

Chapter 3

Five seconds. Just five seconds before the hand scooped up the stooped figure and pulsed down from fifteen. He was sure the letters W-A-L-K had lingered longer. Pedestrians penalized again. Why did they make the figure look so feeble – the city’s ode to scoliosis? He had utterly no chance of crossing in time.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, OCTOBER 13, 2012

Sheldon undid the tie and peeled the shirt off his right shoulder. His ribs ached. His elbow throbbed. The arm hung numbly at his side. He shifted his stance to inspect the back of his shoulder in the mirror. The swelling wasn’t visible but he knew it was there, pressing against the impression left moments ago by the M7 bus. It was a matter of minutes before the arm would stiffen and be immobilized by pain. It wasn’t broken and the shoulder wasn’t dislocated but they hurt like hell. He struggled out of his undershirt to inspect his torso.



He was sure the ribs were unbroken – cracked perhaps, but not broken. He was able to vomit, then cough out the sour remnants of his lunch without collapsing from pain. Still, they had been compressed rather hard. It was remarkable he could still breathe, that he wasn’t gasping like he had when he stepped last week in front of a bounding retriever. The dog should have been leashed. So should the wheelchair. But why stop there? He could have been hit by any number of objects; his reflexes just were not what they used to be.

Sheldon’s ribcage would stiffen along with his arm, perhaps even his neck. He felt a twinge but ignored it. By evening his side would be dark

purple, an inky vessel for a thousand broken capillaries. And by Wednesday, his side would become a splotch of red, blue and yellow, fading eventually into a bilious, fleshy slab.

Marian would know what to do, but Marian was dead – killed by the hospital, just as the hospital killed his daughter, Helen, and his sister, Muriel. He was not going to the hospital and was not going to see a doctor. He was not going to see anyone. He was going to wait out the pain until he could move his side again. And then maybe, just maybe, he would see a doctor, but not in a hospital!

Marian spent her last few years in a wheelchair, the last few before NYL killed her. Sheldon knew you couldn't yank back against a moving chair. The momentum was too strong. So he pushed Mrs. Roberts forward, as hard as he could, and she accelerated in bewilderment to a place of relative safety. No one noticed when the bus brushed off the old man in the checkered blazer. No one noticed his gut swallow the chair's handlebar then cough it free. No one noticed when he staggered, regained his footing, and walked with a deliberate, seemingly dignified air to the wheelchair, then rested his arms against the handles. All eyes were glued to the wheelchair and its stunned occupant.

Sheldon picked his blazer and undershirt up from the floor and laid them carefully on the bedside chair, the one he occupied as sentry when Marian was going through treatment. He ran his hand through the thick, white crop and scratched his scalp. He and Marian shared a small one-bedroom apartment off the back elevator. His work desk and credenza were in the corner by the window. The window faced an apartment forty feet away on the opposite side of the well so the drapes were drawn.

It was always dark in the bedroom now that Marian was gone. The apartment was the most he and Marian could afford, but they regarded it as cozy, and Sheldon's business benefited from the cachet of a Central Park South address. He was not just a money manager; he was a money manager on Central Park South with neighbors who were the *Who's Who* of American theater and ballet. There were many fitful months but they invariably paid the rent, and when the tenants voted in the early eighties to incorporate, Sheldon and Marian pooled their respective savings. There

were times when they scarcely ate, but they always paid the maintenance and spoke endlessly of cashing out their now wildly over-priced shoe box to buy a “real” home in Oneonta. It was too late now. Marian had her plot in Oneonta, but Sheldon wasn’t ready to share it.

Sheldon knew they had invested wisely. He noted ruefully that it was his *only* wise investment, then reminded himself it was not really *his* investment. It was Marian who yearned to see the trees, birds and grass, to feel closer to the farmstead she left behind when she volunteered as a nurse at the end of the Korean War. Central Park was her answer. Sheldon wanted to live in the Bronx, close to his beloved Yankees, close to those who spoke with a proper accent.

Marian swayed his perspective on Manhattan, even moderated his accent. People said he sounded like Jerry Orbach. “Good thing you haven’t heard me sing,” he replied, until Marian reminded him that no one remembered El Gallo and *The Fantasticks*. They were referring to his role in *Law and Order*, in which, Marian assured him, Mr. Orbach never sang.

Well, Sheldon remembered *The Fantasticks* just fine. He remembered it like yesterday. It was the fall of 1959. Eisenhower was President. Sheldon had spent three years in the Reserves but never shipped out. It was peacetime and the country was brimming with youth, hope and, so it seemed, prosperity.

Sheldon helped his father lay tile in the washrooms at a nursing home in Brooklyn, studying accounting during the evenings at Baruch College. It took two weeks’ needling from his father and, because his father could not keep a secret, his sister, mother and next-door neighbor to muster the courage to ask the ash-blond nursing assistant on a date. Had she not worn a badge broadcasting her name, Sheldon would never have found the nerve. Somehow, the badge made it easier, not quite an invitation, but almost. He spent hours rehearsing the syllables, “Marian Willis.”

It turned out Marian already had a boyfriend and she was four years older than Sheldon. But Marian did not forget him and looked him up the following May when her then-boyfriend moved on.

Sheldon's attempt to impress her was *The Fantasticks*, an off-Broadway musical that opened that month to generally positive reviews at the Sullivan Street Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The price was right, the show was new, and it was in the Village, Sheldon's way of intimating he was "cool."

Sheldon's heart stopped when he entered the theater. The playhouse was a black, subterranean room, not larger than his family's living room, furnished with perhaps 100 seats surrounding a tiny raised platform with a couple shabby curtains. A harp and piano were wedged to the side. The props, what few there were, were cardboard. Sheldon felt Marian would never forgive him. She would walk out on him right there, on the banks of this River Styx.

Marian did not walk out. She leaned her seated body against his, second row right, peered up as El Gallo stepped forward to introduce the story of two feuding families and the clandestine love of Matt and Luisa, and began to sing "Try to Remember." She fell in love. Sheldon was already in love. They married in September.

Right now, Sheldon needed to think. He was aching from pain but his head ached more. It ached for a week. Everything was electronic now. You did not phone in your orders. You entered them the efficient way, the automated way, the instantaneous way – online over the computer. The irreversible way.

It seemed so innocent. He wasn't steering the client toward some dubious penny-stock investment. He hadn't exchanged insider information with some mucky muck at Goldman. He hadn't entrusted funds with Madoff, as so many of his neighbors had done. And he hadn't bet \$11.5 billion on sovereign debt like MF Global. Sheldon Vogel prided himself on his integrity, his conscientious stewardship of other people's money. There was never a hint of impropriety. Sheldon valued that reputation.

The irony was, Sheldon Vogel's integrity was never in question. His record spoke for itself. Sheldon's idea of research was to pore over newspaper clippings and trade journals and run crude calculations in Excel, congratulating himself when his intuition paid off, vowing to work harder

when it did not. In the end, he chose stocks that, taken together, unwittingly resembled the Dow Jones Industrials. Sheldon Vogel's integrity was never in question, just his returns. They were like his sister Muriel's blood tests, the ones taken three months before she died – unremarkable.

Sheldon's clients came and went. But his mainstays, the ones who enabled Marian and Sheldon to scrape by were local affiliates of Actors' Equity and the Theatre Musicians Association. Both organizations doled out responsibility for managing portions of their pension funds to individual money managers, who in turn made investment decisions and charged annual fees for their services. Sheldon managed the life savings of actors and musicians and took this responsibility seriously.

Sheldon held on to just three clients after Marian died, the two pension funds plus a trust fund he managed, in his words to Marian, "as a favor" – a favor Sheldon now wished he had forsaken.

The trust beneficiary was his next door neighbor, Allison Pfouts, whose husband, Ezra, passed away in October, 2003. Sheldon and Marian had been the Pfouts' neighbors since moving into the building in 1971. They ran into the Pfouts in the elevator, in the laundry room, at the garbage chute and at the annual stockholders' meeting after the building became a cooperative, but that was the extent of their familiarity. Sheldon could not recall a single instance of stepping into the Pfouts' apartment or of the Pfouts stepping into theirs. Until October 3, 2003, that is, when Ezra Pfouts summoned Mrs. Pfouts and the attending nurse closer to his bedside and whispered his dying words, "Don't worry, Allie. I've arranged everything. Sheldon Vogel will take care of you."

Sheldon and Marian were summoned in late October to the reading of Mr. Pfouts' will. Before commencing, the attorney made a point of recounting Mr. Pfouts' last words, pausing for theatrical effect, as if that final nuncupative declaration was Ezra Pfouts' actual will and testament.

Sheldon and Marian were struck dumb. At first, they feared Mrs. Pfouts was indigent and thereafter entrusted to their care. Worse, they feared Mrs. Pfouts would move in with them. Silently, they wondered if it would be bad form to rise up and dash for the door.

The lawyer continued, "I shall now read the will."

What Mr. Pfouts meant was Sheldon Vogel was appointed manager and financial fiduciary of a trust fund set up to provide for Mrs. Pfouts, assuming Mr. Vogel wanted the business. What made the bequest peculiar was that the asset allocation guidelines were particularized in the trust's charter. The charter prescribed a certain perpetual mix of cash, fixed income securities and equity. It also directed that certain portions of the stock holdings be allocated to certain industries. The fund manager's job was to calculate the portfolio's actual allocation after each year's market activity and bring the portfolio back into alignment. He would be free to choose between individual securities in a designated industry, but the industry allocations and aggregate allocations between cash, stock and bonds were not discretionary. In return for fulfilling these guidelines, the fund manager would earn 1.8 percent per year – take it or leave it. The securities were worth \$1,687,366 as of the date of the reading. Sheldon glanced at Marian for reassurance then took it.

Monday evening, Sheldon began rebalancing the trust fund's portfolio, the same way he rebalanced the portfolio for nearly a decade. Before going to bed, Sheldon logged into the custodial account of the Pfouts trust and placed sell orders for 240 shares of Merck and 400 shares of Pfizer to reduce the client's percentage exposure to pharmaceuticals. The trades would clear by the close of business, Tuesday. He also executed buy orders for Cisco and Intel, reduced the portfolio's reliance on several REITs, shut off the computer, kissed the portrait of Marian Vogel on the forehead, and went to bed.

The zero key stuck when he entered the sell order for Merck. Or his fingers shook. Or he wasn't paying attention. One fact was certain. He did not read the transaction confirmations and must have clicked through the short sale confirmation. He sold 24,000 shares of Merck instead of 240 – 23,400 more than the trust held, and therefore borrowed the remainder on margin from the trust's broker. To compound matters, Merck's share price rose with the market. Merck was up \$3.80 by the close of business Wednesday, so his loss on sale was already \$88,920. And there were still two more days before he had to deliver the securities.

Sheldon was bewildered when he logged into the account on Thursday morning. He saw the error instantly but had no idea what to do. For the first time in his life, he was deeply afraid.



Sheldon's father died on December 31, 1961 from a massive coronary – not celebrating the December 29th birth of his only grandchild, Helen, nor Sheldon's pending graduation from Baruch College, but rather the arrival at New City Stadium in Green Bay, Wisconsin, of the New York Giants for the 29th National Football League championship game against the Packers. Sheldon was still with Marian and Helen at the hospital, and Muriel was helping the elder Mrs. Vogel in the kitchen. She brought her father a beer. He did not reach forward to take it.

Muriel shook her father, rushed to the kitchen and returned with her mother. Mrs. Vogel also shook her husband, hesitated, then brought the beer back to the kitchen. She rummaged through a drawer for a stopper then placed the corked bottle in the refrigerator. "I guess we should call the police," she announced matter-of-factly. Her husband was already bagged and carted to the morgue before Sheldon returned home from the hospital.

Mrs. Vogel put her grief in perspective. "God decides when it's time for us to enter this world and leave. He took your father while the Giants were still winners. If God were angry with him, he would have taken him at the end of the game." The Giants lost 37-0. Mrs. Vogel knew; her husband made it to Heaven. She gave Sheldon the open beer from the fridge. They wished each other "Happy New Year."



\$88,920 and counting. Mrs. Vogel would have known what to do. So would his wife, Marian, the younger Mrs. Vogel. He wondered whether Bank of America already alerted Mrs. Pfouts to the short sale. Of course not, he thought, this is chicken scratch. But to me? To the trust?

Sheldon decided to cut his losses. He consulted the Excel worksheet he updated on Monday evening. He typed 100,000 in a blank cell then divided

it in another cell by the portfolio's aggregate value as of the close of business Monday, \$1,544,878.73. The result was 0.06473. Rounding up, Sheldon placed orders electronically to sell 6.5 percent of each security in the Pfouts estate. This would accommodate the asset allocation requirements of the trust while freeing enough capital to close out the short sale. Several hours later, after verifying the trades had gone through, Sheldon unwound the trust's short position. To his relief, Merck's share price had retreated forty cents from the previous day's close, so the trust's total loss, inclusive of commissions and borrowing costs, was just \$87,631.

Just. Sheldon felt miserable. \$87,631 was \$27,631 more than Allison Pfouts withdrew each year to supplement her social security income. It was enough to pay for three of her semiannual cruises and was a substantial percentage of her principal. The loss would come to light. It had to.

Sheldon doubted whether Mrs. Pfouts would pore over next month's statement. She might, but the market these days was volatile. The Dow ratcheted up or down by a percentage or more seemingly daily. A 6.5 percent decline would not seem outlandish, especially if masked somewhat by the market's actual upward movement.

What worried Sheldon was how the loss would be characterized, as a short-term capital loss rather than a long-term one. Allison's accountant, her lawyer in fact, would catch the discrepancy immediately. It would not take long before she detected the trades Sheldon made to cover his tracks. And then what? Sheldon saw his world unraveling. It was just a typo, a really big typo, but it felt like fraud.



Marian gave up nursing to devote full time to her family. It was unthinkable in 1961 to do otherwise. So she and Sheldon lived in the family apartment on Grand Concourse and 138th Street. The arrangement was temporary, of course. Sheldon would soon be working.

Nine years and three careers later, they moved into an apartment in Hell's Kitchen opposite the parking lot that paved over the debris from the original Madison Square Garden. Accounting was a bust. Sheldon fumbled with numbers. So he sold life insurance for a while and would have continued had the insurance carrier survived. But he had the misfortune

of hitching his wagon to Equity Funding Corporation of America, a company whose executives cooked the books by fabricating policies and policy holders. When news of the scandal broke, Sheldon threw in the towel. The policies he sold to the guys from the Service and to Marian's friends from nursing school were worthless; and the annuity income Sheldon and Marian banked on from policy renewals evaporated, as did many of their friendships.

Sheldon resolved to insulate himself from the misdeeds of others and, more important, get closer to the money. He hung out a shingle and became a money manager. To improve his connections and cachet, he and Marian moved to Central Park South.



Sheldon rummaged through the bottom drawer of his dresser. He knew it was there, forsaken but not forgotten. He gave up smoking for good on his twentieth anniversary and pushed the last remaining pack to the back of the drawer, just in case he should relapse, as he so often had. But this last time he did not, and the cigarettes lay there untouched for thirty-one years.

Sheldon found the unopened pack among the sweaters his wife bought and so neatly folded. He could not remember the last time he wore one. He preferred his blazer and, when it was colder, long underwear and a parka. Sweaters itched, especially the ones Marian picked out for him, so there they lay, neatly folded, nestled in front of a pack of cigarettes. Sheldon fetched a matchbook from the kitchen counter and plodded into the bathroom. He opened a small window that faced into the well and seated himself on the lid of the toilet. His side ached. He leaned left against the pedestal sink, fumbled with the packet, and slipped off its wrapper.

Sheldon thought about the times he stationed himself on the bench inside the park, the bench that now bore Marian's name, savoring a cigarette in peace. He could not smoke inside, not as long as Marian lived, and by the time she died, Sheldon had long lost the urge.

The truth is, Sheldon never "savored" his cigarettes. He endured them. He took slowly to tobacco while he was in the Service, more out of boredom than compulsion. And when he left the Service he resolved to quit.

But quitting was hard, devilishly so, so he did not. He cast the pack aside for a week or two, especially when he went on vacation or neared an anniversary, then bummed one from the superintendent or the handyman and the cycle began anew. Until his twentieth anniversary, when his wife's persistent cough was diagnosed as early-stage lung cancer.

Lung cancer! Marian never smoked. She hated it. But Muriel had; her father-in-law had. And Sheldon had. He gave up smoking for good.

Marian loved the park, as did Sheldon. His one frivolity, his one spend-thrift allowance after she died was to dedicate a bench to her, courtesy of a \$7,500 donation to the Central Park Conservancy.

Sheldon went this afternoon to Marian's bench to think, beseeching her for guidance, for a sign. The sign, if it came, was hidden among the torrent of people scurrying past. Sheldon rose in resignation then pushed a wheelchair away from a veering bus as he returned to the building.

Sheldon searched the medicine cabinet for the mixed jar of Percocet and Vicodin that Marian bequeathed him when she died. Marian also left him bottles of Prednisone, Levamisol, Gefitinib and half a dozen dietary supplements, but right now he was grateful for the Percocet. He placed two tablets in his mouth and washed them down with a cup of water. He glanced at the vial of Prednisone, the anti-inflammatory steroid prescribed during Marian's chemotherapy. "Not yet," he thought. "If I ruptured something, I want my doctor to see it." He did not want to wind up like his sister, Muriel, one of three hundred thousand names chiseled into gravestones at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx just because he took a steroid to reduce swelling and hid the problem. That's why her oncologist was too late. "For Christ's sake," he said, swearing in his wife's religion. He did not dare swear in his own. "The orthopedist worked for the same damned hospital!"

He reseated himself and examined the packet of cigarettes. The label surprised him.

Sheldon expected to see "Chesterfields," the cigarettes Rod Serling so often inveigled him to try while he and Marian watched *The Twilight Zone*. Instead, submitted for his consideration was a packet of "Old Gold," a brand he regarded, even in 1961, as matronly. He doubted whether either

brand was still marketed or even distributed in the United States. Overseas, perhaps.

“I shouldn’t have removed the wrapper,” he thought. “They might have been worth something.”

Sheldon recalled the slogan and chuckled, “Not a Cough in a Carload.” “Right,” he thought. “They’re all dead.”



Muriel died within two weeks of diagnosis. The stomach cancer had progressed to her bones and liver. There was nothing to do but say goodbye. That was 1992. The previous year, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union went on strike. Muriel lost her doormen. So did Marian and Sheldon. Sheldon volunteered as concierge and mail sorter, a terrific opportunity to sniff about and meet his neighbors. Marian kept him company. By the twelfth and final day of the strike, Sheldon knew which money managers and brokers corresponded with which tenants, when each tenant came and went, and who they entertained as guests.

Together, Marian and Sheldon networked like pros and were soon on a first-name basis with every tenant in the building. Sheldon’s client list improved measurably. When negotiators narrowly averted a second strike nineteen years later, Marian and Sheldon sighed collectively, and facetiously blamed their weakening economic situation on the agreeableness “nowadays” of doormen and landlords. “Landlords used to be tough!” Sheldon railed.

“And doormen had spines!” rasped Marian, before coughing up spittle and sipping from the cup Sheldon held for her. He mumbled something about the IV, diverting her attention as tears welled within his lids and dripped in cadence with the bag.

The strike was harder on his sister, Muriel. She lived alone in the family apartment on 138th Street in the Bronx. The neighborhood had changed. The apartment was still located conveniently next to the downtown 4 and 5 express trains, but that was its only enduring virtue. Muriel did not want to commune with her neighbors, and she fell out with Marian – steadfastly refusing to say why. Well, that was her problem. Marian never hurt a fly.

Muriel only ventured outside during the daylight. She double-bolted her door during the evenings and seldom opened the windows. But she still had to bring trash to the basement. She tripped on the last flight of stairs on the twelfth and final day of the strike. Her back ached horribly and she gave up working. She wore a brace, sought regular help from a chiropractor, even tried acupuncture. The pain only worsened.

Her doctor sent her to a specialist at NYL North. The orthopedist prescribed painkillers to ease the pain and anabolic steroids to reduce the inflammation. The steroid might have been prednisone. Sheldon could not remember. The orthopedist monitored her x-rays, modified the medications, took blood samples, and prescribed all manner of physical therapy. Sheldon had to accompany her; Muriel threw a fit if he suggested Marian.

It took eight months to detect the real problem, cancer in the bones. The assigned oncologist never stood a chance. He seemed embarrassed to deliver the diagnosis. The orthopedist offered his written condolences after the funeral, including his card in the event Sheldon or his “lovely wife” should ever require his services. He read somewhere that the oncologist had been promoted to president. Cardigan? Mulligan? Born again? Never again.



Sheldon ran the bath. The water would relax his muscles, lessen the stiffness. It was all Marian would have prescribed, that and a good night’s sleep. “The world will seem brighter in the morning,” Marian would say. Except Sheldon knew it would not be. The Pfouts Estate subterfuge gnawed at him, mocked his imagined ethics, promising to fester like his aching side into a sore that was too extensive and ugly to hide. Why did he race to cover the trade? Why had he not just come clean and promised to make it up? Because he could not. He did not have enough liquid capital.

Sheldon brushed his teeth. They were good teeth, just three fillings, straight, strong and white. Sheldon’s uncle was a dentist, and the dentist’s niece and nephew were his best patients. Sheldon started at the image in the mirror. His lips were parted wide on the right to make room for the brush. The teeth glistened and foam dripped from the corner of his jaw. For a moment, it was the crazed sneer of a con man, a beast who gorged

on unsuspecting investors, then picked clean their remains with an Oral-B toothbrush and Crest Multicare. The beast would reappear in the morning and the following one. Sheldon could bluster his way through life, disguised behind his good-natured smile and checkered blazer, but the creature in the mirror would bare its virile sneer every morning and someday betray him. “Oh Lord, what have I done?”

Sheldon struggled with the brush. His right arm throbbed and his left arm was clumsy. He could not floss, just rinsed with Listerine and spat.

Sheldon disrobed and set himself carefully in the bath. The water was warm, womblike. Sheldon breathed deeply, slid lower, and rested his head against the ledge just left of the spigot. The water massaged his shoulder. He was still thinking about his teeth, his near-perfect set, and what little they bought him. “A man is only as handsome as his soul,” Marian would say, and the dispirited Sheldon concurred. Marian always knew what to say.

He gazed absently at the pile of clothing on the toilet seat, at the packet of cigarettes on top, and then, almost imperceptibly, curled his lips into a smile. A moment passed and his smile broadened into the toothy grin of a child whose first at-bat is a home run. “Thank you, Marian. Thank you, God. One of you is looking out for me.” The sign was there all along, in plain view, ever since he rummaged among the sweaters. He knew the sign was from Marian, not God. But he acknowledged God, just to be respectful.

Marian had not worn much jewelry after her first two bouts with cancer, just her half-carat solitaire, wedding band and occasionally a pair of hoop earrings. So her jewelry chest was shoved to the back of a closet, not surprising in a city like New York where living space is precious. But the chest was not empty. It was chock full of love’s tender offerings, offerings that, even absent his fair Norman maiden, were worth their weight in “Old Gold.”

Sheldon was not rich but he never considered himself poor. And he loved Marian more than he could ever express in words. For their first twenty anniversaries, first twenty Decembers, first twenty Mother’s Days and first twenty birthdays together, Sheldon gave Marian jewelry – diamond earrings, a pearl necklace, an emerald brooch – whatever Sheldon

thought would catch her fancy. Marian inevitably protested, but just as inevitably relented. A buddy from the Service had a stall on West 48th Street in the Diamond District, so Sheldon paid close to wholesale.

Sheldon thought about the contents of the jewelry box. Marian's real fondness was not for diamonds or pearls, but for charm bracelets and sturdy, elaborate settings – the kind that commanded \$1,730 an ounce in today's market. Old Gold, indeed!

The Percocet began to take effect. Sheldon relaxed. He imagined his battered body beginning to mend. Sheldon bathed himself thoroughly but would cleanse his soul in the morning.

He would call Mrs. Pfouts and her attorney to his apartment, explain how a keyboard malfunction (he would omit the possibility of user error) caused a sizable capital drain that he quickly detected, plugged and just as quickly resolved to remedy at his own expense. If Allison and her attorney agreed to keep everything private, he would immediately indemnify the fund for all losses, interest and fees incurred as a result of the errant trade and would, as a gesture of good will, halve this year's annual commission.

To be safe, he would enlist Mr. Roberts to accompany him. How could he refuse? He just saved his wife's life.

Sheldon knew the man in 8B was a lawyer. He knew the occupation of every tenant-owner in the cooperative. That was his job, sizing up incomes, sizing up opportunities. Sheldon needed a witness tomorrow and knew John Roberts would fill in nicely. He might even persuade him to draft the paperwork, lend it an air of legal gravitas. That would impress Mrs. Pfouts, perhaps even her attorney.

Sheldon imagined he was reclining on Marian's bench in the park. The warm water was sunshine on his brow and a gentle breeze against his shoulder; the blue tiles were the glistening windows of the Time Warner Center above the trees, and his legs were pathways that forked deep into the park and westward toward Columbus Circle.

Sheldon reflected on the many times he sat there after Marian died, wondering when he too would share a plot in Oneonta. Most days, he just idled. He had no one to nurse, no one to care for, no one to appreciate his

gentle soul. So it withered like the autumn leaves, until his mind was a vacant lot, a wintry expanse pining for spring but resigned to a long, dreary winter.

Sheldon could live to ninety. His mother had. Or he could die tomorrow. He had outlived his wife, his sister and his daughter. Putting aside his penchant for unintended contact sports, he was as healthy as an ox. But his mind was weary. Life had become tedious. He longed for Marian.

“Well, old girl,” he thought, “You bailed me out again” – the Percocet, the gold, the path to forgiveness and redemption. The Vogel family’s God was not big on forgiveness or redemption, but Marian’s was, and Sheldon revered Marian above anyone else, including the Vogel family God.

Sheldon hummed a strain from his favorite musical, and his pitch-perfect baritone echoed off the bathroom tiles like a choir of voices at the Met, or at a modest basement theater in Greenwich Village. The words mirrored those on Marian’s bench. “Deep in December it’s nice to remember without the hurt the heart is hollow.” Sheldon blessed Marian again and knew someday soon he would follow.