LOVE'S PROJECTION

 It all began at Lamar High School, in the modest southwestern Missouri town of the same name. Lamar was famous for being the birthplace of U.S. President Harry S. Truman, as well as being the home of legendary lawman Wyatt Earp and his family for several years. But our story will focus on a memorable lesson that an ordinary boy and two girls shared in that town, and what happened later to their lives.

 Early in his senior year, Nate Andrews fell deeply in love for the first time with junior Ginger Sutton. She had newly-transferred from the nearby larger city of Springfield. With her reddish-brown hair and vivacious manner, she quickly became one of the most popular girls at school. The boys drooled over her, and the girls were either green with envy or secretly yearned to be just like her. Though not particularly bright in her studies, even her teachers were taken in by her refreshing perkiness and lively, engaging smile.

 Nate adored her. In the few classes that they had together, he spent most of his time staring dreamily at Ginger from across the room. It took him about a month to finally work up the courage to ask her out. When she agreed, he initially couldn't believe his luck but was soon overjoyed! Nate's parents were quietly amused when he shared his excitement over his first serious heart-throb. His younger sister teased him, of course, but his Dad offered his son the keys to the family's Chevy pick-up truck for his date, which was coming up on Saturday night. Nate planned on treating Ginger to a movie and then stop at The Round-Up -- the local hang-out -- for ice cream afterwards.

 "Be back home by midnight, and no later," his father warned him when the big night arrived. "Treat her nice, Nate, like a lady. Pick her up at her door -- don't simply honk from the curb. Meet her parents. Be respectful. Then relax and have a good time, son." his Dad added, smiling.

 "And you drive real safe now, Nate, you hear?" his Mom cautioned, ever-worried after hearing so many tragic accident stories over the years involving inexperienced teen-aged drivers.

 "And don't forget to kiss her good night, lover boy!" said his ten-year-old sister, Trudy, who, as always, couldn't resist having the last word. Nate rolled his eyes, then grabbed a pillow off their living room sofa and whipped it at her. She easily ducked the airborne assault and then stuck out her tongue at her carefully-dressed-for-his-first-big-date brother. "You'll get yours later, you brat!" he promised, as he checked his hair in the hallway mirror one more time and stepped out of the house. Next stop -- Ginger! His nervousness suddenly kicked in. God, I hope she likes me, and that we have a great evening, he prayed. Even though it was mid-October and the weather was cooling, Nate could sense his underarms and palms beginning to sweat.

 After meeting Ginger's parents, the couple headed to the local movie theater -- The Plaza -- where they enjoyed Tom Cruise starring in his newest film, "Top Gun - Maverick." Even with his somewhat clammy hand, Nate took a chance and held Ginger's hand about a half-hour into the movie. She gave it a timid squeeze back and didn't resist. It was an electric sensation! Twenty minutes later, he stepped out into the lobby and came back with a medium tub of warm buttered popcorn and two small root beers. After the show, they walked the three blocks to The Round-Up for hot fudge sundaes. Nate kept a sharp eye on his wristwatch, however, so as not to be late dropping Ginger off at her house and being home himself by midnight.

 The moment of truth came when the Chevy pick-up pulled up in front of the Sutton house. The pair got out -- Nate careful to run over to open Ginger's door, like a classic gentleman -- and strolled together, holding hands, to her front door. Her porch light was on. It was close to 11:45 p.m. The night was clear, with a crisp half-moon silently observing them.

 "Thanks so much, Nate...I had a real nice time," Ginger offered.

 "Me too...I hope we can do it again soon...I mean, go out again, um, not do exactly the same thing again," he replied. (You idiot! What a stupid thing to say! he regretted in his mind, after the awkward words had already been voiced.)

 "I'd like that, Nate" she purred sweetly.

 The overwhelming urge to kiss her flooded his mind. He froze and stared at her smiling face. But he quickly recovered, and gave Ginger a shy kiss on her lips. They were soft and warm and tasted slightly of strawberry lip-gloss.

 "Well, um, good-night...see you at school on Monday. I've got to get home now before 12, or I'll get in big trouble," Nate blurted out. "See ya!" He turned and walked to the Chevy, got in, and took off.

 Everyone was asleep in the Andrews home, so Nate was extra quiet as he headed up to his bedroom. He was so wired up that he couldn't sleep right away. He played the evening over and over again in his mind. He lingered on the fresh memory of their kiss and the sheer excitement of simply holding hands. He realized that he adored Ginger, and would do just about anything to see her and be with her again. And again and again! Finally, he fell asleep.

 Back at school Monday morning, he sought her out. He had a fevered need to know everything about her. Her face and body were perfect, he decided, so now he needed to learn all about her mind and soul, her dreams and wishes. But when he spied Ginger in the hallways, she didn't notice him, because she was always talking with her new girlfriends or rushing to her next class. What Nate didn't notice was another girl watching him very carefully by the hall lockers, not saying a word.

 This girl was a fellow senior named Mary Lou Gump. She was a bright student, and was chipper and cordial with everyone, but her plain face and rather plump figure and bland clothing choices didn't win her many friends around town -- teenagers being finicky like that, forever wanting to be with the 'in-crowd,' yearning to be accepted and popular (with attractiveness, especially among the girls, being of utmost importance). As a result, none of the boys ever asked Mary Lou out on a date, to the best of anyone's knowledge. At the occasional Friday night dances held at the high school, only the most nerdy boys, the loners, or the outcasts risked having a slow dance with Mary Lou.

 Meanwhile, Nate Andrews secretly asked for a photo outtake of Ginger Sutton from a buddy on the school yearbook staff, a pic which had already been taken for the junior class section of the yearbook. He had the picture enlarged so he could frame it and put it next to his bed and fantasize about her. His pesky sister, Trudy, teased him about that too, as one might expect.

 But things were getting serious for Nate now. He started writing; first, notes that he slipped into Ginger's locker or passed to her before or after class, then actual love letters mailed to her address, or simply dropped into the Sutton's mailbox. Whenever she wrote him back, he was ecstatic! He re-read her notes, emails, texts, and letters again and again. Soon, the pair went out on regular dates, two or three fun times per month. There was more delightful kissing in secret shadowy spots around town, as well as increased hand-holding during walks in the park. Nate often called Ginger on the phone to talk when they couldn't see each other. He opened up freely and discussed his most intimate feelings with her. He couldn't help himself. To Nate, she was perfect. Ginger was his ideal woman. He could easily picture them married and having a family of their own. It would be paradise!

 Everything seemed to going right in Nate's mind regarding his relationship with Ginger. Autumn changed to winter -- which was its usual dreary, cold and wet self -- but then Spring finally returned and soon the school prom came around. Naturally, Nate invited Ginger and she excitedly accepted.

 Nate was also urged by his parents to consider what he wanted to do with his life after graduation. His father was a plumber by trade, but the work could be exhausting after so many years, he confessed. Nate had no real interest in attending college, but maybe you could apprentice and become a master electrician? both of his parents suggested. Besides, the money was as good as being a plumber, but not as tough on the body. Nate promised to check into it. After all, he enjoyed working with his hands, and it would be a stable, lucrative career. Once he could afford his own car, he could also do electrical jobs on construction sites in Joplin and Springfield.

 Reminding himself that Ginger was a year younger than him and still had another year of high school to go, Nate assumed that he would simply wait and ask her to get married in another year or two.

 Prom night was wonderful. By now, everyone at school knew that Nate and Ginger were a steady couple. Photos were taken by both sets of parents in their respective living rooms, to help preserve their young adult's special rite-of-passage moment. Nate wore a rented tuxedo for the first time, and Ginger was resplendent in a beautiful pastel yellow formal gown, with a matching flower corsage that Nate gave her.

 The day before, in gym class, in the locker room, the other seniors teased Andrews about whether he had gotten into Ginger's panties yet. "My older brother has a box of Trojans, so I can steal a condom from him and give it to you, Nate. Then you can finally get your cherry!" class top jock Chet Stelnik crowed.

 "Yeah...and you've been dating this hot babe for months, Nate, so by now you should at least be gettin' some regular hand-jobs or blowjobs...am I right, guys?" another boy, Marv Zeidman, added. The other guys whooped and hollered in agreement. "Hey...I think I smell some mayonnaise and herring...anyone else smell that?" another boy, Carl Potts, teased, pretending to sniff the air. "Nothing beats wet, fresh pussy!"

 But just then, burly P.E. teacher and Coach Bud Crandell -- wearing his navy blue Lamar Tigers sweatshirt with its orange logo -- had marched in. "Alright you horn-dogs, enough of that smut talk in my locker room," he growled sternly. "Now get changed and head out to your next class, and I mean pronto! Move it!" The boys immediately sobered up and cut off the comedy.

 Nate had these inescapable sexual thoughts from yesterday in his mind, however, as he slow-danced with his true love in the romantically-darkened school auditorium. As a result, his uncontrollable manly erection rose and seemed like it would burst through his pants. But Ginger -- being a few inches shorter than Nate -- simply murmured after she felt his arousal and pulled him down closer to her groin. "Oh, my God..." Nate said, exhaling heavily, feeling a slight wetness ooze out into his straining jockey shorts.

 Luckily, the lights came up and the slow song they were dancing to concluded. Ginger kissed Nate on the cheek and excused herself to go to the girls washroom to freshen up. Nate discreetly shielded his groin area with his hands until his erection relaxed. That was when Mary Lou Gump slowly approached him. She had come to the prom with three other homely girls, and even caught a few dances with some very shy and acne-faced boys who came stag.

 "Nate, we've never talked much, but I have always admired you from afar. I know you aren't attracted to me, but I have always been secretly attracted to you. In fact, I think I've been in love with you ever since freshman year." Mary Lou smiled with sweet sincerity, almost bordering on adoration, her eyes moist, her breathing throaty and passionate.

 "I know how much you like Ginger, Nate, but I have a real bad feeling about your deepening relationship with her. She is big trouble. Women -- even teen-aged girls -- can sense these things, things that boys can't. She's going to break your heart someday soon, Nate, I'm absolutely certain of it," Mary Lou continued. "Me and the other girls already know that she likes to flirt with other guys behind your back. There are serious rumors about her too, floating around from her old high school days in Springfield, if you ever want to know the details. Do you really, really know her, Nate? Or are you simply projecting your own needs and wants on her and assuming she is your perfect goddess, you know, your ideal girl? Look, Nate, you have to trust me. Please, for your own good, believe what I am saying. I'd hate to see you wreck your whole life just because of her.

 And one more thing, Nate...I will always be there for you, waiting, if you ever want to be my friend...or if you ever want a true, serious relationship. I know I can make you so happy, and I will never let you down! I am ready to pledge my eternal love to you..." She stared into his eyes with such intensity that he was speechless.

 Mary Lou stopped and sighed, then calmly walked away when she noticed Ginger in the distance returning from her bathroom break.

 "What was that all about?" Ginger quickly challenged Nate, her eyes flashing. "What did that ugly cow want with you?"

 Nate was shocked at his girlfriend's sharp, crude, and completely uncalled for reaction. "Oh, nothing really. She asked if I had any career plans after graduation," he lied. "I told her that I might become an electrician or something, that's all."

 This was the first time that he ever told Ginger a lie, he realized, and he felt terrible about it. And Mary Lou's unexpected words of warning and her startling offer of a real relationship haunted him for the rest of the night and even into the next several days.

 The second Saturday in June brought the eager Lamar seniors their long-awaited graduation ceremony. Sunny skies with fluffy white clouds, a bevy of proud parents, and the traditional commencement speeches marked the occasion. A few graduates would go away to college, but most would settle somewhere around the state and get various blue-collar jobs. Some high school sweethearts would get married right away as well, just like their parents had a generation before.

 But while Nate pledged himself to Ginger to remain faithful during her last year of high school (and she to him), trouble between the couple began almost immediately that autumn.

 The time and studying and effort it took to become an electrical apprentice absorbed most of Nate's waking hours. His parents helped by insisting that he live at home until he could become financially independent. But he simply couldn't see Ginger as much as he wanted. Soon, she began to complain. Despite his continued letter writing, texts, emails, and phone calls, their now rarer dates together seemed fraught with a new friction. Nate -- in his desperation, frustration, and obsession with trying not to lose her -- next found himself lying to Ginger more and more. If she mentioned an interesting new book she recently read or a new song she really liked, he immediately agreed with her, even if he later found the book to actually be dull or the song to be banal and annoying. Nate found himself slipping into the habit of accepting anything that Ginger suggested they do. He did everything possible to keep his projected image of his ideal girlfriend from changing. He ignored her increasingly-obvious flaws and clung instead to his own fantasy of her. I can make her love me exactly like I love her, if I can only convince her of my total devotion and worth, he reasoned. Only then could he be happy, and hence, they would be happy together.

 But Nate Andrews was continually not happy with Ginger and their relationship.

 Soon, he was shocked to discover -- through the town 'grape-vine' -- that Ginger Sutton was secretly dating other guys at Lamar High School. Her reputation was quickly emerging as a 'party-girl.' Word got out that she liked to date the most popular school jocks -- wild young men who drove their own cars fast down county roads, and snuck illicit beers on the weekends. It was even rumored that Ginger stayed out late at the clandestine 'Lover's Lane' behind the school's oval track field near the bleachers, with this or that letterman.

 In a panic, Nate assumed that maybe having sex with Ginger would solidify their relationship at last, and turn her back to him, and away from her alarming wayward ways. Over the many months that they knew each other, the couple had hugged and kissed, then petted, then deeply petted. With their hands and fingers, they had brought each other to orgasm once -- a truly amazing and surprisingly powerful sensation. Nate guessed that their natural desires simply needed to be fully engaged and released...then all would be well. After all, she was eighteen now, and he was nineteen. Making love would lead her into thinking like a bride on her wedding night with him, he thought.

 So, being of legal age, he shyly purchased his first box of condoms at a pharmacy during a trip down to Joplin (fearing that he would be recognized in Lamar while buying the tell-tale item), and set up a 'special date' with Ginger Sutton. Wow, would she be surprised when she realized what they were finally about to do! Nate imagined.

 Borrowing his father's truck, Nate brought a clean, warm blanket for the flat bed of the pick-up and drove to the Sutton house to pick up their daughter. In his blue-jeans pocket were two condoms -- a spare in case one was defective. He was afraid to confront Ginger about the rumors of her running around with other guys, because that could derail the whole evening's special experience that he had planned if they got into a big fight.

 Nate did notice, however, a certain reserve --almost a coolness -- from his girlfriend as they drove out into the country away from town on bumpy rural blacktop roads. In fact, for the first time, Ginger initially rejected meeting him at all. She made up paltry excuses why she couldn't see him, until finally agreeing and giving in.

 It being mid-April, the weather was acceptable for what Nate had in mind. This particular night was clear, with a gentle wind and wide display of bright stars above. The couple made small talk while they drove, but the conversation was rather bland, so they fell silent and listened to music on the radio instead. It was 10:12 p.m. when at last Nate pulled the truck over on a deserted gravel road leading to a distant dark farmhouse and parked under a large budding elm tree.

 Nate grinned after he shut off the engine, and turned to face his girlfriend.

 "I love you, Ginger. I've always loved you and no one else, nor will I ever love anyone else. I want us to make love tonight like man and wife. It's my pledge to you to be yours, always." He took out the two condoms from his pocket and showed them to her. Ginger raised her eyebrows and seemed rather unsure about this dramatic offer. Nate led her to the flat back of the truck and neatly spread the soft blue and green plaid blanket out for them. The couple climbed in.

 Nate began kissing Ginger and fondled her breasts under her bra until she stopped him and undressed herself. He slowly did the same. When they were both naked and lying down, Nate slipped a condom on his engorged erect penis, then carefully inserted himself inside of Ginger's warm body. At first, she gasped, but then she seemed to relax as they both began to move rhythmically together for a few moments. Nate uttered a low cry when he released himself in orgasm, then stopped thrusting and gradually slid out of Ginger's vagina. The event was over in about three minutes. Once flaccid, he removed then tossed the gooey used condom over the side of the truck into some bushes near the large elm tree. Finally, they each wiped themselves clean with some Kleenex that Nate had the forethought to provide, then likewise jettisoned the messy tissues in a balled-up wad.

 They lay in each other's arms in silence for awhile, their breathing returning to normal. He held her tight to keep them both warm. He was afraid to ask if she had just lost her virginity with him. It was Nate's first time. He proudly admitted that he had made love with no other girls but her.

 "Oh, Ginger, I love you so!" Nate exclaimed. I want to do this with you every night for the rest of our lives! I can't wait until we can get married and get our own house, and start having children."

 But Ginger was not as enthusiastic or committed as Nate. "Well, that was...interesting, Nate. Kind of different from what I expected, I suppose...It was nice, though...um, thanks, sweetheart." She hurriedly kissed him, but on the cheek, just once. "Now, I think we should get dressed and get back home."

 Her lack of giving back to him what he really wanted to hear at that instant was bewildering to Nate Andrews. The couple talked even less on the way back to Lamar than they did driving up. The truck's radio thus was, by necessity, turned on again, to distract the pair from such an awkward silence.

 The tragic change between the two young people began soon afterward.

 Ginger stopped writing back to Nate. When he called her on the telephone, her parents said she was unavailable and please try another time. His emails and texts went unanswered. On the now rare times when he did catch her, he asked her out, but she said she was busy and couldn't make it. When Nate asked Ginger what was the matter, she was evasive and refused to talk further. Nate felt like his life was over. He felt lost and alone. His future plans with Ginger seemed to be slipping away, becoming shattered. His heart was broken. He cried in secret into his pillow at night. Where had he gone wrong? How had he failed? He wanted to die...

 Nate's parents, meanwhile, found out that the Suttons were going to move to Jefferson City, the state capitol, where Ginger's father had been offered a new job. The family waited until Ginger had graduated from Lamar High before arranging the move. Nate was further devastated. His mother tried to console him, as did his father. "These things can happen in relationships, son. But you're young and resilient, and I'm sure you'll bounce back and find another girl," his Dad counseled. Even sister Trudy sensed enough about the calamity to not tease her big brother anymore about his derailed love life.

 The utter failure of Nate's projection of Ginger as his perfect match was never forgotten, however. She wrote him a final, good-bye letter. "Sorry that things didn't work out for us, Nate, but I'll always treasure the good times we had together..." It was a pathetic ending for something that Nate felt had such potential for ideal, everlasting happiness.

 The young man grew up, of course, and life went on. He finished his electrician's apprenticeship, and moved away from Lamar. Nate set up his skilled trade in Lebanon, Missouri -- a nearby town with more than three times larger than Lamar. Eventually, he was able to mortgage a house. Gradually, he dated other women again, but it was never the same. He was too wary, too closed off, too mistrusting of any female relationship anymore. He later got married, but it ended in divorce after seven years. No children. He never got married again. Yet he hated being alone. Nate poured his energies into his job, as the only avenue he felt was left to help keep his sanity.

 One day in July, eleven years after leaving Lamar, now at age thirty, Andrews got the compelling urge to look up Ginger Sutton on the internet. He tried Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media outlets. Nate finally found a contact for his first true love. He had an firm address in Jefferson City, but no photo. Could it really be her? Was she perhaps still living with her parents? He had to find out. Maybe if she was not married or divorced, might she even love him again? It was worth the risk to find out. It was possible!

 So on the following Sunday, he made the eighty-two mile trip in his tan Ford F-150 to the Missouri state capitol.

 When he found Ginger's address, in a less-than-favorable part of town, Nate stood outside at the curb and wondered if he was doing the right thing. Minutes ticked by. He noticed some suspicious neighbors warily watching him. They probably think I'm a criminal or some kind of stalker, he mused. But he gathered up his nerve at last and went to the front door and boldly knocked.

 A grizzled-looking man in his mid-30s opened the door a crack. He was wearing a sweat-stained sleeveless white undershirt and baggy cargo shorts. He needed a shave and was barefoot. "Do I know you?" he inquired, taken aback. The room behind him smelled of sour carpeting and dirty diapers. A dog started barking loudly from the backyard.

 "Hello...um...no, you don't know me, sir. My name is Nate Andrews. I live over in Lebanon, but I grew up in Lamar and went to high school there. I wonder if this is the house of an old classmate of mine. Her name was Ginger Sutton. Do you happen to know her?"

 "Know her? Hell, yeah...I'm married to her! Come on in. Hey, Ginger! Get your ass out here. Somebody wants to see you," the man yelled. "Pardon the mess, Nate. With three young-uns, it's a never-ending battle. Say, you wanna beer? You know what they say: it's always five o'clock somewhere!" he laughed. (Actually, it was only 10:30 a.m. on a Sunday, with most folks still going to church.) Nate said thanks, but no.

 She walked in the room with a two-year-old on her hip. Her hair needed tending, but it was still reddish-brown and Ginger was recognizable. She had a cigarette in her mouth. Some of the ashes sprinkled down on the diapered toddler. Ginger looked tired and had aged poorly. Her sleeveless tan housedress was wrinkled and splattered with kitchen food stains. Her pale blue fingernail nail polish was badly chipped. Her left upper arm featured an odd tattoo of a black cat's face with a yellow lightning bolt going through one of its eyes.

 "Jesus Christ, Nate! Is that you?" she asked, squinting through the tobacco smoke. She coughed, then put the butt out in a full ashtray. "How y'all been? I see you met my husband, Earl. Actually, he's my second...it's a long story..." Ginger grunted. "Well, come on Nate, have a seat there on the couch. Earl, honey, move that crap off the sofa so our guest can take a load off. Then be a sweetheart and mind the twins playing in the bedroom while I visit here for awhile with my old school friend. Can I get you anything, Nate? A cold Pepsi, some Cheetos, or some Chips Ahoy?" Nate politely declined.

 To say that the next forty-five minutes was perhaps the most bizarre experience thus far of his entire life would not be too much of an exaggeration. After an awkward good-bye hug, Nate was relived to finally leave in a mock-gracious manner. As he drove away from the lingering horror, he realized that seeking out Ginger again was a monumental mistake. Oh...My...God! And to think that I once worshiped the very ground she walked on, and even made love with her.

 The decades went by. Nate was comfortably prosperous -- having saved and invested his money earned as a master electrician -- but he was still very lonely. His parents had recently passed away, and his sister, Trudy, had grown up, gone to college, married, and moved to New Hampshire. She had a daughter now, named Bonnie. Her husband, Luke, was some hot-shot attorney.

 Time went by. Lamar High School announced its 50th Class Reunion for Nate's graduating class. He was curious and wanted to go. Yet he hoped never to see Ginger Sutton again, especially there. It would be too painful, still, after all these years, to be at the exact place where it all began between him and her.

 When he arrived at the reunion, Nate Andrews was hugely relieved that Ginger was not in attendance. The event, however, had a pretty good turnout. Even looking past the many grey, white, or bald heads -- and most people gone to fat and wrinkles -- Nate found that he recognized most of his old classmates. Of course, a few had already sadly died, and a memorial display was set up to honor them. The Grim Reaper never takes a holiday.

 The evening was genial and surprisingly pleasant -- remembering the old days, hearing how everyone's life turned out, sharing funny stories, and the like.

 While Nate was talking with an old friend, he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. He turned around and faced none other than Mary Lou Gump.

 She looked outstanding! Well-shaped and peppy for a woman in her late 60s, nicely tanned, her silver-hair perfect, her outfit and jewelry both contemporary and chic. Nate was stunned at her transformation from her dowdy former teen-aged years.

 They found a more secluded corner of the school auditorium (though the loud music from the house band was still rather intrusive) and casually talked. They shared how life had treated them over the last fifty years since they saw each other. Mary Lou had graduated from college after majoring in Economics, and had recently retired from being the vice-president of the Midwestern division of a national cosmetics company. Her husband, Robert, had been a stock market analyst, but he passed away in a light plane crash with two of his business associates six years ago. Mary Lou had also suffered a miscarriage, and afterwards was unable to conceive any more children. Money-wise, she admitted, she was well-off and very comfortable, but she shouldn't be considered wealthy.

 "Now Nate, I want to give you my Springfield address and cell number. Please stop by when you have a moment. I have something very important to give you, and say to you, in private. I promise, it won't take long, just a few minutes. O.K.?" Mary Lou smiled warmly, and gave him her professional card. Nate took it and agreed.

 Ten days later, Andrews arrived for their arranged visit. Mary Lou's house was quite impressive and very upper-middle class. Each room, as she gave him a brief tour, was colorful, light and airy. She laughed when her surprised Persian cat, Taffy, bolted and went to hide in another room after spotting this new stranger in the house. Mary Lou then offered Nate some sweet iced tea and a trio of mini-oat scones which she had made fresh that morning. It was a humid day, so the home's refreshing air-conditioning was most welcomed.

 The pair sat together on a floral-patterned couch in the living room. Her guest sampled the nice refreshments.

 "Nate, do you happen to recall what I told you the night of the Senior Prom back at Lamar High?"

 "Yes, Mary Lou. I didn't believe you then, but everything you predicted about Ginger Sutton came true. Our relationship ended in disaster, and I never recovered from it emotionally." Nate told his hostess about his upsetting visit to see Ginger again in Jefferson City. He also opened up about his failed marriage, and other dating 'dead-ends.'

 Mary Lou listened with heart-felt compassion.

 "I'm so sorry for the suffering that life has dealt you, Nate," she offered sincerely. "Wait here a minute...I have something to give you." Mary Lou paused and went upstairs to the master bedroom, then returned with a brown cardboard legal-sized file box.

 "These are for you." She handed Nate Andrews the box. When he opened the lid, he was stunned to see that it was filled with what had to be more than two-hundred letters, all addressed to him.

 "I loved you with my whole heart and soul for many, many years, Nate. I wrote my feelings down because I knew I would explode if I kept my emotions bottled up inside. But knew I could never give you any of these letters, because you didn't 'see' me, or even cared that I existed. You were not a love 'projection' of my inner fears, needs, and wants, either, Nate, like Ginger was for you. I saw all of your potential and honesty and wonderful sincerity, but also your flaws and faults...yet I loved you regardless -- with a real and rare love, which I sensed was true, even as a teenager. I hoped and hoped that someday you would realize that I would be your very best choice to have a deep, true relationship with. Yet sadly -- obviously -- that never happened. I went on with my life. I tried to forget you. I'm ashamed to admit that even in my happy marriage, I secretly felt somewhat alone and incomplete at times. Because I was without you, Nate.

 So this box of letters is for you, to take with you. You might like to read them sometime, or you can simply throw them away. But they are a precious, realistic reminder of what could have been...if our life had been with each other instead of with others. It's time for you to go now, Nate, I think, before I start crying."

 Nate Andrews was without words, his emotions tangled as he was starting to understand something very real. Perhaps an almost cosmic realization. After a moment, he cleared his throat and spoke.

 "Is it too late for us now, Mary Lou?" he softly said. We are both free, and we are both alone. Maybe we could try to put our lives back together and...begin at the beginning?"

 Mary Lou moved close to Nate's face after she led him to the door and he turned to face her. He had put the box of love letters he was carrying down so as to reach for the doorknob. She closed her eyes, and kissed him -- just once, but longer than casually -- on the lips. This tender act for her contained all of the passion and all of the ultimate regret that existed in the universe.

 "No, Nate, that can never happen...I'm afraid that time has passed us by. It's gone forever, don't you see?

 So this must good-bye, my dearest dear..."

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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