

## Going Under

You see, I really loved her. Not like the others. All the guys who told her they loved her. When all they really cared about was taking advantage.

Her name was Brenda. Brenda Hill. She came to our town last summer, right before we started eighth grade. The summer of 1954. The summer I decided to take Jesus as my personal savior and be baptized at First Baptist.

That day I was picking up my stack of papers for my afternoon route in front of the Langston Apartments, the way I always did, and there she was, out front on the concrete steps, just sitting there.

"Hi there, paperboy," she said. It was sticky hot, and she had on white shorts and a pink checked halter top, and she was barefoot. Her brown hair was short and brushed back in what they call a duck tail. And her eyes were deep black-brown.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Gordon. Are you new here or just visiting?"

"Moved in yesterday," she said. "And I'm about to melt."

Her face and shoulders were sunburned, not tanned brown like the rest of us, so I figured she was new to the southern weather.

"Where you from?" I asked.

"All over," she said. "We move a lot."

I liked her from the first. She was friendly and pretty and we had some nice talks. She was usually sitting on the steps when I came by to pick up my papers, and I would sit down beside her to roll them. Then she'd help me load up my bike basket with the rolled up newspapers. That's how I've been saving for college. They pay me to ride my bicycle through town and throw newspapers onto the front porches without having to stop. It's good money.

Brenda told me she had lived in Washington D.C. and Florida and even California. Her dad was retired military. And her mama was a secretary.

She started bringing me a glass of lemonade every afternoon, and I'd tell her about the teachers at school and who the nice kids were and the ones she should avoid. I told her about Reverend Keeling at our

Church, how he was somebody you could talk to and he'd listen. I was too shy to ask her for a date. I was too shy to ask anyone for a date. I just liked her, liked talking to her, and looking at her, she was so pretty.

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I didn't see much of her after school started that fall. She showed up now and then on the steps to chat, but I had to wait until after football practice to deliver my papers, and it was too cold by that time for sitting around.

Then one afternoon after practice, Joey Kinser, a ninth grader and the j.v. quarterback, started talking about how that new girl, Brenda, was a hot ticket. He said he'd taken to going to her apartment after practice, and her mama worked, so she wasn't home. They'd drink lemonade or something first and pretend to do homework. Then they'd start French kissing.

"No shit!" Bobby Crumpton said.

"Scout's honor," Joey said. "She starts it. She drops her pencil or something and slides over close to me to pick it up. Then she takes off my glasses and says, 'You got such blue eyes, Joey.' Which makes me turn and look at her. Then she laughs and looks closer, right into my eyes. I get the message she wants something. So I lean forward and put my hand on her tit. You know."

We didn't, but we wanted to.

Joey held back a minute, pulling us in. "Aw, I shouldn't tell you this stuff. She wouldn't like it."

So we begged.

"You get a hard on?" Bobby asked.

Joey laughed. "How else do you think I get it in, dickhead?"

"I don't believe you," I said. I thought of Brenda and how pretty she was and how much I liked her.

"You're such a kid, Gordy," he said, "She loves it."

"Where's her dad?" I asked.

"I never saw any dad," Joey said. "I don't think she has one."

"She does," I said, but nobody listened.

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After that I'd see them together, in the halls at school or after the games. I'd see her rushing onto the field with everybody else. Joey would be all sweaty and his uniform would be muddy, and he'd put his arm around her shoulder and walk off the field, waving at his friends like some hero. And she'd be looking up at him and laughing. I wanted to kill him.

No, I wanted to tell her what kind of things he was saying about her. All the lies and bragging. But I didn't get a chance, because Joey's mama put an end to it. Somehow she got wind of what Joey was up to and started making him come right home after practice. I still didn't believe him, but then other guys, Bobby Crumpton and Billy Sizer and others, guys whose mothers didn't go to First Baptist like the rest of us, started talking.

"You going up to Brenda's today?" one of them would say.

"Nah. It's your turn." And they'd laugh.

Bobby would look at me and say, "How 'bout it, Gordy? All you have to do is tell her you love her. And then watch out for your braces."

I hated him.

But it started me thinking. I'd never kissed a girl, never even had a girlfriend. Maybe Brenda was the place to start. She was the only girl I'd ever felt comfortable just talking with. I thought I might tell her what the guys were saying and promise to set the story straight. But if she was the kind of girl they said, maybe she would kiss me too.

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So I worked up my courage and the next time I picked up my papers at the Langston, I rang the doorbell of her apartment. After a long time she opened the door. She was wearing a blue terrycloth bathrobe.

She took one look at the stack of papers in my arms and said, "Oh. It's you."

"Who'd you think it was?"

"Nobody. Never mind. Want to come in?"

I'd never been inside her apartment before, and I was surprised at how empty it was. There was a sort of saggy brown sofa and a couple of chairs. A TV, of course. But there were no pictures on the walls and no lamps or rugs or figurines. Just a bare wood floor and a ceiling light.

She walked over to the sofa, sat down, and patted the cushion next to her. I pretended not to notice that the belt on her robe had come untied and I could see her leg all the way up to her underpants.

I sat down next to her, my bundle of papers in my lap. "Were you expecting Bobby Crumpton?" I asked.

She laughed. "Maybe. It's OK. I'm glad to see you. It's been awhile." She nodded toward my papers. "Look, you want help with those?"

"Sure," I said and handed her a stack.

We sat rolling papers while I worked up my courage. "Look," I finally said, "I don't want to upset you, but I thought you should know. Bobby's been spreading lies about you."

She sat up real straight and pulled her robe around her. "What'd he say?"

I took a deep breath and blurted out. "He says if he comes here and tells you he loves you, you'll . . ." I couldn't say the words, "let him do things."

The silence was awful. She just kept staring at the rolled up papers. Finally she said, real low, "Do you believe him?"

"I said it was lies."

She turned toward me. She looked so good, sitting there like that, in her blue bathrobe, her brown eyes so dark and wet looking.

"You're really pretty," I said. I didn't know it was coming; it just popped out.

"You think I'm going to let you do things now?" she asked, laughing a kind of nasty laugh.

I felt my cheeks getting hot. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"How *did* you mean it?" She looked suspicious.

"I don't know," I mumbled. "I just mean you're pretty."

"Wait a minute," she said and got up and left the room. I sat there for about ten minutes, wanting to leave, not wanting to leave.

When she came back, she was wearing a blue and black plaid skirt and a red sweater, white socks and brown loafers. Her school clothes. She sat down on the sofa facing me and put her hands on either side of my face. I could feel her soft fingers on my cheeks; she smelled good, like Ivory soap. I wanted to kiss her, to touch her. I'd never felt this way before.

It looked like she'd been crying. At least her eyes were red. I didn't know what to say, so I just sat there hoping she wouldn't move her hands.

She looked right into my eyes and said, "Will you do something for me?"

"Sure." I didn't care what it was, I'd do it.

"Promise?"

"Of course."

"Okay," she said, "I want you to take me to that church of yours."

Just then the door burst open and this short, stocky man walked in. He had on a blue business suit, like my dad wears, but I thought he could use a haircut. He smiled at Brenda. She looked down at her lap and she wasn't smiling.

"Well, who is this?" he asked, nodding his head in my direction.

"It's Gordy," she said. "A friend."

"Nice to meet you, Gordy," he said and reached out to shake my hand. His hand was softer than I expected and I noticed his fingernails needed clipping. But he seemed pretty nice.

"I like this one," he said.

I looked over at her. But she just sat there, which I couldn't figure out, because her dad was watching her like he was waiting for her to say something.

"I better go," I said.

"Yeah," the man said, "You better go. It's getting late."

As I was heading out, Brenda suddenly looked up and said, "Remember what you promised." Her voice was cool, like it didn't really matter what she said. But her eyes looked different. She was begging me.

So that's how she started coming to First Baptist. In the beginning Mother was against it.

"How come she wants to go with us?" she asked. "Where's her family?"

"I guess they don't go to church."

"Well, I don't think much of that," she said.

"Look," I said, "Jesus welcomes everybody. Reverend Keeling is always saying that."

"Yeah, but I've heard rumors about that girl."

"Maybe she wants to change."

"Maybe she's after you."

I could only hope.

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The next Sunday morning we found her waiting on the steps in front of the Langston Apartments. She had on a blue wool coat I hadn't seen before and a little rose colored hat with a veil and white gloves. She thanked Mother for picking her up and sat in the back seat, real still, all the way to church.

First Baptist is the biggest church in our town. Of course, like any town, there are Methodist and Presbyterian churches, but they're pretty small. Most people go to First Baptist, and that's because of Reverend Keeling. He's a big man, real tall, and he says complicated things in a simple way you can understand. You can tell him anything, and he says no matter how bad it is, Jesus will forgive you if you are truly repentant. We all sit there every Sunday in this big sanctuary, with flowers on the altar, the sun shining through the stained glass window of Jesus with the lambs, and we just feel good. I know church is boring for most people, but First Baptist is different.

The first time Brenda came, everyone was staring, trying to figure out what she was doing there, especially with me. But she paid no attention and just smiled and sang the hymns and bowed her head when we prayed. So after awhile folks stopped staring.

Meanwhile, back at school, Bobby Crumpton and his buddies were complaining.

"Brenda's got religion. She's no fun," they'd say.

Bobby claimed he still went to her place after school and messed around, but I knew he was lying, because I was there. After I delivered my papers every afternoon, I'd ring her doorbell. She always met me dressed in her school clothes. I never saw that blue bathrobe again. We'd do our homework or play Monopoly or just talk. I told her about my mama, how she had to work as a nurse since my dad died. She liked hearing about her. But when I asked her questions about her mother, she just said she was a secretary and then changed the subject.

The first time she let me kiss her, I got all dizzy and didn't know where to put my hands. All I could think was how soft her mouth was. How much I loved her. But that was it. If I tried anything funny, like putting my hand on her chest, she'd push me away.

"Come on. You let Joey."

"Look, I've been bad. I admit it. But Reverend Keeling is going to cleanse me of all that."

So I held back. I tried to tell her how I felt about her several times, but she told me to hush, she didn't want to hear it. So I held it inside.

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I always tried to leave before her mama and dad came home, but every once in awhile her dad would show up.

"Hi kid," he'd say and mess up my hair or give me a mock punch in the chest. "How's Brenda getting on at First Church?"

"She's doing great, sir," I'd say, feeling confused. There was something about him that seemed to be making fun. But he was friendly enough and he was awfully fond of Brenda.

"How's my girl?" he'd say.

I always packed up my books when he showed up, and left.

I never saw her mama. Not once.



As I said, I had made the decision to take Jesus as my personal savior and join the church the summer I met Brenda. The time for my baptism had now come. It wasn't actually such a big decision. Everybody in our town joined the church when they were about my age, fourteen. But Reverend Keeling didn't just let you join up; he made sure you understood the step you were taking. There were Bible study classes you had to attend on Friday afternoons, and you had to have a private conference with Reverend Keeling. Finally, there was the baptism, total immersion.

On the first Friday of Bible study, I rang Brenda's doorbell after I'd delivered my papers to tell her I couldn't see her that day. But when she opened the door, she had her coat on.

"I'm going too," she said. "I'm joining the church."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "You've only been going about a month. Most people take longer than that."

"I want to be really saved," she said. "I want Reverend Keeling to wash away all my sins forever."

So, every Friday afternoon for the next two months, we met in a Sunday School classroom with about ten other kids to prepare to take Jesus as our savior. We learned about twenty Psalms by heart and played this game where you would open the Bible at any place and read the scripture out loud and try to figure out what it meant. Brenda was a whiz. She memorized the Bible passages faster than anybody else in the class, and she never goofed off.

On the last afternoon of Bible Study, Reverend Jones asked us to come back to the church that night so that he could meet with each one of us separately. He said he was going to ask us about our lives and why we were making this decision. He talked about the seriousness of the step we were taking and how proud he was of all of us for choosing the Christian path and how he expected us to hold fast to our faith. He said the Baptism would take place on Sunday night. Then he gave everybody a Bible with a red leather cover.

I walked Brenda home as usual that Friday afternoon. It was March, the beginning of spring, and you could smell apple blossoms and the air was warm and sweet.



"How come you're so quiet?" I asked her.

She looked down and muttered something under her breath.

"What's that?"

She still didn't look at me, but I heard her this time. "I'm afraid," was what she whispered.

Now that surprised me. She'd never struck me as scared of anything. Certainly not a pool of waist-high water.

I'd seen dozens of baptisms and had studied the way it was done. We don't go to a river to be baptized in our church, like the primitive Baptists out in the country. We have a baptismal font right at the front of the sanctuary about the size of a bathtub, only deeper. Most of the time it's empty, but when they do baptisms, they fill it with water. They do the baptisms on Sunday nights after the sermon. Reverend Keeling and all the people being baptized wear choir robes over their underwear. But Reverend Keeling also wears hip-high rubber boots under his choir robe; he showed them to me once.

"Look, Brenda," I said. "There's nothing to be afraid of. When it's your turn, Reverend Keeling will take your hand and lead you down the stairs into the water. Which is warm, like in a bathtub. He'll take both your hands in his and say, 'I baptize thee, Brenda Hill, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,' then he'll put his hand over your face. You're supposed to hold your nose with your fingers, which are under his, and he'll tip you back into the water until it covers you. He'll bring you right back up and say to the congregation, 'Lord, it has been done as Thou hast commanded and yet there is room.' That's it."

"I'm talking about tonight."

"Tonight?" It made no sense. "We're just talking to Reverend Keeling tonight. You're surely not afraid of him?"

"Suppose you're too full of sin even for him," she said.

"That's why you get baptized," I said. "To wash your sins away."

"Suppose they won't wash."

"But they will. That's the whole point. You'll feel better after you talk to the Reverend tonight."

She smiled then. "Promise?"

"Promise." I kissed her then, just on the lips, and she kissed me back.

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That night I went by her apartment. I waited a long time, and finally Brenda's dad opened the door. He was in his undershirt, and I realized it was the first time I'd ever seen him without the blue suit.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I came for Brenda."

He smiled this strange kind of smile. "She's not going."

"But the conferences with Reverend Keeling start in about fifteen minutes."

"I heard," he said.

And then I saw her. She was standing behind him in the dark living room.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her voice sounded strange. "I can't."

"Why?" I asked, peering around Mr. Hill to get a better look.

"She's not going," he repeated and shut the door in my face.

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She didn't show up on Sunday night for the Baptism either. I was so sick at heart I could hardly pay attention. I do remember the water being colder than I expected. I kept trying to concentrate on Jesus, but I couldn't stop shivering and all I could think about was Brenda.

The next day at school she acted like she was avoiding me. So I waited by her locker after school.

"What happened?" I asked when she finally showed up.

"I told you before."

"You said you were afraid. But there wasn't anything to be afraid of."

"You don't get it."

"You would have been fine. Reverend Keeling would have held you up the whole time."

"Nobody's strong enough for that," she said. "Not even Reverend Keeling."

"What do you mean?"

She looked away. "Gordy," she said, "you have no idea."

That afternoon, when I rang her doorbell, nobody answered. I even thought I heard voices inside, so I banged on the door and called out to her. But nobody came.

A week later, when I went to pick up my papers, there was a moving van out front.

I went into the building. Brenda's front door was wide open, and the living room was full of boxes. No furniture. I was about to leave when I saw something red sticking out of a pile of trash. I dug out Brenda's Bible and stuffed it in my jacket pocket.

I managed not to cry then, but that night at home, in bed, I cried. And that wasn't the only time.

I loved her so much.