

LAURIE

By John S. Halbert

September, 1964:

As my second year at Florence State got underway, the scene around the big table in the Student Union snack bar was once again lively and loud. Added to the old gang was a whole new crop of freshmen, and our noisy hangout was more boisterous than ever.

One day, right at the start of the semester, I came in just as the energetic crowd was getting re-acquainted after the long summer out of school. Taking part in the convivial conversation was a very pretty flaxen-haired girl with a complexion the color of golden honey, whom I had never seen before. She looked and sounded interesting, so I ordered Cokes for both of us, and introduced myself.

"I'm Laurie!" She extended a perfectly-manicured hand and shook mine. "I just transferred here from California."

As we talked, I knew it wasn't polite to stare, but I couldn't help it---the new coed was as cute as all get-out, and with her dazzling non-stop smile, sparkling eyes, and great sense of humor, I was sure I had hit the jackpot. "How about going with me to the orientation dance this Saturday night?"

The girl suddenly stiffened and rather formally told me she didn't believe she could, then looked at her watch. "I have a class, and I have to leave---right now!" Taken aback by her abrupt, mysterious change, I watched, puzzled, as she reached underneath the table, pulled up a pair of metal crutches and awkwardly hoisted herself out of her chair. A moment later I sat stunned and red-faced as she hobbled toward the door.

Laurie had only one leg!

"Wait!" Mortified, I shoved away from the table and rushed after her. She stopped and looked down as I turned to face her. "I . . . I . . . mean---" I stammered, wringing my hands miserably, at a loss for words. "Well . . . that is . . . I didn't know . . . about . . . *THAT---*"

"She looked up at me, blinking through moist eyes, "they're making some adjustments on my prosthesis, so I'm doing the crutch routine for a few days." The girl wiped her eyes with her hand. "I have to get going---I really *DO* have a class!" She tried to force a smile. "Look, if you want to talk, show me where 'Wesleyan Hall' is! And, if you want to do a good deed---carry this!" She swung her book satchel off her shoulder and I grabbed it.

The awkward episode now behind us, at a surprisingly quick pace Laurie and I headed out across the campus toward yellow, turreted, old Wesleyan Hall. "You walk really fast---I can hardly keep up with you!" I said, puffing.

"You get pretty good at it after a while," she called back over her shoulder, "I actually do get around faster on these crutches than with my artificial leg!"

Watching her, I was struck by how high-spirited she really was, so I decided to try another approach. "Let me start over," I said, catching up to her, "forget the dance--how about going out to dinner with me on Saturday?"

Laurie gave me a phone number, then bumped up the front steps of Wesleyan Hall. At the landing, she turned and smiled back at me. "Call me, tonight!"

That evening at the radio station, right after the eight o'clock news, when I dialed the number she had given me, an older lady answered the phone. In a few seconds, Laurie's voice came on the line. "That's my aunt," she explained. "I'm staying with her. She takes me to school and picks me up."

I again tossed the idea to her about going out on Saturday.

"Only if I choose the menu," she came back, "how about caviar with all the trimmings?"

"This is the South---we're a long way from caviar!"

"What! No caviar? Then, I guess we'll have to settle for steak!"

I knew of a good restaurant up on Shoal Creek with a great view of the water. "I'll pick you up at seven."

She told me her aunt's address. "See you then!"

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Saturday evening, when I rang the doorbell of Laurie's aunt's house, a gray-haired woman opened the door. "You're John!" she beamed. "Laurie will be here in a moment. She told me all about you." The elderly lady lowered her voice and gave me a conspiratorial look. "She thinks you're very---oh, here she is!"

Laurie had crutched up behind me so suddenly and quietly I almost jumped. "Good evening!" she grinned, raising her eyebrows in mock surprise. "Auntie, are you trying to take him away from me?"

"Flattery will get you everywhere!" I pulled a jacket over her shoulders as she handed me her handbag. Once again, Laurie's exuberant, youthful beauty took my breath away. Her orange sundress was a perfect match to her honey-golden skin and straw-colored hair that was pulled up with an orange ribbon.

I helped her get into the Volkswagen and stowed the crutches behind the front seat. As I walked around the car, my heart was pounding---I was falling for this girl. When I slid into the driver's seat, Laurie turned to me with her patented smile. "All right, let's see that great restaurant you told me about!"

Twenty minutes later, we were seated by a big picture window overlooking Shoal Creek, where it flowed into the two-mile-wide Tennessee River. Our table was in a perfect location---the scene of expensive riverfront homes and autumn forests that lined the broad, shimmering water for miles in each direction was striking. I couldn't have picked a more impressive spot and the girl was captivated by the sweeping panorama of early-fall foliage with its brilliant golds, yellows and reds.

Over the main course, Laurie told me about her leg. "I had just turned seventeen," she started, "I'd only had my driver's license a short while, when I was in a car accident." She stopped talking and looked out at the flaming late-afternoon sun on the creek for a few moments. "It happened in a fog---one of the famous 'California freeway fogs'."

"I've heard about the big freeway smashups out there. One of those?"

She nodded. "Some friends and I were going shopping one Saturday morning and I was driving down the highway when all at once we ran into this tremendous fog. A great big truck-van had stopped right in front of us. I held down on the brake pedal as hard as I could but we ran into the back of it. I remember a terrible crash, and stuff flying everywhere."

I put down my knife and fork and listened as she went on.

"I was on the ground and people were looking down at me. I heard sirens, and then I blacked-out. I didn't remember anything else until I woke up in the hospital. My parents were standing over me. That's when they told me---" Laurie stopped and looked away---"that's when they told me . . . they had to . . . take my leg. It took a second or two to register. I lifted the sheet and looked down and saw---where my right leg was supposed to be---*nothing*. Nothing but tubes and bandages." Sudden tears welled-up and she wiped her eyes.

I didn't know what to say, so I handed her a napkin. "What did the doctors say?"

"They told me the impact had shoved the floorboard back while I was pushing down on the brake pedal and the bones in my leg were shattered. Like broken glass, they said. The circulation was all gone and there was nothing else they could do but . . . amputate---"

I listened, trying to take it all in. It was hard to imagine all this had happened to the beautiful girl sitting across the table from me. Once again I found myself being drawn to her.

She looked out at the broad creek just as a water skier zoomed up a ski jump and splashed back into the wake of the boat that was pulling him. When I told her I had once lost control on the same ramp and my swim trunks came off in midair in front of a big Fourth-of July crowd, her eyes got wide. "In front of a lot of people?"

"In front of *hundreds* of people!"

Laurie flashed a quick, wry grin, then stared out the big window for some moments. "My senior year in high school was really a tough time for me . . . I went to rehab several times a week . . . it took a long time to learn how to walk with an artificial leg. There was a lot of pain and phantom itching."

"Phantom itching?"

"Sometimes it felt like my foot was itching, even though it wasn't there, anymore. There was nothing I could do about it, and it nearly drove me crazy. It still happens, sometimes. I guess the worst time was one morning not long after I came home from the hospital when I got out of bed, took a step and fell flat onto the floor. I'd forgotten my leg was gone. Nearly everyone in the rehab group said the same thing had happened to them. Everywhere I went, people stared at me. I felt like I was only half a person."

"I've never thought about that sort of thing. What about your friends?"

"Most stuck with me. Others just sort of drifted away. I guess I didn't need them, anyway. For a long time after the accident I was either in a wheelchair or on crutches, and I guess they weren't sure how to act around me." She managed a half-smile. "I do have a boyfriend back home." My crestfallen expression must have been obvious, as Laurie put her hand on mine. "Nothing's official---besides, he's in California!"

The news about the out-of-town rival was an unexpected surprise, but as I liked and admired Laurie very much, I (selfishly) hoped her West Coast relationship wasn't all that important to her.

We finished our dinner, went outside onto the pier and sat down on a bench. The sun had disappeared and was replaced by hundreds of sparkling lights in homes all along the creekbanks for miles in every direction. As it was a clear night, the stars and the constellations were brilliant. She leaned her head on my shoulder as I pointed out the "Belt of Orion" and we marvelled at the surpassing, purple beauty of the evening.

After a while, the chill got to her, and she shivered. "Let's go somewhere . . ." I suggested. "Where?"

"Well . . . I have a friend who has an apartment and he's out of town for the weekend and he wants me to keep a lookout on his tropical fish. I have the key. "

Laurie shot me a suspicious look. "Yeah, sure . . . next thing, you'll want to show me your etchings! Remember---I have a boyfriend, and he's really big and strong!"

"Scout's honor---" I raised my right hand and gave the scout salute. "I used to be a Scout. And a Scout *is* trustworthy!"

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A half-hour later, we pulled up at an apartment building not far from the college campus. Looking up, I realized my friend's apartment was on the second floor---a daunting obstacle for Laurie and her crutches.

"All right, carry me up the stairs--let's see some muscles!" She held her crutches in one hand, and as I swept her up, I was surprised how lightweight she was---with her leg gone, she probably weighed only about seventy pounds or so.

At the top of the landing, I opened the door, swung her around and fumbled for the light switch. On the far wall was a twenty-gallon tank with tiny fish swimming in it. "See---no etchings! Real fish, just like I said!" I lowered her onto the sofa, then opened a box of fish food.

Laurie spotted a phonograph and some record albums on a shelf. "So your friend likes music," she said, her eyes following my every movement.

I put an album of slow instrumentals on the turntable, and brushed her cheek. Laurie looked up with an expression of wonderment and caressed my wrist, her beautiful hazel eyes sparkling in the lamplight. In that moment, an overwhelming feeling of tenderness toward her came over me.

She pulled herself up. Hold me," she whispered in my ear, her arms around my neck. "Hold me tight."

There, in the dim light of my friend's living room, I held in my arms the pretty flaxen-haired girl with skin the color of light golden honey as we slowly swayed to the music.

Laurie and the guy back home became engaged the following summer.

Years later, someone told me they had six children.