

## Chapter One

*The first time ever I saw your face.* Ewan MacColl,  
recorded by Roberta Flack

It started innocently enough. Doesn't it always? They were seated by chance next to each other. He liked her pretty face, her soft East Texas voice, her quick wit. She liked his height, his handsome face, his laughter.

Sarah found her place card late, after everyone else was seated. She was at a back table with other friends from her book club and their husbands. (She was the only one without a husband.) The party planner had arranged them boy/girl; so Sarah found herself between Mark, husband of her dear friend Jacqueline, and, on her other side, Don and his wife Marge, the newest member of the book group.

Sarah had met Don briefly at the bar before dinner. After greeting her hosts, she walked over to the bar to get a glass of champagne. Rafael, Sarah's favorite waiter, was moonlighting as a bartender for the Williams' party. He smiled as Sarah approached.

"Good evening, Mrs. Townsend," he said. He quickly handed a drink to the tall man standing at the bar and then, without even waiting for Sarah's order, opened a chilled bottle of champagne and poured the effervescent, golden beverage down the side of a flute.

Don sat his glass down on the bar. "You must be Sarah Townsend," he said, extending his hand to Sarah. "Don Jamieson."

"Marge's husband?" Sarah asked, her voice showing her surprise. Sarah thought Marge rather drab. She talked about Rice University events so often that Sarah pictured Marge's husband as a retired Rice University professor, someone short and stocky, wearing a plaid wool jacket, smelling a little of pipe tobacco. The man at the bar did not fit that description! Not at all! Instead, he made her think of Leggett, the handsome business man she still remembered from the movie *Butterfield 8*, a movie she must have seen thirty years earlier.

After shaking hands, Don continued to hold Sarah's hand in his. Rafael set Sarah's champagne on the bar. From across the room, someone called Sarah's name. Only then did Don release her hand. She smiled at him, picked up her champagne, and with a quick "It's nice to meet you," turned and walked away.

Don stood at the bar a few minutes longer, just watching her. He knew he would have a chance to talk to her later. When he and Marge first arrived at the party, they surveyed the tables to determine where they were to be seated.

"You lucked out," Marge commented when she saw Sarah's name on the place card on Don's other side.

"Hi," Sarah said in greeting when she walked up to the table. Both Mark and Don stood up and reached to pull Sarah's chair out for her. A ripple of laughter circled the table when both men placed their hands on the back of Sarah's chair at the same time. Don laughed, too, and pulled his hand away, extending it in a gesture that said go ahead to Mark.

Sarah sat down, saying thank you to Mark and then turning to thank, Don, too. With the last guest at their table seated, everyone began to pick up forks and eat

the salads that had been placed on the table a few minutes before Sarah's arrival. Waiters circled their table, offering cabernet or pouilly fussie, Margaret's favorite wine, to each guest.

In celebration of their golden wedding anniversary, Jerry and Margaret Williams filled the vast Governor's Ballroom at Barton Creek Country Club with friends. Margaret's invitation was addressed to "Sarah Townsend & Guest," but Sarah, who was dating Roger at the time, did not want him at this party with her. He was an amusing man, but her friends at the club, all of whom were married, would see his being there as significant, and Sarah knew Roger never would be her significant other. She did not want her friends to assume he was and start treating them as a couple. It was such a Noah's ark world. Everything at Barton Creek, except working out and the ladies' lunches, was entered two by two. Social activities might as well have a big warning sign, COUPLES ONLY.

Don immediately engaged Sarah in conversation. Occasionally, she made a conscious effort to talk to Mark, as was only polite. Also, she did not want to make Marge jealous. But Don quickly reclaimed her attention. He asked her so many questions that she felt he soon would know her life story.

"You are such a beautiful woman," he said. "I can't understand why some man hasn't snatched you up already."

"Actually, somebody did. But after several sticky runs through the briar patch, I managed to get free."

Don's laughter caused several others at the table to stop talking and ask what was so funny.

"Sarah has been divorced twice," Marge announced to the table at large when Don repeated Sarah's response, but everyone else at the table had known Sarah for years; so this was not news to them.

"I think I listened to too many soap operas during my formative years," Sarah said. "We lived very near the elementary school; so I walked home every day for lunch. Mother always had the radio on. At eleven: thirty every day, we listened to *The Romance of Helen Trent*."

"Wasn't she the woman who proved that romance could begin at thirty-five and even beyond?" Mark intoned in the deep announcer's voice that everyone remembered from the time when their mothers, too, kept the radio on.

"I remember that one," Jackie said. "Helen was in love with Gil, whose estranged wife in name only caused all kinds of trouble for them."

Several diners laughed.

"My mother never missed *Stella Dallas*," Sharon, another book club member, said.

This discussion might have continued, but general conversation was interrupted by the waiters starting to remove the salad plates and serve the main course.

Sarah had selected fillet mignon. Don's choice was grilled salmon. But neither Don nor Sarah ate very much of their delicious entrees. Both were too engaged in their animated conversation. They leaned in toward each other as they talked. If Marge had turned to talk to Don, she might have noticed the obvious attraction, but the rest of the table was involved in a rather heated discussion of politics, and Marge was much more interested in that discussion.

Sarah was surprised to find herself telling Don many stories from her past—her childhood in a house of women, three sisters and a young and beautiful mother.

“All the high school boys had major crushes on her,” Sarah said. “Dad was a long haul truck driver. So he was home only one or two nights a week. His homecoming was always a cause for celebration, though. We had lots of company. Mother cooked chicken fried steak or, if we were in an R month, Daddy bought gulf oysters and pan sautéed them. Ummmm, so good!”

“An R month?” Don questioned.

“Yes. Daddy thought it was safe to eat oysters only during the months with an r. This eliminated the hot summer months. I guess because the warm gulf waters grow too many bacteria then. I was only 14 when Dad died of lung cancer. After that, we really were a house of women. And we no longer ate oysters. How about you, Don? Are your parents still alive?”

“Mother died last year, also of cancer, ovarian, not lung. She already was in her eighties. Dad moved to Austin after her death. “

“Do you have sisters and brothers?”

“No sisters, but I did have three brothers. So I guess our home was almost the opposite of your home—crowded with males. I don’t remember my father ever being away from home, although his second career would have taken him out of El Paso frequently. By then, all of us boys had left home, and Mother travelled with him.”

“What was that career?”

“He headed the cotton growers association. A bust of him is on display in the Department of Agriculture building in Washington, D. C.”

Sarah could hear the pride in Don’s voice. “Oh, so your dad was King of Cotton back when Cotton was King.”

Don smiled. “Your Dad must have been awfully young when he died.”

“Yes, he was only forty-two, a blue-eyed handsome man. Sometimes, when I date older men, people ask if I am looking for a father. But I tell them my father image is of a young, virile man!”

“Tough to compete with,” Don commented. “Do you think that is the real reason you still are single?”

In answer, Sarah only laughed.

Don never had been to Lindale. Actually, as he now confessed to Sarah, he never had even heard of Sarah’s home town, which she described with a mix of amusement and affection.

“What brought you to Austin?” he asked.

Sarah had been so open earlier that Don was surprised to see her hesitate over this question.

“Ah, a man,” he guessed out loud.

“No,” Sarah said. Momentarily, her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Don felt a strong desire to take her pretty face in his hands and kiss away her tears. “I didn’t mean to pry,” he said.

“I want to tell you, Don. Maybe some other time. Not at a party.”

After a brief pause, Sarah asked, “What brought you to Austin?”

“My reason probably is a lot more superficial. Chance played a big part. I had already made an offer on a house in Charlottesville, but the owner countered. I

decided to take a weekend to think about the counter. We were coming to Austin for my cousin's wedding. I spent a lot of time as a boy in Austin since Dad's family lived here. I always liked it. My cousin's wedding was here at Barton Creek, and when I saw the club's golf courses, I decided to move here instead. When we got back home, our real estate agent called and said the owner would reconsider and accept our offer on the house in Charlottesville, but I told her I had changed my mind. We were moving to Austin."

Sarah groaned. "Since I am a real estate broker, I feel sorry for your agent. Still I am happy you chose to retire in Austin."

"Do you think you ever will move back to Lindale?"

"Oh, no, definitely not. Austin is home now. I live a life I love, Don."

Most of his friends enjoyed extremely good fortune, but Don never had heard any of them make such an affirmation. Sarah fascinated him. He did not want the dinner to end.

Sarah had decided before the party that she would skip the dancing. After dinner, the sound of a big band playing hits from the 40s and 50s tempted her to stay and listen. But she had discovered years earlier that dancing did not work when she went to parties where all the other guests were married couples. So after just a brief time, she said her goodbyes to the friends at her table and went to find her hosts. Don was sorry Sarah was leaving. He wasn't very fond of dancing, but if Sarah stayed, he would ask her to dance. He wanted the chance to put his hands on her slim waist.

As she exited the ballroom, Don walked up beside her.

"Too bad we did not meet at another time," he said. "We could have been great pals."

Sarah replied, "We can be great pals anyway."

Her words lingered in Don's mind even after he and Marge left the party and went home. Don, always a light sleeper, was far too excited to sleep. What was going on? He felt like a teenager. He could not stop thinking about Sarah. He could almost hear the sound of her laughter, see her smile. Her full lips looked sexy, inviting. He wondered what it would be like to kiss those lips. He finally fell asleep with her image in his mind, a picture that morphed into wonderful dreams.

After breakfast the next morning, he looked up Sarah's address in the Barton Creek directory and actually drove by her house, no easy feat. Sarah lived in a condo on a ridge line above Barton Creek. Finding his way along the winding roads was a challenge. After several wrong turns, he located the complex and turned into the driveway, only to discover that it ended in front of Sarah's home. He had no choice except to turn around in her driveway. What would she think if she came out and saw him? He could hardly say he was just passing by. Still, a part of him hoped she would walk out of her house. He would have to confess how much she intrigued him.

But Sarah's door did not open. She was not at home. Sarah was walking around Town Lake with her daughter, Susan. The morning was beautiful, incredibly beautiful, as a spring morning in Austin can sometimes be. Redbud trees still were in almost full bloom, their lacy mauve/red blossoms now broken with deep green leaves. Sarah looked up and saw the slim, twisting branches outlined against a blue, blue sky. She still felt high from the fun she had last night

at Margaret Williams' party. She told her daughter about the man she had been seated next to at dinner.

"This is exactly the kind of man I want, Susie, and I don't want to settle for anything else," Sarah declared.

No, this was not a twenty-three year old girl talking, but a woman who soon would be sixty. Incredible! If she had said, "I was fifty years old when I fell passionately in love," the baby boomers would have smiled and looked forward with more hope. But to be sixty, almost unbelievable!

Her parting comment notwithstanding, Sarah really did not expect that she and Don would become great pals. Don had lived in Austin for more than two years, only a couple of miles from Sarah's home. She had even been in his new home (for a book club luncheon), but she had never met him. She did not even have a fantasy about seeing him again. She just hoped she would be lucky enough to meet someone else like him, someone who would delight her in the same way. But, of course, she wanted that man to be single.

To her surprise, when she returned home from her walk, Sarah opened her email to find this message:

**Subject:** Meeting you

**Date:** Sunday 7 April 2002

Sarah,

It was my pleasure and good fortune to be the beneficiary of random seating. Thanks for an entertaining evening and I'll look forward to seeing my new Pal again.

Don

She was amazed. He had not asked for her email address. He told her later that he searched for Sarah Townsend, Realtor and her name with a link to her WEB site had been the first to come up. In 2002, Sarah was not yet using Google to find people; so hearing from Don was a total surprise. She was very pleased and sent off a quick reply saying that the pleasure and good fortune were hers.

**Subject:** Re: Meeting you

**Date:** Sunday 7 April 2002

Don,

What a nice surprise to have a message from you.

This morning as I was walking around Town Lake, I told my daughter about how delightful I had found our conversation. I am afraid I was having so much fun talking to you that I was discourteous to others at our table.

You made the evening much more fun for me.

Sarah

She did not hear from him again for several days. She thought about him though each time she passed his house on her way to workout at Barton Creek. She did not know he was away from home until a second email arrived.

**Subject:** Greetings from Aspen

**Date:** Wednesday 10 April 2002

Sarah,

Greetings from Aspen/Snowmass where the crowds are long gone, the snow is marginal, at best, the good restaurants are closed for the season, and the young are suffering annual sap rising rites. I have been thinking about what a fun

evening I had talking to you and bouncing that against (among other things) the realities of I'm not interested in buying or selling property, you are a dangerous looking woman, and I have not crossed your path in the two and a half years I have lived in Austin.....so, with chances of "paling around" to continue this wonderful conversation about zero....I wonder if you would be up for an occasional email Pen Palship?

Cheers,  
Don.

Sarah was delighted. She could not see any reason why chances to continue their conversation in person should be "about zero," but email did make staying in touch easy. Sarah immediately replied:

**Subject:** Aspen

**Date:** Wednesday 10 April 2002

Don, I wish I were in Aspen even with marginal snow. I have never been there. I think I told you that skiing Aspen is on my list of twenty things I want to do in the next five years.

So, shall we have lunch one day or meet downtown for cappuccino on one of your volunteer days?

Sarah

Sarah had many friends who were men; she did not see any reason she and Don should not be friends. Still, she must have had some misgivings since she asked the advice of her friend Marlene Ross. Marlene had grown up in East Texas with Sarah but now lived, as she liked to say, "on a tropical island," Galveston, Texas.

Sarah forwarded the two messages from Don to her friend.

**Subject:** My new friend

**Date:** Wednesday 10 April 2002

Marlene,

You probably wonder why in the world I am sending you these messages, but it is because I want to tell a friend how much fun I had at a party at Barton Creek Country Club. Margaret Williams, who probably is the world's sweetest and least pretentious lady, had carefully arranged seating so that all her guests would be near people they would enjoy. I was seated with book club friends. Mark and Jackie were on my right, and Marge, a lady from my book club, and her husband Don on my left. Anyway, Marge probably is the least friendly member of our club. Her husband was a delight. He kept me laughing all through dinner.

To my surprise, I have received these two emails from him, which I have forwarded to you.

I would like to see him, but I do not want to jeopardize the good will I have with my women friends at Barton Creek. Does his saying I look like a dangerous woman mean he is sexually attracted to me? Isn't that usually the case when a man wants to be friends with a woman?

By the way, I would not let Roger go to the party with me because he is not really a significant other in my life. Still, he is so much fun that I hope you will be in Austin soon and meet him.

Sarah

Marlene did not see Sarah's email until Thursday morning, but as soon as she read it, she shot back a reply.

**Subject:** Your new friend

**Date:** Thursday 11 April 2002

You don't need for me to answer this question. You know you shouldn't have lunch if he's your book club friend's hubby and you don't want to jeopardize your friendship with her. And you know he's interested in you sexually; isn't every guy you meet? Get Serious!

The doc is in!

Marlene

But did Sarah listen? On, Friday, a very busy day, when Sarah was trying to work as fast as she could to clear all the paper work that had to be done before she left that day, another message from Don appeared on her computer.

**Subject:** Lists

**Date:** Friday 12 April 2002

Sarah,

So what are some of the other items on your to do list?

Lunch probably will not work out next week, but maybe the week after. It's so hot the snow is going fast. The kids are skiing in shorts. My friends and I will be lucky to ski through Sunday. Where else have you been skiing?

Don

Sarah quickly typed into the computer:

**Subject:** Re: Lists

**Date:** Friday 12 April 2002

Hi Don,

On this morning when I cut my workout short because I had to be in the office early, I am taking time to answer you.

What does that tell me?

Mother will be visiting tomorrow through Wednesday (while I have her house painted); so week after next will be better for me, too.

More later today, including the answer to your question about skiing. Montana is my favorite place in America for skiing or hiking or living.

Sarah

Don must still have been at the computer because his reply came back in minutes.

**Subject:** Questions and Answers

**Date:** Friday 12 April 2002

Probably tells you that we share a restless streak and both enjoy getting to know a new fun person.

I would never ask for the full list of your top twenty, but I would like to know two or three items on your list.

Did you get your mother a house that requires major maintenance?

Montana is too cold.

Do you work every day?

Don.

**Subject:** More questions and answers

**Date:** Monday 15 April 2002

Don,

Are you back in Austin? Did you know I have been in your home? It is lovely. Mother's home requires very little maintenance. I bought it in 1983 and am repainting, reroofing, replacing some appliances, etc. for the first time.

Mother is in Austin through Wednesday; so I am working very reduced hours.

Do you play golf every day? How often really?

Sarah

**Subject:** Getting to know you

**Date:** Monday 15 April 2002

Yep, just got back this afternoon. Sorry I missed you when you were here.

My schedule varies, but if left alone I play Monday (after Fallen Angels at the church), Wednesday, Friday mornings at the Austin Golf Club, Tuesday at Barton Creek before library duty, and Thursday afternoon at the Austin Dogfight.

Monomania?

So just how reduced is your work schedule this week and what's your normal week like? Do you work at home as well as the office? How about sharing a couple of your top 20 to do's? So much to know and so little time.

Don

Sarah was busy with her mother and not even checking messages from home; so she did not reply until Wednesday.

**Subject:** Re: Getting to know you

**Date:** Wednesday 17 April 2002

Don,

I worked a very abbreviated schedule this week, which is the reason I am opening your email on Wednesday afternoon. Mother has been visiting me since Saturday. She is 83, and this is her first Austin visit since 1999; so having her here was a special treat. She left at eleven today.

Actually, the very first thing written on my list is ski Aspen. I have never been there. Another is to take a Spanish course in San Miguel. I have that booked August 1-10. Another is to take a bicycle trip through Ireland. Stay in a New England B & B in autumn.

So many fun things to do, but I am embarrassed to note how selfish my list sounds!

In case you ever want to talk on the telephone, my home number is 327-4102.

Sarah

Don did want to telephone, but he had a cell phone plan that listed every phone call he made. Marge, who had majored in accounting at Rice, perused all their bills. Don determined to research a different cell phone plan. But for now, he would play it smart and keep the line of communication open by email.

**Subject:** Lists

**Date:** Wednesday 17 April 2002

Hi Sarah,

Sounds like you had a great visit with your Mother.

It certainly does not seem selfish to me for one who gives to others as much as you do to have a wish list of personal to do's and I am impressed that you are getting on with doing them.

Thanks for your phone number. How many days per week do you work and what sort of schedule do you maintain?

Don

**Subject:** My schedule

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Don, the biggest negative about the career I have chosen is that residential real estate brokers tend to work seven days a week. For example, I have a listing appointment at eleven Saturday and an open house from one to three Sunday afternoon. But one of the biggest positives is that our hours are flexible. So I can take time to do the things I love and to be with people I enjoy.

I actually know very little about you, Don, except that you are bright and fun and the kind of man who helps other people.

Oh, and that golf is your passion.

I want to know much more.

Sarah

**Subject:** A few details

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Well, Sarah, let's start with (based on one short evening of data) what seems to me to be our common traits.....interesting and aggressive listeners, fun, fit, adventurous, inquisitive, smart, usually wise, hard working, caring, sharing, ambitious, and successful outdoorsy middle aged "to do" list making people who think about seizing the moment more often than we do. I have equal passions of golf and skiing, and I drink more beer. You are flashier, more gregarious, like cooler climates, probably more intellectual, and devastatingly attractive. Guess we will have to spend some time together, which I will look forward to, to sort out our respective personalities. (Anyone else read your email?)

Don

**Subject:** Re: A few details

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Don, my email and voice mail on all telephones—office, cell, home—are private.

At any rate, I am not very at risk since I am single and own the company.

How at risk am I that anyone else reads my emails to you? The only risk I run is that my married women friends will feel threatened by my being friends with someone else's husband.

Actually the spark that we seem to have is very rare, at least in my experience. I think it is an essential component of all friendships. These friendships do not always develop because of time or other constraints. But without that spark, even people we see often remain on the periphery of our lives.

I actually wrote more here and then deleted it.

I doubt that I am "more intellectual."

Thank you very much for describing me as "devastatingly attractive."

Sarah

**Subject:** Email

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Sarah San,

Sorry to hear that you deleted something that you wrote because the spark needs honest, straightforward, unfiltered Pal-Ship communication. Of course, my email is only for me as I am not pissing off anyone over a special female friendship, especially an embryonic one! And since I have seen you only once there is always the chance that the devastation will be less (or more) severe next time.

More later.

Do you do email at home?

Cheers,

Don

**Subject:** My favorite things

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Don,

One more message before I leave. I am meeting a friend for drinks at Canyon Cafe and a little dancing at Tangerine's with friends from our West Coast swing dance class. (I was a dance school dropout! Same old story—not enough time.) I hope we have some more cool days. Maybe you could join me for some of my favorite Austin activities—hiking Pedernales Falls, riding my bike at McKinney Falls, strolling through the Umlauf sculpture gardens, watching sunset from my deck.

Will you and Marge be going to the Umlauf Garden Party, their annual fundraiser which is so much fun? If you do not have an invitation, go to [www.umlaufsculpture.org/gardenparty.html](http://www.umlaufsculpture.org/gardenparty.html).

Sarah

**Subject:** More questions

**Date:** Thursday 18 April 2002

Sarah San,

I'm not familiar with Umlauf Gardens (or sunset from your deck for that matter) so I guess we will not be going to their fundraiser. Do you have a road or mountain bike? Do you cook? If so, are you chef or tolerable level? When do you go to the spa at the club? What are your normal Monday through Friday working hours? And how long have you been blonde?

Yea, I know I'm nosey, at times out of line. How many really great pen pals do you have? And how early tomorrow afternoon could you have that cappuccino?

Don

**Subject:** Today

**Date:** Friday 19 April 2002

Don,

Unfortunately, I am just now opening your email; so no cappuccino this afternoon. I was away from work most of the morning. I attended a memorial service for a dear friend who was a member of our book club, although Marge will not have known her since she was too ill to attend before you moved here. I was their agent when they bought their home at Barton Creek. We looked at houses every day from nine to four and then went to the club for drinks and conversation. It was August and hotter than Hades, but Sandra was determined to return to Austin and her friends at Barton Creek. Her husband agreed to telecommute to

his job in Boston so she could live here. They knew at that time that she was unlikely ever to recover fully from her repeated bouts with cancer, and she very much enjoyed her friends at the club.

This is not a very cheerful note, but if we are to be friends, then I want to communicate whatever is significant to me at the moment.

To answer your questions: I work out on weights around six a.m. Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. Sometimes, I return to the club for Stairmaster in the evenings. I don't like to get that sweaty in the morning because I would have to take time to shampoo my hair.

Speaking of hair, as a child, I had very blond, nearly white, hair. I actually first bleached it in high school. Over the years, I have had various shades of blond or light brown, now my natural hair color. Why?

I have a mountain bike and my favorite ride is Boreas Pass in Breckenridge, Colorado.

I rarely cook, and when I do, it definitely is not chef. Do you? I hope so!

I occasionally get interesting emails from Marlene, who has been a friend since we taught school together at Robert E. Lee in Tyler, and from Abeba, a friend who lives in London. Otherwise, you are my only pen pal.

Yes, I have email at home and sometimes check it on the weekend. I'll probably be more motivated to do that now.

Tell me something about your life, past as well as present. Start with your work. What did you do? Where did you do it?

Did you ever see the play *The Irish and How We Got this Way*?

I think you told me you have two adult children. Do I remember that correctly? And one lives in Dallas? But I do not remember what you told me about your other child.

Sarah

**Subject:** Re: Today

**Date:** Friday 19 April 2002

Hi Sarah,

Must have been a tough day for you and probably many tough weeks and months watching a close friend battle cancer. And, you bet, friends share all feelings surrounding the ups and downs in life.

You and Marlene (I hope she still lives in Tyler) can relax. I'm not in the apparently long line of guys trying to get into your pants (cute as they are) and will be more than happy with whatever course our friendship follows.

Mind if I call you Sparky?

No idea why I asked about hair color. It just popped into my head. I once heard that one of the secrets of a happy life is to pick a hair color in high school and stick with it.

A few trips to Central Market Cooking School make me an advanced beginner, but I do like it and have a few wonderful dishes. Actually, I thought about going to culinary school full time shortly after I retired, but decided I was not quite that anal.

Our son (36) and his wife live in Dallas and they have two little girls plus a boy due in July. Our daughter (33) is in Denver with her husband and one two year old boy. Grand Parenting is an absolute hoot.

I'll think about what to share about my Navy and GE experiences...maybe a few of my more unusual stories and a secret or two along the way, but I cannot start now as we have guests coming for dinner.

More later.

Cheers,

Don

On Saturday, he sent more details.

**Subject:** A short bio

**Date:** Saturday 20 April 2002

Hi Sparky,

First, a short bio: Born Houston 1941, one of four boys, moved to El Paso at eleven and stayed until Rice. Engineering and Naval ROTC, graduated, commissioned and married in the same week in 1964. I am not slow. Rice is a five year engineering program, and, yes, I never had my own room. Two years in the navy in Hawaii, engineering officer on a destroyer, seven months in South China Sea.

I joined GE in 1966, engineering, sales, marketing, minor management, MBA, major management. Best assignment two weeks in Europe every month for three years. Family not thrilled. Became great coach, team builder, mentor and business leader (modestly speaking). I'll bore you with more specifics over drinks some day.

Second, I would like to spend some time with you without your or my friends getting hyper and over analyzing this initial chemistry experiment; so lunch downtown does not sound like the best idea. How about coffee, drinks, cooking, hiking the green belt, driving up to see my rich college roommate's lake house under construction on Inks Lake (I told him I would go up soon and report on progress. He lives in California), watching the sun go down or up, whatever? I hate over planning or scheduling. (Hope you are spontaneous.) My windows this next week are Monday 3:30 to 6:30 p. m., Tuesday 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., and Wednesday 1:30 p.m. to Friday 5:00 p.m. Marge is going to visit friends for a couple of days; so maybe you can work one or more of the above into your busy schedule.

Re-reading this, it sounds more of a big rush than intended...just trying to find a way to have a great, relaxed, extended chat.

Hope you listed a big one today.

Cheers,

Don

Before Sarah responded to this email, Don sent another.

**Subject:** *The Irish and How We Got this Way*

**Date:** Saturday 20 April 2002

Hi again,

Never saw the play but we are going to Ireland in June so maybe I will become more learned.

**Subject:** Friendship

**Date:** Saturday 20 April 2002

Don,

I like your notes.

The play is by Frank McCourt (I think the name is right), author of *Angela's Ashes*. It weaves Irish history around Irish music, all the way from *Danny Boy* to U 2. I very much recommend it, especially if you are going to Ireland. I saw it in Chicago.

Marlene lives in Galveston now. She remarried about four years ago and said she felt as if she had won the lottery. Isn't that terrific!

I could meet you for a cappuccino at 1:30 Wednesday, but I would need to be back for a 3:00 appointment. If you are around, meeting would be fun. None of my Barton Creek friends ever are around the downtown coffee shops.

I think you would be a delicious friend, and I hate to eliminate the possibilities just because you are a man and I a woman.

I don't think anything about you could or would be boring.

And I agree about protecting our privacy. Except for the initial emails to Marlene, I have not discussed our "spark".

Oh, but I did tell someone that I know you and Marge. I met one of your golf buddies. I can't remember if his name was Mike Green or Bob Green. His wife Jane also is from East Texas. They are fun.

Sarah

**Subject:** Getting to know you

**Date:** Monday 22 April 2002

Hi Sparky,

I hope that McCourt's plays are a touch lighter than his books, but I did very much enjoy *Tis*.

Mike and Jane Green are first-rate people, and Mike may have told you that we went to the same high school in El Paso.

Unless attacked by a pack of wild dogs, I will see you Wednesday any place that will be convenient for you. The Slacker is completely flexible; so if you prefer to meet after your 3:00 appointment, just let me know.

In the spirit of trying not to be too cool and sharing everything, I trust that, being single, your early acquaintance immunity is higher than mine because I have to admit to a case of the tingles that have not been around for a long time. Like my favorite bumper sticker says, "It's never too late for a happy childhood!"

Cheers,

Don

**Subject:** Greetings from your pen pal

**Date:** Monday 22 April 2002

Don,

I am home in the daytime. Such a luxury. I had a two p.m. closing in Westlake; so I decided to give myself the rest of the day at home. I had opened your email just before I left the office. Even though I slept very little last night, I entered the closing with such a smile on my face that the escrow officer asked if I had just come back from vacation.

Yes, I have spent twenty years of my adult life single, and I am rich in friends, but, Don, it is very rare for anyone to make me feel as high and delighted as I felt talking to you.

As a young girl, I always meant to have a pen pal but somehow never did. This is fun. Given how you make me feel, we should be meeting at Amy's Ice Cream.

Let's meet at CC's coffee shop at Fifth and Lamar at 1:30 Wednesday.  
Sarah

Having Don as a pen pal was fun. Sarah found herself checking email often, always enjoying the anticipation. Would she have mail? Would she have a message from her new friend? She felt a momentary delight each time a message from Don appeared on the screen.

**Subject:** Sleepless in Austin

**Date:** Monday 22 April 2002

And I thought only guys had that sleeping through the night problem. If I had known the hours you were awake I would have considered giving you a call as I wondered the house from 1:00 to 3:00 last night. I hope your lack of sleep was caused by too much fun and not like one of my middle of the night events where I run through every possible thought and idea, just cannot stop the avalanche of thoughts.

And what is a "delicious" friend? Whatever it is, count me in. You are more than great fun, and I'm game for Amy's Ice Cream anytime.

Don

**Subject:** Re: Sleepless in Austin

**Date:** Monday 22 April 2002

Don, this is the second night in a row that I have done that awake at three a.m. routine; so I finally got up at 3:30. I often do this when I am troubled, but I am not now; so I do not know what is causing these sleepless nights.

It will be fun to have a friend who actually will eat ice cream!

Sarah

**Subject:** Greetings from your sleepy pen pal

**Date:** Tuesday 23 April 2002

Sarah,

My experience is that in addition to troubles, sleeplessness seems to increase with restlessness, age, too much cappuccino and not enough chunky monkey. A bit spooky, but I've been awake since three this morning as well.

Sarah, if for any reason you get stuck and need to reach me, my cell phone is 512-750-2824.

Don

**Subject:** See you tomorrow

**Date:** Tuesday 23 April 2002

Thanks. I'll call you if a problem comes up. But it would have to be very important for me to give up our long awaited real time conversation.

Susie, my daughter, and I are hiking the Barton Creek greenbelt tomorrow at 6:30 a.m. I plan a quick weight workout at the club first. We'll see if I am ready to be awake and moving that early. After our walk, Susie and I are having breakfast together at La Madelaine in The Village. So I will go in very late. Then I am meeting you at 1:30 and having a massage at three; so that doesn't leave very much time for work tomorrow.

Doesn't tomorrow sound like a fun day?

Would you like to go to my Bible study breakfast Thursday at seven a.m.? I'll tell you a bit about the group tomorrow. They are very interesting people.

Sarah.

**Subject:** Your schedule

**Date:** Wednesday 24 April 2002

Sarah,

Sounds like a fun day. And my! What an early bird! Do you retire after massage to get ready for Bible study?

Hope you are sleeping better than I am.

Don

Sarah didn't sleep well at all on Tuesday night, and she definitely did not make the early morning workout. Quite the contrary, she showed up fifteen minutes late at the greenbelt, getting off to a bad beginning for the walk with her daughter.

Of course, the late start would make her late getting into the office. Nevertheless, she took time to shower and shampoo her hair. Sarah dressed carefully, choosing her favorite pink summer cotton sweater, the one with open embroidery at the shoulders. She paired it with black slacks and high-heeled sandals. Of course, crises came up at work and she left the office late. She kicked the high-heeled sandals off to make driving easier, found the traffic frustrating, and pulled into the parking lot twenty minutes late! Her own rule was to wait no more than fifteen minutes for another person. Then, when Sarah hurried to put her sandals back on, the ankle strap slipped out and disappeared under the car seat. Hastily trying to extricate the caught strap from under her seat, she managed to catch the top of her hand on the same hook that was entangling the buckle of her sandals, ripping the skin on the top of her hand. So finally, breathless and late, her hand bleeding profusely, she gave up and walked into the coffee shop with her shoe unbuckled and her hand bleeding.

She saw him at once. He was sitting at a small table in front of the windows. He was wearing khakis and a short-sleeved golf shirt. He looked casual and even more handsome than she remembered. He was reading the newspaper, but when he looked up and saw her, she observed, with pleasure, that his face actually brightened. She apologized for being late, but he already had spotted the blood on her hand and no apology was necessary.

"Sarah, you've cut your hand," he said, instead of hello. Immediately, he rose to get napkins and water to clean the wound. He sat across the table from her, their hands on top of the small table. He held her hand in his left hand and gently, with his right hand, pressed the damp napkin against her cut, cleaning the wound and, finally, stopping the bleeding. He thought Sarah looked young and vulnerable with her flushed cheeks and her injured hand, now cradled in his much larger hands.

"How did you do this?" he asked.

Don laughed at her description. "So I was not the only one who was nervous about this meeting." he said.

Sarah only smiled at this comment.

"What will you drink?" Don asked.

"A cappuccino with whole milk, please."

Don got up to order her drink and Sarah watched him with pleasure. She saw the barista, a girl who looked about twenty, smile at him. He was such a good looking man. She knew why she had been nervous about this meeting. She definitely was attracted to him.

But she did not think this attraction was “dangerous”. Such attraction is not uncommon when men and women first meet. If they do not act on it, in time they are only occasionally sexually aware of each other. Many of Sarah’s really good friendships with men had started this way. She was confident she and Don would be friends for many years, and she was happy this very interesting man had come into her life.

Yet on some level, Sarah did know this time was different, this man was different. When she met the husbands of other friends by chance or because of business, she never hesitated to mention the meeting to the wife or to other friends. But this time, she told no one, not even her daughter.

Sarah liked being in the coffee shop with its wonderful aromas, the robust smell of freshly roasted coffee beans and the sweet scent of warm milk. Don waited for her cappuccino. He looked very tall next to the coffee bar and the much smaller baristas. He caught her eye and smiled.

Don felt relieved to see that in the day time, Sarah did not look quite as sexy as he had remembered, but he found her girl next door daytime look even more appealing.

When he returned with her cappuccino, Sarah said “Thank you.” And then, “I saw your name on the cover of *Good Life Magazine*, but the article turned out to be about a retired Methodist minister who celebrated his eighty-fifth birthday by rafting the Colorado River.”

“That would be my Uncle Don.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I come from a long line of Methodist ministers, Sarah, my grandfather, my great grandfather, and I think even a generation or two before that. Dad didn’t want to be a minister, but Uncle Don has carried on the family tradition.”

“So is Uncle Don’s son a minister?”

“No, he doesn’t have a son. I think Mother designated me for that role. She certainly came down on me hard enough anytime I did any of the things that normal boys do.”

“Oh?” Sarah said, but Don did not elaborate.

“Did your Mother work outside the home?” Sarah asked.

“No, but she handled the family finances. She was very frugal. She always saved money from her household allowance, and she was a smart investor. She saved enough money to send all her boys to college if we would go two years to the junior college in El Paso and then to the University of Texas, where my father had gone. But I couldn’t wait to get out of El Paso. So I applied to Rice and enrolled in their navel ROTC program to help cover expenses.”

“I am impressed that you graduated from Rice.” Sarah said. “What was it like to be a student there during the sixties?”

“Damn hard. But fun, too.” Don replied. He told Sarah several stories, less about his studies and more about two of his roommates, Wally and Mike, close friends to this day. Wally was a lawyer in Houston, living near Rice University,

and Mike, who had made millions in high tech, was on the Rice Board of Trustees. His primary home was in California, but he was building a second home at Inks Lake.

Sarah was having such a good time that she completely lost track of the time. She glanced at her watch and was amazed to see that it already was 3:20, too late to call and cancel her massage. She would be very late.

“Don, I’m so sorry.” Sarah said, “I have to leave this very minute.”

But she was delayed a few minutes longer since Don insisted on walking her to her car. When he opened the door for her, Sarah thought he was about to kiss her.

Don had the same feeling. It just seemed like the thing to do, but he hesitated, and Sarah quickly slipped under the wheel and turned her key in the ignition.

Even though Sarah missed most of her massage appointment, she had no regrets. She paid the masseuse the full hour fee and left feeling better than any full hour massage ever had made her feel.