

MISSING

by Debbie Edwards

Allyson's missing.

And somehow psychological insights and philosophical interpretations of life's subtle paradoxes don't mean a damn thing. Because, when you come right down to it, it's who you care about. That's what makes your world. And it doesn't matter how you rationalize love, or caring, or commitment; it doesn't matter what you choose to **call** it. And all the theories about environment and social bonding — the technical aspects of **why** we love — seem hollow and cold. They are to fill white space in thick leather-bound volumes, to be read for class discussion. They are not meant for those of us who feel.

But I will join the sophists. I will ponder life's nuances from behind my over-sized desk in a barren, white office. And I will fill the long yellow sheets of my legal pad with captivating paragraphs which will touch the core of your conscience.

For I am a writer, and that is my job.

And with my words I will pluck that fine thread which unites humanity — I will make you care. And then, with my metaphors and symbolism, I will tell you why. Because people always want to know why, maybe they need to know why.

But it won't make you a better person; it won't change what you feel.

I outline the "Tuesday" heading on my appointment calendar. The pen line forms a fat bubble around the swollen, black cursive lettering. No one has heard from Allyson since last Saturday.

The words spill from my mind, and soon the pages are full. Perhaps another award-winning feature: The Plight of the City's Homeless. Glutted with stunning parallels and impassioned pleas. You will feel every block of copy. And I will have completed another day's work. I lay my pen on the textured vinyl edge of my desk pad. My head falls into my hands, and my eyes close. My fingers hold tightly to my head, intertwined in short, thick hair.

I could be sick right now, if I let my mind go. If I let myself feel — totally unrestrained — I would retch. My neck is tense, my stomach muscles rigid. I press my knees close together.

I let my fingers slip down the back of my neck to massage the top of my spine. My mind regains control of my body, and I stretch.

I've always had this power, this fantastic control over my feelings. The saying is "mind over matter," but "mind over emotions is much more valuable. I developed it when I was young, perfected it as the years passed, as the number of people I cared about grew larger.

I feel more deeply than others. I care too much. I'd bet you'd love for

me to tell you **why**. But it makes no difference. I know it is dangerous, and I keep tight reign on my emotions. If who you care about makes your world, and if you care too deeply, for too many, your feelings begin to tap the life from you. You become perilously vulnerable; your destiny is no longer your own.

So, out of self-preservation, I developed my power, my armor against these feelings. I bury my vulnerability deep within my body, and my mind is its sentinel. I put on my personality each morning, and I am protected. No one guesses the depth of my sensitivity. I lean on my loved ones constantly, but they are unaware of it. They hurt me, often, and never know it. To them, I am strong, a human fortress.

It all seems to balance out in the end, so far. But I worry, and I never, ever, forget.

"If you weren't my father, I wouldn't even like you — I just can't stand you." That's what I said to the man I've come to admire most in the world. To the one who shows me constant patience and understanding. To the one who taught me selflessness. And I'd shouted these words in rage, with a wicked glare. And I'd watched my dad's face lose its color as he hung his head. And I'd seen the water come to his brown eyes. And I'd heard his voice crack, then waver.

"Okay, if that's the way you feel."

And he'd closed my bedroom door.

At the time, I felt no regret. I was 14. Call it "growing pains." Sanctify it with rationale of adolescent behavior. Categorize it any way you choose. My dad has forgotten those words were ever spoken, but they linger in my mind. In that moment of anger, I'd hurt the one I love the most and, in doing so, hurt myself more than anyone else ever could. Even as I sit here, ten years later, the memory could move me to tears.

But I don't let it.

I hear the large window panes in my office shake, a nervous tremor. Must be a storm outside. Here, downtown, the buildings are so close that you can't see the sky through the windows, not without getting down on hands and knees and squinting upward. All I see from my desk is brick wall. I don't concern myself with the weather — it always looks like night.

Still, it's getting late, and I grab my briefcase and head out to my favorite delicatessen.

Sinking into the booth's red leatherette bench, I take a long drink of my Diet-Coke. A mound of stiff-looking macaroni and cheese sits before me in a small, ivory bowl. It is a perfect yellow ball; the lady used an ice cream scoop to spoon it up. My fork pulls at the mass, and soon a small rounded glob comes loose. It is soft and thick, with no particular taste at all. But I swallow each bite slowly, enjoying the warmth it brings. As I scan the evening paper, my stomach muscles tighten once again.

Allyson is missing.

My mind analyzes the situation, looking for a solution. Nothing can

happen to her — I care too much. No one close to me has ever died. I wonder how strong my power is. I wonder what would happen if I lost control.

My hand shakes, and I can hear the rattle of the ice cubes as I raise the foam cup to my lips. I catch two of the cool, slick cubes between my teeth. I hold them there, long after my drink is finished. I bite down hard and search for answers.

She was on her way back from Florida, spring break, and with another girl, Shirley, who I've only met through description in letters and references in conversation. They called Allyson's parents on Saturday from Chattanooga. There had been an accident. Allyson had whiplash, Shirley a broken arm. The car was being fixed, and they would be on their way back to campus in a few hours.

And hours turned into days as the phone lay silent.

I was called early Monday, her mother hoping she had stopped in Indianapolis on her way back to Carbondale. She hadn't. It's not really on her way at all.

And at that moment the tension started, building as the hours passed. My mind will work overtime tonight.

I leave some change for the busboy and make my way, through glass doors, to the wet city pavement. The rush-hour rain has given the city texture. Somehow, everything seems more tactile after a storm. The early evening sun shines through dark, rolling clouds and gives the streets an eerie glow. As I wait at the intersection of Washington and Pennsylvania, I spot him in an alcove.

The street painter. In worn, soiled clothing, with unwashed and uncut hair hanging from beneath a black stocking cap. His hands, with blackened nails, tremble.

He is dirty; he lies; he has too many vices.

And yet each morning he sets up his easel and pulls out a snow white canvas. He prepares his palette and cleans the metal blade that he paints with by scraping it on his shoe. Then, he wipes his shoe on the curb.

His paint is thick, unmixed acrylic. On cold mornings I've seen him warm the thin metal tubes by rolling them in his sticky hands.

His lungs are filled with phlegm, and he wheezes when he breathes deep.

Soon the blade will be bathed in bright, un-muted color. The paint lies thick on his canvas, uneven.

Everyday he stands in the same position, and everyday he paints the same picture. A portrait of a man with gaunt cheeks and sightless eyes. His lines are sharp, his colors bold. His art is the work of a madman.

Though the stoplight has changed many times, I stay to study his creation. I watch him stare into the crowd and then, with painstaking effort, paint a portrait of himself.

He disgusts me.

He is a man overcome with his own sentiments. He cares for no one. And today his art is more brutal than ever before.

The blade cuts wide strokes into the paint on the canvas. Looking through his greasy bangs, I see his milky, blue eyes. He stares at me for a moment, then quickly turns his head. He paints furiously. He must have cared once; there was too much pain in his glance.

And now I watch as a man reduced by the strength of his own emotions paints the only thing left that he is capable of caring for. He is not alive. He is a ghost.

My eyes fill with tears as the wash of colors slowly comes into full form. My muscles constrict, and my throat tightens. For today, the face on the canvas is mine. And I realize that I have to change — I must. Or I will soon become this man's comrade. The mind is not stronger than emotion — I have just been lucky.

I turn and make my way across the dark, wet concrete of the city street. A light drizzle begins to fall.

And Allyson is still missing.