

COURSE CORRECTION III

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HOMEcomings

by

Joseph A. Dane

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Los Angeles: FreeReadPress, 2021
Printed in the United States
ISBN: 9798515035815

CONTENTS

Days of the Pandemic	1
PART ONE: FAMILY MATTERS	17
1.1 High as the Phone Lines	
1.2 <i>Ménagerie</i> : The Art of Preservation	
1.3 Getting the Words Right	
PART TWO: NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH.	93
2.1 An Owl in the Rafters	
2.2 A Man in the Family	
2.3 Road Maintenance: Keeping the Dust Down	
PART THREE: WOMEN FROM AWAY	179
3.1 <i>Ménages: Pas de deux</i>	
3.2 Psycho-Chic	
3.3 Schrödinger's Cat	
EPILOGUE: Ringside	265

DAYS OF THE PANDEMIC

It was late in the pandemic when I learned that every day is like the others.

I thought of Eloise, writing her film scripts, twenty years ago, the two of us writing her film scripts. Something about cloning; the identities of all the future characters entangled. And it was as if we were stalled in life and there would be no progress or delay. No discarded drafts nor celebratory printing up of copies. Just the two of us, awake at 3AM, struggling with the dialog. Never have I wanted time to stop so much as I did then at 3AM, fearing what the passing of time might bring to us. My eyes on her, attuned to annoyance or fatigue. The things she was never able to explain to me. “You don’t know my life,” she said. “You know nothing of my family.”

In two decades, I would learn that every day is the same as all the others.

And predictably Eloise got lost in it—her script-writing of course!—the revisions all cattywampus! Intrigues and plot divagations in high disorder on the computer screen. She pled for mercy, so she said, as students do, and naturally all the professors took pity on her, due to her potential, due to her grace, her loveliness, due to her good heart and it reminded me (by contrast) of my classmate at Columbia who couldn’t finish the thesis required of first-year students, wasting her time (I thought) with me in the opera and one night she showed up late and I touched her arm for the first time letting her know it was alright to barely make the curtain, though how was forgiving such trivia an act of magnanimity? She whispered of complications in her thesis, or her advisor

maybe hitting on her and I knew then she would never get the research project done and this might be the last I would ever see of her. Dark hair. Bad skin. So unlike my Eloise, I would have said, had I known my darling Eloise years before I saw her; had I known the particulars of color and facial tone of both. If she recalls at all, she recalls with some bitterness, I am certain, the jerks she met in graduate school, the predator-advisors never held to account, how she left them to start a family—her kids now gone, she having married finally that lawyer who could not get enough of her.

And what of it?

There were no prize-winning monographs by anyone.

There were no triumphs noted in the obituaries.

I met my cousin Bill, his brother Frank now dead from dementia. I met my cousin Roxie, off in Colorado, or Karen it was, gazing out over the water at Del Mar, flying to Montana for the last day she will spend with her father, a near centenarian. I met my brother, down from Deer Isle, or maybe it was just gathering about me my relatives to lament the death of the woman whose face I picked out, my second cousin, but older than me by a generation, posing with the family on the rocks of Kennebunk, a decade before I was born. And what of my cousin from Monterey, carved up by the shithead boyfriend of her roommate, my aunt dead from the grief of it? Or my step-cousin in jail. All my aunts and uncles finally gone, the youngest of them first to go.

Every day is the same as all the others.

There is no point in learning from experience.

We woke up in Tulsa and threw ourselves into baking tips and the sharing of recipes. We woke up in Venice and you posed with me on the sidewall framed by the bougainvillea. One day and one day only—this is the important part—we heard our neighbors making love without restraint, and of course if you hear those whom you assume to be your neighbors and you only hear them once, you know it is not your two neighbors making love at all, but only one of them.

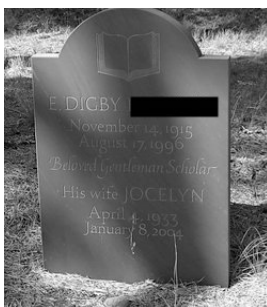


We woke up in my apartment in South Pasadena “designed by an architect!” the owner gushed, as if there were another way to build things. Shared balconies and sliding doors for entry-ways. Clear that the would-be Van der Rohe had never lived in a rented space, where folks like you harass their dwelling-mates with cries of passion. “Oh my God. I’m sorry. Would your neighbors have heard that?” you gasped. “I don’t know; it depends what freeway exit they were on.” Like

your neighbor in Tulsa asking about the sewing machine we seemed to use in the wee hours of the morning!

Remember Jocelyn, our sadly erstwhile neighbor Jocelyn, complaining of the mockingbirds that kept her up at night, changing the metaphor when complaining to the offenders just in time as your eyes widened in embarrassment. Knowing that “mockingbirds,” and only they, were loud enough to overcome her coughing fits.

Jocelyn last met me on the street outside the apartment; I still see her walking toward me, the crumbling façade of the Rialto as back-drop. “I have lung cancer,” she said, explaining the coughing spasms the architect of our building had not foreseen; the coughs that caused me to move to the living room and close off the room that shared a wall with her. No longer could she be comforted by the gossip she claimed to love: “Only the most lurid, please,” she said on her deathbed. And all I could come up with was the worst thing one can say: “You’ll beat it. I know you’ll beat it.” Like what the stranger said to Gabor on Exchange Street in Portland a year before he died so many years ago, and I shook my moralistic head even then, having read Sontag on this matter, now lapsed into that register myself. How inconvenient, this cancer thing, these doctor’s notes, I must have concluded, denying what she was going through. Let’s not mention it. And the closest I got to her after that—to you after that, my friend and neighbor for years—was standing with her surviving daughter in the courtyard laughing over the very anecdote I told above. The one about the mockingbirds.



Every day ...

We woke in my apartment and immediately began to discuss our dinner plans. It was what I call the “very picket fence of things.”

One post after another.

Every day is the same as every other one.

That’s what I learned during the pandemic.

Wedding Plans

On the day Linda Jane got married, I woke up as usual. June, it must have been. That’s the appropriate month for a wedding, no? I once knew, schooled by the teachings in etiquette delivered half-heartedly by my mother, but all I retain from that is how to address notes of condolence.

You know, for friends who die.

That sort of thing.

Addressed to their family.

Trying to find the consoling things to say to the loved ones of those you will never see again.

On the day Linda Jane got married, I woke up and wondered if perhaps I had the date wrong, perhaps failed to sign

the registry. Was there a piece of cookware I was meant to mark in the catalogue? Had I misplaced an RSVP because it had no stamp? Had there been no invitations? Or was one never sent to me?

I rode my motorcycle from the church down through Phippsburg to Georgetown, or perhaps I was living in California then and drove non-stop across the country, through the mountains up past Durango, past the silver mines of Ouray, where I learned first the meaning of the word *precipitous*, to Golden, meeting my beloved cousin for the first time, hardly pausing for breath when I passed Joan's old house just west of Manhattan in Kansas. And maybe onto Georgetown itself, the other one, next to the Folger, where I walked with Linda Jane on the riverbank alert for copperheads.

The tables were all set. You had no choice of where to sit, like for that hippie chick in Glacier when I engineered the seating to get her next to me. So too the tables and the pews as well, the celebrants arranged in order of importance or the facts of genealogies, family in drunken repartee in the front rows. All caught up in the fraud of white dresses, soon to be packed away with the rest of the stuff to be packed away to be lost in a move to be cursed as a ridiculous expense for nothing more than posing with the wedding party or ripped up in a lovers' spat.

Judith appears before me. Of course I am supposed not to have seen her in the muslin wedding dress her mother sewed for her with its cross-stitch embroidery. That's in the etiquette books as well, their tenets fixed and passed on by my mother, amid laments that no one knows how to act these days; no one knows the meaning of a white wedding dress, one she herself refused on principle to wear in the 40s. Judith

is holding the bouquet of daisies, I think it was, my favorite black-eyed Susans having bloomed weeks earlier. She guffaws the moment we stand together—no pure white for her! Not for the hippie chick who had taken advantage of all that 60s' liberality as soon as she was old enough to read of it. The honored guests are assembled, having driven up through the hurricane. Some turned back in the driving rain and fallen tree limbs. Nothing like the storms of the 50s, I think, Carol, or Betsy from the late last decade. But everything is wrong. We are following the path our parents took. Even her amusement is all for show, I later learn, as she slowly absorbs and soon adopts the teachings of her family. She cuckolds me with her best friend Annie the night before the wedding and within a year, she will blame me for leaving her. She will blame me for failing to seek the soul-destroying jobs that could have bought her the horse ranch. She will leave the furniture and cookware behind to be lost in the kitchen fire, my jackets already stolen by her lovers and apartment mates.

I drove down the dirt road to what friends call my summerhome—slowly! got to keep the dust down, Ray always tells me with insistence, although Frank just shrugged: What can you really do? And there all my neighbors stood in the best clothes they could find that didn't need ironing, lined up in the disputed field, deeded to May and her family, their arms angrily akimbo—I not knowing who the kids now coupling up in front of them might be: lascivious locals "caught off the corner," people from away, renters, or maybe just guests at a self-styled B&B, enjoying the scenery, picturesque as all get out, they might say, not knowing the twisted histories of the place. And someone had set up a florid archway, I suppose for the frame of the wedding shots; it has a name I'm sure—one

of those gardening or architectural things—pergola, or something similar—but that's not it—soon to be torn down and the flowers tossed into the compost or burned in the firepit.

"The space expands as the heated molecules repel," the minister digresses, turning the listeners' attention to the change in the atmosphere, the lifting of the fog, as the sunlight burns the mist away. Or maybe he is repeating a sermon from childhood. "Like people," he adds as admonishment, and all the celebrants nod in pious agreement, having no idea what he means by this.

They have been doing this all their lives, marrying their loved ones off and attending their funerals. There is nothing you can tell these loss-hardened listeners that they feel they need to know. There is nothing you can preach to them that they will not swear they have heard before. Each sermon, each threat of moral reckoning, is like all the others.

Elsie flies off to Mexico with Giancarlo. Mid-pandemic. No one even has a test-kit. Rules about documents and papers known only to committed travelers. Health restrictions. Passports or green cards or workplace certificates. I think they did no more than sign for the notary. I think all went like clockwork.

Or did they get hoisted in chairs and carried around the dance floor like Jn and Lisa, or B. herself with the very man who shares her condo, trophies of convention!, while the kid in the band tried to feel up the guest in the white dress. Or was it simply volleyball in the sand with the hippie atheists in Georgetown, most of the players nude, others perched on the tidal rocks, waiting for the drugs to hit or pass through their systems? Were there special standards of pomp for the Catholics? Did they stand in awe of the sharers, speaking of

Tertullian? Who supplied the texts for the sermoning? Did the bride's family curse the wedding guest?

On the day Linda Jane got married, I checked the calendar and saw this day had finally come. I threw on a shirt and went outside to check the cloud cover, check the advent of the sea breeze, check for the calming dew and the sun-streaks across the window glass. Like the *jalousies* of Nature, I would say, or seek the opportunity to say.

The sun clears the windowpanes.

Nothing to be done, as Beckett says.

Each day is like the others.

The Day She Left

On the day my darling Eloise left me at the airport, or I her, I called Linda Jane in West Los Angeles, hardly awake at that hour, and bawled like a baby (what better way to describe it?) then drove to Linda Jane in Long Beach and spilled the entire beans (as good as any!) at the Thanksgiving feast and drove home thinking, with more arrogance than I could know, that all the bad things I had experienced I brought entirely upon myself, and of course (I added grandly), life could not be worse for me than now it was.

That was four months before her suicide.

We sat in the bus on the way from your sister's house in Worcester straight to the airport where you would leave me for the last time. We sat across the aisle, having found no adjacent seats, and of course no one would give up a window and the grand views of and from the freeway just for the convenience of the once-lovers we had always been. It was there that you told me all the feelings were now gone—the bravest thing anyone has ever said or done to me and you put your

hand on my forearm as I had with Elsie, or would do years into the future, but with far more courage and sympathy. And all I could do then was sit in the most excruciating silence imaginable, waiting for our exit.

She Who Would Not Wait for Me, I learned to call her then, the day she left, or determined to, having rehearsed this day for weeks, I think. So clear, her thinking was, now I realize, the evidence in notes we exchanged those last few months. And why I would not simply set her free or why I did not throw myself into the arms of another, a Woman of Today perhaps, and throw that in her face as well to let her suffer what I would suffer, why I did not do that “I will never know”—another bad cliché, I see. “Wishful thinking” in all its senses, a phrase hardly one whit better. “These next few weeks are going to be rough,” I growled. I thought those very words. Not knowing the half of it. Not knowing half the half of what the next two years would bring.

“Enough of this bourgeois complacency,” she must have thought as she reviewed the conversation that foundered on the same thing so many others had (conversations, I mean) with so many others (conversants, now of course). I will not risk the loss of a family, she must have thought; what do you suppose we women want of you? “It’s your own fault. We broached the topic more than once; I can still see us standing below your balcony, designed by an architect, you said, outside the laundry room. ‘Children? Don’t look at me!’ you said, as if with conviction, and then turned toward the stairwell, the very stairwell where your Eloise (as you call her) had collapsed and turned her face to you in tears, Jocelyn, struggling to keep the cough suppressed, watching from the adjacent balcony. And even though I knew your retort was in part a

joke, and even though I knew that we should now talk this out and if we conclude that it is pointless to continue we should stand tall so be it let's simply take a weekend to cry things out—despite knowing this was the right thing to do, it was easier to say nothing.

“And maybe now that we did not speak when then we should, it's time not to speak of this again.”

Off in New York, she was, and I suspect Linda Jane had already taken up with her classmate, *mein irisch Kind* with another Irishman! And one evening she called, out of the blue, perhaps, or just at her regular time in the days when “long distance” was still meaningful, and straight out asked if she could “start another relationship” (no forgetting *those* words!). She asked, that is, exactly as an adult would (or the adults we imagine might exist), and what she wanted was exactly what I for some reason wished for both of us.

And there!

Was that not the time to speak the truth to her, to prove to her I was all that I had claimed to be?

But no! Of course no saying that! So I would emit instead a barely audible gasp of apparent pain, heart-sick, yes, but not enough to make her so piteous as to change her mind; for I knew, from bitter bitter experience, that the wrong thing said at a moment like that would lead to a *status quo ante* and give us another year or two of what dissatisfied both of us and the best thing for me to do (we're talking of my thinking then) was carefully carefully to reply in such a way that she might be crushed by guilt and think she owed me everything, awed by my benevolence, but ... and this is the crucial part! ... break off with me regardless just as she threatened to do. Stay on a

distant coast, enter a nunnery, perhaps, or ok fall into the arms of the new lover who lived across the hall from her, a dunce so benighted he would never realize this woman was the “best there ever was”—that virtue one that only I could know. So I summoned up my best baritonal maturity and sent her off, never to see her again except in the photographs I have almost worn to nothingness by holding them, staring at her eyes as if her eyes again.

There were so many ways of putting it: “The feelings I had. They ...” “Is this a bad time?” “We need to talk ...”

Each of those the same as all the others.

“And what would you have us do? Me do, I mean. With my life. With my intellect. Will I sit in your second bedroom and stare out at the birds or foliage? Will I be enraptured by your resume? Will we talk philosophy?”

Each way of saying it the same as the others.

There were no storied lovers.

There are no miscreants.

I remember as a fifteen-year-old I saw you on a street-corner, Maine Street it was, where Findley crosses it—you having stopped taking my calls two weeks earlier. I followed you, then deftly and athletically skipped past you, awing the audience, as we crossed the side-street to the fire station. I flipped, as I passed, your perfectly dated pony-tail without making eye contact or saying even a word, thus pretending to both real and inexistent on-lookers that we were so close, the two of us as one, that there was no need of a greeting, of pausing to exchange our intimate wit in front of our envious friends listening in in silence, Gene among them, doubtless, the kid who briefly ended up with you and died in the ice. Died before the rest of us.

And do you remember when you walked up to me when we again were teenagers, in lockstep with your dance partner, after you had stroked my neck in the music in ways more practiced than I imagined you would be capable? And I fell for you completely, as I had when we were first-graders. But you then put me firmly in my place, with your Intended standing beside you, arm-in-arm the two of you. Forget those months I had adored you in grade-school. Pointless to appeal to them. Nothing but kid's stuff. As worldly-wise teenagers, how could I think you might be free for me?

Or having you begin our lunch date by walking out of the front door of the man I had no idea was my rival and giving him a full embrace right in front of me. That was Bob, much missed, who died last month of the virus.

Or you pushing my sixteen-year-old hand from your adult breast in high condescension, as the thirty-year-old you finally grew to be, a perfect stranger in a white dress, tighter than it once was, flirting with a high-school kid at the wedding reception: "Good God! My husband is right there!" you laughed in derision.

Or the time I called you when we both lived in Manhattan—oh this one is the worst of all!—and having your roommate, your mother I think it was, choke down her laughter (oh these poor kids!) as she passed on the dubious excuse you were clearly mouthing in the background to get rid of me.

Lunch Date

I studied her across the table, not my darling Eloise, but a woman I had loved for years, years before meeting her, my darling Eloise, that is, seeing first how she had aged since I saw her last two years ago, or remembered her from when

we were teenagers, her once flawless skin now enhanced with life and the California sun, seeing as I stared fixed on her features her form slowly form itself around the younger form I still have in my memory. And I talked with her in my most soothing and relaxed voice as if caressing her forearm until she became the woman I had known for more than a half-century.

"Do you remember that feeling?"

"You mean ..."

"Yes. Falling in love," I said. I'm sure it was me who said that.

"You mean all the clichés? The bells and whistles of emotions?"

"Yes."

"Like my kids feel, you mean. Or what we used to feel as teenagers. Like on the dance floor when she held you for the first minutes of what you hoped would be forever. Those years when emotions passed so quickly we hardly knew what was happening."

"That is what I wish to know."

"What was real then! Or what about those days would we describe as real today? Perhaps you mean later. When you discover that all the times you fell in love as an adolescent were fraudulent—hardly worthy of mention given the knee-buckling emotions that would hit you in the prime of life."

"Of course ..."

"And later too. Perhaps it's something we never get over. Like your friend John said, falling for the violinist as he turned sixty: 'if hormones are involved, all bets are off.' Hardly imagining Pierre was doomed to die of AIDS and he of dementia."

"Yes. Exactly. That is what I am asking."

"How singular these feelings are, we think, simply because the circumstances happen to be ours—feelings no human could possibly have known before today. The ubiquity of what we imagine (wrongly) makes us unique. Those emotions we believe ourselves the first to know. Of course. Of course I remember that. Everyone remembers that."

"You remember; that's the crucial thing. So there is only one possible question that could follow. Only one I could ask. The *telos*, if you will, of this exchange."

"*Telos*! How could you say that? Of course I know. There is only one thing you would want to hear from me."

"Are you ..."

"You shouldn't ask or have to ask me that."

"Do you ..."

"This cannot be the first time you have considered this. I love you, of course—please don't withdraw your hand from me!—but I know you are rehearsing these lines, for me, perhaps for others too, and not feeling them."

She turns toward me then away from me. I am reminded absurdly even then of the slow rotations of the counterweight in the glass-domed clock we had on the mantel, something to mark a wedding or anniversary, its damage blamed on my sister. She turns to me as Linda Jane did that last afternoon in my apartment in Venice, facing me one last time in the shadows that to this day I claim blurred and finally hid her tears, both knowing we would never hold each other there again. You can sense her pain in the photograph, the pain too of me viewing it, as she tries to smile once more for the camera lens.



She turns away from me as others always have, and I am left, not in the dark (a cliché hardly worthy of what I feel for her), but rather in a haze, as in the fogs east of Penobscot or even drifting through the mooring-field in mid-summer. Thinking of the day our shoulders met as teenagers, recalling nothing more than that, nothing thus experienced in the world beyond that, thinking of this day as one when each day was the same as all the others.

PART ONE

FAMILY MATTERS

1.1

HIGH AS THE PHONE LINES

Le plus sûr à la fin si on veut se faire aimer, c'est de n'interroger personne sur rien.

Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, vol. 8, ch. 9

Prelude

It was difficult to reconstruct the histories preceding the day that Uncle Frank shot himself and left behind the note to his sister, left behind the note that left everything to his sister. “Everything to Elizabeth” was all that was reported to the relatives—the next generation, descendants of the old, that is, those of us who were bred to be spared all truth, failure, and embarrassment. This was protection of children. This was bourgeois entitlement. The cottages and spectacular views over the water. The mansions on Summer Street, built by our robber-baron forebears. All those things that were rightfully ours, I suppose, due to our skills at slaughtering animals or dabbling in the slave trade, manipulating the coinage, working the factory-workers and even their children nearly to death. Such things we never spoke about. These were things that escaped the genealogies carefully constructed by our detested grandmother. Like the vagrants, unrecorded in the record-book, with no issue, the pages finally rotting in the gutter-folds. The grim faces of our ancestors, engraved and pen-sketches on the pages, now stare out in despair, as if realizing there is no one left to stare back at them.

My favorite uncle, he was, no uncle at all. A godfather, I was told, a status gained by a quarter hour at the baptismal font in the church where my family set foot only for the christening. So many things we never spoke about. The camaraderie of the young men posing on the beach in their swim suits in the 30s, summers as teenagers, college years at Bowdoin, the women safely in the distance, shaded by umbrellas.



No one spoke of the caliber of the firearm, nor where he had purchased it. Could it be another of the family heirlooms, barely a generation old? Where were the servants who cleaned up after him? Those locals I never saw during our visits there? Or had he graciously strode out with sudden purpose into the back-lot, where we kids once marveled at the luxurious growth of the foliage? By the time we were adults (or what passed for that), he was gone. I never saw Elizabeth again. The magnificent house now closed off to us, gobbled up by the architects—nice gay couple, we were told, *sotto voce*,

the way all gossip was passed on to us—men incurious of the blood stains power-washed or sanded off the floorboards. We incurious of them as well. It is easy to speak with acceptance of the sexual practices and proclivities of those not in the family.

There was no talk of the drugs and alcohol that nearly engulfed me years later when I visited Aunt Anne, Frank's second sister—living in the mansion across from his, both purchased with the blood of the real Americans and the slaves from Africa. We all marveled at the hospitality. No one mentioned Frank or Elizabeth. No one mentioned the young men swanning around on the beach-fronts. Or why his brother conceded (obliquely to be sure) that the heiress Frank was said to have courted was better off with the banker from Connecticut.

I. The Hurricane

Th. #1

What I remember best of these histories leading to the day Frank blew his head away, likely with no more thought of how we might take it than Eloise had when she did the same—what I remember most clearly, if not quite accurately, was the day Hurricane Carol made a run at the East Coast in 1954, a storm such as not seen since the thirties when the concrete seawall buckled under the assault and heaped its remnants high against the roadway.

I woke at the cottage, five miles from Frank's house, to concern among the family—a rarity in those or any days. Most things “were no cause for alarm.” A storm of this magnitude, however, one that would heap stones from the cobblestone beach across the road and into the cottage that had

once held gatherings of all those young men in their risible swimsuits from the Depression—that was too much. That was like the war they had somehow all fought in or survived—something you finally had to pay attention to. And of course when the adults attempted to explain this storm, all they could come up with was yet another allegory, a series of bad similes, and a reference or two to fiction, such that what I envisioned was the twister from *Wizard of Oz*, despite the unpersuasive assurances that these were two different things entirely. Storms, that is. Not merely fictions or histories.

So we packed up the family, just as we did on so many occasions, and Lord knows what went into the car. A change of clothes, perhaps. Maybe a day's worth of food? And certainly two bottles of gin, packed in the recess of the box from the kitchen—no need of refrigeration. All would work out fine. The storm would pass, as all storms had, and we would return to the cottage the next day, picking up the cobblestones and throwing them back onto the beach. Ignoring the trees stacked up on the road-shoulders—like the bodies on the beachfronts, like the firs that fell in November the day that *She Who Would Not Wait for Me* left me finally for good.

In those days, weather prediction was primitive. Who knew what would happen, even in the most immediate of futures? I miss the suit-clad weatherman arranging the H's and L's on the chalkboard, then finding a front to draw in. And I think though we all watched this nightly, no more than a handful of viewers could explain what a cold or an occluded front was, or why High and Low did not refer to temperatures, or what was meant by isobars. We simply watched and nodded our heads in solemnity. The highs were good, we thought, the lows somewhat less so, and doubtless, though

incomprehensible, all consequences had been “taken care of.” This was what adulthood meant: it was best not to inquire into things.

Th. #2

There was no grand conclusion to the day that She Who Would Not Wait for Me left me finally for good. There was no tearing one’s hair out for the camera lens. There was no Olympiad composed, or pithy epigram. There was no trip to the gun store or to the drug store for the poison. Just the call and the hesitation in the voice and no reference to the “date” she had had the weekend before and finally I just paused and said as slowly as I could “Do we need to talk?” and pretty much, that was that. And as I collapsed back into the chair, I thought with astounding naiveté “the next few weeks are going to be rough,” because the pain of losing a lover—these too were things no one discussed. You just sucked it up and pretty soon, things went back to normal. The ice trays froze; the figures in the check-book added up. And the car came back from the mechanic good as new. You could live in the great void of life. Eye of the hurricane I would say as an analogy, with the same unreality.

I thought of Frank then, and considered holding the gun to my chin and using one of those various ways of speaking on the phone or the internet so that she could watch it happen as I stared for the last time into her bewildered face about to experience the same shock I myself had suffered a week earlier, my blood spattering onto the screen before her. But the only death I know as spectacular as that, was one John tried to explain to me—the deadbeat neighbor chasing his girlfriend down, drawing the 9mm from his belt, placing the

muzzle to his temple, and pulling the trigger in front of her, with only the half-open car window to protect her.

Compared to that, most others are barely worth the telling: Joe's wife, for example, finally giving up on him was almost comedy. She must have realized in the end there was no way she could recondition the gay man he had always been into lusting after her. Connoisseur of baroque extravagance? The velvet suit? What was she thinking? Or what too did she intend by hanging herself in the study for him to cut down? The blood from her menstruation dripped onto the drafts of his life-work. When he was dead drunk, he was able to copy his transcriptions well enough for me to type them up for him.

I considered such acts, but all variants required, if not quite courage, at least commitment. And what did I know of commitment? So I did nothing and thus the weeks drew out to months, and the months drew out to years. And maybe if Eloise hadn't done to herself what I had not the courage or stupidity to do to myself, things could have worked out more quietly, and I could have been spared the pain as I suppose Frank, my favorite uncle Frank, no uncle yes, as I have said, was spared his embarrassment.

I drove to Kennebunk. Just to relieve the ache for an afternoon, I thought. And when I got there I instead relived walking with her on these self-same beaches a year or was it two years earlier, and there was nothing that was said that day that made me suspect for an instant we would not be doing this forever. My favorite aunt, or first cousin once-removed she was, would make the joke she made every time I left her on her porch in Kennebunk: "I'll see you right here next year," I would insist as I gave her my farewell kiss. "You

be here! You promise me!” “Oh God, do I *have* to?” And the last time she said that to me was the time I knew that I would never see her again. That she had lapsed into my past in the same way that P. had—not into life, but into my reconstruction of the life I had with both of them.

Reportage

When we drove from the beach to the mansion secure from the storm-winds, I knew nothing of what was to come. The clouds formed in broad bands—like those Columbus saw and recognized on his fourth voyage, I believe it was, harbored his ships and saved both crew and his legacy—that too finally crushed by the genocidal side-notes in his diaries.

I have often researched the history of this storm, but the various stories I’ve heard, the events I read of, and what I believe I remember can barely be collated. It is all chaos and contradiction, like the incalculable wind gusts and swirls in the storm. Stories more persistent than the facts of history, than the facts of understanding or researching history.

Safe in the mansion on Summer Street, I must have been distracted by a generation-old board game or just the Victorian tangle of corridors. I recall no wind. No shaking of the casements. No rain. No anxiety, no Life Lessons imparted by my father, as he wondered where he had cached his gin. And at some point in the late afternoon (although the histories demand it be earlier), the family resolved to check on the beach cottage. Well, part of the family did. It was best to leave me behind ... for safety? To avoid the trauma of witnessing anything unsettling? Off into the pellucid deception of the Eye of the Storm they went, leaving me to climb over the uprooted

elms in the back lot, spared Dutch Elm misery, one might moralize, by being flattened in the wind-gusts.

The remnant family drove to the beach and all was well. No roads impassable. No glass shattered on the living room rug. They drove back—ten minutes max—and when they reached Summer Street, the trailing wall of the eye hit and they were nearly killed as the weakened elms fell across the roadway just as they had by the carriage house. Or so the half-family reported.

Who knew of “eye of the storm” beyond its use as a metaphor? You just repeated such things. No need to understand them. No need to investigate vortices and wind sheer, pressure troughs and ridges and the like. Are not the meteorologists (“weathermen” we called them then) themselves just products of the “boobs above the fold” mentality of the newsroom, reading the prompter with looks of sincerity?

“It was fantastic,” my older brother said. I believe I am sitting or half-asleep in the grand four-poster in my godfather’s house—the man who would have a “problem” or an “issue” or what was later described as “something about the Boy Scouts,” not alone among men of that generation, I suspect. Perhaps I was told the story the next morning or the next day, and that may be when my memories of this day formed: thus the uprooted trees I later clambered over became in my memory those felled an hour before the mischievous eye formed over us.

“We drove to the cottage on Great Hill, and there were branches down everywhere, and a few locals were out with saws and rakes to begin the clean-up. There must have been power outages everywhere, but we saw no signs of that. The

most important thing was whether the doors and windows on the cottage had withstood the storm surge.

“Down on the cobblestone beach, and you know how the two bands of rock, one south, one north, separated by maybe two hundred yards or so, slowly as the tide falls extend outward into the sea like two arms of a giant crab, embracing what at low tide is a shallow lagoon. The arm to the south and west is where you will spend so many hours among the tidal pools in four years as a ten-year-old. The northeasterly arm is formed by the artificial roadway to the farmhouse on Strawberry Island, now abandoned, where Dad and Mom do not let us play. In forty years or more, when most of the house has washed away, you will walk on the remnant foundation stones with your P. and find patches of topsoil still supporting the beach roses. Five years after that, there will be nothing left of it. And nothing left of her as well.

“The lagoon formed at low tide when the two arms meet can’t be more than a few feet deep, blocked completely from the ocean swells. A calm and safe place for kids, although you and I never waded out to check. Maybe something else that was forbidden us. That’s where each day our uncle would walk down with the large wooden thermometer; only if it read 70 would he swim. Curiously, our second-cousin-once-removed, our age, your much-to-be-loved Roxie, will claim in the future that “Grampy” was in fact an excellent and enthusiastic swimmer and would float in the tide-dependent lagoon for hours, and even had a raft or dock anchored out there, which neither of us will ever use or remember. Who knows what the truth is?

“We parked the car and all the cottage windows were intact. The roadway was covered with cobblestones, and

tomorrow you and I can go down there and start pitching them in high arcs over the cement wall back onto the beach.

"What was amazing to me was that the waves, even with the tide that low, broke over the rocks and threw up spray as high as the phone lines, high as the telephone poles. ..."

Those are the words I remember best. But I never understood whether he meant that the spray reached the poles on the roadway, or whether they threw spray upward to twenty feet or so, the height of the lines, or whether, more dramatically the wave crests reached the actual pole-tops already thirty feet above the sea surface.

"The sun was overhead." So another version states by a different witness. "Barely a breeze. And driving back to Frank's house, we turned onto Summer Street. You will learn the way, after you get used to driving down to the old cottage to sit on the porch with Roxie, just as you used to sit there with her mother Natalie, staring out over that lagoon and south to Agamenticus. The back way, that is, turning where there is now a traffic light. Right there the wall of wind encircling the eye of the hurricane hit us and as we drove, we began to watch the enormous elms fall over Summer Street. ..."

How was this possible? The storm sped Northeast such that the passing of the eye would hardly give you time to catch your breath, let alone get to the beach and back. Did that trip take place the next day? Or perhaps just as the storm cleared? For I remember the same thing when Gloria hit here, the only storm with the magnitude of Carol, some thirty years later—the first step in my debauching of Linda Jane, whom I once called "the post-person"!—and when the wind finally veered from the East to the South, evidence that the center of the storm had finally passed, I drove down to the point and

parked my car facing directly into the wind and stood out to experience its force and all I recall is not being certain I had the strength to open the car door against it. Three days we were without power then, and maybe that prepared me for the storm another twenty years into the future when She Who Would Not Wait for Me called to tell me she was leaving me.

Carol hit, then Donna, I think, far out to sea. We sat on the porch where years later I would sit with Roxie and I stared at this monster so far to the east it gave no evidence of its existence. Then we drove home to Brunswick just in time for the third (Edna it was), all rain and no wind, and the cellar flooded and Father, my brother, and I all went down there to pump it out, futilely of course. It was like trying to bail the water from the lagoon at Kennebunk, but it must have made us all feel manly fighting the elements like that as we did.

And then Father (as Plato or Johnson might say) suffered an enthusiastic fit as he worked, bailing and adding to each pointless painful a Great Life Lesson from his past. And for some of these stories I had the impression he was not speaking at all, not drawing on his hard-earned eloquence or experience, but simply repeating phrases he had heard before or had come up with earlier. Things like “we spoke at great length” intoned with such assurance and solemnity it would “prevent all reply,” as Milton might have it, even though we knew those “at-great-length” conversations were likely little more than formal exchanges of platitudes.

I remember losing interest quickly, and practicing my jabs on a punching bag.

I am crawling over the large elm tree in my uncle’s yard; I am sitting in the living room in the morning being told of the

approaching hurricane; I am sitting on the old four-poster. I listen to the words on the telephone and realize she is gone for good.

II. Storm Surge

She Who Would Not Wait for Me

A storm much weaker than that one, more than a lifetime into the future, uprooted trees and up and down the coast and that was the last time She Who Would Not Wait for Me spoke to me with affection. Fine Relationship that was! I would learn. Most of the passion gone, living in the eye of the storm, I would say if I were prone to similes. just the naïve faith in everything—the clear skies overhead and around us. The phone went dead; I hear its silence still. Yet surely my debating skills could not fail to persuade her that leaving me was madness. Surely there were words to bring her to her senses in all sense.

So I stayed up half the night, or all of it, drafting that unassailable argument. You know—the type of thing you might say to one of your enemies that will cause them to tuck their tails between their legs, admit defeat, and slink off in shame and humiliation. Like that. And as near as I can reconstruct it, my Thomasistic reasoning involved determining whether the decision to leave me occurred *before* or rather *after* the shit-head opportunist put his tongue down her throat. A crucial distinction! Because you see: whereas,

(1) if her decision came *after* that, for guilt, say, well hell, of course anyone can be forgiven for a little indiscretion because you realize even I in my blameless morality or what passed for that in my mind had not been entirely faithful in the sense everyone (my bourgeois compatriots I mean) takes

that and what difference does it make if your lover jumps into the sack with someone half your age because really when you think about it I mean in a logical way and stripped of emotion why you ... well maybe not love her but damn you're one with her in some sense and sure you would have all this to hold over her head but magnanimous as you are ... You get the idea.

Whereas,

(2) if she had determined to leave you *before* this hideous event why then you could just step back all grown-up like and ... and ... Well, perhaps at that point you could construct another argument to bring her back to you ... Or something to that effect ...

I had it all figured out, and, in a tortured note to her, expressed it with a rhetoric infinitely more subtle and expansive than what you see above, and I'll be damned if she barely skimmed over it! How was that possible? and she seemed unable to answer even the simplest questions about the aptness of particular phrases finally turned there to perfection.

"He came back!" she gushed, explaining to you why this was not just a simple fling or act of indiscretion. "For seconds?" I said. "Is that all it really takes?" (Or perhaps I didn't say that to her, but just formed my rapier-like riposte in my consciousness—the cutting blow that would reduce her to silence.) And off she went with him, thus or regardless.

When the trees fell in November, it was as if the stuffing had fallen out of things. As if the train had hit the child's penny epitaph and derailed deep in the woods. As if the soap had stuck to the soap tray.

And then I persuaded Eloise to come and make it all right, because minutes with Eloise would provide me more passion than I had experienced all the years coupled up with

another. And the disaster of that visit is too well chronicled to revisit here.

Gloria

Thirty years after Carol, Gloria formed deep in the Atlantic, and by that time, satellites watched its birth, charted its course, and early computers predicted its path. A week in advance, we were certain it would hit, and began to get ready, like good listeners of the news reports. I had my boat hauled by the boatyard. We took Charley's boat across the bay to Robinhood for winter storage. I bought tape for the windows, ate down the fridge for the inevitable power outage, and ran into Linda Jane several times on the road, leaning into her car where she let her shirt fall open for me. I reached in and placed my hand on her forearm.

The spindrift began at 8AM and within an hour the power went out, not to be restored for three days—the same number of days I would be without means of contacting P. when the trees fell in November eleven years ago today. I walked the road, expecting peace and quiet and all I heard was the howl of the generators, Linda Jane curled up with her magazines and sex toys in a comfortable house in town; I walked many times past her doorway and no one so much as looked out at me.

The day before I left for California, now free of storms, Linda Jane dropped in for no more than a minute or two and I held her hips against me, both of us promising more in the future, whenever the future would be available. And then it was another summer, making love out by Haskell's, hardly an act of infidelity, I thought, since Linda Jane in New Jersey

knew nothing of this and if you know nothing, fidelity is as cheap as beach roses.

Aftermath

There were days when I thought all of this would last forever: family dinners at Frank's house, the walking on the cobblestones, the preparations with Linda Jane for the coming hurricane, the waking with my P. or having her arrive "home," as we called it. All that bourgeois complacency of dressing for dinner, the saying of grace, the nightly repartee while love-making, the walks at sunset. And I held her in the car, having survived as best I could what turned out to be our last dinner date, trying to delude myself (and perhaps her as well) that there was a chance we could remain friends or acquaintances or lovers or merely exchange hostile nods as we passed in the library, and I put my hand in the small of her back, where Linda Jane had won me with her massage a decade earlier, and I felt her entire body stiffen in desire, and at that moment, it didn't matter what other man she had or what wild emotions they pretended to experience. It was enough then to feel her feel what passion was. And the coming months of rejection, humiliation, despair and anger? What was all of that compared to knowing this?

I remember the cobblestones washed up on the dead-end road in Kennebunk, past the cottage I can smell just envisioning it. I remember the darkness of the corridor in the second floor, separating the tiny bedrooms—typical of cottages in those days, none of the open spaces one would find today. Another tangle of guest rooms. It was easy to find privacy in those days, or at least spaces where one could be ignored. On the beach itself, looking for sea-life in the tidal pools, on the

adjacent lot, not yet covered with summerhomes. Even in the yard out back, as felt by a ten-year-old.

I remember sitting on the porch staring to the horizon and the speck of Boone Island that bisected it, and imagining Hurricane Donna, I believe it was, or Dora, far beyond view, churning up the water, only a week or two before the third in this series hit, or maybe just sitting there with Roxie years into the future and thinking of doing so as a child.

Linda Jane takes my arm, and presses her breast into my elbow. Linda Jane holds her hand out on the roadway, hitching a ride as soon as my distinctive car comes into view. Linda Jane asks where the pain is in my back as she offers a massage, knowing full well what will come of this.

III. Photo Albums

Frank stands at attention at the head of the dinner table, dressed in his black suit. He slices a foot-long piece of the skin from the swordfish, as I had said how much I loved that cut in the more modest servings served at home. I realize this is all I will recall of him.

I checked through the family albums and it was like looking through the photos rumored to be touched up by the Politburo. Those old panoramic shots pieced together in the darkroom, the enemies of the people edited out or lost in the gutter. In those that came down to me, I find no record of the entire family and friends: none of the whole lot of them sitting on the rock-faces backed by the water. None of those who owned the big houses on Summer Street, those who developed the land on the Point, and bought the cottage once owned by my grandparents. No photos of the carriage house. None of the turreted mansion, which was always said to be

“not the biggest, but the tallest!” on the street, as if that were a sign both of grandeur and austerity. His life known only to an unknown coterie, who recognized him as a college kid, who knew his profession as “fur merchant.” For the rest of us, nothing beyond the details chronicled in the obits of his sisters, asides in the tales of his brother, whose very charm outstripped any truck with the truth.

When he died, I remember breaking the small hasp on the cheap silver jewel box I was warned not to touch: “2nd Prize / Rubber Club of America / Tennis Tournament / July 14 1915”—must be a trophe of my grandfather.



Accepting of my sin, I hid in the closet behind what now seems the grotesquerie of furs, likely sold to us by Frank at a discount. I could stay there, I thought, be forgotten, never to endure the remonstrances of my family for my carelessness, for my failure of duty, for my destroying the things that mattered, like the clock broken by my sister. Far easier that than to face the shame of things, however impunitive, or once again to be subjected to the high-moral speeches of my father,

who always felt the call of duty when it came to lecturing on proprieties, that is, when it came to passing on to the next generation, the ethical pretenses of his forebears. But no one seemed to notice. No one cared about the broken hasp whose untouched state seemed so inviolable a few weeks earlier; no one noticed I was gone.

I received nothing in the will, not even the token \$400 I got from my namesake. I received no notice when Elizabeth died, although I am told the glass-domed anniversary clock came from her. I received no notice when his other sister, Anne, who received me so kindly in the more modest mansion across the street, when she died or moved away to a rest home. There were no clippings from the newspaper pasted carefully onto the black construction paper of the photo albums. And his brother—kindly rhapsode of the past—continued from one project to another, all with the grandest of enthusiasms, leaving all his associates shaking their heads in admiration and disbelief—not one word of Frank when he visited.

For him, there was no history. At least the “him” I was permitted to remember. Frank thus escaped the embarrassments we all suffer as adolescents. He never disappointed the adults. There were no stumblings in middle school, no being slapped around as a grammar school kid. He was never disciplined by schoolmasters, nor fondled by pedophiles who peopled the prep schools. He didn’t get sick on the way to his summer home, nor was he humiliated by the daughter of an equally prestigious family. He did not grow old with his loved ones at his side, surrounded by fading photos of his grandsire. He didn’t get the call from Nate, asking if there was anything he could do. His god-son did not drop everything to run to his

side and tell him how much he had meant to him. There were no contractors called at mid-night, to repair the roof-leak, and the local school board did not write him in desperation, pleading for donations.

What became of the RSVP notes pasted into the album, documenting the parties he attended, his sister at his side, balancing his drink with the grace we kids always believed we saw in the adults we tried to emulate? Where was the stripping off of his best suit, and lowering himself into the bath, not to cut his wrists as so many others had done, but simply to experience the luxurious warmth his family had willed to him? Was life no more than the family name inscribed on the well-groomed peninsulae or the fenced-off lots in the cemetery? The marriage contract disavowed with civility? Were there not balls as grand as you see in the works of Virginia Woolf, or was it Dorothy Parker? Were there books he never read and ironies he never grew up with? Where were the family gatherings on the rock-face? The years away to college or perhaps to the war, which so few of his class had avoided, and even fewer of his class had given their lives for?

Had he sailed from Kennebunk east to Campobello? Or south to the Caribbean, returning home by the coastal steamers? Stopping in each port? Dressing for dinner and cocktails? Aboard with the Cabots or the Kennedys? Had there been a European tour, first-class in the ocean liner—tales of the open sea? The port cities of the Old World? The wonders of culture between the wars in which so many were called to fight?

How had he exercised his business acumen? Conducted the board meetings? What of the real estate ventures and the development of the beach-front? What of the fortune saved to

maintain the grounds? The hours with the work crews? The materials shipped in from Boston? The furniture brought in by freighter? I remember the large box speaker, almost child high!—the latest thing in the 50s!—for the hi-fi on which no music played.

All those signs and accoutrements of the bourgeois aristocracy that made this country what it is today. I'm sure neither he nor they thought twice about torturing the animals and stripping their skins for adornments nor about the swordfish strangling in the air. They never thought of the boys they trained to go unthinking into the military and die in the swamps or murder all those "from away." Nor did Frank himself think twice of the tears of his sisters or the disgrace he had brought to the family, not through his act, but through the act of its being known. Whatever it was ... Things we never talk about ... "Something ..." The closest I could get to the truth.

Just another of the self-slaughterers whose histories could not account for the way things worked out in the end: my darling Eloise, the professors at Bowdoin, Joe's wife, Tim, scion of the most august family in town, Richard, or his near namesake shot in the school lot, my neighbor John, fresh from Sugarloaf, Dick Nesbitt, his boat washed up on the beach at St. Thomas, C.'s niece, years in rehab, or that kid whose name I never remember, fresh from college, Marc's brother, so I hear, finally giving in to schizophrenia and alcohol; or those not knowing the bottle of aspirin would never be enough, or David, posing in the gas fumes for his kids to find and rescue him.

I used to walk alone on the beach-front, no one looking after me, skipping among the cobblestones, slipping on the

seaweed of the rocks the tide exposed, some of the grander ones still visible today bordering the tidal pools. God knows where the family was. I remember scrambling up the cliff side trying to reach the swallows' nests. Trying to understand what "erosion" meant, so unlike the catastrophe of "the hurricane" that had us spend the night at Frank's house. How would one escape from a process that took place over a lifespan, I wondered? How would one escape from anything? Wars and pandemics. Love. How would one escape, as Frank must have tried to do, from life itself? How would one ensure one's likeness was never cut from the album?

"Who is that child just inside the frame?" they will ask in the future. "Nate's family? One of the distant relations. We had visitors in those days. Oh how grand life was in the summer, when the men all came back unharmed by the war, and we all took up our summer residence again. We held cook-outs for the best families in the neighborhood."

IV. No Man has Hurt Me

So let us say then, that nothing happened. The hurricanes of the 50s blew themselves out over the Atlantic—victims of high-level wind-sheer—and never made land-fall. The wall of the eye of Gloria shattered in the Gulf Stream and the fallen trees regained their stature. My P. rebuffed the cad who propositioned her, or perhaps we talked that out like adults the weekend the November storm hit. We drove back to the beach after dining on roast potatoes and swordfish and the sea was calm.

Frank thus never drew the gun from the drawer in the drawing room; he never drank the fatal poison or never slashed his wrists or whatever it was we never talked about.

He stood, rather, in his black suit with his sisters, as if posing for the camera a half-century earlier, smiling, well-bred that he was, however long it took to get the image right. We tightened our ties for the parties and all of us showed up when called for the photographs, admired by generations to come, Frank, Elizabeth, my father, say, stationed among the friends and relatives, those who used to pose so proudly on the beaches of Kennebunk.

And maybe too there was no dinner, attended by my once beloved P., *She Who Would Not Wait For Me*, all giddy with her travel plans to visit Maine for the first time, like the giddiness before her date with the man she left me for. Or maybe I lived my life with her in bourgeois complacency—the life that ended so fatally for Frank and for so many others.

How unlike the *Woman of Today*, I think, leaving in a fury of invective from the lust she still had for me and almost painless to recall within a month or year or so. How unlike my Eloise, in far different ways, who will never pull herself away from me. Perhaps if, as I once wrote, for Linda Jane it was, if we had simply held our breath in the waste of the ship-holds of immigrants, life could have started up again for us. Or perhaps there would be no falling for rivals, or perhaps I would have grown younger, or perhaps for once I would have found the right things to say to her that would have “turned it all around” as the hearers dropped to their knees in wonderment.

Maybe in that world, I hold my darling Eloise, walking the beaches at Kennebunk or the grounds of the Huntington, and absorb in myself the self-slaughtering ways of everyone and realize yes, that was the way to go, finally with the assurance of her love for me, both of us dying in unheralded glory,

and rising through the wings stage right, our hands locked at last. But even trying to flatter her with these absurd visions led to nothing—like trying to evade the indifferent storm, or sorting through the logic of the life of my godfather.

Walking the beaches to the south, walking the occasional shores of what are called the rock-bound coasts to the east, I smell the sea moss, I guess it is, that once washed up on the patches of sand wedged into the cobblestones at Kennebunk. I sit on the porch with my second cousin once-removed, whom I never knew when we were kids, both of us scrambling up the hillside, now eroded to the slightest of inclines, trying to reach the swallows' nests.

1.2

MÉNAGERIE: THE ART OF PRESERVATION

Tale imagine a punto mi rendea
 ciò ch'io udiva, qual prender si suole
 quando a cantar con organi si stea;
 ch'or sì or no s'intendon le parole.

Dante, *Purgatorio*, c. 9

Andrea had six days to get the snapping turtle to the taxidermist. After a week, she was warned, the carcass would rot beyond salvation. Even the flesh-eating beetles would turn away in disgust, and she would have no memento left of those heady days of her innocence, before her lovers stole even that away from her.

The turtle had not been hers. She was not yet born when it came into the house, and as a child, she studied it only at a distance ("Don't get too near him, Sweetie!"). After she left home, she knew only what her mother and the vet passed on to her. In the end, the feeding schedule perhaps was disrupted by her mother's failure to remember things—when to walk the dogs, how to pay the utility bills, when to collect rent from a distant property, how to keep the car running or how to operate it at all. And then the plumbing or electricity that needed to be in working order—at least in the main rooms of the house! And slowly the turtle suffered from malnutrition (or so the vet would have it), dying peacefully in its pond, full on flank steak but starved for the greenery it required, hardly

objecting as the small dogs balanced on its massive shell as if no more than statuary.

Andrea undresses before the mirror. Someone had once pressed her, whether out of jealousy or lechery, and finally she blurted out: "Two men a year. That's me." He had tried to remain expressionless. You have to stay in shape, practice, so her thinking went. You didn't want to tense up each time, like it was tantamount to losing your virginity. You need to keep your composure; you do this every day. "Two men a year," she said provokingly. And this was before he even laid a hand on her.

Long ago, of course, things were different. Ugly (the snapper's name) was willful. One day, he disappeared from the pond on the back of the lot. Everyone assumed that he had been stolen (horrible to imagine), despite the chain-link fence, or simply climbed free of the enclosure ("cage" was the proper word) and was now enjoying a *Wanderjahr* as, according to research, turtles do. In three days, he reappeared next to the house, having rolled the stone away that served as an entrance to the small pond reserved for goldfish and frogs and the like, which he had gobbled up the one time he was installed there. Mom coaxed him onto a shovel, loaded him onto the child's wagon, Rosebud oddly, and returned him to the larger pond, carefully checking for entry points. The next day, he was back, having scaled the chain-link fence once again, and this time, no bones about it: he remained next to the house for his entire life, never testing the bird netting that was all that confined him there, surviving two raccoon attacks, the second ridding the place of marauding predators for weeks. The motion-detecting hose fired in support at God knows what. Even machines have illusions, she thought.

Andrea removes her shirt. Observing what others must have observed. Trying to sense the desire they must have felt or at least pretended to feel. Maybe it was just another notch on the bedpost for them, if guys had bedposts today. She thought of phone calls, of men reaching for her forearm, even those who were uninteresting and skill-less, closing their eyes, and maybe thinking of other things, and she remembered telling one of them: "You know what I liked best about you? You always stared at me. At the ... at the crucial moment ... you stared at me, looking right through me. It scared me to death. Completely unnerved me. I could never let myself go with you staring at me like that, as if into ... as if into my very ..."

I. Domestic Life

It seemed a normal life, here, two hours from the once bucolic house she had grown up in, working as a temp, living in a dark apartment where the obnoxious neighbors were so loud she developed a policy: "I just wait them out," she said. "No need to confront them. I just outlast them." And they would get shot, or their kids would become adults, or they would be evicted or move on and God knows what happened to them or what new neighbor had to suffer the torment. Bass from the music at 3AM, vomit in the corridor: you got used to it. Her uncles or grandparents, even a lover, had spent years in the trenches somewhere off in the Pacific, or on the open plains of France and Germany. Maybe in the jungles of Vietnam with foot-rot. And the mortars had come in every night and you learned, she was told—maybe by that lover, yes, one of the two-a-year it was!—you learned, sleeping out there in the open on top of the bunker, trying to catch a breeze in the

night air—you learned, he said, simply to roll away from the thumps of the mortars, roll off the sandbags to safety, hardly breaking your sleep. ... And if those men could do that, the least you could do was pull a pillow over your head when the neighbor bullied his wife or threatened the insolent kids.

He wouldn't talk of it. He couldn't, he insisted, but did so constantly. Like rolling away, not from the incoming mortars, but from her lying next to him, half-clad like the image she studied right now in the mirror. You could still see the muscle tone beneath the flesh he had put on since coming home, since talking for years about his experiences there, since putting his full weight on her but going silent, as if thinking of something else, maybe the war memoir barely in draft, as if thinking of other women, envisioning, maybe, the boyish whores he says he used to buy or rent overseas, the literary subjects of his lifework. What are you going to do? he asked, sensing the shock in her face and she told him don't give it another thought. Meaning something quite different from the way he construed it.

Need to work on it, she thought to her mirror-image. Get that enviable ass men like so much. Need time to exercise to keep even what you have. Too bad how the sun assaults you. Have to use an umbrella on the beach on the sidewalk too. J. said Sharon, his Chinese girl, used to carry one to class, rarely without one, as if to embody and mock the stereotypes of Asian women from the early last century. Yet when he sailed with her, he said, her black hair blew free in the wind. Her face full lit in the sunlight. He steadies her on the wharf, as she laughs at her lubberly imbalance. Country girl, so she said; from an "inconsequential village of some three million

people.” And he fell enamored of her young body and hesitant diction just as he became obsessed with ... obsessed with ...



She slipped on a thin tee-shirt, and studied exactly what he would see when he pulled back whatever she would wear over it. It would do. Like the time wearing that sweater when it got cold, only a tank-top under it, and going into the warm apartment seeing his eyes nearly pop from his head as he helped her out of it. Or like being kids, having found by chance a moment of privacy in the parking lot, pulling that shirt off, working as fast as possible to gain the experience you would one day find utilitous.

They had a “thing” at High School, or so they all claimed, and the idea was you needed to have sex in public, like the Mile High Club on the airlines, and you would all stand in a tight circle around them—(so each one of them retailed the story)—pretending to listen to the music or watch the game or listen to the Principal in the assembly hall and they would have at it right there at your feet. So many times had she told

this story, repeating as if to confirm the versions others told, she was no longer certain whether they had actually made love in the bleachers there or simply made out like teenagers do or whether it might have been her and a friend or boyfriend or she was just the world-weary one standing guard in the impenetrable circle of would-be sophisticates as the guy beside her pulled her close. She felt his hand moving up her ribs and maintained that cool expression of indifference—you know, existential angst and all that—a stance that serves you well in anything, and didn't move a muscle as he fondled her. Let others, not themselves, stare aghast at what they were witnessing.

She reached for the sundress given her by her sister, who forgot that sun caused her outbreaks, who forgot the umbrella for the beach in Venice. Meant for someone half her age, she conceded, twisting into it. But not bad, with the shirt under it.

Because you had to look good, whenever you can. Even for that temp job, you had to look good. Labor, we're talking here, not a profession. You don't do this for you. Dress-codes and the conventions of the workplace are not part of you. Your economic life and your artistic life are separate entities.

Kierkegaard: "So one's work had better be as dull and meaningless as possible; if one has a special talent, one must not commit against it the sin of making it one's means of livelihood."

—or so J. quoted him, spinning his own variants. Not sure how your social life fit into this: maybe bourgeois philosophers didn't have such things in those days. The point is,

where your money came from didn't matter; this was wage-earning, nothing more. Alienation in the best sense, he said. What did the bosses care if the temps abused each other or laughed at their reprimands? What did temps care if the bosses threatened to turn them out on the streetcorner? Even if your workmates snuck up behind you and ran their hands over your hips, it was easy to brush the hands away and go about your business.

"The time will come": that's the attitude you have to cultivate. That's how Howard spoke of his past in New York. He was going to be a star. Millions in the bank. Interviews on television. A house in Malibu. So what, he would say, if he worked a year as a telemarketer? Annoying the crap out of the cold-called targets of his eloquence? He would laugh at all of it in his autobiography, if his career left him time to compose it.

And it wasn't stardom she wanted. Forget the house in the Valley and the interviews on *The Today Show*. "If I wanted fame and celebrity, I would have studied acting," she always used to say. Her goals were more modest: just getting the words right. Using words to develop characters, turning beats into the arcs of the screen play. Marketing. Knocking on doors and knowing the right doors. Sitting down like a professional, not flouncing like a girl right out of finishing school. Adopting the expressions that let them know that you, as opposed to the rest of them, "meant business"; that you were here to deal with serious people like yourself, not to be banged by a studio executive. And if in the meantime, here, in her working life, here, to pay the rent and groceries, if here she bent low carrying Xerox copies from office to office, so her boss or his minions could peer down her shirt, or

sometimes ask what she was doing for dinner, what did it finally matter to her or to anyone? It's not like being a whore, and if it was, so what? what business is that of anyone?

II. The Phone Call

I called him like I always used to—it was my thing as a liberated feminist—and you could tell something was amiss. Oh no. Not the Marine guy, long gone by then. Too many bar fights, and I should have dumped him when he told me of the first one. “You need to get in the first punch,” he said, as if I would ever find myself in that situation. You know these guys, whenever they drop their voices like that and preface some vicious monolog with “Now I’m not violent; I’m really not ...”. That’s the time to walk away unless you want to end up with a broken jaw or orbital, or limping into the bar on Lincoln Street, with dark glasses hiding the bruises, as J. said one of his seductees did years ago.

So I called him and how was I to know he was living with some girl half my age, or half his anyway. No wonder the conversation seemed to go nowhere and finally I said “Is this a bad time?” and he mumbled something and really, you can’t call it a conversation at all; what he said was nothing—just words. And maybe she turned to him and asked in that girlish voice I assume she had “Who’s that?” and he’s saying “Wrong number” or “Someone trying to sell me something,” or “Problem with the gas meter” God knows how he would have excused it. And she would have gone back to her knitting or her reading of law books and that would have been the end of it. Until they rolled into bed and made love like automatons.

Those girls would drift away. Like that French girl whose every move was calculated, he said, like a tactic in a battle

zone, and she sat back afterwards and said through that froggy overbite (his words, not mine): "Passion. I need passion in my life," startling him, since the only emotions she had ever revealed to him had been hostility and contempt. Married a Beckett scholar and never showed up on campus again. Or that German girl from my contradance class, the one who introduced us years ago—"sturdy" was the word he used of her, but I know it wasn't sturdiness he saw in her! She finally laughed at him as they fell asleep, "Sorry. I'm just monogamous. I'm a one-man girl, I guess." And even when Linda Jane left him, the magical one who cast a spell on him he said, ruining him for others, nothing changed, and damned if he didn't have a replacement within the year and I never saw him again, except that time coming from the beach to catch the bus and I was all done up in clothes covering every square inch of my skin—not to get burned—not to get rashes—not to have guys leering at me—and there he comes jogging down the sidewalk, right past me, and you know he recognized me like how many girls carry an umbrella or parasol I guess you have to call it in the blazing sun of Los Angeles?

I took my pulse when he reached for me because I could feel my heart racing and it scared me half to death and I told him I was dehydrated or something desperate like that as stupid as what his dark-eyed Norwegian girl said the first time he put his arm around her ("I'm round-shouldered"—still embarrasses her to think about!) and he gave me a half smile and maybe formulated some crude joke about body fluids, but anyway it kept him away for a week and then he finally had had enough and just ripped my clothes off without so much as undoing the buttons.

III. Bischoff's Animals

Bischoff's Animals is what J. calls an Old School place. Years ago, they were a classic taxidermy shop. You know, you go hunting, BANG, and you bring in an elk's head or bear carcass and in a few weeks, it's hanging on your wall. Or, say, you're a movie star and your Pomeranian dies, you go to Bischoff's and within a month or two, it's in your living room again and you don't have to feed it and it never poops on your rug. Like when I went in there to donate some of Mom's stuff and there was this enormous bulldog stretched out on the couch, and "Is that thing real?" I said. And Ace, that's his name, paused for effect and smiled at me. "It *was*," he said.

They're in Burbank, right in the middle of the film industry, so they always collect a bunch of stuff on the side just on speculation in case some guy from the low-budget shoot says: "Got anything weird to put in a scientist's office that will creep everyone out?"

"Sure. Just got a five-gallon jar full of ... well, either vodka or formaldehyde, don't know, haven't checked. There's a rattlesnake coiled up in there. Must have been three feet long or more. Will that do?"

"Deal."

The rattlesnake—well, you know where that came from—something Mom collected on one of those late evening drives out to the desert as Sis and I slept in the back seat with a dog or two.



But times change and the wars you're asking your citizens to die in change and Bischoff's had to change. No one is mounting Cape buffalo heads or Irish setters anymore. And as for the movies, the way things are today, how could you predict some customer might come in wanting, not your basic bear-skin rug, but a mountain goat humping a giant frog? An alien in passionate embrace with a blue-footed booby?

So these days, forget the mystery of taxidermy. You just mix up papier mâché and plastic goop and the next thing you know, you have a lion's head in the studio. You can't invest the time making stuffed animals like you see in the Natural History Museum down on Exposition Avenue. Why today, those things don't even refer to the real world of animals at all, but just to the history of depiction, like the clutter in Norma Desmond's living room. Not the real thing or even a

replica of the real thing made *from* the real thing. J. describes this in terms of metaphor and metonymy, but why keep driving your head deeper into the sand of things like that? To me, it's simple: "You do what you gotta do"—that's the way Bischoff's thinks. Like maybe you just screwed the guy because you were tired of not feeling anything for a half-decade or more. Same thing.

And occasionally one of the customers, or donors I should say—like me, the one who kept bringing in the bones and the bodies of the things my biologist mom had collected—she brings in the carcass of the snapping turtle bought at the Five-and-Dime in the fifties, and she wants the shell as a memento (not sure of what) and for her, of course, if you flirt with them a bit and maybe let your shirt fall open like you just happened to forget to wear a bra that day, they're happy to do it. They lower the creature with as much respect as they can into a special vat of beetles and within a few months, you'll have a perfectly clean shell, Ace says, with maybe a dusting of beetle frass, and in the end, everyone's happy: Bischoff's, me; even the turtle will live on in our memories, and the beetles are all well fed.

That's how it goes in this business.

Poor Ugly never encountered another of his species since the day he was lifted from the sale tank at Woolworth's. So instead of procreating, preserving his form in his progeny, he, or maybe she, lounged on the pond surface, basking in the sun, indifferent to the dog prints on its shell, one day to decorate a knick-knack shelf.

The turtle adapted. Bischoff's adapted. And I can too.

IV. Class Consciousness

You need to school yourself. You don't just slap the words onto the page. You don't just dump the paint onto the canvasses. There's a right way of doing things. "Oh yes, The Rules!" J. would say. "That's what Eloise always said to me."

So I invested a bunch of money at UCLA and for a while, all went well. You walk in and it's a big lecture hall, maybe two hundred seats in an amphitheater based on the ones we imagined were in Athens millennia ago. You know. Slaves sweeping the seats for the rich, who hadn't worked a day in their lives, and women couldn't even participate in politics or art except as hookers or housewives in comedies. And for a modern middle-class woman, the very sitting there in determination and hope blinds you to the hundred kids there with you, and maybe the hundred other empty seats of those who realized all this note-taking and homework and assignments and dicta on the chalkboard was for nothing. Any street-person could have snuck into that class and gotten as much out of it as those of us who were all going back to the world of temps and telemarketing, screwing those with dinner-funds, leading no better lives than the women of Athens did.

We would gather in small groups during break or after class, and most of the time, it was some guy ... what's the word? *sidling*, that's it ... sidling up to you and trying to brush against you my God the way the pubescent boys did in middle school. But then the talk would get serious and it wasn't just about hooking up but rather about which version of FinalCut you used and what size font was the best and whether you should save hard copies in case the entire internet and power grid went down and even how to tell one version from another or what you do when that great scene you cut two

weeks ago now seems indispensable. Stuff like that. My God I can just hear J. ranting on about novel-writing: "You can't mistake a typing class for poetry, even though you can't do shit without one. A necessary condition is never a sufficient ..." And I would stop listening or maybe distract him with an open button on my shirt.

And then we would file back into the auditorium and it would be a good day if some guy didn't bump into me from behind or maneuver me into a seat way too close to him. I would try to concentrate and remember the high points, but whether we were discussing Laurel and Hardy, a foreign film no one had heard of, or even the latest block-buster, inevitably that would lead to a half-hour of name-dropping by the professor or guest lecturer of all his contacts in the industry and the time he and a director had taken a lot of drugs and sat down and talked about Susan Sontag, whom he used to know in New York, and how the best way to do things was to have an apartment in Manhattan as well as a beach house in Santa Monica or Malibu and that way you could keep in touch with everyone who was anyone, and the great thing was that you could only need one car, you see, and most of the students just lapped it up, dreaming of a life like that, but for me, there was always a moment as I was taking the notes "apt. in Manhattan" or some such thing when I would suddenly realize I had to work an extra day this week because the rent was coming due and I could barely afford the price of a bus ticket to the beach on the weekend and how was I going to get my hair cut like spend three hours on a different bus getting home for my sister to deal with it or Mom before she died, or maybe I should just tie it all up and stuff it under a wide-brimmed hat

like you see some of the older women do and cover up my bloodshot eyes with sunglasses.

There were some who didn't want to just talk talk talk about lunch dates with cronies in Hollywood. And they would lay it all out for us. Nothing about how grand life was going to be once we hit it big, but just how to do what was required: arcs and beats; 1, 2, 3; A to B to C. Wage-earning, you see. Not art. "Oh yeah," one said, a professional, who made his living doing this. "I have a screenplay too, *my* screenplay, just like each one of you has. Only that's not the one I pitch to the studios. That's not the one that pays my bills for me. What lets you eat doesn't have to be great, just 'good enough' or salable." And for a guy like that I would put in the time, like in the math classes I had as a teenager; I remember I couldn't grasp each new concept until three days to a week after it was introduced. I would fail as a mathematician, I thought, confirming the sexist myths about women and the sciences; until realizing that the quizzes were drawn up in advance and if you understood on Friday what you were supposed to master on Monday, you would be fine, and be credited a genius.

My so-called classmates! All doomed to end up either as janitors or as CEOs of major corporations depending on what their parents did. Me? Just keep at it; that was my plan and still is. And one day, the words will leap from the keyboard and you'll never have to think "gosh is that what Frank or Fred would say in that situation?" Because Frank just speaks, straight from the heart, his fictional heart I mean, and he won't be asking "What's for dinner? Where is the latest *Redbook*?" but conversing for real: about Shakespeare, or his college days at Hampshire or St Johns. And maybe you can add dramatic irony, I think they called it—like when you the

script-writer communicate directly with the audience and everything is now on the table, but your character Frank somehow has no clue as to what is going on, no clue that the audience sees right through him and foresees all that is about to happen to him, no clue even that they are there at all, and no awareness that the words that seem stuck in his throat are put there by the script-writer.

So that weekend you stare at the keyboard, confident in all you've learned. You will hear the music, see the dancers spinning before you in the stage lights. And as you reach for it, as you feel all this in your fingertips, the words now desperate for your utterance, you become Ulysses or Aeneas in the underworld, grasping mere air as they reach for their loved ones, just like those old stories you once read that always began with the writer staring at an empty sheet of paper, or maybe rolling one up in the typewriter as they used to do, the "platen" I think it's called. You rub your hands together, stretch out your fingertips, with the entire morning free before you to do your great life work. And then nothing nothing nothing comes of it." And it's as if there were a Great Secret to Life or a Particular Procedure and everyone in the whole damn world knows about that but somehow you, you missed class that day, or had skipped page one of the manual and here you are adrift with yourself wondering what you'll do for lunch or maybe it's time to clean out the refrigerator.

V. High Tea with Eloise

Maybe it could have been different. Maybe you're not one of those lifeless pelts at Bischoff's; you're more than the moronic and boring self that exists on the surface. I remember J. claimed he could keep his Eloise alive by freeing her self

from its material history, those singular surfaces she destroyed with a gunshot. Her consciousness, if gone, did not limit the essential *her*, he said. Following Hofstadter, he said, the *Gödel Escher Bach* guy, whose wife lived on in his tributes.

So maybe your very being, whatever that is, is free-floating, like your consciousness itself, produced by, but not fixed in, the material brain you have. And perhaps thus it could have been attached to someone else, some rich person or even a successful filmmaker, or perhaps Eloise herself. And that might or would be you, your life, not theirs. And looking back, you would attribute all your success—your scripts, the lovers devoted to you, even the perfect body you admire in the mirror—all of it would have been due not to chance or fate but to your own inherent virtues. That's what you'd think.

Yet reality is brutal on this point. You are you and Eloise is Eloise; Ugly is Ugly and that man sneaking up behind you at the office to cop a feel is that man sneaking up behind you at the office. No use to lament "oh why wasn't my brain embodied in a billionaire?" "Why wasn't I Shakespeare?" Because to do that, one would have to be born as them, and grown that brain and its attendant consciousness—theirs, not yours. Your history? You're just stuck with it! Losing your virginity to the inept sixteen-year-old, community college classes, and finally moving to Los Angeles as if you were the only one who thought to "make it big" simply by living in the most congested place within an afternoon's bus-trip or so from the ranch house you grew up in, where your wildest dream was that one day you would learn to drive and own a car instead of riding the puke-infested busses with all the

low-lives staring at you wondering who put those bruises on your face.

Eloise sits back in class, adjusts her diamond tiara, and lures him to fall in love with her, and of course that turns out to be calamitous. Write of that, he had been told. Write what you know or what you care about. Eloise. Falling in love. The poor thing blowing her head off. And write of keeping her very self alive by reconstructing it in your Elegy.

But she just scoffed at him. "You don't know anything of my life," she said. "What you know is your life. Boring. Like the life I someday hope to have for myself. Puppies and picket fences and PTA meetings on Tuesday. My life was never like that, with my in-laws pawing at me, my family plying me with drugs, not for amusement, but just to keep me out of their hair. Like my lovers who replaced them. Leaving me at home with the bruises on my forearm. I hated it. Every bit of it. And that's why I went to the nut-house, the only place I ever felt safe. Too bad the one guy who loved me there loved me too much and put one of the head-shots I had done for my future career as a movie star right on his chest and blew a hole straight through the picture and through his heart. Expecting me to feel like crap for not loving him."

And then I see her turn away from him and speak to me directly, maybe warning me: "You. Andrea. Is that your name? Don't listen to his b.s. It's all from old movies, or from plays written centuries ago. For that, the best he deserves is a 'pity fuck' like I claimed to give him the first time. Now don't let him stand up for himself and object

and don't you now object in his place! I'm talking here! Because eventually he'll have a fit over something and blow up at you like he did with me, and after that, there seemed no point in living at all; oh woe! J. wailed, grieved and disoriented from having some lover half his age leave him and expecting me to sort it all out for him. Well, I guess I finally did that, didn't I! Blowing my head off on April 5th. Now for some, that was ten years ago, but for you, ten years into the future. As for him, the one more responsible for my death than anyone, he could have lived the rest of his blissful life with me. Instead, he will spend it dreaming of me and pretending the books and elegies he writes for me will serve as recompense.

"Prospero taught Caliban to curse; J. taught me to lie, or rather, claimed that lying was what the poets did. That the love they expressed was all mere rhetoric and wit. Except, of course, when he expressed his love to me. Oh that was the zenith of sincerity! Even the sonnets of Shakespeare—I can still hear his cynical sneer as he read them to us, or sat back and laughed at some obscure joke involving ships and sailing and ok, yes, if there's a bowsprit and all that I get it, like I wasn't born yesterday and I've read more Freud than he has (he forgets, that's what they made us do the year I spent at St Johns before moving on to Hampshire where I did nothing other than sell drugs and lose my mind and what little I had left of virtue).

"How do you know what Donne or Milton meant?' we would say. 'Like you just skim over that passage and nearly fall down laughing while the rest of us are staring at you, tilting our heads the way you claim dogs do when

they really really really want to understand you but have no clue what you are trying to communicate to them.



And he would ask us where the subject and verbs were in the sentence and sometimes yes and sometimes no, we would get them right, then 'what does that say?' he would ask and we would guess again, and 'where's the object ...' and it was like diagramming sentences, I guess, some crap like that that only the worst and oldest of the students had any experience with, and I guess that's what they taught him in the fifties, where they must have beaten something into his swollen head besides chess openings because there is no way he could have amassed all that knowledge if they had just let kids go your own way like my folks did with me. How many times did he spend an afternoon naked in the sun, answering the appalled adults: 'I'm wearing my skin!'

Because what's important is not life at all, the real thing, that is: leftovers for dinner, searching for the remote or

flipping through the channels. What matters is what you say of it—the words, I mean. And that’s what Eloise was always trying to explain to him: “The words,” she said. “That’s what I need. That’s what you should have taught me. You know all of them. Everything else, I know already: the Rules, life, the drama of it all. For me, life is too like the silents, like the ‘two-reelers’ you used to watch on TV as a kid. But maybe if we both knew the words, we could hash things out for real, with depth and nuance, like you dream you might do before a therapist.”

And like her, I studied all of them, with whatever book or thesaurus I could afford beside me. Something I picked up in the second-hand book-store. I know this wasn’t the way things were done in Shakespeare’s day. But maybe then the Industry wasn’t full of lecherous old farts who just wanted to give you a job or internship as Second Production Assistant, which essentially meant you were meat for all the production guys who had real paying jobs and meat for all the actors too, which is why I wanted no part of it, because for God’s sake if I’m going to sell myself, I may as well go to Reno, where his girl from Brittany grew up and learned all those tricks of hers; move there and work in a real whorehouse rather than a pretend one like on a movie shoot, getting coffee for some dead-beat grip and having the assistant director grab my ass whenever we were waiting for lighting crew to get the power back.

And that’s why I took the temp job, while in my real life, I studied the words and crafted my film scripts. Like Kierkegaard, or Faulkner himself, sitting in the cellar staring at the gauges on the boiler, whose numbers meant almost nothing to him. Even Nabokov, lecturing to the kids at Cornell. Like

the Jews, nodding off or shedding tears at the symphony—tailors, businessmen, factory foremen.

And I, as Eloise or even as myself, will stand firm at the office while the guy brushes past me and I will stare at him in contempt, because the art—the things I do, Eloise dancing at the bus station, the real life I experience—all of that is nothing he has access to. Even staring into my face making love to me, closing his eyes at the last minute just so that there will be no trace of me. He has no idea what my life is like.

VI. Two a Year

Two men a year is the best, I think, and that's what I told him, never really keeping count. That way, you're in charge of things. Men are expendable, you see: you lose one, you find another. Maybe he moves to Idaho or has a change of heart and suddenly you haven't heard from him in months. And then it's time to act, not just sit back like the girl you were raised to be in middle school, but pick up the phone and call him, or call one of them; I guess kids now would just send off a text. And there is his voice, remarkably, since I guess he answered the phone with no clue whatsoever who was calling him like old people do today, and I don't remember the exchange in detail, but something was stilted about it and all I could manage was "Is this a bad time?" and maybe the answer: "Yeah, kinda." Not the sort of thing you would turn in your own dialogue, and then the phone went dead.

Now this wasn't the Marine guy who would have flat-out told you what was up, or even come over to demonstrate. This was a guy who told you once that during a completely innocent phone conversation he had with you, he had pleased himself without even letting his voice break, and I guess that

was some sort of “experiment” he had conducted, as he told me happened years before—maybe a warning if I had listened more carefully. The deal was, he wanted to know or experience what it was like to be a woman—maybe so he could write of it! So like you’re just sick of the drama and you give in, like my friend who was being pestered by her date late at night and finally snapped at him “OK. If I screw you, will you just leave?” and I told that to J., and all he said was “Damn, where were girls like that when I was young?”

So he says he tried it for himself, having sex with the woman he was living with whom he had never really loved or felt much of anything for—just sort of fell into it. These things happen in your early 30s when you think, wrongly, your emotions are behind you. His generation’s version of marriages of convenience, I guess. Anyway, could he do it, he wondered, have sex with her without feeling anything? Like women do (or the ones he imagines). Like the script-writer for a porno film. Pure mechanics, his mind completely divorced from any messages of the flesh, however insistent. And he said it was the easiest thing in the world, but it unnerved him, since his girlfriend assumed this was an expression of his love for her, when in fact he felt nothing. Just his “loins” at work, like when he did that with me on the telephone, sharing nothing. And knowing nothing thus of what his women feel, how dare he write of it?

It was never his love I wanted anyway. “Men are such shits,” he would say. “Especially that second one you dragged into the sack this year. To women they will say anything. Don’t believe their lies. For only I can express those things with complete sincerity.” That’s what I wanted. Something to keep my mind alert, determining whether he means half the

things he says to me or to all the others he's likely used this line with. Like if he had just hinted at what he was doing on the phone that night, you know, dropping his voice a half-octave, and maybe even using my name, I would have been soaked with desire and God knows what he might have learned of us.

So then there were those weeks of silence and I guess he never knew that I saw him once other than the time on the sidewalk, and there was some girl a decade younger than either of us hanging on his arm and pressing her breasts into his ribs, and I guess it was then that I realized what he meant by "bad time to talk." And at that point, it was just a matter of calculating how many weeks needed to go by before she left him crawling the earth seeking company like he was when I first met him when the sturdy German girl from the dance class introduced us. I remember as we sat in the car outside my apartment, he leaned over and his eyes and maybe his wrist as well brushed past my nipple; my breath caught in my throat then and I said as calmly as I could "Let's exchange phone numbers" and that pretty much was that.

Two a year. Yes. Because with two a year, there's no fear of entanglements. If a man is worth shit, he'll just go on to someone else, and if he's not, who would want him hanging around pawing you or threatening you in the first place?

The phone rang

That was the point. You had to take care of yourself. Speak and feel for yourself. Stand up to all of it. ...

Bischoff's Animals ...

No sense settling for a man who doesn't give a crap about you,
or chasing after him ...

They said that they would call.



1.3

GETTING THE WORDS RIGHT

“Je dois confesser, d’ailleurs, que lui et même le nommé Racine, ont fait chacun dans leur vie un vers assez bien rythmé, et qui a pour lui, de qui est selon moi le mérite suprême, de ne signifier absolument rien.”

Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*



The night of the Great Debauchery, we walked the campus grounds after the conference in Charlottesville and I let him flirt with me because I told him right off, laughing, I would never sleep with him. “You don’t know that,” he said. “But we can pretend you do.” Like high school kids, he added, or at least like we imagine them to be. No uncertainty. Lines drawn and boundaries set as if since time immemorial. You can get into a lot of trouble thinking like that.

He sat beside me and looked around, making some joke about submarine shows from the 50s with the periscope making a 360-degree turn, alert for enemy warships in the area (and I completely lost track, envisioning different periscope analogies!), and when he saw no one, the first thing he did was kiss my neck and his hand was inside my shirt.

In those days we all wore jeans so tight we could barely button them and I had a white blouse cut the same way. He, of course, paid hardly a bit of attention to fine points of styling, just asked when I would come to my senses ... Well, of course I did, or he did, or we did eventually, came to our senses in all sense, that is; and sometime around 2AM he told me of his mother's room-mate coming back to the apartment in New York in the 30's claiming she was "sex-hausted," and we both laughed, closer to his stolid and steel-cold Mom than either of us would ever imagine we could be. "Where are you going with this?" I asked, it must have been an hour earlier, as he began to caress me again, and that was the only thing I said he claims to remember.

A year or more later, we drove up the coast to visit his brother and then at some point, mocking the locals as we posed with our life-vests and kayak paddles, he said in imitation of them, "Oh yes, they'll mutter disapprovingly of us, that hippie brother of his and his *Jewish girlfriend* ..." and I could feel my heart race, as if he had just touched me without warning, since we never used that term any more than we used the word *love*. That, I guess, was in deference to his family, speaking in their idiolect of "what we were," surely not just a couple of would-be hedonists, because in his family of course you can't have that, that simply will not do; so he finally blurted out the first word that slipped from his word-board.

Impossible to relive that first night, or even to build on it. There was no way I could disencumber myself of those “other people!” (as I styled the man who shared my D.C. condo with me). But I still get ... I’ll call it “wistful,” thinking of that summer we had together, and how we missed our chance, and maybe there’s a touch of that in him too as the last thing he said to my face, visiting D.C. for the Folger, ten or twenty years ago—“I want that summer back,” and I’ll just construe that as I see fit.

I guess it is some middle-aged thing, like he said happened with his friend Marina, now dead too soon for all those who loved her, when they both determined the time was right after so many years, and having settled on that, failed to feel the knee-buckling passion they had counted on. You can only be young for so long, alas; you can’t just go through the motions of it. And you know, if he hadn’t been so reticent (on that one subject, none other! as I often reminded him), maybe he could have blundered into the appropriate words or I might have chanced on them, just once for us getting the words right.

I. Words and Things

The Catalogue

I spent a year in Maine after that, taking walks with him, working for the library, trying to explain to my boss that “cataloguing an old collection” wasn’t just making labels to match each physical book with the proper name for it—*cat*—oh look, there’s one now! That is, typing in the titles of these uncomplicated things, like “*Juliet*. By De Sade,” and having the ISBN pop up as it does on amazon. As if, say, the history of nineteenth-century Russia were no more than the ravings of

Raskolnikov or whatever Tolstoi may have said, and what took place there could be packed into a well-ordered library shelf or two. If we were lucky, I told her, and all went well (which it never does), I could analyze and identify somewhere between a half-dozen and ten a day, and the boss looked at me in bafflement; are not book-copies the simple referents for entries in a database? But rather than protest and reveal her ignorance, she extended my stay through the summer; it was grant money, after all. No point in heaping up a mound of governmental gold unless you have a dragon to guard it.

With cataloguing, it's all about "getting the words right," as he might say. You have to compare the book in your hand with the entries you find in other catalogues and databases—number of pages? printer? typeface? lines per page?—and you have to determine which descriptions are pure moonshine and which match something that does or did or might exist in the real world, perhaps the very book you're holding. You might have to construct your own description, exactly referencing the object in your hands such that somewhere out there, somewhere in the Special Collections room of a distant library, there will be a specialist who pores over what you say and has a revelation, "Yes. That's it. Hats off!" As in *The Plague* by Camus. For without that sort of care and accuracy, you end up with a list of titles dumped into some unedited Union catalogue, like taking on as lovers whatever men happen to be available, and we all know how that works out! OCLC! once the latest thing, and now reflective not of books but of the zeal of incompetents.



So I got the summer in Maine, and finished up that collection pretty much just when the grant money ran out. But no matter how many meals we had or walks or visits to relatives, I don't think we had a physical relationship beyond those appearances. "Girlfriend," he said that day. Mere words with no referent—like the ghost descriptions of the catalogues. The scenes of the novelists.

On the Water

First class of women at Princeton—that's us. We sat in varnished and carpeted schoolrooms filled with affected baritones, and when we spoke, it was like cartoon mice with our high-pitched squeaks and all the pipe-puffing preppies and hippies too glared at us either in condescension or malevolence.

I joined the crew team, one of his colleagues-to-be in the same shell seated right next to me—great for the chest muscles, and I suppose every lover we've had since was grateful for that. So when I finally got to Maine, I told him given my experience I could sail like Cook or Magellan or Josh Slocum himself, and out we went with a bag of Tostitos, him eating

nothing, shaking his head. “Don’t worry,” I said, wolfing them down. “I’m used to the water,” thinking of the surfaces of the currents through Princeton. And then the swells hit and “Oh God,” and knowing exactly what was up, he grabbed my belt. “Don’t *you* worry,” he said, laughing as he held me. “About the washrail, I mean.” And I heaved everything as far overboard as I could, gasping an apology as I sat back on the combing so lubberly he must have taken pity on me.

So the next day, he rigged up the rowboat with two sets of oars and the muscles across my chest hadn’t lost their tone since college and on we went stroke stroke stroke, out into the harbor but short of the swells where I had left the undigested Tostitos. “Do you know of Furnivall?” he said. “Old coot medieval scholar of the 19th century? Big Victorian beard like all of them. Z-Z Top in a tweed suit. In his spare time, and I guess he had a wilderness of that, he ran a school for working women and on weekends, his letters to Bradshaw, or Skeat it may have been—God, combing the archives for crap like sucks, no need to remind you of that!—anyway, these speak of going rowing with ‘the girls’ and I can hear the horny bastard in the stern ‘Stroke Stroke Stroke’, and gee I wonder what *that* was all about. Do you suppose he got it on with one or all of them in the boathouse? And what do you do with a beard like that? In your own personal experience, I mean. Do you grab it as you would a spiked collar or maybe a tie with a horse on it and haul the dashing old lech’s face right into you? ... You’re the power,” he said, as I turned back to him in protest. “I’ll steer.”

I loved the salt spray over the rail when we turned side-to to the current, side-to to the incoming waves from the south as we rowed out of the Basin into the Harbor. “Nice

shirt," he said as I stroked expertly, his palm on my shoulder, feeling the sweat. Then down my ribs and ... "Hey! No fondling!" I cried out to him, maybe half serious. And "No fondling? What are you talking about!" he said. "I don't see any No Fondling signs out here!" And maybe he relaxed, as there was no way to consummate things in public like that. Or maybe that was another woman he said that to. Then he leaned forward, pulling me back into him, and it was the most passion he had shown since that first night, and I can only guess it was the water, the water that he loved so much that he loved everyone who shared it with him.

I taught him to enjoy Maine, you know. I taught him to see the seascape with another's eyes. To think of it as others learn to think of it. We were walking on a drizzly day, and instead of giving in to the drear (as in the Old English!), I told him how I loved the monochromal greys and he looked at me—quizzically, you'd say—and within a week or two, he'd learned to love it too.



"The best," he now says, sailing alone out there in the threatening rain, all his sailing compatriots at home or sitting on their moorings. "Five to ten knots from the Northeast. My favorite conditions. The best."

"Now stroke away," he said as the boat lost its bearings. He gripped the oars and within seconds we were back on course again. It was as if nothing had happened (a favorite phrase of his). Only plenty had happened, even if none was what either of us might have wished for. God knows what he was thinking. Was it Linda Jane, as he called her? Or some young lover ten years our junior? Was it easing around Haskell Island when "the boat just sailed itself past the buoy" as they made love without another boat in sight? Was it barely drifting downwind in the tide and fog so dense you could barely see the bow from the stern when he lay with her on the starboard cushion, one eye on her and the other on the heading marked on the compass?

Doing It Right

J. was always nattering on about waterlines and the length of the hull, pointing out that your basic rowboat was short, stubby, built to carry gear, extra passengers, easy to haul up on shore. Not designed for speed like the shells we crewed at Princeton. But the skills and techniques—those, I knew, were the same: the rower uses not only her arms but her back and legs to provide the power even if frankly, you'd rather have them wrapped around a waist. And I've watched untaught girls and middle-aged paunchy men jump onto the thwarts and jam their Shaw and Tenney oars into the water thinking they were shipmates of Starbuck and Ishmael with their faces locked in pride and make-believe—"Here I am

amid the perils of nature!" And all of them, they all make the same tell-tale mistake of stroking, not with their hands together, but rather left, then right, alternating strokes, like they were walking on their hands or paddling some yuppie kayak from L.L.Bean's, and even when corrected, continue on as if mere obstinacy could take the place of skill. That's what his P. did, despite his instruction. And you know how that turned out. And the boat thus twists left then twists right, like hanging on a mooring in the wind.

You can tell right from the start. There are details that enable you to judge the seamanship of your crew, your captain, or everyone around you, little things, but easily perceptible. And even though his mom hadn't set foot on a boat in decades, Just look, she would say, admiring Mark who owned the boatyard next door and tended the moorings right outside her house; you can tell how good a sailor he is just by watching the way he moves on deck. And no, it's not like in the movies, full stride, heads up, perfectly balanced like Brando on *The Bounty*, but rather knees half bent, shoulders slouched forward, keeping one's center of gravity low to remain unruffled by the sea-state.

Sprezzatura, as Castiglione says: feigned nonchalance, as if sword-fighting, horsemanship, or love-making itself came naturally. But you need to work at it, stay with it, think about it, get the rhythms right, and that way, it will eventually be like poetry—who cares if the early enthusiastic drafts are clumsy and arrhythmic and the phrasing as bad as the periods. Just get the final words right.

It's the same out here on the water, or so he tells me—whether adjusting the main to form the most efficient sail shape, or rowing in tandem, all the while admiring the

muscles on my shoulders and my back, “from your days rowing crew,” he said, his voice matching the timbre of the sea-breeze. “Be sure to thank the coxswain for pushing you as he must have ...”

“She!” I said.

“Her too. Both of you.”

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?”

“Because!” he cried, like the middle-school kid in some ways he always was.

Finally, we grew silent, stroking in unison as the boat tracked true. And within minutes, I could feel the wind pick up, and feel him breathing as if in desire, as he longed only to get back to sailing, or maybe stopping for lunch, or maybe just helping me out of my life vest.

We lay there that night at the conference in the cheap dorm rooms they reserved for us in Charlottesville. And after an hour of his pleading, my hand went slowly slowly down to my belt, unbuckling it then determinedly.

He claims he still dreams of this today.

II: Learning to Speak

1. “If I’m not there,”

So he fell enamored or stunned at age seventeen with the Puerto Rican girl from Bath who was about as exotic as you could find in Maine in those days, and she was “bursting at the seams,” as he described it, and would see again in all the Hispanic girls he finally met when he taught in California. “You and your memories,” I said, hearing this. “Those youthful bodies aren’t for me. It’s like watching athletes on TV—I don’t admire great butts and six-pack abs if I can’t have them for real and for myself.” And after a few dates with Miss

Rodriguez—the word *date* here used in the pathetically innocent sense from the early sixties, not in the new sense he was appalled to find in the idiolect of his students—he discovered what those perfect blooming bodies of teenagers are and she taught him God knows what, maybe things he passed on to me, like how lovers far more experienced than he was had taught her to kiss and how she used to hum, taunting him as he realized only decades later “I can’t get no ...” (the very song his band used to play, oblivious to the implications of the lyrics) “sat-is-fac-tion.”

And one day she called him for a date or they arranged it, and they were to meet at 7:00 sharp and she sneered, smoking hot as she knew she was: “Don’t worry. If you’re not there, I’ll find someone else.” And he answered with all the dumb-ass assurance of a seventeen-year-old, without so much as thinking: *“If I’m not there, I’ll have found someone else already.”* And since then, hardly a day passes without him marveling at his youthful wit, and not one year passes without his regretting that in those days, the only moves he seemed to have were verbal ones.

2. *“Is he open to adoption?”*

“Don’t be ridiculous!” That’s what his mother said to him when he suggested he would just give up the struggles of the past and marry the millionaire, five years his senior, he had known in grad school. Talk about a disconnect! That was the woman his mother loved so much, just as she somewhat grudgingly loved Amy, only now the age we were then. I get why she detested his beloved Linda Jane, or Linda Jane herself—all that bit about having husbands; the calls to them from the phone in the living room. But the millionaire from

New York? safely divorced and no entanglements? having grown up a few years before J. did prior to what we thought was a social “revolution”? The two women had more in common than he did with either of them, both well-trained in civility, his mother, herself having married the younger man his father was.

Statuesque, you call those Swedish types. In truth, she was no more than an inch taller than he was, max, but carried herself like her youngest sister, last of all of them to marry and a full six-feet tall the year she died of breast cancer. His mom was the eldest—I guess you could feel safe with her. There would be no arched eyebrows, or the kind of smile he tells me his second cousin Natalie or her much loved daughter Roxie flashes for him when she has caught him in another lack of insight. Just keep things as they are, his mother thought by contrast, don’t risk upsetting the applecart; and if your life-partner needs a drink or two to keep his neuroses in check, just let that go; there is never need to make a scene. Not about that. Not about anything.

Yet she could never suppress her fears or suspicions, even though the civil words seemed to come easily for both of them. Like the time he came home with an ear-ring, put there by Linda Jane (“as fine as possible,” he learned too late) and his mother burst into tears right in the living room “Which ear is it that those ... homosexuals ...?” Same suspicion C. had, never suspecting, poor thing, that the source of his proclivities was simply the great ass she had. And he laughed at her—his mom, I mean. Or the time he came home and announced to her: “I am in hot pursuit of two women, Ma, both my age, as you’ll be glad to know ... but only if you add them together.”

And one day he got tired of girls like that who would never stay with him more than a week or a year or so, and that's when he said, "Yes, I should just marry the millionaire." And of course he could not resist: "Remember what she once said to me? 'That fucking ex-husband of mine,' she said. Yeah, she said that! 'If he had been responsible, my kids would have been set for life. As it is, they'll have to settle for a measly 14 million each.' " And J. insisted there was no irony in that at all, but his mother was quick in her riposte.

"Don't be ridiculous! She's way too old for you!"

"*Maybe he'll adopt me then,*" he said, I think he said to both of them.

3. *"I'm not really trying to grab your ass. ..."*

Charlie and Nancy were there with us, talking of his father, no reference to the nightly falling off the wagon when he dashed off to the cellar-space for a sip of gin, and J. intoned with uncommon conviction: "Oh yes. Father fought his demons until the end," adding with equally unfounded pomp "and thus spared me from having to do so." And with that, we all exchanged glances in a silence so oppressive that even he had a too rare moment of self-awareness.

We had walked to their house for dinner and I was imagining seascapes and the crashing of waves on the shore, and instead, it was three miles around the Basin, always with a patch of bug-infested trees between us and the water, or what there was of it through all the reeds and mud, and I complained mightily, "Well, yes, but I didn't think it was going to be through the woods," as if woods were an evil thing, like the swamps in Alexandria—Virginia, I mean, not the seat of the

burned-down library—tangled firs and spruce limbs rotting slowly on the shorefront.

And later that fall, I drove out to Harpswell to see Maxine, for the last time it turned out, after he had left for Los Angeles, and when I got to the house I found no trace of her. Then I saw her feet emerge from the side door to the garage, where she had crawled to safety after falling and breaking her wrist in seven places. Seven hours earlier, she insisted, although it was likely no more than one. She kicked her legs out the doorway like “the Wicked Witch of the East,” she said, or I said, and for years we both laughed seeing that image in our heads, even though we never saw each other in the flesh again. And why I helped her back into the house and why I didn’t call 9-1-1 or why I mixed the martinis at her insistence—God knows!

I never got the words right that night, never found the phrase to comfort her or, better, to convince her that this last night she would spend in her house would be one of agony and helplessness. She was imperious and it didn’t do to cross her. So her friends called her the next morning, 8AM as was usual, a custom preparing for this very moment. They got no answer, and raced the fifteen miles to her house, only to find her on the toilet unable to lift herself. Like his neighbor in California, years into the future, who, with no one to check on him, was found that way after three weeks dead. How she got there, I don’t know; maybe she was there the entire night but wouldn’t speak of it. I suppose it worked out well in the end; at least for the three of us, J., Maxine, and me. No one died, at least not then, and we shared the same story for what years there were to come.

So she went to the hospital, then the re-hab center and eventually the assisted living place, and none of this was hell at all for her, as she had imagined it would be in the preceding decades, but a great relief, as all her concerns were taken care of. The driving when she could no longer control her speed without her attention fixed on the speedometer; the shopping for the food she could not remember how to cook; the bills and the closing up the summer house for the winter. All of that gone. Forgetting to worry that J. hadn't called or seen her as each visit or call was something she forgot immediately and each visit or call came as a great surprise to her as if a miracle, unplanned, like having him born in the first place a half-century earlier, never once imagining she might be carrying twins.

And I suppose that was like our own relationship. All surfaces. No broken bones or failing intellects. No scenes. Except maybe the time he drove to Bangor to see her and she no longer recognized him. He called me then, because there was no one else he cared about who knew them both.

The day might come, I thought, and doubtless he did too. The day when he will no longer find the words to steal the hearts of girls in their twenties and he will experience what she did, shivering in October frost, helpless, wondering why he didn't take advantage of what he once had had. As if making love 100 times that summer would have meant nothing—or no! “would have meant too much,” I should have said. And instead, he lusted after every woman he met, as if by necessity, trying to keep himself alive—some Parsifalian thing!—when all he had to do was put his hand on my shoulder or on the shoulder of Eloise or kiss Sylvie as she asked him to or tell Linda Jane whatever extravagant lie she needed or thought

she needed to hear; conceding finally that he would never get a lover of that quality and brains again.

The week we met, we stood in the restaurant lobby—the whole class from the summer seminar, just hours before our night of love-making. He stumbled or maybe I pushed him into my colleague Phoebe, 45 and smoking hot, and his hand flew out and that's when he came up with that line he has used a half-dozen times since, all with equal success! *"I'm really not trying to grab your ass, Madam; I know all the evidence is against me."*

4. *"If you cannot remember ..."*

A future colleague was recounting, once again, his history of lechery. Wives. Lovers. Students cut out from the classroom like cattle for branding. And her name came up—the one he had introduced J. to a year earlier, ten years his senior. And with that deep-chested baritone that so affected (so he thought) the 19-year-olds he lectured to, "She's a babe. No questioning that. But you know. I can't remember whether I screwed her or not." And without the least hesitation J. shot back, speaking now from experience: *"If you cannot remember, then you did not."*

5. *"Never, outside of America ..."*

And it was Carolyn, professor's daughter, and she was enamored of him, her father I mean, well, both of them I guess. The kind of crushes that we all have at age 20, and after she got into law school she showed up at his office, and let's just say that as they got closer he realized she was "under-dressed," and she said "I wore this in your honor," but as he reached for her she stepped away.

It was Carolyn who had sworn him to secrecy when passing on what a friend had once confessed concerning his colleague, and he nearly trampled her to violate that confidence before it grew stale. "I have good news and bad news," he said, catching his colleague on the stairwell. "The good news is that one of your students has a mad crush on you. The bad news? She thinks you'd be better for her Mom."

And regardless, maybe to test him out, she brought J. home to her family. I'm making progress, he thought, and he sat with the father at the kitchen table over coffee and had a real heart-to-heart, or so it seemed, even though the main topic of concern—academia, the relation of professors to students, the relation of this one to his daughter—never came up at all, and he thought he had made a capital impression on the old guy.

As he had. But not in the sense he imagined. That was the end of their flirtation and her slipping off her camisole so that she could come into his office wearing nothing but a loose sweater and jeans. She was going to Europe that summer and that must have been when he used to spend June in Paris, before he began those annual sailing trips of his, which pretty much ended his world travelling. It was all about getting away from home, or away from the stress of watching his mom slowly fail as she did, I think, and if you could do that alone in your boat, there was no need to go through the rigmarole of travel agents, hotels, sublet apartments, and struggling with the languages.

And he told her ... or were those the beginning days of e-mail? Maybe he wrote to her, and told her things he never said to me even when we were lying naked in our own sweat.

"You know," he said, dropping his voice a minor third or so, "*I have never made love outside of America.*"

6. *"I'll tell you what I mean by that ..."*

He never imagined falling for a girl like that, P. I mean (She Who Would Not Wait for Him) or not *falling*—that's the wrong word—just easing into the bourgeois life that so many of us had chosen only to end up trapped by it ... he never imagined that hooking up with her (again in the old sense, not the lascivious one used by his students) this would lead to the worst pain he had ever experienced.

Her friend from the "inconsequential village of three million people in western China" had visited him a few weeks earlier and he had tried his best lines on her, maybe variants of those above, but nothing had come of it. So when P. herself finally arrived, he had, let's say, completed a practice session and when he asked her or told her (with well-rehearsed charm) the usual, she answered "I wouldn't mind that" and he asked her again, because he hadn't expected that, and she said the same thing and the next thing you know they were at it "like animals," as she described it, and it must have been for them as it was for us in Charlottesville, and maybe she had never experienced that before (although to his chagrin she would again). Untaught these women, he thought, despite the benefits of modern sex education. Like whether you can have sex at "that time of the month," or even a few years back, incredibly, what the time of your cycle was when you were most fertile. Not things omitted from a Princeton education! Good thing he didn't get "caught off the corner" (as his high school friends put it so succinctly) or he would have spent the

next two decades raising ornery versions of himself and he and I would never have met in Virginia.

And after a day or so, or maybe that first day, the words just came out of one of them. I don't know which one and I doubt he himself could remember, but he said those words and glossed them immediately, since even then, I'm sure he knew what the hideous endgame of all of this would be. "I love you," he said, as he never once said to me. "And I'll tell you what I mean by that: what that means is *I promise never to be angry at you*"—a promise he kept as well as Bach says Peter did at Gethesemene. And I guess that was all he could come up with, feeling none of the panic-filled emotion he had once felt for his wife-to-be or for Linda Jane and was lucky to feel one more time again. And she must have understood him as he one day asked her over whatever dinner she had cooked for him if she remembered that, and yes she did, and he asked her then if she remembered how he glossed the words—maybe the way he asked Linda Jane if she remembered how he rolled over to face her in the middle of the massage—and She Who Would Not Wait for Him answered that of course she remembered that gloss. "It scared me to death," she said. And he to this day does not know whether that was because adulthood had hit her at last and she thought her life-partner had appeared without warning, or rather that she saw the inevitable end of it, when both would stalk or slink away having learned nothing from the two years they spent together.

7. "If you die ..."

Don't start me off on Eloise. She was the one who ruined him for all of us. Or maybe it was Linda Jane herself. But she was one of the few he never included under that name, not

once alluding to his love for her in his sailing book, nor ever naming her elsewhere except through an alias.

There were so many things he said to her that were all wrong, and sent her storming out of the apartment in a rage, or made her simply laugh at him. All desperately retold in the long-winded *Elegy* he wrote for her. And one time, and only once, did he get the words right for her, with that line on Orpheus as he reached for her so desperately the last time they spoke. *"If you die,"* he wrote, *"there will be no need to journey to the underworld to bring you back to me; for I will be in Hell already, then and for forever."*

III. La Rue de Mauvais Garçons

Walking at sunset. The guidebook in hand charting the city streets like navigated seas. One's French appalling. Barely a soul to converse with. It was like sailing the coast of Maine, east past Pemaquid, east past Schoodic. No one to hear other than the disembodied voices on the radio. Listening in before the cell phones killed the public conversations placed through the Camden Marine Operator and it was like sitting on your couch with the bookmarks slipped from the gutters.

Soles and surfaces. Even the dog waste is now cleaned up and the streets look like streets anywhere. No more Delacroix nudes on the currency. Everything in Euros. Everyone speaks English. There is nothing you can say in either language to display your wit. He thinks of the boats sailing East in the early summer, or the boats not yet sailing. Hailing, perhaps, from Portland or Falmouth. Hailing, say, from Camden or Rockport. The sailors flown in to Mt. Desert from New York or Massachusetts. The sailors sailing in from Newport. "A long way from home," the fishermen used to say, seeing his

homeport named on the transom. Such port names now barely register. Just another mariner in from New Jersey.

Never mastered the language. Pretending to be at home in the streets and the seascapes. Posing with Bob, who died last month of the virus. Posing with Nicola or Gabor in the tourist spots. Never got the words right. Remember that conversation with the book-runner? About medieval monasteries, monks, and itinerant friars, so he thought, only to discover too late the guy had been talking about his “brothers” now living in “Des Moines.” “Ecrivez,” he used to say when the exchanges went south like that. But the words were so grossly mis-spelled only a Magyar could construe them. Who knew illiteracy could be so rampant among such cosmopolitans? Who knew until the early next century in America when proud stupidity won out in the elections?

Walking obliquely to the routes marked out in the guidebook, the streets highlighted with insistence, everyone facing the monuments. Like picking up the land masses in the Down East fog; so he would think in those early summer days in Paris, before he gave them up for his *Dogfish Memory*. Like drifting past the fish pens and the areas marked out for harvesting. Privatization of the seaways. Corporate food for the masses. Is this why we executed the aristocrats? Was this why we sharpened up the guillotines, so that plantations and manors and castles could become wedding factories and we could marvel at their artifice?

Like other cities: the cities of the Ashkenazi he knows nothing of, even that tiny hamlet near Mainz, untouched by the Allies, where he ordered the tobacco and the kindly shopkeeper did his best to conceal his fluent English. All those towns in America. The cities in America: New York, New

Orleans, Los Angeles. Lucky to have spent some time in them before the fires and floods. Lucky to have seen the traces of the old days before Bob died and they disappeared for good. Like Maine and its seaways as styled in the sailing guides from the early last century. The sailboats now left on their moorings as if mere sights for the tourists. The yachts polluting the surfaces in August. Kayaks with their paddlers in tee-shirts, some to drown shocked by the Atlantic cold. Useless to warn the invincible young. The rich indifferent, washing down the salt from their gleaming hulls docked safe in marinas, defying the droughts of late summer. Better to be living on a lakefront, I think. What is this thing they call sailing, and what is this thing he calls sailing too?

Did he not try to meet Carolyn in London? Was his narrator herself not waiting in Leningrad and did she not cross paths with his much loved cousin there? Did he not take the train to Sussex and marvel as the night air came in through the windows? No need for screens. They had not learned of the torment, cod-fishing off Nova Scotia. Mudflats and mosquitoes—that's what Linda Jane describes what once was Norumbega. That mythical land in the north-east with clear pest-free skies and sea creatures in abundance.

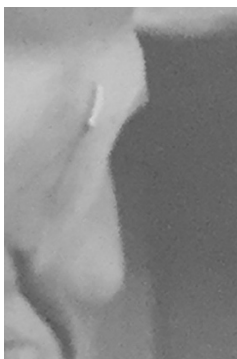
The coldest of lovers lounged with him in the Delta, their bodies so magnificent the traffic stopped for them and the drivers' jaws dropped in admiration. It was a sandwich place in the French Quarter, the Slave Quarters, and after believing themselves exhausted from love-making, they took the streetcar down there from Uptown, slow as maturity itself, they guessed, the hours of the evening just draining away as the old-fashioned car made its hesitant stops on the railbed. Do-Des-Ka-Den, Kurosawa claimed to hear it. And I think

there was an hour between trains as the evening grew late, and when the kitchen closed you still had forty minutes to get to the stop on Canal Street.

She was wearing a pink dress—maybe you'd call it a shift. And she had a pair of sandals and in late April in the mid-seventies, there was no need to wear anything else and she did not, showing off her glorious form for all to admire, on display like so many of the other women and so many of the other men downtown in those days. And he probably had on corduroy pants which may have been discreetly fashionable a decade earlier, or maybe it was jeans from the half-price denim store also on Canal Street, and likely a shirt from L. L. Beans or Goodwill and he thought not a thing about the way he looked, relying stupidly on his inner virtues to shine through. So they walked down to the levee, killing time, the sweat reflecting the streetlights, not a place for strangers, and there was an old violinist from the Philharmonic, standing alone at the base of the levee, staring over the river to the lights at Algiers, and who would know what tragedy consumed him there—the death of a loved one, the intricate passage where he could never get the fingering or the bowing right; the lover who had left him for a new life, or one who perhaps still waited coldly in the apartment somewhere in the Faubourg Marigny, all the passion gone, nothing but bourgeois fidelity, too late now to do a thing about it.

So he sat down next to her—she to his right; he is adamant about that even today, although the memory is no longer fresh for him. And in that stagnant warmth of the city, which need not be described for anyone who has experienced it, in the scent or the stench from the Jax Brewery on the riverbank, in his own cold desire of that evening, he leaned

toward her and her flesh felt cool in the evening air, its surface damp with sweat. And she smiled at him with a confidence a year with him soon killed, and I guess and he guesses that she kissed him but all he remembers is her dress, the workers at the sandwich place, the old violinist, and the weight of her cool breast in his hand.



Coda

Years later, he will return to her, staying at her apartment on Magazine Street, its balcony shared with the neighbor she seduced, or so she claimed, like Linda Jane did the neighbor in Camden when her husband left, her impassioned innamorato hacking through the wallboard with a saws-all. She has gone to fat—still alluring, but only in the worst of ways—white-trash erotics, he thinks—and her voice has developed a desperate clip to it and her stories of giving up the librarianship to become a lab assistant swarm with the diction of professionals, perhaps in desperate imitation of what she thinks is his idiolect (“Publish or perish,” and clichés like that) and all the lust he felt for her or had once felt for her, or

perhaps it was only the admiration of her once perfect body, with the single oblique scar at its waist, faded away that day.

He sat back looking over the railing, wrought-iron like all of them, the love-struck neighbor concealed behind French doors perhaps an arm's length away. He remembered walking with her. Not in Paris. Not by the levee in the French Quarter. Not, as the two of us once did, down by the river in Virginia, circling through the campus quad—overloaded with tributes to Jefferson. Not there. But out on Matinicus, with John, retired one year before I came to the library. Poor John, who saw right through him like Roxie would, both beloved, he now felled by dementia. Out on Matinicus it was, west of Monhegan, islands we never sailed to. And John held back with her, walking as if a couple, trailing him. "So sad," John said of her. "That's her being. That's who she is."



And J. knew he was responsible for much of that. He can still see her in the chamois Bean shirt—that faded yellow of the 70s, a shirt he shared with all the women he had. Carol, riding the bicycles through the Bayou St John up toward the Fairgrounds, practicing the Mercutio death speech from Shakespeare. Linda Jane she was, on her best days, and now her,

Sherry—may as well use the name she will never see herself—walking through the knee-high grass with John, her arms folded beneath her perfect breasts, the scar from the traffic accident hidden in the folds, her disappointment hidden also in the folds. “Triumph Spitfire,” she said. “White, like all of them. My husband demanded that the surgeon get the scarring right.” Or was it another crash—due to a defect in a car built in America? “I had to look good. We had to look good.” A halting monologue of the lawsuit they filed. Still living in poverty. The scar still visible, like the one on dark-skinned V., who recited her awful verse to him. His hand on her hip. “Read to me,” he said, earning another kiss from her. Like Sherry’s voice, no longer hers, it seemed. The voices of lovers whose names now escaped him. Same thing, he thought. Or so he says he thought, thinking of her dreaming of walking with him. On Matinicus. Walking in Paris. Crossing the levee to the river bank. Waking to her rhythmic breath in the cheap bed on Magazine Street.

PART TWO

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

2.1

AN OWL IN THE RAFTERS

“Man könnte mich fragen, ob und inwieweit ich selbst von den hier entwickelten Annahmen überzeugt bin. Meine Antwort würde lauten, daß ich weder selbst überzeugt bin, noch bei anderen um Glauben für sie werbe.”

Freud, “Jenseits des Lustprinzips”

When the EMTs found him passed out in the hot tub, the water tempered by diluted sweat and body waste, life began to make sense again. Things fell into place, and discomfiting ambiguities were put to rest at last. Controlling the dog almost turned the farce into tragedy, and if his wife hadn't had the wherewithal to locate the leash and clear her head long enough to bully it into the guest room, for all we know he may have drowned there, as the EMTs backed slowly into the hallway, calling for help from the Sheriff.

Nice guy, ... he ... Or, well, I mean ... we all ...

The vomit spread over the surface, floating the chest hairs. The dog turds caught the soles of the rescuers.

So that's where life was leading to, we said conclusively, as we began to put it all together. Now we could talk without restraint, no longer bound by decorum or by what little we knew of his history. This was why he had kvetched so much when we insisted his dog be put down after attacking the neighbor's son, even though he had argued, not unpersuasively, that Tom had made “a wrong move” and knew better

than to act that way near large, aggressive dogs. That is why he had spent so much time, insofar as he was capable, on the niceties of rights-of-way, and insisted, even in court documents, that he had no legal obligation to pick up the dogshit fifty feet to either side of the roadway. It took two court orders and a heart-attack to get his attention, and by that time, he was too weak to walk the dog; he had no interest in cleaning up after it nor was there a training program in place. And of course, once the dog learned there were no penalties for crapping in the utility room, it determined (through extrapolation?) there was no reason to beg for a walk again; the neighbors now strolled unchallenged through the blackberry patch. The once-adversaries all missed their court dates.

We recall him walking across campus, in the student auras of student angst, his assured stride a sign of the well-born and fortunate, no need for a degree, no need for the work demanded of his younger colleagues, nothing but authority and stories of the old days as a designer on Broadway, though even he unsure whether those stories referenced historical events, or merely the version he had told a week earlier. Perhaps his obituary puts it best: his designs for a stage-set while still an undergraduate “were said to have stunned the college community with its professionalism.” What more could you ask for than that? Like something Mann’s Aschenbach might say, oblivious to the irony, but more correct in his grammar. All those days shared by Larry, Louie, Nate, even Jim, fellow sailors all, dead now too of course—cocktail-companions (and where do you find those today?)—all convinced of their moral propriety and eager too eager to pass all on to a generation that held that life in contempt.

Now we no longer accede to superifice,
trusting in pretense and façade.
Now the story tells itself.

I. The Drive Home

Ron drives home from the meeting. Fall, when the evening brings a trite peace as if for the end of things: for the young, a beginning; for you, another turn of the wheel, one's nostalgia exhausted in the barbeques of Labor Day. Silences grow more intense; the leisurely strolls in the evening slow and the oncoming faces, New Englanders all, seem to say to you: oh yes, winter may soon be upon us, but we have the spiritual strength to withstand it.

He took the road bisecting the campus, as always. It was easy to recall the old days when driving like that, to imagine other days slowing down to pass the adolescents who would condescend to sharing the roadway. Just what is it that so consumes the young: an unfaithful lover; a family tragedy to work through? Is not "empathy" the word he struggles for? Maybe the comfort of a group, and when he slowed, there was always the chance of some back-and-forth bantering. About the hour. Frost warnings. About aging men in convertibles.

He had forgotten to close the garage door—or was it simply too much trouble?—returning home to surprise a woodchuck in the driveway, which escaped, as they do, to the most obscure space available, in this case a dark and neglected corner of the garage piled with cushions and sail-covers and equipment whose function he could barely remember, where he would find then several tripped but empty mouse traps. And the bodies? Where

were they? he wondered, at first serenely, waking at 2AM that night, concluding that the only explanation was a barn owl, living among the low rafters, and this, being no drafty and picturesque out-building of the old days with easy egress at all levels, he thought in earnest now, precisely how was he to coax the thing to freedom? Did not the creature realize the supply of mice was finite (although to him seeming otherwise)? tossing and turning [why try to better that?] with visions of one-way doors or serious reconstruction or razing the entire edifice, or maybe just an old broom, and not until mid-morning did he come to his senses ...



And finally one of the perambulating students would shock her compatriots by signalling this genial stranger to stop: "If you ..." and then reach untaught for the doorhandle. And for someone who had spent a lifetime ... well, not really a lifetime, but rather nearly a decade in his twenties and early thirties, in the theatre ... for someone like that it was easy to concoct the scenario ...

She was tired of it all, as young people often claim to be. "Enough of this shit," she said when they were out of earshot. "I don't want to spend the rest of the evening proving I can hold my liquor or not giving a crap about who I spend the rest of the night with. What kind of life is that? And what are you doing out here? Cruising for girls like me?"

And he would simply laugh or shrug, as if to answer her but not answering her at all. "You're the one who reached for the door," he would finally say. "I'm just heading home." Then a casual reference to "a place on the water." A pause. "I'm not ... Whatever you ..." Then after a perplexity of turns, a second reference to the "place on the water," the cold and the building of fires, hot tea and coffee, and not one word about an overly protective dog unlikely to fawn over her. "Gas is cheap. [But that would be inept!] I can bring you back here, there I mean." Hardly better. Yet why had she gotten into the car in the first place? Should have been a playwright; that's where the words and fables are! And when the opportunity arose: "I have a guest room, even a cot in the living room. I know that's a cliché. But not as bad as the crackling of the fire that lulls listeners to sleep."

"You know what Eloise says?"

"No. Who's that?"

"My room-mate. Well. Not really. A friend. I think ... Well, I can't think right now. Anyway, she's into fire, or maybe not fire, just science in general. And any time someone gushes over a 'crackling' fire or 'roaring fire' or things like that, she always notes that crackling comes from moisture still trapped in the logs, turning to steam and exploding in romantic sparks, essentially dampening the fire down and keeping it from burning well."

“Just so, you mean, that what ... or rather *that* we love is precisely what prevents us from loving more ...”

And she might smirk, responding to her own wit, if wit, or to his. Or maybe shrug in her existential indifference and not caring one bit whether her friends thought she was debauching herself with an older man just for hell of it, out of spite, or just for the experience. She pulls her collar up and he says, “there’s a fresh blanket behind you if you’re cold. Sorry for the fumes from the heater.” But mostly he paid attention to the road as that was what one did as an adult, operating machinery whether a boat or old convertible.

It was like sailing, he thought. And those who have not done it think it is one of two extremes—savage heroism battling the storms of the movies or calm and peaceful becoming one with nature and letting the breezes take you where they will as you give in to the forces of the universe. But of course, he thought, half-smiling, certain she would notice, sailing is never like that—never one of two coherent extremes ... “What’s?” she asked. And maybe the sub-text was you were thinking of ripping my clothes off you can forget that ... but he answered quickly, “Nothing. Just thinking ... I sail, you see. And ...” And she would reply after a pause ... “You have a boat.” And he would pause too, then nod, a wordless but deft gesture of some kind, and there would be another pause, like waiting for the south wind when the land breeze dies in the morning and he could pretend she was dragging it all out of him and by the time they reached the straight stretch past the Post Office, the words would flow like rain.

“I used to sail,” she said. “Or no, not really. I mean my uncle. He had a boat. Maybe like yours. You can tell me what kind or how big but it probably won’t mean much to me, even

though I know that is what sailors always ask each other. I promise not to make a joke about size or mast height. In any case, he used to take me, or rather, I would pester him to go. And on most days, it was fine. We would get aboard and he would start the engine and we would motor out from our dock on Bustin's Island. Do you know where that is? Just off Freeport. I guess near where we're heading now? And all I recall ... Well, that's not true. I left out the part about my uncle always starting the sail with a couple of pulls from his bottle of rum, I think it was. Maybe whiskey. Something brown. I don't know. I never got into drinking that much. Except when the frat boys had a party and the dumb-asses thought that if they got you drunk they might get laid, when the simple fact is if you're hammered enough to have sex with someone you don't know at all and don't care about, it isn't even sex as far as you're concerned and the guy would be better off pleasuring himself. And in any case, it's like Chaucer said, or so we were told by the Professor who kinda leered at us when reading this: "Vinolent is no defense," the idea being that women use 'being drunk' as an excuse to sleep with the guys they want to sleep with, like 'it's not me; it's the alcohol' and everyone goes away happy. That's the way it works; a lot of things work that way.

"Anyway, my uncle limbered up with the whiskey and after that things just chilled out, and he didn't seem to care whether we got anywhere, which was fine with me. All I wanted to do was lie down in the sun and watch the water sloshing past the bow. And there was one time the wind came up, or maybe there was a thunderstorm—I was only fourteen, maybe sixteen, so what did I know?—and he got all frantic and ordered me back to the cockpit, then there was a great

thrashing of ropes and water and cursing and I guess now I see he was really scared to death, but too embarrassed to admit it even though it should have been perfectly fucking obvious ... oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk like that ... perfectly obvious. But he was my uncle! And finally he got the sail down or something as the squall hit and I was too dumb to be scared, just annoyed that we weren't having a leisurely warm sail, like it was his fault, you know, the way teenage girls blame adults for everything, although I guess because of the drinking he deserved it.

"So I think about that, you know, just sitting up on the foredeck with the cool wind over my face and someone handling the boat like they know what they're doing. And now I've talked enough. Sorry, it's probably the drugs, or just the fact that my friends are such ass-holes ... oh I'm sorry ... that it's pointless to try to talk to them about anything let alone things that actually might matter to anyone, so tell me ... I mean about the boat. Tell me about sailing even though I probably won't understand anything you say, I mean, it's always fun listening to someone talk about something they actually care about rather than some jerk going on and on and on about what great weed they had over the weekend ..."

And then he smiled, or would smile. It was all going as he might plan or imagine it, with just enough variation to keep both of them alert. So "Yes," he said, or would say, quietly averting his eyes to check the side-mirror to check the rear-view mirror to check his speed. And he realized he was imitating his neighbor, or perhaps what was said of him: constantly alert, looking left, looking right, checking the wake behind him. And his neighbor sailor had laughed, as if all who heard were experienced mariners. "Oh yes. I learned that

when I was working on a fishing boat. Lobstering, actually. Although when you work on a boat like that what you do is 'fishing'. Any harvesting of sea animals is 'fishing' whether it's for shrimp or sperm whales. You always look. Everywhere. When we were hauling traps we would be among a 'sea' of lobster buoys (odd that metaphor!) and my captain looked right left everywhere and got a mental picture and by the time we were done with that string he would collate that image with the reality of what he now saw and he would know instantly if one of those buoys had mischievously managed to entangle itself in the wheel; that's what you call the propeller. Because you can't have that. You can't."

Like that, and he almost lost sight of her as he recalled and nearly formed the words attributed to his neighbor. "... Even though there's a simple procedure of getting out of that predicament. You look over the stern and you should see two lines, not one, taut like light rays, trailing you, and to get free ..." But it was too complex. "Ha! I know that look!" he would conclude. "You're bored. And when we see that in our listeners, we always do the same thing: we repeat ourselves. Only louder." And at that she would laugh as everyone would laugh when he made this joke. "Now as for your uncle, I have a rule: no drugs or alcohol when the boat is underway. No one should be hurt on your watch ... under your command, that means. There was an old book written called *Heavy Weather Sailing* and it was from the 30s I think so few of the particulars really apply today. ... Oh. I'm boring you. I see you're bored. And when we see that ..."

"All I know is it's an absolute monarchy or dictatorship on a boat. That's what my uncle told me."

"That's what Gabor used to say too, although you won't find many sailors among the Magyars. On my boat, I never enforce that."

"So we all get a vote?"

"Well, everyone gets 'a say.' Or perhaps better 'to voice their say,' since, in a true republic ..." But that was too much. No need to pretend to be the serene philosopher of politics and life, tempered by years of experience.

She sat back, and he could sense her relax, as he checked the mirror checked the roadway no more than glanced at her to ensure she was still comfortable.

"I know you," she said, now turning away from him. "Gabor too. And all the rest of them. You teach something. Drama, I think. I go there, to school I mean. But you must know that. Although now, you're just a sailor and someone who's giving me a ride. You know what's his name, math I think, and every cute guy gets asked to go down to Land's End to watch the surf and get felt up by him. And the worst of them? It's Herb."

He would give a short shrug as if to say "Well of course, but I don't ... I mean it's not right to bad-mouth one's ..."

"Sure you do. Everyone does," she said. "You know how it works? What he does? You get a paper back and there's no grade, but a comment 'See me', and you go in and the horndog looks at his watch and says, 'Hey. It's lunch time. Let's ...' and maybe you say 'I can't I ...' then it's 'How about dinner, then?' and this goes on unless you confront the bastard directly about it, and you know what? He does this every year, every class, never varying. And I guess it's the old adage that if you're so inept that 99% of the women you hit on tell you to go fuck yourself ... oh I'm sorry, there I go again ... anyway, in

that case all you have to do is hit on 100 of them a day and you'll have a new lover every night."

He laughed. He had made this same joke himself.

"It's better not to get involved," she said. "Unless, well, I did it for a grade once ... won't tell you who ... Don't look shocked. It's not as if we actually *said* OK, I screw you and you give me an A, although that's what it was. ..."

"Sorry ... Here's the road. Now be sure to wave to any scandalized neighbors. I keep telling them, 'if only I could actually live the life that you all accuse me of!!'" And maybe she had understood and maybe she had even laughed a bit about that. "Don't worry," he added, as if in regret. "None of them will be awake. We'll start a fire ..."

Or perhaps ...

Perhaps the words were different words. Or barely words at all.

"You ok?" This is what he could ask or could have asked as he stops the car on the road bisecting the campus.

An act of kindness. Nothing more than that.

He does not think of himself and his future, but only her, sitting silent and alone by the walkway. No one in the area; no one out for the night air. She stares at him but says nothing. For her he does this. She is not reading; not engrossed in her cell-phone. "Are you OK?" he repeats. "Is there anything I can ..." "I'm fine," she answers finally, but with no hostility. "I'm fine ..." "OK," he says quietly. "I'll just wait here for a bit; so that you're not alone." For her he does this.

And there is a pause as both of them relax. And then she stands, walks around the car and reaches for the door ...

That's exactly how it was.

Or perhaps it was much simpler.

He drives on the road bisecting the campus, slowly, seeing no one.

Nothing is out of the ordinary.

He passes College Street and accelerates, barely noticing the hitchhiker, nearly grazing her ...

II. The Idyllic Charm of the Bourgeoisie

In three days they were on their third sail, and there would be more as the season grew short in September. The wind would come up predictably in late morning and blow until sundown and they could plan or not plan any day they wanted out there on the water.

Most crewmembers in his experience grow quickly bored or annoyed with the complexities of line-handling, although he would announce to everyone, with the same indifference of a flight attendant describing safety gear, that they were free to do as much or as little as they wanted. She was different, curious about all of it.

So he showed her how the throttle and gearshift worked as they motored off from the mooring. And she reached for the helm insistently as he directed her out into the seaway. "Try not to hit the buoys. When we're under sail, it doesn't matter much. But under power ... well ..." and he thought what he would tell her one day about freeing a prop fouled in pot warp.

And finally he raised the main, and as they fell off slowly to the starboard tack with plenty of sea-room, he eased the throttle down, put the engine into neutral, then slowly unfurled the jib. He showed her how to power the diesel off, and they were sailing, for real, just as one would do in a movie or

commercial and from that point on, everything more or less fell into place.

She took to it immediately. She took to everything immediately. Like the way he explained the winches to her and the tell-tales on the genoa, the tensions needed on the jib-sheets. And day after day it would go like that, each day with her taking more control, always focused completely on their course and their progress. Always adjusting trim to the wind shifts. And now every morning he would receive a text message "Wind's up" or "wind's up?" and they would have another afternoon on the water. And you have to know that within a week or two he had fallen completely for her, emotions like you feel or used to feel as a despairing teenager.

"You're fantastic," he said, referring he thought to the way she mastered the subtleties of boat-handling.

"What bullshit," she answered. "I've only been sailing a week or two. This is a lie, just to make me feel good, or ..."

"No no. I'm not lying. Not for a second." Then he paused, as she glanced at him, waiting. "Now don't get me wrong! I *would* lie to you of course... But I just don't have to."

And she laughed aloud. "This is not the first time you've said that. ..."

"You're right. I admit it," he said. "But it's the first time I've been able to use that line with complete sincerity." There. Finally. Getting the words right after so many attempts.

It was obvious how things would go after that. And I and he will spare you the details of confession and seduction. How one evening he had stood next to her, or sat across the table, the dog now trusting that she posed no threat, and raised his hands so that she could see his gestures, and bowed his head so that he would not make eye-contact with her, and then he

repeated the words he had been practicing all night which were something to the effect that he was sorry but that he had fallen completely in love with her, and the poor thing laughed aloud at him, and said that was very interesting and she was flattered of course I mean who wouldn't be but that it was obvious that he simply had a boyish crush on her and there was nothing wrong with that but life was difficult enough without involving love in it and he had answered that was all fine but it was not true he knew damn well what love was and the difference between that and what she was referring to if there really was any difference in the first place and he had confirmed this for nights and hours as he lay awake whether she was back in her apartment in town or sleeping as she had that first night covered with a blanket on the living room couch and after going over and over it, he realized he was absolutely incapable of thinking of anything else but her and wanted to be next to her under any circumstances and it didn't matter whether he was married or who her boyfriends were this is just what life did and you either followed your heart with the disastrous consequences that inevitably entailed or you lapsed back into the life that would do nothing but stagnate suddenly realizing too late that life isn't like going out for a day-sail and coming in early since there would be plenty of opportunities to sail later that summer but that this was the only life the only summer you had and as it wound down if you had the chance to crush yourself emotionally with feelings like this you may as well commit to them because the pain you will feel in the future will never be as bad as the regret at having had these feelings but doing nothing about them.

“Because the pain will end ...” he continued. “Whereas the love annexed to pain, you must struggle to ...” but she paid no attention.

“‘Harmless lech’,” she said. “That’s what my friends said of you. ‘Harmless lech’ indeed! There is nothing, nothing harmless about you!”

And he thought of how it had been decades earlier: there you were, with that teenage compatriot, your bodies magnificent, her skin dark, or “olive,” she called it. And you didn’t need to get drunk and act like a horny inexperienced ass-hole the way you always did in those days. All you had to do was stay sober, and maybe offer her a back-rub, corny as that was, and just express to her the admiration for what you were now seeing, feeling, and experiencing—something you would look back to years into the future with no regret. And it didn’t matter whether you stroked her expertly or did not or kissed her or did not or whether you made love or went through the juvenile motions of it, just tell her or express to her for God’s sake what marvels she possessed and what man, do you suppose, had ever said such things to her? Speaking from the heart, I mean, rather than speaking as we were taught to do or thought we ought to do in those wasted years of our wasted youth.

She took the helm and he sat back against the combing and it was like the unreality of the images on TV and he felt as if he should light a cigarette and let the breeze blow the smoke aft into the stern-wake. She muttered the directives, repeating verbatim what he had said to her, and he answered “Ready,” then she broke character a bit “I’ll do it. ... ‘Hard a’lee’.” And with that she swung the helm into his knees, reached across him to release the windward sheet, holding it,

as he had taught her, until the sail backwinded, then caught it on the lee-rail just as the wind did and winched it taut as the boat settled onto its new course, four points off the wind at the most efficient tack and he could almost feel her heart, as his, beat quickly in pride.

And on that last sail she pointed with authority to the transom as soon as they were aboard and said "You sit right there." Then all alone, without assistance, she took off the sail cover and ties, and let the main unflake into the cockpit. Then raised it expertly, securing the winch handle, and brought the dinghy to the bow to tie it off on the pennant. Then backwinding the half-furled jib to fall off the mooring, and running into a bit of trouble getting the sails set, and "What happened?" he asked and she shook her hands in annoyance. And he just laughed, not helping her out of the fix she had gotten them into. And when she finally put the boat on course with the sails set hard into the wind, he said, just as his neighbor might say: "Deal with the main first. Or no. That's not quite accurate. What I mean is 'One thing at a time'. Deal with one thing at a time. So set the main, and get that squared away, then turn your attention to the genoa. Or do the reverse. Just don't do everything at once."

And she laughed. Because "Sure! Focus on one thing: just fall in love, for example. Is that what you mean? What could be easier than that? Don't pause to predict all the consequences or try to solve all the inevitable problems at once, like what will I tell my friends how will I make a living or have a career or in twenty years when I am forty and you are eighty how is this going to feel or what if I want a baby and don't still love you do you think my parents are going to freak out what happens when your wife returns she is going to be bat-shit

crazy and will you go back to her or will she sue you for every penny you're worth and do you think the first thing I will do when we are married or nearly so is to cuckold you and do everything I can to have a child that likely won't be yours? ..." Right. Why leave the genoa untrimmed because you're distracted by the main still luffing in the breeze? One thing at a time. And if we just start by falling in love and accept that, then we can move on to brooding over what friends or colleagues will say or think of it. And by that time, not now of course, we will truly be able to say "Who gives a fuck about their bourgeois sense of propriety?"

And what have I been telling you? ...

I hear the voice of Eloise, John's voice, the voice of the artist-dominatrix.

These twin protagonists, you and this pathetic philanderer! Both sailors, you the supposed neighbor he thinks about. Each fighting for supremacy. He seeks himself in you: is this how you once sought to find yourself in me? Or is this all—the very tale I mean—revenge for some imagined slight? I assure you he feels nothing (in any sense!) of the contempt you claim to feel for him.

No one envies anyone!

At the end of that last sail, she brought the boat into the wind, stalling as if expertly a half-arm's-length from the mooring. "For you," she said. "You know why I wanted to do that perfectly. It was for you. To show you what a great teacher you've been. Not for me. I don't need to be a good

sailor for myself." Doubtless a line, much like his own, that she had practiced often with different men under different circumstances. Like panting to your lover that she was the best there ever was, or worse, telling her that when you looked at her, what you saw reflected was yourself, that there was finally no distinction between the two of you, and you remembered hearing yourself say that a few days earlier and you remembered too that as you said it, you remembered, as if in chastisement, saying it with complete sincerity some thirty years earlier.

So maybe around nine she would fall asleep with her book in hand and you would do what lovers do, settling each other in, or settling into a routine, and then, if awake alone, you would lie down next to her and it would be a pattern no one broke or questioned or complained about as if those were the accoutrements of the good life.

Puppy dogs.

Picket fences.

Calls from the kids from their dorm rooms.

She might be gone in the morning, not waking you, and it was like the old days, getting the coffee ready and trying to remember if you had a class before 10AM that day. And perhaps in mid-afternoon your paths would cross again, like your path would always cross with E., or even Linda Jane when you conspired to meet for lunch in the "meditation chapel" on campus, so often desecrated. And then with her (or was it once with others?) there followed negotiations of what you would have for dinner and who would cook and who would be the sous-chef and which end of the table you would sit on or did you need a trip to Trader Joe's and maybe if it was early enough you could go for a walk just as the sun

set and it was here, here, she would say at some hideous point in the future, here was the only place she felt secure with you, secure in walking with you, secure with being a couple with you, and perhaps that's life in a liberal, cosmopolitan neighborhood such as this or was it that one, and maybe you mistook that for a world that was nothing at all like the one you dreamed about. Tickets to the symphony. The movement you could listen to and think—there is nowhere I would rather be. Carol beside you, or maybe it was Eloise or S. or Linda Jane herself. This was "it." You thought: making love with your life-partner. Nothing and no one else to dream or fantasize about. The clock of life having struck and stuck for good. Or life in the eye of the storm it might have been, safe from the swirling winds about you or the scandals of modern society.

Like sailing in August, the challenges of the season all in the past where you could revel in them without danger. The breezes disrupt the stagnation of July, as the north-westerlies hint at the season's end. The sun, low in the horizon, glances off the surface, the air and the water now sharing the warmth of late summer. The boat sails as if sailing itself, in defiance of the skills of the sailors, now sailing in her hands, as if you could sit and admire the sea surface, the surfaces of her skin, the surfaces of your relationship, as if you could constrict your world and perception to that, ignoring the depth of things and the obstinacy of the tidal currents.

You thought then of your first wife, plain as plain could be, you thought, the two of you arm-in-arm so publicly and you realized, as if a revelation, that you did not care what she looked like, and suddenly, to your surprise, could not even imagine her in the eyes of others. Did they lust after her as you did? Were you the hottest couple in the neighborhood?

Or did the on-lookers on their porch stoops think some cliché such as for every human, there is a life-partner, or whatever that banality is.

And when she as others left or would leave or might leave or had done so, the pain would link to other pains and all the once-lovers or imagined ones would laugh at you at once. You would feel the hurt not from her alone, but from all of them. And know too that joy, as Chateaubriand laments, is by contrast always singular, not in the best sense (I have never felt this way before!) but in the worst (this is the only joy I've known or ever will experience).

III. For Every Sock, there is a Drawer

Maybe it had been a year abroad and his wife was returning in mid-winter, or maybe they had divorced or separated a year ago, or maybe he had never known her at all, or long ago rejected the “marriages of convenience” that tend to come in middle age. Perhaps the committees had never convened to enforce the ethics of the lecture hall or perhaps the break-up had been so amicable there was no reason for a student to file a complaint against him. Perhaps the institution was still ruled the way it had been ruled in the old days when what you did was your own damn business, when the students and their ways meant nothing; no one listened to them, and no one answered their concerns with anything more than a look of interest and a quiet, barely perceptible nod, and perhaps a knowing pat on the shoulder “We’ll take care of it”—the politician’s farewell, and you knew that nothing would be done and within days, all things would be back to normal. The “Baptist tip,” my friend called it, referring to the gesture of

those leaving the service early after an hour or more of homilies, promising to return.

But it was Gabor, from land-locked Hungary, who had ruined this fantasy, sharing the gossip from the committee room. Too swayed by reality, I guess. Too little sense of propriety. "And you know the most delicious part?" he said, with his malicious grin, the truth buried in sophistication—former singer for the Vienna Boys Choir, a year's leave in San Francisco during the most dangerous time there—obsessed with the impersonality of the bath-houses in the 70s, struck down with what so many were struck down with, poor bastard. Couldn't say so publicly, but he had it coming, no? The malice he had learned to keep from the surface—all those years fleeing the Soviets in the 50s. "The best part," sneering in happiness, "she remained *virgo intacta* through the whole thing." Through the whole sordid affair, he meant, the cries of passion from the office audible to all those who walked the corridor.

So Ron's wife returned from a year abroad to welcoming parades and her associates' cries of adulation Or had she left merely for the summer? Had the two of them determined that all was fine, the extraneous lovers a small matter, merely water under the bridge? that they both had their separate lives, and that's what "made it work"? Or had she sat him down as another had done on the transom—insistently. "I'll handle things." As Dick C's wife had sat her husband down for his thirty years of chasing after the irresistible boys on the campus quad. "For Christ sake it's one thing to take some undergraduate down to Land's End and fondle him through his shorts when the tourists turn away but it's another thing to get a blow-job from the local police chief in the fucking Rest

Area of the highway why for Christ sake everyone in town knows what goes on there, and I remember at a party—you were even there, you bastard—our neighbor Nate's son talking about stopping in all innocence to relieve himself and not ten feet into the woods sensed he was being followed and realized too what that was all about and what the place was all about and thinking of the impersonal sex so loved by Gabor himself and I suppose now that this has made the papers everyone in town will know and every time they pass the place with the 'Rest Area Closed' sign on it they will laugh and they will tell the story, not of being followed into the brush by the would-be sex partner, but of you, you is what they will talk about, you and the horny cop you barely knew. And they will imagine my own rage as a coda. 'Ha!' they will say, 'we should re-name this the Dick C. Memorial Rest Stop', adding snidely, 'Police Enforced!' marveling at their wit. And just what do you think we will do the next time we are invited for drinks? Tell the whole tale from our point of view? And what is that, do you suppose?" Perhaps like that, though without the consequent slashing of the femoral artery and bleeding out in the kitchen.



And one day not quite out of hearing, Ron would catch the wry smile on the colleague's face and he would hear the refrain *virgo intacta virgo intacta*. For God's sake, one might say, if you're going to be so damn indiscreet you might as well sample the goods or whatever you're going to call it. Fall in love for real or just debauch her like Herb used to do! Screw the consequences. Go down in a blaze of glory, knowing that even though you die a pauper the butt of everyone's jokes at least you got yours in your own time, and don't talk to me about how, the way you worked things out, you got to experience joy in all its wonderment, because no one is going to believe that for a minute; whereas there's no denying the notches on your bedpost. Enough of the fantasies about the chaste love voiced in a Shakespeare play or in the banal lyrics of music or poetry ...

So she came back and all he said to her was something about disgruntled students and long drawn-out investigations by carefully appointed committees of responsible colleagues and students and administrators and you know how rumors fly about crap like that, and yes he needed help with the boat and took what he could get and what a damn mistake that was, and don't worry, he won't be so foolish as to trust anyone again and don't listen to what his gossip-mongering colleagues suggested if he wanted to prey upon students he would have had scores of them.

All went back to the unruffled state of things. The quips over coffee. The well-behaved and dressed-up dinner guests. Except for that part about him lapsing into dementia, having the dog run wild over both of them and their neighbors and any hapless wanderers of the nearby fields until they locked

him in the house and let him live as one of them. Forgetting about the impending lawsuits and finally passing out in his own body waste in the hot-tub. EMTs stepping over debris in the hallway. Body temperature to dangerous levels. Like heat stroke. Or perhaps just the alcohol level in the blood but, damn!, you have to get the guy to the hospital to live no matter what the impediments might be. Rolling the gurney over the dog shit that littered the bedroom and the hallway. And his wife, annoyed with having had to make the call, stalked about as if nothing were out of the ordinary, nothing happening at all, except for her unusual anger that day.

Too bad the members of the committee room, sworn to secrecy, paid no attention to their oaths. Too bad the EMTs, sworn too to respect the privacy of those whose lives they tried to save, could not resist retailing the stories about him. A shame about the drugs. The alcohol. The untrained and ill-mannered dog. The infirmities of age, and the fact that it was too late to have anyone come in to make the decrepit house as presentable as it had been in the old days when they sat out on the porch with their well-bred dinner guests, waving in condescension to the passing fishermen.

Too bad for all of it, and in another day, regaining consciousness, informed of what had happened, lifted red-hot and nearly dead from the hot-tub, he would be amazed that it had all come to this.

Or was it like that at all?

For him, or for the others?

Was this the story he wished to disseminate?

Were any of the stories those he wished to disseminate?

The trees fall in the November rain.

Frank, in consort with others, raises the muzzle to his chin.

The neighbors stand tall in high disdain.

There is no point to anything.

2.2

A MAN IN THE FAMILY

The more images I gathered from the past, I said, the more unlikely it seemed to me that the past had actually happened in this or that way, for nothing about it could be called normal: most of it was absurd, and if not absurd, then appalling.

Sebald, *Vertigo*

You would think Bobby, my husband for three decades, dead for a half-day, rigor mortis setting in as his body swung from the oak limb, you would think that would have been the worst of it. But for some things, it's the periphery that matter. Those are the things you care about; those are the things that crush you in the end.

We lived at the end of the road. No, I don't mean the real end—the cul-de-sac where J. lives (some call it the fag-end of the road, imagining his proclivities, and laugh hysterically as if that were funny). I mean where the town road ends and the private gravel road begins. The beginning end. I don't live there anymore, and thank God I never will again.

I. Days of Innocence

It wasn't special. Life, I mean. Little to distinguish us from anyone. Dad working as a mechanic, always training my older sister in woodcraft and engine repair and boat maintenance and by the time I was old enough to care about anything like that, she had already appropriated most of the tools in the toolshed, all the paint brushes, all the machines and the

hulls of the various row-boats, sailing dinghies, and even an ice-boat that filled the garage and the outbuilding of our cottage in Maine. Rarely was one rigged or sailed, rarely floated out to the mooring. And as her arms grew stronger and she assumed that athletic stride that an eldest son might have, I hung out with my girlfriends, my clothes growing tighter about me, and soon, I didn't need the envy of my friends to assure me that some things in life were just fine. Maybe that's not normal but to us it seemed so.

I never knew why my mother hated me (no point in pretending I have an affectionate name for her). Like I've had kids myself and no matter how much of a pain-in-the-ass they can be—and that, I found, never stops, even when they grow to adulthood—even then, there is no way I would ever develop a malicious hatred for them, wish the worst for them, or crap on them to their faces. You're a mom, for Christ sake, and if you didn't want that, you should never have gotten married in the first place.

Maybe it was because for a few years at least, Dad turned his affections away from her. Or maybe because I ruined that perfect body for her simply by being born. Who knows. You can still see it in her. I mean others can. Even failing, and half-blind, and now passing 80, yes, it's still there. Slim and once athletic I guess, and I imagine when she was ... what ... 25 or 30 was it? ... seeing what those two pregnancies did to her physically, then watching her form reborn in me—me, the one she thought responsible—then having everyone around her insist that she love me and be proud of me and work to make life easier for me ... that was just too much for her. By that time, she had already given up Sis to her husband, who kept her close to him in everything, had a word for her in

everything, and finally on his deathbed said to her in a whisper, "Now promise me," he said, still in my hearing, not his last words but as close to those as I remember. "You have to promise me you'll take care of her," he said, nodding to the open door where our mother had been standing a few minutes earlier. And maybe he knew how I would have answered this; maybe he trusted that Sis would simply assent. But what would he care or know once he was gone if both of us ran screaming from the house an hour after the funeral?

Sis took seriously the promise extracted from her. And after that, the old hateful bat, my mom, exploited her fidelity to that promise, brutalizing her for decades. And of course there was hell to pay when our neighbor took a shine to her. Nothing serious. Just flirting with her and pretending to lust after her every chance he got. "You need a man," he said, reaching a tool for her in the toolshed. "She better hurry up," our mother snapped, not seeing his left hand braced on her waist for balance, but rarely out of hearing.

Now me, I never took that stuff seriously. I've had men trying to screw me since I was a teenager, hitting on me even when Bobby was no more than ten feet away. And they would maybe hear us snap at each other—a sharp tongue—yup, that's me; I was born with that, I guess, the only thing I inherited that's worth shit other than I suppose this physique she thinks I stole from her. These dumb-ass Lotharios didn't know that it was all routine for us, almost a show of affection, and they would come up to me quietly, lean over as if trying to cop a feel and say something completely insipid like "You know, if you ever want to talk ... If you do, just know that I'm here for you." And for God's sake, how stupid do you suppose they think I am, or any woman is? I'd almost prefer them to

come right out with it, "You know, if you have five minutes free in the next few days and want to have sex with me ..." or something like that. And you know, when J. just said that directly, having gotten nowhere in all his years of chasing after my sister, having waited the two or three years after Bobby was gone so that I could finally get a laugh out of it, rather than feel the stress and pain of losing him, when he did that, it was amusing, I'll admit. And now, whenever I'm, say, walking my kid's newborn in the stroller, he's sure to drive by and cry out for all to hear "Nice ass, Grandma!" Although don't get me wrong: I'm no fool. Like the time we had dinner, you can be certain I made damn sure every chair I sat in was so placed that there was no way he could get within 10 feet of me, poor guy. And if my sister had just ...

But now I see I'm really getting ahead of myself.

A lot sucked about being kids. Too much family interference. And instead of getting felt up in the back seat of old Chevys I spent most of my time with my girlfriends because that way, I could just storm out of the house whenever I wanted and wouldn't have to wait patiently for some guy to come over to be put down by my family. So I'd run off and Sis would stay home, maybe to work on some project suggested by Dad, and no matter when I got home, I'd get shat on by our mother. "Oh. Home early I see. Didn't things work out for you?" or "Next time I'm going to lock the door if you're out later than ten." Or "Why are you wasting your time with those loser friends of yours?" Always something; so after a while, I just didn't listen, and once I met Bobby, I didn't have to bother with her. The last time I drove off with him, I glanced back through the rear window and saw Sis standing there. Arms down. Dejected, as if abandoned. Expressionless. No wailing

or marks of despair. Just an acknowledgement I think. A realization of what the next thirty years of life would be for her.

I think what ruined things was the time she spotted the two of them, J. and Sis, I mean, making out in the dark recess of the garage. I doubt Sis ever knew they'd been caught like that. But he told me he had come up upon her when her hands were busy with something and pulled her to him and she went limp in his arms, or some such b.s.—you know, the way guys describe these things all mushy and romantic, like if they were in a movie or something—and he looked up over her shoulder as he pulled her hips to him and there she was, my hateful mom, turning away in the doorframe pretending not to see but locking eyes with him for a second letting him know she had, and from what I understand, things were never quite the same after that. All the spirited conversations he used to have with her—my mother now I'm talking about, only ten or fifteen years his senior—all those ended. And the sharp insults they used to trade that he once laughed at, attributing it to her "spunk" or "vitality"—all those lost their irony, and I don't think their relationship meant shit after that. And the evenings Sis used to wander down to his house? No more of that. Why even I once took the dogs for a walk there, trying to get away from her when I was visiting, and no sooner had I taken the turn in the driveway than she snapped at me "Where do you think *you're* going?" and instead of answering like J. said I should have "Shut up, Ma. I'm going down the road to screw my neighbor. Wanna join me?" I just stammered something vague and evasive, and she shot back "What do you want to go down *there* for?"

And thus the only time he ever touched me, well, except for that one time he just flat out ..., but never mind that. It was

during the pandemic and as I was turning away, he said “I wish to inform you, Grandma, that I am about to violate social distancing by giving you an affectionate pat on the ass.” And I wheeled away and he did exactly that and I just cracked a huge smile, not because I felt any desire for him, but just because it was one of the few times I actually got to laugh during the two winters I spent up there.

I never could determine which of us J. wanted more. I kidded him about that, and he cited Casanova, or maybe he just made it up for the hell of it. A threesome of sorts. Like if you’re in hot pursuit of someone and as defense they bring a chaperone, maybe a neighbor or a sister—the true seducer welcomes this as it makes everything easier (Casanova, Book 8, chap. 4). Taking liberties with the one—maybe the chaperone? maybe the sister?—simply makes the other more receptive, and before you know it, you have a pair or a trio of lovers to deal with.

So maybe when he saw our mom glaring at the two of them he should have just invited her over or maybe the time Sis surprised the two of us ... that time ...

Ha ha. What bullshit! Threesomes. Sororal rivalries. This is in his mind, not in ours. Why would you trust him or Casanova? My view? ... Listen. They know nothing of what is in our heads.

II. Life Cycles of the Well-to-Do

Three of them I had and after the eldest had a kid herself, we would visit Maine; for no matter how bad things were there, the landscape was always beautiful and that’s what we’d grown up with. Most summers, there would be one weekend when the whole family would gather for what we

called a reunion and that was the worst, pretty much two days of torture, the only redeeming feature being that it was as bad for the other three generations as it was for us.

Being here without wringing her neck, Bobby said, was tough; it meant he had to practice professional civility even in his domestic life, like having to shave and wear a suit all the time, you know, in a figurative sense. No time off for him. And the last time he was here, he said with a prescience that now scares the crap out of me, "I'm telling you, I swear, I am *never* coming to this place again as long as she's alive." And who knows, maybe she'll outlive us all as she did him, and if that's the only way to be free of her, fine.

She never liked Bobby. Never trusted him. Always imagined he was plotting to steal her fortune from her, even though she didn't have a pot to piss in other than the two houses her dead husband left to her. "Nothing!" she would cry out. "The men get *nothing*." Meaning of course that I would be cut out of the will entirely, and my poor sister, having given up three decades of her life caring for her, would inherit the whole shebang and have not a goddamn thing to do but fill it with the crap she acquired over the years instead of the love she should have gotten from her family or from whatever man finally dragged her off by the hair to his cave, although I suppose we're not supposed to say things like that anymore.

My cousin lives right next to that cottage, and she and my mother, and Sis too, spend most of the summer quarreling over the boundary line like God forbid your very kin should mow one mower's width into your, *your* lawn. One day J. came down, he tells me, cutting out the shrubs with the brown-tail moths for us, since he and he alone seemed not to be allergic to them. He took the brush to the shore, piled it on a sandy

spot, and set it with its infectious nests on fire, only to have her charge over accusing him of littering, just as she would accuse us if she found seaweed washed up on her pathetic beach, like some evil-doer would sneak up at low tide and drop it there. And he told her what he was up to, and when she demanded to see his burn permit issued by the Fire Warden and you should use soap to kill them anyway he lost it in exasperation, "Listen, if you want the freaking caterpillars yourself so that you can dispose of them, or perhaps raise them like the kids you never had, I'll just leave them on your doorstep." And an hour later she came back "You're not sore, are you?" Who uses the word *sore* in that sense anymore? So like my mother. Each of them thought nothing of railing away against a friend or neighbor or daughter, and then when whoever she was crapping on fell grimly silent, trying not to make a scene, she would stand back as if aghast and accuse them of being pissed for no reason. Must run in the family. If I'm that way, I hope to God someone tells me rather than let me live my venomous life out until the end.

Anyway, Bobby and me? We had it knocked. House in Falmouth, maybe not the better side of the highway, and the ski-lodge house in Sugarloaf, with all the glass opening up vistas of snow. Like Christmas all winter. And I loved both of them and all those cleaning skills I inherited, the same ones that turned my own sister into a hoarder—those I use to keep both places spotless and myself looking good, and when the kids gave us time, we could go out, Bobby and me, and go dancing or go to a sports bar or hang out with loud and boisterous friends and I didn't care about the repartee I could give as good as I got, and it only got weird if one of them assumed it was OK to proposition me or maybe pat my shoulder or my

ass, and I knew that if Bobby ever saw that he would beat the guy to a pulp so I always said nothing. That's what being a woman is all about today—you just say nothing or you cause all kinds of hell. And maybe Mom—there, I've used a name for her—maybe she felt the same way before she gave up working so she could get married. Too bad she couldn't see that it was the bosses who were the problem, they were the ones demanding servility and meekishness, and not her family.

So now she comes up here, and during the summer her normal day is standing on the lawn with her arms folded angrily, observing Sis do whatever chore she determines needs to be done. That might be picking up brush from the yard, or re-arranging the stuff already packed into the garage so tight there is no way of retrieving anything, or something almost surreal and other-worldly, like varnishing a set of oars that have not been used in the last half-century or maybe caulking the dried-up seams of a boat that has not been buoyed on the water since it was bought for a song twenty years earlier.

I remember coming up one weekend and being put to work; my kids must have been at home or maybe they all just ran wild. We were scraping what was intended one day to be our guest cottage, but was actually no more than yet another storage bin full of piled-up furniture. And as I ran the scraper over the old paint, I realized we had done exactly this some time ago and were now flaking off the primer that we had never gotten around to painting over a half-decade earlier, all of course amid accusations of inefficiency and laziness, levelled by one who never did a lick of work herself. By that time, her eyesight was gone and her walk less steady, and wandering up the road the 100 yards to supervise us was risky, given that not one of the neighbors would have thought twice about

running the old bat down in the middle of the roadway then suing for damages. In large part freed of her, we managed to get a good coat of primer done.

Sis always got into it with the neighbors, like when they were fixing potholes in the road and scraped down gravel that was in “her” field, off she goes, flagging them down and demanding that they repair the damage. We never paid the road maintenance fees, and Sis claimed with absolute conviction that our father had told her she didn’t have to, which for her was enough. And she claimed once she would simply put a gate across the road because she had a perfect right to do so, and none of the neighbors would have been able to drive to their houses, and I tell you, thinking like that, or I should say, just saying such idiotic things, that’s what causes our neighbors to roll their eyes whenever our name comes up, and pass around gossip that, who knows, may well have come from within the family.

III. Funeral Rites

When someone dies on that road—any of the fifteen houses or so—we have a big gathering in the field, the one whose boundaries are always in dispute. Where every few years, someone, usually my mother, will throw down the money for a surveyor and swear publicly they will force the neighbors to pay for it. All that accomplishes, of course, is driving another stake deep into the ground that one abutter will accuse the other of sneaking out at night to move a mower’s width or two. The only thing that damn field has been used for since I was born is awkward celebrations of marriages or “of life” (meaning ‘death’) and there hasn’t been

a wedding on this road since well before I refused to ruin my own by having it there.

So we sat out there for the “sharing,” which was as ludicrous as it gets. No one had really known Bobby, and those who had, realized how much he hated being here. Not the place itself, with its skies and seascapes, but the mere presence of his mother-in-law. And despite the underlying hostility of the neighborhood, the speakers all got up in their freshly washed summer shirts and tried to be civil, telling stories about how he once helped them launch a boat, or perhaps clean the carburetor of an old log-splitter, or perhaps once had gone down to the store to get beer or a pizza for them and then my mother leaned over to me and said, not providing sympathy at all, “Now you know how *I* felt when your father passed.” And no, I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what you felt, I thought. Because I’m not a despicable and spiteful person like you are, and I didn’t just get left with enough to provide for me nor did my dead husband extort promises from my children to take care of me. And besides, Bobby’s dying didn’t have a goddamn thing to do with you and none of us could care less about what your feelings were when your husband finally got free of you some thirty years ago.

We had another one the next year when Donna’s father Dick died, or father-in-law he was. Twenty years in the military, self-styled Jack-of-all-trades—the signs of his work littered the neighborhood: fuse boxes with the wires mislabelled, water pipes nowhere near to code, paint jobs with no primer, and carpentry with all the angles wrong and the nail-heads bent. The junk piled up in their drive-way—you never know what one day you might need—and it must have been a contagion that swept the neighborhood, as each one of

these people—Sis, Donna, even Bob and Kathie before everyone got sick of them—not one of them with so much as a pot to piss in, nor any room to store such a thing—every Saturday morning off they all would go to Yard Sales thrilled to find some useless trinket for \$2.00 that on Ebay might sell for a king's ransom but never did. Finally, it was easier simply to raze the shed where all that stuff was stored and leave the crap out on the roadway. I counted nineteen empty gas cans there, and nearly a dozen red traffic cones; Donna carefully removed the caps of the gas cans, fearful that someone might steal them, even though half of them were split from disuse and the rest would end up in a landfill.

There must have been forty people there. I remember Donna went to J., and informed him her sisters would be staying in his guest house was that ok? And he told me he was so appalled at the suggestion that he hadn't been able to stammer a coherent refusal. Turned out she was not on speaking terms with them anyway, and why would she expect anyone else to offer accommodations? So J. then did as he always does—never answered her as the time approached. And on the day itself, he found some woman and fell bat-shit crazy in love with her, and decided that when push came to shove if he had the choice to spend a few hours with her or pay tribute to one of the fixtures of the neighborhood, he would choose her, even if it meant his neighbors would grumble at his boorishness for years. And he wrote Donna some abstruse philosophical note about accepting the consequences for personal decisions he had made, and she understood not a word of this mystifying bullshit, which came down to the fact that he would basically do anything to get laid and didn't give a crap about the norms of society.

It may have been a week or maybe two weeks after the gathering. We were all out on the lawn, me, my sister and mother, and a couple of kids, and he stopped by and normally that would mean going up and saying something lewd to my sister, but this time he just came straight for me, and gave me a hug without so much as a word, and that, I tell you, that was about as good as it could get. I was done with all the consolations and religious assurances and moralistic nodding of heads and questions about finances. All I wanted was that—a hug. And it would be another week or two before he came back, and this time, I simply unloaded on him about the whole damn situation.

Seems that Bobby loved the trappings of the high life and maybe for twenty years we lived it—trips to Boston and \$300 dinners in Portland; he always found enough money to secure a loan that would be paid off with another one. Kids in college or deciding not to bother with it, a second house in ski-country; life was grand, I tell you.

And how the fuck was I supposed to know that he had formed a company with his friends, “investing,” and that his share of the start-up funds came not from loose change he had lying about or from the commissions from his brokerage but from his own retirement. And how too was I to know what would be left after “down-sizing,” as it was called. First the ski-lodge in Sugarloaf—no way I was going to stare alone into the snowscapes he loved so much. And when the big house on Falmouth hit the market, I’d discover there was only thirty grand in equity in both of them, every other nickel now in the hands of bankers or his fellow “investors” in the “investing” company, which was essentially a gambling

operation run by his friends and funded largely on Bobby the Dope's retirement and second mortgages.

So one day we were all up in Sugarloaf, or rather half the family was. That would be Bobby, me, and our son, whose own company, like his father's, had just gone belly-up. Pretty much a tee-shirt mail-order place, backed, or so he dreamed, by a life-style brand, which itself was only a couple of twenty-year-olds driving across the country in a family van with an iPhone. And at the last minute, Bobby said he had a couple of things to do, but we should take the car back down to Falmouth and he would be right behind us in the "van," as we called our SUV; so off we went. And maybe there had been some back-and-forth between us. We had just come up from the cottage to meet him there and things were always stressful if my mother was involved, however indirectly; so this time, my son and I just drove straight home to Falmouth and I tell you by the time we got there I had a very bad feeling about this and started calling as soon as it got dark.

The phone rang and rang, and sometimes I would get his voice saying he was unable to answer and sometimes it would simply go dead. And I finally couldn't stand it, it must have been 1AM and I called the sheriff. We knew him, or maybe one of his deputies. You know how it is in small towns like that, and he said he would get someone to go out to the house at least, but it was hard to do much in the pitch black and besides, you know how phone service is up here. And an hour later he called back—no nothing, he said, no one answering, the house was dark, what was the license of the ... the van, you said? And he's probably just going for a ride, or maybe camping you know that's what people do up here and I wouldn't worry but you bet as soon as it's dawn and we can see more

than what we might looking up our butt-holes we'll get right on it I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.

You know. Reassuring shit like that. And I didn't sleep a wink, and at 7AM, or maybe it was 8 when the new shift at the sheriff's office came on, I got a call and they had actually found our SUV, having looked for a van for an hour or more, parked not far from our ski house and had he said anything about camping are you sure of that? And true there were no hiking trails there, but you never know, and how about a spare set of keys did I know ...

And I didn't hesitate. No sense in answering bullshit like this I got in my car and my son too and we drove hell-bent it must have been though two hours away and on the way I got a call, but reception was bad and all the message was that I should call the sheriff back it was ... I think he said "important" or "urgent" or one of the words like that and there was no way I was going to listen to whatever message they had to deliver over a crappy phone connection when in an hour I would hear it to my face.

And driving up that narrow road, I knew damn well what I would find and sure enough, less than a mile from the driveway there it was, the van, pulled discreetly off the road, or what would have been discreetly had there not been a sheriff's car in front of it and two or three trucks behind, and maybe one was a make-shift ambulance or maybe these were just the pick-ups of the local deputies or volunteers or whatever they were and when I finally stopped sputtering what the fuck was going on and told them who I was and no I didn't feel like going to the fucking station who was in charge then one of the deputies hemmed and hawed and didn't know what to say or do and didn't know who had the authority to

say or do anything and I screamed at him and would have slapped him but he finally blurted out “They ... I mean we ... they found him. Hung. Tree limb. ... I thought you said it was a van. ... Not a hundred yards ...” And before he could finish I had pushed him away and followed a fresh trail, now well-beaten, into the woods where there were a couple of useless dead-beats standing around with their hands in their pockets around a bunched-up blanket on the ground and when I said to them “Where was it?” they kind of looked at the tree and looked at me, and finally figured out who I was after mistaking me for my daughter for God’s sake, even giving a wry smile at that as if I gave a shit about some jerk checking me out at this point and pretty much that was that.

I stayed in the house. The ski house I loved so much. That both of us loved so much. I had to at that point, so much to be done. And there wasn’t a goddamn sign of anything there. No note, no pile of belongings. Nothing hidden. Nothing cleaned up. Now sometimes when you’re about to do something like that, I hear about going through your stuff and making sure you don’t leave anything embarrassing behind like dirty underwear or a sex toy, but as far as I could tell, everything in the house was exactly as I had left it a day earlier.

This is the sort of shit you’ll never figure out and eventually I would come to accept that. But for a year or more I did nothing other than try to understand it, reconstruct what had led to it, working through the receipts and bills, talking to doctors, talking to his “partners,” who seemed more interested in hitting on me than on admitting that they may have had a hand in this. Talking to lawyers about the finances, then having to spend two years in the summer cottage because I had no damn place to live, nearly every day of it, chastised by

my mother for running up the heating bills even though I was the one paying for it. And this was some far cry from the days of determining which of our two houses would be the most fun to spend the weekend in.

Maybe he had a lover stashed away somewhere and she left him the same way he left us. Maybe that. Or maybe he got some bad news from the doctor that neither would share with me. But in the end, I guess it was the money and I guess too it's pointless to guess further. He just couldn't face admitting the stupidity of what he'd done—that is, lose nearly every cent of what we had because his blow-hard frat-boy friends had gotten some hare-brained scheme of an investment company, beginning from Day One by setting up generous salaries for all of them—Bobby too, I must confess—and burning through a couple of million, and even more, for all I know, within a year or two and leaving all of us, maybe themselves as well, in the lurch. So when I called about the house and mortgages and shit, all they could do was fire back “Well listen, we're broke too. Sorry about Bobby, I mean really we are, but we're not freaking magicians.”

My son took everything hard, poor kid, and nothing I could do to help him. First his company, and then his dad. Both too wrapped up in fantasies rather than the nuts and bolts of it all. “You got to hustle,” J. said. “It's not about tee-shirts or ‘life-style’, whatever that is. How you will live when you make it big, or congratulating yourself on the salary you assigned yourself today.” You have to be relentless, whether you're dealing with customers or insurance agents or knocking on doors like a screenwriter hawking his screen-play, and you don't give up—just like not worrying if 99 out of 100 women reject you—just keep going until the numbers add up,

just keep hustling. Forget “branding,” whatever that is, lifestyles or principles. Think material. Sell your wares, what you really have, rather than some abstract b.s. like your personality or the enviable way you live.

Relentless! That’s the advice I took, even if my son did not. And finally in three years my lawyers squeezed enough out of Bobby’s fellow investors to at least put a down payment on a small place on the Cape where maybe I can live out my life somewhere near where my kids are and finally have some peace.

Poor Sis co-signed the mortgage papers. Then delayed her retirement for a year just to ensure that I was settled in.



IV. Love in the Porchlight

I spent two winters in the uninsulated cottage, freezing my ass off and paying through the nose for the electric heat, which probably contributed more to global warming than to making the place livable. Letting the dogs out and chasing them down when they got loose and sometimes walking down to the end of the road just to sit on the porch where J. once tried to maneuver me into a seat next to him, poor guy.

The days passed like cold stones and the dark wind was unforgiving, and all I did was fear that when it got warm enough for comfort, Sis would bring our mother up and all the shit I had avoided just by submitting to the winter misery would start up again.

So the sun came out one day when I was alone there and J. said "Let's go for a walk." Or maybe it was a sail. Hard to plot out what it was or what it would be best to be. The important thing is that there was no one around, no one scowling in disapproval; and the next thing I knew his hand was on my shoulder—not stroking me, but strong into my muscles. A massage of some sort. Deep and relaxing. Like the time Sis had the headache or a migraine attack and he came over in full view of everyone in the house and administered a back-rub and after that, I guess he had license to offer any cure he could think of, as long as our mother wasn't there to hiss and spit at him.

So we took a stroll, I guess I'll say, down around the point, and it must have been spring as there was no one there but a couple of college kids, and you know how they are: they stare in avant-garde despair out into the horizon with the entire weight of the universe on their shoulders. All I had on my shoulder was his hand! And the kids pretended to pay no attention, but you know they were muttering: "My God. Old people! Have they no sense of shame?"

And for the first time in my life, I mean outside of times with Bobby, I let down my guard a bit. Even though J. was as sharp-tongued as I was, I knew there would be no need for defenses. What was he going to do? Assault me in public? Why would I be afraid of that? And we lay down, now I'll say that it was in the warm grass, or maybe it was next to a

crackling fire, you know, the way our neighbor Ron once did with that student he picked up on the campus quad. And suddenly it was like being kids, or not being kids at all, since now there was no need for anxiety or worrying what your girlfriends might think of you. Just the warmth from the fire and the wind dying outside as the sun went down.

Those, or others like them, would have been among the happiest moments of my life.

Yeah, Chris is one of those men who tries to be a nice guy but it's just beyond him. I mean it's kind of amusing to have him show up on the first of November with the deer rifle locked and loaded, strapped to his shoulder, with his 11-year-old son beside him and the two of them off to slaughter one of the ubiquitous deer in the neighborhood. He was a "local guy" working construction, like so many of them, and when Sis broke her knee, or I did, or one of the neighbors maybe it was, slipping and falling on the black ice, laid up in the house most of the winter, it was Chris who before work each morning dropped off a pile of construction waste to start the fire with, then brought a day's supply of wood in and filled the woodstove, keeping the place warm enough for her to survive.

And that went on all winter, much to the admiring praise of all the neighbors. Except, perhaps, the neighbor who rented the house to him, and finally all of it came out. Two months behind in rent, and no prospect of ever clearing that debt and days missed at the construction site because some mornings, even though you can get the wood to your neighbor, it hardly seems worth the effort, hung over like that, to show up when you might be told

there's nothing for you that day, and no matter how much you played the genial role of the "local guy," when the bills piled up and the guy who had done so much for you by renting his house to you and your family, himself got screwed because of your financial incompetence or indifference—that was the end of things. And it didn't matter that you had an excuse, having spent all that money on the old Corvette which you got "for a song," no one could resist a price like that!, and held on to it like the most valuable of possessions—better to sell your son into slavery than part with it. And blessedly, by the time the overly tolerant landlord had the nerve and the gump-tion and the threatened court order to evict the bastard, by that time Sis's knee or mine, or that of the neighbor, had healed completely as the sun itself came out and made the wood fires unnecessary. We'd thought he might be doing this just to get in our pants, but all it was was trying to build up some material credit in the neighborhood. Maybe a month's rent or two.

And maybe all guys are like that. Duplicitous, with their souls at odds with their appearance. You know, like Ray, our neighbor: "a kinder man never walked the earth," you wrote, you idiot! Before learning later of the wife-beatings and the cursing and the right-wing politics, and you thought back over all the friends you had had in life, those initial crushes you had had on them, and how getting to know their tortured and twisted souls only made the renouncing of them that much more embarrassing or painful.

Friends and lovers, people in general—they just don't age well.

Alcohol got him too.

Haven't heard his name in months.

So eventually we had a real date. Or what would pass for one. Remember what those were like? Real dates, I mean. All ours really amounted to was him picking me up at the bus station, and since it was a half-hour drive to the cottage where there would be no food to eat but frozen dinners and stale cookies, I let him take me to that restaurant on Union Street once run by the owner of the dance-hall where he played in a bad band as a teenager and maybe that's where he tried to feel up the wedding guest at the reception. He sat across the table bantering and not one moment did he take his eyes off me.

We got into the car, and on it went. His hand on my forearm for most of it, and by the time we got to the driveway, we were both pretty excited, now like being kids for real, and he turned off the car and headlights, and we went right at it, right there in the front seat, gear shift and all, just like teenagers, and this time when he reached for my shirt I helped him get me out of it as I never had before and suddenly, the universe lit up ...

No no. I don't mean like in some romantic scene of a chick flick. I mean for real.

Porch lights and garage lights suddenly ablaze and my Gawd it's like mid-day out there, but all it was was my mother waking up and going out to the front steps for a smoke. Like she couldn't do that in the dark? and at least part of me suspects she knew damn well that on the other side of the garage there was a car in the driveway with a guy trying to rip her

daughter's clothes off, just as there had been so many times when we were all kids on dates in high school.

And I can't remember what we did or how far we got, whether we even stifled our laughter out there, or how long we waited for the lights to turn off again. None of the endings for that tale makes sense to me. No way we are going to sit there making out spot-lit in full view of the neighbors and no way we're going to lean back pretending we are having a conversation about mortgages and food expenses and no way we are going to button ourselves all up again, shake hands and say goodnight, and send me off to walk past the glaring eyes of my disapproving mother.

So maybe it all went differently from the way it had gone in the real world. And maybe in that make-believe world she just finished her cigarette and went back to bed without the slightest inkling of where her daughter was and for all she knew I could have been sound asleep in the guest room. And in that world, everything slowed down, and it wasn't as if there were two horny teenagers just freed of the porch lights, but two adults now, having lived the better part of their lives there and experiencing emotions they had not felt in a decade or more. Two decades. Like the life-times of my children. And then both of us relaxed and said things I can't imagine saying—yes that's exactly how it went!—who cares what I imagine the details of this to be. And after that it was just the two of us living in this retrograde world of ours, making love as we had been doing it since the day we were married—that day when we stood out there in the disputed field in full sunlight, almost as we do now, with our scandalized neighbors in attendance, not giving a crap what anyone thought or ever would think of us.

2.3

ROAD MAINTENANCE: KEEPING THE DUST DOWN

There was never any time when I was living *one* life, the life of a husband, a lover, a friend. Wherever I was, whatever I was engaged in, I was leading multiple lives. Thus, whatever it is that I choose to regard as *my* story is lost, drowned, indissolubly fused with the lives, the drama, the stories of others.

Henry Miller, *Black Spring*

I. Doctor's Orders

Nothing much changed when my son died of cancer, like Frank would fifteen years later. Pancreatic. Liver. Our insides matter only to the coroners.

Nothing much changed for me when my neighbor young Burt died of a heart attack, more than a decade ago, having driven half-way to Florida, waking up in the cheap motel room in New Jersey, barely able to move. How he got home, we don't know. Dick, his father-in-law, was never quite the same after that, though he still walked the neighborhood in his work suit, cigarette hanging from his lips, grunting in complaint as he always did, and finally he just gave up too, and it took his daughter-in-law Donna breaking down the door to the bedroom to find him two days after he died there.

T., my son's wife, kept drinking through all of it, just like Dick's sister B. had, who weighed no more than a rabbit when he finally carried her for the last time out to the ambulance. Her kid, my grandson, thus grew up raised by anyone in the

neighborhood, and you know how that “It takes a village” bullshit you used to hear from the liberals works out. Oh his mom had plenty of boyfriends, and they all tried to lend a hand with the kid, helping with his gardening or just fixing all the junk piled up in the yard—lawn mowers, ATVs, chain saws, and leaf-blowers too, even though there isn’t a deciduous tree on the property. I gave him my boat and fishing gear, but at 19 he finally quit fishing for a living and moved away, leaving behind the stalks of his weed plants, but since half the people on the road now grow their own, no one even bothers to pick through the compost.

And nothing much changed when Frank went to the hospital for the final time last fall, except things got a little quiet and there was a feeling of dread everywhere. Summerfolk gone for the season. Winter coming on and no end for the pandemic. Nights too cold to sit on the porch in the evening. D., Frank’s wife, and daughter of my second wife, had already lost fifty pounds worrying about him, and the voluptuous form she once strutted around with shrunk almost by the day and the flesh in her face greyed and you would swear to God she could have been my wife, mine, like her mother was in fact, and I didn’t see either of them crack a smile for months until J. got back from California and spent an hour with her gossiping about the neighborhood.

Now by the time Dick died two years ago, he had lost his zest for life; his wife dying, yes, he could deal with that—unhealthy as she was, diabetic, overweight, legs all shot, confined to a chair in the end—but once Burt was gone with his sister Donna off to Indiana for the winter, it was tough. As in my case, there wasn’t much work left in that failing body of his, even had the code enforcement officer turned a blind eye,

which he hadn't done in years. The Boy Scouts too found it easier just to cancel the annual bean supper that paid their bills rather than endure three days of Dick's telling them what to do, and pulling out his Fire Warden credentials to demand they get the proper permits for the fire he himself would tend, and if anyone objected or grumbled behind his back, which of course they always did, have him attribute it to envy or lack of expertise. Eventually, even taking Mrs. ___ to the hospital for her dialysis was out of the question, as his driving was no longer reliable enough for anyone to take advantage of his good-heartedness. He finally drove his RV to his summer camp in South China, swearing he would never come back, then showed up in November, swearing with equal vehemence he would never leave the neighborhood again like that, and damned if not even once in the few years he had left did he go back to the place on the lake he claimed to love so much.

Poor Burt—that's Dick's stepson—never got to that point. He had showed up years ago at what was then Dick's mother's house and took over the shack by the water, which fell down only weeks after he moved to the main house, and doubtless the other outbuildings won't to be far behind. Maybe that was when his own mother, Dick's wife, died herself, but certainly during the years when his sister Donna first started coming here for the summers. Burt was already going all to fat and losing his teeth. And maybe he fished a bit (everyone did around here at some point), but the physical strain was too much, and eventually he took a job at a nearly local sporting goods place which was nothing but a couple of rooms where a bunch of red-neck survivalists and Second Amendment types would gather and complain about the

government conspiracies that were making it difficult for them to find the kind of .22 shells they liked.

Burt used to hang out with May's sister down the road a lot. And ... well, you never know; maybe some women have a thing for unwashed but guileless types like that. One day he came back from the hospital and showed everyone the scar from the heart operation and after that, he spent most of his time in the house watching pornography on the internet and I guess at that point, he had no need to hang out with the girls down the road to try whatever he learned from TV on them.

I know my neighbor J. says the first time he saw or noticed "Sis," we call her, she was up on the roof of that fallen-down camp next to their house and she was shingling it with Burt. She must have been around 20 or 25, or maybe she was in college then, and from what I can tell from the back-and-forth traffic here, that pretty much started a decades long affair between the two of them, Sis and J., I mean, or at least an attempt at one by him, until the mother got wind of it and somehow put a stop to it. In her mind, her daughter's whole purpose in life was to look after her. I guess she's got no idea what it's like to watch your child die, and I would have hated like hell to have my grief of losing mine tainted by some stupid thought that I would have no one to take care of me when I got to the age I am now.

After Burt died, I worked the garden as he had. Not for food—I eat stuff out of cans anyway—but just to keep that tradition alive. Dick's father set it up—the only perfectly aligned small plot in the neighborhood. I never knew him. Richard Senior, that is. Nor his wife who outlived him by a decade. Meticulous, I'm told. None of that passed down to Dick or of course to Burt, who was only an in-law. That garden

was all that was not slovenly in Burt's life, the one thing that remained, they say, the same as it was when Richard Sr tended it. Burt fertilized it with left-over lobster-bait he would proudly describe at the least provocation, and, like Richard Sr had, screened and sifted the dirt down until the carrots grew in perfect symmetry. D., Frank's wife, or widow now, always lent a hand there for the weeding, and Burt would try to flirt with her, while Frank did all he could to hold down his laughter. And then they all died: Dick and Burt and even Frank, who planted that garden last summer, leaving me the only one to tend it. Big tomato plants eaten down to their stems by the deer, what fruit they bore I gave to J., once we started speaking again.

A lot of animosity on the road in those days, and it all centered on whether the oil companies should be allowed to set up a fuel station here; the vote was nearly 50/50 and half the people on the road and in the town generally wouldn't speak to me, or maybe it was me who wouldn't speak to them. Most evenings, we would gather in anger and resignation around the open fire pit, complaining about people from away who wanted to do everything their way, and not the way things had always been done here. Me. Dick. His wife. All of them. Watching the flames dart through my son's name, carved into the steel reflecting plate.

No one could reconstruct with certainty what had happened. First they were going to bring in an oil refinery and no one in town would ever have to pay taxes again. Then the summerfolk got wind of it—oil tankers spoiling the grandeur of their vistas out past the Monument all the way to Halfway Rock. Then the fishermen with the Jolly Rogers flying from their stanchions decided they were all good with fucking over

the summerfolk, and blinded themselves to the fact that half the time the bay would be closed to boating and they'd lose whatever paltry livelihoods they had. Then the local selectmen who had arranged the whole thing after being charmed and bribed by the oil companies (how else do you account for their two new boats?—J. refers to them as the *Conoco* and the *Philips*), then they hired an accountant to do the math and conceded, alas, no: all of us, that is all those who hadn't thrown their hands up in despair and moved away, all would be paying the same mil rate as before: the rich people would move away and the tax burden would fall on the rest of us. Didn't matter. By that time, everyone hated everyone else so much there was no way they were going to back down, or change whatever opinion they had a month earlier, and you knew it was all about the Old Days: "Why when I was young, me and Bill used to walk to school all the way down from the point and on weekends we could go into any damn woods we wanted and hunt whatever moved and now you got No Trespassing signs all over the goddamn place put up by outsiders who bought all the shorefront and if and once we get rid of them, things got a chance of getting back to normal."

But I don't know. If, like me, you watch your son die, then your neighbor's son die, then your neighbor's wife and him too then your son-in-law gives in and goes to the hospital for the last time, and the complaints continue on without so much as a hitch, then you'll realize that you can screw over all the outsiders you want and there's still no way you go back to the Old Days. Not because you can't time travel or because things change. But because things don't change: people from Massachusetts or the big time industrialists—what's the difference? *Forma manent*, as the priests would say. You never

lost those grand old days because they were no different from the day last week when a tenement got repainted in the next town over.

Nothing changes. Each day is as bad as the one before it and each day your history gives you one more day to deal with. Like the cancer last year. Mine, I mean. Still inside me, I suspect. That was bad, and the chemo that put it in remission no better, and all that gave me was one more chance to visit my brother, or what little is left of him from Alzheimer's, less each year of course, and watching Frank get dragged off to the hospital to die either in the most agonizing way possible or drugged out on morphine to wander in confusion somewhere in his past.

It all began when Ren insisted that I go to the doctor to see why I was tired all the damn time and I finally did. Not because I thought it would do any good, but simply to appease her. You know, put less kindly, get her off my back. But things did not go well, and the doctor said flat-out that given the condition of my heart and lungs if I so much as lifted a hammer I would be dead within a week or maybe right on the spot and even though I did all he said, damned if I didn't lose my breath to cancer within the year.

So when they resingled one of those tiny cottages I rent out, all I could do was stand around and watch. Couldn't go up the ladder; couldn't lift even a half-bundle of shingles; couldn't so much as nail one in. And when you've worked your whole life, the last thing you want to be is the old guy, stomping about on the worksite, complaining about the way workers do their jobs today, spewing advice and criticism. So suddenly I'm him! that guy, raging inside just as I am now, while the young men, even my son-in-law fresh from the

heart operation, do all the work. "Don't you have something better to do than to bother us?" they might say or think, the bastards. "Check the mail? See if there's a football game on TV? Drive to town for the groceries?"

You know I don't think I've ever made anyone care for me or look after me, never even made Ren cook a meal for me in all the time we've been together. If there are fresh vegetables I'll eat a salad and if not, I can open a can of beans and put it on the stove and I can do that as well as anyone. A great reader she is, did I tell you that?, and if I can give her time to finish another chapter by doing the things that need to be done myself rather than make her pick up after me, then I've done something good in life, no?

Now I'm not violent. I never hit a woman or a man in my life despite my years in the service. But I know I could get mean and this made it worse. I hated the way Renee tried to run my life for me, even though she meant well, meant to protect me and maybe even keep me alive, and I would bitch and sometimes insult her right in public, then grumble something like an apology, and pretty much go back to acting as I always had.

I think the last time I really got into it with her was when the storm took the big spruce tree down in the yard, and J. came by with his new electric chain saw that he barely had the skill to handle and began cutting it up. Then Frank, who knew what he was doing, joined in and the two of them had at it, and I went down there with Renee and started doing what I could—pulling the small branches away and loading them onto the flat-bed trailer and I admit I showed an aspect of myself that J. had never seen—railing away at my wife about how slow she was or how she picked up the wrong

branches or had the wrong gloves, whereas Frank, by contrast, would correct J.'s own work quietly, sometimes waiting a day to show him how to lop the branches closer to the trunk, and after that J., who had never seen me act like a loud-mouthed asshole, had a heart-to-heart with Frank, who told him no, you're not seeing a sudden and uncharacteristic outburst of frustration from me. That's the way I am, and he could not tell you how many times I had gotten into it with Renee like that and sent her in tears over to D. to commiserate. But that's just how things are, and I think after that, my relation to J. slipped back a bit toward the suppressed hostility we had known all those years when our political differences seemed paramount and we imagined we knew what they were.

This getting old thing ... this is taking an awful long time.

II. Language Class

You know, they hated us; or at least, some of them did. That's why they put us to work to build their towns for them. But still they hated us.

And it wouldn't matter whether you were a Riendeau or a Labbe or a Belanger or a Boileau or a Pelletier you were all the same to the rich folks, just another Frenchman, a frog, whose name even you couldn't pronounce correctly. You began to think maybe if you were a Bernier then all the Berniers in the city were your relatives and finally you realized that's what the rich folks wanted you to think, just as they did—you were all one undifferentiated tribe with the same accent and your names interchangeable. And you lived as the rich folk wanted you to live, in three-story tenements, poor as churchmice, where "going home" meant trudging up the stairs past

open doorways of your neighbors, who weren't family at all, nor friends, and complained constantly of the noise even when it came from a different building altogether.

A lot of my friends married the first girl they got their hands on, working for the same factory as their dads, where if you made it big, say, got promoted to one of the more complex machines or even made a foreman, then what you earned was just enough to afford an apartment for yourself not much different from the one you grew up in. And when the factories closed, you and all those kids you fathered had nothing.

That's why I took the first job I could that was away from that. No way I would ever work in the dust of the factories, and if I had to be up on a roof in 90 degree weather or during a damn thunderstorm, or slog through the ice and slush to help some poor bastard replace a tire or cut up a tree—it didn't matter. It was outdoors and I was moving, and as long as you have those two things, you're alive.

I remember the moment I realized I had escaped the tenements: some guy I knew as a kid came up to me and started ranting on about the Somalis, and I had no idea what he was talking; then I realized he was speaking in French, and I barely understood a damn word of the language that had been all around me growing up. *Liberté*, by God! Free at last, at least of that!

Now I'll give this much to my family. My dad, even though he could hardly form a sentence in English himself, demanded that we use it. And use it like the non-French kids did at school, because if we didn't sound like a bunch of god-damn Frenchmen maybe that would give us a leg up in life. So when the day finally came I couldn't construe a simple curse in the language he had made us renounce, that's when I knew

I would never end up in a factory but would be out in the city building skyscrapers or cutting down spruce trees in the woods or working on a fishing boat with no one within a mile of me even though I barely made enough money to pay for bait and gasoline.

You know, in that sense, I'm like the rich neighbor next to J., a man as old as I am, but stooped and unsteady on his feet. I heard his story once, and it stuck with me, maybe giving me the words to tell my own history—words I never learned in the school I hated so much.

"I was a lawyer," W. said. "And I hated it. I worked for a firm in Augusta and hated court and hated meetings and hated all the paperwork. I'm a people guy, but I also wanted to build something. Make something. Something concrete. So finally I quit the firm and went into business with my dad, who ran a construction company. And even if I never got my hands dirty, everything I did involved planning and engineering and getting permits for what we were building. And it might be the state capital, or an office building, where for all I know they sold dildos and life insurance, or maybe an apartment building or drug-infested tenement, but to me, you see, it was all the same; it didn't matter. There I was, staring over a desert, maybe the way the Israelites felt having left Egypt, and I rolled up my sleeves and within a year or two there was a building there. Mine or part mine. And when I retired, my idleness drove me nuts and I would get my son to design and build something on the property—a road, a dock, a woodshed, anything just to make a structure rise from nothing."

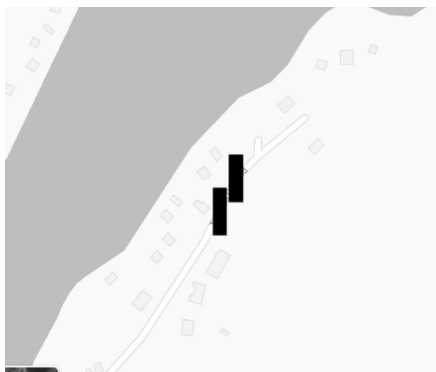
Like that. And you'd think some rich guy with a half a dozen kids, two houses in Maine and a condo in Florida to winter in wouldn't have much in common with a blue-collar

guy like me, whose only seasonal traveling is visiting my poor dying brother in North Carolina, who barely knows me now. But what we care about, W. and me, I mean, is the same: watching the foundation; watching the framing; watching the roof go up. That's why there's a rock-solid but purposeless bunk-house next to his cottage down the road, and that's why there's that group of three cottages here I rent, and if I'm lucky, I'll eventually get almost as much in rent money as I put into renovating them.

Look at this frame I have today. Lean, like I'm told was the way all those GIs looked coming out of World War II and Korea. Like my neighbors—Philip, J., John too—busy all the time, even if the frenetic work they do down here isn't what pays the bills for them. All those round-bellied guys dressed in camo you see toting guns around today? like Chris, the next-door tenant, who occasionally condescends to pay his rent bill? I doubt they work like we did, and I doubt too they served a day in the military like I had to do as a kid between the wars in the fifties.

Because work is everything; you've done it all your life. And when that's taken away from you because of your smoking, your heart, the wife who cares about you—when that happens you've got nothing left. For what else is there? Beyond life, I mean. Yeah, I know. That's odd coming from a Catholic kid like me, but take my word for it, no one who grew up with me and took communion with me believed one word of what the priests tried to feed us while the rich Episcopalians stood by shaking their heads in contempt.

III. The Road Association



“You look at this road,” Philip says. “A quarter-mile long, all gravel, single-story cottages, all on posts, each with shore-front or access. Years ago there were roads like this up and down the coast of Maine. You remember? Your girlfriend in high school? Her dad worked as a pipe-fitter at Bath Iron Works. Laid off for months. Still had enough to build his own house in Topsham and buy the cottage on Mere Point for the summer, one mile further down from the grand white-boy colonial you lived in then, almost close enough to walk to hoping she would let you feel her up that day. Today that road is paved over with mansions and lawns leading down to the water, peopled with surly teenagers on lounge chairs. Even the colonial you had where you spent days chasing the animals in the century-old woods is all prettified with fish-ponds and exotic flowers. It’s like this all the way to Eastport, and each one of these former shack owners whines in indignation: ‘They’ve taxed me off my land!’ when the truth is they simply could not bear turning down what they were offered for it.

“This road is one of the few with most of the old blue-collar cottages intact, even though their owners all moved here in our lifetimes. There’s hardly any of the old locals left or any sign of them, except, well maybe at far end—the start, I mean, where the road turns to gravel. But May and her mom? they hardly live on the road at all, and despise those of us who do. That’s what was so bad about Frank dying. ...”

Last of the real locals, did he mean? the authentic ones we all tried to be or emulate?



I could swear his voice broke saying this, and I have never heard Philip’s voice break over anything.

Renee:

I read most of the day, and the rest of the time I worry about Ray, who can't stand being cooped up inside unless it's on the weekend and there's a football game he can watch on TV. I guess he could do that on a computer too, except that for someone like him, learning a computer would be like taking a typing class in high-school—all girls and what's the point of it?

So when there's some task to be done like clipping a rose bush or hauling brush or maybe Frank has decided to revive an old well in the field where they used to hold family gatherings and weddings and the like, I'll go outside and work beside him. The point being not to share labor but just to keep him from pushing himself too hard, and all I get for that is abuse from him—doesn't like the way I stack the brush, doesn't like how I get too close to the saw, doesn't like this or that. Now I know all this has nothing to do with me, nothing whatsoever; it's because he can't do things himself like he used to. But the words: they hurt regardless. Even when they don't come from the heart. Or maybe especially when they do.

C.:

Most of it goes over my head. I bought the cottage only a few years ago and I barely knew them—Ray and Frank, I mean, nor any of the others. Then finally my boyfriend George went down there and charmed all of them. Somehow they found out he had been a guard in a prison, and it wasn't so much prison work they admired—it's Maine—not a big prison industry here—but just the fact that he had once worn a uniform, and for most of them, that was enough. That was why Dick would find some work-suit at Renys, or maybe a

security uniform at Walmart and if he could wear it correctly, he could claim or imply that this was his Fire Warden uniform and a sign that he deserved respect.

These men. It's all they know! Uniforms and surfaces. They don't know how to look deep into the wood block for its soul and see the form your chisel will allow to emerge. They don't see the shapes in the glass fragments. That's why they are all freaked out when they come down here and find me working with a table saw, making a vanity or library carrel, and it's sure not the same me they see squeezing into my black swimsuit and swimming across the bay while they make lewd comments from their porches.

And even more taken aback they were, after George and I split up, as that's the way it goes for adults—no animosity—just the way things are. Because then, then, there were men coming down here for reasons other than to check out my woodworking skills, even though usually it went the way it did the time I invited a local fisherman, of some notoriety I hear (although being from away, how was I to know?), and for our “date” he shows up and I'm expecting Great! we'll go off to some lobster shack or watch the sunset and instead he just sits down at the kitchen table and it's pretty clear he is expecting to be fed, or perhaps, being adults, we'll just skip dinner and get right to it on the freshly varnished coffee table, or perhaps go to his house where he'll ply me with Triscuits and Peach Schnapps and I will be his forever or at least for an hour or so. But I guess that's what the internet is for, to find out exactly what kind of folks you're surrounded with. And then one time I went down the road to have dinner with J., passing Philip and his dad W.'s cottage, and J. told me he would only host me if I promised when I left to tousle my hair

and button my shirt wrong and hail old W., panting in exhaustion as loud as I could on my way home.

And somehow we got to talking about the tick situation, and oh yes, he said, Michael got one on his “nut” (and he hadn’t asked for clarification), then, even worse, he was ... well, let’s say just seated and began wondering about the hemorrhoid he did not know he had, and, seeing my chance, “Ha! That’s nothing!” I said. “I got one in ...” But there was no way J. was going to allow a woman to finish *that* thought.

Philip is right. I couldn’t find a road with cottages like this for years of searching, and when this place came up for sale, when old Mrs. Saindon died, I jumped on it, and just in time to prevent the years of neglect from collapsing it onto the foundation posts.

W.:

Well, initially it was all about the kids, and this property would have been perfect—the main cottage and the garage with the semi-legal apartment. My wife and I could live there, until we found a grander place on the main road or maybe at the Colony itself, and the kids would share the cottage, a week here, a week there, and I would be the patriarch of the whole operation, coming down for dinner on the weekends. J. tells me his guest house was designed the same way by his parents—to provide a one-month vacation for each of the three kids in summer, adding, wily, that then he himself decided to move home for good, and his siblings visited only when convenient, and during those stays it was always basically a cat fight for the weekend about who sleeps where.

Of course we have our own version of that. Like when the dogs were so loud one son had to have their voice boxes

removed, and then there was the alcohol and the drunken parties and the f-bombs and then there was the time the two got into it because one didn't like the other chopping firewood during "his" week, and finally it looked like all the plans you have for your kids sharing everything equally didn't mean shit.

Same with Frank's kids, Ray's kids. Same with Carol's kid. One of them anyway. She didn't mention her, I'll bet. The one who refuses to visit here, and will not speak in her mother's presence. What did Carol do to deserve that? Well, you wonder, but then again, so what? Did the fact she wanted a social life inconvenience the kid in some way? Do my kids object when I wend my way to dinner and hit on some retiree in the assisted living place?

Ph.:

Well I taught her everything—woodwork, engine repair. And I made a good living at that. Then Ray came by that day when I was putting in that foundation, and he had the shop saw that could cut the bricks for me, and even though it only took him an hour (not that he contributed anything to the job beyond the saw itself, anything like expertise or experience) he had the gall to ask hey, could you have a look at my car for me, starter problem I think. But I've had enough practice not letting people take advantage of me that I just told him, no, that's my job, and there was no way I could just give my time away like that, and he must have bad-mouthed me, as from that point on, relations on this road were never quite the same and I told both May and Sis that there was no damn way we would ever pay the road association fees like a bunch of chumps.

Donna:

You just have to make space for things and that means Bill got to clean out all Dad's stuff and whatever my brother Burt had added to that and God knows there were gas cans and power tools and jars and bottles and finally, Bill just put them all out on the road and said what wasn't gone in two weeks he would take to the dump. That doesn't give anyone the right to steal, of course, which is why I kept the caps for the gas cans separate, and I suppose half of the stuff moved no more than 100 yards to another over-stuffed garage on this road. Then we razed the shed entirely—God knows where our own stuff will go when we finally come back from Indiana for good—and our van would not pass inspection, so I asked J. where he got his cars done, and after hemming and hawing he told me, and I was kinda pissed because that's the same place I had gone and Eric told me there was no way he could give me a sticker with half the frame rotted out and I might as well leave it in the field or register it in Indiana and just hope for the best.

And I guess we'll be back here, if we can figure out how to do it on the money we get from our Indiana house, hardly worth shit, and maybe there will be enough left over to put a new paint job on this one which hasn't been touched since Dick's dad died over forty years ago.

Don't ask me about my sisters.

I last saw them at the funeral.

Sis:

Read the law. It says walking on the shore unless you are fishing is trespassing so if you come past our house shuffling through the sand you have to be below high water mark and

you better be carrying a fishing pole, and as for the road itself, we own both sides, and no one is going to tell us what to do to maintain it. My father told me we didn't have to pay the Road Association fees so I don't. As far as I'm concerned, they have a 10-foot right of way and if two cars meet in the middle, well, one of them needs to back up past the property line because there is no way I am going to let them drive into the field just to let the other car pass.

D.:

I used to love telling of the day my husband Frank went rabbit hunting, sometimes changing the details just to tease him, and when I start, I can see him wave his arms in bemusement, trying to silence me as if to save his dignity, when the truth is, there's not a man on the road more respected than he is, (or more respected than he was, I guess I need to learn to say, although I doubt I ever will). Anyway, his cousin brought his beagle along, an expert rabbit hunter, and when the dog went into the brush you could tell by the tone of his baying when he raised one; and then as the tone shifted higher, say from B-flat to a D, you could determine as well exactly how close he was to catching it.

The baying grew more insistent, louder, rising in pitch—C, C#—driving the rabbit right at them. Frank raised the muzzle of the 20-gauge and blew half the beagle's tail away.

Chris:

Screw them. Like I don't need court orders and sheriffs coming down here because I'm two months behind in rent, like who hasn't been in that situation? And no one seems to give a crap if it weren't for me his own damn sister or

daughter-in-law she was would likely have frozen to freaking death because how with her knee shattered like that was she supposed to go outside for the wood and fill the woodstove criss-crossing it so that it will burn correctly without the embers all going cold on her. And who gives a crap that I kept them in food with deer meat half the winter and looked out for everyone and kept the damn place in perfect shape until the end and if they want to hire me with a belt sander to take all the gouges out they're going to have to deal with, the cheap bastards better damn well pay in advance.

Runner:

I'm new here. But I know how you get insinuated into this culture, and when I was trying to move my bicycle up the stairs I heard Frank tell J. in that exaggerated local accent of his, never free of irony, both of their attentions fixed on my butt: "She ain't no looker," and this from a guy with a bad heart, overweight, and only a few months, sadly, to live, and spoken to a guy who never looked at a woman without lust in his heart. "I'll never be that girl," I vowed, meeting J. when we were both out running and I could sense him checking me out and I guess he likely went back to Frank and said "If you meant her, your eyes are bad!" because I know damn well what a man's look means. And that's why I keep in shape—running, bicycling—like pretty much all the women on this road—(J. calls my neighbor C. the "round-breasted Christian lady" with good reason) and May and her sister, and D., and even the new girl Betty Lou, trim and athletic, even staggering on crutches from her knee replacement because we're all sick of hearing the old canard about Maine women being "sturdy" or "wholesome" which pretty much means sitting around all

winter depressed in the ice and snow and putting on ten pounds it will take you all the following summer to get rid of.

John T.:

I lost my home here, repossessed by the bank after my parents forgot to make their payments on the second or third mortgage they had taken out on it. 200K would have done it at the auction, and all I needed was a down payment and I could keep the place I'd spent most of my summers in. Remember the time my power boat sank out there by the moorings and no one could swim in the Basin for a month while the gas and oil leaked out of it? So W. found out who he was bidding against (the former owner for God's sake!) and withdrew and then I head to the bank with my winning bid, which would have been twenty grand less or even more than that had W. just stayed out of it, and I figured they'd bless the whole thing—same bank my family had all their lives, and damned if they wouldn't sign off on a single cent, and damned if not one of the neighbors who had attended the auction with such curiosity, even Ray, who had designs on buying up the entire road—not one of them offered to spot me the funds, and I lost my earnest money and screw them, I never drove down that road again.

J.:

So they shake their heads and complain that the world has gone to hell, but they can never quite articulate how things were in the Old Days on this road, when as far as I can tell, people rarely spoke to any of their neighbors and then only to complain about a different one.

And when they lament their own wasted youth, it's always the same story, like those old vinyl disks where the needle gets stuck in the grooves: O Woe O Woe, I acted the fool, I drank, I chased women, I beat up my best friend, I crashed the car, I sat with my thumb up my ass for decades, thus adding, as both Ray and W. concede, not a thing to life. No phrase, no image, nothing of beauty. Nothing that has not been expressed before. I remember walking down the railway tracks beneath the old bridge, where Allen, committed to his art and fearless of heights, would swing from the highest point; I closed my eyes, forgetting everything, even the names, which I no longer hide behind an alias.

Tess:

I delivered mail in the old days and when you do that you know everyone in town and half their secrets and as soon as I got divorced you know all the men went after me, including J., of course, who was the only one who really interested me, and I would drive down to his house, like pretending I had a package to deliver and I felt his hands down my waist to my hips, letting my terrycloth robe open to the waist ...



Richard Senior:

I know nothing of those people. That's what happens, not when you age, but when the world ages around you, and soon enough, all you worked for in life, all those years with General Electric, all that you imagined of your future, is gone. I'd have been the overseer had I lived and doled out the Road Association funds for road repair and I would have kept the place spotless even when my son and his stepson moved back here, because I would never have tolerated the way they let the trash build up and all the "maybe useful" things like gas cans and old electrical wire would have gone immediately into the trash—the dump, that is, not the fancy-ass Recycling Center they replaced it with. And I think the only thing I passed on to these people was the care I took with the garden, and even Burt, with no teeth, unshaven, and no washed clothes, used to go out there and screen the dirt so that the carrots would come out like perfect cones, and I guess that's the only thing he inherited, however indirectly, from me, and the only mark I made on the way things were in the road. The field unused, my daughter B. finally dead from the alcohol and Dick carrying her to the ambulance weighing no more than the clothes she was in, the house unpainted since I died on all of them, thirty years or more ago. Potholes in the road. And all of Ray's cottages abused by the renters.

I kept the mud room spotless. The tools organized in the shed. I mowed the field and rototilled the garden, and when I retired, we ate those vegetables and the cranberries from the now-drained bog throughout the winter. There was no way my son Dick was going to follow in my footsteps, even though he, by virtue of being born here, had better claim to being a local than I ever did. Instead, he took over my grave sense of

authority, but did not know how to hide it in a reticent exterior, and within a decade, he was a beloved laughingstock in the community.

Ray:

I married into it. Became the most prosperous of the working folks on the road. My first wife was shit, and I didn't really want to raise kids. But I was duty bound to provide for them, and that much I did, and I don't regret it, even though my firstborn went and died on us as he did, the only one who ever lived on this road, even if only for five years or so. As for the others, you can't really count it when one of them shows up on a blistering hot day and all they want is to sit on your porch in the cool sea breeze and drink your beer, eat whatever you have to offer them, and calculate what their portion of the estate will be.

John:

Well I just got here so there's not much I can add to this. Although I see everyone loves to hear details of how cheap the previous owners, Bob and Kathie, were, and how they tried to charge me \$30 for the propane they left behind in the tank after stiffing me for a half million on the property. And how all their bullshit environmentalism didn't seem to extend to the trash and debris they left piled up in the woods. I tell you just providing an occasional salacious bit of gossip about them—that did more to endear me to this community than any of the usual—introductions, invitations, joining the PTA, offers of wine. And thank God for J., who sailed by and saved me when the motor gave out on the inflatable and I fell overboard, and Philip too who motored out and took me back

half-frozen to the dock. Not for saving my life, of course; I could have managed that on my own. But for providing a story to tell of me.

G.:

Oh my God, I said, after he offered me the drugs. "Oh my God I'm so high! I'm so high!" And before he could apologize or talk me down from it I cried out: "Give me more. I want more!" And he laughed at me and held me as he always would: "So now you know," he said, "what I go through with you."



IV. Frank

I may as well tell this in my own voice if, that is, I am able to hear what that voice is or should be. Frank was Ray's son-in-law, or step-son-in-law. And the two of them, through a complex history of inheritance or house purchases ended up living on adjacent plots on our road where earlier, two families had feuded until they all died and none of the neighbors could remember what the issue had been at the source of it. The only story told about them was that a Hatfield drove out a bit too aggressively for a beer run or perhaps to mail a

package and on the one rise of the single-lane road, just after it turns from gravel to asphalt, ran head-long into a McCoy hurrying home from work. It was the only time they had spoken to each other in years and it did not go well. Like when the dead-beat tenant Chris side-swiped Frank's wife D. while he himself was texting and tried to blame her for the accident.

And at some point after that, the older generation got weak and sick and the sons left home finally for good. Not sure what happened to Peter, or Arthur, I'm told his name was—slow, he was, and deliberate. I don't think he could quite live on his own. Bobby joined the security at Bowdoin, and loved his job; yet when they militarized the force, providing creased uniforms and sidearms, he quit. It was not what he'd signed up for, hoping for no more than to help out and banter with the college kids. He would come home from work, row to his power boat, and take one, sometimes two laps around the Basin, ten minutes tops. And trudge home for dinner. And one summer I simply saw no more of them. I have no idea what's left of that branch of the family or the family of their mortal enemies. Years ago, Renee had married into one of them (her second marriage?) and then her daughter married Frank (or have I got that backwards?) and now, here they are as if they'd been here forever.

Frank was the epitome of the blue-collar types Philip admired—"Damn it, Bub," his mother used to say to him. "High school? In the front door and out the back, every day. That's you. You're using the bus as your personal taxi service to town!" Frank worked as a truck-driver when his eyesight and heart permitted, splitting and stacking wood, and even at the end, when Dick took to wandering aimlessly about the neighborhood with his work-suit unbuttoned to the waist,

humoring him, and lighting his cigarettes for him. You never heard Frank say a bad word about anyone, unless, that is, one of us had so thoroughly misjudged one of our neighbors, they needed to be set straight. Like me, for example, learning that the civil albeit gruff exterior I so admired in Ray was no more (or less) authentic than the outbursts of anger that I thought so uncharacteristic of him.

Frank never had such outbursts, at least, none that I ever witnessed or was told about; and when he got sick, for the last time it turned out, he didn't vent or complain, but sucked it up as if providing an example for all us soft-souled summer-folk. Sitting on the small porch with D., speaking with all passers-by when it was warm enough, and inside before the TV when it was not. And sometimes when I realize I will never see them there again, it's like a stabbing in my soul.

Even after his heart went bad, Frank kept working on the wood-pile until he almost died, he tells me, of congestive heart failure the day after we split the storm-blown spruce into cordwood. Like Ray, he felt that work was all he had, although he could not have been more wrong in this. That was a year before the doctors finally told him there was nothing they could do and D., always so upbeat and cheerful, lapsed into the same resigned grief shown by her mother living right next door to her.

Frank was part of the largest "clan" in the area and one of the largest on the coast. Second cousin to my sister-in-law in fact, and no one who grew up here has not had close relations with at least one of them. Many of them were fishermen—charmers all, although often lacking even the most rudimentary of ethics. It was impossible not to love them, unless you were their competitor. Short lobsters, cut trap-lines,

and dreams of the old days, when one night, they went out stop-seining for herring and even the deckhand earned \$10,000, two years pay for him. They then chased that day or a similar day for the rest of their careers and died still short on their house payments, unable to pay for their coffins.

The clan slowly dispersed over the state—poets, politicians, or heavy-equipment operators like Frank, who grew up next to the trailer park on Maquoit and bullied those of us on the next peninsula. Their names got watered down, or hyphenated with others, and finally some of them, like Frank, just died leaving nothing but his much-loved wife behind him.

“He took my boat out,” Ray tells me, pointing to the finger-smudged photograph. “Or maybe it was his by then. In the last few years, we didn’t care much who owned what. Like all the equipment Dick had willed to him—a four-wheeler, log-splitter, and back-hoe—it all pretty much ended up with the Road Association. Frank kept my boat running and maybe even did a little lobstering with me. Hard to remember. Then it was just for striper fishing, and this is the best picture of him I have, both on film and in my mind. Philip must have taken it; that’s the wake of his son in the foreground. Their dog in the bow. Frank standing there in his shorts, the studied wave of a local—hand below the shoulder, palm half down! No highlander waves like that. Shirtless. Beer belly in all its glory. Look at D. on the thwarts, facing not ahead, as working fishermen do, but back, back, that is, toward him. Notice that? No sailor ever faces that way. Maybe knowing that she would have only a year or two more with him.”



The two of them turned to the camera, to Philip, that is, although Ray holding the photo Philip had copied for him, always insists they are waving, for the last time, not at the photographer, but at him.

V. Tears of Leporello

So now they're gone: Frank and Burt and Dick, then the Labbes and the Turcottes and St. Pierres—basically all the Frenchmen—and even those whose strange, forgotten names are on the make-shift signpost on the main-road, a dead spruce trunk with nothing left of the branches but wood-chips—all of them dead or bought out or reduced to in-laws. And now when the newcomers go to the bank, no one cries out to them as they once did to me, "Ah! A real Brunswick name!"

It was too much for me. Too much to think about. I sat back in exhaustion and let Renee walk over to console her daughter D. alone for there wasn't shit I could do to help. I had no strength of any kind. Nothing to climb a few steps on

a ladder and work on the siding on a face-board on a light that was flickering. And no words—nothing to say to her that would make her face light up like it used to. I sat back and the last thing I remember seeing of the real world was the cribbage board and the cards with the last hand Ren and I played still face-up on the table. And slowly a procession formed—people I had seen on this road, some I knew and barely knew, and I watched them pass by like in the parades they used to have back in the fifties: guests, new-comers, renters maybe, tourists looking for sights marked on the *Gazetteer*, visitors from years and years ago. But the most notable, at least to me, were J.'s friends—those who dusted up the road as they came to visit or to stay. I thought of all the time we spent gossiping and complaining about them around the fire pit with my son's name cut into it, and it was as if they were all gathering here to exact their revenge.

It was Kelley first, long before her namesake niece took her own life off in Florida. Turns out the only local any of us know who caught the virus and could have died of it. Oh sure, there had been others down visiting or staying with him before her, but for them, I only knew what I hear about. Many times I saw her, usually alone: walking the dog, off to see the harbor. Never spoke to me. Shy maybe, or afraid the dog might poop in my yard. Didn't see the two of them together much and when I did, they never stopped and always hid whatever rapport there was between them. No public affection. Indifferent to me, to Renee, and everyone, it seemed. They blended into the neighborhood, as if they had become like the rest of us. She taught high school. Half the kids in the neighborhood, had there been any, would have known her. And if I got the story right, her first job at that high school was

the one J.'s mother had left vacant, although the dates don't seem quite to support that. Maybe I just want the relations on the road to be more formidable than they are in history.

And at some point there must have been a tearful or maybe it was an angry scene involving an old Volvo spinning through a 180 to return to a driveway and nearly being t-boned by a camper, and finally she was replaced by that Asian girl, half his age. Now that was a scandal, truly. Their ages now, I mean, although in the check-out line at Hannaford's, when she first arrived, the clerk looks at her and asks with no ill-intent: "So. You from the Music school?" I mean hell you're Asian, where's your flute? So much for there being no racists in a town like this! Maybe it took the edge off the contempt they once felt for the Frenchmen. And whenever she was around he was all over her, the same way as he was all over that other Asian girl years earlier who sunned herself half naked on his lawn. There's a name for that affliction, some say, but it was no different when the girl from Brittany visited him and, lust after her though he clearly did, you could tell by the way she clenched her teeth through that overbite that things weren't right with them.

And don't forget the Polish girl, now somewhere in Wales or England, I think. And she was always on fire with that smile of hers—one they call ear-to-ear—but there were always hints of aggression in it, like her fist was always clenched behind her back, and I wasn't surprised when there came a day where she too was gone from all our lives.

Dropping off to sleep, or still half-asleep, I saw his Eloise, who never came to Maine at all. He was never truly with her, if you follow this, except when he was in tears pouring his soul out to the very air that refused to carry his voice to her.

Her voice, he said. Her soul, he says, still present in what he writes and thinks of her. I saw the Woman of Today, who was ashamed to be seen with him, maybe ashamed to be seen with us as well, but when she thought they were alone with no one to spy on them, she jumped on him and they made out like teenagers.

I saw Amy—from a time long before I came to the neighborhood—and he loved her and would not stop loving her no matter how hopeless it was for him, and he was so tragically besotted he couldn't even see the things she struggled with, things that were plain to everyone, even after she broke up with him on the bus from Worcester to the airport.

L., her too, who only made it to the state once and held it in contempt. Or Sherry, sad, walking with him out on Matinicus. Or Andrea, who was never here, barely held his attention, and was only loosely based on the namesake who inspired her existence.

Britt, like everyone except him refers to her, astounding in her youth and beauty, she whom he never loved and kicked himself for years for letting go. Or B., who spent a summer here, trading barbs with him, and would drive down I guess futilely every evening and rarely stayed til morning.

Linda Jane came for less than a week, and he never got over her. Even herding his family away when she called her husband on the phone, just as Betty Lou, not John's wife, but a namesake too, had done years earlier. He wrote about her in one of the books that Renee read, but I'm damned if I understood a word of it or even what she tried to explain to me.

Then all who loved him and spent all their time with him and all who never could express all the pain he had caused

them. You know who they are, even if unnamed here. All of them. There before me.



They used to describe stuff like this in church, and maybe that's where this comes from. Visions that happened to the saints in the desert or a holy man locked in a cell in the monastery. And history and fantasy would get all balled up by the adults and I was just a kid how was I to know the difference between men and angels and then just a bunch of boys dressed up in faggy robes or whatever it was or maybe a bunch of the less poor kids dressed up in costumes for a school play that not one of us had a clue about.

And sometimes remembering it, thinking back on that day when they all appeared before me as I fell asleep on the porch, I get confused as to what the actants in the vision really were; I see some of them like ghosts or the angels we were told about in catechism. Or costumed like a dancer on tv in robes or liquefacted silks. Or sometimes they just *were*—like in life, I mean, although the stones did not move beneath their footsteps. And sometimes they were mere shadows, and some of them, they were less than shadows even in the least of its senses. Just names I had heard, heard of, or only imagined. Just sentences I had made up once or had had read to

me. Right past me they came, their attentions fixed, as if I were not there at all, like I was just one of the patrons of the movie screen, having paid my admission and required to sit in silence. And that's how things will likely be when I am gone; no one will so much as break stride walking past the house I built to retire in.

I remember how years prior to this I would grumble or cry outright about the dust from the dry gravel and keeping one's speed down. And once I did that right in the face of his friend Sandra from Brooklyn, who wasn't about to be intimidated by some old guy from Maine whose forebears came from what once was Acadia and she laughed in that New York accent right back in my face. I said nothing. You have to be discreet in your reprimands, given we're all neighbors here.

That was the problem with Bob and Kathie who decided (as others did; no point in naming them) that you need to distinguish good neighbors from bad ones and keep them in their proper place. Because when you start dividing humanity up like that, everyone will end up in the bad column or basket and at that point you'll likely just leave in a huff. That's what they did, Bob and Kathie did, I mean, only to divorce soon after because neither one of them could hope to live up to the high ethical standards of the other.

It's best, I think, or I think now, just to let the world go. Don't make a scene of it. Like with his father. A frigging saint, or that's what we were led to think. Genial, talkative, almost comical the way his accent, strained to begin with, thickened when he spoke to us. Upstanding citizen. Pillar of the community, oh yes. And no one was supposed to know about or take into account the gin bottles hidden in the cellar or the Peach brandy he shared with Arnie in winter, or the assaults on his

children and what was the point finally of determining whether those were real or I just imagined them.

Now I don't know whether this was a dream or only a *reverie* as the poets would call it. But I finally woke with the sun now in my eyes having dropped below the protecting screen I put up two years ago. Renee beside me now, reading as she always does. I guess I showed nothing, and though all the history of our living here came to me, she didn't seem to notice, and the page turned in her hand as it always has. And I saw him, J., now a version of him almost as old as myself. And he was staring into and through the shadows I had envisioned and pretending to know none of them. Things were different out on Matinicus, he said. Sailing there. There where few of them had ever been. There where he once watched the sun rise over Wooden Ball Island to the east.

PART THREE

WOMEN FROM AWAY

3.1

MÉNAGES: PAS DE DEUX

Erbarme dich, erbarme dich.
Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen,
Stell ich mich doch wieder ein
Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*

I: Dramatis Personae

LJ 1

The day Linda Jane drove away on the way to
Manhattan,
Blessings were as cheap and sincere as rain.
I recall occasional calls
(*occasional* in the ancient sense of course),
Multifarious conclusions drawn
From worse. Nothing but the usual:
friendship is simple;
communication is not possible;
insults, expressions of devotion ...

How did he find me?

She was reported to have said.

I'm surprised he can remember me.

I sent her off, *mein irisch Kind*, having packed her car for her, on her summer-long road trip just like in the movies. Home to Kansas, home to see family in Alaska, away from home to Maine for a visit, most of America passed obedient to the genre, to Manhattan (New York of course) where we stayed in Hell's Kitchen with crack-heads lining the sidewalk

and day-old street food soaked in city waste and run-off, to Law School to better oneself, as we described it then, three hundred dollars for the new suit I eased from her shoulders, knowing in weeks or months all would be over.

These women of their twenties,
Skin still holding the flesh in,
Those curious girlish inflections—
Inexperience, the anxieties
Of starting out in life.

I don't recall what we said of emotions,
Or how we spoke of the future.
I don't remember our pet salutations,
Her full name on my lips,
Your full being in my arms.

The best moment with Linda Jane was tossing her the football on the beach one Sunday amid the tourists and tackling her, just as I might have done decades years earlier when I had no idea what the future would bring, and sensing the warmth of her athletic body beneath the sweatshirt I still wear at times today.



We fell into the California-dry sand, the two of us, her laughing, surprised that we could do this without injury. So much without injury.

And I should have told her then.

I should have taken her lovely face into my hands and said:

“In forty years, I will be thinking still
of lying here in the Venice sand with you.”

I will then dream of my hands stroking her, enchanted with her charming naiveté's ... like the time she claims the tornado hit her rented home in Kansas and the three of them, her mother and home-schooled brother hid in the bathroom as the surrounding walls spiraled in on them. Never speaking of the aftermath. Where did they move to? Was this history? Or was this merely something she saw on television? And after that, she claimed, such things, that is to say thunder-storms and tornadoes, aroused her, with the same intensity that they terrify sailors like myself.

One day I was running, and I felt the flu hit.

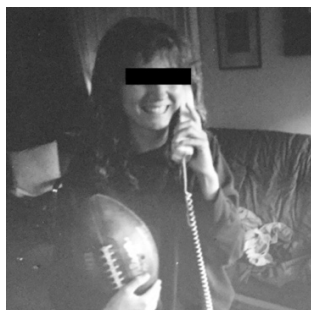
I staggered back home—a mile or so—barely making it, crawled into bed nearly in tears and just then she fell through the doorway and collapsed beside me hardly removing her work clothes and we both sweated and cried until the dark was gone, too weak to reach for the pills on the nightstand, and she, as she, toughed it out at dawn, somehow made it to her car and drove to the office, only to turn around and drive home as I lay there,

blind, still in tears with the pain of it,
and scooped up the laundry—"It smells of sick people
here."

Oh, "physically," is what you ask or say,
or I assume you do. I say:

Best there ever was or could have been. That simple. Better
than those would-be professionals about whom I cared (as
my father might have put it), not a "tinker's damn" whatever
that was.

With her, your bodies simply meshed as one.



LJ 2

I looked at Linda Jane and once in love, I could not judge
how she appeared to anyone. The curl of the lips, perfected
by those Italian girls! Oh yes. Irresistible. Just take their word
for it—or the word of those who always seemed to fall enamored
of them. So what of your sex-mates, I used to say to her.
Who keeps score? So what if we were even? Why, I recall telling
... Andrea it must have been, French girl ... "Sorry. That
sorceress has cast a spell on me. Making me worth shit for all
the rest of you." And I wrote books for her and wrote notes to

her and received long responses in her characteristic Fairbank or Palmer scrawl, and once a post-it, all stored with the old photographs: "We cannot be friends. Please do not write or call." And I would violate that dictum in a year or two and it was as if everything, all of it, were forgotten or as if, as I always say, nothing had happened.

For years I lectured of my faith in her, even when she gave in to or seduced herself the men who fawned on her. Appalled, my dormant auditors, discovering their elders not at all as they expect themselves to be. And I said I didn't give a crap that Linda Jane sighed in the arms of another in the old and unnerving sense *sighed* I mean, and that she likely screamed in passion as loudly as when she kept our scandalized neighbors awake at night or roused them out of their naps at mid-day. "You kids!" I chastised them. "Still seeking your soul-mates." O woe! O whither! "I don't waste time on hypotheticals," I said, but said:

My dearest Linda Jane, or would you have me use my own name of you, and you mine, as we so often did, and hardly grasped our own identities? My dearest Linda Jane, I never doubted you, having never doubted myself, even when you wrestled free to take up with that shithead opportunist and have me discover it through your worst enemy (the only recompense I have), who called me, playing dumb, pretending to know nothing, excepting the salacious gossip targeting the two of you.

You were too obsessed with surfaces
the vision of me with another, our surfaces
as if one, making love with one another,
not love of course, in any of its subsets.

And since you had no notion of “fidelity”
(in the strict sense in which you had been bred)
—all that bourgeois bullshit of family—
but lusted after other men as fiercely
as you lusted after them as a college kid,
you assumed the same of me.

“If only,” I said, pretending to lament, “we both were guilty of
the sluttishness you charge me with!”

Because with you, you see,
Our talk was never feints and parrying.
It was like talking to myself and so
I say, following my lecture notes:

*“Listen to me. This will be on the test. One day you will fall in
love, and you will gaze into that lover’s eyes and it will be like
standing before a mirror and you will think:*

*yes this is it now I can be completely open speak from
the heart all those old clichés of love my God they’re
true in the strongest possible sense there are no
boundaries between me and my loved one and thus no
secrets to be kept and I can say anything ...*

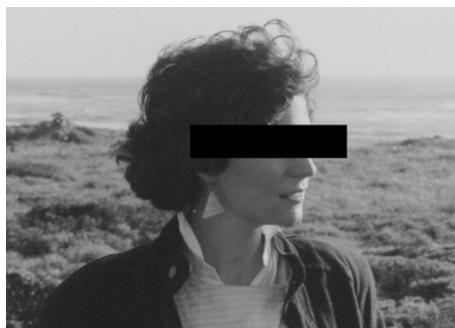
*And I caution you: at that moment, please recall my words to
you, which of course you will think inapplicable: When you feel
that: Don’t do it! Say nothing; do not say anything.”*

And the self-certain young will sit back
shocked at the scandal, just as when I said
I did not care what my dearest Linda Jane had
done or how many lovers my darling Eloise had had

or about those of Linda Jane in Kansas,
Her children raised to college age.
I never once doubted them.

And you, Linda Jane, I will tell you that I know, as others do,
the love of your life is the same man he was mere weeks after
we first met. And one day you will say this to my face.

“And you,” I say,
Speaking again from the lectern,
“What do you know of love?”



II. The Beachfront

“Just look at what you’ve done,” so chides the voice of the artist-Dominatrix. “All this wailing for the exes you yourself abandoned. Your pain derails your memories. No time for narrative; no time for character, time to consider what a shit you’ve been to all of us. Did you think teaching me to read would be enough? That the deadening rhythms of speech would obscure all you’ve failed to do?”

“ ‘Helping her out of her life-vest.’ Nice phrase. Dactylic. Or harder, as above: ‘Roused out of their naps at mid-day.’ All that reading of Homer and Vergil, or maybe it was just Pound and Ashbery, wasn’t for nothing, I guess, though all your ex-lovers as a consequence endure the shackling, as Donne might say, in verse as you endure the shackling in grief.

“Oh yes. You can claim, as others do, that it all started when you foundered carrying on with Linda Jane. Did you think you had no need to compromise? That you could get your way, ‘as you, the youngest, always do,’ the Woman of Today lashed out, when she no longer would admit she was in love with you? So you dispersed her being through all of them, Linda Jane’s that is, and once you did that, the flood-gates of Bad Faith opened up for you, and the words just flowed as if inexhaustible.

“Your Eloise! No need to name her here or single her out. Your way is always the same. You insinuate yourself into the minds of these women, or pretend to, these once-lovers, these characters you never knew or would attempt to know. Just getting your way, that’s all it was. Followed by the same lewd tales you tell of all of them.

“Was it really Carolyn who came to your office dressed like that? Or was it others? And just because she did, or you imagined it, what might she have been thinking? No wonder women complain of the lies men write of them, trying to partake of their consciousness, when all they find is their own puerility.



“Do you remember the time we walked on the beach? A real one. Not the artificial beach on Sebago, formed by the jetty. Not the one so often cited in on-line dating sites (amazing that there’s littoral space left for the rest of us). And I was trying to dress modestly, not flaunting the athletic form I knew drove you to distraction, but you told me later you spent the whole time looking down my shirt. Or was that Linda Jane? and you put your arm over her shoulder, fondling her in public, and finally she determined the only way to make you behave was to give in to it, and within a minute, you lost interest.

“Do you remember tossing me ... must have been a football, then coming at me in full stride tackling me, and it was like the time you were roller-skating with Linda Jane on your first date, another Italian girl!, that type then your favorite, apparently, and you tripped her up, leaving both of you unhurt on the sand with your full weight upon her. ‘Believe me,’ you claim to have said to her, panting with risk, ‘I did *not*

engineer that'. And you doubtless added as you always do 'Although I *would* have had I thought of it'. Like you tell all the women when your dog runs up to them in happiness: 'I swear I did not train him to do that!'



"And you forget that the only time you ran on the beach with Linda Jane was north near San Francisco. Some conference in Stanford, I think it was, where she could get away from her husband without having half the city report her shenanigans back to him. And freed of that, she told tales of her days as a teenager in New Jersey, surrounded by lecherous Italian and Jewish boys and the more you heard, or so you claim, the more you lusted after her.

"So was it really her you loved? Don't you brood about that today? Was it not the way the two of you embraced her wanton past as a sixteen-year-old—those skirts so short she couldn't raise her arms above her shoulder, stripped down to her underwear, so she says, by the guy whose penis she

expected (as the dutiful child of a single-parent household) would be the size of a pencil—that past where, as she herself says, despite the horrors of family life, everyone had fun, acting like irresponsible kids. Whereas for you, there was no fun in the perfect family of your childhood, the one all of us claim to want, the one that taught you to act like adults as soon as possible. And (you say so sadly) sadly, so you did.

“The time you kissed me. Remember that? You came up behind me, one arm around my waist, the other gently turning my face to you, and you said you loved me, and I had no other response than to close my eyes. Trite, I know, but the only way I could acknowledge it. And even recalling that today, you feel yourself relax, deluding yourself into thinking that for once, that time once, you spoke from the heart and all the world you cared about or acknowledged at that moment listened to what you had to say.

“We sat on the breakwater, and the mist soon turned to rain and you pretended to shield me from it as you pulled me close. ‘This is such a bad idea’, I said, as you stroked my face and I pressed my cheek into your palm. Even today, I get heartsick with the thought of it.



“Do you remember the two years we lived here? On the beach? Cooking, and making love like real people? The bread we baked. Those mornings on the boardwalk? The perfect bourgeois life. The photos of us framed in bougainvillea. My fidelity to you beyond reproach despite the men who surrounded us. All that before you sent me (or was it Linda Jane herself?) to New York to Maine to Kansas where all of your old lovers seemed to congregate. And even today you lament: why did I not tell her then, each night then ‘you are the best. You are the best that ever was.’

“Remember when Ron picked up the young stranger while driving through the campus quad? The poor bastard less than a year or two from dementia. It did no good for him to get the story straight as all the self-aggrandizing versions he told got lost in the miasmas of the committee room; within weeks none of what he heard or spoke that day made the slightest sense to him.”

III. The Great Plains of America

1. On the great plains of America, one never drove “to,” you used to say, but only “through.” The avenue to the Rockies it all was, as in the train trips of the 50s to your cousins in Denver, waking and making your way to the dome car for a view of the mountains on the horizon at dawn, all still hours away.

And yet you drove to Joan. Ten years your senior. In the end, you felt like you were nothing as she reached for you the last time, and only acknowledged then that there had been more than a friendship between you. And instead of lying in her arms that night, you drove north, through the grassfires of Oklahoma, and finally to her who would become Linda Jane, still engrossed then in the vapid love notes from her

adoring husband in Los Angeles. Or you drove to A., Linda Jane herself, after she took the job in Topeka, "Whatever you do," her genial landlady warned, Miss Dove so aptly named, her voice rising musically, "don't touch the light while standing in the bathtub." Or to your dark-eyed Norwegian girl, up on the northern plains. "I don't want you to love me," she said, years in the future, or that's what I have her say. "I only want you to father my child for me. Not to father him in any other sense." And I lay with her and I looked into her face and the expression she returned to me she returns to me still.

We threw the ball in the park, trying to look like a couple recreating or exercising or whatever normal people do. I pulled her to me, and the first thing I did was half undress her and she turned her face to me in shock, as no man had ever been so brazen with her. Or she turned her face in shock to me because what would happen if one of her classmates or my colleagues saw me embracing her? Or she turned her face to me just as Joan would turn her face when I sent her the chapter of the book recounting my love for her, and "What is he thinking?" she would ask herself, shaking her head for emphasis. "Does he not concede we live lives other than those of his fictions? Has he written once to my daughters? Does he recall with accuracy the pained conversation outside my old house when I told him of my engagement to the farmer from Salinas? When he drove away for the last time? Only to leave a cryptic note for me, two years later, phatic as the linguists say, he says, at the gas-stop just east of Glasco?"

Do you remember too trying to act like adults out there on the great plains of America? Let's drive to Yankton, I said, Sioux City, or cross into Iowa? You just shook your head, whatever you meant by that, and off we went into the dark and the unknown country roads with hardly a driver on them, and we finally agreed to stop at the first restaurant or diner we might find and sit there like royalty since no one would know who we were, poring over the menu for food I would not understand, and you could not afford. Like real people do. The ones you never notice or hear about. All I recall is looking at you across the table holding the shiny menu: "Everyone knows we are strangers here."



We walked at dusk, along the river in Minneapolis, and the tan you bought from the salon was already fading when I unbuttoned enough of your jacket to warm my hands in your sweater. You lowered your chin barely perceptibly and stared up at me, assuring me you knew all there was to know of this.

On the way through the farmland, we must never once have considered what roles we would play for your former friends and family. I recall you denying, "heatedly," you'd say, their fears and their accusations over the telephone; you then slowly hung up and looked to me in genuine perplexity. "I'm pretending I'm not having a sexual relationship with you," you said, surprised to have discovered this.

We drove through those hills in the late fall, it was, looking for shelter or privacy on these plains and finding that in the reeds of the run-off lake. And as we lay there, now decent but exhausted, we saw the rushes part and a passer-by looked in on us. Expressionless. No ironic smile or excitement. Nor scowl of disapproval. You still blush when I remind you today of this.

We rode back to your house on the motorcycle, and I can sometimes convince myself that I felt your face pressed into my neck.

2. And I asked her, not ... not *her* ... I mean my ... I'm speaking now of ...

"You really don't understand, do you?" she said. "You professors put all this time into your notions of university- or college-hood, thinking you might make a better world for all of us. Those institutions you see as pinnacles of reason and benevolence—they're fantasies. Do you know how students make decisions? Real students, I mean, not those about whom you pontificate so grandly in the committee room. They pay no attention to your schemes and hypotheses. Take me: two institutions to apply to and one asks for one essay and the other asks for two. That's all it took. What was I to do? Compose a second heart-felt summary of extracurriculars just for the chance to matriculate ten miles further to the west? And had I done that (that is, had I acted like the obedient would-be student or citizen of your institutional imaginings), we would never have met and who knows who you would be dreaming of today, and who you might wrongly style 'the best; she is the best that ever was.'



“Do you remember when I left for work and smashed my car up, returning to the apartment at dinner time, asking if you would drive me to the repair shop the next morning, having spent the entire day away from you without asking for your help or support? You were amazed at my self-reliance and never once considered what a shit you must have been such that I wouldn’t think of calling you, not simply as a ‘guy’ who would help me out, but more important as a man who loved me who would do anything for me who would give me a reassuring hug ‘Are you ok? That’s the main thing; that’s all I care about’ and all those things that are easy for us to imagine today but which then, apparently, were beyond your capacity to express. Do you think all the men who held me were as reserved or reticent? Do you think none of them simply gushed: ‘Oh my God, you are the most ...’. Does no man see what you once saw in me? What about your friends and associates? Did not one of them set you straight on me? Like your friend Tess, that beautiful Dutch woman, same name as she

you call the post-person, married to that rival and friend of yours who died last month of the virus. We met when the two of you ran into me on the campus quad just before our first date and she was reported to have said to you: 'That girl likes you, and you better act right now. I know. Women like that do not run long free.'

"And I guess she was right, and it amazed me since I never believed anyone took me seriously about anything and suddenly there's a man admiring me and stroking me—a real one, not some rhetorician in a tweed suit—a man who will one day ... who will one day think ... who will one day take my face into his hands and say to me ..."

3. "I got this apartment with you in mind," she lies, Linda Jane now, the eponymous one, who gave her name to others. "A mile from the Arkansas River, winding grandly through Tulsa, what you in *Dogfish Memory* will call Nebraska. You can jog down there and turn east or west and run as far along the embankment as you can endure being away from me. You can fly here taking the plane with the seat warmed by my husband, and you can listen to me cry out in hysterics about how you don't love me or cannot be faithful to me or don't care enough about the institution of marriage or didn't tell my mother what she needed to hear or reduced me to tears when flirting with my colleague's wife.

"You took the direct flight from Los Angeles; you staggered out into the concourse. 'Don't touch me,' you said, with the melodramatics you always affected. 'This cold. I've been wheezing all day. I don't want you to catch it.' 'I don't care!' I said and we made out like high school kids in front of everyone. And of course after the weekend of this, you flew back

and called: "Are you ok? You didn't get my cold did you? Oh I hope ..." "Of course I did, you idiot," I said. "It's disgusting. I told you: I did the math."

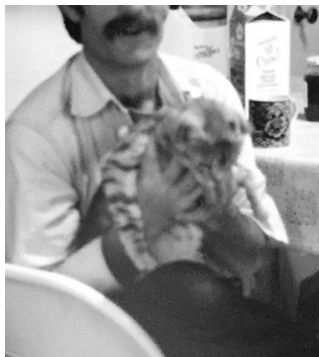
On the great plains of America, Linda Jane takes me to the suburban mall so that I can experience what this country is. No trees left; all the cement-stricken shrubs brought in from Mexico. Like the America she grew up with in New Jersey. At a stoplight, the couple behind us kisses discreetly; we turn to them and take the challenge, opening our mouths wide and do all we can to ravish each other before the light turns. We turn left at the stoplight, our prides swollen with our public indiscretions, half-way to the safety of her rented home.

Or was this when things began to fall apart for us? After I misjudged us as a trans-human entity within which there need be no secrets, and told her consequently and stupidly of the German wife ... of ..., deaf to the admonitory voice I use at the lectern. And on this day or on a later day I balled my fist up in her face and said if she accused me of cuckolding a friend again ... if she laughed at me again for ... I said ... if she did that I said ... My hand dropped and I just gave up and began to weep. It was like being pushed to the brink by P. years later, and slapping the chair edge in frustration and I swear, as she recalled the past blows to her face given her by all those others, her mouth split into its famous grin.



In time, Linda Jane becomes her photographs—all I have left of her. All the letters, even the lascivious tapes we made for each other, likely blended into the detritus of a closet or garage or simply gone like so much I once stored there. Perhaps I was angry enough to trash everything out of spite, although now, I am uncertain whether I struck out at her in this absurd and painful way or, with quiet calculation, packed the old mnemonic tapes away, with the respect undue to any material thing. When She who Would Not Wait for Me left, never to return to the apartment, I tried to rid the place of all signs of her, and wasted months failing to accomplish anything.

You took care of the cat you loved before I gave it up for adoption maybe to be torn apart by pit bulls when I moved to Los Angeles for the summer. You should have known I was never coming back for him.



*Where are the tokens of love you professed for me?
Where are the books we shared?*

*Where are the trips to museums, and was it not me who
gave you your ironic love for Fragonard?
Where the flights to New Jersey to visit my cousins?
Where were the cigarettes rolled up in our shirtsleeves?"*

Interlude: Swimming on Sebago

*We stripped off our clothes and left them in disarray on the
dock or on the bank along the Piscataqua and when you ease
into inland water in summer, there is no shock or discomfort.
Like finding your way back through aeons of evolution, I joked,
admiring the too-human body next to me.*

*All surfaces as I watched her. The surface of the water. The
refracted surfaces of her flesh. Our histories dispersed in chaos.
No objection possible. I reached for her and there was nothing
but the lake water between us.*

*Do you remember the morning we swam to the edge of the
breakwater, with our hips barely breaking the surface? So un-
like the buoyant salt of the ocean. You could drink the water
from the cup you always kept on the landing. I swam up next to
you and felt the mild shock of the currents.*

*You could bury your face in the water, as your eyes sting
in protest.*

*You could hold your breath, unable to shake the memory
of the deaths of your loved ones.*

*You could shake your head free of that and imagine a life
together.*



Or was it Greenwood Pond, Rangeley or Moosehead? The Eastern Branch of the Kennebec, where all of you watched in indifference as the current, its strength poorly judged, took me seaward? We smoked half the drugs you brought, and “Don’t worry,” you said. “Just show the same moderation you witness here in me: I like to maintain my ability to read.” And I knew then I would sleep without issue and in the morning we would have nothing to speak of.

And I remember paddling out into the inlets carved into the rush, turning and seeing you in the trailing wake. And I remember holding you near the dock as I swam in the drug haze, thinking of swimming in the lake with you.

IV. Detasseling

It didn’t seem like much—and wasn’t!—flying out there to the Great Plains of America, seeking work at a college by the run-off lake where they raised the animals, perhaps the same lake where my dark-eyed Norwegian girl would lead me into the protecting reeds two years into the future. Clothes pressed for the interview, the rental car, the odor of motel disinfectant in every room you went. The fields around

you idle in sun, awaiting the harvest. And all you learned, besides the names of realtors hawking their mobile homes, was that in order to fit in with your academic colleagues, you should consider detasseling corn in the summer.

Detasseling. They asked you that? It's what keeps kids in spending money, keeps them busy for a few weeks in the summer. You don't expect to be working in a fishing boat out there, do you? And who wants to spend months behind a counter at Rite Aid—no better than pounding and sanding shoes in the factory queue, like you used to do the summer you fell prey to alcohol. Imagine what would have happened had you not given up on that.

There would have been no trips to the museum.

There would have been no swimming on Sebago. Corn requires detasseling just before maturity, as ... But you don't need to know the botany of it any more than you need to know hydrologic cycles in order to sail, the history of typography just to read what I've written here. You walk down the rows, lopping off the genitals of the male corn, like Kronos did to Saturn, I guess, only you won't have to wolf down a stone in place of your son as he did, nor have to vomit out all those children stored up in your gut, and you know, if he had just kept chaste an aeon or two none of this might have happened and we would still be living under his reign today.

This is mostly about production: got to keep the females focused on fruit. But I suppose it also involves controlling one's sex life: hybrids, cross-fertilization, and purity of stock. You can't let Corn Fred get it on with Corn Felicity or God forbid his own kin (or was that the point?)

or maybe with anyone at all. And perhaps the telos of the whole operation is patenting the genes so the rest of us empty our savings on seed catalogues. Don't ask me for the technical details of it: those are known only to the chemists at Monsanto. To flip the pages of the catalogue, we use the hands and palms calloused down to the bone by our summer work as teenagers.

And you spent the afternoon in interviews wondering how they found you or you them. And when you were done with what passed for dinner—gizzards and sides, no doubt—and you had more or less botched it and said the least articulate and least appropriate things possible whenever you chanced to speak, inasmuch as at 8:30 “It was late” as it always seems to be out on the Great Plains, they dropped you off at the motel room, never to contact you again, except by mail. And there was a horrific crash of thunder, and at that instant, you walked Alice-like straight through a plate glass door. You brushed off its fragments, in light from the lightning, expecting to faint from the blood loss, relieved that you had only slightly cut your knee, destroying the only dress-up slacks you owned, which you would patch and wear another year or more. And you then, you ... what happened? ... you made certain movements, unpurposed then but motivated now, that took you, dripping with glass, to the door of another applicant, brought in for a different position. Like you, then, she was, without the fresh scar from the accident. Yet how did you yourself learn or deduce that she was not simply a runaway or purse salesperson? Or had she come up to you in adult concern as you stood in childish shock amid the glass shards?

“What is all this costing them, I wonder”; so I said when the storm eased, or she said perhaps, an attempt at wit, with a gesture as embarrassing to recall as the words themselves. Maybe the hiring committee runs out of money and can’t bring in competitors, the best chance we have, speaking for both of us—of working here, speaking now officially—or the only one. “Or by contrast, we,” one joked clumsily in return, “will be the ones running out of money and have to take a job here.” Physical fitness, I think her field was, but that seems too convenient for the truth.

She is propped on the bed but I am seeing her as if in the view finder. And I assume there must have been two beds there facing a TV screen, and it’s not impossible that we watched some clipped program on cable. And I could see suddenly where all this would lead—not the experience, but the chance to tell of it—“Debauched by a total stranger in the motel room!” Myself, I mean.

“Well? What exactly was their pitch to you?”

“It was what I imagined,” she said. “And that not in a good sense. First there was a workload like you would find in middle school—five days a week, commitments on weekends—but nothing seemed defined for me. I would spend the day in the gym, I guess, watching the men struggle uneasily with their jock-straps, while I battled those persistent myths about menstruation firmly held by mid-west Christians and college kids, myths dispelled on the coasts, both east and west, when you and I were in middle school. And is this why? I wondered. Is this why I woke up at 5:30 for years, dragging my sorry but rock-hard ass over to the gym to the exercise mats, the weight room, the varnished surfaces of the court floor, smelling of sweat for the rest of the day and falling asleep in the

classroom? As if 'Oh I lettered three years in field hockey!' is going to put me on a corporate board, or land me a job in the academy where I have four months off in the summer and all my vacations paid. That cushy future you aspire to but have no chance of finding here. ..."

I don't know I don't know. I have no idea how the genetics works on this. And yes I spent years in ag school, but the pollination of plant-life on industrial scale—all that meant nothing to the hippies we were then! Would you rather study Malthusian rates of population growth, or roll up your sleeves, or toss your shirt away entirely, and get right down to it with your life-partner? Like how we slathered on the bottom paint of the hulls in the Freeport marina, with never a thought of the open sea.

"They didn't really test or question me. Wouldn't it have been appropriate to haul me out to the gym, stuff me into a sports bra, and demand to see my floor exercise? Spike a volleyball or dribble up to half court? Like I suppose they asked you, did they not: 'How many volumes in the last novel of Dickens?' 'What's the deal with all those characters named Roderigo in Shakespeare?'"

We conceded there would be no celebrants raising us to their shoulders to bear as victory trophies through the campus quad.

There would be no yellow ribbons marking our return to our home states.

"So all of this is pure theatre—our futures as colleagues, I mean, which we will never be—those futures more real in the fictioning than they will ever become in life. The only

world, then, like Donne's, no?, the two of us sharing this motel space, reeking of disinfectant, and you know," I added, lowering my voice to provide the precise shade of irony, "in the judgment formed in the committee room, we were meant to be here." I was unsure whether her answering smile lent this a sense better than the banalities even I had yet to formulate.

A beauty? Well, fit, I'm sure. I ... Listen to me stammer even now, my course untrimmed by regret! All those unrealized futures having passed, I could not recognize her as she is today or was even then. And what difference would a traffic-stopping cut to her shirt have made to anyone? Or had she been just "plain as day," my wife perhaps, or "no looker," as Frank would say? Like Linda Jane swearing she made herself as homely as possible in two circumstances: (1) at the gym, to inspire her to work harder and never risk complacency, or (2) preparing for a day with me, testing me in ways I always won. And "Hey!" she cried out to me, raising herself to her elbows. "That was not how I planned things! This is not how this was supposed to go." "Why not?" I said, burying my face in her neck. Nothing is out of reach in the stagnant air out there in the great plains of America.

"Oh yes. It was different ten years ago," she continued. "I had a bus. A VW of course. We painted it in outlandish colors and you could do that because I was in Vermont and all that anyone did in those days if they saw paisley sideboards or peace signs was to shake their head and go back to doing whatever it is you do there ..."

"Snow forts and mittens. Swinging on birches ..."

"So we drove, I forget where. Across the country it was, or maybe just to Albany or Rochester, and at a gas station Fred gets out and before I stop him (upstate New York, you

know, no different then), good Lord! he is practicing tai-chi moves at the gas pump and within five minutes the sheriff arrives to help the outraged owner put a stop to this. But it's basically Mayberry, and the sheriff tells us, in a quiet aside, we're fine, he just is duty-bound to answer all calls and complaints, and we hear the owner—Bill, we were told—call out as he leaves 'Are you going to let them get away with it?'

"And then the bus broke down somewhere and I went immediately into the girly crying jag routine for the tow truck, because that was the best way to get out of this fix. Sometimes you simply have to do what must be done ..."

And somehow the conversation got past the small-talk we should have saved for the grand cocktail hours of our future.

"And what was ..."

"What?"

"The best. You said. What was the best ..."

"Oh that. It was a high school reunion, and this guy I had known years earlier said he was into tantric sex ..."

"I have always felt the most appropriate punishment for extolling tantric sex is tantric sex."

"Ha! You've obviously told that joke before. And equally obviously, you're a guy!"

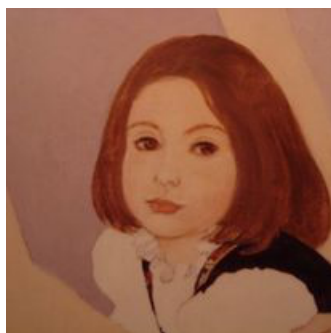
"I have a feeling you've ... But anyway ..."

"So he had a hotel room for the reunion and off we went the second night while the rest of our classmates got drunk and danced to music popular a decade past their graduation, and I'll spare you the details, so you can just imagine them, which I'm sure you can do as well as I can concoct them for you, but it was the best sex I ever had."

"You've told this ..."

“Of course I have. A number of times. Last year. I was at a party. And someone there, who ended up teaching yoga in Israel, announces we will have a story-telling contest and the rules are simply that the stories must be true. And my physicist friend you may one day fall in love with told of shelf-reading in the basement of City Lights Books in San Francisco, noticing a pink-clad pedophile lurking in the stacks and, all 100 pounds of her, hauling the perv out onto the streets by his package, and another guy told of a blind date with a ‘comedienne’ that went south in peculiar ways, so he went home and looked her up on the internet and turns out she specializes in making porno you-tube videos with midgets. Then some guy went on about having a boat crush his unbraked car when it rolled into the jackstands in the boatyard and that was the same day his live-in girlfriend left him and an old flame fled the apartment after an hour dead-sick of his lamenting and all that set the bar pretty high so I told that story of the bus and tantric sex and I can assure you I embellished it as much as possible so as not to be laughed out of the story-room!

“And then my sister died. And that was the day I looked at that bus with the paisley painted exterior and decided that driving around in it, half-wasted from drugs, was no longer possible. And that’s when I became who I am today. Did I show you this?”



“That’s astonishing ... Were you ten in that picture?”

“My mother painted it.”

“That is as alluring a face as I have ever seen. And it’s exactly the same in the picture as in life some fifteen years into the future.”

“Another thing you’ve said before. Easy enough to determine when your lines are paced to perfection, or on their way to that, just as in the story-contest when the guy chanted lines you could almost scan as poetry: ‘And I will turn to my darling Eloise and I will say to her ...’ That is something he had recited many many times before.

“I loved that bus, and hated everything in life that made me give up on it. And that’s what unnerved me about all this. I mean where we are today. Getting into a soul-less car at the rental office, not one painted with paisley, driving through all these equally soul-less cornfields. Pure machinery, hardly what you would stuff old hippies in. And then, to have nothing to show for it all—who wants to be alone out here on the Great Plains of America, hoping one day to be invited for desert and have everyone suggest that I get a cat for company ...”

And so it went like that.

"I've never known a dog to interfere with love-making," she said or was that me? "And I've known ... quite a few dogs. ... If you follow me."

"Nor I. And to your second point, I haven't known nearly as many dogs as I would like."

"I had one look at us once."

"Ok. That's unsettling. I mean to hear you tell of it."

"My partner liked it. Who knows what the dog thought."

"Likely about food ..."

Drink? Do you ...

I ... that is ...

"Well, I guess so, yes. But the problem with recreational sex is that it's very rarely 'recreational' and all too often not 'sex'."

"You've made this joke before?"

"Of course."

...

Too bad that did not come to be. For this would not end as so many others did. Not with the protagonist flailing at the unfeeling earth in the back lot, or trapped in the stale air of the *sous-sol* in Montparnasse, the walls oiled as if to soak up the scattered light rays of Paris. This would not end in a labored call to the States or to the ex who would not use your own name of you. It would not end with a stinging rebuke in the committee room.

"Please, George. Tell me about detasseling!"

So we lay there without thinking or consequence, in the magical motel room of a town we would never return to. And one day she lies back, in semi-retirement herself and with the kids all gone and the husband long dead and she remembers

or thinks of debauching me in Buena Vista, Iowa; August, 1979.

V: Finale

“Oh for God’s sake, no. I can’t stroll around your neighborhood in this, as they say, the largest town in Iowa on the Pacific coast. I know walking off the holiday meal in a family group is the civil thing to do and part of the tribute to the holiday. But you aren’t the only people I know in this city. Some as close as two blocks east. Oh I checked. The address, her address, I mean, and I suppose it’s a good thing I did that years ago (or maybe a bad thing!), before the White Pages went dark on us. I’d say I found her inadvertently, but we can’t all discover momentous things by accident, like monks in their rudderless currachs, or Columbus looking for India (can we still speak of him today? I mean apart from conversations with his countrymen?). No, don’t worry. It’s not that I care or ever cared where my ex-lovers are ... I’m sorry; lies should sound less shallow. Of course I do. But never mind. The point is, I am telling you she lives within a hue and cry of alarm and if she sees me on the streets she will call the cops and file a restraining order.”

“Well, you’re exaggerating...”

“Maybe. I’m not so sure. Wild black hair. I guess I have a thing for that. Such hair, I mean. Doubtless dyed by now. I don’t know the words used by beauticians. ‘Shaggy and combed out’ is what Dante says. As for her ... Well, I’ll just repeat what her once ten-year-old sister was reported to have said of her: ‘You have such a good figure.’ Figure indeed! No one uses that word today, but you can now imagine the possible referent based on the perception of a ten-year-old as

reported by a self-involved Italian girl. Thin lips, the characteristic nose of the Neapolitans. That—maybe all of it—no doubt applies to thousands of women within a mile of us today, their names derived from doves or wheat. Not a jaw-dropping beauty like yourself. Eyes never quite meet yours, but even as I imagine the duplicitous smile right now, my heart feels that never quite forgotten pang ‘My God, there it is again.’



“Now interestingly enough, her huckster-now-consort, the shit-head geek she left me for, believed he had a way with eccentrics, you know, the kind who turn into stalkers and murderers. He was one with them, in some sense. Or so he thought. And maybe he was—being a predator himself. So one day some crazy guy off the streets walked into the office, claiming he wanted to read Shakespeare and learn literary criticism. You know the type. And the staff just shuddered and turned away, hoping he would vanish, but no, her future consort, still a year from his degree, pretending to be a man of the people, heard the guy and began to talk with him. And within minutes, they set up a schedule of assignments, playing professor/student, you see, and he would give the guy a

PMLA article to read, and a week later they would meet and the guy would gush “Brilliant! Brilliant!” so effusively that it took his idiot mentor weeks to figure out the poor bastard was dyslexic and couldn’t read so much as a paragraph, and why he kept the pretense up so long is quite beyond me, but maybe he was used to keeping up pretenses in both his academic and his social life. You know, like his innocence itself, victim of the blind god ... It pains even to think it.

“And you know what? It serves him right, now three decades with a woman who doesn’t love him worth a shit, and dreams guiltily of me.”

“Maybe ...”

“Thinking that is what I think faith is to me.”

“Faith is more than that.”

“For others, maybe. You would think I would have outgrown these distant loves and jealousies, but all this is as close to me today as it was three decades ago, a decade before I met you. I remember a woman I hardly knew once telling stories of tantric sex at a party, and among my usual rejoinders was one I left unsaid, that with my Linda Jane, there was no need of skills like that! *Capisce?*”

“I know. We were speaking earlier of ...”

“Oh yes. Go on the college website to see her accolades. But then, you know these community college students. And doubtless one of those veterans or simply crazy illiterates mad to read Shakespeare who wander the hallways fell in love with her and stalked her and eventually all her paranoid fantasies were indistinguishable from the truth. And that is why it is now no longer possible for me to contact her.”

“I’m not speaking of that.”

“I know.”

"It was here. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember."

"We were standing on my doorstep."

"Yes. Just the two of us."

"We were faced toward the roadway."

"I know. I will never forget it."

"You said ..."

"I said I loved you. You said ..."

"I said 'You don't have to say that.'"

"I said, or thought this at the time, 'If I had had to say it, it would have meant nothing,'"

She stares through the window into the distance and I have no idea what is troubling her. I pull her to me and she offers no resistance. Running on the beach with her to keep her perfect form in shape. My arm around her on the breakwater. Stroking her in the concert-hall or on the grand lawns of Virginia. She lay back on her elbows and listened to tales of porn-stars and City Lights bookstore. We sit on the porch after our tennis match and face away then toward the Kansas sunset. She leans forward. "This is how we dress for the winter," she explains to me; layer after layer glazing the flesh tones. There are words for this. For the water on Sebago, the wheat fields of Nebraska.

3.2

PSYCHO-CHIC

I can only tell you that my surroundings are *me*. Everything is me, because I have rejected all conventions, the opinion of the world, all its laws. I am not obliged, as you and Jeanne are, to play a social role.

Anais Nin, *Diary*, vol. 1.

I. Dance Class

“Erotic dancing,” I’ve heard it called. But no one called it that in what I’ll call The Industry, where nothing said had any literal sense, like Genêt says of theatres and whorehouses. “Exotic” works better, like my very being—tall, Asian, with legs “that go forever,” as they say. And I use that whether in stories I tell of it or the poems I write of it; and it doesn’t really matter whether I’m describing this to a stranger or some man who is mad to have sex with me or to my aunt coming from the church where my father has been sermoning. I tell my students too, shocked that I speak of it, a woman only a half-decade older than they are. They hear what they want to hear in the adjective. They see what they want to see in the instructor’s form. That oppressive gaze we learned about in grad school.



That's where we'll begin because that's where my life begins, adult life, I mean, the only life J. knows about, the life of a professional—and by that, I mean the life where I was at least capable of self-sufficiency. Teaching. Dancing. Or 'dancing,' if you will, in scare quotes. Even selling drugs, although I never made a dime doing that. Potential. That's what I had in those days. I could have done anything and I guess in some sense I succeeded. I cajoled the doctor into certifying me as schizophrenic, making me eligible for state disability, and even that cost me nothing. No way I would pay money for hours with a psychiatrist I could just lure to my couch in five minutes, and once I eased my hips into him I knew he would attest to anything.

Yet after a glass of wine, even I can get the words wrong, and I suppose when I was hired we spoke of dancing not as poets do (a metaphor, don't you see?) but as clients of lawyers who advised us not to speak directly of anything. That's why most of my Berkeley friends went to Law School, so they could dispute everything their rivals swear on a Bible is the God's own truth, even though you could learn such things a

lot easier in a college English class or graduate seminar. And the only difference between the courses I took at Berkeley and those I had in high school was that high school teachers occasionally listened to you and sent you on to college for what they thought would be more of it, although for professors at Berkeley, listening in silence as a student speaks?—that never occurs to them, so mesmerized are they by the headiness of the cerebral drugs served up in the seminars of their youth. I know. I've been one of them, standing before the class and free-associating like the poets do, and be sure you don't stop for a student to get in a word just keep going and have them listen to the rhythms of your speech. Like the characters of Proust say or are said to say as J. himself has said.

Because the profession, any profession, is exactly that: professing/ Not telling the truth. To profess, you see, not to *be* in any sense. And that's all you do, profess, and that's how the money you need to live comes in. Whether counting up your royalties or working your butt off for it or having your family or the state give it to you or maybe even someone who is still reeling from having fucked your brains out (so he thinks!). Ha! Like the time I invited J. to lunch and after taking him to somewhere as fancy as he'd feel comfortable in, "Oh J., could you pay for this? I have ..." And it was like the time I e-mailed him in a panic when the drugs ran out: "I need \$100. Can you come over? It's a perfect time, hubby off to teach his night class." And if he hadn't been out of town, who knows where we both would have ended up? And who knows whether he would ever have gotten it again for free?

So I went to what I guess was an office, or the strip club next to the office. And I had been invited there or sent there, I think, by ... no. That's not correct, although it would make

perfect sense if true. I had been taken there by some rich guy to see some other rich guy in business with one of my family's friends; and now we're sitting on some sticky vinyl bench with drinks, and all I could hear as I watched the girl in the off-light was the imagined voice of J., my "mentor" I'll call him, when he showed me the photo of his once girl-friend a few weeks earlier and "Wouldn't you like to hop into the sack with that?" he said, and the way he said it? There was no disrespect. He said this because he loved her and didn't care what others thought or the fact that he had "objectified" her, as we were taught to say. He didn't give a shit about that, he said.

"You know, ..." And I am hearing him go on, even as the guy in the bad suit stinking of cologne is sliding or sidling up next to me glancing at the dancer then at me and in my mind I hear J. going on "It was a year or two after she had left me or we had just given up and determined to be 'friends'— God! ... Don't get me started. You know how that goes. Anyway, I wanted a threesome with her and M., the only difficulty being that she would no longer sleep with me, M. never had, and neither had ever expressed the slightest sexual interest in the other." That's the story I heard in my head as a pile of twenties took shape and rose high on the desktop next to my drink.

And I get that confused with the other story J. told me once, not so amusing as the first. A month after she was gone ... Eloise it was ... anyway, the gist is that after their relationship fell apart as it always did, she, his Eloise I mean, finally went to the gun store and bought a handgun, left a note for the mailman, and blew her head off in her living room, having practiced with the first round just to ensure that the resistance of the trigger wouldn't somehow affect her aim and leave her an invalid instead of a memory.

Now that's not the story, just the background.

So for months, the poor guy would talk of nothing else, even though suffering through the pain of P. leaving him—another Asian girl, like me, you see! But no Asian girl has the ass I have! And she, P. that is, was so naïve he had to teach her even the most basic things—who knows, some of which may have come from me or maybe from the girl in Brittany! Now where was I? Oh yes. Anyway, he has a friend and wife for dinner, and at some point the subject of Eloise, his darling Eloise comes up and he pulls out one of the many photos he has of her. This one just her face—the naked body having been cropped away in Photoshop, just as in all my public photos, which I always tease J. with by sending him the full-frontal originals. And as he is doing this, he gives a shortened version of the shortened history above—Love of his Life, he says, who died (because of him?) two months ago. “She was beautiful. Hot,” he gushes. I’m embarrassed to quote it. And “Let me see,” his friend’s wife snarls, angrily reaching for the photograph.



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The last trace of the lovely Eloise, naked in the shower, but only her face here visible. She tosses the photo down on the table, not even making a show of reverence, and snaps: "I'm hotter than that." Still warm in the grave, and she says that!

All this is going through my head as the old guy begins to put his weight on me and it will be stroking my neck and feeling me up next and I am choking on the bad cologne, concentrating on the stories running through my head so that I don't need to waste any psychic energy trying to determine what is happening in the garish vinyl of the strip club.

Because I knew then the job would be pretty much what I was experiencing right there—abstracting myself from my body and very being, alienation as we learned in school, or something Heidegger says, I think; they taught us at Berkeley—it doesn't matter what. It's just that when life is unbearably dull or annoying, you need a way out of it, and dancing on that stage with a bunch of rich old guys fondling their wallets fixed on my every move even though I know nothing of dance, I could just get so high it wouldn't matter what you called what I was doing up there. For when you're high like that, none of what goes on around you is part of your real life—going to the grocery store, say, or writing poems in your diary.

And now I feel his hand on my thigh. No interest in my chest—likes those large-breasted girls, I guess. And through all the haze of that, J.'s stories chase each other as in some grand fugue like the time we were lying there and he was beside himself with excitement and I kept placing my fingers on his lips and saying "You can kiss me. But you have to listen to a poem first," and I swear he would have listened to the *Tale of Genji*, half of *Anna Karenina*, or my entire poetic oeuvre

which I could barely create fast enough to keep ahead of him, and finally this gentle reverie is broken as the old guy suddenly stands up and adjusts his pants a bit too ostentatiously; he holds out his hand for me, absurdly chivalrous, and leads me then to the office and I suppose I am walking but rather than sensing my legs move, all I feel are the poorly-lit walls and sordid faces gliding past me until I am standing before the manager, a friend of his, he claims, but more likely someone someone else has paid for I suspect, and in order to have gone through the various offers and counter-offers and negotiations I must have been so high I hardly knew what was happening, and the next thing I know, I'm making a living, or living one.

And I don't need to share all the details with you; even my future employers made only the most oblique allusions to how things work. They just turned me over to Madame Li, old but kindly, somewhat less discreet than they had been, and pretty soon all was spelled out for me. How you have an appointment with a particular client who pays extra to have you dance for him and drink with him and how you negotiate whatever he's willing to pony up for you, no one ever saying quite the truth. And I just nodded, because by the time your client takes a fancy to you, as the old novelists would say, you don't need any special skills, although everyone, it seems, graciously consents to help with your training. And this went on for a year or so; the money was great, even though most of it went to my boss or up my nose, and I swear if the drugs I took had not almost completely obliterated my sense of things, I would be dancing for those clients still.

She treated me well, you know. Even the days I missed, or staggered in so weak I couldn't dance at all and some days

she would just help me into my costume, as it was known, basically nude, and set me down next to my “date,” or “mark” or whatever you want to call him, who didn’t give a crap if I could articulate a single sentence, since my tongue was hardly created by God to be mellifluous in any but a metaphoric sense and I think if I had died right on the spot he would have continued until my body cooled to room temperature.

II. The Artist Loft

I used to live in a loft on Spring Street in downtown LA, an area washed clean, maybe a year or two after I left, in a wave of bourgeois artists and gay couples with small dogs. There was a side lot to park in, and I told J. to pretend to be my “boss,” since that was likely the only work relationship the lot-attendant would understand, and parking would then be free as all he had to do was remind the guy I was the one on the fourth floor who flashed him whenever her friends needed a parking space, and I guess J. didn’t trust me enough to try it, or didn’t want to deal with the horny lot attendant describing what he saw of me, but just waited until street parking opened up at 6.

It was an artist’s loft, or like a Hollywood set of one. And maybe years earlier ... I’ll call him John as it was so long ago I can’t keep the names straight ... anyway, John the owner had done silkscreens although I don’t remember seeing any of the equipment there. Just a large open space, inherited from his family, maybe an old table with the uneven legs shimmed up. And he never really worked or painted much but he would sometimes slide out a large sketchpad from a pile of them and I would pose nude for him, and thus that wonderful sketch of

me in conté or carré sticks, easily identifiable, though my face is turned away.

Along the wall facing the street were three doors and one was for my room, where he tacked up the drawing he had made of me, and the one next to me was for some teenage runaway he had met a month ago with rose-colored lips, and you know she would be posing for a portrait soon and probably a lot more than that when the rent came due. She had been bussing or hitchhiking south to Los Angeles from probably Oregon or someplace like that and had met a guy, maybe a minor like herself, and they had wandered away from the bus station and I guess John had an eye for kids like that hanging out around Union Station among broken glass and the tents of the homeless and within a day or two they were installed in the loft right next to me, and when J. met them he could barely hold his laughter in, because it reminded him of the way things were when he was in his twenties and we all had dinner with J. beside himself trying to cop a feel from me, so we all got high and went up to the rooftop—it was like living in a dream world—New York City in the 60s, J. said! But it was downtown Los Angeles and when you looked out over the city and the lights from other buildings there, you knew you were looking not at artists doing their life-work but a bunch of immigrant slaves in illegal sweatshops. And J. was behind me and pulled my hips into him right in front of everyone and I could feel him wanting me, just as always.

And then John got into a speed monologue about the Clippers or Lakers players he knew and who had bought drugs from him, or some passage out of a philosophy book he had had taught to him 30 years ago, and J., I guess, had only one thing on his mind and somehow realized cutting this guy

short or correcting his views or pronunciation of Hegel and Heidegger would have doomed any chance he had of getting my shirt off in the sideroom. Then John looked at me because someone had mentioned ‘position’, and out of the blue he leers at me saying how I had mastered the most important one, and as if to shut him up, I just jumped right into his arms as J. looked on in envy. And that was a year before the summer when I took off with my coke-head lover to New York, and finally called him in Maine and “Oh J.,” I said, all breathy and seductive, “let me come up there. I’m so tired of New York. Exhausted. You know. All the sex. The drugs. The alcohol.”

“Sounds pretty damn good to me!” everyone he told of this would say. But he stayed calm and pretended this was simple banter: “Take the bus straight through. I assure you, we have none of that stuff here in Maine.”

And that led to our sailing trips, or day-jaunts I guess they were. He tried to show me how to run the boat, but frankly I wasn’t interested. I just wanted to bare my shoulders and sit on the bow securing myself on the pulpit in the July sun, and I could feel him settle the boat onto its course and crawl up to me—one hand for yourself, one hand on the boat, or whatever the dictum was—and he didn’t even turn my face to him but kissed my neck and to this day, he tells me, every time he passes that island, or steers through the channel marked by the red spindle to the port side, he thinks of sailing through that passage with me.

I walked down the ramp and opened my shirt for the dock attendants, and J. says that for the rest of the summer, everyone at the marina treated him with respect and called him by his surname.

III. Family Life

It was after dinner the second or third day I was there and I don't remember what he served me. Something he was proud of, sourdough bread, home-made pasta, but all I could think of was that I hadn't been high in two days and there was a limit to how much of this I could stand, even though I claimed Maine was the perfect antidote to the dissolute life I had been leading that summer in New York. And I asked him for a back-rub, using the shortened form of his name I never heard anyone use but me. Soft and sighing, they call it. Like meaning it. "J.," I said. Predictably he worked his way from my shoulder blades down my back and when he held my hips I let him know of course this was sexual and I thought the poor guy was going to explode, and I tried to be coy: "Oh no. I just can't," I said, and I have no idea where that phrase came from, having never uttered it in my life. "I have to keep some form of virtue after all those weeks in New York." "Well, I'm not keeping mine," he cried out, burying his face in my neck. And a day or two later, I finally got off the bus at Port Authority and I took a good look at myself, and my—I'll call it a dress although it barely came half-way down my thighs and in some light you could see right through it—I realized my dress was on inside-out and had been for the eight hours or so I'd spent on the bus and I hadn't noticed a thing when I threw it on all in a rush, nothing under it, and he's somehow recovered enough to say "We need to go if you want to catch that bus," and I know when our friend A. saw him two years later he finally just asked straight up: "Did you have sex with that woman?" You know. Like Clinton. And damn, like his then girlfriend asked as well. "Well,..." and I assume there was

some hesitancy there. "It depends on what you mean by 'sex'." And as I understand it, the conversation did not proceed far beyond that because who really wants to know?

Poor guy. J.'s musician friend A., I'm speaking of. He could never understand how I ended up married to my husband, but J. himself couldn't understand why he couldn't understand that. Wasn't it obvious? The fact is, you can pretty much get any man you want if you just keep the conversation going, as it were. As when J. showed me the island way out in the Atlantic which the adoring husband of Edna St Vincent Millay had bought for her and where so many histories converged, and for a while, every time I wrote him I would say things like "Oh J., sometimes I think I should just marry you and we could live on that island forever" like let him think he too has the power of the newspaper magnate or businessman or whoever it was that supported Millay or, say, Anaïs Nin all those decades, and if he would just do that for me, he would have all the sex he wanted (at least when I'm around), and he would squire me around in New York or Los Angeles, and it would likely be years before he finally understood that all I cared about was my art, however I defined it that day, or money and the drugs I could exchange it for, and if you have to screw a guy now and then to live as you want to live then that's what you do: commit to it, if you follow me.

Maybe two years after that I had my child and if I hadn't been still a little crazy and into drugs a bit more than I should have been, that might have been the most important moment of my life, as it is described by every Mom I've ever met. "Oh the happiest day of my life the happiest day of my life," they all gush, and they must have a thing for pain or it's just b.s. because all they really like is the gas that keeps you from

feeling anything or maybe they just never experienced that orgasmic rush that makes all other pleasures trivial.

And for a year or maybe two I worked like a dog to get my body back to what it was. Flat and hard, straight from my shoulders to my waist, and I sent J. the photos that proved that there were no stretch marks and my boobs hadn't turned to mush and the two of us I mean me and my daughter went over to his apartment for lunch, and he whispered about the most lascivious thing I have ever imagined—something my kid would have had no chance of understanding even had he acted the whole thing out right there in his living room.



Then there was the time I was coming over and “Bring some of that plant material,” he said, thinking I think of the weed I had smoked a month earlier when he fashioned the bong for me out of the toilet-paper roll. So I show up with a cactus branch or shoot or whatever you call it and just boil it up, I tell him, and ... but before I could finish he interrupts me and cries out, “Jesus Christ, that thing is as big as my thigh I said I wanted to get high not freaking hallucinate!” And then he waited for my daughter to turn away and he leaned over me and stroked my hips following the curve that broke into

my thigh and his voice dropped that half-octave it often did, but I hardly heard him. I was already high and the peak got more intense as we were having lunch at the coffee shop and my daughter was drenched in pee and I couldn't do shit about changing her and you know kids are so used to that they hardly notice I guess it's like a dog that would be happy to mark every corner of your house and roll in it except finally realizing that there are more treats and love to be had by getting house-broken.

But it never worked; I mean for him. For J., I mean. Or rather, I pretended that nothing worked. And I would be talking about how my husband gave me a vibrator and how I wanted to learn how to ejaculate again like before I had the kid and things like that, and when that had the predictable effect on him: "I'm a married woman!" I would snap all huffy and indignant although the only time I really ever said no to him was that first time on his couch in Pasadena. And he didn't care. Not about anything. Not about getting his way and not about how sordid the whole thing was, cuckolding the husband of a crazy woman. For what was a spouse compared to the entourage of lovers I had had in the past, not one of whom affected or even knew how badly he wanted me?

So one day I was completely whacked out and that was the day Social Services arrived for an interview and they saw me and they saw my young child—had I mentioned that?—I guess I had—oh yes, in the coffee shop with J. when she peed all over herself and I was too wasted to do a thing about it. Right. Of course. Well, they arrived and I was in no condition to put a good face on things or even respond coherently, and maybe I tried to call J. or someone else thinking that \$100 would get me out of this fix and the next thing I knew, it was

three months in rehab by court order and I guess I was lucky to get my daughter back after that, even if it was only a few years before we went through the whole thing again.

IV. Four Variations

1. I could have sworn my husband threatened my uncle with a gun and I did swear that to anyone who would listen and stuck to that story whenever I was asked even though the details were getting murkier and I found myself living out of cars or the bedrooms of men I never knew and one time even three days in a motel room where I only woke up from the drugs long enough to have sex with the man I thought was funding it all for me but could have been fucking anyone.

2. Selfies on the Internet: I can't resist them, and now they show that history of all that firm flesh the prescriptions put on me making me sexier every day: self-fashioning, we called it in grad school. Like J. used to do, pretending to be a professor, or embarrassed that he was a real one. Or my husband, pretending to be a hipster rock-musician when all he was was an adjunct English instructor, something I'd done myself in the days when I could get it together enough to show up for class and look at Shakespeare or maybe just read my poems to them, and I could never resist the tall dark guy, or he wouldn't have to be dark or tall or anything, but inevitably he or one of them would ask me out, or not really out, but just to drop by to a party, you know, like kids do I guess, and once I got there they would ply me with drugs and alcohol and I would dance with my shirt off or maybe give the cutest or horniest one of them a lapdance right in front of everyone and

after a couple of years, it wasn't even worth applying for jobs like that again.

3. I remember sailing with J. off Ragged Island, where Edna St Vincent Millay flashed for the fishermen. It was day three of my vacation and I guess I had sobered up by then, or all the drugs had washed out of my system. Well, maybe except for the weed I had brought without telling him, and that's why I couldn't just spend the night with him as he wanted. I needed space and I couldn't have him thinking I was dependent on chemicals.

We sailed out there and one time, sailing out past Saddleback, he kissed me as I was sitting on the bow, my feet over the rails, my arms locked on the pulpit. "This is it," he said. "The very place where so much has happened and I assume will continue to happen in the future. But what is happening right now is a consuming desire to jump your bones."

4. He used to promise me he would never abandon me even if he had to abandon himself. He wasn't worried, he said. You just accepted what life brought. For in the end, you could either spend your life worrying about suffering dementia, just as his dead friend Jess had done, worrying pointlessly about what finally came to be, or John, still living, or his mother, or his teachers, or his favorite uncle. You could do that, worry, fight, or try to hide what was happening, or simply embrace it. And if ever he got diagnosed with it, he said, he would write a blog or post daily (whatever it was or is he posts) and all his readers could chart what was happening to him and to his prose over the next few years until, like all of them, he finally fell silent, and at that point they could exchange their

discomfort for ignorance or acceptance of how things were and perhaps nod piously to one another as if they had been blessed with an important life lesson and then go on as if nothing had happened, as he would say.

And hearing him describe that in such detail made me reconsider everything. All the guilt over the drugs and losing my teaching job and having my daughter taken away from me. I'm a poet, you know. An artist. What do materialities mean to me? And if the day ever came when I couldn't find the perfect words or the ideal shapes on the canvas, my shattered brain would provide me with better ones, even more poetic, unencumbered now by the rules and clichés of bourgeois painting and poetry. So it's the same, I thought, whether we're talking literature or schizophrenia or dementia or drugs or whatever you do that defines your life.

Now you could fight it, as I did, or as everyone tried to get me to do. Clean up now and then, that is. You could also try to hide it, pretend to be sleeping on our queen-sized water-bed rather than on an abandoned mattress dragged onto the floor of a crack house. You know, like old people losing their pasts as the future closes in on them, or like all those alcoholics do, denying it, never facing it—it's their thing, I think, the alkies and winos. You could do that or you could just give in: drop the pretenses and accept who you are. Forget raising children to middle-aged security. Forget the scholarly essay that would bring all its readers to their feet; the poem that would leave them gasping for breath. Instead, form your very soul around the pleasure you get from drugs. And even more important—now this is what normal people don't get, so pay attention—even J., when I told him this, even he claimed it had never occurred to him. It's not just the getting

high; it's not the astonishing rush of false enlightenment. No, it's the sensation, after an hour or more of this, of coming down from it, of returning to your normal life of dishwashers and bill-paying. Tormenting the cat with a laser. "Getting high," I say with a sneer. "That's what occasional users or non-users think is the point." But it's not that at all. It's the coming back, back to ... not sanity, not reason. But rather returning to what I'll call your very self. The self that wakes. The self that puts a meal together. The self that makes an appointment with the doctor. That writes poems and sets them to simple guitar chords. That one. The only one that matters.

That's what the professionals in the rehab center got all wrong. Speaking of drugs as an escape, when it's really a "returning to"; speaking of "the battle" "the conflict" "winning" "the victories of sobriety," when it's really a truce with oneself, however pathetic that self may be. ("Ah the specious reasoning of the addict," I hear you now object!)

So J. imagines a diary documenting the slow deterioration he will experience each day and he will whittle that self down, as his poet-friend Louis once said, until there is nothing left of it. And perhaps the me that's worth salvation is also trimmed down like my flesh itself after the pregnancy: reduced to the one I return to after the drugs, the essential self, uncluttered with external things, but blessed with *caritas*. That's what love is, or so my father preaches from the pulpit. And no matter what ... "toll" they call it ... drugs take on your social life, no matter how much that *you* (that public *you* I mean) may deteriorate, the essential one will not—dull as dust and dishwater though it well may be.

V. Lunch Date With Mussels

So I had to see him. I loved the way he lost control around me, and I loved too that he would listen to my poems or pretend to appreciate my careless acrylics and treat me like more than a hot Asian girl with a feeling for the arts.

And I said I absolutely *must* cook for him, just like I did that evening in the downtown loft, and it must be a recipe of mussels and wine, must must must, and when J. arrives, God the last thing he expected was to find my husband there, just happening not to have gone to work that day and he and J. sat at the kitchen table talking about some gig my husband had for the professors in the department; it was outside with colored light projections on the garage door on a Sunday afternoon and the music if you could call it that was such that of course the cops would be called, interrupting everyone in the back yard trying to remember the rules for croquet, and it was pretty much an hour of discomfort for everyone. That's what J. and my husband talked about, while I adjusted my skirt in the mirror.

And then I said J. can we get groceries now? and off we went, me talking about my schizophrenia classification from Social Services and then I find the mussels sitting on ice in the fish counter and I needed six pounds of them for the recipe and J. objected all the way to the register no need of that many no need of that many and I suppose he was trying to save me money or something and I love him you know but he's cheap or he sure can be or maybe he's just naïve sometimes so when we were in line I looked at him all doe-eyed and touched his forearm the way I did years earlier when I asked him for a back rub and maybe brushed my chest up against him "Oh J., can you pay for these please?" And he laughs as it's hardly the

first bill he's picked up for me and thank God they are on sale, he says. And all I thought was \$20-30 is an eighth of weed and of course in the end hubby isn't hungry and J. never eats lunch and we spent most of the time trying to figure out who to give the half-priced mussels to.

I could tell by the way he looked at me that the old passion remained, but I could tell as well that he was scared of me, and I don't think it had to do with the fact that I was schizo nor the fact that I was an addict or a whore. None of that. What scared him was that my ass was no longer that of a teenager. My once-flat chest now fleshed out like everyone's. The passing of time, something he refused to acknowledge in himself, was on complete display with me.

He never believed I was really nuts, and kept returning to the same dilatory admonition every time I mentioned my battles with Social Services. "You don't want to play-act," he would say. "It's amusing to style yourself as a crazy person. But it's dangerous to do that. You know, years ago," he said, "I would stand up there in class and then, to amuse myself, abstract myself from the person I was pretending at the time to be. That is, I would slowly abandon my physical body, moving to a position up on the ceiling near the security camera where I could observe myself lecturing to them and I would do this, getting more and more remote from my self, until I found the person I was observing, me that is, stopped making a great deal of sense. At times, even a few of the students seemed to notice, although generally they never noticed anything, and at that point, I would snap back to myself again, realizing that had I gotten too lost in the weirdness of it, I might never find my way back to my body again."

“Like Herr Fritz!” I said. “German professor and theosophist when you were in college. So you tell it. One day he is not in class, and the secretary, worried, calls his house, only to have Frau Fritz answer with utter nonchalance: ‘He is fine; he was having his coffee this morning and his soul flew out the window; now he must wait for it to return.’ “

“Exactly,” he said. “I’m glad you remember. Because if you act out like that, eventually you will find there is no distinction between the roles you play and your true self, whatever you think that is. You’ll be the victim of your own bad faith, and now, as Sartre might say, no longer pretending to be that officious waiter, but finding yourself as nothing more than that.”

Oh J., do you remember when we lay on the rug before the open fire and I asked you for a back rub?



We knew exactly what that meant and then I began dreaming of living on that island out there in the Atlantic and you would always take care of me, maybe bringing food and books and I would walk among the beach roses as the fishing boats come in watching me and I would pose for them just the way I used

to flash the security guard at the loft at Spring Street years ago and life would become something I would write about in a memoir with some cool title like “Lost Seoul on the Atlantic.”

Or the time I invited you to the symphony and they were doing the B-Minor Mass or one of the Passions, and I imagine you thought you could snuggle up and stroke my thighs and instead I show up with my parents and sisters, and we girls my God dressed in these flowery dresses with pretty bows, carrying our prissy purses at our waists, my born-again parents completely oblivious to the irony, and I thought you would die of shock. Or when we went to hear the jazz group led by our keyboardist friend and when we walk in I sit my aunt right between the two of us, and I suppose I should have warned you that I was under a court order not to drive and not to go anywhere unsupervised but I just let you stew in perplexity as there was pretty much nothing I could ever do to cool your lust for me.

We were painting his house in Maine and he put on his work-clothes, but I said I was fine in my bikini and I know it drove him nuts and no I didn’t need any gloves or protection and OK you’re the artist, he must have thought, you’re the one half-way through the seascape of the bay and after two hours or so, both of us were covered in paint head to toe, and he just slipped off his gloves and hat and long-sleeved shirt and that was that and I walked over to the hose, unhooked my bikini and ran the cool water over me and crap nothing happened and “Oh shit,” he said. “What the hell? Did you think that was water-based? latex or acrylic?” Then he got out the turpentine or mineral spirits or whatever it was or hand-cleaner “You don’t have any open cuts, do you? Or ...” and slowly

began rubbing the paint flecks off me, off my shoulders, off my stomach, off my feet and thighs “Oh here’s a particularly troublesome spot; I really really really need to spend more time on this!” and I could feel myself drifting off in the fumes of the solvents and he should have known better than to be all gentleman-like or biding his time because he could have taken me right then and there and I would have been none the wiser. Like being hammered on some drug and gaining just enough consciousness to find some guy making love to you and trying to remember if you had even been a part of that decision or whether this was a routine with this guy whoever he was or if it was worth the effort trying to come or sometimes it was cool just to reach up at that point and dig your fingernails into his back just to determine whether he was capable of feeling anything.

And I think sailing was the best part of my life with him and perhaps my life altogether, and we went out one morning past the islands and the wind came up just as we made the turn at Hope Island, heading back to the harbor and I threw off my shirt, made my way (carefully! as he insisted) to the bow and put both feet over the side, holding the pulpit rail and of course gripping the hull like it was totally sexual and would have seemed that way to everyone. I remember the boat turning right, swinging to starboard I guess he’d say, into the channel and there was a red spindle marking the channel edge to our left and “why is that to port?” I said, parroting his instructions on navigation— “red right return” all I could recall—and there followed a long peroration to the effect that the spindle marked a route oblique to our route; that not all destinations nor the courses to them are the same, nor are all variants of a single course foreseen. Just as in life, I’m sure he

added then, but who understands these things or anything? I was drifting drifting almost making love to the foredeck and suddenly I felt his hands on my shoulder and when he kissed me I turned my face upwards toward the sky and closed my eyes and he was gone, back to the cockpit and I lay back on the deck feeling as if I were waiting for him or waiting for myself to return to me.

3.3

SCHRÖDINGER'S CAT

In the graceful flow of a river, the smooth passage of time, and the majestic ascent of a hot air balloon, we perceive continuity of motion. There are no abrupt changes, no jumping over intermediate points in the movement.

Swokowski, *Calculus*

I think it was late in April, maybe after my P. had left (she who was *once* mine, I should have said) and you, my darling Eloise, you had blown your head away, and I went to Elsie's apartment for consolation (let's call her LC to avoid confusion), twenty years or more my junior, and finally had the nerve or insolence to put my hand on her forearm, hoping for the best. "That kinda freaks me out," she said, and that was both the beginning and the end of things. She might have laughed at me or thrown me out onto the landing. She might have slapped me silly too, or taken me on the spot and any of those would have been worse than the way things worked out for us. We never mentioned this day again.

It was when my hand dropped away from her in respect or in a show of politesse, it could have been—that was the moment I fell in love with her.

E: *What nonsense. That's hardly possible. I have no idea what your purpose is in bringing all this up again.*

Nothing escapes her. Nothing gets past my Eloise.

E: *First, your facts: where should I begin? For one: the claim of love itself—no one knows better than I do how hollow that is!—let's not go into it. Doubtless also: the move you say you made (how suave, reaching for her arm like that!—it's a wonder you're not a virgin still!) and your telling me of this today. All ... well, "stuff and nonsense," as our mothers used to say. You never made a pass at her. What you did was only what you always do with everyone. A pass, you see, even a proposition, if you will, that—that requires feeling, desire. Even lust. And you had none of that that night. Just the pain of losing P. and knowing I too would soon be gone for good. That's why I could never trust you. You could not resist the adoration of the young Asian girl, the snideness of the lovely sociologist. You could not defend yourself from the condolences of some, nor the strictures of the woman from the Colony.*

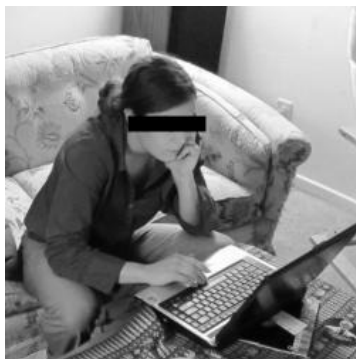
Now I'll grant that at some point you well may have fallen for her. Elsie, we're talking now. Who knows what your emotions are. You may want to claim that as well. But fact or mere assertion—it surely wasn't that day.

*Not a day among so many when you longed for your ex—
She Who Would Not Wait for You.*

Not a day among so many when you still wept for me.

J: Perhaps it wasn't that day. Perhaps it was a party, and God knows I attend too few of those ... you would say too many, I suppose, chastising me for my lack of social skills. Outside a commune-like apartment on Venice or maybe it was Washington Blvd with mock paisley curves slop-painted onto a now garish exterior, the interior untouched by a carpenter, and why the cops or parents allowed that place to exist is a mystery. But it was like the 60s, as was so much of

what she introduced me to that year—hadn't I once lived all this?—and the place was full of kids only two or three of whom were in residence and I assumed or hoped they were all of legal age and she was scheduled (could you call it that?) to play the guitar I lent to her—a Strat, not bad that, even if only a knock-off—and while waiting for this, we slid down the plastic slide (orange) from the loft, and sat together on the black vinyl couch, filched from the street or from the drop-off lot at Goodwill. And it wasn't as if I were trying to seduce her then; it was ... it was as if I were trying to appear to be doing so. Or no; it was otherwise: we acted as a long-time couple, almost bored with the other's presence and love—projected that, psychology might say. And one of the hippie or New Age or goth or emo or hipster guests or residents would nod and say 'See? Coupled up. That's what the bourgeois life is and all about. In the best and worst of sense. See them there? They care not a whit for convention. They just are. *Are*, you see. Existentialism, you know. I took a class. We read Kierkegaard. They are ... well I don't know what you call them. *Klassische gesprochen*: the two of them are one.'



And listening to that imaginary and barely lucid commentary, I would not look into her eyes as we sat on the couch together, knowing she would turn away. I did not take her hand fearing the same, and the moment or moments passed, our *kairos*, as it were, and of course I sat back knowing no more of her or what she felt than I did the day I met her ten years earlier.

E: *Ten years earlier? Or do you mean "ago"?*

J: Earlier, I think. That would be before you even came into my life. For ten years is more than we ever had ...

E: *In life, that is. What was she, do you think? Another screen for me? As you always claim my rivals are. Not women that you love, but through them, loving me. Is she a screen now for the scientist I always claim to be? Or serving as a chess partner, someone with whom to talk philosophy ...*

J: It was there. Ten years ago. You were gone by then, ten years after we had met. You and me. She and I outside on the sidewalk. There was another couple there and they talked right through us, right past us, the headlights sweeping your face, hers I mean, as the cars passed east and west on the boulevard. The voices of the couple crossed the path of our eyes and our eyes met and that was it. That was the moment ...

E: *You all talked at cross-purposes. Figuratively ... No. I mean that literally, don't I? The abstract lines of sight crossing the material waves of the voices of the couple, suddenly ignored,*

standing with you. Which is it? Scientists don't speak in metaphors. These are among the things you never taught to us.

J: Or was it not in Maine, and she or was it you yourself had flown up to see a relative, and misjudging this completely, I thought to show off my house and the neglected woods, idyllic, on the coast where all the tourists go, the house neglected too, as she, LC that is, but not you, I think, demanded of all our living areas. She longed for an urban landscape like the one she grew up with in Baltimore. Even Columbus was unurbane for her. What the f.ck does one need Nature for? she would shoot back not quite ironically. And the closest we could get to city-life that night with the sun near set, was walking over the foot-bridge in Boothbay scuffed down by the tourists, sandals and running shoes, awestruck by the picturesque light on the moored boats and she could not understand what all the fuss was about.

We played chess at her house in Columbus ...

E: *No no. Not that.*

J: We played chess as I played chess with P., She who Would not Wait for Me, or ...

E: *You went through the motions, you mean. Explaining the various strategies. The control of the center. The odds of victory. You could have mentioned even gambits then, in your professorial way of course—not to be taken seriously. But you never played with them. Not with either of them. Not with anyone. You only played with me. The smart one. That's me, remember? Educated at the best places rich Americans can*

afford—Hampshire and St. Johns. And that is why you fell for her, when my concentration began to fail, wracked by the doctors and herbalists, and you no longer could talk of Tarski or logic squares with me.



J: We walked across town to the bookstore in Columbus and she bought a small book on “bundling”! reprinted from the neo-Puritans of the late 19th century, Stiles it must have been. Good God! “Bundling” was essentially how we lived in life, we knew. “Hysterical!” she styled it, reading it aloud to me; “hysterical” as she described so many things, including all my heartfelt protestations of devotion.

Or was it Chinatown? A reunion of sorts, all her old classmates there, or two of them, and I had all I could do to distinguish them as I had loved them all, singly and as one. Then the jokes flew around about what a tough guy she was and the next thing I knew she had me in a bear-hug—embracing me at last—and I laughed in mock-protest as she lifted me all hundred pounds of her and only by threatening to kick her ass or stuff her into a bait barrel the way David did the son of his competitor would she agree to put me down. And I think the only other time I felt that close to her was that time

outside the hippie pad on Venice Blvd or was it Washington?, and her artist friends were talking so heatedly across our own eyes staring at each other they missed completely what was going on between us.

E: *Aw. How sweet. At least in this variation, you admit to feeling. Feeling something, even though it's only loss you appreciate: when you had me, when you had her. O woe! Blah blah blah. Or when you were lying in bourgeois complacency with a woman about to leave you for a man half your age. Now think for a moment: when you were aloft like that, in her arms at last as your feet flailed helplessly over the sidewalk, when you caught her eye on Venice Blvd, or was it Washington, you said?, couldn't you then have taken her face into your hands, couldn't you have said to her ... the night I ran down the stairs afraid you might or even might not be home and you coaxed me back into the apartment, could you not ... would it have been too much that day ... could you not then have said to me, 'My darling, you are ...'*

J: So many times I tried to catch your eye like that or simply catch your eye again. Sleeping next to you, as we always did, or one time in your apartment, lying on your couch talking I remember distinctly about Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and I held your hand and it may have been the closest I have ever been ...

LC: The day you fell in love with me ...

The day you fell in love with me (and I have doubts concerning that, as you know) was hearing of the day in San Francisco. Hearing the story I told of it before

Jn's friend Allyson told of the tantric sex at her high school reunion. Before you told of the boat falling on the car and P. leaving you and how you threw your darling Eloise out onto the street or drove her in epicyclicals back to the airport. I was there for the weekend or maybe I was up visiting Carol from Irvine, as I used to do a lot when I was bouncing around supporting myself on post-docs. You were still teaching in L.A., back where we had met ("Change is bad!" you always say)—but neither of us knew we meant a thing to each other.

So we were maybe wandering around the Tenderloin and finally, the place being so small, not like Los Angeles where you might say "Let's go to the beach!" and your friend from the East Side or Pasadena looks at you like you're some provincial rube, completely nuts, or constructs a joke so esoteric and urbane that no display of ironic indifference will hide the fact that you do not understand it. Like when I called you from your home state and Where are you? Oh I'm on a bridge in ... Boothbay Harbor I guess it is ... that apparently I should find completely enchanting why not meet me here? With no clue that it was a ninety-minute drive for you. Like you were supposed to sail there or hail a taxi.

So I say to Carol let's go to City Lights Bookstore with the wannabes; act so no one will identify us as ones ourselves, and off we go, and there's still good stuff there, but scattered, so we split up and eventually I find my way to the basement with its creepy and tangled aisles and corridors, like a mini-version of the Strand in Manhattan where you spent so many hours

as a grad student, and down there is some middle-school chick or high school kid and she is pretty much doing her retro-beatnik thing and when I turn a corner, I see some sleaze-bag dressed in a pink track suit like a Russian pimp you might find at Traktir's in West Hollywood or maybe a rube from Iowa who got sold sweatpants and an unmatched shirt in the bus station and he was following her around and it took me a second to notice the bastard has his hands in his pants like he's watching a porno video on youtube, and "Hey you fucker you piece of shit!" I shouted striding up to him, a foot taller he was than me, and I grabbed him by the crotch and squeezed as hard as I could and dragged him right up the fucking staircase, yowling all the way, past the cashier and right out into the street and screamed that if I saw him again, I would rip his nuts off and stuff them down his throat, and the whole store is standing back in awe knowing that at least one of us is someone not to be messed with and the safest thing to do is bury your face in HOWL again.

You remember that story. You've told it many times.

I grew up in Baltimore. And you don't leave a city like that, but as in the old joke of the country girl, you carry all its grit wherever you happen to find yourself. So one day, I'm in the apartment with my old ex (let's just call him X)—a physicist too, like me at Hopkins. I'll give him this: he had that single-minded focus common among so many experimental scientists, the trait that makes them competent professionals. Or simply mediocre ones. All things I neither wanted nor possessed.

Some kind of OCD or obsession where you'll do an experiment once and write down the results then do it again and write it up, and do it again then do it again But me? No way. Theory for me; I don't care what the oscilloscopes read, or what the knock-out mice brains look like when sectioned for the microscope. Like when I was reading Feyerabend and my exams were coming up—particle physics we're talking here, not queer theory or gender-whatever that your would-be budding colleagues bullshit their way through—but all I could do was bury my head in this Marxist crap and hope one day I'd get back to my calculations. And then this entire dialectic of misgivings is interrupted by gunfire in the street and I'll be goddamned if I am just going to hunker down and spend the next two weeks speculating on what might have been going on maybe the revolution has begun at last, so I shoved in a placemark, grabbed the trash and down I went, and my presumedly devoted boyfriend X runs to the window, ducking so that only the top of his forehead is visible and his voice is coming from an unearthly location it seems "Jesus Christ Jesus Christ get back inside. Get back!"

And I stood in the street, suddenly curious as to what my role in all this might be. Whose side do I take when the actants run out in front of me?

I can't resist shit like this.

Guns blazing?

Wallets spewing cash in every direction?

Drugs scattered on the pavement.

Rain. Mud. Just like in the movies.

And me, standing in the middle in bewilderment as these figures multiply as if menacing but possibly just involved in some kind of street theatre, itself as if orchestrated or merely attended by my soon-to-be-ex boyfriend, who won't even come down to rescue me or support me in the streets, as the whole troupe of male-factors dances around me and when I rub my eyes to clear my head I find them all gone, the street in the utter silence of the evening and my boyfriend, X in all senses X, about to be evicted from my apartment and my life, now completely prone beneath the window I suspect wailing in despair of my safety.

Those are the stories I once told
That you say
Made you fall in love with me.

E: *I remember all this now. You're such a bad liar! You told me everything—even if providing no more than a fictional veneer for things. It was in the early days, the days when you were besotted with me, before you began to realize what love is and how badly you had always failed and likely always will at that. You were to meet her in Westwood, LC or Elsie, a name dangerously close to mine, you said, a former student. A physicist. What did I know of your once friends and associates? I wasn't worried or suspicious; I could sense that you felt nothing for her—rare for you who falls for all of them—even you unsuspecting then. And besides, those were also the days when I was whacked out on drugs most of the time, and my jealousy card was already so full there was no way I could even pencil her in as an alternate.*

You drove there and ate at the Persian place, and she displayed her prodigious appetite. How she does it, I don't know. Still strong and athletic, all hundred pounds of her. It's because she—as her friends say “a gay man trapped in a woman's body”—she is careful not to fall into any of these girly ways you men claim to despise but which quite frankly weave spells around you and have always worked quite well for me. And at some point during the dinner you realize how smart and amusing she is, like me in that respect. Nice couple, the two of you! So what if you didn't lust after her that night quite to the extent you later would and then still lusted after me. And though this science took you back to your physics-flunking days, that did not seem to deter you. Like “If I come to your seminar, will I be able to understand anything you say?” (as if you could do that now! Remember, I'm the scientist, not you!) and you just meant to flatter her, of course, not realizing that this would reveal as well whether she in fact wanted you there, and not as an accoutrement—scientists hardly care about the humanists who wander in!—that is, she might by that let slip what she felt for you. But what were such Proustian lucubrations then to you?

Well, you know where I'm going with this, where you wanted this tale to go. I've heard the story too many times. You are in Tulsa with your Linda Jane and it's been two days since you just “dropped in” although the reason is that Joan let you know she could no longer welcome you at her house out on the Great Plains of America. I suspect she, that is, Joan, loved you still, but knew full well you would never have a life together. More or less what all of us learn, don't you think? And by now, by the simple fact of your having driven bereft to “your friend in Oklahoma,” as Linda Jane was then known to her, both you and she, Linda Jane I mean, know pretty much for certain the

course this is all about to take. So after the appropriate interval, you are just bantering away on the couch, you flirtatious as always, but no one takes you seriously, and somehow—God knows the context—she says “... and being attracted to you as I am ...”. And you of course stop the conversation stone-cold dead right then and there and put your hand on her left cheek, as you so many times in the future would do, and draw her to you; you say—no question here, you say, my memory is exact on this point—“You just said you were attracted to me.” And let’s hear no more of that for now.

You walked Elsie, both of you bloated from the servings in the Persian place, to her car, so proud she was of its neglected paint, the creases from the accident, the pliers she used for the ignition, the doors with no functioning locks, the windows barely operable. That was the moment, sitting in her car with her, speaking of the pliers used for the ignition, that was the moment you were trying to tell me of.

LC: It was at Jn’s just after Hanukkah, and his wife Lisa was off to a conference somewhere so he and I decided to do something called the Feast of the Seven Fishes, which is Italian, of course, Christmas Eve, although you, J., you thought it must have been another Jewish feast with gefilte fish and stuff you’d never seen on a dinnerplate before. And by the time you got there (the only guest—did you give that the thought you should?), the place smelled of celebration, with the round table full of overlapping plates of food we could not possibly consume, even though, ok, sometimes to prove to you or anyone I wasn’t just some wussy girl (you know what Lisa calls me, don’t you?), I would wolf

the food down with my prodigious appetite like the time I bought three pork steaks for the two of us, so thick it took twenty minutes to cook them, and you, part-time vegetarian that you were, ate maybe half of yours. Yes. Like that. Only Jn and I by this time had also consumed half a fifth of Scotch and what happened that night was that you get going on and on “The only thing I miss; the only thing I miss about my drinking days—sharing a shot of that with you.” That was thirty years ago, I cried out, only to have you mumble something I could not hear in response.

So now I’m hammered and Jn is baiting me about losing my last dorky boyfriend, and I cry out in a voice that could only have been shaped by alcohol: “Fuck it. Sometimes I ... I mean I really do. I need a young man. Some twenty-year-old ...”.

“Like one of your students?”

“Whatever, man. You know. Just pure physicality. No emotion. No entailments. To cleanse my palette, as it were. Rid myself of the taste of guys with an excuse for everything.”

“What bullshit!” you cried out. “Like an old lecherous colleague of mine once said to the most beautiful of my students years ago: ‘Those young men, Tess—they’re not worth a shit.’ Listen, I’ll tell you what you need. You need a man of taste and experience. An older man, maybe twenty years or more your senior. Sensitive to your needs and all that sort of thing.”

And I could sense Jn’s smile change from civility and joy to curiosity. Was ... Do you suppose ... Have they But then the Scotch took over for both of us and

we spent the next half-hour discussing food preparation.

J: I remember when I met them. I remember. It was a few years before the Feast of the Fishes you tell about, and not long before or well before my falling in love with you. Jn and Lisa, matched on the internet, you said. Two kids made for each other. And they just “dropped by” like young people do and still can and we all once did. And she had a guitar she wore like a back-pack, and the four of us sat in the apartment you shared with Sarah and talked like nothing was the least bit unusual about all of us being there together, all at ease about the two of us being there or ...

LC: We drove to the Valley to a warehouse or garage, a “venue” in this case, with no one there but participants, no audience but ourselves. Very hip. The kind of thing you read about in the papers. And I brought my double-bass telling you that you had to perform with me. And Sarah’s brother is putting on some crazy act with candles and bad smells so incoherent it’s pointless to describe it here. A band to follow us, one we would not wait to listen to, all freaked out by what Sarah’s brother did and what they heard from you and me. You read in your best chest voice a particularly disturbing pedophilic passage from *The Water Babies*—a book you remember from your childhood and associate with your awful grandmother—while I played unknown riffs, barefoot, on the bass.

J: The highpoint was when I imagined you with me on one of my sailing trips. Two weeks it took to pack in the provisions, do you remember that? No point in going hungry! reviewing the check-list, calculating sea-states and potential fuel consumption. On the second week in June, we left, casting off the dinghy tied to the mooring and catching the sea-breeze as it came up through the islands ...

E: *Ha ha! Even she will ridicule you for this. Don't imagine anyone is flattered by the mis-use of their histories.*

There were no sailing trips to Bermuda.

There were no days of fighting Fundy tides on the way to Halifax.

LC: The best part of our time together, now that I consider it, was walking through Venice from my apartment. Sometimes around the schools over past Washington or Culver, and sometimes we made it all the way to the beach, even past your old apartment or both of them, I think, where you paused and uttered the same theatrical banalities everyone does when they see or talk of places where they used to live. All that bullshit nostalgia. And even though I chastised you for your first wistful gaffe, when we reached the repainted stucco of the second place, you repeated most of what you'd said earlier, nothing stopping you, you having learned to ironize, you'd argue in defense of this.

As for going to the beach—that was way too bourgeois for me, bordering on vulgarity (in the bad sense, I mean); so we never walked on the bike-path or on the beach itself like you used to do with your many Linda

Janes tackling them in the sand trying to win them over, or perhaps just struggling to keep things going another desperate month or two by taking them into your arms on the breakwater, by murmuring in air mixed with the salt spray. But unlike you with them, you and I never sat down on the jetty in the rain, making out like teenagers, nor did you stare down my shirt in one of the crappy side-walk restaurants, passé for decades as even you know, and instead wandered up to Abbott Kinney, hardly recognizable since you lived there and bought coffee in some hipster place then back to the main drag, Venice Blvd itself, away from the beachfront, seeking the least attractive and most roach-infested place we could find so that we could both feel at home again. And at half the street corners, waiting for the light, you would put your arm around me, slowly even lovingly, and ask me in complete sincerity "Do you mind if I ...". And I would say, without implying anything, "No. It's fine," while at the same time, giving you nothing in the way of encouragement, because it didn't matter what you felt (even if I had believed what you used to say to me) and didn't matter what I felt for you (something I never even attempted to formulate) and it sure as fuck didn't matter what any bourgeois tight-ass from Torrance or San Pedro thought of us.

And maybe if you had simply faced up to the facts of life, the facts of what life had brought to the two of us, you could have said, knowing it to no effect: "Maybe I will give up everything for you ... Or no. Let me revise that, not wishing to base our futures on lies, however

well-intentioned. Maybe just dispense with it (much better put), referencing here the suppositious attributes of my existence in the world, inessentials, here I mean. California, sailing, the seastates of New England, what are these but secondaries? Books and furniture. Nothing of substance. And I will do all that for you and not give any more of a shit than I do now when you fly off to Finland or Hungary and sleep with other men whenever you feel like it or spend hours in some singles' bar putting them in their place, telling tales like Elizabeth or maybe Sarah tells tales of you in Italy when you took the guy off into the shrubbery and all she remembers hearing from the two of you was the poor bastard crying out *Piano! Piano!* and you, you ...".

Not bad, that, don't you think? I catch the nuances of your style far better than you do mine. All those big-voiced promises of yours for naught. What a fool you were, thinking me a deity who might be wooed by sacrifice!

I loved that you saw me as a version of the smart tough guy you thought yourself to be: even though I could pick you up and carry you over my shoulder and sometimes did ... you, well I will never forget that look you returned to me, as we lay together half-asleep in my apartment. Like the time I took you to the gym and slid down the rope-ribbon, which you had never seen a woman do, upside down and your jaw just dropped in awe of me and you cried out for everyone to hear: "Damn! Marry me!" and if you could have said that to me directly, with no one there to hand you the aegis of

irony, you would be staring into my sometimes loving face today.

You always mention what I did for you in Columbus. We could have been discussing politics, urban life in LA or Baltimore, the treatment of animals, or Marxist ideology. Some topic, philosophical or social, of no direction and little consequence, and I had the upper hand on you. Dismissing your bromide or “anodyne,” you’d say, defense, I readied for the kill, you having revealed yourself to be an idiot. But I stopped, you claim. That’s how you remember it. I didn’t say the triumphant and mildly hurtful thing that would have capped my argument and put you in your place. I said nothing. And you realized then I knew what you felt for me.

E: *There. Do you hear that? She was one you might have cared about. A rival too, perhaps. That would have gotten my goat for good, whatever that means. But what do you know of how things could have been?*

J: She hit like a professional. And one day she took on a boxer’s stance, balled up her fists and threw a punch at me. Not a real punch, of course, she could have hurt me in countless ways without threatening that. But as emphasis to the story she was telling then about being accosted in a bus station, Baltimore it must have been, and catching the guy in the chest such that he could hardly breathe in astonishment. A straight right thrown from the shoulder as the pugilists would do. Not like a stunt man or extra in the movies. A blow that can lead to a broken jaw or carpal bone. But for me, she pulled that punch expertly as it caught my shoulder, the same

way she would pull back in an argument, then she laughed at me in her tough-guy way, catching her lip in an overbite as if looking for a second opening.

E.: So again, you depend on others' kindnesses, as you say Williams said, but rarely offer your own. How many times did I stand in your doorway, or drop down on the steps of the landing, trapping your neighbors I assume, who were too embarrassed to come out to see what was happening. Where is the landlord? surely the police will come! "A family!" I cried out to you, collapsed on the stairwell. Collapsed in grief on the stairwell. Crying in all senses, the tears on my cheeks. "All I ever wanted was a family." What fucking good are you? Why wouldn't you do the one thing I asked of you? The one thing ...

J: You're right. That was it. Entirely it. So she called me one day "Hey!" it was her generation's form of "hello" I guess, and I don't believe I'm wrong to read some affection into the way she inflected it. "I gotta ask," she said. "It's Giancarlo. The Italian guy, well obviously. You don't know him. We met as post-docs in Irvine. And ... well, there's ... I mean remember telling you all that about cleansing my palette or whatever at the Feast of the Fishes a couple of years ago? And anyway, we had this long talk and I always thought he was just shy, but for Crise sake he's 30 years old and has fallen for me like a school kid knowing nothing of women, and I mean I need to know is that weird? I mean, should I be weirded out?"

And I just laughed and said there were millions of virgins that age and older wandering about with supreme confidence as if no one had ever imagined in general such lack of

experience, and consequently never suspected theirs. And whenever I tried to talk to her of ...

E: *What difference does it make? Maybe the same things you always talked about to me. Or more evasions, hardly worth distinguishing, to the same purpose too. She wanted a child, just as I did. Just as I always told you: making a baby. That's what it was all about.*

J: ... Of ... now I forget. I guess I raised an arbitrary topic to remind her of my love for her: the offer I had never made, the offer of a life together, still on the table. And this went on and finally she tells me she has been traveling to see or traveling with Giancarlo, only I know they're long-time friends and so was taken aback to find out they were family. Like married with a child on the way. And all I could come up with was a stupid joke, "Ha!" I said. "I think this means it might be late for me to make my move."

She talked of him with affection but without emotion. I could never understand that: did she have none? or she was loathe to admit that she was susceptible to these intense feelings that make fools of all of us (tough guy that she was)? or was she showing me the kindness of not expressing love for others than myself?

E: *Perhaps this has nothing to do with you. Did you ever think of that? They wanted a family. What's wrong with that? Did they need to draw up a contract? Extort each other's signature? Were you pledged as a witness?*

None of this, even or especially your telling of it today, none of it is real in the sense that it's fully intelligible or even

perceivable to anyone other than yourself. That's why Joan got so miffed when you finally wrote her of what she meant to you. And of course you embellished it with all kinds of things you suspected might have been going on in your head years ago, and wild unsupported hopes of what she might have felt as well. But to her, to Joan, the real one now I mean, living now in Wisconsin, not the imagined one of your fiction, to her you were not someone to settle down with, just another traveler from away. The kind of person who would drop in on the way from coast to coast making her life more interesting, as she displayed her hosting skills. She was the best at that; it was as if you had lived with her for years. There were times, sleeping in the same room with her, you must have suspected that you needed nothing more in life than to listen to her breathing the night air next to the window: the only cool room in the house, she said. But you said nothing. Keeping it to yourself, I guess. How could she feel you were or ever considered being in love with her? And not once, of course, would she ever have thought to be in love with you.

And then her past—all that you wrote of her first husband, based, I think, on one or two details she let slip the first time you met her. You never had what it took to say "I am so sorry. That must have been hard on you, hard on your family." Formulaic, yes, but effective. Instead, you put on your manly airs, as all men do: Oh yes. You understood. You knew how these self-slaughterings go. No need for one as worldly-wise as you to hear the pain of it. Why you yourself had once put the unloaded shotgun to your chin ...

Remember your former student, up from Law School in Virginia? Carmen, another Italian girl, not the namesake French girl you so loved as a high school kid, dropping in for a

visit from the Great Plains of America where you left your dark-eyed Norwegian girl to find her way through life without your help? Prancing around on your lawn, hardly wearing anything; even your mother was impressed with that. And off you went for dinner at the local fish place, ordering the same crappy food you always did, because change? That's just not something you ever do. And as you droned on in your self-involved way, she repeated, "That's what men do. Bring the conversation back to themselves." And she stared right at you, and surely she was thinking "What a dope this guy is. Glad I never jumped him out there in the Dakotas. Who knows how annoying that would have turned out for both of us." And that's why, even though you admired the way her form had bloomed in the last year or so, you got nowhere. Even when she told the story of her college days: "Oh yes," she said, clearly throwing it in your face. "My room-mate. I don't think you knew her. Pretty hot, although that hardly mattered. And we would try out guys and compare notes on them. Every week or so—there was no lack of them! And if you hadn't been so naïve, you could have gotten in that line yourself. And it was a line; so believe me, you would have had to wait your turn. But I could tell by your doe-eyed innocence that you wanted something ... well, not more, let's just say 'more regular' than a one-night stand with a couple of college kids. And can you imagine the fun we would have had spreading rumors about you?" And I remember too what you said to me when you heard of this: "Comparing notes on lovers? Holy crap that's the scariest thing I've ever heard in my life." And it's the same thing, you know, the same thing you remember that the lovely sociologist, older than you are yourself, my rival, for God's sake, said of the men she met on match.com and would pass immediately on to her friend in Santa Monica.

J: I think the day I fell in love with you was the day I was lying beside you, and I took your hand and it was the only time with you I did not fear I had somehow gracelessly engineered this moment of affection, like that time I sat down at the picnic table in Glacier decades ago, maneuvering expertly such that the hippie chick was forced to take a seat beside me, and instead of admiring how I entrapped her in my sophisticated seducer's web, the entire table laughed at me for my middle-school incompetence.

E: *You have never heard her voice. Because you never did attend that seminar. That was your error. That was your downfall. Your hamartia, if you will—the tragic flaw as described in the theory you so derided from the lectern. You never saw her weaknesses, don't you see? You were afraid of them because you worked so hard at concealing your own. Ok. I know I'm sounding like the rankist Freudian of the 1930s. Those who were parroted by late-century academics. Those who never once turned their cynical skepsis onto their foundation myths. Yet don't you see? All you had to feel or say was what you say you should have said to so many others: "My darling, you are the best. You are the best that ever was."*

J: No no. I remember. Listen to me now. It was before you ran off with Giancarlo, before you had your family. And therefore long before I lost you finally for good.

We were sitting cross-legged on her apartment floor in Columbus. Debating politics or ideology. The shackles of class. Who knows what the topic was? I muttered some

banality purely for civility. She called me on it, as nothing escapes my Elsie's intellect. Not one to hold back, was she. And there I sat, helpless and exposed. All those sophisticated escape-routes sealed, and the stone still fixed at Easter. And instead of the mock-contempt I deserved to get from her, I heard nothing. She paused. She said nothing.

And I knew,
though she never spoke of this to me,
perhaps I just suspected then
she knew I was in love with her.

EPILOGUE

RINGSIDE

I. The Dominatrix

The day the boat fell on the car, I knew ...

"You can stop right there!" she cries out, the artist-Dominatrix. "We know all about that. You came home expecting triumph then, you come home in triumph now—another year and still no one knows what a reprobate you are. You wished for parades and ticker-tape, but after five months away from her, P. I mean, both of you faithless as always, there was no one in the apartment to greet you. Remember that? Dragging your ill-packed suitcase across the courtyard to your stoop steps after the non-stop flight from Boston? Hoping she would surprise you by being there, guilt-ridden, ready to start again with you rather than with the lover half your age. And all you found were the empty spaces she had occupied; the painful clutter of the things she left behind pretending that mementi were signs of magnanimity.

"You took me to the symphony, still in agony. Somehow you found a parking space, hours before curtain as was your way. Then you walked me two or three blocks to the car weeping for love or sympathy and I was wearing shoes that made me a head taller, but forced me to walk as if en pointe, and maybe if I had been into ballet like your darling Eloise, or into rope climbing and trapeze like your Elsie is or was, I could have pulled it off and listened or just distracted you. All those years of wielding the lash of the dominatrix, hardening my core, did nothing as I stumbled my way across the sidewalk to the door you held open for me.

"I tried boxing. Martial arts, they call it now. Good for confidence. Good for getting the frustrations out. Good for the balance too, they say. Useful in my profession, or so I thought. And all I could hear is what you said to me a year ago:

Norm and Nick, it was, two good middle-class kids, jaws set as determined juveniles, off to the parking lot on Cushing Street, accompanied by Dave, mean bastard who never deigned to fight anyone but sailors from the Navy Base, thus earning the role of peace-maker or referee or judge and after a minute or so Nick (who knew all about fighting, even predicting Liston would be unbeaten for decades) had the a-hole pinned—no damage done, no punches landed, and Dave pulled them apart and declared a winner, I guess, since they both came back glowering in rage or in pride even though nothing could possibly have been settled in what turned out to be a one-fall wrestling match.

And then the next time Dave stepped in, *you said*, it was a couple of poor kids from Bowdoinham or Maquoit out in the high school parking lot, and the poorer of them had made some crass remark about the homely girl-friend of the less poor one (Norm had said something similar to Nick about his, although the issue for these bourgeois duelists was not beauty but fidelity), and off they went in the ankle-deep snow, half-melted by the salt, and all I remember was the poorer of them on his back, his cheap shoe somehow dislodged exposing his even cheaper white socks, and the vengeance-seeking lover, less dirt-poor than he, pinning him with his knees, hands freed 'Take it back!' he demanded, and

the poor bastard merely struggled, suffering in his refusal to recant a half-dozen very practiced blows to the face, at which point Dave tapped the victor on the shoulder and that was that. His face a mess, the kid took enough time to retrieve his shoe, stood tall, barely able to see, 'Where is he?' he asked, in the accent of the poor kids from Maquoit, repeating the words he had heard in some cheap western or detective show and Dave merely said 'You've had enough. You'll end up in the hospital.' And that I guess was it, and I doubt the homely girlfriend took any honor from that as she was damn lucky to be involved with anyone.

And Pete B. took on Joe Mulligan, both practiced in brawling, and Pete grabbed his tie, but Joe spun him around and picked him off the ground, as Elsie did to me, and Pete began kicking desperately with his heel into Joe's shin, and Joe, now riled in earnest, raised him high in rage and threw him through a plate-glass window. All this Pete, bloody and beaten soundly as often, told me as we walked out of the bar for a cigarette break, only to find the bouncer—a bad dude if there ever was one—on his back and Andy the bar-owner leaning over him 'Can you hear me? Can you hear me?' and the poor bastard managed to raise one arm and nothing more as it turned out the sailor he had tried to throw out for hitting on his girlfriend landed a kick in the groin and that was that.

"You thought then, so you said, of the only fight you won convincingly. You were eight. Billy Asprey in tears though no blows

were struck. That was all there was to it! So you thought. Play-acting. Not reality.

*Only poor kids and fools suffer broken orbitals.
That's what you finally said to me!*

"All these voices," she continues, as I drift away from her, hearing voices variants of hers and others too. "Andrea, May or her sister, Elsie, even Eloise, with whom you never stopped conversing. These words were never theirs. Think for a moment: if you hardly know what goes on in your own head, how are you to imagine what goes on in ours? Or are you with Freud, in his Psychopathologie, where only your own motives seem inaccessible. 'Nun gibt es aber nichts Willkürliches, nichts Undeterminiertes im Psychischen,' is how he puts it. And how does 'arbitrary' mean 'by chance'? 'Nothing to do with us,' Barbara will snap, more succinctly than I could ever do, not as criticism, she'll say, but perhaps with not perfectly concealed annoyance. 'Did you share this with anyone else?' she'll ask. 'Were they not horrified or [more politely] perplexed at what you claim they were thinking?' What do you really know, after all? How many calls have you made to the coroner?

"Remember," she concludes. "This will be on the test, I promise you. Just as you used to say in irony to all of us:

The things that made you loathsome as a teenager

Are things that make you loathsome still.

Every day is like the others."

That's what she said to me,

a year from the pandemic.

Those were the days when we thought we could do anything.

II. Nancy M.

N: *Linda Jane, you mean. Or one of them. That was decades ago, mere prelude to all you've wept for since: your lovers leaving you, Eloise leaving everything. Did you come to me out of desperation? She and I were best friends, remember? So beautiful she was; well, not that. No classic beauty, not like her who will be first to hear of this. Slim, alluring—something she cultivated most of her life. Too much sustenance from alcohol, I suspect. Deserved a lot better than she got ('lot' in the strict sense here). Deserved better than you, that is, and most of your rivals too! I suppose you served your purpose adequately, naïve kid that you were, naïve especially in your efforts to seem otherwise. Those were the days! She told me all of it. How Herb who introduced you got all pumped up suggesting that he of course perhaps or possibly had added her to "il catalogo" (mostly students) of those seduced by his old school baritone, and how you one day put him in his place, since you knew from experience what he could only guess. Then you came back from New Orleans and most of the novel taste of you had worn off, as it always does. So I just warned her to be careful. You saw her, did you not, the week after she got beaten nearly to unconsciousness? You say you had a date at the Rustic Cabin—just a bar down on Lincoln Street where you had made an ass of yourself many times in your drinking days one time falling into the marsh behind it. I suppose that date must have been later, when you could still drink a beer without lapsing into lugubrious self-pity or self-aggrandizement.*

What fools you were. Young and fit, and given that, your age and physicality I mean, there were lovers everywhere for you: you had no need to risk a goddam thing. If I looked like she

did then, or you as you did, I would not spend my time in pandering.

Didn't you ever note the scars on her wrists? From the days when we believed you could bleed yourself out like that, and not, like Eloise, end up frustrated in a warm bath feeling barely faint before her friend or once-lover broke the door down to rescue her. I imagine both of them—Linda Jane and Eloise herself—learned from experience, growing more skilled after the trial round of wrist-slashing and overdoses, wouldn't you think? And in that case, if that is true, that is, you don't need to waste a second thought on either one of them.

So now all others who remember her and dealt with her are dead or moved away. Without me, she is nothing more than the shaky memory of the hedonist who let you share her bed once and only once—two days before you left for New Orleans. Not insisting that last night that you fight each other for space in a sleeping bag in the utility room, where all the tenants stored the junk they would never use again. There where you had slept a week earlier in order not to desecrate the space she reserved for that shit-head married man, the two of you feeling in the must of the discards the unexpected joy of being resourceful as high school kids. That final deep night's sleep the last or nearly so, however, as she tired of you after a year of letter exchanges where she tried to elevate her style but misused half the words she chose, and gave you that volume of Pound she said an old lover had once given to her and you, naïve as you were in those days, could not distinguish a book copy from a general print run (well of course, you had not yet read the definitive tome on that topic you yourself would write some decades into the future!), just as you could not discern the realities of emotion, thinking she had given you the res ipsissima,

the thing itself, love itself, that is, not just the word for it, the book with words printed on its pages; whereas you soon of course suspected that this ironic thing you held was not a book in the strict bibliographical sense at all, that these were not love poems after all, because this was not love in the first place, but rather an extended pretense of all of it and you, affixed to her, were nothing more than a parody.

You understand that now?

What did you imagine she would do? Would she give up her history and start one with you? A man, hardly more than a boy, with neither money, depths of soul, nor experience? Did you think she would no longer thrill in the threats of violence? Did you think that she would, as you hoped your others might, push away the men who clambered after her and stuffed those twenties into her waistband?"

J: It was at Bill's restaurant, on Center Street, a block from the station I remember as a kid in the fifties, where my father wheeled me down as a toddler to watch the trains come in, there where I used to drink with fake id's as a teenager. The three of us: you, her, and me, and you began talking of your psychiatrist—the town had only one in those days, same one who counseled David after his wife left him and before the last drunken assault got him sentenced to rehab. And of course you fell in love with him, that charming professional, who excused it, glossing it as some kind of "transference." Too bad professors cannot invoke that convenient theory as defense. With us, the provosts and the deans persist in their more simplistic views of harassment.

And you burst into tears with emotion, right over the glass of cheap beer: oh God! rejected by your therapist! Linda

Jane listened patiently, clearly understanding this herself, myself of course appalled. And I think that was the night she planned to stay with me out by the water, away from the utility room and the mock-bridal bed, and I remember distinctly you turning toward her and whispering insistently, and her listening expressionless. "What was all that about?" I asked her as we lay together that night in the day bed in the guest house. "She was warning me," she said, but I never got the particulars, imagining without evidence that it had to do with my irresistible charms which would complicate her life. More likely it had to do with the belligerent boyfriend, who may have been hoodwinked the first time a year ago but was unlikely to fall for that again. "Be gentle," she then said to a man than whom no gentler, in that context, walked the earth.

Best there ever was, I thought then in my appalling naïveté, soon to be corrected. Would that I could return to this issue once again today.

She told me of taking in the homeless man when she lived in Manhattan, although *homeless* is not the word she used. Washed and fed the poor guy, then fucked his brains out, as she herself put it, and turned him back onto the streets. Did she tell you of that? Her best friend and confidante? Or just of Herb? Whom I silenced with that retort so many years ago, not bad for the untutored youth I claimed myself to be.

N: *With some justice too—your claim, I mean. You remember your neighbor, the service wife? The lover you had before her?—your first pathetic act of marital infidelity. It took nothing to seduce her, of course. Barely out of her teens, and with a kid fathered by the first horny soldier from her hometown in New Jersey. But there you go—you were new at this! And you*

got used to her, hippie that you were, that is to say, used to her as she essentially was, you thought, in your vacuous philosophy, in and out of her tee-shirt, so much so that you could barely contain your laughter and despair when she “dressed up” one evening, ready to go out with her husband and celebrate a birthday or a wedding anniversary, appearing at your door to show off what a stunner she had been as a teenager and still was, with the skirt and caked make-up six years out of date—oh my God it was awful!—exactly what she wowed the boys with as a high school kid. The two like a post-hippie couple from Peoria, and how, you thought, how was it that I ever fell for that?

J: The pages were scattered about us, chapter by chapter. Ten years my senior, she was, but looking like none of it; in her fifties now by my calculations. “Sibyl’s leaves” is the metaphor I always use of this. It was a month earlier, or later perhaps, when we met in the bar and she lowered her dark glasses enough to show the bruises on her face. “This is what you get for messing with married men,” she said. “They are the worst. They are the ones consumed with jealousy. They are the ones who do this to you.”

We sat in her living room. 9AM it must have been, “sex-hausted” as I have ever been, and the belligerent lover knocks on her door. “Put your shoes on,” was all she said, and I sat there cross-legged arranging the papers—the novel one of us had written—for some reason fearing nothing. “And?” I asked, surprised at the silence as she returned alone to me. “I sent him away. He said he had become suddenly anxious, drinking the coffee his un-loved wife had brewed for him. A premonition. You know, like your sixteen-year-old girlfriend

said she had when she made you throw the beer away. I told him he was dreaming. Everything was fine. He was dreaming, yes, but he was dreaming truth."

Prime of life. Everything about her shaped to perfection. And she knew all the tricks I had never experienced like the clichéd "raking of the nails across the back," and all that "be gentle" crap, and all I knew for certain in the alarming pain was that she herself felt nothing.

"Sit down," she said when we met for the last time. "And I tell you this with both affection and admiration. I love you, but you must understand, in this relationship, if you wish to call it that, you are no more than a piece of meat."

N: *So where is she now? That's what this comes to; that's what you want to know. That's the only reason you are here with me today. We were best friends. I told you that. Although maybe I failed to detail the pertinent particulars. We shared a shrink, remember? And shared too all that we shared with him. That's why you have nothing left to tell me of yourself. The years went on. She couldn't break free of the belligerent bastard who put all those bruises on her face, which she exposed after limping into the bar, where for the first time, you placed your hand on her forearm, as you will do to no effect with Elsie, years into the future. He was good at this, never breaking her skin or cheekbones, seething that he didn't have the courage to leave his wife that day. But that was then, a year before we met or two decades from today. And what you want to know is the ending of the narrative. Where she is now, and how, with all your newfound experience, you might share with her the old ineptitudes of youth. I think she went off with him. Married him*

maybe. What else was she to do? After the divorce, I mean, she

...

Oh for Chrisake I have no idea I'm just making this shit up. I had enough going on in my own head I didn't need to know what was going on in hers. We drifted. We drifted. It's what people are sermonized to do, remember that? Your brother. He was rehearsing a school report, and you sat as mock-audience

...

J: Yes, I remember: ... thinking he was practicing for the priesthood even then.

III. Eloise

E: *Ha ha. You'll never find her now. In her eighties or, more likely, dead like the rest of us. And you don't know a thing about her, about either of them. But I remember. I remember everything. And I know what they were and why you fell for them.*

All this happened just after your crazy days, as you called them. You talked of this constantly, years ago. I mean the point in time of your talking, not the ... No. That's ambiguous as well. I remember you telling me of those days, I'll say. Or perhaps the day when you first understood or defined them as crazy days. The day your found the words for them, I mean. That's it. I've had so many in my own life, as you know, the times and places are no more notable than is the way we speak of them. To you, however, all this was the zenith of experience. Like falling in love, that lover leaving you yet again, parents aging to dementia, friends and neighbors dying of disease. So unique, that feels; no one has experienced what you have, as I have, we think, even though everyone has. Every one of us. And it was at moments like that, you used to lecture to your students, that all of us

become most human and “general,” as the eighteenth-century wordsmiths said. Experiencing what everyone experiences and finding in that what we might call (uneasily perhaps) our own unique identities.

You told me all about those days that spring, living what all kids I know have gone through at that age. How you would wake up hoping against hope it was no earlier than the hour you woke up the day before, or the hour you woke up a week earlier. And you would work on some novel you blessedly burned, or invent or run an errand, and as you were getting well, you felt each day that you only had to survive until the Dick Cavett Show. 4:30, I think you said. And you had made it then, survived the day, I mean, and could watch television through the news and flip the channels until you chanced on a documentary. Then maybe take some drug to help you sleep again. And each day went like this. Each day for years, it seemed, until you met Linda Jane—she who on the bus from Worcester to the airport would tell you she no longer was in love with you. That day, the day you fell in love with her, you threw the drugs away and haven’t touched them since.

Remember living like that? That’s why you look back on the pandemic as you do, supplanting the grief you should feel at the deaths of your loved ones with a guilty sense of nostalgia—waking up each morning with a purpose, even if nothing more than to survive another day of it, cutting wood, listening to the opera, writing of the love you once had for me.

For you don’t have to give in. Not to the pain of life, I mean. Not as I did fifteen years ago. No one abandoned you. No one laughed at your stupidity or errors on the playing field. So what if your young lover found another man, or men? And passed on to them all the tricks you taught her taught to you by your

Puerto Rican girl or your lover from Brittany? How much did you care about the men I slept with instead of you? Not a whit! You said. And if he or they can't get the job done, you always insisted, lowering your voice as you always do, just call me and we'll finish things up for you. And there were times ... Oh yes, there were times we did. And those times may have been the closest I ever felt to you.

You took a job on a fishing boat; fog, no humans within earshot. Best job you ever had, you claimed, and still claim, sitting back and remembering waking at 3 AM, like we used to wake up to work on my film scripts, only then driving to the wharf and maybe spending a half-hour or more "baiting up," as you called it, which meant shoveling into galvanized bushel tubs the salted fish David dumped into the cockpit from the 300-pound-plus bait barrels.

You left the mooring as the sun rose and by noon your day was nearly done. And David was bat-shit crazed from having his wife and kids leave him, with complete justification, of course, as no one leaves a man without reason, and compared to him—the man who had spent a year in the nut-house as we called it then (Thorazine and electro-shock—a real old school place!) there for assaulting the son of a competitor—compared to him, you were little short of normal. Something you never wished to be.

There was one day when he spent Sunday out with his kids on the islands; visitation rights it must have been. He stripped down to his shorts to swim with them like a real dad or like real dads do, and I guess drank half a case of beer in the pure joy of family. But like all commercial fishermen, he had rarely if ever exposed his flesh to the sun, always done up in foul-weather gear, and he called you at 3 in the morning agonized with the

sun-burn no way to go to sea that day—the only day in the three years you worked for him he ever missed—so you drank the coffee you had brewed, jumped into your car and drove three hours west to see your wife-to-be who had barely planned her morning chores at the horse ranch in the Berkshires when you turned into the driveway. Good God what if she had been in the arms of her once-lover from Albany? Or those of a stable-mate? For Crise sake hadn't you thought of that? But all went well (you've always had more luck than you deserve!) and her eyes widened in amazement at seeing you, minutes before you caught her in the cheap Polaroid.



And of course you nearly passed out from sleep deprivation driving home in the evening, due at the wharf an hour before dawn, eating the vitamins like candy as if that would do any good for you.

Those were the days, I suspect, at least for you. I cannot bring the others back for you.

Now do not argue here that you, like Prospero, taught me how to speak or simply how to curse. Do not claim you showed me how to get the words right. I cannot “flesh out these memories” in a pencil sketch for you. I cannot in my screenplays save the woman beaten to submission by the therapist, Linda Jane that is, a half-century older than she was the last day you laid eyes on her, or much better, myself to you in the process.

You’ve forgotten, haven’t you? How much you hated of me, both my wealth and my poverty. You assumed that since I came from the family known to everyone, money was something you or let’s say we never had to think about. But you’re a slave regardless, don’t you see? Whether you are pampered by servants or stealing for sustenance. How is either (in the abstract, of course, philosophically) any different from sitting in the living room my mother signed for and waiting for the new credit card to arrive for me? Like sure, she could have paid \$100 to move all the books from our vanity press out of the guest house, free now for her young lover barely my age, off to a storage unit or to the study, but instead she insisted I do it, just to remind me who was in charge; and yes, Frank, 250 pounds, could have done it in an hour or so, so much was his love for me, but I sucked it up, as they say, even though I could barely lift more than a dozen books and I was wheezing from an asthma attack and you had finally said those vile things to me that could not be unsaid and I had lost all interest in sex—whether with Frank or anyone—his only virtue being kindness, poor guy (hardly your strong suit, to say the least!)—and all I did was punish him for that.

My shabby apartment where we slept on the good days—all I could afford from whatever Mom gave to me—eating bad food and dressed in clothes from Goodwill—remember that?

Sand-poor though you were in my eyes, you just shook your head in ill-disguised condescension. Playing poverty, that's what you're doing! you sneered in silence when I turned away. You would never say that to my face (although you would finally say far worse). But that's the way you thought, since that's what you yourself had done, living in the garret in New Orleans, wondering whether you could spare that day the 10 cents for an ice-cream sandwich, as if you would starve without that luxury.

And all I could do was fire back at you: what do you know of my life? Inflecting that with all the contempt I had access to that day, still loving you as if in spite of all I wanted out of life. "What do you know of anything?" I said. You know I never asked for truth from you. I never wanted revelation. Nothing from your big-boned intellect. That was never what I asked you for or of. ...

That was years from the pandemic.

And that is how she spoke to me.

Those were the days when my darling Eloise could say anything.

IV. Death Mask

I parked on the street next to the hospital and everyone was dressed in surgical gowns and face-masks, no one sure of anything, and I found my way to the ICU where you were dying, good as dead already, unresponsive, and they let me disconnect the life-support. What did it matter to you, after you were gone, and unable to remember anything? What did it matter to me, who would live amid the unfamiliar silences forever?

I took the phone call in the morning, and despite the salvaging narratives, all came down to the same predictable thing as it always does. And all the blood-curdling hangings and self-inflicted gun-shots and slashed wrists and pill-swallowing filled my consciousness.

I sat on the streetcorner as if exhausted and remembered you leaning forward at the dinner table, to hear and doubtless to surpass my wit, as your wife, my friend for years, tried to serve as your hearing or cover for it, bad as mine was then.

There was nothing to say.

Do not speak to me.

No one hears the condolences of sermonists.



The boat turns into the currents, stalled expertly at the mooring. I balance on the skiff thwarts and slide the halter onto the bow stem, the smell of bait fish aired in the sun. The breezes shift to the south. The hull speeds to its hull-speed, all the sails now shaped to perfection.

Six days it took to raise the Easternmost port in the sailing grounds. Not a lost day among them. And it hardly mattered what drug deals had gone bad for you, the books you had read all wrong or not at all, or the revelations you awaited that all fell flat. Maybe on the drive through Bucksport you got lost in the seascapes, now seen from the land, with the wind stretched out to the horizons. Maybe you stood back from the work bench, feeling you had finally gotten the distinctions right. "Rub my back," you said, and I suddenly felt the sweep of your flesh beneath me, your breath barely warm in acknowledgement. Do you recall how you reached out to me, slowly, and pulled my face down to your face? Nothing could escape perfection then. Do you remember answering your name with mine or was it mine with yours? hardly sensing the undistinguished flesh between us?

Two teenagers cross the interstate on the pedestrian bridge in Colorado, newly built in the city you grew up in. That was the day I fell in love with you, sixty years ago. Far cry from the black bridge on Federal street, flanked by old colonials, where Allen, fearless of heights, would swing from the highest point, and I would close my vertiginous eyes to escape the witnessing, blind to reality, holding the side rail to keep from collapsing, though sensing nothing would come of this. There would be no bodies disfigured on the railbed, no fighting to unconsciousness, no larcenies of local businesses, no auto wrecks or betraying of one's countrymen. None of the shame known by my sister, who, as a child, broke the anniversary clock ("It was an accident!" she cried in protest) and kept it with her ever since. Those are the things that get noted in history. Those are the things that matter.

I felt your embrace days after the pandemic waned into nothingness. You held me hard and I could feel your ribs against my ribs and I gave you what must have been the clumsiest and most unflattering kiss I have ever attempted, but that's what you do when you don't know anything. When you have nothing more to say. No phrase, no instance of beauty, nothing that has not been expressed before.

And one day you will say to me, I'm sure of it: All those years! I hear you say to me. More than a half-century. Adding to yourself what I can only guess, something about those days when our paths crossed on the Great Plains of America. Taking your face into my hands. Something about Maine, it was, that summer years ago, something about New York or Los Angeles.