

Love Potion Number 9

Rick Aaron Slickman ached from his neck to his toes and his joints creaked louder than the pine floor in his room, but he kept a smile on his face. At 72, every trip to the shared bathroom down the hall in the old house on Bewildered Street in Grand Junction felt like an Olympic event.

“Hey Ron, how’s the freezer warehouse job?” They talked while taking care of business. “Nice seeing you. Well, someday, you will meet the woman of your dreams.” He advised, “Don’t get her pregnant.” The fellow was in his fifties and the son of his cousin, Charley, his best friend until Rick had worked for him. He got tired of being ordered around and they got into a fist fight.

Such is life.

Rick made it back to his tiny room and dropped into the lumpy recliner. His wrecked right knee had ruined his dream of a college scholarship, but he had stubbornly refused to have it replaced. “No money for it.” He sang Nat King Cole’s song, “Smile, though your heart is breaking.” The blank walls seemed to enjoy it.

He opened his Cedaredge High School annual from 1969 and stared at the photo of him and Robyn riding across the brilliantly lit football field in a red convertible Corvette as the Homecoming King and Queen. Gorgeous with long brown hair and hazel eyes in a crimson gown, she was his first and he hoped his *only*.

But with time running out in the fourth quarter, so had his luck. A linebacker from Hotchkiss High had slammed into his knee when he dove over the goal line right as the

final gun went off. As a result, he nearly missed the homecoming dance where Robyn had waited patiently, refusing to dance with any other boy.

Rick gulped from a cheap gallon of red wine and sang The Searchers hit, “I took my troubles down to Madame Ruth’s. You know that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth. She’s got a pad down on Thirty-Fourth and Vine, selling little bottles of Love Potion Number 9.” He laughed at himself. A guy had to keep his sense of humor.

Memory lane tripped him. He remembered his past mistakes, the unfortunate events, and most importantly, his lifelong love – a girl with a beautiful smile and a talent for making clothes out of left over material. He chuckled as he recalled her long red robe made from shag bathroom carpets. He declared, “I should have kept my jeans and her dress zipped until we were married.”

Back then, he was determined to dance despite being injured. After a locker room shower, he had limped into the gym towards Robyn with the grace of a waddling duck. He planned to sweep her off her feet with a romantic spin, but his messed-up knee had other plans. He stepped on her left toe which made his swollen knee buckle – causing him to stumble into a group of innocent girls who fell against the snack table, scattering salsa and chips through the air like confetti.

Dancing couples stared and laughter broke out.

He stood with his face dripping fruit punch.

Robyn had doubled over, mirth spilling from her lips.

Rick realized he didn't have to be perfect to win her over. With a goofy grin, he tottered back to her, chips and red sauce stuck to his face. “At least we’re having fun, right?” He said with a smile that could light up a black hole.

She wiped away tears of laughter and took his hand. “*You* are a disaster... but you’re *my* disaster.”

As the music resumed, he took Robyn’s hand and led her out to his old grey Chevy sedan since he couldn’t dance. The warm night had an atmosphere of romance, and with hormones blinding him, he asked, “Will you go steady with me?”

She held his blue and silver class ring that said, CHS 1969. “I love you with all the bacteria in my guts.” She had a quirky sense of humor and made everything fun.

He had laughed sensuously.

Love showed its wretched sense of humor. In January of 1971, at 16, Robyn learned she was pregnant. Her hazel eyes wide, she said, “I can’t believe it. We always used a condom.”

They agreed to name the baby after a popular tune: Michelle, Sweet Caroline, or Sherry Baby if it was a girl. If it was a boy, Daniel, Jude, or Tommy. He promised, “We’ll make it somehow. I’m not afraid of hard work.”

In the spring at the District track meet, he was running the high hurdles and a competitor from Olathe High in the next lane accidentally hit his arm. It threw him off, and he missed the last hurdle, splattering onto the asphalt track, and fucking up his right knee. He needed surgery and the doctor took out his medial meniscus. The darned thing constantly ached and was unstable.

He had only enough money to pay for one quarter at Mesa College in Grand Junction, and then went to work at the sugar beet factory in Delta. Robyn kept her pregnancy hidden for nearly eight months by wearing extra clothes, pretending she was getting fat like her two older sisters. “I got my draft notice the same day her mom took

Robyn to the doctor, thinking she had an ovarian tumor.” Her strict Mormon parents promptly shipped her off to live with relatives somewhere in Utah. He shook his head at the annual. “Despite joining their church and trying to get a mission call to convert the poor Catholics in Guatemala so I could marry her in the Moron Temple, they slammed the door in my face.”

Back in those days, he thought he was destined to be a brilliant attorney who helped women. Failing to get a football scholarship, he was drafted to fight in Vietnam because he wasn’t in college.

Two years later, he and Robyn found each other in the San Francisco Bay area and were married before he was shipped to pilot a Cobra to defend NATO airspace in Germany. He loved their little toddler, Sweet Caroline. His wife came to see him in Germany and Robyn became pregnant again. Just two weeks before he was to be released, a pair of Soviet MiG 21s ripped over the base. He was about to fire rockets at the first one when the second MiG’s wing clipped his tail. It caused the Cobra to point straight up, and then in a loop, it headed to the earth. It was the last he remembered for years.

Gradually, in scattered fragments, some memories returned. He wondered – was the baby a blonde with blue eyes like him or a brunette with hazel eyes like her? She was the love of his life.

His heart ached more than his joints.

God, how he wished.

After the terrible concussion, he was transferred to the VA hospital in Grand Junction. For some reason, he had walked out. He found himself working in a mountain

sawmill and doing carpentry jobs around the area. He followed jobs, his mind confused with gaps, fragments, and blanks as a night without stars. He drank red wine to deal with the pain in his heart and body.

Days turned into decades, his memories shielded by thick grey curtains that temporarily lifted. Some moments, he remembered.

His knee kept giving out and causing more injuries. Now on a pittance of social security, he suffered from more aches and pains than he cared to count. As the sun set on his life, the ghost of his knee nibbled at his sanity and he marinated in his Love Potion Number 9 since it numbed his burning knee.

After a particularly grueling day of smiling as he greeted people at Walmart, every joint ached with arthritis. He sank into his faded recliner with a sigh loud enough to wake the ghosts of his past. They stomped past as he sipped from a gallon jug of Love Potion Number 9 and popped another prescription pain pill.

Staring out the window of his bare room at the bustling youths playing soccer in a Grand Junction neighborhood park, he fantasized about being back in 1968 when everything was fresh. He imagined how he would change things, especially what happened with Robyn that December night when he got her pregnant up on the south side of Grand Mesa in the Love Cove. He took another pain pill with a gulp of wine. A guy couldn't change the choices made in the past. It was Karma, the bitch. "Why am I paying for mistakes made in another life?"

One night after hiding his pain as he laughed with folks who came into Walmart, he guzzled wine like it was grape juice and sucked on cigarettes – although he hadn't smoked since Nixon was president. Rick washed down a handful of pain pills meant for

his sciatica. The potion soothed the burning in his knee, the ache in his back, and sort of numbed his empty heart. With a contented sigh, he crushed out the last of the Camel filters and slumped into his lumpy recliner – lost to the embrace of potion-induced dreams filled with visions of being with Robyn. He drooped, slobbering wine onto his chest.

Rick felt a strange sensation of being pulled through a tunnel before crashing into a place with mixed cheers and boos. When he arrived at the other side, he didn't find paradise or a cramped room filled with regrets. Instead, he sprawled on the stadium-lit football field of Cedaredge High School in the middle of a game, wearing a tight jersey that accentuated muscles he hadn't possessed in decades. "What in the name of fried donuts?" He exclaimed, popping up like organic rye bread from a toaster.

"Who are you talking to, Rick?" It was Charlie, the quarterback and his cousin. They were seniors at Cedaredge High School in Western Colorado. Their number one goal was to get scholarships to a small college and avoid the raging Vietnam War the US was losing. Even Walter Cronkite, the trusted CBS newscaster, said it was unwinnable.

"I'm talking to a relative I'm trying to forget."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Are you okay? I thought you were knocked out when you caught that pass since that Hotchkiss player speared you in the head." He patted his shoulder pads. "Nice first down catch. You're the best tight end in the conference and you make me look good with those impossible catches."

"I'm alright." He staggered to the huddle, holding his head. He was back in high school as a senior! He looked down at himself and nearly fainted. No more skinny,

sagging, and age-spotted arms—he was a hawk-eyed teenager again. A thrill of youthful energy surged through him.

The next play was between him and the right tackle. He knocked the Hotchkiss linebacker down and their fullback made another first down. He helped the opponent up, but there was anger in the kid's dark eyes. "I'll get you."

The next play, the linebacker tried to take his right knee out, but Rick anticipated it this time. Instead of getting his knee hurt, he shoved the boy's head down onto the turf.

The young man glared at him. "I'll get you on the next play."

Rick grinned to himself. Because his knee was strong, he wouldn't get injured next spring when running the high hurdles. He would take Robyn to prom and then he'd set a State record – he was sure of it.

It was a reverse to Rick. The pulling guard opened a hole and seeing daylight, he turned on the afterburner. The defensive backs had followed the offensive movement to the right. He was the fastest man in the conference. Putting everything he had into it, he sped for the goal line with the defense chasing him. Touchdown! It was an accident because he tripped over his own feet while showing off as he trotted backwards.

The final horn sounded.

"We won!" The Cedaredge fans tumbled from the stands onto the field.

Instead of having the coach tell him, "Your knee is badly swollen. I'll wrap it, but you should see a doctor on Monday," he blinked against the bright field lights, and before him stood bell-bottom jeans, psychedelic shirt patterns, and the aroma of patchouli oil in the air.

And there was Robyn, running to him across the field, stunning with flowing brown hair, her hazel eyes filled with pride. “You did it, you scored the winning touchdown!” She threw her arms around him and leaped up with her muscular cheerleader legs straddling his grass-stained uniform pants.

This time would be different, he promised himself. Armed with the wisdom of an old man, he would woo her and not get her pregnant.

He felt the shock of paddles on his chest. His drunken, stoned eyes flickered.

“Good!” The EMT turned. “Guys, he’s alive; let’s get him into the ambulance. They need to pump his stomach.”

Days later, his eyes fluttered open in a hospital room, tubes in his arms and clear bags of some shit above him—this was *not* the heaven he envisioned. He looked around in confusion. Pissed him off. He’d rather be playing football and kissing Robyn. He moaned, “God, please, if you care, take me home.”

The hospital social worker came and talked with him, asking about his life and why he wanted to end it. After three interviews over several days, she said, “According to your medical records, you need two rotator cuff repairs, a right knee replacement, and your spine fused at L 4-5.” She caught his pained blue eyes. “If you agreed to the surgeries, you might find life a lot more tolerable.” Seeing the doubt in his eyes, she added, “Medicare will pay for it.”

“No, I’m ready to go to the other side. I don’t have any friends or family, and I’ve lived with pain since I was a senior in high school.” He shook his head quickly. “It would be a waste of medical resources.”

The nice social worker shook her head. “You are a stubborn man, aren’t you?”

“Yep. Once I make my mind up, I make it happen.” He didn’t say that as soon as he was released, he’d drink his love potion and swallow all the prescribed OxyContin and Percocet, and then he’d wander down the middle of Bewildered Street and meet the Lord.

Mary Sue stared at him. “Rick, I’ve seen you greeting people at Walmart. You make us feel warm and welcome. I hope you’ll change your mind.” Somewhat upset, she left.

Closing his eyes, he didn’t give a thought to having the surgeries.

He was done.

Rick heard a noise and this beautiful woman in her fifties with long brown hair and hazel eyes quietly walked in. Behind her stood two adult children who looked somewhat like him—the muscular man was adorned with blonde hair and the brunette female held a baby in her arms.

He stared at the lady. She looked just like Robyn. *Am I dreaming?*

“They said you’re well enough to have visitors.” She gently took his weathered, spotted, and blue-veined hand. “Thank God, I’ve finally found you.” Moisture rose in her eyes.

“W..who are you?”

“I’m your daughter, Sweet Caroline. I paid for an internet search to get your phone number, and I kept calling you one night. Your buddy across the hall told me about the EMT’s saving your life.” She smiled, oddly mystified. “He is a nice man. Ron wondered why you didn’t answer your phone so he went over to check on you.” She

introduced the kids, “This is your son, Daniel, and his sister, Sherry Baby, and her child is Michelle. Isn’t she beautiful? She looks like Grandma Robyn.”

His Love Potion Number 9-free brain was clear. “Where are you from?”

“We drove over from San Francisco in your restored 1931 Chevy. I’ve been trying to find you since I was thirteen.” A tear ran down her pink cheek.

“Well, it’s *sure* nice to finally meet you. You’re lovely. I’ve always wished things had turned out the way your mom and I wanted.”

“May we call you Dad?”

“Well, of *course*!” Something in his chest broke loose. He fought the tears welling up. She looked exactly like Robyn and the boy, Daniel, looked like him. Sherry Baby was a blend of them with strawberry blonde hair and hypnotizing green eyes, while Michelle was as beautiful as the love of his life, and her hazel eyes sparkled with love.

Sweet Caroline leaned to him, softly wrapping her arms around him. They kissed as joy ran down their cheeks.

His two other children and the granddaughter moved to the other side of the bed, their hands reaching out. Sweet Caroline sat on the bed, and everyone held hands.

No one could speak.

Sherry Baby touched his chest as Michelle leaned in close.

He wrapped his arms around Michelle, holding her gently and looking at her familiar face. He caught his breath. “Where’s your grandmother?” He stubbornly forced the tears to stop.

“She’s at the motel. Grandma is afraid you might not love her after how her parents treated you. She never married and never dated.” Something in her hazel eyes. “Gram says that *you* belong together.”

A lump rose in his throat and he gritted his teeth.

They talked for an hour and then Sweet Caroline realized that the old man was tired because his eyes kept closing. She stood. “We’ll come back tomorrow.”

“I’d love to see Robyn.” Those darned tears started up again. “She’s the only woman I ever loved.”

Sweet Caroline and her siblings smiled brightly. Michelle kissed his cheek softly. “Love you, Grandpa.”

“Love you too.”

He dropped into the void and slept soundly for who knows how long.

The social worker came in. “I heard you had some visitors. How do you feel?”

His memories intact, he said, “Wonderful.” He shook his head with disbelief. “I haven’t felt like this since Robyn was sent away.”

They had a delightful talk. At the end of her visit, Mary Sue asked, “Would you consider talking to one of the surgeons? Your medical records say you have been suffering for many years.”

“Sure.” Laughter rose on his lips. “Maybe send the knee replacement doctor.”

The food service cart arrived.

Rick couldn’t believe how good the hospital food smelled and tasted.

Slept like a rock. No football nightmares.

In the morning after coffee and a great breakfast, he pulled himself up and raised the back of the bed as he worked to control his excitement. Unable to, he managed to move the IV lines so he could make it to the restroom without using the plastic jug. There, he got cleaned up as well as possible, using water to smooth his thin blonde hair. “Oh well, she’s got to look old too.” He flashed his super nova smile that over shown black holes.

To his surprise, the pain wasn’t as bad, so he walked up the hall and back, pushing the IV rack in front of him, using it like a cane. He asked for his clothes, but a doctor had to order the IVs removed and all that. With steel determination, he sat on the hard leather couch, waiting, the IV rack to his left side. His heart pounded each time footsteps approached his room, hoping it was Robyn. He hadn’t felt anything in his empty heart for years. This was exciting and confusing.

The hours passed as he thought of her, their unique romance, her pregnancy when he left to be inducted to kill or be killed in Vietnam.

Disappointed and afraid Robyn might not come, he ate lunch alone. The tasteless food in his stomach made him sleepy, so he crawled back into the bed and slept, dreaming of her, of them – of having a family.

A light touch on his right arm startled him awake. It was Sweet Caroline. He looked around. She was alone. He stared into her sky blue eyes.

“Mom is outside. She’s too nervous to come in.”

A wide grin on his face, he said softly, “Tell her I won’t bite.”

She turned and called, “Mom, come in. Dad is awake and he wants to see you.”

With long silver hair, Robyn walked in with a shy smile, her hazel eyes down. She wore his small marquise engagement ring and a plain white dress as if she was going to the Salt Lake Temple to be married for time and *all* eternity.

Their anxious eyes met and ignoring each other's deep wrinkles, they saw each other in high school.

Suddenly, he was happy to be alive.