



# Character Sketch

*by Melinda Russell*

"So . . . This is it?" He held up the bottle of pills in front of my face.

"Sam, I can explain —"

"Oh, there's nothing to explain, lady. It's called suicide."

"No! Listen to me," I begged.

"How long? How long ago did you quit?" Sam went out of the kitchen into the den.

"Sam —"

"Answer me!"

"A few weeks ago. I don't know." I followed him.

"A few weeks . . . Ha, ha, ha! Oh! Brilliant joke, lady. The whole time pretending to me, lying to me!" He turned on me.

"Don't be hurt, Sam. Let me talk —"

"Hurt? Oh, right . . . Sure, think nothing about it. I quit taking the pills, so just stop thinking. I have cancer, but let's just forget that, too. C'mon, babel! I'm not stupid. Do you know what those pills do?"

"Yes! I damn well know what they do . . . Better than you do! They drain me, make me shake and mess my whole system up so I don't know what to expect next from my own body!" I pointed at the pills in furious contempt.

"Uh! I can't take . . . You're so utterly selfish! You think nothing of us, just —"

"It's for you I did it. I quit for you and —"

"And the kids, right? I hear the holy martyr in you alright! What else have you been lying about?" he accused.

"I don't believe you . . . I'm not going to talk about this anymore." I went back into the kitchen.

"What else? I have a right to know. I have a say in this. What about the radiation treatments, the rest of chemotherapy, too? The shots?" Sam grabbed me by the wrists.

"Call Dr. Saxson. You'd never believe me anyway!" With a long cold glare he let go of my wrists.

"You did . . . You quit the rest, too." The horror in his eyes pierced my heart. I looked away, biting my lip. "Hell, why didn't you just cut your wrists?"

"Will you listen to me? Hear me out."

"You just gave up! I can't believe the woman I married and the woman I love would just lie down and be defeated! You have three children out there! Two boys, ages seven and four and a precious little girl who is barely walking! You've got a fantastic home, a husband who loves you more than anything in this world. You've got so much, babe! How can you lose all of that without. . ." He was pale and frantic as he paced back and forth.

"Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I'm hurting - torn to pieces inside about dying?" I faced him.

"I'm not so sure anymore."

"Sam, give me a chance here to talk. Just a few minutes. . ."

"No! It's settled! You start taking the pills again. Tomorrow you'll go back to the doctor, apologize and start all over again. That's final!"

"I can't do that. . ."

"Take the damn pills! Now! So I can see for myself." He thrust the bottle into my hand. I let the bottle drop. "I thought you loved us, cared for us. . ."

"I do."

"Then prove it! If not for me, for the children's sake! For them!" His voice cracked.

"That's why I stopped, Sam! I thought it over and over. I talked with the doctors and shrinks. I even went to the Priest, Sam! The drugs just weren't working, Sam. Dr. Saxson wanted to start a whole new stock of experimental crap! I just couldn't take that again. Nothing is working. I've grown immune, even to the radiation. They had to increase the dosage three times in just nine months! And they wanted to increase the radiation again!"

"I know it's hard, babe."

"You don't know squat about it! You've managed to escape me as much as you can. . . Work, band rehearsal, bowling league. You don't know! I spent hours in the john getting sick. When I was not in the john, I was collapsed on the couch near exhaustion. Just picking up Molly for a kiss tired me! And to look at me then? Don't you think I knew why the boys didn't invite friends over anymore, and why Kit never told me about school open-house or plays?" I was quivering uncontrollably. "My hair fell out in clumps which were like patches of dry, dead weeds. I have bald places like some old man, places which I can't cover over anymore! Why? Because I don't have enough left to cover! And I was losing five pounds each day. I couldn't keep my food down or hold my water in. Even now I'm skin and bones. Clothes hang on me like I'm a sorry scarecrow. I'm a walking skeleton!"

"Honey —"

"No, don't interrupt me. You still turn the lights off when I get undressed.

You never touch me or hold me unless I plead with you, and even then you're cold and stiff about it. . . And I couldn't cope emotionally. I blew up at the slightest thing. The kids were scared to death of me. If I was not yelling, puking or panting, I was crying. They never knew what to expect from me. I couldn't remember anything. I couldn't have told you what I did yesterday if I were still on chemotherapy! The radiation turned me yellow and made me sick. The pills drained and confused me. The shots. . . Well —"

"But you're alive!"

"At what cost, Sam? You knew that wasn't me. Molly cried whenever I picked her up. Kit and Jamie winced when they had to be in the same room with me. They hated me. They wanted to hide me, escape from me. What kind of mother is that? They are still ashamed of me. And you're not any better. The band never comes around anymore or any of your friends. In fact, you're rarely here. I know where you've been at nights. I like Claessa, too, and I don't blame you."

"She means nothing to me. I love you, not her. Who is she?" He was nervous.

"You must sleep with her for a reason. I would hate to think you chose just anyone to mess around with, Sam. I can't blame you. I disgust myself. I'm ugly and not much of a wife. We fight daily, and I usually start it. I'm to blame. Right now we have no marriage. It's gone, but I want it back. I want you back. I want to be me again, to live and feel right again!"

"What you're doing is no better than suicide, Kate. You'll die!"

"I'll die anyway. With or without drugs, I still have cancer."

"But the drugs prolong the time we have with you. Time for your children to have a mother and for me to share my love with you. Time, babe. . ."

"The longer those artificial means keep me alive, the longer the torture would be for all of us. I feel good today, Sam. Haven't you noticed a change? Look! See my arms. There are no more bumps, red patches or knots. I don't feel like some unimportant pin cushion, and I haven't gotten sick in four hours! Four hours, Sam, think of it! Four extra hours for me to spend with the kids or you and not in the john. I played all morning with Molly. Honey, she didn't cry a sound when I held her. Jamie wants to bring Gavin over for lunch tomorrow. My weight has been steady for three days. Kit broke his milk glass this morning at breakfast, but I cleaned it up and kissed him good-bye. I can cope! I didn't yell or cry! Don't you see, babe?"

Sam just stared at me, not answering.

"I feel good. . . No, fantastic! This afternoon, I'm taking Molly to the park. It's a beautiful day. I've missed so much, Sam. It's like being reborn all over again. And my senses - I feel, smell, hear and see so vividly! I'm me again. I can think clearly again. I wrote poems last night while you slept. Poems, Sam! How long has it been since I've even tried to write again? Don't take this from me, Sam. I'm alive! I'm living and breathing."

"Probably for only three months since you stopped the treatment."

"But what full, joyful and intense remaining months."

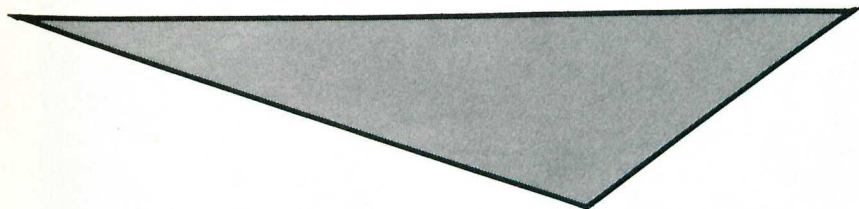
"Weeks, maybe."

"Yes, maybe days! It doesn't matter anymore as long as I have time enough to leave the memory of someone happy, fulfilled and beautiful. Each day now is like a precious gift that I can't afford to waste. I want to be ready to die, Sam. Ready to say I lived the best life, and I'm ready to move on. I don't want to hold regrets or worries on my deathbed."

"But can't you even fight back? Isn't life worth that much to you? To fight back?"

"It's worth living in, Sam. It's worth living to live. Fighting is like war or crime. It's death, not life. You're dying when you fight, so caught up in defeating death and in not dying. Death is the preoccupation, not life. I'm tired of dwelling on death and tired of struggling against an enemy I can't possibly beat. I'll live with cancer, but I refuse to die with cancer."

Sam turned away, silent. Moments later his shoulders heaved, and he sank down into the chair. He was sobbing, choking, and cursing.



## Brothers

*by C. Gard*

Drawn together for reasons never understood  
 Times shared, battles fought, happiness found.  
 Friendship is taken beyond its limits  
 It becomes something more—we become brothers.

Months pass—freedom is lost  
 Distances grow, caring deepens, strength increases.  
 We brothers are torn apart—as are our hearts  
 Struggling to survive—we triumph.

Reality is not to be trusted  
 Tears fall, embraces linger, voices sing.  
 Keep yesterday alive, but forget not tomorrow  
 Love survives—as do we brothers.

We are brothers, you and I  
 I live for you, and you for me.  
 Failures are shared, successes also  
 We are one, we can never again be divided.

The worries are many  
 Live through Monday, past Wednesday, for Friday.  
 When the two halves become again whole  
 We brothers are again united

Brother, my life is yours, yours mine  
 Living, Loving, Laughing, Crying.  
 All is shared, secrets are nonexistent  
 We will always be brothers, and together we will survive.

P.S. Mother sends her love