

You'll Have To Ask

By Rumple_deWriter

Published on Stories Space on 20 Oct 2015



"Well, if you want to do something like that, you'll have to ask."

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/flash-fiction/youll-have-to-ask.aspx>

It occurred to Mark Cahill that things could be one hell of a lot worse. He was out of his room at the nearby Manhattan veterans' hospital, sitting in a coffee shop on Lexington Avenue and staring across the cluttered table of a two-person booth into the soft, brown eyes of a very attractive student nurse. At the moment, she seemed to be saying something about school. He'd nod at times, even mumble to show interest, while concentrating on the view. With a touch of crispness in the early fall air, she had on a burgundy turtleneck with a navy-blue vest, matching mini-skirt, and knee-high boots. Mark didn't know fashion, but knew what he liked, and he liked what he saw, a lot. But there was something more about her today than just looks. She seemed brighter, happier, more spontaneous than usual, and in a way he couldn't understand, very desirable. Since he first kissed her back in the summer, they'd done about everything possible, everything that is except make love. And since she made no secret about being engaged to her long-time boyfriend, it seemed obvious to him they never would. He could handle that. While their increasingly intimate fooling around was fantastic, more than he'd ever hoped for, just being with her is what counted most. She made being stuck in a New York hospital, a thousand miles from home, endurable, even enjoyable, although he still wondered why, being engaged, she kept visiting and going out with him after her summer job on his ward at the VA ended and she returned to school. Maybe it was a last fling before marriage. Maybe she felt sorry for him. Maybe he'd never know. Whatever the reason, their not making love meant zero danger of commitment, and he liked it that way. Since Vietnam, he'd avoided getting close to anyone new. Still, the way she looked now... "Are you listening to me?" Gwen Kaplan interrupted her monologue and gave him a look of tolerant exasperation. "Not really. I do believe you were in the middle of a major rant and rave about the idiocy of one of your instructors, but don't press me for details." "So if you weren't paying rapt attention to my every word, what were you doing?" "To tell the truth, I was thinking how great you look today and how I'm glad you managed to get back from home in time for us to go out, and how much I wish you didn't have that damn test tomorrow." "Why, thank you." Gwen seemed both pleased and a little startled by the unexpected compliment. "I'm really sorry about the test. Believe me, I'd much rather spend the evening with you than with a study group." "I think that's what they call a back-handed compliment. But I'll take whatever compliments I can get. And who knows, it may be a good thing. You look so good today, you might run the risk of me trying to seduce you."

Gwen said nothing--just stared at him. Then, in an even, almost flat, voice she said, "Well, if you want to do something like that, you'll have to ask." Mark sat dumbfounded. He had been joking, well, maybe half-joking. It was supposed to be one of those things you said to a girl to let her know you wanted to make love with her without having to come right out and say so. According to the small town, southern script he'd always followed, the boy asked. The girl then either ignored the remark or smiled coyly while shaking her head, hinting that someday she might become interested. For whatever reason, this girl hadn't followed that time-honored script. Instead, she'd all but dared him to proposition her. Over the past few months they'd gotten into some heavy make-out sessions, but nothing more. She was a nice Jewish girl from Queens and engaged. Making out with a beat-up vet you liked and felt sorry for might be okay, but nothing more. Now this. Sure wish I understood what the hell's happening, he thought. But if this is how they do things up here in the big city, I'll try to go along with the program. With Gwen's gaze still boring into him, Mark stammered, "Sure. Well then, uh, so how about it? I mean, would you like to, you know, spend the night with me, some weekend?" To his astonishment, he heard her say, "All right. But what were you thinking about in terms of when and where?" It all seemed a bit unreal. After practically inviting him to ask, Gwen had said, yes, and now wanted to know when and where. "As soon as possible, of course," he said, rushing his words. He paused, smiled at his own nervousness, and then continued in a more normal voice. "But as I may have mentioned, I'm a stranger here myself. I've got no idea about the where part." For just a moment, she seemed to analyze the situation. "This coming weekend may be okay. Johnny's going out of town with his mother so all I'll have to worry about is my parents. And I think my friend Sue once stayed in a hotel around here with one of her boyfriends." "I'll try to check on the hotel with her tonight. But for now, the Fundamentals of Medical-Surgical Nursing calls. If I don't get back to the dorm and hit the books, I'll be an ex-nursing student." Mark took the hint, stood, and watched as Gwen picked up her purse and slid out of the booth. The movement revealed an enticing expanse of very long legs. It might still be a beautiful, early fall day in New York, but in his considered opinion, things had somehow managed to become a hell of a lot better. •Note: The opening to this story first appeared in, More Than Just A Kiss: conclusion,