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don't think i'm anybody's thursday someone's  
saving me for a rainy day*

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Article 7

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## Say, Uncle

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## SAY, UNCLE

Somehow Uncle Charlie slipped in the back door of the school and found locker 408. When I came down for lunch, I found the notes, looking well-spaced and very important, slipped through the ventilating cracks.

Dear Bets,

I had the greatest time with you Monday.  
You're my personal sunshine and everything  
seems bearable after being with you.

Meet me at Jacobson's at the bell.

Love, Charlie

If I looked down Ross Court, I could pick out his red Camaro, with all six-foot six of him folded in. I spied both ways, then slid in beside him, smiling and smugly proud of myself.

"Did anyone see you?" he questioned.

"I don't think so."

Then the sunglasses and we were on our way.

"Hey, how *Are* you, doll?" Next came the usual survey of me. I pulled my coat a little tighter, and wondered if all uncles acted like this. These were the times I wished I was sophisticated, trying to hide my poorly-shaven legs and cross them properly.

Then it was my turn. Mom was right, he even *looked* like the devil. Wispy red hair, prematurely grey at the top and a ten-year-old's set of freckles. Silk embroidered shirt (20 dollars, I'd guess) and competing wide tie. Only on Charlie would you think pink stripes looked great with green fleur-de-lis. The suit was definitely Italian, picking up the tan background of the tie. Being a fanatic about shoes, I spent an extra minute on his. He noticed.

"Hey, like my shoes? Guess how much." He pulled up his matching pants to show his matching socks and the shiniest alligator I'd ever seen.

Here we go again, I thought. My god, he must have twenty pairs of those things.

"OK, I guess 85 bucks."

"Close. 120 smackers—pure alligator. Like em?"

"Sure, but I wouldn't pay 120 bucks for them," thinking of my \$1.25 an hour job at McDonald's.

"That's the difference between you and me, doll."

We talked all the way to lunch, but I never saw his face until we sat down in the red, cracked booth, always in the corner, away from doors and windows. Sunglasses off.

"Sorry, Bets, but you know it's got to be this way. I've got so much on everyone else and I can't afford to let them get anything on me. Besides, it's all clean, anyway, but you think they and your Aunt Liz would believe that?"

I was always starving and ordered the Hamburger Deluxe—65c. Charlie ordered whatever I did and then he'd nibble nervously, eyes always straying back to the door.

Charlie could never get his mind off business. He talked constant about the thousands he owed guys and the millions they owed him. I listened, not knowing the difference between net profit and gross net gain, or whether to feel sorrow or envy for him.

"Charlie," I asked, "is it worth it all, the money I mean?"

"Bets, don't let anyone ever try to fool you. If you don't have money, you can't do a *thing*."

After talking to him, I used to go home, half in a trance, thinking my ideas were right, but admitting that his way sounded pretty tempting.

Listening to his problems, you'd think he couldn't even pay for all those ice cream cones we bought everyday. Then you'd look at him, like he just stepped out of the *New York Times Mens' Section* and that crazy smile. He figured three hundred dollars spent for a suit couldn't even dent his debt, so he just gave up and had a good time. Every time he left for home, he'd tell me to go have some fun for a change, and he'd hand me a twenty dollar bill.

When I started working at the florist's, Charlie practically supported it singlehandedly. I could always expect him every Tuesday and Thursday at 4:00, strolling in, hands behind his back, planting his feet like a platypus and looking forebodingly obnoxious. "What was he up to this time?" I wondered.

"Ma'am," he winked at me, "I'll take everything in the store. Wrap it up, will you please?" I played the dumb salesgirl, trying to cover up knowing him, as he straight-faced my boss and drilled her on the eating habits of the venus fly trap.

I guess he figured I needed the sales, because he never left without three carnations. It was such a waste, because the only one who ever got them was the already overstuffed waste barrel. My aunt wouldn't appreciate them, she'd just put two and two together and Charlie and I would be banned forever from all family functions. But that was how Charlie got his kicks.

Then I started getting notes three times a week in 408. God, I thought, how many business partners does he have in Grand Rapids?

It turned out that I was his main one and we soon both got sick of Arbie's roast beef, butter pecan ice cream and checking every hamburger place to make sure some Lyle Johnson or Biff Anderson wasn't there.

The next note went something like this:

Bets: How's about taking Chicago tomorrow?  
Make arrangements, dress sharp and I'll  
pick you up at Jacobson's at 8:00. You'll  
be the hit of the Loop.

Love, Charlie

As it turned out, I wasn't ready for Chicago yet. After three driving hours of Charlie's philosophy on life, I was tired and hungry when we finally got there. The maitre-d at Fritzel's didn't remember Charlie quite as well as the other people waiting for a table. They had already slipped him a ten before Charlie got a chance to. I wolfed down my macaroni and cheese as Charlie bluffed his way through another Biff Anderson who had also chosen Fritzel's for lunch that day. When I got home, I had to feed my mother another whopper about where I had been for the past ten hours. The lies were all beginning to sound the same.

I went to my locker less and less between hours, hoping the notes would stop coming. I couldn't tell the new ones from the pile of the old, and once I found myself waiting in front of the bakery on January 17th, when I was supposed to be in Jacobson's parking lot on the 20th. Something had to give.

I started to have all kinds of meetings to attend, bulletins to write and clubs to organize. Charlie sensed it and laid off for a week. Then the notes started hitting me again, a little more

urgent than before:

Bets: I must talk to you. Meet me  
at Ross Court at 3:30.  
Please come.

Charlie

I started thinking about Aunt Liz. Charlie underestimated her, but she knew as well as I did that men didn't have "business meetings" on Saturday.

"It's women's intuition, Charlie," I told him. "She know." I guess he figured I didn't know much about the subject because he showed up every Saturday whether I'd see him or not. I'd spot him slowly turning the corners, then speeding down the street as he passed my house. Sometimes he went around the block four times.

The whole thing came to an end at Arbie's over my 83rd Super Arby. Charlie was nibbling as usual when a huge, calloused hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Hey, Chuckie baby! Where you been hiding yourself?" Biff Anderson himself—also Aunt Liz's second favorite dancing partner.

Charlie came on a little too strong, yukking it up a little more than usual. He introduced me as his long lost niece, on our way to auntie's house. He even pulled himself together enough to invite the guy to play golf.

Charlie said you should always judge a guy by the way he acts in a tight squeeze. And that one finally made up my mind.

The next note was about what I expected:

Bets: I've got to go to Cleveland this weekend.  
I want you to come. Please say yes. I'll  
be at Ross Court at 3:30.

Love, Charlie

I ripped it in half and threw it to the back of the locker. I could see a Camaro from the door. Earlier than usual, I thought.

I pulled my collar around my ears, locked my eyes straight ahead, and pushed open the door. A few more steps, and I'd be past the street. He honked twice.

"No, Charlie," I said to myself, "I can't hear you anymore."