treat in and of itself. Like I said, for me, it had been instant.

For her...it hadn't been. The stark, naked truth of the matter was that Celeste was just not attracted to me. I wasn't handsome enough, sexy enough, masculine enough... whatever it is that attracts women to men, I just wasn't... enough. We became wonderfully close friends, and I fell quietly, desperately in love with her. Maybe not so quietly, though. It became apparent to Celeste what my feelings for her were, and she told me as gently as possible that she just didn't...couldn't...feel the same way about me. She took the emotional responsibility off her shoulders and thrust it squarely onto mine. It became obvious that I was once again in control of my life, that Celeste wanted nothing to do with me in...that way.

When we lived in the same city (Baltimore,), and I saw her every day, life was indeed hard for me. Because of our closeness as friends, I got a view of her life that I would have probably been better off not having. Boyfriends came and went, none of them in my eyes good enough for my sweet Celeste. Slowly, a picture of who she was and what she wanted emerged to my startled, love-struck eyes. To this day, I still love her, but Celeste was, and is...a bitch. There is no other way to put it, no nice euphemisms to use. She is demanding, controlling, and completely unreasonable in the exceptions she holds for the men in her life.

She wants the man in her life to have a good body. Yet, she complains when the man spends time in the gym to keep that body in shape for her. She claims that she wants the man to put her at the center of his life, and when they do, she bitches that they are smothering her. She wants him to be successful, yet gives them grief when the hours required at the office cut into time that would otherwise be spent with her.

I never wanted to delve into the underlying psychological reasons Celeste was this way. I just held the knowledge that if she had given me the chance she had given so many other, lesser (in my view, anyway,) men, that she would have found what she was looking for. But I never got that chance; Celeste wouldn't consider a relationship with me in that way. I was not her type. I didn't turn her on. I was not a man in her eyes.

There is no way to describe that kind of pain. Men do a lot of macho posturing about not needing women and being happy single. I can't speak for anyone else but myself...Celeste owned me heart and soul. And the fact that I couldn't be who she needed me to be nearly killed me. The mood swings that set in whenever she found a new boyfriend and proudly announced to me that they were sleeping together grew worse and worse over time. It finally became apparent that something was going to have to be done. I knew that if I was in the same city as Celeste that there was no way I could stay away. She had gotten completely and utterly under my skin. I had several choices. I could kill myself, a rather abrupt and final solution, or I could move away. I chose the latter, and announced my decision to Celeste without telling her why.

The casual way in which she received that little piece of news should have sealed it for me. She just agreed with me and mouthed empty words about missing me and hoping that I was doing what was right for me. The meal continued, and I silently fumed, knowing two things at once: I desperately wanted her to beg me to stay, and that she never would.

After my move to the West Coast, Celeste and I had kept in touch with occasional phone calls (mostly made by me in moments of terrible weakness,) letters, (also mostly written by me. I think she wrote me three times in six years,) and cards and presents. The relationship had a strong base in the shared experiences in Baltimore, but wasn't growing. Slowly, over the last six months, we'd grown apart, slowly, quietly realizing that the relationship was coming to an end.

That's why the phone call was so surprising.

"Celeste? What's up?"

"Brad...I'm coming to San Diego tomorrow. I was wondering if I could come and see you." There was something in her voice, a note I didn't recognize, that sent a chill down my back and made the hairs on my neck stand up.

"Uh...sure. No problem. I work at home. Anytime is good."

"Fine. I'll call when I land. See you tomorrow. We.. .." She trailed off, and then finished it in a rush. "We have to talk, Brad. I'll see you tomorrow." And then she hung up. I sat, listening to a dial tone from three thousand miles away and wondered what the hell was going on.

I had a hard time returning to my work.

I was pacing in the living room when I heard the taxi stop outside my house. I looked through the curtains and felt myself frown. Celeste was standing on the curb, two suitcases at her feet, looking up at the house with what can only be described as a look of trepidation on her face.

I opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch, waving. She looked at me and smiled, and then it all flew back into my head. I had been hiding the memory and dodging the remembrance almost since the night it had happened.

The one and only night Celeste and I had spent together as a man and woman were meant to. One month to the day before I left Baltimore to come here.

*“A memory is what is left when something happens that does not completely unhappen.”*

- Edward de Bono (b. 1933)  
British author

*Baltimore, three years ago:*

It had been a long week, and I was looking forward to having a few drinks after work at the local watering hole, a favorite place for the employees of DynaTech, the company I programmed for. I entered O'Mally's Pub and took a stool at the bar, Sam the bartender sliding a glass of tap beer in front of me without asking. He didn't look for money and I didn't offer. We would settle before I left, and I trusted him to keep an honest count of the beer I consumed.

Three silent beers later, I heard the jangle of the door and looked into the mirror to see Celeste entering the bar. She had a morose, forlorn expression on her face, and spotting me, made her way over and joined me, taking the stool to my left.

“Scotch, rocks,” she told Sam, and he vanished to grant her request. We sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, and then she started talking. Her boyfriend had broken up with her not minutes before, telling her that she was a controlling, evil bitch, and that he never wanted to see her again. Publicly, I agreed with Celeste, that he was a bastard and a jerk, and that it was his loss. Privately, I admired his backbone. Anyone who had gotten to know Celeste as well as I had knew how hard it was to get the woman out of your head.

Celeste was a brunette, hair so dark black that it was almost blue. She wore it short, just below her shoulder blades. It cascaded down and looked soft and sweet to the touch. I didn't know; I'd never touched Celeste in my life. Not even a friendly hug or a New Years' kiss. Well, to be completely accurate, the one time I had touched her was still fresh in my mind, no matter how hard I tried to forget. Standing beside her at her desk, trying to show her how to work a new program I'd written, I leaned over and put my hand on her shoulder. I felt her stiffen, and slightly pull away, as though the feel of my skin against her repulsed and disgusted her. I quickly pulled my hand back and tried to hide the flush of shame and self-hate that filled my face. I never tried to touch her again.

Back at the bar, Celeste and I got stinking drunk over the next four hours. Beers and shots and slammers, empty glasses accumulating on the bartop. Money ran out before desire to consume more did, and I helped her to my car, taking her keys with me. I didn't want her driving, even though I was in no condition to drive myself. With typical male macho thinking, I was sure that I was able to drive better drunk than she was.

They say that the Gods protect babies, fools, drunks, and ships named “Enterprise,” and I qualified on three of four counts. We made it the two miles to her house with little trouble and,

thankfully, no cops. I got her upstairs to her apartment and unlocked the door. I turned to leave, and felt her hand closed around my arm.

"Where you goin'?" she slurred, smiling at me with a grin I'd never seen on her face before. "Why don't you come in and stay awhile?" I'd been over her apartment a dozen times, mostly to install things or fix stuff... I'd never been just 'invited' over, so this was promising to be a new experience. Truth be told, there were alarm bells going off inside my head about this, and I knew where it was leading. I also knew what the eventual result was going to be, but I went along anyway. I'd had enough of long lonely nights spent talking to a pillow instead of a warm body, of greeting the mornings with no one to kiss hello, of just being alone all the damn time. The secret promise in Celeste's eyes was all I needed to allow myself to be dragged into her apartment...into her web.

You can guess the rest. We had fumbling, sweaty, intense sex. The best sex of my life, for several reasons. The alcohol had lessened both of our inhibitions, so some of the things we did and said to each other have not, at least for my part, been repeated since. The best of my life because it was Celeste, the woman of my dreams, the center of my life, my reason for living, undulating and thrusting beneath me as I brought us both to the crest of pleasure several times that long drunken night.

But when the morning came, you can probably also guess what happened. A small, fervent part of me wanted her to wake up and look at me and smile and kiss me softly, aware that she had found the man of her dreams. But that, as you know, was not to be.

Her eyes opened, and she took in my form. I saw confusion cross her face, and then her eyes widened as the memories of the night before flooded her mind. And then she got this look on her face, a look that I still have trouble describing. It was something like disgust and sadness and determination all mixed together. There is no single word for all three emotions, but I knew what they added up to. I could almost predict, to the letter, what she was going to say next.

"Oh, God," she said. "We didn't."

I nodded, careful not to smile. She threw an arm across her eyes, blocking out the bright rational sunlight of morning. "I can't fucking believe it," she said, turning away from me. I reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, to make sure, and she pulled away from me as if stung. I needed no more hints.

Standing, I dressed quickly and left. The night was never mentioned between us again. It was as if it had never happened. I never brought it up, alluded to it, and for the most part, tried to forget it. For Celeste had been a truly wonderful, exciting, generous lover, who had shown me things and done things to me that I'd only to that point read about in various men's magazines. She had completely and utterly stolen my heart, and my soul, and to be frank, my cock, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life exploring and discovering the secrets her mind and body held.

One month later, to the day, I left Baltimore for San Diego. Three long years had passed, and I hadn't seen Celeste in any of that time. The occasional phone call, like I said, and some cards and letters. Mostly letters from me.

Until now.

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*"Memory, the priestess,  
kills the present*

*and offers its heart to the shrine of the dead past."*

- Rabindranath Tagore  
Indian author, philosopher

Celeste leaned down and grabbed her suitcases, and slowly walked towards me. In the three years since I'd last seen her, several things had happened. Firstly, I wasn't about to stoop and scrape and come running at her beck and call. She was a strong young woman; she could carry her own damn bags. Secondly, she had that look on her face, the same look she always gave me when she wanted something.

And I knew that unless it was something that didn't have the potential to hurt me, something that I wouldn't mind giving to a stranger on the street, she wasn't going to get it from me.

Not this time.

And again, I was wrong. So wrong.

Celeste dropped the suitcases on my porch and was suddenly in my arms, her own arms around my neck, burying her face against me. "Brad," she said/moaned, "It's so good to see you." She pulled her head back and then slowly, softly kissed me on the lips. It was a friendly, warm, brotherly kiss, and then it lengthened for a second, grew some heat, and then was dust.

"Can I come in? We need to talk, big guy." I had said nothing to this point, and I just nodded, opening the door and pointing with my chin. If she took offense at my non-offer of help, she didn't show it. She just bent down, grabbed her suitcases and followed my lead. She dumped them at the base of the stairs and found the living room. She sat on a couch and looked around. I'd had a decorator in about two years ago, and the place looked good. I knew it, and she knew it. We were three years and as many thousands of miles away from Baltimore and those times.

I took a leather wing chair across from the couch and crossed my legs, folding my hands in my lap, looking expectantly at the woman who had once filled my life with joy. I took a fast moment to think about her as she gathered her own thoughts.

I remember what it was like having her in my life every day. How I didn't feel complete, didn't feel...whole, or human, until I'd seen her every day, talked to her, made her laugh and heard the sound that made the songbirds in the trees hang their heads in shame. How she made me feel human when the forces controlling my life conspired to make me feel less so.

And then I remembered the callous way she'd treated me, the easy ways she found to crush my spirit and trample my feelings. Celeste had a cruel streak in her, something she didn't hesitate to use when she felt trapped or cornered. She sometimes delighted in seeing people bend to her will, seeing them flush with anger or embarrassment when her venomous tongue hit the mark. She was a bitch, through and through, and I'd fallen into the ultimate vanity, thinking I could tame her.

"Brad," she said, her face somber and direct. "I don't know quite how to say this...I..." she trailed off, I suppose looking for the right words. I sat silently, not offering any help or brooking any bullshit.

"Last year," she started, "the company switched insurance carriers in an effort to control costs. This new company believes more in preventative medicine than waiting for something to happen and then worrying about it. Towards that end, physicals are two dollars, drugs are like six dollars, most preventative procedures are likewise very affordable. I hadn't had a physical in about five years, so I signed up and had a complete one done."

A sudden ball of ice appeared in my stomach, and my mind started working, getting the denial circuits warmed up. Somehow, I knew. The only reason Celeste would come three thousand miles to see me was because she...

"They found something," Celeste confirmed, searching my face. "They have this new toy, something called an MRI. Stands for Magnetic--"

"Resonance Imaging," I finished for her. "It can take crystal clear pictures down to the cellular level. Thousands of times better than that old Computerized Axial Tomography..."

"Yeah. And what they found is..." Shaking her head, Celeste tapped a finger against her skull. "What they call 'a mass.' I call it a tumor. About the size of a plum."

"Where?" I asked. "Exactly where?"

"I don't know if I can remember it. Hemispheric something-or-other."

"Hemispheric Bridge?" I asked, fear dripping from every word.

"Yes," she said, and seeing the look on my face, she knew I knew.

"It's inoperable, isn't it?" Celeste nodded. "Chemotherapy? Radiation treatment?"

"Tried and failed. Both of them. My hair just finished growing back. The mass got bigger. It's now about the size of a baseball. A small baseball. And it's strike three for me, Brad. I'm out."

I sighed, all thoughts of turning her away gone from my mind. "Do you know what the rate of metasis is?"

"What's that?"

"Cancer is so horrible because it's basically uncontrolled cell growth. The cells keep dividing and growing. The rate that happens, the rate of growth of the mass...the tumor, is called the metasis rate. Do you know how fast it's growing. How...long...?"

Celeste's smile was perhaps the saddest one I'd ever seen. It spoke of dreams vanquished and hopes dashed, and made my bowels do a backflip. "I don't know the exact rate. They said no longer than six months. As I get closer to... that time...my vision will start to go, I'll get flaky, my vision will dim...all sorts of bad things are going to happen, Brad."

My hunger for knowledge and the way I chewed through reference books of any color had given me a huge base of information about cancer and cancer patients. I knew that Celeste would be lucky to last three months, let alone six months. Her life was ending, right before me, and I was powerless to do anything about it. Frustration welled up inside me, threatening to break free and run screaming around the room.

Back in Baltimore, I'd spent many a night whispering to the pillow that I'd have given 30 IQ points to be handsome, that I'd have given almost anything to be Celeste's hero. To save her from some horrible demon, just to see the look of gratitude and love on her face. Just to see her finally acknowledge that I was the man for her. And now, here, in my living room, thousands of miles and thousands of days since we'd seen each other, Celeste was telling me that the biggest, baddest demon of all was slowly wrapping his cold, smelly hands around her neck and squeezing, and all I could do is watch.

And I knew that's what she wanted me to do. Watch her die. Help her die with dignity. I knew then, with a certainty borne only of complete self-knowledge, that I was the closest thing to a friend that Celeste had. She'd never let anyone, least of all me, get close to her, get inside her, and now, when she needed someone, she'd turned to me, hoping that there was enough residual love left inside me to do this one last thing for her.

"Wait here," I said, standing and striding from the room. I went to my office and closed the door. The office had been the biggest bedroom in the house, and it now held what I laughingly called the center of my life. The past three years had been good to me professionally. I was one of

the highest paid contract programmers in the world, working on various contracts all the time. I had nothing pressing, and about two hundred thousand dollars in the bank. I could put my life on hold, I knew, but did I want to? Did I want to spend the next ninety days with the one true love of my life, watching her slowly waste away?

“Shit!” I said, looking at my favorite picture of her and I. Taken at a company Christmas party, Celeste and I are standing next to each other, smiling at each other... If I look at that picture hard enough and long enough, I can almost imagine us as a couple, together and happy.

There was never any question, never any debate. My mind and my heart were in total agreement. My life, my personal life, had been in some kind of holding pattern for three years. I'd dated off and on, but none of them had been pretty as Celeste or as smart as Celeste or... enough. They hadn't been enough like Celeste for me to even think about a long-term relationship. This would provide...closure. A way to say goodbye to a time and a person in my life that had held me for so long. It was horrible, sad news, and I would have gladly spent the rest of my life quietly and desperately in love with her, personally stagnant, if it would mean Celeste got to live. But I didn't get to make those decisions; the Fates did. All I had to do was live with them.

All Celeste had to do was die with them. The least I could do is let her die with some love in her heart and some dignity in her bearing.

Returning to the living room, I retook my chair and studied her silently for a moment. There was a look of hopeful want on Celeste's face, and for a single, cruel moment I considered dashing her hopes. It would be a sweet revenge, the dark side of my heart said, one that she truly deserved. But the good side of my heart won out, and I just nodded.

“I'll be with you,” I said softly. “Until the end.” Relief flooded Celeste's face as she sat back and smiled. And then she started to cry. Long, wracking sobs that tore my soul and rended my heart. I joined her on the couch, wrapping her up in my arms, rocking her gently, stroking her hair.

And this time, Celeste didn't stiffen, didn't pull away from my touch or my hug. She gripped me back, her arms suprisingly strong, as we cried together for almost an hour.

## -4-

*“The man who gets on best with women  
is the one who knows best how to  
get on without them.”*

-Charles Baudelaire

The next week was interesting. We got to know each other again, and I noticed something different about her. This may sound strange, but it's true. Celeste had mostly dealt with the fact that she was dying, and in some strange way, it had freed her. The cruelty and hate and bitterness that she'd felt toward the world for all those unknown reasons had fled her, and she was once again the woman I'd originally fallen in love with.

She smiled and laughed more than I remembered, or expected, and we found a wonderful warmth and closeness still existed between us. Celeste waited three nights before joining me in my bed, and it came as a wonderful shock and surprise.

I'd put her in the guest room, not wanting to make any assumptions. But we'd been touching more, hugging more, spending time on the couch, watching old movies on TV and just stroking each other. That night, I'd kissed her neck and gently tickled her ear with my tongue, and she'd moaned and pressed herself against me. The movie ended ten minutes later, and I'd turned in, still excited by the taste of her skin and the warmth and closeness of her body.

I was almost asleep when my mind announced that there was someone else in the room. I'd long ago understood what the concept of the Second Amendment meant, and had a Baretta 92F 9mm pistol under my pillow ever since. My hand closed around the grip, and I softly took it off safety. I wasn't sure who it was, and my half-dream state, I had forgotten that Celeste was even in the house.

My hand relaxed when I heard her voice. "Are you awake?" One of the most inane questions in the world.

"Yes," I said softly, and turned to face her. The moonlight was streaming in from my skylight, casting her in a silvery puddle of warmth. She was wearing one of my button-down shirts, and apparently nothing else. Her hair was combed out and rested on her lovely shoulders. She had a haunting look on her face, like she was afraid I was going to send her away. I peeled the sheets back and patted the bed next to me, and eagerly, she joined me.

Celeste turned her back to me and snuggled up in spoon position. The years apart had put some steel into my backbone, and I didn't shy away from her, letting her feel my throbbing need pulse against her buttocks.

She laughed, a short, sweet giggle that seemed to fill the room. "My, my, " she said, "is that all for me?" I just grunted a little, hunching my hips against her.

Turning to face me, Celeste pressed her palm against my cheek and softly kissed me, letting me taste her lips for the briefest of seconds. "Make love to me, Brad. Please. Make me feel alive."

Taking my hand in hers, she slid it inside the shirt and around one of her breasts. The night we'd spent together flashed across my mind again, and I knew I didn't want a repeat of that particular morning-after.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She frowned. "It's not catching, you know." I laughed with her at that.

"No...I know that. I was just remembering the last time we did this." Finally, the words had been spoken. Celeste frowned and then understanding flew across her features.

"I'm sorry...about the way things went that time," she said. "It was...difficult for me to get close to anyone. And you weren't...what I wanted, what I thought I needed then. But now-" I silenced her with a kiss and started exploring her body, the body in thousands of my dreams, with my hands and mouth and lips and tongue. She was slightly sweaty and salty under my mouth, and I rejoiced in each discovery. It was like going back to your childhood home, finding all the nooks and crannies, all the hidey-spots you remember from your youth.

Slowly, we became one with the night. Our bodies joined and separated, making gentle, passionate love as the moon slowly marched across the floor. Celeste was wet and warm and welcoming, her legs caressing my side as I gave pleasure the best I knew how. We tasted and sucked and kissed and caressed as the night drew on, and when I finally spent myself inside her, we collapsed against each other, sweaty, sticky bodies adhering with the moisture of our passion.

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The next morning came early for me; I'd stayed awake after Celeste and I'd pulled apart and watched her sleep. The gentle, graceful curves of her legs and buttocks amazed me, and I traced the soft, silky skin with my fingers as she lightly snored.

The sun replaced the moon, golden beams of light crawling across the floor and up the bed. When they were an inch from her face, Celeste opened her eyes and smiled at me. I waited for it.

It didn't come. She lifted her face to mine and kissed me softly, her tongue playing across my lips. I opened my mouth, and we shared a passionate greeting to this new day. One day closer to her death.

We spent the day in bed, tussling and wrestling and making slow, passionate love. Thrusting into her, supporting my weight on my arms, I looked down at her face, twisted in pleasure, her legs crossed over my back, her heels urgently encouraging me to go faster, deeper, harder, I remembered now why "Angel Falls" had been my favorite television show of the Fall 1993 season.

The actress that played Rae Dawn Snow, Chelsa Field, looked exactly like Celeste. They could have been sisters; same dark hair, same flashing eyes, same body, same whiskey-and-honey voice. I'd never put it together before, and that amazed me. Picking up speed, I emptied myself inside her just as Celeste joined me, dissolving into climax.

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The days and weeks settled into a routine. Celeste let me guide her, showing her new things, trying new things out. We spent hours on the couch, watching as many old movies as I could find. She started to learn French under my expert guidance. We ate Thai food and rented a sailboat. Every memory recorded for posterity by my handy camcorder.

Once, I asked if I should contact Maryanne, Celeste's only living relative, an older sister that lived in Spokane. Celeste's expression clouded, and then she shook her head.

"She hates me," she stated. When pressed for a reason, Celeste would only shake her head and refuse to answer. I let it drop.

Most days we greeted the mornings by making love. Those interludes stretched and grew until we were spending most every day in bed until noon. Celeste was hungry and generous, asking to try new things. She wanted to please me, and this was surprising. I'd always assumed that Celeste was a selfish, demanding lover. For all I know, she had been before. But she wasn't now.

We explored our mutual fantasies together, discovering those hidden pockets of excitement that pushed buttons and made cocks hard and pussies wet. We spent long hours between each other's thighs, tasting and licking and slurping. At first, Celeste was reluctant to let me cum in her mouth, but after coaching and some time, she began greedily drinking me, savoring the taste of my ejaculate.

The day she asked me to tie her up was a banner day, to say the least. With ties and my bathrobe sash, I secured her to our bed (interesting how quickly it had come from 'my' bed to 'our' bed...) and proceeded to tease and please her for one rainy California afternoon. Celeste had climaxed repeatedly, flowing from one to another, soaking the bed and my crotch with her arousal.

After, I'd untied her, and she'd collapsed into my arms, kissing and hugging me.

"That was wonderful, Brad," she said. "I never thought that I'd be able to...trust someone enough to do that to me. That was so special. I'll never forget it...or you." Brave words for a woman two months away from her own death, I thought.

# -5-

*"It is not death, but dying,  
which is terrible."*

- Henry Fielding

*"He that dies pays all debts."*  
- Stephano, "The Tempest"  
William Shakespeare

One warm afternoon we spent naked, sitting on my bed, telling each other our life stories. We gently frigged each other, not so much to arouse the other, just some friendly touching. My hands were filled with her breasts as she told me about her parents (both dead now,) and her sister (aforementioned Spokane problem,) and the boys she dated and slept with.

Before, when she told me of the men she'd taken to her bed, I'd been filled with jealousy and anger. Now, because it was me and not them in her bed, I listened as she explained why she could never find the man she was looking for.

Her waning days on this mortal coil had forced Celeste to examine who she'd become, and why. Back in Baltimore, she'd discovered that she was a selfish, controlling bitch, and that she'd pushed away the only man that had ever cared about her the way she'd wanted. The only man who had taken her shit again and again and come back for more. That realization had changed her somehow, softened her, made her more free and accessible. And that's when she'd jumped on a plane to spend her last days with me.

As the second of the three months drew to a close, Celeste started exhibiting changes. She would enter fugue states that would last up to an hour, and when she came out of them, she had no memory of ever having been gone. Entire hours vanished for her, and she had no memory of what'd had happened while she'd been away. Her vision started to deteriorate, and after examining a medical text on the matter, I concluded that she had last then three weeks to live.

When she was lucid, Celeste and I spent as much time together as possible, making love constantly. We were hungry now, trying to cram every last fuck in before the piper had to be paid. She was constantly wet for me, cornering me in the shower or the kitchen, begging me to make love to her, to make her feel alive.

The last two weeks were the worse. The fugue states came and went with such rapidity that it was almost as if Celeste were schizophrenic. One moment we would be making urgent, hungry love, our bodies slapping together wetly as we wallowed in our pleasure, and in the next I would be making love to a lump of dead flesh that was staring at the ceiling. And then she would be back, blinking her eyes and starting to fuck me again. It played hell with my emotions, and with hers too. She could see the pain and confusion in my eyes.

With one week to go, we stopped making love. I didn't know that she was only six days away from death. It wasn't like I'd marked the days on the calendar. Celeste and I made out her will, and then I managed to get her sister's telephone number out of her, to inform her of Celeste's death... after the fact.

She spent most of the time in bed, talking with me. Talking about all the things she'd wanted to do, wanted to see, wanted to read and hear and watch and taste. I held her in my arms

and told her fairy tales, related the plots to wonderful novels that I'd read, and promised her that I'd never forget her.

Celeste made me promise that I'd go on with my life after she was gone, that I'd find someone to love me as much as I loved her, someone that would treat me well, the way I deserved to be treated. I made the promise, but in the back of my mind I wondered if I could keep it. Celeste had once again become the center of my universe. We were in a little cocoon, she and I, spending those last days in my apartment, not going out, just talking and laughing and holding one another as the cool hand of death slowly approached.

Celeste died in her sleep. I woke to a bright new morning, reaching over to shake her awake. The stiffness told me all I needed to know. I kissed her face once, and got out of bed. Walking into my office, I sat down at the desk, called the funeral home, the police department and Celeste's sister. And I finally found out why Maryanne hated Celeste so much.

Celeste had seduced her husband and fucked him while Maryanne watched from the hall. Maryanne said that she was sorry that Celeste was dead, but that no, she wouldn't be able to attend the funeral. I promised to forward a copy of the will, and she thanked me and ended the call.

I buried Celeste two days later, in a cemetery six blocks from my house. For three months, I visited her grave every day, leaving flowers and poems. I spent one horrible drunk night sleeping on the mound of earth, crying out to the Gods that would do such a thing to me, and to her.

It's been six months since Celeste died. I've got a new girlfriend now, a woman I met in church. She heard the entire story of me and Celeste one night, and held me in her arms as I cried myself to sleep. When the morning came, a little of Celeste's memory had left me, and Susan was more in my thoughts. Susan and I are growing closer every day, and the memory of Celeste is fading equally slowly. I have a feeling that Susan and I will be married someday, because she is able to understand why I will never be able to forget Celeste, and never be able to love anyone else the same again.