

## CONFIDANTE

by Linda Millican

By twisting just a little to the right, the young woman was able to avoid the spring that was jutting up from the worn upholstery. She finally found a comfortable position in the rather ancient back seat of the Red Cab. Again she was alone with her thoughts, and the same ones kept returning. Just like they had during her three day stay at Community Hospital. She had been in a minor accident and had been unconscious for twenty-three hours. The next forty-nine hours had been occupied with the usual white blur of the various attendants as well as a snowy blur of thought and feelings. Now they were returning to crowd her mind, but this time she could push them aside because she was out in the real world again.

"Hey, up there, mister, have you ever been in an accident? I mean, not that I worry about your driving, but I just got out of the hospital because of a minor car wreck. I mean, have you ever had an accident of any kind and been unconscious?"

The taxi driver mumbled something about being a good driver and the crazy things people ask about. She analyzed him as a listener, period. He probably wouldn't even grumble again, just nod his head at random intervals in her monologue. But she needed to talk.

"Being unconscious for almost a whole day is really weird. What a crazy feeling to wake up and be told that a whole segment of your life has slipped by without so much as consulting you! And how inconvenient. . . I didn't even have any of my things with me. . . none of those little things you take for granted at home." She could feel the anxiety swelling up, and she barely whispered, "I can't wait to get back." It didn't matter any more if the driver was indifferent. Charlene Brenner was lost in her own thoughts.

She settled back and fingered the message the nurse had delivered to her just before she checked out. The neatly teletyped note was fresh from the answering machine. "Sorry I can't make it to pick you up, dear, but this Board of Directors meeting could mean my next job." She folded it neatly and put it in her purse. She relaxed, gave up on any conversation with the driver, and enjoyed the bright sunshine. "That's not so bad, that Benjamin can't take me triumphantly back to our apartment. This way I can have a few hours alone to think about this whole silly incident, and I'll even have time to record it all

in my diary before he returns home. That will be good because all the feelings are still fresh in my mind. It's almost funny how I missed not being able to write in that thick leather book once a day."

The taxi wound through an apartment complex. The driver indifferently blew the smoke from his cigar out into the fresh suburban air, and Charlene shifted her weight in the seat and tried to get as comfortable as possible. In the stillness she let her thoughts snowball about the volumes of personal feelings and confessions she had revealed to the pages of her diary. She recalled the first time she had even gotten angry with her parents, and, since a fifteen-year-old couldn't yell back, she had written a venomous letter. Three days later she had torn it into tiny shreds and burned it in an ash tray she had secreted away from her father's den.

Slowing down, the driver turned and said, "Thirty-two forty-one, lady?" He caught her unconscious nod and pulled the taxi up next to the mail box. She paid him and then just stood outside the building she had left three days earlier. After a few moments she picked up the train case of necessities that Benjamin had brought on his first visit to the hospital after the doctor said she would be alright. She headed toward the entrance way, and, a little uncertainly, navigated the three flights of stairs. Such exercise was a bit exhausting after three days of complete bed rest. She found herself humming as she faced the big blue door with 316 boldly embossed in the middle. She considered doing a curtsy and stopping to ask permission to be admitted into the royal castle. She slipped the key in the lock and worked with it a few moments. It always got stuck. Soon she was inside her own domain. She quietly shut the door and leaned against its security. The sunlight cast patterns on the gold carpet, and there was no need to ruin the mood of the early afternoon by turning on the lights. The door to the bedroom was slightly ajar. She walked in and found herself standing in front of an innocent and familiar piece of furniture.

"The strangest thing about being unconscious is that you don't even regret the time you've lost. It's just a big blank that replaces the unpleasantness that would have filled it! Almost wish a person could do that whenever he needed to." She opened the bottom drawer to her dresser and reached toward the back left-hand side. Then she tried the right-hand side. The she tried the left-hand side again. She pulled out all the sweaters and shoved them aside. She leaned back and sighed. "Now c'mon, you just couldn't have lost that!" Her hands probed into every corner of the drawer and searched through all the sweaters.

She sat down on the floor in front of the dresser. "Now, c'mon, Char, just remain calm and try to remember where you put it the last time you wrote in it." There was little comfort in that thought because she knew she had put it in that back corner of that bottom drawer. The last time she had gone through this trauma was in college after she had scrawled pages of scathing criticism of her room-mate. Then she had remembered that she had merely changed the hiding place because she didn't want anyone to be suspicious of any one particular place. Now, in the privacy of her own home, there was no reason to worry about someone finding it. . . except. . .

"I just know I left it in this drawer. It didn't disintegrate into thin air. Some of the things Benjamin doesn't know about are written in that book. I've become so very free when I write in that diary that Benjamin would be quite shocked about some of it . . . quite shocked."

There on the floor of the bedroom she shared with her husband, she couldn't hold back the wealth of memories she had so cautiously locked away in that diary.

The smell of the Dean's Office even returned with the memory of the fear that had engulfed her when she heard the secretary call her into the inner office for a review with the women's council. She wouldn't let herself think about the earlier long weekend she had spent learning about life and love, but the impact of the strict probationary rules they imposed upon her for this extra-curricular part of her education would always remain close to her immediate recall. The disgust that had filled her was still poignant in her memory as she visualized the clear sunshiny day when she packed up her luggage and started walking away from those petty rules and those little people.

A dread chilled her as she visualized her husband's shock upon reading that diary. She stood quickly and attacked the left-hand side of the bottom dresser drawer again. Every drawer was siezed, ravaged, and then slowly returned. With each new drawer she remembered a feeling or an event that she had carefully recorded in the hidden little book instead of risking her husband's reaction. Frantically she searched every possible place where the diary could be. Their apartment consisted of five small but cozy rooms.

"It's just not here, there isn't one place it could be that I haven't checked. Heaven knows I've even checked the most unlikely places too! It must have been . . . taken. Why? Why would anyone . . . who. . . ?" She had to sit down again. Her eyes continued the search but without

any hope. There was just a questioning fear in her face that was becoming more and more apparent. "Benjamin said he had that Julia Whitcomb help him pack the overnight bag he brought to the hospital. Maybe . . . when she was helping with that she discovered it." She could conceive of only two people who would have been in her drawers while she was gone. The idea that either of them might know all her secrets overwhelmed her.

Those precious hours that she had blessed on her taxi ride home had passed. Benjamin would be arriving soon. He had stopped by the babysitter's to pick up little John and the two would be entering any moment. A quick glance satisfied Charlene that all had been returned to a state of innocence, and her frantic search had left nothing in an uproar. Thanks be to that old college room-mate who had taught her to clean up her messes as soon as she had made them!

There was the sound of a key sticking in the lock. She unconsciously held her breath. His tall silhouette with the shadow of his son draped over one shoulder reminded her that she had forgotten to turn on the lights since she returned, although the dimness could easily be mistaken for a romantic atmosphere.

"Darling! It's so great to have you home again." He unwound his sleepy son from his shoulder and threw the supply bag in the nearest chair. He wrapped his arms around her and mumbled about how he had missed her and had worried about her. "The little one asked every day if he could stay here with mommy instead of going to the sitter's. Why he just cried and cried at night when I'd put him to bed. Now would you like to know how much your loving husband missed you?" He growled and picked her up to spin her around in circles. His arms were strong and secure. His power over her was unquestioned; it never had been challenged.

She kept observing his eyes, trying to detect something in his voice, and also to keep him from suspecting that she suspected or knew that he had betrayed her solemn vow of secrecy. But he had never been aware that she had taken a vow of privacy when they had married. Her embraces and warm words satisfied him, but underneath every action there was an alertness to any revealing information about her diary.

"Julie was so kind to help you out for these three days. I bet she was a real gem for little things around the house too. Did she help you clean up around here or did she just give her opinion about what I would need in that overnight bag?"

"Oh, Julie. Yea, she just came over that one day and said 'yes, of course,' or 'don't be silly Benjamin.' The clean-up is all mine. . . John thinks he helped so remember to thank him in the morning. Perhaps we'd better tuck him in." He gently cradled his son in his arms and nodded toward the necessities bag while heading for the small den that served as the boy's bedroom.

That night all was warm and tender. He never realized that her mind was returning again and again to a small leather book.

The next day while he was at the office she searched once again. It was to no avail. She plotted and planned how she could let him tell her he didn't even know the diary existed. Then she practiced short discourses which flatly revealed her secret and asked for his help in locating the book. Those practices lasted about ten minutes and she decided that was impractical . . . and why reveal the whole thing to him! For the lack of anything more satisfactory she decided she would have to wait and see if he let any new knowledge slip out. More hopefully, she decided that some time would reveal if his reactions to her were the same as they had always been or if there was a change.

During the next few days she knew she was being skillful in her observations, but she was also getting impatient because her obscure, subtle methods weren't giving any definite results. The possibility of confiding in him entered her mind on the second day. The thought of baring all her needs to him presented itself and departed after a short consideration. He just wouldn't understand.

As the weeks passed, Charlene heard herself asking him snide little questions, and picking up little habits or supposedly new attitudes as indicative of his reaction to the passages in the diary. She was afraid to acknowledge the diary in case she was mistaken, but she seemed to find all these possible indications that he knew more than she had ever told him.

The third Sunday after her return it happened. He took offense at one of her questions. They were preparing a picnic to take to Hunting Park for an all-day escapade. He asked her if she like to take off on escapades; she started and asked what he meant.

"Every damn time I make a statement these days, you ask 'Now what do you mean by *that*?' I've had it. I say what I mean. Char, the most *innocent* little comments have gotten me more 'go-to-hell' looks in the past few weeks than I would have thought were possible. I just don't understand you any more, I just plain don't understand."

“Did you ever? Did you ever really try to understand me? Why your precious life took up so much of your time you never took the time to try to realize what mine is like. I don’t even think you care.” And while she was saying all these things she could feel her disgust mounting up deep inside. The words stuck in her throat.

It was deathly quiet in their “cozy” kitchen. After a few dreadful seconds they both turned at the sound of a door slowly opening. Little John was wandering in from his bedroom, lugging the yellow supply bag behind him. There were big tears in his eyes too. He looked up at them, first at his daddy, then at his mommy. “Mommy and daddy, will you fix this for John? It’s all gone.” He held up a nibbled, crumpled leather book cover with all the pages torn from the inside. “It got broked. . . .”