Too Close for Comfort

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I ink out one more square and sit back to view the whole calendar page. Twenty-nine of the thirty-one days in March are crossed out. Today, I should have started another period. I am never late. Never. My arms across my breasts, I hug myself, filled with joy. I'm going to have a baby.

I have wanted one for ages. It's not that I'm running out of time. At thirty-three I have plenty of it. I only know that a baby is what I want most in the world. I haven't told Joe-Ray yet, and I'm bursting with the need to share my good news with him. Every time we've been together I've been tempted to blurt it out, but I wanted to wait until I was sure. Now, I reach for the phone, hesitate, change my mind. I want to see his face when I tell him. Watch it light up like mine.

The phone rings and I jerk my hand away, startled. I recognize the full resonate tones that vibrate the speaker. It's Joe-Ray.

"What are you doing Saturday?"

"Well, it's my day off." I don't remind him it's my birthday. I'm sure he'll remember. "I was hoping we'd do something together."

"Ever been fishing?"

"Fishing?"

"Yeah. You ever been?"

"No ... but —"

"You'll love it. I'll pick you up at four-thirty."

"In the *morning*?"

"Of course in the morning."

"But, Saturday ... it's my"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. It's not important. I'll be ready."

Joe-Ray Boggs and I met last fall at the Melody Inn where I work. It happened like this. One day just after Labor Day a shiny red Peterbuilt rumbled into the parking lot. The air brakes split the quiet of the day and blew up a cloud of dust. His tape deck was blasting out a Randy Travis tune so loud you couldn't hear the juke inside the Inn.

Joe-Ray was wearing a tight pair of jeans—which he filled out perfectly—a checked western-style shirt, and the most beat-up straw cowboy hat I'd ever seen. A big red, white, and blue button pinned to it proclaimed: "Truckers Are Good Ole Boys."

When you work in a bar you get used to everything in pants hitting on you. After a while you can develop a dismal view of the male population in general and truckers in particular. I didn't smile at him or even acknowledge his presence.

He sat at the bar and flashed a smile that would make an Osmond envious. His eyes looked like milk chocolate almost at the melting point. "Hi ...," he glanced at the name tag above my left breast, "... Judy."

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FICTION

"What'll you have?" I fastened him with a cold look and waited for the usual, expected, suggestive remark.

"Two cheeseburgers and a Coors."

I let my face soften a bit. "You want fries with that, Cowboy?"

"Yes, mam. That sounds real good."

It was the *mam* that did it. Softened me right up. Business was slow and we talked a bit while he ate. The next day he came back again. And the next. For two weeks he never missed a day. He invited me to a Halloween dance and afterwards I asked him to sleep over for the first time. He was a bit rougher than I thought he would be but we were good together.

He asked me to move in with him soon after that. Or, if I didn't want to give up my apartment, he said he would move in with me. I wasn't ready for that, yet. But almost. Until I met Joe-Ray, I wasn't sure there was a man in the world I would consider living with, let alone raising a baby with. Now I wasn't so sure.

Because of his job, he spent more time on the road than he did at home. When he was home we spent most of our time in bed. It's hard to get to know someone that way. But what I knew I liked and I decided the time was right to let myself get pregnant.

The edge of the sun is just pushing the night off the horizon when we get to the lake. The skyline is a fragile robin's egg blue while, overhead, you can still see a few faint stars. By the time Joe-Ray finds a place that suits him, the water sparkles brilliant red-gold in a blinding highway between the sun and us. Behind us pines and wild cherry trees perfume the morning chill.

"Since you've never been, why don't you just sit there on that log while I get things set up, okay?"

I nod, stifle a yawn as soon as he turns away. It hangs in the air like smoke. I sit on the dead branch. It's rough and uncomfortable even through my slacks and in a few seconds I realize it's also very damp.

He picks a night crawler out of a white Styrofoam container and I wince as he stabs it with a hook several times. "Now, watch how I do this," he says as he casts the line out. The water is serene, a living mirror. Far out there is a *plip* and a slight ripple as the bait enters the water. The line floats down and kisses the surface like a thread from a spider web.

Joe-Ray holds the worms out to me in one hand, a rod and reel in the other. "Now you."

"Huh?"

"You can't fish without bait, Jude."

"I'm not going to *touch* one of those slimy things!"

"They won't bite."

"No."

"But you gotta."

"I don't *gotta* do anything," I say, standing up, hands on hips. "Including running a hook in and out of one of those poor things."

"Hell, they're only worms."

I watch his jaw muscles bounce for a few seconds while he thinks it over. "Okay," he says, "If you're gonna be a big baby, I'll do it for you."

I'm surprised and stung. Why am I a baby for not doing something he wants me to do? I hate seeing anything suffer, even a worm, and Joe-Ray knows it. There is a lot to this fishing I hadn't thought about.

Neither of us speaks for a long time. Some scout-crows land in a huge oak tree behind us and their grating *caws-caws* break the stillness. I think they're fascinating. They appear to be holding a conversation. Their discussion lasts for several minutes. Finally, Joe-Ray picks up a rock as big as a baseball and hurls it at the crows, missing them a mile but chasing them away.

I was enjoying them and I'm still a little hot about Joe-Ray's remark. "You might have hurt one of them," I say. My voice is high, tight.

He shrugs, "Who gives a damn. They're just crows." He goes back to watching his rod tip. His face reminds me of my nephew after his mother scolds him. Something else bothers me. Something in what he says or the way he says it. The silence becomes thicker, more uncomfortable.

Abruptly, he jumps up, fishing rod snatched high above his head. "Got one!"

It's a big one. Not very pretty: a ponderous, mud-yellow belly, flaring whiskers, cold, beady eyes. He says it's a catfish, which is strange because it's making loud barking noises. It flops around wetly, dirt and gravel sticking to its sides and eyes like breaching on a chicken leg.

"Tough fish, catfish," Joe-Ray says. "But good eating." He plants his foot firmly on the fish's head. Reaching into his tackle box he withdraws a long, thin-bladed knife. "Show you something," he says. He winks one eye expansively.

He places the gleaming blade just behind the head of the catfish. With a flick of his arm he quickly pulls the knife along the spine and out near the tail, slicing the meat and skin off one whole side. I gasp in horror as the blade grates along the bones. The fish shudders.

It beats its tail against the ground in a frenzy, barking and grunting pitifully.

I overcome my shock, bound off the log. "What the hell are you doing?" I shout.

"Called filleting," he says. He does the other side of the fish as quickly as the first.

"Jesus!" my voice is as sharp as the filleting knife. "Why the hell don't you kill it before you do that, for Chrissakes!" I hug myself, rub my arms furiously trying to warm the gooseflesh away.

Joe-Ray looks at me like the question makes no sense. Angrily, he flips the still barking catfish into the water with the toe of his boot. It struggles for a few seconds, weakly swims away to a slow agonizing death. "I was just showing you how tough they are. Goddam, it's just a catfish."

I make him take me home. Immediately.

I'm done with fishing and I'm done with Joe-Ray Boggs. Like the cat that made love to the skunk, I haven't had all I want, but I've had all I can stand. I'm relieved I didn't tell him I'm pregnant. I don't need someone with his philosophy to help me raise my baby.

I realize what bothers me about the way he thinks and acts. It isn't a very big step from it's just a *worm*, *crow*, *catfish*; to it's just a *relationship*, *lover*, *baby*.