

## Perfect Woman

### Part 1

My lady, I thought, she'll need to have found on her own the same answers that I've found, that this world is not remotely what it seems, that whatever we hold in our thought comes true in our lives, that miracles aren't miraculous. She and I, we'll never get along unless ...I blinked. She'll have to be exactly the same as me.

A lot more physically beautiful than me, of course, for I so love beauty, but she'll have to share my prejudice as well as my passion. I couldn't imagine myself falling into life with a woman who trails smoke and ashes everywhere she goes. If she needs parties and cocktails to be happy, or drugs, or if she were afraid of airplanes or afraid of anything, or if she weren't supremely self-reliant, if she lacked a taste for adventure, if she didn't laugh at the silly things I call humor, it wouldn't work. If she didn't want to share money when we have it and fantasy when we don't, if she didn't like raccoons, ... oh, Richard, this won't be easy. Without all of the above and more, you're better off alone!

In the back of the notebook writing forward, as we rolled in overdrive along Interstate 65 between Louisville and Birmingham, for three hundred miles, I made a list: The Perfect Woman. By the ninth page I was getting discouraged. Every line I wrote was important, every line had to be. Yet no one could meet ..., I couldn't meet those standards myself!

### Part 2

WE LAY in the sun on the deck, Donna and me, the two of us on my becalmed sailboat, drifting with the current thirty miles north of Key West. "No woman in my life owns me," I told her quietly, patiently, "and I own not one of them. That's terribly important to me. I promise: never will I be possessive of you, never jealous."

"That's a nice change," she said. Her hair was short and black, her brown eyes closed against the sun. She was tanned the color of oiled teak from years of summer since a divorce far northward. "Most men can't understand. I'm living the way I want to. I'll be with them if I want to be with them, I'll be gone if I don't. That doesn't frighten you?" She moved the straps of her bikini, to keep the tan unstreaked.

"Frighten? It delights me! No chains or ropes or knots, no arguments, no boredoms. A present from the heart: *I'm here not because I'm supposed to be here, or because I'm trapped here, but because I'd rather be with you than anywhere in the world.*"

The water lapped gently. Instead of shadows, bright lights Sparkled up on the sail.

"You will find me the safest friend you have," I said.

"Safest?"

"Because I cherish my own freedom, I cherish yours, too. I am extremely sensitive. If ever I touch you, do anything you'd rather not, you need whisper the gentlest 'No.' I despise intruders and crashers-into-privacy. You ever hint I'm one myself, you'll find me gone before you finish the hint."

She rolled on her side, head on her arm, and opened her eyes, “That does not sound like a proposal of marriage, Richard.”

“It isn’t.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you get a lot of those?” I asked.

“A few is too many,” she said. “One marriage was enough. In my case, one marriage more than I should have had. Some people are better off married; I’m not.”

I told her a little about the marriage I had ended, happy years gone hard and grim. I had learned exactly the lessons she had.

I checked the soft glass table of the Gulf for wind-ruffles. The sea was smooth as warm ice.

“What a shame, Donna, we can’t disagree on something.”

We drifted for another hour before wind caught the sails and the boat surged ahead. By the time we set foot on land once more we were good acquaintances, bugging farewell, promising to see each other again someday.

As it was with Donna, so with every other woman in my life. Respect for sovereignty, for privacy, for total independence. Gentle alliances against loneliness, they were, cool rational love-affairs without the love.

Some of my women-friends had never married, but most were divorced. A few were survivors of unhappy affairs, beaten by violent men, terrified, warped by massive stress into endless depressions. Love, for them, was a tragic misunderstanding; love was an empty word left after meaning had been battered away by spouse-as-owner, lover-become-jailer.

Had I gone looking way far back in my thought, I might have found a puzzle: Love between man and woman isn’t a word that works anymore. But Richard, is it a meaning?

I wouldn’t have had an answer.

Months rippled by, and as I lost interest in love, what it is and isn’t, so I lost the motive to look for my hidden soulmate. Gradually her place was taken by a different idea emerging, an idea as rational and flawless as those upon which my business affairs now turned.

If the perfect mate, I thought, is one who meets all of our needs all of the time, and if one of our needs is for variety itself, then *no one person anywhere can be the perfect mate!*

The only true soulmate is to be found in many different people. My perfect woman is partly the flash and intellect of this friend, she’s partly the heart-racing beauty of that one, partly the devil-may-care adventure of another. Should none of these women be available for the day, then my soulmate sparkles in other bodies, elsewhere; being perfect does not include being unavailable,

“Richard, the whole idea is bizarre! It will never work!” Had the inner me shouted that, and it did, it would have had rags stuffed in its mouth.

“Show me why this idea is wrong,” I would have said, “show me where it won’t work. And do it

without using the words *love, marriage, commitment*. Do it bound and gagged while I shout louder than you can about how I intend to run my life!”

What do you know? The perfect-woman-in-many-women design, she won the contest hands-down.

An infinite supply of money. As many airplanes as I wish. The perfect woman for my own. This is happiness!

### **Part 3**

“Leslie was special. Every woman is special for a day, Richard. But special turns to commonplace, boredom sets in, respect vanishes, freedom’s lost. Lose your freedom, what more is there to lose?”

The figure was massive, but quicker than a cat in battle, immensely strong.

“You built me to be your closest friend, Richard. You did not build me pretty, or laughing, or warm and pliant. You built me to protect you from affairs turned ugly; you built me to guarantee your survival as a free soul. I can save you only if you do as I say. Can you show me a single happy marriage? One? Of all the men you know, is there one whose marriage would not go happier through instant divorce, and friendship instead?”

I had to admit. “Not one.”

“The secret of my strength,” he said, “is that I do not lie. Until you can out-reason me, change my fact to fiction, I shall be with you, and I shall guide and protect you. Leslie is beautiful to you today. Other women were beautiful to you yesterday. Every one of them would have destroyed you in marriage. There is one perfect woman for you, but she dwells in many different bodies....”

“I know. I know.”

“You know. When you find one woman in the world who can give you more than many women can, I’ll disappear.”

(Richard Bach, *The Bridge Across Forever*)