

LOVE, TIMOTHY

by LeBron Benton

The telephone rang lamely as Joan fumbled for her keys in the hallway. The grocery bags she was carrying were heavy and one of them was splitting on the bottom. As she finally shoved open the door, the bag broke and a cascade of oranges and frozen boxes fell out all over the floor. The telephone was still ringing as she rushed over to answer it.

"Hello?" she asked as she lifted the receiver to her ear. She wondered who would be calling since everyone knew she worked until five-thirty.

"Hello?" she asked again as there was no reply.

"Hello, who's calling please? Hello? Yes, this is Joan. What?—No...I don't know who you are...my what? But I don't...who is this? What...um...oh God...oh please...no...stop please...oh God you're sick...**shut up**..."

She felt sick at her stomach and rushed into the bathroom. She breathed heavily and put her head between her knees. As soon as she felt a little better she sat up. Tears welled up in her eyes as the full force of the call hit her. Why her? she thought. Why did some sicko have to call her and tell her his fantasies? People like that were just sick though, that's all. Don't let it bother you. Call Mother, that's it, call Mother and tell her; she'll make you feel better, she decided.

She cleaned herself up and changed into her bathrobe. Suddenly she stopped and looked at herself in the mirror. She looked down at her twenty-seven-year-old body. What a homely face—she looked about forty. She'd never marry. Mother would have to do without grandchildren. If that sicko only knew—boy, would he never call again. She had to make a joke of it somehow.

She went back into the living room of her small apartment and picked up the groceries that had fallen. She took them into the kitchen and poured them onto the counter. As she did so, tears began to well up in her eyes again. She tried to hold them back so as not to be hysterical when her mother answered the telephone.

"Hello?" she asked over the static on the line.

"Oh, hello Joan," answered her mother, "I'm glad you called because I wanted to remind you that we're going to see Winnie at the hospital this Sunday and you promised me you'd..."

"Oh Mother, shut up!" Joan half screamed into the telephone. "Please listen to me just a minute." She was already crying hysterically. Poor Mother, she didn't know what was going on (stop yelling and calm down.)

"Mother, a man just called and asked if I knew who he was and I said I didn't and he said good, but then he was my—lover—and I said I didn't have one and then he...oh God Mother he was sick! What if he calls back? What do I do?"

"First of all, calm down," her mother said, half crying herself. This was going to be a rough one to handle.

"Are you sure you didn't recognize the voice? You know it's usually someone you know that does something like this."

"No," said Joan, "I'm pretty sure it's some sicko. Oh God, Mother, why me?"

"Just whenever he calls, hang up right away—he'll stop soon enough."

"You mean you think he'll call again? Do they do that a lot?" said Joan with renewed panic.

"Honey, I don't know if he'll call back, but he will stop soon enough if you just ignore him."

"Okay, okay." Joan paused, making sure she was calm enough. "Okay, I'm alright now. Okay, I'll um...be sure to pick you up on Sunday."

"Alright, you just calm down and call me if anything happens. Love you."

"I love you too, Mother. Bye."

She breathed relief as she replaced the receiver. What a mother—she'd gotten her daughter out of more problems.

She began to empty the grocery bags and put things away. As she did so she tried to calm herself down—not by trying not to think about it, but by saying to herself that the guy was sick probably and really harmless. No problem if he called again.

The next day when she came home she thought again about what had happened at the same time the day before. She had been thinking about it on and off all day long, but she had been fairly calm until now. Now she wondered if he knew her schedule and was waiting for her. What if he was in the apartment? No, it was locked and there was really no way he could have gotten in. She unlocked the door and looked immediately at the telephone. It just sat there. No, it wasn't going to ring—he wasn't going to call. But would he call at a different time? Didn't they usually pick a time and call at the same time? Mother seemed to know more; maybe she could call her. She sat down by the telephone. No, she thought, don't make her paranoid too. Maybe they have some brochures on it at the hospital or something. That's it. On Sunday she'd pick up some pamphlets or something, without letting her mother know. She could get some comfort from them maybe, or at least she could find out what—

"Riiinnng!!!"

Oh God.

"Riii-iinnng!!!"

She was frozen in her seat. Should she answer it? What if it was only her mother? No, why would she call? It must be him. She decided not to answer it. No, he wasn't going to get to her. He wasn't. But the telephone went on ringing—he wouldn't stop. Finally, she decided to answer it. She'd just see if it was him and if it was, she'd hang up right away. She reached abruptly for the receiver and lifted it to her ear.

"What!" she said sharply, ready for anything he might say.

"Honey, are you alright? Has he called back?" It was Mother.

"Mother, for God's sake I thought it was him. That's why I took so long to answer. I'm sorry, but I've been thinking about it all day."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called."

"It's okay, Mother, I'm glad to hear your voice and not his. And no, he hasn't called."

"Alright, I just wanted to make sure. I'll see you Sunday. Love you, bye."

"Bye, Mother."

She put down the receiver and got up to remove her coat. Thank God it wasn't him, she muttered. Great timing, Mother. She threw her coat onto the sofa and started for the kitchen. Suddenly the telephone started ringing

again. Probably Mother, calling to remind her of something. Honestly, she always did that!

"Hello? Oh no...oh please...mister please...don't...oh just piss off!!!" she slammed down the receiver in disgust.

Damn him! How long would it be before he left her alone? He was just sick in the head though—some pervert. Some pervert who didn't have anything better to do than call up women and say things to them—just to prove his own masculinity or something. Don't let some pansy sissy get to you...you're stronger than he is. He's just so sick. A sick pansy who can't—

"Riii-iiiiinnng!!!"

Twice? So, she hadn't put him off enough before, was that it? Alright, she'd show him. She started for the receiver—what it if was Mother again? Well, she'd just have to find out.

"Hello?" she said coldly.

"Hello, Joan? I'm sorry to keep calling, but did you get that needlepoint finished? I thought we'd take it to Winnie this weekend and—"

"Mother, he called again just now. Right after I hung up. I told him to piss off."

"Oh I'm so sorry, honey. But you just keep ignoring him." Her mother sounded like she was pacifying a child.

"Mother, how long is this going to go on? I can't just sit here and leap out of my skin every time the telephone rings. Isn't there something I can do?" There was a touch of desperate whining in her plea.

"Well, do one thing at least—call the police. At least they can start looking for him or trace the calls or something."

"Will they bug my telephone?"

"Yes, and they'll probably want you to stay on the line longer so they can trace the calls." Her mother was trying to be a little more reassuring. She was really just as confused and upset as her daughter—but she couldn't let her know that.

"Mother! You mean I'll have to speak to him?"

"Maybe not speak, just listen...rather hear but don't listen. Just give the police time to trace it."

"Do you think it'll work?" Obviously her mother wouldn't know—what was she asking for?

"I'm not sure, but you'll have to try—it's the only thing you can do." Her mother emphasized "only" in a way that made Joan think there might be another way out.

"Alright, Mother, I'll call them right away. See you on Sunday. Love you. Bye."

It was two weeks later when Joan again found herself fumbling with groceries and keys outside her apartment while the telephone rang inside.

"Just a minute!" she yelled as she finally burst through the door. She put down her bags in the kitchen before they ripped and walked over to the telephone. She took her time answering because experience had taught her that this guy was really patient and would ring that telephone all day if he had to. She lifted the receiver and heard the familiar click which meant that the taping machine was working. He started in on his usual obscene rampage and she half listened, half sorted groceries. She had actually become quite immune to his talk—it still bothered her to know he was waiting to call her every day. What if he ever decided to come to her apartment? He had mentioned it a while ago and she had become very upset about it for a time. But he never came. He just kept calling. And calling, and calling, and calling.

Why couldn't he pick on someone else for a change? Why hadn't the police been able to do anything? Actually, they had explained that to her earlier in the week. He apparently called from a different pay telephone each time and they could trace the locations, but by the time they got there he had already gone. They had told her to be patient and to try to talk back to him so they would have time to catch him. But this guy was tricky—he never spoke for more than five minutes or so. In fact, he had told Joan that he knew someone was probably looking for him. He even told her that he was calling from different booths each time. The police really hadn't been a help. Nor had her mother. Nor had the silly brochures. Nothing or no one had helped her.

Maybe it was time she tried to get herself out of this. Maybe there was another way to get rid of this guy. But what? She had tried patience—he never got tired of talking to her. She had tried, both pathetically and sternly, telling him to just leave her alone. She had even tried hanging up immediately when she knew it was him. That didn't work either because he would just call again—besides, the police said that was more a hindrance than a help.

His five minutes were just about up now so she decided to go ahead and hang up. So what if the police told her off. They weren't doing any good anyway. She had to do something for herself.

"Hello, Timothy. How are you doing? Honestly, I've had the longest day—how about you? Really? Well that's good to hear...that's real good, Timothy. Remember, don't get so upset when someone turns you down like that...yes...I'm sure you've turned people down yourself...ha ha...come on, Timothy, it's not that bad...How do I know? I don't know, I just know! Ha ha...where are you going tonight? Oh, really? That's a nice place—just stay calm, okay? Alright, have fun. Bye!"

She put the receiver down and smiled smugly. What a neat guy. Well, not really, he still had a long way to go—but look how far he'd come. And she had done it! No psychiatrist or social worker or anything! And look at him now—going out to the same singles' bars she went to—with half a chance as well.

It was strange to think that the same man who had given her obscene telephone calls was now someone with whom she was deeply involved—psychologically at least. It had been a long road—three weeks from obscenity to counsel. It started with Joan asking him questions about his childhood, his schooling, and his sex life. At first he didn't respond at all; he just kept telling her what he was going to do with her. But eventually he started answering her questions. "Yes" and "no" answers at first, then longer answers in which he told her just about everything there was to know about him. She eventually began to anticipate his calls—she became anxious if he didn't call. She told him this too.

She found out through these little sessions—some of them lasted an hour or more—that his name was Timothy, he was born and raised in town, and he worked at the Post Office. He had been married twice, but he was now a thirty-seven year old divorcee. He had no children, no relatives in town, and very few friends. Joan still didn't quite know why he had isolated himself so much. He wasn't particularly secure or social—sometimes he was really boring.

He had literally picked her name out of a telephone directory. He said he wasn't sorry he'd called her now because she had helped him so much. He was sorry he had upset her though—said he couldn't imagine doing that to

anyone now. Indeed, Joan had come along way in those few weeks. It was hard to build someone's confidence without really knowing them—but she had, and look where he stood now. Yet, she still wasn't sure she wanted to meet him in a bar or anything.

As ever, the telephone was ringing when she returned home on a Friday evening.

"I'm coming!" she yelled as she rushed into the apartment, "Just a minute, Timothy, okay?"

She put her groceries on the sofa just as one of them split open. Silly bags, they never gave you anything strong enough.

"Hello, Timothy! What? Who? Oh, hello, Guy. I'm sorry, I thought you were someone else. How are you? Good...I'm fine...tonight? Where? Okay, sure that sounds like fun...yeah..Timothy? No, I'm not...well, he's sort of a friend of mine...well, it's a long story...really Guy, you wouldn't be...well, he's this, um, man who gave me an obscene telephone call and I couldn't do anything about it...what? Yeah, he's a friend of mine you see because I tried to help him and now he calls me every day and we talk...what...what...hey! No...look, it's not sick...no Guy we just...Guy! It's not! Guy!—"

She slammed down the telephone and reached into her pocket for a handkerchief. What a bastard! And she really liked him too. Idiot! Just when she was getting somewhere with him, and he has to butt into something he doesn't understand.

She picked up the receiver and called her mother.

"Mother, it's me. Hi."

"Is anything the matter?" Her mother was aware of her daughter's relationship with Timothy, although she didn't really approve of it.

Now she was worried that something had gone wrong and that Timothy had upset Joan again.

"No, not really, Mother. Remember Guy?"

"The boy you met last week. I thought you two were getting on fairly well."

"Well, we were. In fact, he just called and asked me out tonight."

"Well, now what's the problem—is it getting too involved?"

"No, nothing like that, Mother. See, he found out about Timothy and he said it was sick and to just forget everything."

There was a brief silence on the line which told Joan her mother was thinking, "I told you so."

"Mother?"

"Yes, I'm here. I don't know what to tell you. You know how I feel about this whole thing right now."

"Yes, Mother." She didn't want to hear a lecture right now for Christ's sake.

"Mother, what should I do?"

Another pause, a long pause, as her mother thought. Finally she answered.

"Arrange a meeting. Lunch or dinner or something...make sure there are plenty of people around. Get things sorted out once and for all, Joan."

"Am I supposed to tell him to leave me alone?"

"No, not necessarily. Just make the relationship something more than 'I get calls from this obscene friend.'"

"I see. But what if he won't?"

"You'll just have to see."

"Alright. Bye, Mother."

"Hello, Mother?" This wasn't going to be easy for either one of them.

"Hello Joan, you're back already?"

"Mother, he never showed. I waited for two hours and he never showed. And he didn't call me at six tonight like he always does."

"Joan I just can't help thinking he didn't call you because he's calling some other poor lonely woman."

"Mother—"

"No, Joan! Get it into your head that this guy's just another sicko. He's just another one of those—"

"No he's NOT!!!" Joan slammed the receiver down, furious with her mother. She hadn't understood anything from the beginning. She had just kept up this facade of support to appease her daughter as you would appease a child. Well, Timothy was not sick—at least not any more. If there was anything she knew about him, it was that he was not sick.

Joan sat for a while, still angry with her mother. She sat, staring at the telephone, knowing it wasn't going to ring. She still didn't understand why he hadn't shown up. Was he that shy? Embarrassed? Entirely helpless?

As she sat there, her eye was suddenly caught by the movement of a piece of white paper sliding in under the door from outside. She jumped up and ran to the door—the paper was actually an envelope with her name printed boldly on the outside. Immediately she flung open the door to see who had delivered it. All she saw was a young boy about ten years old, running off down the street and around the corner.

She looked back at the envelope and slowly opened it. Inside was a small white card which read, "Thank you Joan. Love, Timothy."

