**FOUR LETTERS: ONE WORD**

by Michael Halm

Howdy, Mr. Thomas Wilson,

I found your name listed in the East-West Correspondence Club's members. I'm guessing from your address there at the university that you're a student -- or maybe even a professor or something. I think that's exciting. No one in my own family have ever gone to the university, not to graduate anyway. Daddy tells folks he went to the university ... to fix the boiler. Ha! Ha! Well, he thinks it's funny. I think that he's pretty smart to know how to fix so many things, don't you?

I've been working since last summer when I turned eighteen with my oldest brother Bobby at the convenience store. I work late sometimes, so I read the Romance novels. You're a reader I bet. What sort of books do you read? Other than your text book, I mean. I never did like reading in school, but I like being able to read what I like now. Billy nearly went to college -- he's another brother, the next oldest to Bobby -- but then he decided to join the navy and is a sub somewhere. Were you ever in the service? I don't much like that he he did it -- Billy that is -- but Daddy's proud of him for it. Betsy, my oldest sister, is also single now like me. I mean I'm single and haven't been married and she's been married and now isn't. Sometimes she lets me come over and babysit. I like babysitting. I like it better than working at the store. I like being Aunt Annie.

Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are you the youngest too? Do you have nieces or nephews? Am I asking too many questions? It's just that the ad in the listing didn't give much information. Well, there's some things in our family that we wouldn't be too quick about telling to outsiders. I hope that you answer my letter. I promise to answer, if you do, O. K.?

Oh, besides Romance I like Country and Western song. If you answer and if you do too, I'd love to correspond with you about your favorites. Please write. If this reaches you before Christmas, have a merry one.

Hopefully your new penpal,

Annie

Dearest Annie,

Sometimes as I answer your letters I find it hard to believe that we have been writing each other only about four months now. It's because we have written so often, now nearly every day. I wish I could talk to you and see you in person, but my studies will keep me too busy at least until Memorial Day weekend. I like to thank you for the tape and the photo you sent. It's so nice to see the person, the lovely person, who I have been writing all this time and to hear you sing.

I have to confess that I showed your photo to my roommate. As you know I haven't made friends easily here, but I had to show you off a bit. I'm quite proud to call you my friend. Actually, dare I say it, I think I could be falling in love with you, "Texark Anna", even though we've never met yet. Opposites do attract.

Well, that about all for now. I have to practice my music again before bedtime. Maybe I;ll have that song I've been working on finished before break and can sing it for you then. I'd love to have you be my first audience for it. I think you'll like it.

Much love,

Your friend,

Tom

Listen here, College Boy,

Annie doesn't want you writing her any more. I helped her burn all those Romance novels and all those letters of yours that you have been writing. I am screening her mail now that she's staying with me and the kids and send them back if there are any more. You cannot reach her at the folks' either, so don't try. It's over. If we do find out that Annie's pregnant, I've agreed to help her out. God knows she's the only one in the family who helped me through my troubles. God, it better not be twins again! It looks like it'll be hard for her to forget you in any case, but I'll help her with that too. For some silly reason she has it in her head that it was her fault, that she lead you on, that it was or could have been true love. She reads too much! She keeps saying she loves you too much to ruin your life, but I'm going make sure you don't ruin hers!

This is your first and last warning,

Betsy

Dear, dear Tommie,

Of course you have our forgiveness. The forgiveness comes free along with our love and you will always have it whatever happens. We're proud, Dad and I, of your going for your degree, but we have been concerned that you have been neglecting a social life so far from home.

Your father and I, you know, wrote to each other for two years before we ever met, not until he returned from Vietnam. When we did, we too did get into some pretty heavy petty. We understand, surprisingly as that may be for you.

We would have wished that you didn't have to learn this lesson the hard way, but we pray this experience will make you a better songwriter and a better man. If you've learned the difference between love that lasts and infatuation, it'd be worth it. Just as there are some false springs here before true spring arrives, there may be many false loves before you find true love. You may be a late blooming lover, dear, but even the longest winter, the longest childhood must end. Spring always comes after winter -- perhaps you can use that as a song title. If you want, we talk about this more when you're home, or if you don't we won't. Just know that we'll always be for you.

As always, love,

Mom