

12-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

McIntier, Paul (1994) "The Swan Song," *Forces*: Vol. 1994 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol1994/iss1/2>

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The Swan Song

Paul McIntier

Sunlight was fading, and through the window Steve could see the streetlights glowing. Not many cars passed through the quiet, suburban neighborhood, and even fewer since the snowfall of the previous night. The winters were generally mild, but occasionally Old Man Winter made an appearance just long enough to screw up the traffic. Steve remembered passing several cars that had slid off the highway on his way home from work. He felt much better once inside the house, looking out the window and studying the long shadows of the trees lining the boulevard.

Turning away from the window, he clinked the ice cubes in his glass. It was his second Scotch and soda in the past hour, but it wouldn't be his last. At this rate, he would have to make another run to the supermarket for more limes.

It never fails, he thought. I always seem to have enough soda for the scotch, but never enough limes.

He drained the last of the drink and went to the kitchen to mix another one. The last few nights had been a bitch for him, and tonight he planned to get drunk. He had a difficult task in front of him tomorrow, and he knew he would not be able to sleep.

Glancing at the kitchen calendar, he noticed that six days had passed since he last saw Amanda. Now the house seemed like a schoolyard in the summer--too quiet. Even though not a large house, its emptiness made it feel like a mansion. Nor was it the first time he had spent a few nights alone here. In the six years they were together, she had left twice. This time, though, it was for good, and he knew it. But knowing it did not make it any easier to accept.

He plopped down into the recliner in front of the TV.

A movie-of-the-week was on, but he had missed too much of it to get in on the story. He doubted he would have been able to stay interested anyway, so he aimed the remote and clicked the TV off. He reached for the picture on the table beside him. It was a photograph of the two of them at the lake the previous summer with a group of friends on a weekend camping trip. Amanda's long hair was dripping wet, as were the cutoffs and the white t-shirt she wore. Steve was standing next to her, unable to contain his laughter. Rick Donner, Steve's best friend from college, had snapped the picture shortly after Steve had thrown Amanda into the lake. It certainly wasn't the best picture of her; it didn't show off the wavy brown hair or the deep blue eyes that had melted his knees--and his heart--the first time he saw her. It was, however, a photo that had captured the very heart and spirit of their relationship: a joyful celebration of life shared by two people without a care in the world.

He set the picture back on the table and took another sip from his glass. The ticking of the mantel clock was amplified now that the TV was off. Amanda hadn't cared much for television, so he had grown used to the hypnotic sound of the clock. The house was not always silent when she was around, though, as they both enjoyed listening to music rather than vegetating in front of the boob tube. They had an extensive music library to keep them entertained.

I guess it's now my music collection, he thought.

Amanda did, however, enjoy watching movies on the VCR. Steve could remember the first one they watched together when they first moved into the house. It was *9-1/2 Weeks*, and his friends told him it was the perfect one to watch with your lover.

They were right.

Steve and Amanda had spread a blanket out in front of the set and sat down with their bowls of popcorn and their Cokes. But less than thirty minutes later, they lost interest. It wasn't that the movie was uninteresting, they had just become more interested in each other.

"You know, this movie is starting to make me a little . . . uh . . ."

"Frisky?" he finished.

"Well, I was thinking of a different word, but that one comes close," she said, a playful grin crossing her face.

They undressed slowly, as if neither of them had experienced buttons and zippers before. She looked down into his face, her hair brushing his cheeks as the glow of the TV cast their shadows on the far wall.

"I want you to know," she whispered, leaning toward his ear, "I may not be as inventive as this movie, but I can promise you that each time we make love it will be more special than the time before." He remembered thinking afterward that he would enjoy discovering how she was

going to top that night's session.

The clock chimed 10:00 and his mind jumped to the present, sobering as it was. He noticed his glass was nearly empty again.

Why don't I just bring the damn booze in here.

He went to the kitchen and poured another drink. Returning to the living room, he set the bottles and the lime on the coffee table and dropped back into the recliner. He was having trouble concentrating on anything; his mind kept floating back to the way things used to be with Amanda around the house. He knew they would never be that way again. He assumed she would be better off, but he wasn't so sure about himself.

He thought back to the time his company had sent him to a job site almost 200 miles away. Because the work would keep him away for about ten days, the company put him up in a hotel.

Those ten days, however, seemed like weeks. On Thursday, after just four days away, he called her.

"Do you have a date tomorrow?" he asked.

"A what? What are you talking about, 'a date'?" She was not sure if he was serious.

"What do you think I mean? A date, you know?"

"Of course I don't, you know that," she answered, growing upset that he would suggest such a thing.

"Would you like one? With me, I mean?"

"Sure I--" she began, but stopped herself. "Well, wait, I don't know," she said, her tone changing. Steve could almost hear the mischievous grin creep across her face. "Ginny and I were going to go catch a movie, and then maybe . . ."

"Well, okay," he interrupted. "I noticed this topless bar down the street anyway, and . . ."

"Don't you dare!" she hissed. Steve started laughing, and she soon joined in.

"Okay," she said, "you've got a date. Now tell me how you plan to do this."

He told her about the little barbecue restaurant off the highway about halfway between them. He noticed it because it seemed to be the only thing in the area, and the parking lot had been full of cars when he drove past it. A couple of the guys he worked with had eaten there, and they all raved about the place, so he made plans to get off work a little early and meet her there for dinner the next evening.

"It looked as if three-quarters of the parking lot was full of pickups, so I'd imagine that jeans and a western shirt would be appropriate enough," he told her. "And wear those red cowboy boots you have. I'd bet my last paycheck there's sawdust on the floor and a country band in the back! And who knows, I might even feel like dancing!"

"This I gotta see," she said.

So they agreed to meet at seven, but when Steve pulled into the parking lot, he noticed Amanda's car already there. He thought he might have trouble finding her until he looked to the back wall and saw a gorgeous brunette leaning her head out of a booth, watching the door. She was even more beautiful than the day he left on this silly assignment. Slipping into the booth across from her, he leaned across the table and kissed her.

"I'm sorry," she told him, "but you'll have to leave. I'm expecting my boyfriend any minute." She started giggling, and that was when he noticed the three empty beer bottles next to the wall of the booth. She had never really been able to hold her booze, anyway, he thought.

"How long have you been here?"

"Well, I got too excited, and I couldn't just wait around the house, so I left a little early. I had to make sure I could find the place, and then I wasn't sure about the parking . . ."

"How long?" he asked again, grinning at her rambling.

"About two hours."

"How can you be so goofy after only three beers in two hours?" he asked, gesturing toward the bottles.

"Oh, she's already cleared the table once."

He decided it was best not to ask how many empties were removed, so he smiled and leaned across the table for another kiss. This one lasted a bit longer.

They ordered a generous plate of barbecue and finished off with a slice of their favorite dessert, Dutch apple pie. Strains of country music were drifting from the back room, and Steve's feet started tapping. He assumed it was a jukebox in a back room full of pool tables and pin-ball machines. He ordered another round of beers, but Amanda declined this one, so they headed for the room in the back.

Steve laughed when he turned the corner and looked down the length of the hall. "The Back Room" was handwritten in big, bright red letters on a hollow-core door. He knew it was a hollow core because there was a fist-sized hole in it. All of a sudden Steve was a little apprehensive about entering.

Aw, what the hell, he thought, and pushed the door open with his boot. As he suspected, the cement floor was littered with crushed cigarette butts and empty peanut shells, and one half of the room made up the game room, while the other half was set aside for dancing. Already several couples were out there, holding each other tight and moving to what his Daddy always called "buckle-polishin' music." Steve wasn't much for country dancing; all that spinning around made him feel silly and a bit dizzy. But tonight was different, and he really didn't care how he looked or what people thought of him. All he cared about

at that moment was Amanda.

A car roared down the street and its blaring radio brought Steve back to reality. His glass was completely empty, but he had no recollection of finishing it. Reaching for the bottle of Scotch, he noticed that it was nearly empty as well. Evidently he had poured a couple more, but he couldn't remember doing that, either. He went to the kitchen for another bottle of Scotch and the last bottle of soda.

Standing at the sink, Steve poured a fresh drink and decided he had better eat dinner. He had fixed a light snack just after he came home from work, but that was three hours and several Scotch and sodas ago. He called out for a pizza to have it delivered. There was nothing in the refrigerator worth fixing, and he certainly was in no condition to drive to the nearest fast food restaurant.

About twenty-five minutes later his pizza arrived, and he paid the driver, tipping him far more than he should. He had ordered a sausage and mushroom pizza, the kind he always ordered when the choice was left up to him. He grabbed a couple of paper towels off the roll and went back to the recliner, the pizza box resting on his lap.

"Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub. Yeeaaaaaayyy, God!"

This made him laugh so hard that he sloshed a good portion of his drink on the carpet and almost dumped the pizza on the floor.

"Where in the hell did you learn that?" he asked out loud to no one in particular.

He flipped through his mental photo album of the past thirty years until he came upon the image of him and his younger brother, Brent, at the dinner table when Steve was eight.

"Daddy, may I say grace over dinner?" Brent had asked. "I learned a new one in school."

Reluctantly his father agreed, and Brent recited the prayer he had heard in the school cafeteria that day. Steve would never forget the looks on his parents' faces. Mouths gaping, eyes as big as golf balls, they scolded him for his irreverence. From that moment on, they were always somewhat apprehensive whenever it

was Brent's turn to say grace.

Steve had eaten half of his pizza when the phone rang. He stared at it, debating whether or not he should answer it. After the fifth ring, he decided he should. He crossed the floor, on unsteady steps, to the end table, reluctant to speak with whomever was on the other end. It wasn't that he feared Amanda's voice coming through the line; he knew she wouldn't be calling anymore. Nor did he fear hearing his mother's voice, constantly reassuring him that everything would be all right, and would he like her to come over for a visit? His mother could still not get over the fact that her baby boy was thirty and perfectly capable of dealing with life's tragedies, however big or small.

No, he was not afraid of talking to any one specific person, just to people in general. He was not in a talkative mood. Fearing an emergency, though, he

picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" The word seemed to pour from his mouth.

"Steve? It's Rick. What's up?"

"Not much Rick, how's it going?" His tongue felt too thick for his mouth.

"Pretty good. Listen, a group of us guys were headed down to The Roundhouse and we thought you might like to come along."

The Roundhouse was a downtown sports

bar that had once been a small theater-in-the-round. When the theater closed, it was converted into a bar that had quickly become Steve's favorite place to unwind after work. But tonight he was already too unwound. He squeezed the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger, his head throbbing. Normally he would welcome the chance to get out of the house for a "boy's night out," but tonight he was well ahead of them in the drinking department, and he really did not feel like being -- or having -- company.

"I don't think so, Rick, but thanks for asking. Can I take a raincheck?"

"Of course you can, anytime. But I gotta tell you, Steve, I'm worried about you. So are the rest of the guys. Nobody's seen you out of the house in three days."

"Yeah, well, it's my damned house, and if I want

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to stay in it, I will, all right?"

Regretting the words as he spoke them, he fumbled for an apology. "I'm sorry. It's been kinda hard for me to handle, but I've decided the only way I can go on is to admit to Amanda that I know it's over."

"What are you saying, that you're gonna talk to her?"

"Yeah," Steve replied after what seemed an eternity.

"Like I said, it'll make it a lot easier to accept the fact that I won't see her anymore."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Steve could tell Rick disagreed with the idea. He really didn't care about Rick's opinion anyway, or anyone else's for that matter. Tomorrow he would put the whole thing behind him.

"Okay, Steve, whatever you think's best. Give me a call this weekend, all right?"

Steve told him he would and then replaced the receiver in its cradle. The booze was starting to get to him and the pizza was beginning to rebel against his stomach. He walked back into the living room and stretched out on the sofa. The clock above the fireplace began chiming the midnight hour. Steve was out before it finished.

When he awoke the next morning, Steve felt as if someone had set off a stick of dynamite in his head. He noticed the half-empty bottle of Scotch on the table and realized he had made only a couple more drinks before he passed out. His head, as always, was pounding, and for the umpteenth time he vowed to stop abusing his body with alcohol. Sitting up, he tried to put his feet on the floor, but it seemed to move away from him. After two or three attempts, he managed to plant them. Looking about the room, he tried to remember the events of the night before. He could remember the pizza guy showing up, but that was about it. As he shook the cobwebs from his head, it felt as if several steel balls were ping-ponging off the inside of his skull like a pinball machine. One thing he did remember, though, was that he needed to pay a visit to Amanda. He wasn't looking forward to it, but he knew it was necessary.

He walked to the bathroom and examined his face in the mirror. He knew he ought to shave the three-day growth of beard, but he reasoned it would be simpler to let it grow and just shave his teeth. His tongue felt like it was wrapped in fur. Hopping into a steaming hot shower, he attempted to scrub away the misery and self-pity, but could

not. Instead, he watched the grit and grime of the past three days slip down the drain.

Just like your life, if you don't straighten up, he thought.

He toweled off and walked into the bedroom to get dressed. The telephone rang, but he let the answering machine get it. He wanted to hurry and put this day behind him so he could continue with his life.

He fought the urge to turn
and walk away, thinking it
would be better to leave well
enough alone . . .

"I always knew this would be difficult, but I didn't know it would be *this* difficult." He twisted the gold and black onyx ring around his finger nervously. It was something he often found himself doing whenever he was uptight or restless. Now, finally realizing that a six-year relationship had ceased to exist and would not resume again, Steve was nervous about opening up. He fought the urge to turn and walk

away, thinking it would be better to leave well enough alone, but he knew the pain in his heart would not go away unless he saw this through.

Looking up he saw the sun directly overhead, but it did nothing to warm the December air. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The air stung his lungs, and he could feel the cold concrete bench on the back of his legs. He waved to the groundskeeper who was out picking up trash on the lawn.

"I guess it took awhile to sink in, but I know I'll never have you back. The reality was there, but I didn't want to accept it. Now I know that I have to go, but I hope you don't mind if I reminisce a little before I go." He knew he would get no objection, so he continued.

"I can remember when we first met. It was as if everyone at the party suddenly faded into the background, and there was just you and me standing in the room. I thought of those TV shows where the picture suddenly goes out of focus as they take you on a flashback. But this wasn't a flashback; it was more of a *flashforward*, a look into the future. From that moment on, I knew the future would see the two of us together. I never once saw a day that we would be apart. If I remember right, it was some time before you felt the same thing, but eventually you came around."

He looked down at his hands and noticed they were shaking. Feeling the urge to shove them into the pockets of his coat, he realized there was no need to hide his nervousness. He glanced down at his feet just as the wind blew a

styrofoam cup against his shoe. He kicked it away.

"It was an incredible feeling, Amanda, it really was.

At twenty-four, I thought I had a few more years of playing the field before I would want to settle down, but all that went out the window in a matter of days. I had hoped you would be with me for the rest of my life, but I guess things have a way of changing whether we want them to or not. What, did God step away for a minute, and someone else dealt us this hand? I don't know. But whatever happened -- *why* it happened -- it makes my heart so heavy that I sometimes feel as if I'm going to buckle under the strain."

He stopped twisting the ring and stared at it. It was 14-carat gold with a rectangular top. The top was split into two triangles, one of which was the black onyx he had always wanted in a ring. The other half was brushed gold with a tiny diamond set in its center. Amanda had given it to him the day he turned thirty, almost six months ago.

"This is a "BILY" present," she had told him, "as well as a birthday present."

"Who's Billy? I don't understand." He wanted to scold her for spending the money, but he couldn't deny he wanted the ring. He felt a wave of selfishness come over him.

Besides, she's a big girl and can spend her money however she wants.

It was the same ring he had shown her almost a year ago. It was on his "Someday I'd Like To Have It" list, but he only told her he liked it a lot. He said nothing about wanting it, yet here it was on his finger.

"It's not a "who," it's a "what." A "BILY" present is a "Because I Love You" present." She kissed him on the tip on his nose. "Happy Birthday."

"I love you, too, Amanda." He picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. They made love as if it had been the first time for both of them, slowly, yet passionately.

He pushed the thought from his mind. The ring would now be a symbol of a time that was, a feeling he would more than likely never experience again.

"Remember the time we made love in my parent's bathtub when they were out of town?" He managed to smile in spite of the pain inside. It was the first time either one had used a bathtub for something other than bathing. It was quite awkward, and they both laughed afterward as they realized it was not unlike what their parents must have gone through in the back seats of their cars.

RAIN

The pregnant clouds
Anxious to deliver
Her labor pains explode
over the horizon
Until the water breaks
and the miracle is born.

Melanie Beggs

"Or how about the time you taught me the art of stir-frying chicken, and we stuffed ourselves until we were sick. You said you never wanted to see another wok again.

"I'm going to miss times like that, Amanda. I'm going to miss the times we'd turn on the stereo, turn off the lights, and dance in the middle of the living room. I'm going to miss how you'd politely put up with my singing no matter where we were. I had to hear from Rick that I sounded like a fork in a blender and that I ought to stick with shower singing. There is so much that I'm going to miss, sweetheart, and I don't know how I'll manage."

Brushing a tear off his cheek, he realized he still had so much to share with her, but now he would be unable to do so.

"It's been so hard without you, Amanda. Just one week ago, I was holding you in my arms, and now . . . this . . ." He let the thought go unspoken.

He had started crying now, the tears streaming down his face. Despite the hurt, he felt the sadness in his heart easing, just as he knew it would. He walked over and placed the flowers he brought with him next to the marker at the head of her grave.

"I miss you, Amanda. I miss you, and I love you. I always will."

I wrote a good omelette . . .

and ate a hot poem . . .

after loving you.

Nikki Giovanni