

My First Life

A Novel

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For Brooklyn,
where it all began

PART 1

LOST

Today's the day I go to the new shrink.

I didn't sleep well last night thinking about it. Of course, the traffic doesn't help, either. Morning and evening and into the night, cars race down the street. The hump in the road a block south of my building fails to slow them. Even the regulars hit their heads and curse from the bounce and the jolt when they've had too much to drink and forget. Hubcaps litter the side of the road.

Less common, but still regular enough, are the sudden crashes and inevitable sirens and drunken drivers wrapping themselves around utility poles or slamming into parked cars.

We who live in the houses along the street assume the high-speed driving is due to the long straight stretch and the fact that running along the river as it does the street is the best north-south route in this section of town. Also, there really isn't any reason to slow down or stop, unless you live here.

This river, as with too many rivers where people are or have been, shows both the remnants of its lost beauty and the record of its abuse. A quarter-mile downriver, the abandoned fuel company landing spoils the view with rotting timbers and pilings protruding along the shore. Vacant and decrepit buildings border the fuel company property on either side. Beer cans, broken brooms with broken handles, bits of diapers, amorphous mixes of rotting paper and cloth, used and discarded condoms, plastic garbage bags tossed there weeks or months ago and torn open by ravaging dogs or cats—these and more—litter the sidewalk and the lots. Among the waste and decay, the prominent lances of purple loosestrife are in bloom, growing up between the boards and tires and trash.

The river does at least provide a cooling breeze in the summer. And when the summer is in full bloom, the junk trees, which will grow anywhere, and the wild grasses and the brush, and the scrubby, unnamed flowers—these things help you forget, if only for a moment, the abandoned cars and the shattered windows and the broken down buildings with “fuck you” scrawled on the walls.

A quarter-mile or so up the street from the fuel landing, the buildings that line the street on the water side are either renovated from the last real estate boom when everyone thought this part of town was ripe for rampant price appreciation or else they are the corpses of buildings whose turn came too late to be recalled to life. When the boom fizzled, the frenzy of speculation and development died as quickly as it took the local banks to begin saying “no.” Projects were stillborn or only partly finished. A few latecomers made it to completion, only to sit ingloriously ignored and foreclosed upon when they couldn't be sold and rents were unable to carry the debt.

Across the street where I live, one row of houses away from the river, the buildings are less traumatized. Because they were less promising to the real estate developers, lacking river frontage, they suffered less from the wild swings in economic fortune. They're mostly old, wood frame, multi-family houses built into the rising slope of the ground. The first levels are more or less finished basements with walkout fronts. Almost all are built over dirt, no real basements. Most are now tied into the city sewer system, but three houses down, I know for sure, they're still on septic. In a good rain, the septic systems, old and inadequate, back up and you can smell them a half a block away. Some of the buildings, aspiring to greatness in earlier, more promising times, were built with turrets and cupolas and other such pretensions, but for the most part, the houses are plain. They all have lopsided wooden staircases leading up to the first level. All need painting.

The couple that owns 237 River Road, just south of where I live, are out cleaning up the litter that spontaneously appears overnight in the lot across the street from their building. The women upstairs in my building persist in dumping their garbage there. They can't seem to remember when the pickup is or perhaps the problem is agreeing on whose turn it is to take it out and so take this obvious expedient requiring no commitment to a schedule. The anxious couple in 237 repeatedly report them to the city, but the authorities always come too late to catch them at it, if they come at all.

As the couple—I never did get their names—clean the mess neatly into big plastic bags they talk to each other about “the kind of people that would just dump their garbage like that” and they shake their heads in disgust. They never belonged here, as if anyone does.

They believed the real estate agent who sold them their building. It seemed like a good investment at the time — “getting in on the ground floor.” Their plan was to hold it for two or three years and sell the building for a nice profit. Except it didn't work out that way. No one is buying and their two tenants have stopped paying the rent. Slowly the couple is sinking into financial ruin. Slowly their desperation grows as they grimly work to purge the nearby vacant lots along the street of trash, trying to maintain their illusion of a preserved prosperity for any potential buyer.

Up by 244 River Road, across the street, the Italian stallion is working on the wreck he bought for two hundred dollars. It's a totaled, two-year-old Buick. He thinks he's ‘Super Mechanic’ and will fix it up and make a killing. But it's still a wreck and an eyesore and I think he's all talk. He leaves lots of tools around with the hood up and the trunk up. He has managed to get the doors open, but he's been at it a long time now and I don't think he'll ever get it fixed. Besides, he loves his motorcycle too much. He can't seem to work at anything for more than maybe twenty minutes before it's...varrooom, varrooom. Off he goes on his motorcycle. Actually, I don't know how he earns his money. He's living with his parents and doesn't seem to work, that is, have a regular job, you know, with set hours.

It is a neighborhood, at least, a community of sorts along the river. Rivercrest section of Benton. I've been living here now for about a year. One street back, up the hill, it's another world. Up there, it's a suburban world of well-kept, blue-collar, Italian homes. Anyone else would have left, what with the decay and the drugs and the whores along the river. But Italians are interesting people. “Eh, it's my neighborhood—I aint leavin'.” I can hear them now.

I live in 239 River Road, ground floor. My place isn't much, but these days I call it home. Three rooms—kitchen, living room, and bedroom. It sounds bigger than it is. Three small rooms, but they're mine and it serves for now. Plus I get the use of the backyard. Well, we all do, but we kind of know-how to share it so we don't get in each other's way. Not that it's an unfriendly building, because it isn't. I know the other tenants. We speak to each other.

On the middle level, there's John. Quiet. Secretive, really. Evidently into drugs. I see the crack vials in his garbage from time to time. I always think he should be more discreet, but I guess the garbage men don't really care what people do with their lives. John seems anachronistically polite for a young man. That's not common these days. A good looking boy, too. He has dark, brooding eyes and thick black hair parted in the center. His face is smooth and he keeps it close-shaven giving him a vulnerable boyish look in a strong and dangerous man's body. I imagine he has no trouble with the ladies, though I don't remember him ever in the company of a woman, at least not in the neighborhood. He's friendly enough, but his toys are worrisome for a person his age, his youth, you know.

He drives a new Mazda with gold metallic trim and wire wheels, sunroof, tinted windows, big engine. It's got to be drug money. Despite his manners, he seems to wear an invisible sign that we all can see. “Don't fuck with me or my things.” People give his car a wide berth when it's parked on the street. I don't ask too many questions when we meet. “Hiya, John. How's it goin'.” You know, safe stuff. There are rumors of serious violence by his hands. The best part about John is that he keeps very late hours. So I never

hear him.

I know the floors are thin. The previous tenant in John's apartment was a young woman in the throes of getting divorced. It was her bachelor apartment and she was making up for lost time. The music was loud and the parties were loud and the running back and forth and the humping was loud. It was not a relaxing time for me. I hate having to deal with noise problems—of having to ask people to keep it down. I discovered earplugs because of her. Surprisingly, they cut out the noise almost completely. But they didn't cut out the anger that gnawed at me that she could be so inconsiderate, no matter that I found a way to counter her irritating lifestyle. She was only here a short time after I moved in, though. John was a big improvement even if in a scary sort of way.

On the top floor, it's Sheila and Karen. They are a big improvement, as well. Before them, there was that blackish Puerto Rican woman and her daughter. And the cats. Noisy, smelly creatures. The cats, that is. Well, actually, all of them. The daughter didn't take any better care of the cats than she did of her child. Cat piss is the worst. There's no way to get rid of the smell. Water seems only to aggravate it. I don't think she had a litter box in the apartment. Couldn't afford it, I suppose. So of course, she had to have two cats. And on welfare, food stamps, and child support when she could get it. The whole disaster scenario. I never got their names.

The daughter sounded so sweet when you talked to her. Very earnest, childlike voice. Very dedicated to her child. Grief stricken with the collapse of her marriage. It was all very sad and moving. Except that she lied. All the time. About anything and everything. For no apparent benefit to herself. And she didn't do anything, I mean around the house or work for that matter.

As for the mother, she too had let herself go, but in an overweight, trappy kind of desperate way with an outlandish wardrobe mix of cheap, revealing party dresses often worn over skirts and blouses that never seemed to go together. It was like her clothes were in a big, lottery tumbler and when the cylinder stopped rotating whatever mix of clothes came out is what she wore. She and her daughter would sit in the apartment and watch television and talk all day long. It was cable TV. There probably should be a government allowance, like food stamps, for cable TV, the opiate of the masses.

The daughter's husband would come by once in a while, to see the baby, I guess. Then they would fight. And he would yell at her to do something. Clean up the place, clean the baby, do something. And she would cry and tell him, scream really, that she loved him and if only he would love her back she would feel good enough about herself to do these things he was asking her to do. Evidently, she had been to a shrink and had learned just enough to construct a blame-script that didn't involve her. He'd heard this all before and was not interested anymore in the debate.

Eventually, he would slap her, sometimes often. Then there would be a period of silence or at least low-level sound that I could not make out when I assumed they were engaged in "make up" sex. Then he would leave. She always had a few extra dollars after these encounters. I decided it was all part of the child support payment ritual they had worked out. Inevitably, mother and daughter left for god knows where and when Sheila and Karen took their apartment, the daughter was pregnant again.

Actually, Karen took the apartment first with her husband about three months ago. I forget his name. He was very rarely around. But when they separated I was surprised. They had just arrived from Colorado or some such western straight-arrow place. Being from out of town with no local rental history it would normally be hard to get an apartment, but her husband's father was some kind of a big shot in Ravenport and he guaranteed their rent. She was very western. You know, "sir's" and "thank you's" and "your welcome's" scattered in her conversation like raisins in a biscuit. Her hair was long and light brown with an appealing slight curliness. She used very little makeup and even when she dressed comfortably on warm days her clothes were carefully modest, though I noticed that she had long and shapely legs that showed to advantage when she wore a short skirt. She seemed like the kind of wife a man could be happy with. But I guess you

never know unless you walk in their moccasins for a while, as they say.

I never got a feel for her husband. He just wasn't around much. Working hard, I guess. So, when they separated after only about two months I was surprised. I didn't see it coming the way you know when a couple is in trouble. Sheila came after he left. Karen wasn't able to make the rent payments with her salary alone and needed a roommate. She advertised for a roommate and Sheila answered the ad.

Sheila was an unlikely choice if you'd have asked me then. She's very different from Karen. Very confident in herself as a woman and confident that she can handle any man. She's just a little bit of a thing—maybe five feet two. But she's all there and doesn't mind letting you know it, either. Tight clothes over a tight ass and ample breasts are Sheila's specialty. The tighter the better. She turns every head when she appears. Yet she wears her clothes as if she's unconscious of the effect she is having on people, which of course she isn't. But she acts as though she is—as if there's nothing unusual about her clothes, clothes that were little more than painted to her body—that she didn't give it a second thought and never imagined that anyone else did either. Yeah, right.

Maybe it wasn't such an unlikely choice after all. It's exactly the way Karen would like to feel about herself. I don't think she's up to it. I think Sheila and her friends scare Karen sometimes.

Next door, 241 River Road, it's a two-family house. A two-bedroom and a one-bedroom. The two-bedroom, that's the Black Muslim family. He treats his wife like shit. I don't know if that's a Muslim thing, a black thing, or just him. He's very big and would ordinarily, I guess, be quite intimidating, except for his mild way of speaking—not apologetic or deferential, just, I don't know, quiet and sincere. He seems sincere when he talks to you and it defuses your concern about his size and his blackness.

He seems intelligent enough, but when she irritates him, which due to her youth she seems unable to avoid, he just beats the living crap out of her. Actually, I find it disgusting—her lack of self-respect by tolerating such treatment and his undisciplined and unexpected violence. But maybe institutionalized abuse of women, if that's what it is, is better than the guy who's just mean and enjoys beating up his wife. Then again, what's the difference for the woman?

Her teeth in the front have been knocked out. She told me in the street that she had an epileptic seizure and accidentally broke them against the wall. She's had the seizures since she was a child, she said. Stranger things have happened, but I don't believe her. Too many times she's come running out into the night, clutching her robe, screaming in terror for someone to call the police. And each time when they come, after waking the whole neighborhood with her cries for help, she refuses to press charges, disgusting the police, her neighbors, and I think even her husband who usually sits grimly in the back seat of the police car waiting for the charade to be over.

Above them are the lesbians. Rhoda's the dyke and Jane is the other one, whatever that's called. I don't know what to make of them. Rhoda has a daughter—not living with her. She comes to visit from time to time. Nice looking kid. Quite a sexy little thing. About seventeen years old. Seems completely normal. The women, on the other hand, fight like cats. Screaming and yelling at each other all the time. Thank god they're not in my building. One night, I swear, in a wild shouting match, Rhoda fell out of the window and broke her arm. She landed on the trash barrels stored below her window. Lucky she wasn't killed. Actually, Jane is Rhoda's second live-in lover. I wonder how long Jane will last. I think she's bisexual and I think the fights are about her boyfriends. It's very weird. Rhoda is not my type physically at all. She's short and a tad on the plump side and really very masculine looking. Jane, on the other hand, is quite a stunner. Thin, good figure, straight jet-black hair, dark, penetrating eyes, full lips, the kind you want to suck on. I wonder what she sees in Rhoda. Well, different strokes, I guess.

I take a river glimpse between buildings before going into my apartment and I wonder why it offers me so little tranquility. That's the appeal after all—isn't it?—for waterfront property, or water glimpse, anyway. The tranquility of the water scene, the shimmering light, the reflected sky, the primordial connection with our ascent from the ocean. It should be tranquil for me here. That's all I've sought since leaving Sharon and

all the conflicts and the children. That was the most difficult part of my decision to leave. The children. I love them so.

Tranquility was my goal. And yet I can't remember any serious period of tranquility, ever. If I had to describe what it would feel like or look like, I couldn't. I expect that I would know it when I achieved it. So far it has eluded me. And yet, compared to so many others, I guess things could be a lot worse.

I spend a lot of time in my apartment. I feel safe here. In control. I take the phone off the hook as soon as I enter. No one can get to me if I don't want them to. The 'draw bridge' is up and I can count on some undisturbed solitude. I won't leave it off the hook all night. Just long enough to wind down, to feel safe. This lousy little apartment may not be much, but it's mine. I control who and what can get to me here. No explanations, no apologies, no arguments.

I remember when I left the house I first moved into a kind of transition studio apartment. What did I have? A mattress, a beach chair with plastic netting, a card table with two folding chairs, and my hifi set. My friend, Andy, who helped me move said, "Are you nuts? You're not taking the stereo? She never listens to music. It'll take her two years before she realizes it's gone. Take it." He was right.

When people called me then, they'd ask where I was, there was such an echo. Hellooooo, hellooo, helloo, hello. I mean there was nothing to absorb the sound. It was like I was calling from inside a cave. Not now. I've gotten a few things along the way, along with my freedom—a real apartment, a sofa, a couple of armchairs, heavy room darkening curtains, and a Persian carpet. Pictures and photographs I hung on the walls really helped personalize the apartment, made it mine.

I do regret how much television I watch. I seem to need the sound in the background, except when I'm reading. I'm studying about wildflowers. It's been a long-term interest of mine. I tell myself I'm doing it so I can share the knowledge with the children when I take them on nature walks, botanizing and all that. But I think I'm really doing it for me. It seems sort of fundamental to be in touch with nature, to see oneself as an element of a larger picture that is not completely manmade. Maybe it's just that anything associated with people has such a strong potential to become spiteful. Nature is just nature. There's nothing personal in it. And if you get to know the names and the characteristics of wildflowers, where to look for them and how to spot them, they become like friends you can meet almost anywhere. Dirty, empty lots, even like the lot across the street with the loosestrife and the five-lobed cinquefoils and the giant dandelion-like goat's beard. I like knowing the names of the flowers.

As I said, I watch a lot of television, especially when I'm eating and it makes eating take too long, which I regret because it's time I could have spent better reading, exercising, writing, whatever. I find I'm writing a lot of letters these days. I don't know why I like to write letters. Or maybe I do. Nobody writes letters anymore. It makes me feel special. I know they are going to get the letter and think that it's special to get a letter and special of me to write one. Everyone just calls now. But a call is no good. There's nothing to savor afterward except the imperfect memory that fades quickly into just a generalized phone call. "Oh yeah, I got a call from Whomever the other day." One call is like any other. They just merge into a vat of mental waste material. To me, phone calls are the vanilla of communication. They have no individual character for the most part and no lasting value. But a letter! It's a gift basket of flavors. You can reread it and discover new meaning or simply relive the feelings it gave when you first read it. It is a continuing joy. I've been told I write lovely letters.

I guess people are set in their ways. No one takes the trouble to write. I hardly get any letters myself. And the holiday cards are such a disgusting substitute. I hate them. They're worse than phone calls. They're a lying excuse for communication. They're a fraud. I usually just tear them up when I get them without even opening them. I take notice of the return address and send a long letter to whoever sent it to show them what real communication should look like.

My apartment gets a little warm this time of year and dinner preparations only make it hotter. There's not a lot of cross ventilation at the moment. Right now it's the time of day when the wind direction changes

and so there's naturally a period of stillness. I sweat easily and it's been a humid day today. Nothing like what it will be in August, but bad enough.

I like cooking Chinese food. I like especially the cutting and chopping and organizing into little piles and the sauces in little Dixie cups. But you need to get the oil and the wok good and hot and it only adds to the heat in the room. But at least you don't have to cook long. Only a few minutes and you're done, so the heat aspect isn't really so terrible. Actually, that's one of the advantages of Chinese cooking, how quickly everything cooks.

I sit on the couch with my food on a tray table and turn on the TV to watch the news while I eat. I think about the appointment I have for later. It's my new shrink. Highly recommended. Well, we'll see. My mind is distracted and I can't really focus on the broadcast. Nevertheless, my eating is timed perfectly this night. One hour for CNN that fills one hour for dinner.

Dinner is over and it's still light out, but the sun is decidedly lower in the sky and the air is beginning to cool somewhat. The nights still do that in June. By August there will be no difference. Hot as hell during the day. Hot as hell in the evening. I go out in the backyard with Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Wildflowers* and my notebook and some wilted remains of a flower I collected on my walk from the bus stop. I couldn't remember what it was called and as long as I saw there were other flowers around just like it, I wasn't concerned about picking it.

I quickly thumb through the guide to locate the section with that type of flower head. I locate the flower and write it down in my notebook. I've been keeping a record now for about six months of the flowers I've recognized or identified. Almost a hundred different kinds so far.

I close the notebook and put it down beside the couch and close my eyes. The landlord had the lawn mowed yesterday and I can still smell the intoxicating odor of freshly cut grass. If memory had an odor, it would smell like cut grass. I practice my sensory awareness exercises—listening to the sounds of the still warm zephyr through the beech and maple trees along the rear border of the back yard. And, of course, the smell of the grass, and the feel of the breeze and sound of the birds and the far off dog barking at some passerby and the airplane just becoming audible though still very far off. I take a deep breath and relax leaving all the images free to drift and merge and disappear one by one until I slip into a short nap.

When I awake, I go inside to get my copy of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and my English/French dictionary. I'm trying to read it in French. Lots of English penciled into the text for the words I don't know, but I'm pleased that the annotations are getting less and less as I'm slowly working my way through the play. I make myself comfortable once again on the couch and pick up where I left off with *Cyrano*, dictionary on my lap. However, I'm still tired from the poor sleep I had last night and nod off again after only a few moments. When I awake, it's time to get going to the shrink.

Dusk is beginning to blur the day as the darkness of evening waits in the wings. I decide to take the bus to the shrink instead of driving. Just a whim. No reason. I walk to the bus stop about a quarter-mile up the street, by the Market Avenue bridge. The bridge seems to me to be a wannabe version of the Ponte Vecchio in Florence with its shops and walkway. I saw it once when I was on vacation in Europe. It was the only bridge the Germans left standing after their retreat from Italy in World War II. They also failed to burn Paris as Hitler ordered. Interesting people, the Germans—capable of such atrocities and yet culturally sensitive. Well, the Market Avenue Bridge is not quite the Ponte Vecchio. In fact, the stores and such are not really on the bridge itself. They're on the approach to it from the east. But still, I see a similarity for some reason. At least, it makes me think of the Ponte Vecchio, so that must mean something.

The bikers come and go from the restaurant at the foot of the bridge. Developers have been trying to shut that place down for months as a blight on the neighborhood. By itself, it seems harmless enough, but it does attract the drug trade. And those guys are a definite danger. It's not unusual to hear the sound of gunfire at night. You can get a little jumpy waiting alone for a bus. But I figure I'm clearly not a customer or a cop so unless I just get unlucky and happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, I'm okay. So far so good.

It is worrisome, though.

The bus comes and a woman who was waiting inside a nearby store now rushes out to meet the bus. I often think I'm waiting alone only to find in the last seconds before the bus arrives that there are one or two, sometimes more, women waiting in hiding. They don't trust me or the street. It's probably a good policy for them. They can never be too careful these days.

Riding on a bus is like riding in an elevator. No one looks at anybody, people talk in whispers, life seems suspended. Except for kids. For them, it's a trip all by itself. It doesn't matter whether there's a destination or not. But with adults, it's just an elevator ride with sort of understood rules. Everyone fills up the seats one by one first so that every double seat first is a single. And then when there's no other choice, the singles start to get filled in and you can imagine people thinking "What do you want, sitting here next to me? Why didn't you take that other seat? Why me? And you better not talk to me because I don't know you and I don't want to have to be socializing with you when I don't know you, so if you have to sit here just do it and don't make a fuss or start talking to me."

Everyone secretly wishes, I know, that the bus driver would lower the interior lights at night. The buses are too bright. You have to cup your hand to your eyes to look out the window after dark. Mostly all you see is your own image looking out at nothing.

One thing about buses though. I do enjoy watching people and people are always coming and going on a bus if you have any distance at all to cover. You learn to watch people furtively. In the summer women's clothes are often suggestive and revealing, which is fun. For the most part, until we get closer to town the women tend to be poor Puerto Rican and overweight and beaten down, their spirit buried in flesh. The teenagers are still slim and are practicing at being provocative with their boyfriends or would-be boyfriends. They're more interesting to watch. Their lithe young bodies and smiling faces and easy good nature are endearing, really. They're treated well at this stage in their lives. It doesn't seem to last. By the time they're twenty they dress like tramps and when they're thirty their lives have shriveled, reduced to cooking, cleaning, and having babies.

I watch a young couple in the back of the bus talking enthusiastically with each other. They're about seventeen, I guess. When he steals a quick kiss, he also cops a quick feel through her light blouse. She looks around and giggles and pushes him away, uncrossing her bare legs for better leverage. But soon they press closely together again and begin to whisper excitedly. I turn to the front of the bus.

I think again about this shrink. I haven't been to one recently. Of course, when I was married to Sharon there was a steady stream of them. Shrinks and marriage counselors. We tried everything except a witch doctor. I don't know how these people get away with it. You go to them on a regular basis, pay them good money for long periods of time and they never tell you what's wrong with you or what you can do about it. They just talk with you and ask you questions and listen. It is so unstructured and so unfair. There should almost be a law against it. They should be made to give a diagnosis and a treatment plan after the third visit like you would expect from a regular doctor. And that's another thing. You don't have to even be a doctor. Most counselors only have master's degrees. I mean, anyone, practically, can start messing with your mind. And they have creative ways of calling themselves things other than psychotherapists so they can avoid licensing requirements. They become holistic communications consultants or some meaningless equivalent. Because we don't know what to do or where to turn, we go to them. We try them all. How many times have I thought that a good sympathetic bartender would do just as well as these expensive charlatans and at least you're left with a nice buzz afterward.

But we're a culture impressed with legitimacy. And all these shrinks and counselors and therapists and what-have-you lay claim to some title and we're all impressed and we continue to seek them out and try them like some new highly recommended skin cream, hair conditioner, or vitamin supplement.

I pull the string and a little, dull, metallic "ping" goes off by the driver's seat. I get up and walk to the rear exit door. The bus slows gradually. Even so, there is a slight lurch as it comes to a complete halt and I

grab the pole by the door for support. I give one last glance to the couple in the rear. She looks up and smiles at me as I descend into the street. Sweet!

*No, Doc. That would be an understatement
to say it just didn't work out*

Actually it never really did work right from the start
it's a stupid story
we thought she was pregnant
I didn't know what to do so we got engaged
I didn't want to embarrass her
I was twenty years old and she was seventeen
she wasn't even pregnant
stupid stupid stupid
what a joke

Almost right after we were married
we started with marriage counselors
you'll excuse me if by now I seem
a little unenthusiastic
about your profession and what you do here
it's just you have to try something anything
something to get help even when you know
it won't work
Sharon's mother was going to a psychologist
so naturally we went
from the beginning until the end
her mom believing in psychotherapy and all
off and on
her me them us alone together in groups
on weekends every which way
talk talk talk
all bullshit so far anyway

But highly recommended
I remember hearing that from the beginning
you too for that matter
highly recommended

On our honeymoon, she couldn't stand anything I arranged
the plane was too noisy the hotel didn't have ice-skating

who goes to Florida to go ice skating
the side-trips were all dumb
I liked them
Seaquarium porpoises entertaining I thought
with their high jumping and ringing bells
I arranged boat ride tours and dinners
and sketch artists you name it

For Sharon, it was too damp too hot too early too late
it made me sick all her complaining
she was never satisfied
always judging nothing ever okay

Did I ever love her?

Did I ever love her
I don't know I must've once
but I married the first girl who let me fuck her
like a jerk like a kid like a hard-up little putz
just like I knew I would

Her mother was better looking than she was
had sperm swimming in her eyes
Henry Miller said that
my mother-in-law was a tall brunette with highlights of gray
her face was angular with high cheekbones and piercing brown eyes
that when she wanted to could make you uneasy and turn away
you know what I mean
otherwise, you felt a conspiracy building
if you held her gaze
she had a firm body slender and well proportioned
with a man's imagination, I detected beautiful breasts
you know how there are some women
who even as they age
never lose the shape and firmness of young breasts
she was like that

Her hands were long-fingered and sensitive
unlike Italians who moved their whole arms
when they spoke
it was her fingers they played with each other
rubbed and rolled against each other as she spoke
completing a kind of unconscious
three-note chord
her breasts
her fingers
her mouth

She used to kiss me on the mouth
you know when we greeted or said goodbye
I liked that what's not to like
once her colleague noticed and commented on it
and she made a joke
but I always wondered how come too
just something sexy about her
she was married three times
sad cursed life with a kind of desperate pathos

Sharon was very different from her mother
I could imagine a reverse Lolita story
marrying the daughter
to be near the mother
Sharon was shorter than her mother
with a round face and short-cropped blond hair
she had hazel eyes but her gaze
was never arresting the way her mother's was
but as with so many ordinary women
when she smiled her face lit up
and became beautiful
for a time

She wasn't exactly slender but she was okay
her body was adequate
all the essential parts accounted for but no more
what she lacked in physical magnetism
she failed to compensate for with personality
as some women can
I have known the homeliest women
who over time
became more and more attractive
this was not Sharon
she did have nice legs though

Sharon's mother screwed up all her girls
her oldest Susan is completely nuts
her kids—I mean Susan's kids—returning from school
caught her once coming out the of bedroom stark naked
with their Sunday school teacher
also buck naked

Susan's husband Daniel is even nuttier than she is
they loved science fiction conventions
they called them conventions but it was just a cover to get laid

they were really orgies drugs cheating you name it
we went to one in Michigan with them
even there I couldn't get laid Sharon wasn't in the mood
and I didn't have the nerve to strike out on my own
something I still regret a missed opportunity
I did get to see the aurora borealis though
for the only time
amazing unexpected mind-bending sight
it makes you wonder what else you haven't seen

Those two Susan and her husband were both
so full of bullshit
we're free we respect each other
we're not each other's jailers
anything's okay if we love each other
blah blah blah
god I was so jealous of all the ass they got between them
of course, they eventually got divorced

The middle daughter Samantha was spoiled rotten
she was the beauty of the group
could do no wrong
what a mercenary bitch but the world is for the beautiful right
and there's no doubt she was and knew it and knew its worth
and would work it until she couldn't work it anymore
her mother knew it
and didn't care because she liked having a beautiful girl-child
who could fuck men over

You've got to have a profession her mother would tell Sharon
you can't trust men they always cheat eventually
I love you Michael she'd say but you know it's true or might be
and then you're nowhere if you can't support yourself
trapped dead powerless
what a message of hope to give your newly married daughter

This was our first dinner mind you as a married couple
and she's giving her daughter a lesson
on how to survive a rotten marriage while she's eating my food
while I'm thinking what would it be like to fuck her
I mean she just had that effect on you

Of course I felt judged unfairly and violated too. Ironic, yes?

It was a great dinner and that was a great little apartment
basement job the kind you think are dark and horrible and damp
and embarrassing to say you live in

not this one
it was lovely beautiful it was ours it had three rooms
with those funny high up basement windows
every room painted white so it was very bright
and the back door in the kitchen was mostly glass
so lots of light came in from the backyard
with grass and a couple of big trees
and the owner's kids playing in the backyard
squealing and running around and wanting to play with me

And she's eating my food in my castle with my wife
and telling her to get a job
so she can leave me comfortably when the inevitable time comes
I mean Sharon wanted to work anyway
but her mother's coaching certainly gave a bad feel to it
like there was an ulterior motive

Actually I wasn't too happy with that meal
Sharon jumping up and down being the perfect little housewife
and me sitting there
as if I ever told Sharon not to go to school
or get a profession or whatever the hell she wanted to do
what am I supposed to do
guarantee I'm never going to cheat on her daughter
where's my guarantee

*No, I didn't think Sharon had to prove anything to me.
Doc, she didn't owe me anything.*

You know I remember this line from a movie
the fucking you get aint worth the fucking you get
I love that line I don't remember the movie any more
but it was a true line
I loved the play on words and the play on life
maybe it was too bitter but I felt pretty bitter near the end of our marriage
I mean how long do you put up with always being told
you're a dollar short
maybe I think she did owe me something
loyalty or just friendship or help or something
I don't know what but yes she did owe me something
good sex at least or even some modest interest in me
something

Making love to her?

First off I didn't know what I was doing
I mean she was a lot more experienced than I was

she was only sixteen when I met her
and her cherry had already been plucked
she told me it was from horseback riding
yeah right
but I figured it was from her boyfriend fingering her
she got caught one time in the closet with his hands down her pants
she told me this I guess to show me how honest she was with me

She's probably telling the truth too
she probably never did really have sex before me
but she did everything else I'm convinced
so she should have been some help
but she wasn't

I just fumbled along trying a little of this and a little of that
when it was all done she just starts crying
I ask her if there's anything I can do
no
was it any good for you
she says no
is there anything I can do better next time
no
well we've got to do something tell me how I can be better
no you're the man you're supposed to know what to do
how the hell am I supposed to know what to do
some things you just have to learn by experience
and the truth was I had none

I tell her your mother's not here you can talk dirty
give me some hints I can't read your mind
nothing
then she actually says to me if you don't know how to make me happy
I can't tell you
if you really loved me you'd know how

Don't smile. You think it sounds funny. It isn't funny.

You know men can be insecure about sex too
I didn't need this mind-reading bullshit and the crying
I wanted to think I was okay and if I wasn't
we would kind of get better at it together
I didn't need it to be a fucking
test of whether I loved her

You know maybe
I had an unrealistic idea of what marriage would be like
but so did she

and talk about dead meat
what's that old joke about Jewish women
what's the difference between Jell-O and a Jewish women
Jell-O moves when you eat it

Yes, I'm still angry. I let myself be angry now.

I'm really angry at myself mostly
that's what you guys say all the time anyway isn't it
twelve years I can't believe I was such a putz
twelve years
how long should it take to wise up

You know we were gonna get divorced a couple of years into it
but her dad talked us out of it
I liked him
big ballsy guy very affectionate very generous
had a heart attack a real bad one
he was getting over it when I first met Sharon
so he had a happy outlook on life
I guess he was glad he was still alive and planned
not to let women or kids or anything make him crazy

He was easygoing but firm
men loved him you know in an okay way
he was a fisherman he liked to travel he liked to tell stories
he was very sure of himself
he was a funny guy
but very chauvinistic
I mean women were definitely there to serve men
but women loved him anyway he was such a charmer
and even though he was pretty overweight he was a damn good dancer
and a great cook and very generous
did I say that already
and I had the impression he was good in bed
For that women will put up with a lot of shit
if the sex is good

Anyway we were gonna get divorced
we couldn't talk to my parents
they would have died
if they knew we were thinking of getting a divorce
my Uncle Norman got divorced once
and the family was shocked
I was about ten years old at the time
I was shocked

About a year later Uncle Norman and Aunt Shirley got remarried
I guess they shocked themselves
I wouldn't talk to Sharon's mother about our problems
Or maybe it was only mine I don't know
I didn't want to give her the satisfaction
you know
I-told-you-so

So anyway we call Sharon's dad
he insists
we come over to his place right away
and we both spill our guts
and hearing ourselves it all sounded so stupid and petty
and he kept hugging us and telling us everybody has these problems
and it all goes away if you can be friends with each other
and the family all loves us so much and wants us to be happy and so on
he was so sweet and he cared so much that like jerks
we decided to give it another go
we did our duty by everyone
it could've been nice and clean then
too bad

What do I mean clean? Doc, really?

I mean kids
what else
anyone who has kids to keep a marriage together
is fucking crazy
so naturally that's what we did
but you know in a weird kind of way it did keep us together
we love our kids and surprisingly even to me
we never really fought over them

We agreed mostly on how to raise them
I was in the delivery room with both my kids
Sharon nursed both of them
we were alternative-life-style kind of parents
Sharon nursed our son, Allen, till he was two
and our daughter Meredith until she was three
we didn't use canned baby foods ever
we mashed up real food for them
we never had screaming babies that make some parents crazy
I mean it's hard to scream with a tit in your mouth
right

Considering everything we were very responsible parents
kids can keep you together but they don't solve your problems

we fought about everything else
except the kids
and staying married you can feel just as alone

Doc, how is it possible for marriages to turn to shit so thoroughly
I mean how is it possible to have kids with a woman
who you can't remember ever saying one nice thing to you
making kids it's such an intimate thing to do
I mean you have to take your clothes off
get close and kiss and hold each other
and do your thing
you know I can't remember her ever being
really affectionate towards me
it must have been there
can you block it out so completely
honest to god I don't remember her ever being my friend
and we made everybody happy
and everybody loved the kids

But now it's not neat and it's not clean
marriages come and go but the kids are there forever
and in the hands of some women
they're a weapon pointed right at their ex-husband's heart

And please spare me the social commentary
on abuse and oppression
and how the courts used to be so unfair to women
it may have been true once but not anymore
no matter what
the man loses
it's all bleeding heart bullshit
women use the kids period end of sentence
and if they're the dumpee forget it
they'll never be rational towards you again

*No, sex wasn't the issue, Doc,
and, well, maybe it was.*

What do I mean
I mean I don't know where do I start
I got better at sex
I read books I went to x-rated movies
I did research you might say
one time I found this really good marriage manual
I read it and gave it to Sharon
I said it was a helpful book that
I had learned a lot from it would she like to read it

you know what she says
I can't identify with this book
what's to identify I say
you take the girl's part I take the boy's
anyway she never read the book

So I would practice on her what I found out and I was amazed
you know it's all biological I mean
if you punch the right buttons
the old piano roll plays the right tune
so after a while Sharon having orgasms was not our problem
so you see sex was not an issue anymore except
they were unmoving silent orgasms weird emotionless crazy
so sex was still an issue
I mean it was like
she didn't want to give me any credit for her orgasms
she kept them all inside
to herself for herself
it was frustrating and it made me angry
so I guess sex never stopped being an issue

I wanted a good lay so badly it's all I ever thought about
so that's when I started thinking about cheating on her
even if it would give her mother
an I-told-you-so moment
goddamnedest thing though
Sharon beat me to it
in fact I know of at least two guys she did
one was at the company where I was working for chrissakes
and the other that I know for sure was her chiropractor
I saw him once
he looked like her father
so I thought that explained a lot

After the chiropractor I figured I was taking things too lightly
it was not a good sign
I probably was repressing and all
so we found this psychologist he was Swiss
and had a great accent and wore pullovers
and slippers and no kidding he smoked a pipe
actually he only held the pipe because tobacco smoke makes me sick
and I asked him if he could refrain while we were with him
I thought he was going to need a shrink after that
but he manned up and said okay

I'm watching this movie on cable. Cinemax has these bullshit dirty movies that aren't really dirty, just tits and ass. But sometimes I watch them. Suddenly, I smell talcum powder. The air fills with the sweet aroma and I look around and there's no reason for the smell, but it's there and powerful just the same. I close my eyes and drift with the fragrance, analyzing it, trying to determine if it's real or another aura. I get them sometimes. I remember waiting in the subway one time and I suddenly smelled apples. Like on a farm or a country roadside vegetable store. The air is musty and cool because that's when you buy fresh apples—in the fall. And the air has that apple smell, not sweet like applesauce, but a little zippy, maybe from the slight fermentation that may be going on in the bottom of the buckets. I don't know why I smelled apples that day.

That's when I learned about auras. In the subway. I asked someone if he smelled apples too and of course, he didn't. But we talked about it while we waited for the train and he said they were called auras. I've come to learn that they frequently precede a seizure or a migraine, but that's never been the with me, at least, so far.

You know, instead of feeling that it was a problem, my having auras once in a while, I like it. It's like a special sense. I think of it as a gift. Not a talent, because I had no conscious claim to the ability. But a gift, handed to me for nothing, for me to enjoy.

The talcum powder smell soothed me and made me feel clean and I remembered my mother drying me with a big towel after a bath. She didn't pat me dry the way I've since seen grown women dry themselves. She'd rub me briskly instead, shaking my little body, getting the circulation going as she dried me. I never liked that part of it much. But then I'd stand there in the brightly lit, warm, steamy bathroom and she'd take the container of talcum powder and she'd sprinkle it on my body and very gently spread it around and the air would fill with the sweet scent as I stood there naked with my mother completely dressed and I'd formulate in my mind how to ask her why it was okay for her to see me naked, but not for me to see her naked. But I never dared ask her because I sensed it was a dangerous question, better left unasked. I don't know what I feared when I didn't ask her that, but something kept me from asking and my intuition tells me now it was probably just as well. My mother scared me about her body when I was only five or six years old and the talcum powder reminded me of it.

I remember another time when I was older. A bunch of kids and I were huddled discussing a bit of news related to a partially overheard remark leading one of my fellow nine-year-olds to claim that for some exotic reason a man will sometimes push his penis into a lady's bellybutton. None of us could make any sense out of this unusual behavior, but my friend swore he was conveying it on good authority. This was too strange and too interesting to let alone and clearly did not involve anything, in my young mind, my parents would be doing to each other so I did not feel any precautionary restraint. I told my mother what my friend had said, expecting we would both laugh about this silly story. Instead, she looked uncomfortable and mumbled something that I no longer remember. But the next day she gave me a book on the facts of life written for children. My mother was a firm believer in books and I got this trait from her, for which I am grateful. I dutifully read the book, but what it told me no longer sounded as strangely fun as my friend's version.

My mother and father usually slept late on Sundays. I would get up and play quietly in the room I shared with my older brother, Leon, or go to the living room and listen to records like "The Little Engine That Could" on our big Zenith console. Or I'd listen to the radio. My favorite show was "Big John and

Sparky.” Big John would play children’s records with stories or fairy tales. I’d sit with my head practically against the huge speaker because I played it very low so as not to disturb my parents. I don’t remember what Sparky was. A person, an elf. I don’t remember.

Usually, I would listen to the radio or the phonograph or play with my toys until my parents came out of their bedroom ready for our special Sunday morning breakfast. Once, I was very excited because Big John was playing songs from the Uncle Remus album and we had just gone to see "The Song of the South" at the Radio City Music Hall the weekend before. I heard my parents stirring in their bedroom and excitedly I ran to tell them what was on the radio. I opened the door and burst in. My father was still lying down on the bed, the blanket covering him, but my mother was sitting on the edge of the bed facing the door. Naked.

It was like a psychic explosion, like rolling off the bed in your sleep and suddenly in an instant, you’re falling and sensory experiences get crammed into a microsecond and fill you with an entirely unexpected experience. There was a startled scream from my mother, a look of horror on her face and a wild clutching of cloth or blanket to cover her large bare breasts and a sudden mid-flight paralysis by me followed instantly by abject apologies for I knew not what and a hasty retreat, backing out the door and closing it, my continuous stream of apologies trailing behind me like the glistening trail of a slug on the sidewalk. It’s possible I did that once or twice more before I learned to utterly curb my enthusiasm if it led to barging into their bedroom.

I did, however, realize that I must have stumbled onto something interesting here and tried unsuccessfully by subterfuge, with mirrors and so forth, to catch her naked again to see what it was that was so forbidden to me. The task was beyond my abilities. So I continued to pose my question to my mother only in my head. Why could she see me naked and I couldn’t see her? But I never asked and I never found out.

There was no such problem with bodily parts with my father. I remember my mother frequently reminding him to take me to the bathroom with him when he pissed so I’d see how it works and learn to do it the same way. I remember standing by the toilet after my father had done his business, holding my little penis going “wee, wee, wee.” Toilet training, you see. Well, my dad had the biggest cock I ever saw, which wasn’t really saying much because the only other cock I’d seen was my little one. I was impressed as hell that mine would some day grow that big.

My mother had terrific breasts as I recollect even from my brief encounters. I wonder if all boys at some time or other see their mother’s breasts and that’s why we all love tits so much. It reminds us of our mothers. Because there’s no doubt that we do love breasts.

Tits and ass. Men are so predictable. I remember getting a CB radio for my car shortly after getting divorced. It would be fun, I thought. But it wasn’t. It was scary and embarrassing. Scary because of the violence it exposed you to. I live a fairly sheltered life amongst fairly educated people. Professionals mostly. So I was unprepared for the anonymous voices spewing out, in their protective isolation, the hatred, the threats, the accusations that emerge from what must be their terrified, horror-filled lives. It frightened me that these people were restrained only by fear of the law, from acting out their frustration and aggression and suppressed violence. Those who tell you, “It can’t happen here” when referring to Nazi Germany never owned a CB radio.

Also, it’s embarrassing that men are so easy. You’re driving along listening to the CB for colorful communications such as "Smokies down the road with a picture taker." (Translation—State police with a radar unit.) Listening to the half-hearted banter of the heading-home crowd, suddenly a female voice comes on the air. All it takes is a “Howdy, boys” and she’s got half the drivers within range knocking on her signal trying to get directions for a good time, like a bunch of mindless dogs after a bitch in heat. One whiff and they’re all there sniffing and jerking and shaking with anticipation. They’re so easy and so undignified. Had they no self-respect? God, they behaved like Pavlov’s dogs, slobbering and dripping all over themselves for they don’t even know what. Probably a case of the clap. Or worse.

So I’m watching this dumb movie. Tits and ass. And talcum powder.

But I've learned to respect the power of associations and enjoy the paths it can lead you down. It can help you get a hook into a piece of a lost or long-forgotten memory. A pinky, as it were, is all it takes. And once you've got your pinky in you can gradually expand your awareness, little by little, like a fragrance spreading to fill the room, until gradually the complete memory returns and you are there and it's all within your conscious control again and you can turn it around or circle it, feel it, see it in whatever detail you like. All it takes is an association, a hook to regain that long-dormant memory.

Take, for instance, a soft, cool, misty rain. I'll never think of misty rain without associating it with Linda. Sharon and I had been going to a folk dancing group pretty regularly for several years. Most of the people we socialized with were involved in this folk dancing group. I was never very good at it. But I enjoyed the exercise and the people were interesting and usually intelligent and accomplished. I have no theory for why this is true. It is merely an observation. There also seemed to be a randy undercurrent. This may not have been a product of the folk dancing so much as a product of the type of person it attracted.

There was once a dance-weekend at a beautiful, rural location that Sharon and I went on that comes to mind sometimes when I'm in a misty rain, along with the mental image of Linda. I did some dancing, but mostly just walked around enjoying the countryside, socializing with the dancers who were taking a break. That's how I met Linda. She was, like me, the spouse of an avid dancer and like me, mostly an avid observer. So, we had time on our hands and walked and talked and found we were quite comfortable with each other. We spent a lot of time with each other. I was not really on the make, but when she told me her biggest regret for the weekend was not having brought her diaphragm, I understood that if I was interested so was she. I was still married and did not feel ready for such a bohemian lifestyle. I ignored the implications of her remark. She took it well. We continued a very friendly and cordial relationship for the rest of the weekend. On the last day, we experienced together a moment of unexpected awe.

It was Sunday morning, early. Linda and I met and decided to take a walk while our spouses did their dancing thing. A misting rain deterred casual walking for most and, so, kept the trail and the surrounding grounds pretty much for us alone. Feeling frisky, walked off the trail and into the encompassing forest. As we walked, we came upon what I quickly recognized was an expansive field of Mayapple plants growing beneath the overhanging trees. Never having seen these plants before, but knowing of them from my wildflower studies, I stooped to examine the beautiful green inverted wishbone shape of the stem. At the crotch of the wishbone was a single, white, dainty bell-shaped flower. Above, at the tops of the two arms of the upward-pointing wishbone large, green, fan-like leaves projected, creating a sort of green canopy.

Looking down on this field, I could see only the green canopy formed by the large leaves, about eighteen inches from the ground. I stooped to look under the canopy and saw hundreds of white flowers, like ballerinas inside a tent, dancing in the green, tinted light, while the gentle rain continued. I stood up: green canopy; I stooped: white ballerinas dancing. I turned my head up to feel the rainy mist refreshing my face with its cool moisture. I opened my mouth, closed my eyes, and felt even then the moment burrow deeply into my memory where the soul exists. Linda and I turned to each other and kissed. It was just one of those inspired moments, an opportunity too perfect to be missed.

*

I get up now and turn the television off. Stupid waste of time! My apartment is completely dark. And quiet. The evening is sultry and warm and I've left the front door open so that the cool evening breeze from the river can come through the screen door and out the back window. The apartment has great cross ventilation.

I walk to the open front door. A cool breeze blows through the screen and I hear the sound of a plane in the distance. The night and the plane remind me of a time in Florida of carousing with frogs by the pond at

my parent's condominium one evening and looking up to see a jet, very high and with glowing lights, silently streaking across the star-speckled sky, a testament to man's godlike achievements.

Tonight my mind seems filled with memories and associations. Perhaps it's from my recent visit to the shrink. Every sense in my body reminds me of something in my past. I am bursting with memories. I return to the living room and sit on the couch. I lean my head back and close my eyes. It's no use. The governor is off and my mind is racing with images and memories flashing by, above the speed limit as it were. I need to slow it down again and the only way I know is to take an aspirin and a shot of scotch. I don't know if the aspirin and scotch really do anything or whether it's just a ritual I've developed that my brain recognizes and goes along with. But it always works and in a few minutes, I'm usually finally able to fall asleep if I'm in bed, or able to read once again if I'm not.

It's nine-thirty and I'm too restless to go to sleep. I close my eyes again and think of Linda. I like to remember her unspoken offer of a sexual dalliance and fantasize about what it might have been like had I taken her up on her obvious willingness. I think of it with mixed emotions. Despite the Mayapple moment, missed opportunities or no opportunities seem to characterize my life. Linda, in general, was just one more. Yet, my time with Linda was among the most concrete of my several jack-off scenarios and therefore the most suitable for service.

My contempt for my lack of success with women lasts only so long as I drift into a reverie of Linda and me. In my mind, I am free to explore her body and pursue my pleasures, and ultimately, to relieve my sexual tension.

I doze off.

When I open my eyes it's eleven o'clock and I'm wide awake. I hate masturbating. Whenever I do I feel disgusted with myself afterward. I need air. I need to move around. I need to feel something real. My apartment begins to stifle me. Suddenly I feel panicky about breathing, about getting sufficient air. I get up and pace the living room. It won't help. I know that from experience. I go to my hall closet and put on a light jacket. Taking my keys and my wallet, I lock the apartment and walk into the cool night air to my car just down the street.

As much to reassure me that I can now do things like this without having to explain or get permission, either overt or implied, I decide to drive to the town pier. It's a ride of only ten minutes, and with my nap, I'm sure I won't be too tired for work tomorrow.

The streets are quiet and mostly empty. I leave the windows down and drive with the air conditioner off. The breeze washes my face like a cool splash and my breathing is regular again. I feel daring and free for this simple act of self-determination.

From the well-lit residential streets, I pass to the dark commercial streets bordering the harbor area. I know the way and find the entrance to the town beach. The parking lot is empty except for two cars parked together under a light with young people standing around, radios playing. I park away from them and walk to the pier. The air is now decidedly filled with the fragrance of the ocean. Walking onto the sand, the soothing, periodic whoosh of the waves washing the shore draws me closer and closer to the water's edge. I walk along the strandline of the outgoing tide. There is a full moon and everything is bathed in its silvery light. Moonlight is special because it is reflected light. That's what makes moonlight unique and why everything seems eerie and lifeless in bright moonlight. Some parts of the spectrum are missing—the parts that reflect life and hope.

The tide's edge is not enough for me. I must get closer. I walk onto the rock breakwater jutting out into the bay. As I walk, it gets narrower and narrower. I walk to the very last rock. I crouch down and listen to the sound of the edge of the surf rolling its way along the breakwater to the shore. I notice an inexplicable chillness of the air as the moon moves temporarily behind a cloud. Soon, the moon reappears, but the chill remains.

Looking out over the black and ageless water, I am overwhelmed with the sense of my own isolation. For all my memories, for all my freedom, I am alone. I sit on the wet rocks and listen to the seagulls circling overhead.

I wake up slowly. My eyes open and I cautiously look around my room. The light is coming in through the parted curtain hanging over the casement window. The bedroom has no closet, but rather an armoire. The armoire is okay. I don't have that many clothes anyway. It seems vaguely European and compensates for the makeshift and inadequate appearance by American standards. I wish there was more room for books, however. Only enough room for a small night table beside the bed. I have six or seven books and a couple of magazines piled on it. My glass of scotch is resting precariously on a folded napkin on top of the pile of books. Usually, I just put the glass on the floor.

It's five to six.

The walls need patching where the plaster has cracked, but most of the problems have been hidden by the pictures I've hung up. Two of my own, done years earlier when I was a student and had the motivation and space in a much larger apartment. It was only Sharon and me then. No family, no child support payments.

One of the paintings that is by me is of a young girl reading, done in oil. It was from a small black and white print in the book review section of the Sunday Times. She is sitting in bed, blankets pulled around her, so except for her face and short-sleeve covered arms her charms are not revealed and her age is not well established, though evidently young. The book she is reading rests in her lap. I elaborated the colors from my imagination. The whole scene seems to project a reverence for books that caught my eye and appealed to me. I added the colors and backlit the girl for dramatic effect. Funny thing is that I seemed to use up all my emotional attachment to the scene by the time it was complete. Though I am satisfied with the results, the painting doesn't speak to me anymore. Yet I still hang it up. It is big and covers most of the crack behind it.

The only other painting of mine that I still retain is purely abstract. I only did this one abstract. No others. It was too difficult for me, not knowing where I was going or what I was painting. I struggled with this one. I hated the effort itself, unlike with the painting of the reading girl and many others that I gave away as gifts.

Yet surprisingly, I like this painting more than I do that of the girl. This is very strange to me and I have no explanation. It's a large painting. Maybe two feet by three feet. Maybe more. The colors are bright and vibrant with large patches of pure white to offset and enhance the smaller, vividly colored patches. I think it's the boldness of the large white areas that I am so fond of. It took conscious creative thought to make the white areas as large as they are. At least I like to think so.

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Still in bed, I look around the room trying to feel calm and content, but all I feel is adrift. Another day.

After a few minutes I push the covers aside and slowly get up and go to the bathroom to urinate. It comes out slowly and again I worry that something is wrong. I'll give it a few more days and then I'll have to see a doctor. I hate the thought of anything seriously wrong. I don't know how people survive the degradation of a hospital stay.

I knew an engineer once, older man. He had cancer, maybe of the bladder. I don't remember. But he went through hell. They had to stick a catheter up his cock on a pretty regular basis. The discomfort and the

humiliation would have made me crazy. And my father had angina. They did a catheterization on him, of course, to see the extent of the closures. He described it for me once. It sounded awful. They stick a tube about a quarter-inch in diameter, maybe I exaggerate, into an artery in your thigh and work it until it gets to your heart so they can see the blockage in your arteries. And of course, you're awake.

With all the advances in medicine, why can't they figure out that these things hurt people and disgust us? Why can't they figure out how to avoid all this? Not enough doctors get this procedure done to them.

I'm terrible at this medical stuff. I faint easily in hospitals. I went to visit Sharon when she had her tonsils out. We were married and she was having sore throats all the time and the doctor finally said to lose the tonsils as soon as the current infection was over. I went to see her after the surgery and she was asleep, lying on her side, her head on a pillow, with a small stainless steel dish under her chin. It was there to catch any drooling. One look at the bloody yuck dripping from her mouth as she slept and everything started going pink and I headed for the hall to lie down on a gurney before I fell.

I remember visiting my grandfather once after he had just had a gall bladder operation. He was a bit of a hypochondriac and there's nothing better for one of this type than really to have something wrong with him. He studied his operation. He had all his pertinent books by his side. He knew all the procedures. When Sharon and I arrived, after a few words of "how are you" he begins to tell us, in detail, about his operation. I started taking deep breaths and looking around the room trying not to listen while pretending to be interested, so as not to offend him. It was only partly working when he said, "You want to see the drain in my chest?" He lifted his pajama shirt to show us and the next thing I knew some Philippine doctor was giving me smelling salts and I was in the bed next to my grandfather's.

I know my time will come to face the terror of serious hospital time—it does to everyone eventually, except those who die young by accident or fate. I know I'll be terrible. I dread it and fear it. I pray that doctors learn how to eliminate pain before it's my turn. How much time do I have, I wonder?

I did hospital time once. A long time ago, when I was about twenty-five. I had a low-grade fever that wouldn't go away. After a couple of weeks, the doctor said I have to go to the hospital to have some serious tests done to find out what's going on with me.

After about six days of testing, taking blood, first this side, then that, then this side again, they decided I have leukemia. I was twenty-five years old and I had leukemia. They didn't actually tell me I had leukemia, just that they wanted to take some of my bone marrow to study and they wanted to prepare me mentally for the procedure, which of course was going to be painful and disgusting.

My life had not gotten lost then yet and I thought about the prospect of dying. Even then I was an agnostic, at most. I pleased myself that I did not suddenly get religion and plead to make a deal with god so long as he let me live. I loved life then and part of that love was feeling that every day was a treasure and that I had already been very lucky. Strangely, I felt at peace with the prospect of death then. I had so much more to look forward to in years then and yet I was at peace. And now? I've gotten lost somehow. My life has never gelled. Somehow everything seems temporary, transitional. I don't know. Pointless?

Those people who say you should live in the present I now think are wrong. My curse is that I'm only living in the present. I take no satisfaction from my past and I have no enthusiasm for my future. I live only in the meaningless, endless, fruitless, flicker of the moment.

Anyway, I had called my brother then to talk to him about the bone marrow stuff. He was very helpful. The first thing he said was, "Bullshit. Did they test you for mono?" Who knows? They don't tell you squat. That afternoon I asked the doctors if they tested me for mono. He said they were going to do that as a last possibility before the bone marrow test. Probably tonight. They did and it was mono. A special diagnostic team working on me for a week, at great expense, came up with no definitive diagnosis, but my brother figured it out eleven hundred miles away over the phone with no tests and no cost to me. I'm not complaining mind you. I'd rather have mono than leukemia. The point is that for a time at least I thought I

had leukemia and I handled myself well then. Would I do as well now? Some attitudes change and others do not. "It's complicated" explains a lot about life.

The Sunday paper is at the front door. I pick it up. The air smells fresh and, early as it is, it's still a little chilly from the unusually cool night. I quickly look at the bold headline, unable to avoid it. "40,000 AT ANTI-TAX RALLY." I pull out the arts section and throw the rest in the trash. I just want the schedule of events. I don't read the paper anymore. I just get angry at the rampant stupidity if I do.

I read a biography of Gandhi a few years ago. I wanted to believe that he was right. That peace wins out over violence. I wanted to cultivate a benign, forgiving, accepting, calmness. I wanted to emulate his positive and loving attitude. It didn't work. I didn't have his inner vision and I didn't know how to get it. I still don't. And maybe Gandhi was a lucky fool.

But at least I learned to avoid the things that make me crazy. Like the newspapers. The news industry in general. And the commentators. It's all bullshit and it's all insincere and it's mostly stupid promoting of the opinions of the owners—who in turn pander to the prejudices of their largest customer base.

Freedom of the press? By god, that's all the Constitution guarantees—noninterference with the press. There's nothing about the responsibility of the press to be fair or accurate or rational. It's all become transparent posturing and show business. And the letters to the editor from the readers. Oh, my god. Where do they find people so stupid, so narrow-minded, so self-centered, so uninformed, so unable to recognize even the smallest inconsistency or idiocy in their arguments and pronouncements? Who cares what these morons think? Then I remember that intelligent editors are choosing these letters to get just the reaction they are getting from me now. They go to their meetings and pat themselves on the back for being controversial and daring—when all they've been is manipulative.

So I don't get the paper every day anymore or listen to the news. Just the Sunday paper for the ads and the arts section and the events calendar. Every week I look for something that can get me into a community of people. I'm still looking for a visceral connection.

I spread out the arts section on the coffee table in the living room, but my heart isn't in it. I need music at times like this when I'm feeling depressed and lonely. At least I'm able to admit to myself that that's how I'm feeling. I turn on the stereo and place "The Man of La Mancha" on the turntable. It's very powerful medicine for me, which I use only sparingly so that I don't desensitize myself to its influence. That's a concept I learned from our family doctor when I was a kid and doctors made house calls. He wouldn't give penicillin for a viral infection, even though we all wanted me to get something to make me well again. He insisted that there was nothing to do for a virus except wait it out. The best medicine in these cases, he said, was time. Also, the inevitable two aspirins, plenty of fluids, plenty of rest. He said he didn't want to give me antibiotics when I didn't need them or they might not be effective for me when I did need them. I respected him for that. Anyway, Don Quixote and Dulcinea are my antibiotics now. I have to be careful to use them only when really needed.

I sit and listen to the overture. My mind drifts to the Jewish Marriage Encounter weekend Sharon and I attended trying desperately to make things better, to make things work. Music was a big part of the weekend. Early in the weekend-long program, they played Aldonza's song "It's All the Same to Me." Aldonza is the gutter slut who explains to Don Quixote the kind of woman she is. She is annoyed and disgusted by his ludicrous courtesies towards her. The singer's voice is wonderfully expressive—thick and guttural and harsh and filled with contempt for the world. It is a powerful song, especially knowing now what was to come before the weekend was out. The music paints a very convincing portrait of self-loathing.

I remember an unfortunately obese woman in the group bursting into tears just at the end of a break. She had read a poster on the wall that was supposed to be inspirational. It said, "God does not love garbage." The implication was that God loves you, so you are not garbage. She got the message wrong, backward. She felt like garbage, so she understood the sign to mean God does not love her. This was just one more blow to

her that she could no longer take. She fell apart completely, crying deeply and left the retreat. She seemed very nice. Sweet and gentle. It was too bad.

Personally, I have always felt that crying like that was therapeutic. Somehow it cleanses. I don't remember anymore, but I think it was therapeutic for her, too. I just remember vividly how powerful the music was...that it had possessed the power to induce this reaction in this poor woman. She felt about herself the way Aldonza felt about herself. I hadn't felt like garbage then. I thought Sharon was the garbage. Not really. I guess that's not fair. I thought she needed to learn how to communicate, to show affection. I don't know. I had a long list of things I wanted her to do differently or better.

At these weekend encounter things, you feel wrung out emotionally. Somehow, for a brief moment, you feel liberated, ennobled, really at peace. Maybe it's just a trick, but it does work for a while. Toward the end of the weekend, when everyone is feeling lots better about themselves, their partner, and the world, the organizers of the weekend played another song from "The Man of La Mancha." The counterpoint to the song "It's All the Same Me" is called "Dulcinea." It is the ludicrous name that Don Quixote has given to Aldonza and he invests in this ideal Woman all his cockeyed, glorious delusions of Platonic Beauty and Truth and Honor.

On his deathbed, he has won Aldonza over. She implores him to remember his dream, to remember the name he used to call her. As I remember this even now my eyes water. She sings in her most lyrical voice of his vision of Dulcinea and she has become Dulcinea. You hear it in her words, in her inflections, in her emotion, in her voice. The harsh voice of Aldonza has been replaced by the sublime voice of Dulcinea. She has been transformed and ennobled by his vision. Change for us all is no longer a theoretical possibility, but rather a manifest actuality.

It was a most amazing inspirational moment to hear the same person who first knew herself to be Aldonza, to hear that hard, cruel voice transform itself, because of an attitude change, into that sensuous, sweet, and lovely voice of Dulcinea. It was unforgettable, I tell you. I don't even need to hear the music. The memory of the transformation is so vivid, merely thinking about it gives me a lump in my throat. I don't think this is weak or silly of me. I like believing that such redemption is possible. Also, I like being in touch with my 'feminine' side.

I don't know what to do today. I know that activity is important so that one doesn't become morbid. I decide to do the bills. This is a hateful job, but when it's done there is always a sense of satisfaction that there is, once again, enough money after all. Rent. Electric bill. Texaco. Car insurance. Telephone bill. Credit card installment. Will that balance ever get to zero? I swear again to leave the card out of my wallet. But I don't. You never know when you might need it. Oil bill for the furnace. Thank god the winter is drawing to a close. Child support. Payment to the lawyer for the last time I had to take Sharon to court to get her to stop interfering with my seeing the kids. She has become relentless in her campaign of obstruction. She has overcome her early passive shock and gone to war with me. Now our children are her weapons of choice.

I play back in my mind, as I do so often lately, how I lurch through my life.

*

It all comes back, like a bad dream suddenly remembered because of a freakishly random association. In this case, it was the sudden chill in the air, as it was then, that reminded me of how the end began and I am there once again living through it in my mind, real and fully present—

This is a propitious weekend. Sharon is planning a trip to visit her old high school buddy, Sylvia, in Westchester. She's going to take Merrie and Allen with her. I just want her to disappear from my life. I want to be rid of her. I found a room that I could rent on a month-to-month basis that will do until I got myself organized. It's a small, studio apartment with a sleep sofa. That's all I need for now.

I watch the car with Sharon and the children disappear from sight. With Andy's help, I begin packing my car. All my clothes, some essential books, pens, some critical files. Whatever I need to function for the next several weeks until formal rights and responsibilities are legally established. Some silverware, dishes, pots, some towels, soap, toilet paper. The essentials. Just enough to survive the initial shock of separation. Bankbook. Checkbook. I remember my Aunt Shirley getting to the bank first and cleaning my Uncle Norman out completely. She left him with nothing. Not me. I'll do my duty by Sharon, but won't let myself be at her mercy.

It doesn't take long. I look around and I'm satisfied. I leave a note telling Sharon I'm leaving her. That I want a divorce. That I will call her when she gets back and we will talk about what to do next. It was all over quickly. After all the years, all the struggling, it only took about the time it takes to vacuum the house and it's done. I lock the front door, thank Andy for his help, get into my car, and drive away.

At my temporary abode, it doesn't take long to unpack the car. I go to the Sears down the street and buy a shower curtain and I'm in business. My transition apartment is part of what appears to be a converted motel. Concrete block construction, two levels, long, straight hallways with stairwells at either end. Except it isn't a converted motel. It was built new this way. The owner decided, he explained to me when I rented it, that there is a market niche for new, short-term rental apartments. He apparently decided enough people were divorcing that he would be the transition-apartment king of the area. I guess he's right because every room is rented. About thirty units.

Understandably, I'm having trouble falling asleep this first night. The telephone in the room next to mine has been ringing all night. I mean, not off and on throughout the night, but on. All night. Obviously, no one is home and just as obviously the caller doesn't care. With the help of earplugs, enough sound is deadened that I should be able to get to sleep. Somehow this is beginning to seem symbolic to me.

The next morning I make myself some breakfast. Cold cereal and milk, coffee, and a Hostess cupcake. Not gourmet, but it will do. When I open the door to check the weather there's a note on my door, surprising me. Startling me actually since no one, not even Andy knows where I am. It's the guy from next door whose phone was ringing all night. He asks me to come see him, to knock on his door.

"I'm so sorry," he says, letting me in when I knock. "It's my wife. When I go out, I take the phone off the hook. She's done this before. I just forgot last night. Again, I really apologize. She does this to make me crazy and to create problems with my neighbors here."

He seems exhausted and it's only just the morning. I readily accept his apology, say it's not his fault, and internally take it as a sign of what may be in store for me.

About ten-thirty, after a brief walk and reading the paper, I call Sharon.

Her voice is very quiet. It's a little scary. I never heard real fear in her voice before. She understands this is the real thing, what she feared all our married life. Her mother's prediction has come true.

"Michael, where are you?"

"I don't want to go into that right now, Sharon. I think it's better if you don't know where I am for a little while."

"We have to talk. You can't do this. You can't do this, Michael. What will become of us?"

"We'll survive like everyone else who goes through this."

"No, no, no, no, no. I won't survive. I can't stand this. It's not happening. Please, we have to talk. Please, Michael. You can't just do this. Just walk out. You have to come home and talk. You have to think of the children. Of us. You have to. You have to come. You...you...you have to, you have to. You have to. You have to. You have to."

I start getting more scared.

"Alright. Calm down. I'll come over. Take a deep breath. Did you hear me? Are you taking a deep breath?"

I hear the sound of deep breathing.

"When are you coming?"

"Where are the children?"

"I'll have Mindy pick them up to play with her kids. I'll call her now. Call me right back."

"I don't want them there when we talk."

"I understand. Call me back. Just wait a few minutes for me to arrange it. Promise. Promise me. Will you call in five minutes?"

"Yes. Yes, I promise."

"What's your phone number, Michael?"

I gave her my number. I'm calling from a payphone at a garage near my apartment. I haven't had time to set up a phone service yet in the flat. I tell her again that I'll call her back in five minutes.

It all seems so cruel to me, but there isn't any other way besides direct and unequivocal. I try to convince myself, it's the kindest way, ultimately, to do this. A clean break.

At the house, I ring the downstairs bell to the family room in the basement rather than using the front door. I don't know why. I guess it's because it was the door I used when I left and to the room that I used most when I was happy there. Sharon opens the door and steps back as though afraid she might touch something and break it. She retreats into the room. I walk in and close the door. I could smell the cedar from the cedar closet I recently added to the room. It was simply a project to take my mind off things. For a while, it had worked. It struck me now as no longer a pleasant smell.

It's not an overly bright room and being west-facing, only during the late afternoon does the light shine directly through the sliding glass doors that make up almost the entire outside wall. I decided in the past that the overhead light fixture detracted from the charm and warmth of the paneled and carpeted room. I had removed the light fixture and sealed the ceiling outlet. Table lamps gave the room the warmth I was looking for.

Now, it's dark in the room as I enter. Sharon had not turned on the lights and so the room is still in the shadow of the building. I suppose the darkness is more real and representative to her than the safety and peace that incandescent lights project.

"Thank you for coming," she says quietly.

I don't know what to say so I don't say anything.

"When did you leave?"

"Yesterday, right after you left for upstate."

"Just like that?"

"After all these years, Sharon, it's hardly 'just like that.' Aren't you tired of this, too?"

"Tired of what? Having a family, having children, having responsibilities? How can you do this? Aren't you ashamed?"

"Look, Sharon, it's done. I don't want to talk about whether I should do this or not. I've done it. It took me a long time to make this decision. Now it's made. We need to move on from here and figure out what to do next. I don't know why it's such a goddam surprise to you. You've been living for this moment since we got married."

"No, no that's not true! We have to talk about this. No, no, no, no, no. This can't be happening. I know I've made you crazy. I'll change. I'm crazy. I don't know what's wrong with me. You're right. It's my fault. I can change. I'll do anything you want. You...you mustn't leave. I can't handle it, Michael. I can't. I know you're angry with me. You can do anything you want. Anything. I love you."

"You love me? All these years and I never felt you even liked me. It's too late, Sharon."

She keeps coming closer and closer as I retreat, trying to keep a distance between us.

"You can beat me, Michael. You can. I deserve it. You're right. You are. You're right. Beat me, but don't leave me, Michael. I can't stand it. I can't, I can't. Michael...Michael."

She grabs onto me and sobs and sobs. I'm pretty goddam scared that she's cracking up. I never expected this. She's always been such an aloof, unemotional person.

It is tempting to hit her. The frustration of all our years of therapy and unhappiness pulls me towards vengeance, but it's just not me and I let the moment pass. But I am scared. I really am afraid she's going to lose it. I need to get the hell out of here. This scene is doing nobody any good. I'm sure of that. Sharon is a survivor. She just needs time to accept the new reality. I know where this drama is heading and nothing good will come from my staying any longer. I have made the finality of my decision clear, in person, and it's time now to leave.

"Sharon, I'll call you tonight," I say, backing towards the door.

I call her sister from the payphone.

"Susan, this is Michael. Okay...actually, not so well. Sharon and I have separated...Yes, yesterday. Look, she's not taking this too well and I'm a little afraid for her emotionally. I think you better call her...right, thanks. Okay. Goodbye."

Susan is even crazier than Sharon, so naturally, Sharon looks up to her. I called Sharon's friend, Sylvia, next and gave her the same message.

That was enough. The support system will kick in and I'll be the biggest piece of shit in the state in about two hours. I know that, but I don't care. Sharon will survive and prosper. It's in her genes. And it was out in the open now.

I figure the next two days or so will be critical for Sharon. For me too, I guess. Even though I'm confident in the long term, she still has me worried in the short term. I call Ryan.

"Ryan...Michael. Fine. Well, it's complicated. How you doing?... Good for you guys. Listen, Ryan, I need a favor. Sharon and I just split up. Yeah...yeah. Yes, the real thing, Ryan. I'm calling from a payphone...Yes. Take down my phone number, just in case...786-3448. Ryan, Sharon's not taking this too well, as you can imagine, and to tell you the truth, I'm a little afraid she might do something nuts before the dust settles...No she doesn't know where I'm staying, but if she really wants to find out it's not all that hard to do. To tell you the truth I don't want her coming after me with a knife or something. She's a bit whacked-out right now...I called her sister. She'll be okay, but later, in a little while. In a few days. Not now. Now she's not okay, you know. I mean not predictable. Can I stay at your place for a couple of days? It'd just be about two days is all. That should do it. But I really need to hide out for right now...Okay, thanks, Ryan... Right away. Is that okay?... Great. I'll be right over... You're sure it will be okay with Carol?... Okay. Bless you both."

I do talk about my last shrink a lot I guess.

You don't mind if I talk about him do you
 I remember the time when he got to me
 it was the sound of the laughter I think
 they're laughing together Sharon
 and our man who shall remain nameless
 actually I think they had something going on the side
 by the time I suspected that
 I no longer cared except on general principles

Anyway I'm frustrated and feeling hopeless like this is my last chance
 and his office was kind of sacred to me then
 a place for saving lost lives
 and they're laughing
 and suddenly I become furious
 I start yelling at them both
 enough I can't stand this bullshit talk anymore I'm going crazy
 I don't need more of this stupid talk talk talk

I guess I startled them both but our man was very cool and asks me
 what I want to do instead
 by now I'm a little nuts and I start screaming
 what do you mean instead
 you mean this is it this is what you planned for us
 what I need is to not listen to you two laughing
 as if this is some goddam joke
 what I need is for somebody to do some work here
 what I need
 is to be able to just hug my wife and be happy
 I should have seen his next move coming but I'm not thinking
 I'm a bit wild
 so of course our man says why don't you do that Michael
 Sharon is right there just reach out and hug her

Now I think that was definitely irresponsible of him
 I mean if it was that easy
 we wouldn't have spent a fucking fortune on shrinks
 to find out why it was so hard

I mean I feel he set me up just then you know
anyway of course now I'm no longer bouncing off the walls anymore
I'm petrified I'm frozen like stone
they're both watching me Sharon with that little half smile
you know the kind where you know you shouldn't be smiling
but you can't help it so part of your face starts to smile
and the other part tries to hold it back
and it gets all twisted
our man says what's happening Michael just reach out
I felt like a mouse in a cobra cage I was frozen
you know I just couldn't take any more rejection
holding a dead body
you touch her and it's like you're not there
no acknowledgment no recognition of your existence
I just couldn't do it like that again
of course Sharon was enjoying this
she wouldn't lean towards me or show any interest
just sits there thinking she's perfect
which of course I pointed out to them
Sharon takes umbrage at this and off we go again

*Well, I don't know what I could have done differently. Besides,
that's what I paid him to know.*

I usually do well with shrinks
but I didn't feel good about that session
I felt that I had missed a chance
I felt that if I had just been able to take one more risk
if I had just reached out and held Sharon
you know put aside my fears my own need to be right
some barriers would've come down
maybe not but anyway
I felt responsible and I hadn't felt responsible in years

There was this time it was really hot out and the trains broke down
they didn't have power for about two hours
no air conditioning nothing
I was pacing back and forth in the street
by the stairs leading down into the subway
you know and watching the people
coming up and out once they got the power on
and the trains rolling again
they looked like they'd been through a war
all sweaty and exhausted from the heat
and angry that the system had screwed them again
we lived in Queens then and she worked in Manhattan
I usually got home before she did so I liked to meet her

I didn't have my wallet with me when I left the apartment
usually it's no big deal meeting Sharon
it was only a couple of blocks so I didn't need my wallet
it was getting too stuffed and I hated carrying it with me
unless I needed to
anyway there's this florist shop across the street where you know
I'm waiting and I only had some change in my pocket

The flower girl thinks I'm a jerk or cheap
when I tell her I've only got about two dollars in change
can I buy a flower for my wife she's stuck on the train
I want to cheer her up when she arrives
I tell her about my wallet so she thinks about it
and warms to my plight you might say
and says I can buy a carnation
a nice dark red one with white edges
and she'll wrap it nice it'll look very sweet
my wife will give me a big kiss
so I grab my two-dollar bouquet
and run back across the street to wait for Sharon
finally she arrives with a mob of other half dead riders
I shout to her and grab her hand and get her out of the crowd
out of the sweltering station area as fast as I can
I guide her to where there's some shade from the trees

She's beat and dripping wet from the heat and sweating
god what an experience she says
oh my god I'm soaked to the skin
I'm amazed no one died from the heat she says
I tell her I know it must have been awful
everyone looked so stricken coming out of the train
I'm surprised there weren't any ambulances
they should have done something I say
in case someone was really bad off

I ask her if she's okay
no she's not okay but she's not dead she says
or permanently deformed
but it was an absolutely lousy experience
I know I can imagine I say actually I can't imagine
but I want her to feel that I'm sympathetic to her condition
I hand her my flower
with a little fern
poking out the top of the green paper funnel wrapped around it
I explain about my wallet and all and why it isn't more
but I tell her I wanted to have something to cheer her up

so she removes the paper and takes one look at the flower and she says
but Michael it's one carnation
I start to explain about my wallet again

But it's not even cut down she says it's a long raw carnation
I mean Michael don't you think it looks ridiculous
me walking around with this big stalk of a flower
so I think here we go again
so I tell her well I really didn't think about it
I was sort of just looking at the flower end

A gift should be received in the spirit in which it was given
don't you think
that was one of her problems she never knew how to accept a gift
and she never looked at the flower end

It took me nine more years after that to finally decide
enough is enough that was just one example
of her not being my friend just being my critic for twelve years
after all the struggling we hadn't gotten anywhere
you know I mean in all that time
twelve years and nothing had changed it still was a lonely hell for me

I just left I just simply left
I waited until everyone was gone packed up and walked out
and so here we are

I don't know. I'm not sure why I'm here.

Last week I was driving home from work listening to the radio
and they're playing a John Lennon song
a love song and I start crying
I don't know just like that I start crying

I have to pull over by a bridge underpass
it's raining and I'm crying
and I'm sort of watching myself crying
I'm saying to myself what the hell is this what's going on
but it's gonna happen no matter what
so I just watched myself doing this thing
and I heard myself making these choking sounds and my mouth is all twisted
and I've got for chrissake tears running down my face
and it's funny because I wasn't even thinking of John Lennon
I was just crying for myself for what I was missing
affection love friendship
I sat there in the car for a while my head resting on the steering column
wondering what was happening to me

I've always been good at controlling my feelings
I've always felt it was better to be rational about things
and try to be unemotional
but the more reasonable you are the more some people
take that as weakness or else they get angry because
you're not feeding back the same irrational emotion
they are projecting
I mean everyone seems to go nuts if you try to keep your head
my obligations become endless my explanations become endless
my reassurances and apologies become endless
and it's just not working for me
I find I'm crying a lot lately

I don't know what I want to do.

I just want to be happy
I can't remember ever being happy not really
sometimes Sharon and I and then with kids
would be doing interesting stuff
but it just masked the unhappiness you know
so it was a sham all the time
it seems the more crowded we live our lives
the more alone we become at least for me
how does that happen

It's stupid but I think about these things
if I died tomorrow who would come to my funeral
but really why do I even care since I'd be dead
if two came or two hundred it's all the same to the stiff
lying refreshed and accessorized in a box
I have to keep reminding myself
that the number of people who come to your funeral
is not a measure of the success of your life

I often think I would want to be cremated rather than buried
but I still remember my brother's criticism
when my cousin Sam was cremated
what's the matter he said
the Germans didn't cremate enough Jews
it's a good argument
but I guess I like the idea of being portable
dumb reason right

Thursday. Sharon is supposed to have the kids ready and available for me at six o'clock. She doesn't show up with them until seven-thirty. I sit in her driveway for an hour and a half, waiting to take the children to dinner. It's a school night. Where the hell was she with them? Shopping, of course! When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping! She 'lost track of the time.' Again.

"Now don't keep them out too late. They have school tomorrow."

I can't believe her. As if I didn't know. Out of a fourteen-day cycle, they stay with me seven days, but she acts as if she's the primary parent. What do the words 'joint custody' mean. Evidently, to her, not much. If I make a scene the kids go nuts and the evening is completely shot. Meanwhile, I'm so pissed I can hardly enjoy the time with them.

Sunday is usually a good day. I pick them up from Sunday school if they haven't spent the weekend with me.

"Where are you going with them?" this Sunday Sharon asks me for no apparent reason except to provoke me. And she does.

"Sharon, let's not start this. I don't have to tell you what I'm doing or where I'm going."

"Have them back by five. I'm having a party with their friends and I want them back by five."

"The agreement says seven. They'll be back by seven."

"The children want to go to this party. All their friends will be there. The party starts at five. We're having a barbecue. Why can't you have them back by five?"

"Why do you schedule parties on the days I have the children? Why are you never on time giving them to me? Why do we always have a scene? Do you enjoy making the kids crazy? Do you enjoy going to court? Can't we ever just act civilized for the children's sake?"

"What is the big deal? It's just a couple of hours. You'll have them all day?"

It always sounds reasonable. Except if I give an inch. Then it just gets worse and worse and worse. I have to stick with the terms of the agreement. Little good that it does me. "Put it down in your diary," my lawyer says. Yeah. So we can go to court, so he can make some more money off me, so the court can recommend mediation which is another way of doing nothing. What in heaven's name is there to mediate? I thought I had a fucking agreement. A court-ordered agreement! Just follow the agreement. More days off from work to talk to the mediators who report back to the judge that there was a misunderstanding. And off we go again.

"They'll be back by seven. We're going into New York and they'll be back by seven."

Sharon actually grabs Allen's sleeve and keeps him from going. Meredith just stands there and watches, crying.

I remember thinking to myself, this is crazy. We're having a tug-of-war with my son in the temple parking lot. You only see things like this in movies. If I let go, we'll never get away from her. If I let go, I empower her by showing her that if she acts crazy she can get her way. I have to act as crazy as she does so she doesn't get any reward for her craziness and the kids suffer through all this. How can the courts let this happen? What else can I do? Why aren't there more dead women lying on the ground? Jesus, how much provocation can a person take before you snap? To someone not living through it, it all seems so stupid and juvenile and destructive and irresponsible. To someone not living through it.

Sharon rips Allen's sleeve holding him back. That seems to bring her to her senses and she lets go of him. We finally leave the Sunday School parking lot and our time together begins.

I think about whether to put this down in the diary later. I decide there is no point. I'll just get pissed off more than I already am. I don't know what good it does me anyway. The lawyer never seems to get any mileage from these entries.

I knew that Sharon was a survivor. I never knew how strong she was. She's much stronger than I am. Than anyone I know. Even my friends are amazed by her. She is unrelenting. She will never miss an opportunity to make me crazy. It's a family trait. I noticed it first with her brother. Her brother Frank was a very emotional guy with a very short fuse who would throw a tantrum whenever it served his purpose. I mean, curse and rant and rave and shout, the whole nine yards if he was crossed somehow, by something real or imagined.

He would do some completely nutty thing. I don't know, insist that we do this instead of that. It might be some small thing when we were doing something together in the past, like which restaurant to go to or what kind of beer to buy. You never knew what would set him off. But then he would go nuts, make accusations, make a scene, embarrass everyone. People would give in quickly, raising their eyebrows, shrugging their shoulders and saying with or without words, "It's just Frank being Frank. What can you do?"

So he got his way a lot. I realized that for Frank acting nuts was very empowering. Now I see it is a family trait.

When a policeman stopped him recently for going through a red light, he told his kids to start crying and the louder the better. He was proud of it and told the story with great gusto. Their kids didn't need much coaching because they knew a lot about crying from their father. He's pretty violent with his kids and would hit them even in front of other members of the family. He even told how he managed to produce his own alligator tears for the benefit of this policeman. Naturally, the point of his story was that he didn't get the ticket.

I find him pretty disgusting. To tell you the truth, I never believed that he was really nuts. He's very intelligent and very manipulative. I believe he sees the strategic benefit of acting crazy and does it consciously. On the other hand, maybe purposely acting nuts is nuts.

Anyway, his little sister learned all his tricks.

*

I can't stand thinking about the constant tension whenever I'm picking up Merrie and Allen. Suddenly, I feel like everything is closing in on me. Oh, shit, I think. Not again. I've had this before. Sometimes taking an aspirin helps. Sometimes a shot of scotch. Most of the time when it happens, though, I have to get up and walk around, maybe turn all the lights on if I'm home, open the windows so I don't feel so much inside of something. It's a kind of claustrophobia, I guess, that comes on and makes me nuts sometimes. Not often. Not enough to see a shrink about. In fact, so rarely that I don't think I've ever mentioned it to a shrink. It must always skip my mind in the heat of whatever more pressing effrontery I'm dealing with at the time.

I remember vaguely now the first time this I was hit with a panic attack. I was camping with Sharon. It was night and there was no moon. It was very dark and I was inside the tent in the double sleeping bag with Sharon. My brain suddenly started racing. My skin started to get a crawly, itchy, tingling feeling. My breathing suddenly felt inadequate, as if I was not getting enough air. I mean, I was breathing and all, but just not enough. I got out of the tent and started walking around scared to death wondering what was happening to me. I opened the car door so that the little light would help me get a sense of where I was and what things looked like and it gave me a space bigger than the inside of the tent to see myself in. Gradually my breathing became less unsatisfying and the beating of my heart less obvious. I don't like ever being aware of my heart. I just want it to do what it's supposed to do without me knowing about it. Eventually, I

calmed down, but while in it, I thought I was having a heart attack. It scared me plenty. That's why it's called a 'panic' attack.

I can't think of camping without thinking of the friends we lost over camping. Sharon and I were real advocates of tent camping. It's healthy and close to nature, blah, blah, blah. But we did enjoy camping then.

We had met a couple who were also into nature. They were vegetarians and liked to hike. Surprisingly, they hadn't ever been camping before and I saw them as definite camping material, for sure. They were into the alternative lifestyle route. Sally liked to make cold gazpacho and didn't shave her legs or her underarms. That kind of stuff. Her husband was like that too. I don't mean about not shaving his legs, but about going along with all Sally's alternative lifestyle ideas. It's really surprising to me now that they hadn't ever gone camping.

Anyway, we talked them into going away for a weekend with us. They borrowed a tent from someone, some other stuff, and off we went. Well, we hardly got the tents up when it started to rain. It rained all night. That's not the really bad news. The really bad news was that their tent did not have a sewn-in floor and also they were set up in a natural run-off it seemed. Water poured through their tent. Oh, I forgot. They also had a toddler and an infant. It was a nightmare, that night. They left the next morning.

I worked very hard to convince them that the person who lent them that tent was no friend. A little rain is to be expected once in a while. But a modern tent has a sewn-in floor and you get through times like that with games and singing and so forth in the tent. I must have sounded convincing because they agreed to go again.

The new date arrived. This time they had sensible equipment. I think they went out and bought stuff. This time the weather was beautiful. Everything was picture perfect. The first night at the campground we had a great fire going. We sang songs. We watched the fire. When it had died sufficiently to hot, glowing embers, we made delicious marinated, barbecued chicken. The ladies made a great fresh salad. We had condiments, and corn-on-the-cob, and chilled drinks, and cookies, and watermelon. It was a feast.

The next morning everyone had food poisoning, except for the baby, who didn't eat the chicken.

We never saw them again after that weekend. I guess I don't blame them. Thank god no one died.

It always has seemed a goddam funny story, even though we lost them as friends. I mean they weren't that good friends. We hadn't known them too long and it is a hell of a story. We didn't try to contact them again. I guess we were embarrassed about the whole thing and felt they would never trust us again anyway. So, what the hell. It was a disaster and there was nothing we could do about it.

Remembering this has distracted my attention from the itchy-crawlies and they have gone away. For now.

*

I wake up not knowing where I am for a moment. Calmly, I get out of bed assuring myself it will all come back as I move around. I find the doorknob and push the door aside. As I enter the bathroom it comes back to me. Who I am. Where I am. The layout of the apartment. I don't bother turning the bathroom light on. I just feel down and make sure the seat is up. I take a long, slow piss. When I walk back to bed I pass the dresser and the clock shows that it's almost 2:30 in the morning. I'm feeling very horny suddenly. I lie back in bed and open the drawer of the night table and pull out a copy of Penthouse. I start to thumb through it. Only to relax me, I think to myself. Yeah, right.

After a while, satisfied, I go back to sleep. I have a weird dream about a little girl. I don't know, maybe eleven or twelve years old. She's very precocious and lies on a bed nude. A poor imitation of a slutty, leering expression on her face creates a parody of sexual excitement. She spreads her legs and waves them invitingly, stroking her vagina lightly, beckoning in a foolish, almost jovial manner. She continues to stroke herself and smile and leer childishly, incongruously. Suddenly, a male adult appears, hovering over her, not

doing anything, only giving the appearance of something hot about to happen, gesticulating suggestively, but nothing really happening. I feel vaguely disappointed.

Even as I sleep, I analyze my dream, thinking with contempt for the character in *Crime and Punishment* who so disgusted himself after having a dream of child molestation that he committed suicide. What a fool. That's what dreams are for: to do anything, to dare anything, to consider anything we would never do in reality. In fact, it's a safety valve. In what way did it reflect on him, or on me for that matter, that we had these dreams? That our subconscious minds were for a moment exploring an aspect of forbidden sexuality is no crime. It's not even unnatural. I bet it would be found to be quite common if everyone who had such dreams from time to time would admit to them.

It's all hormonal anyway. I'm sure it has to do with overstimulating the production of testosterone. High levels of testosterone will produce a natural reaction that will either be relieved by masturbation, sex, or dreams. I've thought about this a lot because sometimes my need for physical release is so high that I could easily contemplate actions I would not normally consider. You just have to be careful about overstimulation. I'm not surprised there are so many sex crimes. Testosterone can lead to serious compulsions. I'm convinced of that. There ought to be a chemical or a drug or something that can keep that hormone in check. (How do you make a hormone? Don't pay her. Yuk, yuk.) There probably might even be one. I've just been too embarrassed to ask a doctor. Embarrassed I guess isn't the right word. I didn't want a doctor to think of me as some kind of pervert. I don't know. Doctors see everything anyway. They probably wouldn't care—or give two thoughts about it.

What's normal and what isn't? Depends on who's writing the story, doesn't it? There seem to be a lot of people getting away with a lot of shit. I place restrictions, so many restrictions, on myself. 'This isn't right. That isn't right. I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't think that.' And the rest of the world does whatever the hell it wants.

Sandy Gennero comes to mind. Little Sandy. I played "doctor" with Sandy when I was, what, six years old. She was the next-door neighbor's daughter. My age. Maybe a year younger, maybe the same, I don't remember now. We were playmates. She had a younger brother, but he had some terrible lung disease or something and he never was available to play with us. So Sandy and I played alone. At that age it didn't matter what gender you were. We all just played. Maybe it started with me being the "daddy" and she was the "mommy". Honestly, I don't remember how it started. But I do remember sitting on the stairs in my house with no one home. With Sandy. I guess my mother's frantic reaction to my catching her nude once in a while made me curious to see what I was missing. I remember sitting on the steps very carefully examining Sandy's vagina. She, of course, had seen her brother's penis and knew that she was different, but that's about all she knew, or me either for that matter. I remember us both seriously pondering the mystery of her vagina. Where had her penis gone? Was it folded inside her somehow, you know, pushed inside out, inside? I have to smile now thinking about it. It was kind of cute in a way. Really innocent. Except that I did get a lot of pleasure out of examining her. And after a while, I started feeling guilty that I was using her. Even at that tender age guilt reared its judgmental head. It's amazing to me now, how young guilt kicks in.

Anyway, I asked her if she wanted to see mine, you know, out of a sense of fair play. Of course, she said yes, so the next chance we got we both ran to the bathroom in my house and closed the door. No one was home upstairs in our apartment. There was pretty much always someone home downstairs at Sandy's apartment because of her brother. So I'm standing there in the middle of the bathroom and I pull down my pants to show her my equipment and I get this little erection which completely mystified me, not having any idea what all this stuff is about except that it's fun to do this with Sandy.

I don't remember why that was as far as it went. Maybe we moved, or she and I just lost interest or became afraid we might get caught. I don't recall. It was probably just as well because my memories of it are sweet and innocent.

Years later, in college, during the first day of class in a required English section, the teacher is calling out the roll and she calls out Sandra Gennero. Naturally, she calls out my name too. This is years later and I'm trying to picture Sandy and whether this girl could be the same Sandy Gennero. She didn't show up the next day. I guess she dropped the class or changed sections. I never saw her again. It had to be her.

She must've been embarrassed. There was no need.

*

It's always been a source of dismay to me that I married the first girl who returned my affections. I was so insecure with girls. I never thought it would happen again, find someone who really liked me.

I remember how I met Sharon. I was in a fraternity in college and one Friday night a bunch of us crashed a party that we got wind of. A couple of the guys had cars and we all piled into the cars and off we went. It was the usual scene. I was okay but shy. You know, talked to a few people, danced a little bit. Nothing special, as usual. Except I was seemingly making progress with one girl, Sharon, of course. Her sister was a college freshman and she was still a senior in high school. So maybe I seemed like a big deal to her. A college man talking to her and all that. Or maybe I just got lucky. Who knows? Maybe she liked me. I still don't know, actually, other than the fact that I seemed to get somewhere with Sharon and got her phone number. The only thing I remember vividly happened outside when I went out for a little air during the evening.

Two dogs were humping in the middle of the intersection. I'd never seen dogs do that. I'd never seen any form of animal life do that.

It was a cool, fall evening. I was alone near the intersection and the street lights were throwing a glow of yellow light onto the road and on the ground and on the trees and shrubs and on the cars parked along the curb. The night sky was completely washed away by the harsh brightness of the street lights. In the middle of the intersection, the two dogs were locked, humping away, the male shaking the female's body, completely dominating her. She was absolutely a prisoner of his, with his upper body completely enveloping her, his lower body repeatedly ramming into her in quick, spasmodic thrusts. I was fascinated, thrilled by the sight of something so primal and real. This was no abstract discussion of the birds and the bees. It was one of the great forces of nature manifested before me. It was primitive and uninhibited and violent. It made a great impression on me.

(Question: How do you get a man excited? Answer: Show up!)

Years later, thinking back on that scene, I like to think of it as somehow symbolic of my relationship with Sharon. Yet I am never able to decide just what the symbolism was. I spent my life with Sharon trying to prove my loyalty to her, trying to find the key to sexual harmony with her, explaining and apologizing and reassuring her. All to no avail. If anything, those dogs were the antithesis of my relationship with Sharon.

Sharon was just sixteen when I met her, but quite precocious. We dated. She hated her mother's new husband and wanted desperately to get out of the house. We were the couple that never fought. The ideal couple. It was great for me. I remember the first time I played with her breasts. What a thrill for me. Really! I mean I was in college and I had never even copped a feel.

We were swimming at the town beach and we stopped to rest by the rocks that projected here and there along the shore. Leaning against the rocks, I kissed her from behind, only this time I slipped my hand into the cup of her swimming suit top, sliding my hand over her breast. She didn't react, that is, she didn't resist my advance and I continued, lightly caressing her breast, brushing her nipple, kissing her neck and watching over her shoulder as my hand cups her breast. It was a wonderful experience for me. We, of course, did a lot of that from that point on in our courtship.

And of course, it led to thoughts of "going all the way." She was just seventeen when we did. How it happened, our first fuck, was classic I expect. We were in my parent's car. It was evening and we were in the

parking lot of the nature preserve. It was dark and the lot was empty. I suggested we go in the back seat “where we would be more comfortable.” One thing led to another and we both, I think, decided this would be it.

I reached under her skirt and rolled her panties down. She did not resist and since I had already graduated to fondling her vagina, this was not necessarily a major move. I lay over her, however, kissed her passionately, and said, “Let me put it in, just for a second.” What a line. I wonder how many couples have heard those words. Every one probably. It worked and I meant it, too, at the time I said it. Oh, well. What is it they say about good intentions?

Without a word, she spread her legs. I was scared to death of getting her pregnant but did not really know how much in you had to be, for how long, and whether you were safe if you didn’t come. I’d read something about leaking, but at that moment I considered myself fully seaworthy. I positioned myself properly, rising a bit to affect insertion, and slid right in.

It was the most amazing feeling I had ever experienced. The whole length of my cock was being caressed, at once, everywhere. It was so uniquely different from masturbating. I was afraid to move around too much for fear of coming. On the other hand, I was not exactly in complete control of myself, under the circumstances. I could only last a few moments when I realized I was going to ejaculate. I quickly pulled out and came on Sharon’s belly. It was an unbelievable experience. I lay on her panting and gasping and sort of in a daze, understanding completely what all the fuss was about.

It occurred to me only later that Sharon was certainly no virgin. This was a surprising discovery, considering I met her when she was sixteen. Earlier in our dating, she was fond of telling me about some boy who was madly crazy for her whom she had finally dumped. She enjoyed telling me how he hitchhiked into the country to see her while she was away at camp during the summer before she and I met, and she wouldn’t even talk to him. I always felt that was cruel of her, but never went any further thinking about it. I wasn’t good at reading the signs.

We only experimented one more time with actual penetration before she informed me that she was late. I decided we needed to get engaged to save her from embarrassment. You know, get the ball rolling just in case. Shortly after the engagement announcement was made, her period conveniently arrived. We were married right after her eighteenth birthday.

I pick up the phone. Begin to dial and put the phone down. Then replay the cycle, my heart pounding. Stupid. Why is this affecting me so? Why am I so agitated about a simple transaction? Not even a transaction. A preliminary to a transaction. What can happen? I'm making a phone call for chrissake. I can always just hang up. I dial again.

A very pleasant business-like woman's voice answers the phone. "Hello."

"Is this Maiden Voyage?" I ask.

"Yes."

"How much is your service?"

"A hundred fifty dollars an hour."

"What does that include?"

"That's for complete service."

"Okay, thanks." I hang up.

Yes. No. Yes. No.

What's the problem? Why not?

I walk back and forth in my room. Should I? Suppose I catch something. What about my neighbors? Will my neighbors see this going on? Some trollop shows up at my door. Who cares what they see! This is really a good service. It could cost me a hundred and fifty dollars easy on dinners and dates before I got a woman into the sack and then she's still there in the morning and the relationship has to continue beyond its 'useful service date.'

What every man needs is a blow-up doll with three working orifices that he can put back in the closet whenever he's done. What did that guy at work call women? A life support system for a cunt.

Where's my pride for chrissake? My self-esteem? What has pride got to do with it? I want to get laid. Now. Maybe tomorrow I'll meet some woman who'll change my life, who'll inspire me and love me. But today, right now, I want to get laid.

I dial again. I hang up before the first ring is finished.

"Shit."

I sit down in my reading chair, lean back and close my eyes.

Slow, deep breaths.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, SHIT."

I can't do this. I've got to see what I'm getting into.

No pun intended.

*

I take the train from Benton to Grand Central Station. When I leave the station I start walking west along Forty Second Street, looking at the store windows, watching the cabs struggling to make better time than I am, walking, watching the people. New York is the best people-watching city in the world. Anything can be found on the streets of Manhattan.

I remember a trip to Jerusalem where I was astonished by the sight of men in business suits walking the

same paths as Arabs leading sheep. In its way, New York has every bit as much diversity on its streets as that. Maybe more, if you could see as well into the hearts of its feverish population.

The gift shops on Broadway attract my attention momentarily with their outrageous sale signs and displays of electronic and photographic gadgetry. I walk into one store and watch as the numerous sales personnel hustle the customers lining all the counters two and three deep. I walk out and continue on past Avenue of the Americas. The movie marquees begin to attract my attention. Past Broadway they abound. Saucy titles like "Lust Weekend" or "Swamp of Passion" or "Campus Concubine" appear with photo teasers plastered all around the box offices incongruously staffed with their matronly ticket sellers.

"Live Sex Act on Stage," the sign says in front of "Sonny's Sex Cinema and XXX Adult Arcade". I watch who goes into the theater and who comes out. Showtimes mean nothing at places like this. For the movies anyway. Maybe for the "live sex act," some people worry about the time, but I doubt it. Several of the men—it's almost always only men—look surprisingly normal. Others look like derelicts. Mostly, if they have the ticket money, they get in. Some are kept out, denied admission for reasons I cannot discern. Probably they're known from a prior bad experience. I decide to go in, enticed by the live sex act bait. I've come here to push the envelope of my experience. So be it.

Once past the turnstile, there is almost no lobby, simply doors leading to the theater. I push the doors aside and am immediately struck by the sound of heavy breathing coming from the screen and a huge image of a cock sliding in and out of a woman's mouth, her saliva dripping along the length of this titanic joint. My eyes adjust to the light and I see the house is largely empty except for widely separated men scattered about watching intently. During the movie, a guy about three seats from where I sit is jacking off under his windbreaker. Very surreptitious, but it is clear enough what he's doing. To each his own.

After the twentieth blowjob, I get bored and decide to take a pass on the live sex act. I change my mind when I realize from what passes for a plot that the movie is about to end. In a few moments, the credits appear and after another few minutes the house lights come up slightly. Awful, canned, honky-tonk music begins to play, and a black couple dance onto the stage from the wing. The stage has no furniture except for a wooden stool. The woman is carrying a folded blanket, which she spreads on the stage in time with the music in a more or less vain attempt to couple her performance to the beat of the music. She is wearing a loose-fitting satin robe. Her black hair is dyed a garish shade of blond. She is wearing no shoes. The man follows her slowly, posturing and gesturing, also in time with the music. They dance closely and gradually disrobe until they are both completely naked. They are both rather average looking and they touch and make simulated humping motions and the woman moans and groans in a most unconvincing way, following choreographed instructions that she has memorized but clearly are not inspiring.

Evidently, props were forgotten and a young man, a stagehand I guess, jumps out from the wing and throws two pillows on the blanket and just as quickly retreats. The woman sways over to the blanket and pillows and stands, gyrating grotesquely, waiting for the man. He slowly wends his way to the woman by a series of exaggerated dance steps. Finally, the man lays the woman on the blanket and appears to mount her as she lifelessly spreads her legs wide for him and they both begin to simulate the "live sex act on stage."

I'll say it's an act. Very unconvincing, but what am I expecting?. Then I picture them doing this for three or four shows a day for maybe five or six days a week and I become more sympathetic to them. They're just two working stiffs trying to earn a living.

They also raise obvious questions. I wonder what they get paid? If they belong to Actors Equity? What do they think of their job? What do they think of us? What do I think of me? It's complicated.

As I push through the exit doors leading to the small lobby, I notice a stairway with a sign saying "More Sex Entertainment" and an arrow pointing down. In for a penny, in for a pound. I decide to go downstairs. After all, this theater, as advertised, is a true sex arcade.

The first entertainment at the bottom of the stairs is a series of little booths that hold only one person standing and for each of which a heavy curtain can be drawn for complete privacy. I go in and close the

curtain. Inside is a coin box that takes quarters. I place a quarter in the slot and a little hatch slides up revealing a window opening to a small stage. On the stage, lit with blue and red lights, is a nude dancer, quite beautiful actually, another black woman. She gyrates and bumps and grinds in front of the several open hatches. Surprisingly, she seems animated and enjoying her own performance, which she executes artistically and even with some humor. Just as my couple of minutes is up and the hatch begins to slide down, I see another dancer, a white girl, enter the stage apparently to relieve the one I had been watching. When I leave my booth, I see that there are about another half dozen of these observation booths, all occupied.

As I walk further into the bowels of this subterranean sexual buffet I come across an area of little stand-alone movie machines on metal pedestals. For another quarter you get to see on a little screen the next three minutes of whatever movie is being shown on that particular pedestal. Curious, I find the change-guy and get a couple of dollars in quarters.

There are a dozen of these pedestals, standing in four ordered rows as if planted like some perverted orchard. Each one has a little picture giving some insight into the theme of the movie, along with its title, of course. I decide on a smorgasbord approach—a little here, a little there. The first movie pedestal I try has a black man and a black woman. The man is holding a white female child. I mean an infant, maybe one-year-old. The woman is holding the child bent so that her genitals are facing the man who is jerking off on the baby. I'm astonished. Clearly, this isn't legal, but enforcers of the law, I guess, rarely monitor these enterprises, and if they do, it's probably just a fine and they are back in business. Evil shit.

I wonder where the mother of this child is? How did this innocent child get to be in this movie? What kind of person thought this scenario was a good idea? I wonder what the future holds for this unfortunate little girl. Then I remember reading about American businessmen flying to Thailand to have sex with children. What will this little girl's future be? Probably just like so many other trapped, enslaved, and abused little girls all over the world. I move along at random, disgusted. Jesus Christ! What a world.

Another machine has two really ditzy looking young women prancing about a pony, playing with his shlong, and masturbating him and each other. Another more or less straight movie has just two women and a man. One of the women was supposed to get fucked while the other was supposed to lick various parts of their bodies. Evidently, the male here decided to change the scenario. The second woman seems genuinely surprised, her acting skills, I am convinced, are not up to such a convincing display of astonishment when he took her and proceeded to plow into her over and over again with great energy and enthusiasm. When he was done with her, still not having come, she got up, really looking shocked, and literally staggered out of the camera's frame. I found this video, by its obviously going off-script, actually interesting.

In another section of the basement, next to a small gift shop, you could rent a 'model.' For twenty bucks you also get a camera, probably with no film in it. You go to your own little room and whatever you arrange beyond dancing and picture-taking for ten minutes is between you and the model. I get all this from a kind of roundabout, suggestive poster explaining things. I take a pass on this. By now I am tired of this unrelenting trash. I surprise myself that I have gone even this far along this trail of random prurience.

On second thought, I am surprised by the amount of thought that went into catering here to a wide diversity of interests. It's evident there was a deep understanding of the target customer, a business plan, and an array of products, services, and price options. The porn business, here at least, seems to be just that...a business. A depraved business, but a business nonetheless. I am beginning, reluctantly, to feel the onset of admiration for the business skills demonstrated by this enterprise. My budding admiration alarms me.

I no longer know why I am here or why I am doing this and decide to leave. The sun is bright and targets me as soon as I leave the theater, but in a few seconds, my eyes adjust. Even in Manhattan, the air outside seems fresh and clean compared to the atmosphere in the theater. I continue walking west. Between Avenue of the Americas and Broadway, next to the movies and gift shops, I notice a series of nondescript building entrances, mostly open, each revealing a long, poorly lit hallway with a narrow stairway located at

the rear, evidently a common architectural theme when these buildings were first put up. By each entrance, a tawdry young woman sits on a folding chair, a sign no doubt of the services provided within like the vertical spiral column outside a barbershop or the hanging three balls of a pawn shop. Beside each seated woman there is a narrow, vertical, colorfully worded sign propped up against the wall announcing "Girls, girls, girls."

Curious, I stop to speak with a woman I choose at random seated by one such door. I tell her I'd like to go upstairs to see if I'm interested. She shrugs and motions me through the entrance. I walk up the narrow flight of stairs to a second-floor hallway. This hallway, too, is not well lit and I follow it until I see an open door to a room with several women sitting in various states of casual dress: a bathrobe, an oversize t-shirt, a blouse open at the front and shorts, a bath towel, a slip. Something for everyone. An older woman sits at a small table just inside the doorway. There is a metal box on the table. As I enter the room she greets me and asks me something with a strong Spanish accent. It sounds like she is asking "Who are you like?" and I don't understand what she's asking me. I look stupidly at her and at the women. She asks again, "So...?"

I ignore her and look around the room. There is nothing to distinguish the room. No pictures, no potted plant, no decorations of any kind. Nothing to indicate the nature of its occupants or its use. There are just the old woman by the door and the five women sitting and waiting on a long sofa against the wall. A closed door to the right presumably leads to the bedroom. A curtainless window behind the sofa provides a view of the brick wall of an adjacent building.

Two of the women are white and three are black. They're all variously unattractive. Not even unattractive in an interesting way. All are slim but in a way that suggests malnutrition rather than dietary restraint. Two of the women have obviously bad teeth. Another has badly disheveled hair and another has an obvious bruise on the side of her face. All five have crudely flamboyant makeup that only detracts from any hope for appeal. One of the black women seems stoned with that far away look that hopefully is where her mind is as well. Any place but here.

I am pretty sure they are all diseased or at least crab infested. After a moment I turn to leave. The older woman watches me silently as I walk out past her. As I leave, I turn my head and give one last look. Of the five waiting women only one, one of the white women, seemingly the youngest, raises her head and acknowledges my presence with a half-smile. She quickly drops her eyes again to the floor in front of her.

The scene brings to mind Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* with its shocking, gut-wrenching descriptions of just these desperate, pathetic, self-destructive, hopeless people. This is the side of life the "good people" never see, these walking tragedies that lurk about us, invisible. I remember after reading Selby's book feeling that it opened my eyes, but I am stunned by the difference between a book description, no matter how vivid, and reality.

How did I ever get that book, anyway? Not my usual fare. Ah, yes. Sharon's mother. She didn't want her daughter to read such a book, so she gave it to me instead. I wonder now, if not her daughter, why me? What was going on in that woman's mind that I missed? And here I am, dipping my toes, by my own free will and choice, into Selby's world, the world she introduced to me.

Outside again, I continue walking west. It's about 4 p.m. and the street is filling with people. I turn north onto Tenth Avenue. There are fewer gift shops and garish lights and signs and mostly now I find little fast food joints, bakeries, tax preparation offices, small clothing shops, and some travel agencies. But still, I see those nondescript doors with men now sitting beside them. No signs or advertisements now beside their chairs. These establishments, I suppose, are for the relatively more discriminating customers who already know where they want to go and know what to expect. I guess that the seated men are for security and that the transactions are probably more costly.

As I walk along I see a young woman, pixyish, maybe just five feet tall and sixteen years old or maybe twenty or something in between. I suck at guessing female ages. She's dressed provocatively in very short yellow shorts and a light blue tube top. The bottom of her tube top and the top of her shorts conspire like the

opposing forces of like magnetic poles to reveal her belly button in the center of her perfectly flat stomach. Her skin is slightly moist from perspiration. It's a hot late afternoon. She is dark-complexioned, probably part Negro, with long, straight, black hair that hangs freely about her shoulders. Probably part Asian as well since I don't think Negro and Caucasian alone would have produced her delicate facial features and her straight hair. She has bright green, almond-shaped eyes, a slightly roundish, intelligent face with no lines or wrinkles. Her nose is small and narrow and she has a slightly pouting lower lip. She is perfectly proportioned for her size and she has a splendid, unadorned, natural beauty.

She captivates me immediately. I act with uncharacteristic boldness. Walking up to her, she turns to me and I ask her, "Hi, can I buy you an ice cream? You look hot." How I stumbled into that lovely double entendre I don't know, but I'm delighted with myself.

She looks directly in my face with strong eye contact, pauses only for an instant, evidently used to sizing situations up quickly, and gives me a charming smile. It is one of the contagious types that reflexively prompts my smile in return. I offer my hand. "My name is Michael."

She reaches out and takes my hand. I notice the delicate fingers and somehow caressing touch of her grip. This girl is amazing. "People call me Little Julie," she says. I love it. She makes no effort to release my hand, but I let go of hers. Subtly, she is letting me take the lead. I turn and point to a nearby fast food shop and she nods her approval. We walk in and sit at a small table with two chairs. I ask her what flavor she wants and she says, "You choose." Pleased, I walk to the counter, and after looking over the surprisingly broad selection choose two mint chocolate chips.

I come back to the table with two cups, two scoops each and two little, white, plastic spoons. "Would you like some water with that?" I ask. She just smiles her magic smile. I realize I am snared by this impish creature of the street. I get two cups of ice water.

After I sit down, a few minutes go by as we taste our ice cream and sip our water. Finally, she asks me, "Where are you from, Michael?"

Michael! I feel like we're already friends.

"Connecticut, near Benton. I'm just here for the day. Walking around. You know, seeing the sights." I pause just for an instant. "And Little Julie, you are quite the sight." Another pause. "How old are you, anyway?"

She gives another of her enigmatic smiles and says, "How old would you like me to be?"

I smile at her sense of humor. "Old enough to bleed," I say, laughing. I can't believe how crass I'm being, but she has turned this repartee into a kind of sexual innuendo game.

"Are you a doctor?" she asks coyly.

"Do you want me to be?" I respond. Touché.

"Michael, you're a bad boy."

"Not too bad, I hope. I don't bite."

"Well, that's good to know. How did you know I wanted ice cream?"

"What do you mean? Didn't I hear you? 'Buy me ice cream, buy me ice cream.' So I did."

"I like a man who's a good listener." I just smile again, enjoying her taking a break from whatever it is she was doing before I accosted her.

"You're a beautiful girl, you know that? Of course you know that."

"Thank you, Michael. You're not bad looking yourself. I have a thing for receding hairlines."

"Ouch, that hurt. Age, you know. Not much I can do about that."

"I'm serious," she says. "I find maturity very sexy." Her head tilts to the side and her eyes paint me with an appreciative scan, top to bottom.

"How old are you, Michael, really?"

"Thirty-four." I lie by several years. I don't know why. Suddenly we are dancing around a transaction.

Our ice cream break is almost over now. "Do you have any plans for this afternoon?" I ask.

"I have to get back to work."

"Can I walk you there?"

"Sure. Come on."

We get up and I leave a small tip on the table. We walk outside into the heat once more. After just two blocks she says, "Well, here it is."

She points to a doorway. "Would you like to come up?" Another magnetic smile as she takes my hand. "Would you like to spend more time with me?"

Involuntarily, I let out a little sigh. "Of course," I say.

As she nods to the man sitting by the door, she leads me inside silently by the hand. Once again there is the long hallway and the flight of stairs. As we slowly climb the stairs, she explains to me why a man is sitting at the top of the stairs. He is thin, with a wiry mustache and a shaved head. He is wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans. He appears to be Hispanic.

"I need to pay for the time we spend together using this man's room. Can you pay him for me? He'll want twenty-five dollars. Do you mind?" I smile and squeeze her hand. There is no turning back now. I know I need to see this to the end or I will have the rest of my life to regret not going the full route. When we get to the top of the stairs, Little Julie turns to me. I fumble with my wallet and give her a twenty and a ten. She hands them to the man. He does not return change. I let it pass.

He smiles back at her and me and instantly proves the exception to the rule that a smile warms anyone's face. It's a dead smile that I would have thought impossible to achieve. I let Little Julie lead me quickly away to a room down the hall. She opens the door and ushers me inside. The room is hardly larger than a walk-in closet. It has one chair and a narrow, rectangular table, like an examining table in a doctor's office. It has a firm, false-leather mattress partially covered by a wrinkled sheet. There are no windows. Little Julie gently places me in the chair.

"Michael, this is what I do. I give pleasure to men I like. I like you, Michael. Would you like me to give you pleasure?" She kneels in front of me between my legs and takes my hands in hers. "For money, Michael?"

"Of course," I say softly. "How much."

"Surprise me," she says, thrusting her sprightly smile at me again.

I came prepared for I knew not what before I left home. I pull out my wallet and give her two hundred dollars. She smiles and taking the money folds it and places it in the rear pocket of her shorts.

"That's very generous, Michael. Thank you. Just relax and I'll get some clean linens for the table. I will be back in a moment. Okay?"

I nod but as soon as she leaves the room I wonder if I just got conned. Take the money and run. After all, what do I know about this girl that I should just have trusted her like that with my two hundred dollars? Am I being a fool? I decide to wait five minutes and if she doesn't show, just leave and count myself lucky.

In about three minutes the door opens and in she walks with a clean white sheet and a pillow with a clean pillowcase. Very businesslike now she arranges the sheet and pillow. Turning to me, she says, "Michael, why don't you get comfortable and I will come back when you are ready." She turns and once again leaves the room. Not a problem. This is how she knows I'm not a cop. With my dick hanging out.

In a few minutes, she knocks on the door.

"Okay, Little Julie," I say, standing as she enters.

She smiles at me, raises her arms in the classic motion for removing her top, and says, "Would you like to help me, Michael?"

*

It's night and I am home again. I call the phone number Little Julie gave me. A woman answers the phone

quickly. I hear music and several women's voices in the background. I begin to visualize a dark, smoky room filled with a stable of women.

"Is Little Julie there?" I ask, slightly annoyed with myself for behaving pointlessly now. Why am I calling? I have no clue.

"What?" the voice asks.

"I met Little Julie today and she gave me this number. May I speak to her?"

The voice on the line comes alive. "Are you the guy who bought her ice cream?"

I say, "Yes," now feeling like a fool. Suddenly a strong male voice takes the phone asking who wants to talk with Little Julie. It's obviously a black voice. I quickly hang up. What the hell am I thinking?

Chalk it up to experience. I take a deep breath. Chalk it up to no regrets, Michael.

*

Get a grip, I tell myself. There is a world of self-indulgence that I cannot afford, the world of expensive toys, women, and travel. There is also a world of self-indulgence that I can afford, the world of sexual license. I have now seen some part of it and come out more or less unscathed. No STDs so far as I know. No drug addiction. No public embarrassment—a victimless journey across the border to the city within the city. The city of no regrets.

No regrets? Is that a good enough reason to have made this journey to the edge of Selby's world, brief though it was? Why did I need this? Men, good men go through their entire lives not feeling regretful that they haven't wallowed in slime. And yet now I do feel, having made this journey, that I have checked off a box, completed a goal.

Why did I make this choice? People talk about character and morals. These are ideas, head stuff, not feelings. And I believe feelings come first, then we use the head stuff to explain, to justify the acts we do based first on our viscera. In our gut. Our brain is slower, more deliberative by nature. For me at least, emotions are instantaneous and control my actions. Justifications come later.

What is my head stuff saying to me? The child porn is loathsome, where almost any action to utterly extinguish it is justified. About the prostitution, I am indifferent, seeing it as a business in need of regulation rather than suppression. Without regulation, young women can be and are trapped, abused, diseased, without hope or options. For many young women, it is a sentence to a degrading life and an early death from causes beyond their control. For others, it is just a job. As for the sex arcades, the sex theme parks so to speak, it's just another business. I could care less about provided it stopped offering a commercial venue to the scum producing child pornography. So, after Michael's big adventure, I find, as with so many things in life, it's complicated. But all this is just head stuff.

I have always felt I was a risk-taker. But now I see it's not that I take risks. It's more that I act viscerally. The governor that slows response to give time for deliberation is set to kick in too high with me. The window for action is set too wide. I think it's something like, what, that I have a stifled thirst for self-indulgence. For years society and propriety and religion and family kept me not only from acting on my impulses but kept me even from acknowledging them. All my life I've been pleasing others. My parents, my teachers, even my childhood friends. Always doing what they asked of me. Always deferring to their needs. Doing what was expected. With women, always trying to make them feel loved, protected, listened to. Always feeling a need to prove myself. Always other-directed.

Divorce liberated me from all that.

(Question: How do you make a woman come? Answer: Who cares! Yuk, yuk.)

After my divorce, I created a new paradigm—my three rules.

Don't do anything I don't want to do simply to be polite!

Don't be with people who drain my energy!

No regrets!

No regrets. Hmm. How does that work exactly, Michael? Do I have any governor? It's not religion, of that I'm sure. Religion stopped being my guide decades ago. So, if it's not religion, then what is it? I remember reading somewhere that in the time of the early colonies in America, or perhaps only in a Massachusetts, I don't remember, atheists were considered *ipso facto* immoral. Without the benefit of religion, it was believed people would simply be adrift without a compass in a sea of temptation. I don't agree. I don't think it is all that difficult to know what is right and what is wrong. The challenge is to choose what is right when what is wrong may seem so appealing.

I think that's what my romp through the muck today has been all about. It's been a test of whether 'no regrets' has any limits for me.

There is not a religion on Earth that preaches and prescribes murder, incest, torture, rape, theft, cheating, lying, the whole panoply of what people universally acknowledge to be wrong. And yet, the world is filled with these acts that the rational, thinking mind rejects, but that the irrational domain of impulse embraces. Are they so hard to give up? Evidently so. As for me, is the avoidance of regret simply the path to demeaning self-indulgence? How do I come to choose those things that I will regret not doing? What is the behavioral filter that guides my choices? I don't know.

At least I found today that, for me, Selby's world is a world too sad. I can visit it just once and be done with it. Unlike a good meal, after his world is chewed and swallowed I find, for me at least, there is no lingering taste that compels the second bite.

It's my turn to drive this morning. I quickly make the rounds, picking up my colleagues. Andy is a round-faced, clean-cut, slightly overweight bachelor. His hair is just the amber side of being reddish, with a short, traditional haircut, parted on the left. No glasses. No facial angularity. Really, not much interest to his face except for his eyes. His eyes look directly at you when he speaks. I like that in a person. And he leans forward a little when the discussion is intense. He shows interest and engagement.

Herb is taller and thinner. Dark curly hair, funny pushed-in face, almost flat. Narrow lips, small mouth. dark-framed glasses. He looks like a scholarly Jew. And in fact, he is. Quite bright and mostly a conventional family man. Seems happy. Never gets excited. He has a good sense of humor and knows a dirty joke about any subject you can name. Literally. Say, "hotdog" and he will tell a dirty story about hotdogs. Quite an unexpected talent for a scholarly Jew. You wouldn't think it to look at him.

Ryan is the hyper one in the group. Young looking for his age, he's about forty-two or three and looks thirty. Thin, flawless face, thick blond hair with a small forehead that emphasizes his mane even more. Incongruously, he has a largish nose on his otherwise chisel-featured face. His wife was perpetually making him nuts and always for some vague, undefined complaint we never could figure out exactly. He always had some important date to keep or some project that was coming due or some bill to pay or some damn thing that he was in a stew about. Because of this, it's difficult to take him seriously, although to him, of course, all his laments are quite serious and urgent.

But Andy is having the most difficulty recently. He has an on-again, off-again engagement going with Courtney, a very beautiful, but difficult woman. A lot of work, in my view. Right now, it's on again.

"There's not much I can do, guys, when she asks me to help her with her diaphragm," Andy laments. I'm not all that sympathetic considering my current celibate status.

"Mister Happy commands and Andy follows!" from Herb.

We all offer our standard expressions of support.

"Fuck you."

"In your dreams."

"You should live so long."

We all laugh at his "problem."

"Seriously," he says. "I can't believe it. In college I had all the pussy I could ever want. I was lucky. I'm not bragging. It's just a fact. So wouldn't you know that I'm gonna marry the one woman who plays me instead of the other way around. The one woman who gives me the most problems, who can hold out longer than I can and then blow my socks off when she's ready to. Am I crazy or what?"

"I don't know," I say. "I missed the sexual revolution in college by about 40 minutes. I'm no expert. I remember reading somewhere back then that college men were getting laid an average of 3.2 times a month. I was very pissed off. I wanted to kill the guy who was getting my share."

Herb leans over the front seat from the back where he's sitting, looks at Andy, and says, "So, were you helpful?"

Andy looks at him, not understanding.

"With the diaphragm?"

We all crack up again.

Ryan says, "You know it's not a good sign when an engagement is on and off the way yours is. The marriages don't usually last."

"Thanks a lot, Suzy Sunshine."

"Then again," Ryan adds. "The ones that aren't on and off don't last too long either. So you might as well go with the best lay."

We all concur with the wisdom of that statement. It sort of stops the conversation for a while.

After a bit, I ask Andy, "So, do you miss your college days? You know, all the women?"

"I wish it'd never happened."

"What are you talking about? All those memories. I've got nothing to remember, or almost nothing anyway."

"Lucky you. You don't have anything to not remember. I keep asking myself why I put up with all this shit every time I remember the old days. It would be easier not to remember, not to have a standard for comparison. Courtney is such a spoiled brat."

"Most of the world would consider you lucky," I venture.

"Well, most of the world doesn't know jack shit about Courtney. She is so moody and always wants her way and never wants sex when I want it. In fact, if she even smells that I want it, she's turned off. She has to be in complete control of this. Of course, she'll never admit that she does this. That's what we fight about all the time. But it's as obvious as the nose on your face, no offense intended, Ryan."

Even Ryan laughs.

"Well, she's a damn good looking woman. I could wait 'til she was ready. It doesn't seem such a hardship to me." Herb leans back, a satisfied grin on his face as if savoring the thought of Courtney getting around to being ready for him.

Andy sighs. "I never thought I...me...that I would be pussy-whipped. But you're right Herb. She just overwhelms me sometimes with how beautiful she is."

"I still think I'd rather have the memories I had to choke down, painful as that might be than have a safe experiential void. My college days were boring sexually. I mean *boring*. At least until I met Sharon. That turned out well. It's strange how a void, a vacuum, an absence of something, can carry a shit load of baggage too. That's probably why I married Sharon. She took my cherry, so to speak and I got carried away. Men are ridiculous creatures. If women only knew the power their pussies have over us."

"What do you mean, if they only knew? They all know. Every single one of them. Did you ever see a girl wearing short shorts? Why do you think she wears them? Because she knows...she *knows* she has dynamite legs and wants to show them off. Or some other woman will wear clothes that emphasize her breasts because she has great breasts. Or her ass or her hair or whatever her best feature may be. They all know what they've got and they all know how to play it." Andy's getting warmed up now. "And you know what? The women know that the men know that they're being played and it makes no difference because the little head leads the big head. We know it and they know it and we don't care because we're all a bunch of shmucks."

Once again we are silenced by the unexpected wisdom of our discourse.

Memories. I'm full of shit. There is no vacuum. I have my own memories that I choke down. A late bloomer. That's what my mother used to call me. They're just not the memories I would brag about. We all have our memories. Shit, we're all haunted.

The traffic slows to its usual crawl at its usual place and Ryan asks me to turn on the radio for some music. My mind drifts with the music as I stop-and-go automatically.

*

Sharon would be sleeping next to me. What's it been? Three, four, five weeks since we'd had sex? For the ten-thousandth time, I'd lie quietly, next to her. How did it come to this? I had no clue. Every marriage started with love. When does it change?

But I guess that isn't true. Not every marriage starts with love. Some begin with lust. Some with social pressure. Some from sloth or ignorance. Some, like mine, begin with a lie.

No, they don't all begin with love. But they all begin a new chain of memories. There's never a void. The mysteries of the female body, one way or the other get explored when you're married. The mystery gets demystified. The wife becomes the generic woman, the template for all women. Eventually, it gets old.

I have x-ray vision, another one of my gifts. In a way, it just makes things worse. I know what's there and can undress any woman I see. I know all. I see all. My mind can wander over their bodies. Or lying in bed, I can think and dream a vivid fantasy.

It isn't all creative fantasy. There are fact-based fantasies, as well. In bed, Sharon snoring by my side, I often thought of her friend, Carol, and my cock would stir. I would be careful to leave a space between Sharon and me at these moments. No part of our bodies would touch. With Carol on my mind, my left hand would slowly play its five-fingered melody. Slowly, slowly. Careful not to 'rock the boat'.

*

It's been a long week—a "five Monday" workweek. Friday finally! Friday has its mixed blessings for me. Living alone is, well, lonely, I have found, but I no longer face the daily torment of a loveless environment where love should have been.

The trick after divorce is meeting women. I remember saying in a more confident time to a divorced and lonely friend, "If you want to meet women, you have to go where women are." True enough, but somehow the people I meet are women I would not want to be seen with, and the women who excite me do not want to be seen with me. Also, I discovered that in the world of divorced males, their number is legion. I remember signing up for a Chinese cooking class, hoping I would meet women there. What I met instead were other men looking to meet women. Bummer.

I decide to try "Cooky's" after work to see if I can get lucky. I drop the guys off at their homes and head downtown. "Cooky's" is already filled. The bar is packed. The porch in the rear, off the bar, is packed. I mean, *No space!* I worm my way through the wall-to-wall bodies. The music and noise level are high, rattling the windows of the cars in the parking lot loud. The air inside is hand waving smoky. I hesitate in the foyer area. Do I really want to engage with this? I watch the dynamics, the games, the gesturing and gesticulating, ice-cubes clinking, glasses and beer bottles everywhere, the men making earnest conversation, the women smirking, everyone in one way or another enjoying the attention after a week of exhausting and powerless hustling.

I already anticipate the scene. I will order a drink, drink it slowly while watching from the 'outside', slowly circulate the room, talk to no one, imagine many of the women as my lovers, get disgusted, and finally, logically, inevitably leave.

I go in anyway. I push to the bar and about three deep, wait my turn when I will order a 12-year-old Dewars with a splash of water. The bartender is about twenty-two, maybe, and definitely chosen for her looks. She is remarkably beautiful with a flawless face and not a single wrinkle or line. She has classic high cheekbones, aquiline nose, dark black hair with long poodle curls hanging down around her shoulders. A white starched business shirt conceals her breasts that sway teasingly as she moves. She has a wholesome face that lights up when she smiles, which she does endearingly for each customer. Each one gets a smile and each one puts a dollar in the tip jar on the bar counter and considers it a bargain. Her shorts reveal a firm and well-shaped ass and long and shapely legs. It is a pleasure to wait my turn to order.

After ordering, I take my drink, place a dollar in the jar, and move to the patio outside where there is less smoke. Standing by the outside railing, I sip my drink and watch the crowd. I don't know anyone. This should be telling me that this is not my crowd, but I want it to be, so I linger. The women are delicious here or at least interesting to look at, and by late evening they will all be getting laid. It's a sobering thought. I'm suddenly the sperm inventory clerk calculating the thousands of gallons of sperm being shot up between women's legs worldwide. Women everywhere fucked on weekends, like a wave tied to the night, sweeping around Earth in tune with its rotation. Why do I think of things like this? In this way? I am definitely weird about sex.

I want it too badly. Dogs can sense fear. Women can sense desperation. I guess it's not that difficult to detect. I am confident that if I could project an I-don't-give-a-damn attitude, I'd be more successful with women. Then again, what is this crazy fixation with sex? I need to tie a knot in my libido.

The early evening sun is warming my drink. I sip it again and the magic of good scotch begins to take hold. I can't get myself to go back inside again. It's too dark and purposeful. Somehow, out on the patio, I can just enjoy the weather, the air, the release from the week. Not up to the hustling inside, I decide to leave.

"Michael!"

I turn around, astonished, looking for the direction of the voice—a woman's voice.

"Michael, over here." The voice comes from a table next to the patio door. A hand waving me over.

Theresa Strado. Folk dancing. A friend at last.

I wave back happily. "Terri!"

She motions me over. She's with three other people. Two other women and a man. I push my way to their table, feeling suddenly a part of the scene, legitimized. I have gone to a popular watering hole and been recognized. I'm such a pathetic shit, I think to myself as I move towards her, at the same time having a satisfying out-of-body experience, watching myself walking to the table.

"Hey, Terri. What's happening?" aping my best Joe Cool.

"Not enough. But it's Friday and that's a start."

Terri is definitely a charmer and a passionate Italian. She is short, which is good for me when I am with her because at just a shade under about five and a half feet, she doesn't tower over me as so many other women can. She has luscious, Mediterranean skin, and dark brown eyes and short, almost kinky-curly black hair. She is slim, but strong-boned, with surprising breasts, not huge or disproportionate, just full for such a short, slender woman. Her breasts, always a source of power over men, are just there like some trick waiting to happen. And her hands, always moving, are very expressive when she talks, Italian-like.

Terri and I have a sort of brother/sister relationship. I'm not sure how this happened. I think it began with her instant assessment of me as decent and honorable and intelligent and all those other things that make a woman respect you and trust you but not lust after you. I've just never learned how to make a sexy first impression. Or second. Which is too bad because I have had many delicious fantasies about Terri. But it's a dead issue in that regard. I have no idea how I could shift our relationship from safe to serious.

Terri lifts her glass to me and to the others at the table, wishes us all a long life, and belts down a gulp of Corona. Her friends laugh and join her in her toast. I raise my drink to my lips and take a sympathetic sip of my scotch. Suddenly, I feel stupid standing there while they're all seated, but it's hopeless to even think of finding a chair, much less bringing it to this particular table. So live with it, Michael.

"No hot plans for the weekend?" I ask Terri tactlessly.

"Hey, hombre. I don't kiss and tell."

"Well, good for you and good for him." I smile back at her, disgusted by having gotten myself into this inane repartee. Terri is disarmingly sweet and sincere. "So, introduce me," I say to her, gesturing to the others at the table.

"Sam, Martha. Friends visiting from the Bronx. Michael Roth...Krissy. Krissy works at People's Bank. Watch out for bankers on weekends, Michael. They're a dangerous lot."

"I've always wanted to be that," I say.

"A banker?" Terri shows her surprise in her voice.

I laugh. "No. Dangerous. I was always the one where mothers would say how happy they would be if their daughters went out with me, because I was such a nice boy. So sensible. Nothing to worry about. I wanted mothers all over the east coast to be worrying about me for the sake of their daughters. But they never did."

Krissy laughs. She has a nice laugh. In fact, I never met a woman who didn't have a nice laugh. What the fuck! It's so easy to be nice a little bit, give a smile, laugh. We men don't ask for much. An occasional show of respect and appreciation, while we hunt the woolly mammoth.

"Krissy, are you dangerous?" I ask still holding her hand from the introductory handshake.

"Nah. Don't believe anything Terri says about me. You know the real truth about bankers. *Boring!*"

Terri reacts with mock shock. "What *do* you mean, Krissy? Wasn't that your phone number my brother told me about on the men's bathroom wall? 'For a good time call Krissy Edwards...227. What was the rest of that?'"

"Never you mind! I thought my father washed those all off," Krissy says in mock horror. "No wonder I'm still so popular." We're all laughing now. Nice girls.

Pretending to take out a pad and pencil, I look at Terri. "What was that phone number again?"

"Sorry, Michael. Krissy's dad made me stop giving her number to every hormonal teenager looking for a good time. You'll have to get it yourself. My lips are sealed." We laugh again. I'm only half kidding about the phone number.

"So, Michael, how do you know Terri?" Martha asks. Nice segue.

"Well. Let's see. How do I know Terri? Let me count the ways. Are you talking biblical?" Terri pokes me in the thigh.

Suddenly, at an adjacent table, a patron gets up and leaves. I quickly ask the remaining patrons if I can take the chair, to which they readily consent. I slide the chair over to our table and sit down.

Settling in, I get back to Martha's question. "Let's see. We both do folk dancing, and we know each other from that. I'm still terrible at it, but enthusiastic. I make everyone crazy because they think I know what I'm doing because I do it with verve, you know...with authority...and they start to follow me, and then they realize I'm faking it, and then they get angry at me, that I'm not taking the dancing or them seriously enough. Anyway, Terri and I met at folk dancing."

"That's right. He's a terrible dancer." We all break up laughing again. The beer and the scotch and the weekend are making everything funny and pleasant.

"Well, I'm not planning to give up my day job yet," I say with a clownish grin.

"Smart decision," says Terri.

"Listen. A group of us are going to Ken Ralston's house for pizza and music and beer and carousing. Would you and Krissy like to come? Martha and Sam are coming too. What say?" asks Terri.

"Sure," Krissy says.

"Sounds great," I add.

'*You and Krissy.*' I wonder how that happened?

"Done," says Terri.

Okay! I now have a plan for the rest of the evening. And Krissy is a lovely surprise.

Women are such a mystery. Nothing new there. It amazes me the types of men women go out with. I mean fall in love with. Guys that, if I was a woman, I'd cross the street to avoid. I asked a woman friend once what she looks for in a man before she decides to date him. She gave me all the predictable answers: honest, sensitive, good sense of humor, kind, likes pets and children. Yeah, right. Everything her next boyfriend was not. An obnoxious, abusive drunk with a penchant for auto accidents and unemployment. And she was crazy about him and suffered for months when they broke up because, surprise, surprise, his wife

found out about him seeing her. A nice surprise the wife was. It never occurred to my friend that after eight months of trying to get him to marry her, he was already married.

I watch Krissy and she is pretty as a picture and about thirty. I can hardly take my eyes off her. She has such a striking delicacy about her. Everything about her is delicate. Thin-boned frame. Long, slender fingers. No ring. A Modigliani neck, a goddam, honest-to-god swan. Her face is smooth with high-fashion cheekbones. Big blue eyes with a thin line of blond eyebrow hair and almost no eye makeup to detract from that luscious blue. Just a yummy face. Her hair, long and blond, but not straight and thin like Scandinavian girls have, but rather thick and somewhat wavy, catches the light like a glass crystal and dancing with highlights and textures. Her skin is ivory or alabaster, but not transparent the way some fair-skinned women can be with their blue veins showing through.

I'm starting to think of the Song of Songs just looking at her. She's wearing a high-neck blouse with a lace collar and a red ribbon around her neck. The blouse has long sleeves, but I can see thin, delicate wrists. The familiar lay of her blouse reveals to my all-seeing eyes her smallish breasts. Her slender waist is evident from the cinch of her flaring skirt. The whole impression is one of a delicate piece of china. Like a work of art or a delicate porcelain figurine, I could look at her for hours.

I can't judge her height, but her legs are shapely from what I can see and also pale and smooth. She is not wearing stockings. It's hot so I don't read anything into this. She has a surprisingly husky...not husky, strong...a surprisingly strong voice for such a delicate looking thing. Her skin seems completely hairless, except of course where you expect hair, eyebrows, head, and so on. I wonder what the skin of her inner thigh feels like and I'm suddenly jealous of all the men who must surely have already been invited to peruse the pleasures of that thought-provoking body. She shifts her weight and I imagine her body naked making the same movement. I am convinced any man would.

I look around at the packed room, the noise, the music, the negotiating, the posturing, the lies, and the pathos. My history tells me in advance in advance that nothing will come of this party or evening.

No. I'm not angry. I just don't know where to start.

Or whether to start
 I followed a woman back to her house the other day
 I don't know what I had in mind
 something desperate
 it scares me a little

I was in the supermarket and I saw this woman there
 I went there hoping to find someone
 any woman
 I was in a kind of frenzied fantasy
 Looking for someone to control to dominate I guess
 and it would be easy

I mean I was imagining spotting some beautiful woman
 and following her home
 to you know do whatever I wanted to her
 rape her undress her watch her whatever
 it was all going to be so easy
 I mean you read about it all the time
 some woman waking up and finding a man in her bedroom
 and he has a knife
 and says fuck me or I'll kill you so she does of course
 or some variation on that and I felt
 what the hell
 I could do that too
 this is all very theoretical like I said a fantasy
 except I followed her home
 it's like one time
 continuing the do-anything-you-want-to-do theme

One time Sharon had a girlfriend over
 actually she was the girlfriend of a male friend
 but it wasn't going so well for them and for some reason
 this woman Carol liked me I guess in a brotherly sort of way

I was very serene then and sort of very commanding in my serenity
and she saw me as a together person who wasn't just dead weight
that's what she thought of her boyfriend
I guess she saw me as stronger
I made her feel like she could be strong with me
without making me feel bad
or something like that it seemed to me
anyway I know she liked me I think
I mean I know

Sharon knew this too
so one day I come home and there's Sharon and Carol
in the living room when I come in and somehow
I forget now how this all came about
but they dare me
or something like that
they're both talking about
how women are just as good as men
in most everything even better
but somehow in a contrived way giggling
like it was already staged between them

I have no idea why they staged this whole scenario for me?

I mean this whole conversation was contrived
I don't know why
it just doesn't pass the smell test thinking back on it
anyway somehow they're talking about physical strength
and Carol challenges me to a leg wrestle and Sharon
doesn't say anything just smirking

Now this is after a day at work but man is man
and Carol has an okay body
with the usual male attractors
I mean she has one of those bodies that you see sometimes
a thick body just shy of chubby
but somehow still very feminine
with large breasts a great ass and an acceptable
middle-of-the-meter waist
she has red hair that I guess
accounted for her pale complexion
and an open and what I previously thought
to be a guileless face
but she could set her jaw and then
her red hair would tell the truth about Carol
and those big breast of hers
she could make herself a contender

at anything

So I did not take this challenge lightly
anyway the thought of leg wrestling her instantly
got my gonads going
she's wearing slacks but the thought
of wrapping my leg
around her thigh instantly seems
like a good idea although
I'm smart enough not to look too eager
god knows what they were thinking or why
I was being manipulated
even then I realized that
but then again
I certainly had no problem being used in this way
whatever the hell they were up to

So we begin to leg wrestle except
Carol really wants to beat me and like prove something
and I realize there's more going on here
I'm a target here

They're gong to prove something to each other using me
I start to get angry about her aggressiveness
and I guess her bullshit and Sharon's bullshit
I mean were they in a fucking frenzy over a dead issue
a man is stronger than a woman
period end of sentence

My playfulness leaves me and I begin in earnest
and stop fooling around
pretty soon we're not just leg wrestling any more
we're just plain wrestling
she is like a fucking mad woman
and she's straining and I'm straining and we're both
squirming and turning
trying to get locks on each other
and I'm more and more applying all my strength because
I'm determined now
not to just win but to make her completely
helpless and have to acknowledge
you know
that helplessness

I'm finally straddling her with my knees on either side of her
my feet bent back over her legs pinning them
my arms are stretched out locking her wrists to the floor

my dick is pressed against her belly
she can't move and she's out of breath and flushed
her shirt is out of her pants
I'm breathing pretty hard

I mean she put up a pretty good fight
finally she says uncle and they both suddenly start laughing
I'm wondering what the fuck is going on
we get up and they're still laughing and I'm thinking
what the fuck is this

I don't remember when this was.

This was quite a number of years ago when we were first married
second or third year maybe
but anyway we decide to make dinner for Carol
Sharon has to get some food from the supermarket and I
decide to shave while she's out and
Carol keeps me company in the bathroom

We're talking and I'm shaving and she's sitting
on the toilet seat
we're all cozy
I'm doing this male thing with the razor
I can see the material of her blouse
stretching across those great tits
and we're talking and somehow the conversation
drifts into male female relationships

I say something brilliant like it's such a pain in the ass
that it's hardly worth all the effort
and Carol says what do you mean what effort
why is it such an effort
I tell her a man has to always perform
there's no such thing as a man and a woman
just enjoying each other
just looking at each other or just one of the parties
kind of just exploring the other one
without it necessarily having to lead to anything
sex or anything
just looking
just to touch and explore with no performance expected
just appreciate and enjoy with no obligations

You know what I mean I ask her
and she looks at me and doesn't say anything
but I know it's okay to go on

actually I'm warming to the subject
I don't even think about whether this is out of line or not
because it's something I've been thinking about for a long time
it's just made for the moment you might say coming out easily
like a mouse squeezing through a hole in the wall
seemingly half its size
I mean that would be my real fantasy I tell her
a woman just lying there
smiling
inviting
no hassles no bullshit no performances
just there for me to see to study to touch just to play with
for my own pleasure
(Qestion: What is Italian foreplay?
Answer: "Eh, you awake?")

What's the big fucking deal I ask her
just give the man a little pleasure sometimes
just for him
but it never works that way
there's this unwritten contract I tell her
'if you play with me
you owe me an orgasm'

Did you ever just play with a man Carol I ask her
no she says and gives me a look
I'm not sure what kind but a look
did you ever just let a man play with you
or just look at you nude
with no other expectation going nowhere as it were
I guess not really she says
see
I say to her I rest my case
I go back to shaving
rinsing my face putting on aftershave

So I'm slapping my face and Carol starts unbuttoning her blouse
slowly just like that
just unbuttoning her blouse
like an afterthought you know
just something to do

She definitely got my attention right away and like
if it aint broke don't fix it
so I don't say anything
I just turn slightly and lean against the basin
to watch what she's doing

after undoing all the buttons
she pulls her blouse apart and open of course
I can't take my eyes off her bra
how full the cups are and her nipples darkening
pushing out the fabric

I mean I can feel the weight of her breasts just looking at her bra
then she takes her hands and grabs the underside of her bra
under each breast and just lifts her bra up and over each breast
her breasts are beautiful and her skin is pale
and sort of translucent and you can see the veins under her skin
but not in some weird medical way
just that it was the delicate quality of her skin
her breasts so full and well-shaped
though of course they hang somewhat being so large but
she was still young and there was plenty of muscle tone
so they hang sort of because they had to
but they weren't pendulous
just
just large

I stood there and soaked it in
I was surprised to note that I was not getting
sexually aroused by all this which I pointed out to her
kind of indicating that this was okay you know
her showing me her breasts
not okay that I wasn't getting sexually aroused
just something between friends
and I wasn't taking this as an invitation but rather
as her response to our conversation
and wasn't she a good sport
shit like that

I don't know why I wasn't aroused, but I wasn't.

Weird shit in those days
but I did enjoy watching except
just then the door starts to rattle and I suddenly remember
I'm married and my wife is back with the groceries
I rush to the door frantically hoping to head her off
delay her so Carol can pull herself together
putz that I am I must've had some guilty look on my face
Mister Glassface
and she instantly says what the hell's
going on here
nothing
nothing my ass and Carol is not quite done up yet

and her blouse is together again but not quite buttoned
and Sharon is seemingly mad as hell
and I'm saying things like now wait a minute
don't jump to conclusions
I'm mentally trying out my
this-was-like-a-brother-and-a-sister thing speech
but I don't even believe it and Carol's looking angry at me now
and Sharon's looking angry at me and suddenly I'm angry
I mean what the fuck is going on here

Suddenly I'm feeling set up
for I haven't the foggiest idea what or why
and I get angrier and I start accusing them of arranging this all
we go round and round for a while until we're all satisfied
that we have made each other completely crazy
Carol says maybe she better go and no one says not to
so she leaves

It was pretty tense for a while after that but after a few sessions
at the shrink it all just blended in with the rest of the bullshit
I often wonder what would have happened between me and Carol
if Sharon had not come home then
if we simply had kept going

I mean I have often fantasized
about a continuing relationship with Carol
it wouldn't take a lot of convincing to talk my equipment
into getting back on the job if she and I were alone again
I'm convinced it was the shock of it the novelty of it
you know
that took me by surprise
I didn't then and don't now see any merit
in my not getting sexually aroused
in the presence of Carol's wonderful tits
it was a mistake I often regretted
another lost opportunity
not just then of course because
Sharon *was* coming home after all
but maybe another time

Yes. I do regret that nothing came of it.

Missed opportunities are the story of my life
or most of the time no opportunity at all

*I'm not avoiding talking about something.
I'm just not sure how to start.*

Like I said
I followed a woman home the other day
I don't know what I was thinking
except I was fantasizing about some kind of action
you know doing something to her
violent I think

I was going to rape her
I mean in my fantasy
I wasn't actually going to do it
to this woman this specific woman this person I was following
I mean I was following her and fantasizing
about raping her in general
not really her but the idea of her
the idea of following her home checking it out
making sure there was no one home during the day
menfolk you know are more likely to be working
and she would be alone
sounds crazy right

So I could get her at my mercy or in my power
or something like that
you know without worrying about being disturbed
or interrupted or whatever just us
and me doing stuff to her
I don't know what just having her in my power
and no shit about it
just do what I say and that's all
just whatever I say

Anyway I guess I don't know what the hell I wanted to do
I just wanted to follow her home because she was beautiful
and I wanted to see maybe how easy it would be to do this stuff
if I really wanted to do it

All the time I'm following her I'm thinking
how no one in the world knows what I'm doing
except me so I can just stop at any point
and no one will be the wiser and I can just decide
what the break-off point will be you know
when I need to stop
or go through with it if I don't get to that point
of no return

I'm okay and even if I get to that point I can just stop
still no one will know anything about anything but me

and all the time I'm thinking this I'm thinking that police
have got to have all sorts of new high tech shit that can identify you
from something you wouldn't have thought of in a million years
or some high tech way to trace you to find you to nail you
so you can't deny anything or get away
that you just get nailed by something
you never even knew they had
some amazing new technique some new technology
and all the time I'm thinking
I'm fucking crazy what am I doing

I follow her right to her house she pulls into the driveway
of course I drive right by
I'm scared shitless and my heart is pounding
I don't know what the fuck I'm doing
so I go around the block and when I go by her driveway
she's taking in her groceries
did I mention that I saw her in the supermarket
I saw this woman pushing her carriage and she's
thin and fit and dressed well with a stylish skirt and blouse
and good posture that makes me conclude
she is high maintenance but worth it
anyway I go around the block one more time
when I come back she's inside the house
the car trunk is down so I figure she's finished
with the carrying in and stuff
so I park the car and just sit and watch her house
I sat there for a long time
Doc what the hell am I doing

Yes, do you have any water? I could use a drink.

I mean do I need some medication or something
I saw this movie once
it was many years ago so
I don't remember much but some things stand out
one thing I still remember is this guy in the movie
is obsessed with sex
I don't remember the story anymore but at the end
he cuts his dick off with an electric handheld meat slicer
I mean that's something if you're a guy
you don't forget

A woman I knew at the time
we weren't sure if we were friends or lovers
she was Israeli
took me to see this movie her treat

shit after seeing the movie
I had grave doubts about whether to pursue her
you know was she sending me a message
if so what

You're tapping your fingers
do you know that
I guess I am wandering from my stalking story

I don't know why my stalking story reminded me of my cutting-off-the-penis story.

Or maybe I do
it's pretty obvious now that I said the two in the same sentence
and you don't have to worry I'm going to go and rape someone
I may be crazy but I'm not stupid

PART 2

FOUND

Another year shot to hell. I spend New Year's Eve alone with "homemade" manicotti and take-out chicken dinner from the Greek restaurant by the bridge. I pick the bones clean and decide on a New Year's resolution. I will keep a journal. I've never done that, but the idea of writing something with a fountain pen, filling a piece of blank paper with my handwritten words, gives me a warm feeling about honoring the past and perhaps a bit of rebellion against the relentless march of technology. I'm excited by the prospect. A fountain pen and a paper journal.

*

January 2nd

I watched the "Hunchback of Notre Dame" last night. Charles Laughton was such a unique actor. His voice, his mannerisms, his weird lips and unhandsome face. Watching him you knew you were watching someone memorable. I also watched "Amadeus." Or most of it anyway. I left out the part where his life goes to rack and ruin. I couldn't bear to watch that again. I watched Barbarella with Jane Fonda. Somehow I remembered it differently from when I saw it in the movies. More nudity then. More of Jane's tits. It seemed shocking to me at the time, and now I'm not shocked so something has been cut out perhaps. But why? Certainly not to avoid offending. This movie is child's play by today's standards. Oh, well. I also got a porno flick. That I enjoyed. It's amazing, though, how fast the novelty of the movie wears off. Once seen, the power of the movie to arouse drops dramatically with each viewing. Like our smelling faculty, porno flicks seem to saturate the senses quickly. You get used to a foul odor and after a while, you don't seem to smell it anymore. Porno flicks seem to work the same way. After a while, you need a new flick with new women, new plot, new anything. It's like I have sexual arousal saturation. Is this a general phenomenon with all men? Does this explain why we are such philanderers or at least wannabes? Sexual saturation. I suspect that's it.

*

I reread my first journal entry. What bullshit. Okay. I'm new at this. And I don't have to do it every day. Just when the spirit moves me.

*

January 3rd

I got a call from Robbin Shaw. She says there's a management opening in the training department. Pam has been promoted. She talked to Phil Saunders about me and although I'm not certified for any of the courses, Phil said to go ahead and apply. I'm a fast study and he likes my "presence" and my management skills. The job is at a pretty high level and there may even be some interesting travel involved to help train trainers in other locations. So I sent an updated resume to Phil along with a memo saying I really want the position. I'm not crazy about the whole prospect, though. I don't want to move, but the job is at the main

office, the power center in Hartford. And if I don't apply they will stop suggesting further possible promotions to me.

Went to dinner with the kids. Meredith is in the throes of her first serious boyfriend. Sharon hates this kid. I don't think it's worth getting worked up over. Chances are he'll be gone within the year. The transition from middle school to high school has been tough on Merrie and some acting out is to be expected. Allen has met a sweet young thing. Cyndi. For a high school girl, Cyndi is quite mature. I trust Allen's good sense, but hormones are hormones and for two high school juniors that could spell trouble. Allen may need some watching where Cyndi is concerned. He's old enough now to get into real trouble.

*

The phone rings just as I am going out to meet with Herb about some tax issues. An unknown woman's voice asks if this is Michael.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"You don't know me, Michael. My name is Charlotte Stewart and I was given your name and number by a mutual friend from work."

"A mutual friend? Sounds mysterious. Who is it?"

"Well, that's not the point of my call. I have a strange request to make of you if you will hear me out for a few minutes," she says. Her voice is calm and pleasant so I don't think there's anything crazy going on here. I figure, what the hell.

"Charlotte, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, Charlotte, I'm a little pressed for time, but what's on your mind?"

"I have this friend, Michael, and it's she I'm really calling about."

"Your friend?"

"Yes. I got your name because I was told you're a nice guy. A good man."

"Thanks for that, I think. But what does this have to do with me and your friend?"

"Okay. You're busy so I'll just spit it out. My friend is very attractive, but more often than not she gets herself into self-destructive relationships with men. Because she is so good looking, very good looking men frequently hit on her. I guess a normal guy is just scared off by her looks. So she ends up in destructive relationships with good looking jerks who once they get her into bed have fun for a while and then dump her for their next victim. She does this and it's painful to watch and she always has her heartbroken. I tell her what her pattern is and she listens and then does the same thing all over again. She's a good friend to me and I want to help her."

"Charlotte, I recognize the pattern. But, again, what does this have to do with me?"

"I want to introduce you to her. Because you're a good man who won't treat her like a conquest, like a plaything, and throw her away when you're done."

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Umm. Okay."

"Are you seeing anyone now?"

"No," she says with a half questioning tone in her voice.

"Well, let me be frank with *you* and perhaps a bit harsh since I don't have time really to choose my words more carefully. Your friend sounds like nothing but trouble for a man like me. I try to avoid self-destructive individuals. Much as you might hope this is not true, it sounds like your friend has spent a lifetime benefitting from her good looks and probably will never be able to break the pattern you just described, which I suspect is based on shallow self-absorption and high maintenance. You, on the other

hand, sound like a loyal friend, a good person, and worthy of a devoted kindred spirit. Why aren't you seeing someone?"

"No. That's not why I called," she says, sounding flustered.

"I know it's not, but think about what I said. I think you are wasting your time and energy trying to run interference for your friend's love life. My experience, anyway, is that no good deed goes unpunished and at the very least she will continue to disappoint you. Her pattern of romances is what she is comfortable with or she would have changed it long ago. I need to go. I'm sorry if I'm being a little brusque. And I'm sorry I can't help you."

"Michael, you have my friend all wrong. She's not like what you just described. She's sweet and sensitive and in a way, her looks have been a curse. I wish you could get to know her the way I do."

"Hmm. Charlotte, you're a great friend, and right now that she has a friend like you is her best recommendation. But—there's always a but isn't there?—I still think I will take a pass on this. I wish you and your friend lucky and happy lives. I'm sorry. I just am running late and have to go."

"Okay. Thanks, Michael, for listening to me. You're a good sport. I think what I was told about you is true and I'm sorry my friend can't seem to meet people like you."

"Charlotte, people like me, as you say, are invisible to people like your friend. They look right through us. It's just the way it is. I'm sorry, I have to go. Good luck."

"Thanks again. Goodbye."

I hang up the phone. Strange call. Where did that come from?

*

January 15th

A goddamn disaster. The New England Bank of Commerce has gone belly up and all my stock, more or less half my life's savings are gone—soon to be wiped out by an imminent Federal takeover of the bank. It lost about 450 million dollars this quarter. It only had \$250 million in capital. Thus, it is insolvent. Trading in the stock is stopped. It doesn't get any clearer than that. When the Feds take over, all investor equity goes down the toilet. This was a blue-chip stock. Jesus Christ. All gone. The third biggest bank in New England. Who could have predicted this? Jesus. Shit.

*

The sky is blood red in my dream, with bright yellow clouds. The trees have deep blue foliage and their trunks are golden with black streaks. The ground is a light purple. The image is in high contrast producing a kind of dark outline, Cezanne-like, around each object adding to the unnatural appearance of the whole. In my dream, I am watching the trees from a high hill looking down into the valley where the trees are located.

I know I am dreaming.

I recognize the bizarrely colored landscape as a sign of my dream. I am examining the scene logically, trying to discover the method to the madness of the unnatural colorations. I see beside the largest tree in my dream image a curled figure. It is not clear if the figure is male or female, but its coloration is normal in contrast to the rest of the scene. The figure is naked, but because of its huddled pose, I still cannot make out the gender. As I watch, the figure explodes, turning into a rain of colored confetti. The trees begin to melt like some Dali dreamscape and rather than simply puddling on the ground, they drain into the soil and disappear. A black sun begins to form in the upper left, beside the melting trees. Slowly, it casts a black shadow rather than light over the scene until all is darkness.

The scene shrinks, compressing to a black sphere with a white background. Suddenly a human hand projects into the scene and envelopes the black sphere, hiding it from view. I know the hand is mine projecting into the image, but how I know this I don't know.

My hand opens and reveals a small golden bird within. The bird turns and stares at me, watching from outside the frame of this dream image and speaks. "Why?" it asks. "Why?" it repeats. "Why?" Then it says, "Feed me. I'm hungry."

Instantly, the other hand, palm open and down, smashes the gold bird, crushing it in my palm. What looks like water begins to seep between the fingers of my lower hand, gradually filling the bottom of the scene, which has transformed into a kind of fishbowl. As the bowl fills with the clear liquid, the little bird can be seen flying slowly within it, back and forth like a small goldfish might do.

As I watch the dream, the bowl disappears and the gold bird transforms into the rear of the head of a young female. As the head slowly turns towards me, it is simultaneously growing in size, becoming bigger and bigger until all you can see is the face of a young female. It is Krissy's face turned toward me, smiling, but eyes focused somewhere behind me, greeting someone else.

I try to imprint these images in my memory so I can think about them when I wake up, but I know I will have forgotten them by morning.

*

Right now, the prospect of a promotion seems amazingly fortuitous. Except for the move. My kids are here in Benton. I really don't want to move to Hartford, that far away from them. At least not for a few more years, until they are out of high school and are living at their colleges, wherever that may be.

What is that Chinese curse? May your children live in interesting times. I would be very happy right now with peaceful and uninteresting. Now I have to go through the motions of wanting the promotion while at the same time looking for another job that will keep me here in Benton or at least nearby. One of the worst times in your life is looking for a job with the inevitable serial rejections until something positive happens. Usually because of a friend and having nothing whatever to do with all your job-finding efforts. It's not what you know. It's who you know.

The phone rings and I pick it up on the second ring. What the hell. I'm sitting right next to it. It's foolish to let it ring just not to seem anxious to hear from people. From anyone.

"Hello."

"Hi, Michael. It's Krissy Edwards."

"Well! What a surprise. It's been a long time."

"Yes. Not since Ken Ralston's party."

I am now forced to recall the scene of yet another failed social experience for me. I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything.

"It's been a few months. I know. I've wanted to call you sooner but I didn't know if you would be glad to hear from me or not."

More silence.

"Well, anyway, I just wanted to see how you are doing."

I realize I am making this very difficult for her. Sensing this is her exit line, I say quickly, "No, I'm glad you called. Really, how are you doing?"

"Michael, I feel very bad about that party. I was pretty much a jerk towards you and want to apologize. I wanted to apologize as soon as you left, but I couldn't believe I acted so stupidly. Denial, you know?"

"Well, sometimes things just aren't meant to be. It was noisy and crowded and not really conducive to getting to know each other."

"You're being very generous, Michael. I acted like total shit. I don't know what I was thinking."

"How come you're calling me now?"

"Luckily, I was talking with a friend of mine and she says to me, 'So let me get this straight. You met this guy and from the little that you remember he's funny, good looking in a grown-up, non-jock sort of way, suitably employed, is a good listener, can keep a conversation going, and wasn't a self-absorbed jerk.' Then she asked me to tell her again what was wrong with this? When she put it all that way, I was shocked again at how stupid I was. All I remember as we spoke at the party was me looking over your shoulder to see who else I could be talking to. It was pretty obvious. I'm ashamed of myself for being so rude."

"Krissy, do you know someone named Charlotte?"

"Yes, Charlotte Stewart. Why?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering. I came across the name recently. It's not important."

"Michael, will you forgive me?"

"Krissy. That's not necessary. I just figured you weren't interested."

"But Michael, I am interested. Look, can we discuss this over a glass of wine? My treat."

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I like Loretta's Italian Restaurant. Loretta owned a restaurant in Italy so when she moved to the United States, naturally, she started a restaurant here. It's entirely a family operation. I think Italians like it that way. Nobody knows their business, but the family. The husband, Bernard, is not Italian, but Swiss. How he met Loretta, I don't know, but he got lucky as she is a very savvy and successful businesswoman. Maybe she needed an accountant and figured she might as well marry one. He does the books. Loretta's son, Angelo, and daughter, Crystal, share the kitchen duties, preparing their exquisite northern Italian cuisine, and Crystal's husband, Marco, is the waiter. There is also one waitress, Camilla, outside the family. I don't know how she slipped into the operation, but she is a very attractive dark-haired beauty with a slight Spanish accent and a vivacious personality, well-suited for a service industry job. Everyone loves her and when she isn't busy she relieves Loretta of door duty, welcoming new patrons and gushing over old ones. When Loretta isn't at the door she is walking around chatting with the customers, making sure they're happy. The restaurant is all about the personal touch.

I watch as Krissy is greeted at the door. She is wearing a long, flower-patterned, and brightly colored skirt and a white long sleeve blouse plunging a bit more than I expected. Her blond hair is done up in a kind of bun on the top that emphasizes the long line of her flawless neck. Is she aware of the impression she makes? Dumb question.

Camilla offers several words of greeting and listens as Krissy evidently explains she is on a mission to meet me. Camilla knows me well and points out my table to her. I wave to her, and Marco quickly moves in to escort her to me. I stand up as Marco adjusts her seat for her as she sits down.

A little breathless, Krissy apologizes for being a few minutes late.

"Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose," she says. "I seem to have synchronized with the traffic lights perfectly. I got stopped at every single one."

"You're here now. That's the important thing."

"Yes," she says, holding eye contact that I always find difficult to maintain, less so with men than with women. "That's the important thing, Michael." Finally, she breaks eye contact, looking about the room for Marco. When she gets his attention he comes over and she asks me what I would like to drink. I look at Marco. "Dewars, 12-year-old, with one ice cubes and a splash of water." Krissy orders a glass of Nappa Valley cabernet.

I suddenly think of the poem by Ogden Nash. 'Candy is dandy,/but liquor is quicker'.

We exchange small talk until the drinks arrive. As Krissy's drink is placed before her she leans back in her chair and says with a smile, "So. Thank you for meeting with me."

"Is that what we're doing? Having a meeting?" I realize that came out a bit harsh, so I smile as well.

Krissy takes a sip of her wine. After a brief pause, she says to me, "Let's start over. So, Michael, how about those Red Sox?" We both laugh.

"They can't hold a candle to how surprising women can be, I reply." I take a sip of my scotch.

"I'm sure it's a genetic thing," Krissy says. "Universal. All women make men crazy. It's part of our charm."

"Hmmm," is all I can say to that.

"You know, I see Terri from time to time and she is always saying something nice about you," Krissy says. For some reason, I am avoiding keeping eye contact with Krissy.

"Is that so? Well, then I am going to say something nice about her. She has wonderful instincts about people. How well do you know her?"

"I mean, we're not exactly friends. We don't see each other often enough for that. But we are friendly and you know how girls like to talk. It doesn't take much for us to share more than men probably would ever do."

"Did you know Terri's parents were both deaf when she was born? Her first language was sign language. She learned sign language like we learned to speak the language we speak. She didn't really think anything special about that since that was all she knew. But as she began interacting with other children her weak English skills became more and more apparent.

"At first they thought she was retarded, but eventually someone figured it out—that vocal language with all its rules just was not used in her life at home. She got special help in school because at home it was just sign language. But Terri has a good head for languages and got on the same page with the other kids pretty quickly. She must have been a tough kid because normally other children would try to make anyone who is different miserable. But not Terri. I'm told she also has a good left jab."

"Interesting. I didn't know any of this about her. I mean the sign language, not the left jab. Well, I didn't know that either." We both laugh.

"The reason I bring it up is it's a long intro to my nice thing I want to say about her. Her intuition about people is so good because you get good at reading body language when you know sign language. Sign language is surprisingly rich in nuance that even long-time users not born to it find difficult to spot. But for those born to it, watch out." Another sip of scotch feels good here. "They see everything. Terri can be spooky that way. She is unfailingly honest herself and amazingly intuitive about people. Whoever marries her...well, complete honesty will be unavoidable. Lying will not be a successful option."

"Wow, there goes half my arsenal," Krissy jokes.

"So tell me, is 'Krissy' your actual name or the friendly version?"

"No, it's Kristina. Everyone calls me Krissy, of course. I'm not sure how I feel about that. It began when I was quite young and seems to have taken root. I do like Kristina, but getting people to use it seems like a hopeless quest, doomed to failure. So, it's Krissy. I'm happy with it."

Krissy continues with her disconcerting way of not breaking eye contact. I won't be drawn into a battle of wills with her over this. I make no effort to hold her gaze, but rather casually look around the room from time to time and then return to her.

"I was lucky as a kid. For some reason, no one called me 'Mike'. Mike sounds too much to me like an Irish immigrant. Maybe a cop. Not a good match for a size challenged Jewish kid. Luckily, I've always been called Michael."

"Are you very religious, Michael?"

"No, thank god." As soon as I say this I am charmed by the irony of it. It just popped out. I am happy to see Krissy laughing, catching the inconsistency immediately. Smart girl.

"An atheist?" Krissy asks.

"Yes," I say without equivocation.

"An atheist grateful to god for his atheism. I like it."

"Are you very religious?" I ask her.

"No," she says and takes a sip of her wine. "Thank god."

We both laugh.

"Maybe we should sit apart," I say, "so when the lightning bolt strikes it won't get both of us at once."

"Whom do you think is in more danger? A Jewish atheist or a Catholic atheist?" Krissy asks feigning seriousness.

"Definitely the Catholic atheist. Hell and damnation and all that. If you're Jewish and a male they just take away your bar mitzvah money. I don't mean to stereotype, but you know the old joke. Jesus saves, but Moses invests."

"Okay, moving right along. I think we better get off this topic. You never know what god you're offending," Krissy says.

"Can I interest you in some dessert?" I ask. "My treat."

Krissy leans forward as if to impart a secret. "I noticed at our neighbor's table a scrumptious looking tiramisu."

I lean back and getting Marco's attention, order a tiramisu to share, and two espressos. While waiting for dessert we both sit quietly enjoying sips of our drinks. "Would you like a refresher for your drink?" I ask.

"No, I'm fine. Driving, you know."

Marco unobtrusively places the desert in the center of the table and places a small, white porcelain plate and a small fork in front of each of us along with the espressos and two little spoons. I take my espresso with sugar. Krissy takes hers as is.

"So, Krissy, tell me about your family. I'm trying to figure out how complex the mixture is that produced such a beautiful woman."

"Thank you, sir," she says, lobbing her radiant smile at me. "Pretty complex. Part English, Dutch, Japanese, and Italian. At least that I know of. Maybe American Indian in there somewhere, as well. My immediate parents are...were...are Dutch and Italian. You can't find a stranger combination than those two. You can't get a Dutchman to start talking and you can't get an Italian to stop.

"My mom was all Italian and maybe the exception to the rule. There was a cartload of Italian family members that came with the package, all noisy and opinionated and disagreeing all the time at the top of their voices and arguing among themselves, but if anyone dared to attack the family they circled the wagons. No one from outside the family could harm or criticize the family and get away with it.

"And do they eat! Did I mention eating? My god, they love to eat. I remember my first visit to Aunt Rosie, well, the first visit I remember anyway. It was on a weekend and in the middle of the night Saturday, really very early Sunday morning, Aunt Rosie got up and started cooking. I woke up from the sounds coming from the kitchen. I went quietly, tiptoe, like kids do when they exaggerate being stealthy, to see what was going on. I saw Aunt Rosie stirring a huge pot, the kind you might imagine for a military mess hall or a witches brew. She was making some kind of red sauce. It looked like it could feed an army. And the smell! To die for!

"When morning arrived she and Uncle Frankie were setting up tables and chairs. The tables were set end-to-end in a long row passing from the kitchen through an opening into the dining room and finally into the living room. There must have been seating for twenty, at least. By late morning, the food started appearing on the tables. At the same time, people started arriving. And they came and they came and before you knew it all the chairs were taken and the talking escalated until you could hardly hear the person sitting next to you and the young men were all handsome and dark and vain. I loved them all. I felt so lucky to have so many relatives who loved me and pinched my cheeks and told me stories about Italy and said if anyone ever bothered me, little Krissy, just let them know and it will be the last time they ever do. They were very protective of me. I always felt safe. Until my mom died.

"My mom died six years ago of breast cancer. It was horrible. Of course, I was a grown woman, but still, I never believed my mom could die. She was so gentle and loving. She never seemed to need to raise her voice to be heard when she spoke. I could tell her anything. I would ask her advice about young girl stuff that I couldn't ask anyone else. And I knew, somehow, when I needed to ask for her permission without understanding how I knew to do this. She held a kind of royal position in the family. Not royal exactly. What do I mean? Not royal, but respected. Almost like the godfather images you see in cheap movies about the mafia, except godmother, not father. Everyone trusted her. Despite her mild ways and soft voice, she was constantly being asked to mediate some dispute or other and when she did her decision was final. All sides trusted her good judgment."

"It must have been very hard on you and your father when she died," I say.

"For me, yes. Very hard. My father remarried, but I'm not very close to her. She just sort of appeared after about a year and then they were married. Everyone was pretty shocked since my mom had not even been dead a full year, but I figured, what the hell, he's not getting any younger. Also, I think he was afraid of death and thought getting married again would keep him alive. My grandfather died within a year of my grandmother. I think he was spooked by this."

"So you don't actually have any immediate family nearby," I say.

"Yes, that's true. I can think of several times when having Cousin Johnny or Uncle Vito or Uncle Frankie nearby would have been comforting. But pretty much all my relatives are a plane flight away now."

Krissy seems to have exhausted herself recalling the structure of her family and leans back in her chair. Her head hangs down a little bit, almost in reflection. Then she quickly perks up and with a sweet smile asks me, "What about you?"

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"My family is typical Jewish, European origins and crazy relatives. My grandfather, Moshe, was from Poland. My grandmother, Leah, was born in Russia but moved to Poland where she met my grandfather. It was a very romantic story. My grandfather was from a kind of Jewish aristocratic family and my grandmother was comparatively poor. When the family on my grandfather's side learned of his love for Leah they made it clear that she was too low and not suitable for the family. He persisted and they threatened him with disinheritance and expulsion from the family. He left home and married Leah. They had four children and were crazy in love. They were an inspiration to all three of my aunts and my father."

"It must have been difficult for them," Krissy says, "his being without the support of his family. I can't imagine how lonely that must have been for him. Not to mention the injustice of it."

"Yes, it was difficult, I'm told, especially when Grandpa Moshe came to America. Those were crazy clannish times. My grandfather came to America alone to get established, leaving my grandmother to make do with whatever she and the children could earn and whatever my grandfather could send from America. One winter, I'm told, it was particularly harsh and out of desperation my father, then about nine years old, was sent to my great grandfather's family home to ask for help. He walked five miles in the snow. When the door was opened by my great grandmother she took one look at who it was and slammed the door shut. That's how crazy they were."

"Wow," is all Krissy can say. She lowers her head, looking at her tightly clasped hands. She separates them.

I pause for a sip of the espresso. I haven't touched the tiramisu and Krissy observes my lack of enthusiasm for the dessert.

"You don't really like tiramisu, do you, Michael?"

"You got me. I'm not a big dessert eater, although the coconut smells good. I wonder what dessert that is going with or maybe it's part of a sauce for one of the dishes."

Krissy seems to be testing the air for aromas.

"I don't smell any coconut."

I sniff the air.

"Hmmm. Well, my ex-wife used to say my nose was purely for decoration. Anyway, back to more about me."

By now I am making full eye contact with Krissy. It went from being a challenge, a kind of contest that I chose to avoid, to an easy pleasure instead. Her face with its sculpted features, clear skin, and bright blue eyes now has me enthralled. I click espresso cups with her and continue.

"I'm an orphan now. It always sounds so weird to say that. One thinks of orphans as children and as a result of war. Maybe it's just me. Anyway, my father died of a heart attack while otherwise in the best of health. We always joked among ourselves that if he ever died it was not going to be from anything serious. He looked that good for his age. We also said afterwards that Florida has the best-looking corpses in America. All that sunshine and outdoor living. He died just shy of eighty-two. It was a nice, quiet death.

"My mother died of a blood disease of some kind. Actually, I'm not really clear on why she died. Personally, I think it was an allergic reaction to some medication they were giving her, but try to get a handle on that. Good luck. She was seventy-three when she died. I was quite close to her and for years after her death kept wanting to pick up the phone and call her. She was very smart. My father, by contrast, was a simple man. He was, how shall I say, a stone beneath which, when turned, there were no surprises to be found."

I used that line in one of the poems I wrote about my father.

"You didn't like your father?" Krissy asks.

I sigh an unintended sigh. "My father was not a person to not like. He was just...not a deep thinker. I remember overhearing an uncle once asking him if he ever thought about death. My father said, 'No.' 'That's funny,' my uncle said. 'I think of death all the time'."

We sit silently for a moment. Good time to change the mood, I think.

"But you know, in any group, he was the one making people happy. He was—what?—carefree! He laughed easily, had a surprisingly good singing voice, and could imitate the accent and sound of almost any language in Europe, without actually speaking the language. He was the darling of his three sisters and my grandmother. He could whistle like a bird and you could hear him coming by that whistle. He made everyone in the family happy, but he had no ambition beyond selling. My mother would nag him to 'improve himself.' And she always had a goal for him. Electronics technician, insurance salesman, real estate agent, whatever. For each of her goals, he obviously felt it would be easier to acquiesce. To pretend. You know, 'happy wife, happy life.' He would study and get his various licenses, practice whatever it was for a few months, and then go back to what he loved best, selling men's clothes in a department store."

"Tell me more about your mom. If you don't mind, that is. I'd like to know her better."

"Hmmm. My mom. As I said she was very smart. Not just book learning, although she read all the time, but independently smart. She was able to just manage to graduate high school before the family's need for another income took over her life. She taught herself bookkeeping and got a civil service job working for the city. She gave that up after she was married and had my brother and me to look after. It was the time when mothers stayed home to raise their kids."

"She had a big influence on you, didn't she?" Krissy says.

"She introduced a higher intellectual level into our lives that was not common in our neighborhood or social set. If the radio was on, we listened to the classical music station for the most part. If we were not playing, we were expected to be reading. And not just anything. Only the classics. She had read them all. Dostoevsky, Hugo, Scott, Dumas, and Dickens. Also American writers like Twain and Fitzgerald and Sinclair and Melville, and Thoreau. She loved good writing and she loved words. It was not unusual to find her asleep with the dictionary on her belly. She just loved to discover words she didn't already know. She was amazing that way."

"I can tell you like words and reading as well. Obviously from your mom," Krissy says giving my hand resting on the table a small squeeze. I continue my story, but her brief touch catches me off guard and electrifies me.

"Hmm. Let's see. She was quite good looking, also. I think my father always considered himself lucky that she had wanted to marry him. He recognized her complexity, I think, and just accepted it without trying to compete. It was a world he knew was beyond him. But I think he also knew his strengths lay elsewhere. Ultimately, he loved her, admired her, and respected her. And for these reasons, he put up with her nagging. And she did nag. While he clearly understood her strengths, she never seemed to understand his limitations, or to accept them, in any event."

Krissy is listening intently, leaning forward, elbows on the table, chin supported by her cupped hands, and maintaining unwavering eye contact.

"So, Michael, you got your mother's brains. Did you get your father's happy outlook on life?"

"Great question. Can I defer an answer until I find out if we will have a second date? May I call this our first date?"

"Yes, and yes and I would love for us to have a second date."

"Me too, Krissy. Me too."

*

February 15th

Krissy asked me if I inherited my father's happy outlook on life. I would have to say I did not. I am much too thoughtful and thinking is the enemy of carefree. I wish I could be more like my father.

I send Krissy a dozen roses. At work. After such a promising date last night, I figured, what the hell, make a gesture of appreciation.

I try not to think of her too often, but I'm unsuccessful. I am conflicted between the pleasure of recalling our date at Loretta's restaurant and the certainty that it was all a huge mistake. Krissy is simply out of my league. I know it and she will figure it out as well sooner or later. I am simply not a guy who will ever turn heads in a bar. Women do not imagine themselves in bed with me, getting wet just thinking about me. This I have learned since my divorce from Sharon. I have acquired a certain amount of skill since then, but I need a woman who is willing to take a chance before they can discover this. Like Gloria.

How did Gentlemen's Quarterly put it? Every divorced man will have his transitional woman. Gloria was mine. What a slut. She was wonderful. What it was that attracted her to me, I have no idea, but out of the blue she called me saying she heard Sharon and I were separated. Up until that call, Gloria had simply been part of the background of faces at the folk dancing group. We hardly spoke before her call to me.

I was my usual charming self on the phone, but at a loss to understand why she was calling me. Gloria was not one to stand for confusion and made things clear pretty quickly. After a few minutes of beating around the bush, she simply threw caution to the wind and said something like, "I've been interested in you the first time I saw you at folk dancing. Now that you're a free agent, I would like us to get to know each other well. To get to know each other very well." Who knew that folk dancing was going to give science fiction conventions a run for their money as a great venue for getting laid.

I remember our first date. Bless her heart. Gloria was not to be denied. After dinner and a movie, she made it clear we would have dessert at her house. When we got there, we sat on the couch in her living room talking and holding hands and lightly kissing. I began to feel like a fool for not taking serious advantage of the situation. I boldly got off the couch, knelt before her, pulled up her skirt and gently pushing her thighs apart, placed my mouth firmly over her crotch through her panties. And then I exhale warm air through the cloth.

I guess my move was a bit fast because I remember the first thing she said was, "What are you doing?" Having already decided she was a sure thing, I said, "Searching for treasure," and proceeded to pull off her panties. I figured, what the hell. We proceeded along the traditional path of undressing and groping and all the preliminaries. However, when the proper moment came, my equipment came up short. Luckily, Gloria was equal to the challenge.

Calmly she disengaged us and said, "Let's have a drink." She brought out the scotch, how did she know, and calmed me down. After a few minutes, she walked me into her bedroom and the rest is a blur of sexual excess. Over the months that she was my transitional woman I learned, without bragging, "at my master's feet" the skill and art of lovemaking. God bless her. She changed my life. But eventually a wealthy young man took an interest in her and Gloria was gone with the wind. I was not too distraught as I always considered this a tenuous relationship at best. Gloria was like a good wine. There was a proper time when the chemistry is right and the flavors are at their peak of nuance and perfection. After that time, everything loses its brightness and turns to a tiresome, muddy "bleh." No longer at its best. So she moved on to where she would again be fresh. I am grateful to Gloria. No regrets.

But Krissy is different. She is the kind of woman who will continue to amaze, who will never grow stale. Looking at her, just looking, is food for my soul. There is a cleanliness, a purity about her beauty that is not just physical. It touches my soul. She is such a gentle creature. Her voice is slightly breathy and you want to hear the next thing she is going to say just to hear her voice. And the amazing thing about the whole Krissy experience is that she seems utterly unaware of the impression she makes, though I assume, as with any attractive woman, she understands completely.

The phone rings and when I pick it up Terri says, "Hi, Michael. You dog! A dozen long stem red roses? I'm impressed. So, you had a good time."

"Terri, what can I say? Totally unexpected."

"And you sent them to her at work!" Terri says with a tone of voice obviously filled with admiration. "Every woman loves to get flowers at work. It makes all the other women crazy with jealousy. And that so pumps up the pleasure for us! How did you know that?"

"Just did something right quite by accident, I assure you. I was simply moved by the moment. Did you speak with Krissy?"

"Well, yeh-ehh-es!" Terri has this way sometimes of making a one-syllable word sound like three.

"We're girls you know. Gossip and all that. Delicious!"

"So what did she say?" I ask.

"Well, young man, I think you earned a gold star. She said she had a lovely time, that you are a lovely man, that you are a lovely listener, that you shared lovely stories about yourselves and ... let's see. It was all just lovely."

"Terri, come on. Stop the BS. What do you think? You talked with her. You read her. I know you did. You can't help it. Lovely is like nice. It doesn't say anything. I just feel like it's too good to be true. You know? Is she as sweet and goodhearted and adorable as she seems to me? And does she really think I'm lovely? I do want to be lovely for her, Terri."

Terri is silent on the phone for what seems like forever. I know her so well. And I trust that body language thing she does. She is quiet for so long that it's making me nervous. I just wait until she is ready to speak.

"I like Krissy," Terri finally says. "And I like you." She pauses for a few seconds. "I don't think it's a good idea for me to do what you seem to be asking me to do, to validate Krissy for you. I don't think my gift is meant to be used that way. At least not for other people. I use what I see for myself. I can't in good conscience use it for other people. You and Krissy are going to have to figure this out for yourselves."

It's now my turn to be silent for a time. Then I ask Terri, "Okay. I get it. But if you saw something obvious, obvious to you, something where I was walking into a firestorm, you would tell me, right? I mean we are friends, right?"

"Yes, I would warn you. We are friends and I would warn you. I don't see any firestorm, Michael. The rest is up to the two of you. That's all I want to say. Except I hope you continue to make each other happy."

"Okay. That's something."

"Good. So what's next in the charm offensive?"

"Well, I included a note with the flowers, an invitation to a play in New Haven, The Yale Rep."

"What's the play?" Terri asks.

"Does it matter?"

"True. Not really," Terri says. I can hear the smile in her voice. "What else? Dinner?"

"Of course. But I'm cooking."

"Wow. You really know how to show a girl a good time."

"Don't minimize my talents. I'm a pretty good cook and I aim to impress."

"What are you going to make?" Terri asks, ever the gossip.

"That's my little secret," I say. "Terri, thanks for being my friend."

"Don't get all sappy on me now. Love you. Bye."

"I love you, too, Terri. Bye."

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Five-thirty. I got home early, but I'm a little behind my schedule, leaving me a little frazzled. It's a simple recipe and I should be finished well before Krissy arrives. A seafood medley with red sauce over my wildly famous tarragon rice with roasted elephant garlic on the side. I love making the sauce. A large, roughly chopped onion and several cloves of minced garlic sautéed in olive oil, a tablespoon of brown sugar, a spoon of spicy mustard, a splash of Worcestershire sauce, four or five slices of jalapeño pepper, minced, two cans of stewed tomatoes, roughly chopped and one small can of tomato paste. Slow simmer for about twenty minutes, then add one ounce of reasonably good cognac and finally a pound and a half of cubed flounder, shrimp, scallops, and mussels. Simmer for another couple of minutes until the fish is white. Serve with asparagus with a drizzle of lemon butter sauce with dill. Of course, a chilled bottle of white Bordeaux. Finish with espresso and key lime pie for dessert. Ahhh!

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We sit in the balcony, one row back from the railing. I hate those seats by the rail. They always seem to obstruct the view and leave me wondering who designs these things? Have they never sat in the first row of the balcony? The theater is surprisingly hot. Although it's still winter outside, it's not winter inside. It seems overcompensating. Before sitting, we take off our coats. I'm thinking of taking off my sport jacket as well.

"Wow," I say, pretending to fan myself. Krissy just shrugs and settles into her seat.

Krissy looks wonderful sitting next to me. Long skirt and a silk blouse. My favorite. I don't know why I like long skirts on a woman so much. Perhaps I just like the long, thin look. A long skirt, for me, is an inexplicable blend of contrasting effects—of hippy and elegant. For a woman who covers herself up so regularly and demurely, Krissy still manages to hold my undivided attention in a world of distractions.

For some reason, I think of a late dinner in Lyon when I was there on a business trip. The French think nothing of dinner at ten. I cannot sleep on a stomach full of food and so did not sleep well in France. But I do believe everything is a learning experience. That dinner was no exception.

Lyon is well known for its cuisine. Almost any restaurant was sure to satisfy, so I chose at random and was not disappointed for more reasons than one. I was sitting, waiting for my dinner to be served, and looking around the restaurant. A man and a woman sat at the table to the right and in front of me. The woman's back was to me. The man was perhaps forty-five or fifty and was in deep conversation with his female companion. He was quite a handsome fellow. Light-colored wavy hair, strong face with bright, intelligent eyes, squarish jaw, and from what I could see, a trim figure. She had his undivided attention. He leaned forward towards her as she spoke, his gaze never wavering. What was going on that merited such focused attention, I remember wondering. I marveled at his attentiveness. It clearly was not some tragedy playing out because from time to time a laugh would break their focus and he smiled frequently at her. I remember being astonished by the evident bond between them, perhaps the more so because it was just that kind of bond that was missing in my life then.

I could not help but monitor their conversation as my dinner and theirs were served. Throughout the meal, they maintained the same scenario. It being late for me, my dinner was rather light compared to theirs and I finished before them. I walked past their table as I left the restaurant, eager to see this beauty who had so completely captivated her partner. A glance was all I would allow myself so as not to invade their privacy. I was shocked by the utterly ordinary appearance of the woman. There was nothing of conventional beauty about her. She had mousy brown hair and a completely undistinguished face, not beautiful, not

homely, simply ordinary. But as I passed, something he said obviously amused her. She smiled warmly at him and that smile was transformative. Her smile repaid him with a gift worthy of all this man's previous attentions. There was more to this woman than I would have ever imagined had I not inserted myself, so to speak, into this little drama. I was stunned by how shallow my observations and my judgments were then. I wonder how much, if anything, I still retain today from that learning experience many years ago.

I wonder why I'm not invisible to Krissy. I have no illusions about myself and the first impression that I make on a woman. I am the male equivalent, in appearance at least, to that mousy brown woman in Lyon, France. I say a little prayer of gratitude to Krissy's friend who suggested she get to know me better. I also resolve to smile frequently.

The lights finally dim indicating the play is about to begin. The performance is starting surprisingly late, due, I suppose, to the foul weather and people, consequently, arriving late. The curtain opens and we immediately understand why the theater is so warm. The stage is transformed into the interior of a female bathhouse. There are seven women on stage, some young, some elderly, all topless, some bottomless as well, some with towels wrapped around their waists. For several moments there is a busy flow of movement, but no dialog, I guess to give the audience time to adjust to the rampant nudity.

As the play begins it just seems like talk, talk, talk, blah, blah, blah about nothing in particular that the playwright makes us care about. As a result, the gossip and trivia, despite the novelty of the setting and the nudity, ultimately is just boring. Suddenly, one actress, an older woman who is lying on a bench, decides to stretch her legs wide apart in the air just as another woman is walking by. This, of course, offers the woman passing an unobstructed view of the lying, older woman's crotch. The passing woman stifles a stage gasp while the audience, reaching for anything, manages one of the few laughs so far in the play.

I take Krissy's hand, lean close to her ear and whisper, "What do you say we leave at the intermission?" Krissy squeezes my hand, rolls her eyes up and shakes her head in the affirmative. "Thank god," she whispers. We both relax realizing there will soon be an end to the torment. I put an arm around Krissy and she snuggles closer to me. Every place our bodies touch seems hypersensitive to me. It amazes me how in the beginning of a relationship one's body can be so sensitive to the slightest contact. It has to be an adaptive achievement of evolution that in time the sensitivity fades. If it did not, the act of love would be unbearable.

Intermission. Finally.

Krissy and I get up with the brightening of the lights. We take our coats and begin slide-shuffling to the end of the row. I hope it is not too obvious that we will not be returning. Maybe people will assume we are going out for some fresh air. I also wonder why I care what people think. I look around and see several other couples on the main floor also leaving with their coats. We don't wait for the elevator. We take the stairs.

At the theater door, I help Krissy with her coat and we plunge into the night and head to my car. We walk past the soft glow of the reduced lighting from the stores, now closed for the evening. The deserted feel of the street is comforting rather than alarming. I attribute this to the fact that Krissy has hooked her arm in mine, familiarly, as if accustomed to this little intimacy by a lifetime of traveling the same path together. We leave two tracks of footprints in the dusting of snow that fell while we were in the theater.

It's a beautiful night, cold and crisp. When the light, or rather lack of light, permits, we see a clear sky with Orion and the Big Dipper and the North Star all brightly visible. The moon is a narrow crescent.

We turn onto the side street where I was able to find parking. We walk slowly towards my car, enjoying the peacefulness of the moment. At the car, I walk Krissy to the passenger side and unlock and open the door for her. Immediately, there is an explosion of garlic odor emanating like a cloud from my car. We look at each other in shocked surprise. It is overwhelming. I had no idea I had seasoned our dinner with so much garlic. Evidently, on the ride to the theater, we both exuded garlic from every pore and filled the car with our effusion. Because of the closed windows of winter, it all stayed trapped in the car.

Instantly, we burst into laughter.

"My gosh," Krissy says. "They all must have stood up and cheered in the balcony when we didn't return after the intermission."

"Well, I guess we're not fit company right now. I think maybe there are only two safe places for us in our current state of toxicity," I say, looking very serious. "Your place or mine?"

"Nice move, sailor," Krissy says to me with a sly smile as she slides into my car.

"Terri, what do I do now? I'm out of my depth, truly." I asked Terri to meet me at Cooky's after work and I am glad she is here.

I have always been one to make impulsive decisions about women. Show me a little kindness and interest and I'm yours. And of course there is the physical part. A woman has to light my fire so to speak. She has to be fairly attractive, in my view. I remember one of my cousins being annoyed with me about that. She was trying to fix me up with one of her single friends and I kept saying I wasn't interested. She kept pressing me about how nice her friend was and finally became insistent that I explain my rejection. I said, "I don't find her attractive." My cousin, without really pausing to think, blurted out, "Well, your not such a prize yourself." She quickly realized that was perhaps a little harsh to say face-to-face. and tried to smile her way out of it.

In a way, of course, she was right. By "hunky" standards, I was "not such a prize," but I never really let that deter me from my female-good-looks expectation. I guess I think I am a prize to a woman who can see beneath the surface, beyond the superficial. And by attractive I mean a woman who, for whatever reason, I like to look at and where that liking doesn't diminish with time, but rather grows richer with shared experiences that "accessorize" her appearance and add depth to the attraction. I am reminded of that woman in the restaurant in Lyon. There *was* something about her that made her attractive, just not in the fashion model, high maintenance sense. It's not easy to explain what leads the heart. Much easier to explain what leads Mister Happy.

"What's the problem, Michael?" Terri gives me one of her penetrating, Italian, how-lucky-you-are-but-too-dumb-to-realize-it looks. "Is life being too good to you?"

"It's not that simple, girl. It's complicated." I take a sip of wine, then say, "Let me lay it out so I can get your informed opinion."

"I'm listening. Tell me how good becomes bad."

"Not bad. I didn't say bad. I said complicated."

"Okay. Complicated. Shoot."

"It's that damned promotion in Hartford. It's coming at just the right time financially for me. I lost a bundle on the stock market and the extra money for the promotion is surprisingly timely, at least in one way. But the problem is Hartford. I don't want to move. My kids are here and Krissy is here. I don't want to be that far from them."

"So Krissy is part of the calculation?"

"Terri, I was hooked the minute you introduced us."

"My dear Michael, are you blaming me now for your happiness?" Terri says with a frown.

I take another sip of wine. "Let me lay it all out." I give a deep sigh and settle into my bar stool.

"Okay. I need the money the promotion provides. But I want to stay close to my kids and Krissy. I don't want to turn down the promotion because management will see me as not ambitious and will stop offering career moves. If I hadn't had a big loss in the stock market I could live with that, but now its hard to turn down more money. So, my beautiful young friend on whom I depend so much for support and guidance, what to do?"

"Hmm. Have you spoken with Krissy about any of this? She might be open to moving to Hartford."

"No. I'm just letting our relationship sort of blossom. You know, I don't want to scare her off by coming on too intense. I don't want to do or say anything that will cause me to lose her." I pause then lean forward. "You realize, of course, this is all your fault."

"Well, you could marry me and then there wouldn't be any problem." Terri throws one of her wicked smiles at me.

"No, that wouldn't work. I like cabernet and you like blanc. We'd be fighting all the time. It would never work."

"True. That's very true. Definitely incompatible."

"Any other words of wisdom?"

"Let's see what your options are. You can move to Hartford and give up Krissy. There are other fish in the sea. Or you can move to Hartford and have a long distance relationship with Krissy and your kids. Sometimes that works. Or finally, you can decide not to apply for the promotion and learn to live on less at your current salary. You can look for another job here in Benton at a higher salary. Did I leave anything out?"

"That's the same list I came up with. Now what to do, Terri?"

"Find another job that's local for more money. That would be my first choice, if I were you." Terri sits back and folds her arms.

"Shit. That's the same choice I came up with. I hate looking for a new job." I lean back in my chair as well, hands in my lap, and a sigh escapes from somewhere inside me. "Has Krissy said anything recently to you about me?" I ask.

"We don't really run into each other that often. I told you we're friendly, but not really friends. If you want I can call and make a lunch date with her. Girl talk will take care of the rest."

"That would be great, Terri. I'll be your best friend forever if you do this for me."

"Despite that generous offer, I'll do it anyway. Consider it done, Michael." Terri rubs her fingers through her hair, thinking, and then says to me, "Spying for you on a 'sister'. Is that devotion to you or what?"

"It's not spying," I say indignantly. "It's fact finding."

"Oh. Is that what it is? Not as much fun. But I'll do it anyway."

"And report back to me, right?"

"Yes, my captain, sir." We both laugh.

*

One more thing to worry about. While speaking with Terri, I got the distinct aroma of apples again. What's with these apples? Are they auras or is my nose supersensitive and picking up aromas others might not notice? It's possible, I guess. I do have other 'talents' as well. I sometimes feel as if I can sense the rotation of Earth.

It sounds strange, when I mention this to someone, but I really believe that I can. I was at the beach when I first noticed this. I was sitting on a little beach chair close to the water's edge, just relaxing, alone. It was a sunny day and high tide was due in about two hours.

I watched then as the tide slowly advanced towards where I was sitting. I had only my chair and the book I was reading. I don't remember now what it was, but I would peak over the top of the book from time to time to see if I needed to move my chair. The tide came closer and closer, but stopped advancing just short of my outstretched feet. And then it began to recede.

It was then that I suddenly sensed a strange feeling, like a slow rumbling beneath me. I discounted an earthquake because of my location on the east coast shoreline. I don't remember if there have ever been earthquakes in Connecticut. My senses were alerted, however, and suddenly it seemed not like a rumbling,

but like a lumbering rotation. It felt like a huge turning resistance was being overcome. I sensed a great struggle between monstrous competing forces that were almost equal in strength, but not quite. It was this small imbalance that I felt and that turned Earth. Strange, yet that is what it seemed like to me. I seem to be able to regain that feeling of the rotation of Earth at will if I'm quiet and alone.

As for the auras, when I could not identify the source of the fragrance I would try to discover some environmental trigger that produced a particular odor, but always unsuccessfully. Now, for no apparent reason, apples seem to be the flavor of choice. And unlike my subtle sensing of Earth's rotation, the odors are well defined and clearly identifiable as to what they are.

Some see auras as a gift, others as a sign of disease. I don't have the time or inclination to follow up on this, but I feel well in general so, along with my rotation sensing, I will place this in the gift category.

I wonder what Krissy would think if she knew she was getting involved with a man who smelled odors that weren't there and who sensed Earth's rotation. Now, if I could only have a gift for investing. That would be more welcome. My brother says I do have a gift, the gift of an organic chemist. I take good money and turn it into shit. It's a sobering talent that I would greatly like to pass along to someone else now.

I am remarking how calm I am having lost eighty-five thousand dollars in the stock market. I have to admit it was a serious blow, and I even had thoughts of suicide. How could you not when that kind of money is at stake? Thankfully, I have always thought of suicide as a long-term solution to a short-term problem. Sleep on it. Things rarely look worse and usually look better by morning. I believe there are no exceptions to this insight. Suicide is a bad long term strategy.

Money has always seemed important to me, having a lot of it, that is. Probably I obsessed too much on it. This was the way the universe was telling me to reassess, that happiness can come from unexpected ways, people, places, whatever. I decided I will have to wait for my next life to be a rich man. Happiness will have to come from somewhere else in this life, scattered among the detritus of my current situation.

I remember a time years ago when I first started working right out of college. It was a difficult time. Everything I touched seemed to turn out wrong or bad. I knew I would be given some slack for a while because I was new, but it seemed like I was cursed. My work was either incorrect, inadequate, out of scope, out of budget, or out of time. It was a learning curve from Hell. One day, as I sat at my desk in my small office, head in my hands lamenting my fate, I heard and felt a shocking crash from the small office adjacent and to the rear of mine in the long row of offices. I rushed out to my neighbor's office to see what happened and whether I could help. What I saw when I entered was the three shelves of books mounted to the wall above Martin's desk had collapsed and crashed down onto his desk and onto him and onto the floor. I stood at his door perhaps a few seconds longer than I should have, but my first, satisfying thought was that whatever had been plaguing me had now passed on to Martin. And it was true. Things changed for me for the better from that moment on, at least at work.

Perhaps my "organic chemistry" style of investing will change as well and that these pleasant auras are the harbinger of positive change. Most people hate change, but not me. I am a fan of change, mostly because my life usually sucks or at least seems constantly to disappoint. Change is usually my friend. Sometimes it's been my guardian angel. It seems that only a few months ago I was obsessed with the idea of sex and women and having sex, even under the most difficult, if not disgusting circumstances.

What was I thinking? Good title for a book. That phrase is so apropos to so many news stories one reads about. What were they thinking? The guy who hands the teller a stickup note written on the back of an envelope on the front side of which are his name and address. That kind of thing. I think back on my flirtation with risky sex and wonder, 'what was I thinking?' Loneliness is an evil guide. It can be the gateway to despair and from there it's just a short ride to Crazyville, where all things make sense and the governor is set to high.

Sexual obsession is just like any other addiction. It's easy to say, "I've got it under control," and believe it even when you don't even marginally have it under control. Addiction is the disease that tells you you

don't have a disease and so you are hooked and can't easily get off the habit. I'm told that the way to break an addiction is to replace it with something even more desirable. Krissy seems to be my something even more desirable than having a dangerous secret life of wanton sexual behavior.

Well, thoughts of such behavior, not actual behavior. I never really did anything seriously crazy, but I think that was rather due to a lack of opportunity than due to an intact superego keeping me straight. Timing is everything and the time for my what-was-he-thinking article in the local newspaper had fortunately passed me by.

*

February 25th

Terri got back to me. Good girl that she is, she met with Krissy for lunch yesterday. The good news is that I have moved beyond "lovely" to "lovable," as in someone she could fall in love with. Now I feel a bit ashamed of myself for using Terri to spy on Krissy's feelings, but there it is. I did it, and though I suddenly think it does not speak well for my character, or Terri's for that matter, to have introduced subterfuge into our relationship, the end result is what I had hoped for. Krissy's eyes are open, and she likes me anyway. More than likes me.

*

As I pull up to the curb to let Andy out, he turns to me and says, "Michael, it's been a hard, boring day. I know these guys have wives to set their agendas for them, but we don't. At least I don't yet. How about we go to Cooky's for dinner and a couple of beers?"

Andy turns to Herb and Ryan. "Am I right? You guys up for a boy's night out or has the whip got you?"

They both shrug helplessly and wave off the invite, Andy being more or less correct. Their evenings are all planned by their better halves.

"As I predicted," Andy says. "Trust me, when I speak words of wisdom. Besides, I want to get a look behind that shit-eating grin you've been wearing for a week now. It's got to be a woman, and you've got to be getting your pipes cleaned."

I just smile at that, which makes all the guys laugh.

"Okay, okay. But I can't do it tonight. Picking up my kids. How about tomorrow night?"

"Great! I'll see you at Cooky's tomorrow at seven," Andy says. Then he waves goodbye and walks away toward his house.

I pull away slowly and head next to Herb's house.

"So? What's going on?" Ryan asks. "Has Suzy Sunshine finally tapped you on the scrotum. Do you have something you want to share with us?"

"Hey guys, I don't want to jinx anything. You know how the gods are jealous of a happy mortal."

"For sure," Ryan says.

"But do we know her?" Herb asks.

"No, I don't think so. Her name is Kristina Edwards. She works at the bank across the street."

"And...?" Ryan says, trying to draw me out. I am deathly afraid of talking about this. I really mean it, on some level anyway, that I don't want the gods to hear about this.

"And...Andy's not going to get anything else either."

*

Why am I so afraid to talk about my relationship with Krissy with other people, except for Terri, of course? I don't know.

Do I deserve her? What is it the Buddhists say? All creatures seek happiness. And there are so many ways to achieve happiness. To the Buddhists it's not about material possessions or even people possessions. It's more a state of mind. Anyone can be happy anywhere if his or her attitude is right. Thoreau, I think it was, said he felt more freedom locked up in his prison cell for tax evasion than his neighbors outside the jail, but who were captive to what he believed to be a tyrannical law.

I never did quite buy the part of Buddhist philosophy that involved renunciation of attachments. Their idea, at least to my understanding, was that attachments were ultimately the source of unhappiness. I was never able to embrace this premise. I understand that everything is impermanent, things change, people you love die, move, or betray you. Objects, like people, age and decay, no longer good for what they were originally intended. Yes, but it's not always like that. There is a beginning and a middle that can be filled with happiness. Life is a story that always ends badly. I get it. But the key word here is "ends". In the meantime, I like my attachments.

It seems to me that most if not all religions spend all their time focusing on a good death, while I would rather focus on a good life and let death take care of itself. There was a sermon I heard some years ago at a Unitarian Society meeting when I dabbled with that path. The minister was telling of a late middle aged woman who came to him for advice. She was seeing two men and was undecided whom to choose. One was a steady, dependable man, generous and kind, and he had good night vision for a man his age, and that might be critical some time. But, she said, despite all his wonderful attributes, she found him predictable and boring. The other man was a rascal, always playful, loved to dance and party, and always displayed his winning smile and good humor. But, she said to the minister, his night vision was not good and she drove when they needed to drive at night. She was worried that if something happened to her at night, if there was an emergency, she could not count on bachelor number two to drive. The minister said to the congregation to his way of thinking it was an easy choice she faced. He paused to let the congregation try to discover on their own what that easy choice might be. Finally, he said he asked her, "How often do you expect to have an emergency? Go with the fun guy." I never forgot that sermon.

I left the Unitarian Society deciding it was not really a spiritual group but rather a group of well-meaning and intelligent do-gooders. That was not what I was looking for at the time. The minister had some great lines in his sermons, though, that I found refreshing. For example, Unitarians pray to one god, at most. Or Unitarians pray to whom it may concern. He was a sweet guy. Unfortunately, he picked up a virus that strangely attacked his heart and it finally killed him. My interest in the Society died with him.

No one wants to die, under normal circumstances anyway. I remember an author confirming this when he wrote of his experiences working in a hospice. One night a ninety-three year old woman was wheeled in on a gurney. As she moved through the halls of the hospice, he accompanied her. He said he remembered her repeating over and over, "Why me? Why me?"

I take a kind of 'supermarket shopping' approach to religion. Walk down the aisles; take a little from here, a little from there; pass by what doesn't make sense to me. From the time of my close call with leukemia as a young man I realized I did not believe that an entity called 'God' exists. I don't want to argue the point with anyone. It's my decision for myself and myself alone. I try to persuade no one. And I don't let other people try to dissuade me.

*

I finish washing the dishes from my dinner and then dry them and put them away. Am I thinking too much about this whole thing with Krissy? Making too much of it? Falling into my familiar pattern of overblowing a simple return of affection? Why do I do that, anyway? I keep spending money on shrinks and

they still haven't answered the most basic questions for me about my behavior. Of course, they will say that they aren't supposed to answer the questions. I am. But I think that's a lot of bullshit. It's their business plan that ensures that they never fail. We fail instead. Very shrewd. There is no way for them to fail because all the performance expectations are for the client, not for them. Ugh. Don't get started down that path. It will just make me crazy. Crazier?

I decide to sit on the front steps and have a glass of wine and a pipe and listen to the traffic and watch the daylight fade and evening slide in silently, stealing the day from me, stealing the colors and the depth and the sense of engagement with my surroundings. But quiet stillness has its own virtues and accouterments. Peace and my glass of wine and my pipe, for example. Everything slows and it is a good time to reminisce.

I think about when Krissy and I made love.

*

She held my arm before I had a chance to offer it as we walked from my car to the entrance to her home. The street was slippery because the snow from the previous day had melted and refroze by early evening. Krissy's grip was tight and she leaned heavily against me as we walked. This said to me, "You make me feel safe." When we got to her front door she gave me her keys to open the door for us. Another message for me. Letting me take charge. Such a sweet woman.

We took off our coats and Krissy hung them both in the closet by the entrance. She ushered me into her living room and seated me comfortably at the end of an overstuffed, old fashioned couch with blue, silk upholstery. I sank soundlessly. Krissy put on an Andy Williams album and went to the kitchen. She returned in an instant with a bottle of cabernet, a cork screw, and two glasses.

"Do the honors?" she asked me, handing me the bottle and the corkscrew.

I looked at the label and saw the wine was from Nappa Valley. It just keeps getting better, I remember thinking. Krissy lit several candles while I opened the wine and poured two healthy portions. Then she sat next to me, legs curled beneath her, and took the wine glass I offered her. We clicked glasses and took a sip. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was so beautiful in the muted light with Andy Williams singing quietly in the background.

Finally, beginning to feel self-conscious by my staring I guess, she said, "What?"

I just leaned towards her and kissed her gently on the lips and lingered for a few seconds longer than a simple kiss would take. Her lips were moist. I remember how that thrilled me. I pulled away slowly, still looking at her, looking deeply into her eyes. Krissy watched me for a moment and then with a laugh lunged towards me and planted a big, wet kiss right on my mouth, then pulled away still laughing. Instantly, we were both laughing. She cuddled up next to me and asked me, "Do you think the ladies are still walking around naked talking about their vaginas?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'll have to look into that." Then we both started laughing again.

She put her head on my shoulder. I think that simple act is the female equivalent of a cat purring. It must likewise be an evolutionary adaptation that promotes survival like purring does for a cat. Otherwise why have a cat around? Hmm. Perhaps I'm overstating this analogy. I don't mean to say without women putting their heads on their man's shoulder why have them around. But it is a terrific tactic. Men love it. When a woman does that, we feel like kings. No! Like gods! Very effective, ladies. I offer my observation to the universe.

This mental digression brakes the mood of my recollection, so I take a sip of my wine and tamp down the tobacco in my pipe a bit to compress the ash. Night has now fallen and the temperature drops with it. I get up to get a heavier jacket and then sit down again on my front porch. Settling in, I ask myself, "Now where was I?" Oh yes, more kisses, more laughs and then Krissy led me by the hand to her bedroom. She sat

me on the edge of her bed and to my surprise, left the room. When she returned she had two candles, which she placed on her dresser. She turned the room light off and a pleasant flickering glow remained.

She sat on my lap straddling my legs, facing me. Still with a smile on her face she began to unbutton my shirt. She pulled the bottom of my shirt out of my slacks so she could get to all the buttons then slipped the shirt off me. Then she playfully ran her right index finger down the row of buttons on her blouse letting me know they were next. I smiled and slowly and carefully unbuttoned each button, pulling out the blouse where it disappeared beneath her skirt, and then slipping the blouse off her shoulders. Her bra was lacy and sheer and feminine. She shook her shoulders back and forth, putting her breasts on exhibition, so to speak.

Then she reached down, undid my belt and the button and zipper on my slacks. She slid off my lap and with a beckoning finger indicated I must stand. When I did, of course, my trousers fell to the floor. Krissy bent and untied each shoe and gently lifted each foot and pulled each shoe off me along with the socks. I stepped out of my slacks. She gently pushed me back to the edge of the bed and had me sit again. Then she stepped in front of me and pointed to the button and zipper on the side of her skirt. Being a fast study, I quickly undid both and her skirt likewise dropped to the floor. Her stomach was flat and her body trim and well defined.

Krissy reached back and undid her bra, slipping it off her shoulders, but with a girlish grin, keeping the cups on each breast with her hands, again shaking her shoulders. I just smiled like a fool enjoying the pace of things, not in a rush. Finally, she dropped her bra completely and put her hands on her hips. "Showing off?" I asked. She shook her head up and down and then leaned forward, placing her right nipple nearly on my lips. I quickly gave it a gentle kiss. Then she did the same with her left breast and I kissed her left nipple as well. Then Krissy went to her dresser and blew out one of the candles. As she returned to the bed, she slipped out of her panties. Standing in front me, she pushed me gently back so I was lying on her bed with my feet dangling over the end. She bent down and slowly slid my briefs over my now erect member of the party and onto the floor.

"Scoot back," she said and then lay down beside me with her right arm across my chest. The whole length of her body pressing against mine sent crackling jolts of awareness right through me.

We did not have sex.

We made love.

*

March 3rd

Amazing evening with Krissy. Why didn't I stay the night? I might as well have. I left at 2:30. I'm pretty sure I had an open invitation. (Pardon the pun.) Perhaps I just still can't believe my good fortune.

Andy wants to save me from myself. He may have a point. I do tend to rush in where bachelors fear to tread.

I'm early and so I decide to walk around a bit rather than wait for Andy inside Cooky's. I walk around in the parking lot looking at the different makes and models of the cars. I'm not all that interested in cars, but it's a way to kill time and the air is invigorating.

Cooky's is a bit tony so the range of cars is on the high expectation end of people's Christmas as-long-as-I'm-dreaming wish list. High-end GM models, Mercedes, Volvo, and several high-end Japanese models. I look inside several cars to see how complex the instrumentation is.

I'm looking inside a Caddy when one of the valet guys comes up to me. He comes up behind me and makes me jump when he says, "Can I help you, sir?"

"No. I'm just waiting for a friend." I begin to see how this might look to the valet guy.

"I'm sorry sir, but for security reasons, you're not allowed in the valet parking area."

"Of course," I say. "I'll just wait by the entrance."

"Thank you, sir."

He doesn't move while I walk away. He's just watching. He's been trained well. I go to the front door and of course, Andy is waiting there for me.

"You're late," he says.

"*Au contraire*," I say. "Actually, I got here early and was killing time casing the parking lot for opportunities to improve my transportation situation."

"Is that what they're calling grand theft auto these days?" Andy says with a foolish smirk.

"Only if you're caught. Only if you're caught!"

Andy reserved a table for two in advance so we are immediately shown to our table now that I complete our party. It's against the window facing the patio garden by the side of the building. It's not much of a garden in late winter, but the location is less crowded and less busy with customer traffic.

Our waiter's name, he informs us, is Jean, with a distinct French accent. For drinks, I order my usual twelve-year-old Dewars. Andy orders an apple martini.

It's very pleasant at Cooky's during the week. Gone on weekends, replaced by a frantic sense of urgency and an obsession with getting connected before the night is out. Now, the background music is light jazz that I can actually hear. We sit quietly for a few moments savoring the low-key ambiance.

"So, how is Phyllis?" I finally ask.

"Part of the word syphilis," he says, but not with a smile.

"More drama?" I ask.

"Forget it. You're not getting off that easy. We're here to talk about you. So give. Tell me everything. Like I'm your sister. Give me the girl-talk version. They do it so much better."

"You're going to start right off pumping me? Wringing confessions from me without mercy? Where is your humanity, sir?"

"Left it home with Phyllis, from whom I have strict instructions to show you no mercy."

Happily at that moment the waiter, Gene, brings the drinks.

He asks if we are ready to order.

"We're going light tonight, right Michael?" I nod my concurrence.

"May I?" Andy asks me, taking the dominant role here. Again I nod my consent.

"Okay, then we'll have a large shrimp Caesar salad and Sicilian flatbread," Andy says. "We're gonna split the salad," Andy adds. "And a refill on the drinks when these are done. You're in charge." I smile and keep nodding my agreement while Andy is ordering and instructing our waiter.

Gene takes off with the order and Andy sits back in his chair giving me one of those looks. The one that says, 'Okay, you can spread the bullshit with everybody else, but the BS stops here because I can tell the difference.'

I sit back in my chair and give him my counter look, half smiling, that says, 'Do your worst. I will never break. Torture me. It won't work.'

"So," Andy says. "What's this I hear about you wanting to get married to a woman you just met?"

This surprises me. I learn an important lesson. Terri is not to be trusted where juicy gossip is involved. She betrayed my confidence.

"Hmm. You're not even waiting until the first course is served," I say

"And...?" It seems that Andy is not to be denied tonight.

"Okay. Perhaps I got a little carried away when I said that. But you tell me, Andy. Is there a minimum time before a person knows, I mean really knows this is the one? Is it a month, six months, a year? What about a minute, a second, the instant you see someone if it's the right person? It's all about chemistry, Andy, anyway. Isn't it? In a way, it's a kind of magic when that bolt comes out of nowhere, unexpected, shocking, illuminating."

"Michael, you've been out of circulation for a couple of years now. Isn't it possible that you're just finally horny and ready?"

I don't want to explain myself, but this is exactly what Andy is pushing me to do. Maybe this is good. Maybe talking this out, saying what I am thinking and feeling will help clarify things for me as well.

"Andy, let me say first that it's complicated. But shit, life is complicated. No problem. It is what it is. I also want to say that when I talk about my reaction when I first met Krissy, that was no ordinary reaction. I've been attracted to women before. Hell, I'm attracted to women all day long. I can sit in a Starbucks and watch the young women who come there. They're often beautiful and sexy and I have the most delicious fantasies. Or I can ask one of them out and date her and have sex with her and have a trusting intimate relationship. I have done this and had that a couple of times since my divorce. And these are very nice women. I would not have gone out with them a third time if they weren't nice and desirable and all the rest. But it's not like that with Krissy."

Andy starts to speak, but I stop him with my hand telling him to stop.

"It's good for me to say this to you because it helps me understand a little bit the reality of what I feel. I don't think everyone experiences in their life what happened to me when I met Krissy. I think people can go through their entire lives and think they have been in love and not know what they've missed. Andy, I have strong faith in my feelings, in my body when it speaks to me. I have learned over the years and even more over the time since my divorce that I can trust my feelings. Not only that, and this may sound strange, but I believe I have special sensitivities that give more credibility to my feelings than you might think wise for me to trust."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Every guy who let his pecker think for him thought he had a special grip on reality. It's a lovely thought, Michael, your sensitivity, but it's a bit delusional, don't you think? I mean love is nice and all that, but the earth doesn't really move under your feet. You just think it does."

I take a sip of my Dewars. I look at Andy and suddenly feel tired. Why am I doing this, letting him try to dissuade me from my self-trust?

"Andy, you are one of my closest and best friends and I know you want me to be happy and not to suffer from making a terrible mistake, as you might see it. I know you mean only good for me. I believe that. And while I am going to reject the caution and the doubt that you are throwing at me, I know you mean well. But I am not going to talk about this anymore. I thought I could satisfy your natural curiosity, knowing that I am in a relationship, but Terri violated a confidence with you that has you asking me questions and making statements I don't want to hear or go into. I have never been happier in my life. I want you to be happy for me. Can you do that for me?"

Andy is an intelligent man. I know he is thinking carefully about what I just said. I know that is why he is still silent. He will figure it out. Silence has never been a problem for me. I find silence is often a fertile time that nurtures the seeds of understanding.

"Michael." Andy leans forward making strong eye contact with me. "Michael, I am very, very happy for you."

*

March 9th

My meeting with Andy was very helpful. It not only clarified for me my feelings about Krissy, but also solidified my intuition about trusting my intuition. I want Shit! Pen is running out of

"Michael, how would you like to do something very different?"

"With you?" I ask foolishly

"Of course with me, silly goose," Krissy says, planting a kiss on the tip of my nose. "Let's go to a place called Bargemusic this Saturday. Do you know what that is?"

"Never heard of it."

"Okay, then it will be my surprise, but it's a bit of a drive. It's in Brooklyn."

My eyes widen in surprise already. "Brooklyn is a bit of a drive all right, my darling girl."

"Yes, but I'll drive. It'll be such fun. Please." Along with the please, Krissy bites my ear.

"Do that again," I say. "I'm still thinking."

Krissy leans closer to me on her couch and snuggling up begins to brush my hair with her hands and kiss my neck. "Pretty please," she says in between kisses. "With a cherry on top!"

"Well, okay. If we must," I say, feigning bored indifference.

That seems to have been the right answer. Krissy brings her lips to mine and lightly kisses me. Then giving her tongue license, she gently brushes my lips back and forth until my lips begin to part and her tongue and mine have a little conversation with each other. I admit this makes me a bit crazy and I pull her even closer and enjoy a long, wet kiss.

"My god, girl. This is so unfair. I am under your spell. I am putty in your hands. I am a pawn to your smile. I am dead gone for your kisses. Do you know the power you have over me? Seriously."

"You don't mean little ol' me can tame a big boy like you? I don't think so." While she says this she is rubbing the back of my right knee, something she has learned is particularly effective in getting my attention.

"Okay. Okay. Saturday it is," I say. "But I think we need to go for a walk now or we will just fall into making love again."

"And again. And again. And your problem, sir, is...?"

"No problem. Evidently. But I would still like to take a walk. It's a beautiful, clear night and it's not so cold. Come on. Let's go."

"Party pooper," Krissy says, but gets up. We both go to the closet and put on our jackets. "You know what?" Krissy says. "Let's go to the park. We can watch the sunset from the pier. I think there's just enough time before it starts."

*

It's a short drive to the park. Krissy takes my arm as we walk to the pier from the parking lot. I have, of course, seen the sunset many times in my life and I suppose anything can become ordinary if you see it often enough. For example, I no longer go out of my way or make time to see fourth of July fireworks. Even sunsets can become routine. After a while, it takes a new context to make it more affecting. For example, seeing the sunset at the Grand Canyon, watching the light of the setting sun paint, with animation, the primordial, rock cliffs a vivid gold. The light, more swiftly than I would ever imagine, seemingly with a life

of its own, disappears in a sweeping blaze just as the enormity of the end of the day takes hold. Now that was a sunset to remember forever.

Or again, when I once watched the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico at the beach on Longboat Key in Florida, what I remember most was the mix of spectators along the shore. There were equal portions of seagulls and people standing motionless, captivated, at least for the duration, as the setting sun slowly dipped deeper and deeper into the water. It was an interesting and memorable anthropomorphic moment, my imagining the seagulls experiencing the same sense of transfixing awe as any human observer. But what I remember most about that memorable sunset was a great blue heron standing on the beach not ten feet away from me, bold as brass, with its gaze likewise locked on the setting sun. I imagined this scene, minus the human presence, and wondered what inner spirit present in the primitive understanding of these birds led them to repeat this ritual every evening going back in time for countless eons.

Tonight I go to see the sunset mostly because Krissy wishes it.

We arrive just in time, as the first hints of the colors to come appear in the west. We park the car and hurry to the pier. Once there, we walk past the crowd of people lining the pier to get to the outermost part of the pier that extends farthest into the bay. We find a spot along the railing and so as not to take up too much room Krissy steps behind me and snuggling closely puts her arms around me, her chin resting on my shoulder, her body pressed against my back. I think, without her, this would just be another sunset. Of course, as time goes by the lights blossom over the water and it is, to be sure, a beautiful show. Krissy whispers in my ear, "Thank you, Michael." I cover her hands around my waist with mine as she snuggles even closer behind me.

As the lights fade and the crowd begins to disperse, I only then begin to look around. I am surprised to see how many elderly people are here. Why this surprises me and even pleases me I cannot say, but it does. I am equally surprised by the lack of young people. My interest in this puzzle wanes quickly and Krissy and I begin to move away with the crowd as well. Selective park lights have come on and a few hundred feet from the pier I can see a well-lit area with several bocce courts. I have heard of bocce, but never really watched a game.

"Krissy, I think there are bocce games over there. Would you like to watch for a while?"

"Yes, let's go," she says and grabs my hand in response, pulling on me, dragging me behind her as I try to keep up.

When we get to the courts I see it is mostly older Italian men playing and watching. The women, I decide, are home cooking. We stand along the edge of one court and watch the game unfold. It really is interesting and Krissy is getting very caught up in the enthusiasm of the spectators, laughing when they laugh, clapping when they clap, sighing with disappointment when they do. She is, for me, normally so beautiful to watch, but now with her smiles and enthusiasm, she just takes my breath away. I am speechless and just stand back overwhelmed with the sight of her.

When the game is over, there is a moment of brief disorganization, but these are Italian men to be sure and they quickly notice Krissy. Several of the players come over and begin talking with her, asking her if she knows bocce, whether she has ever played, what did she think of the game, and the like. Krissy responds so sweetly and innocently that she captivates them all with her charm.

"Would you like to play a short game?" one man asks her while several of the men encourage her to accept. Krissy gives me a fast look and I nod assent. She claps and says, "Really? Will you show me?" With this, the crowd that was beginning to disperse reverses and gathers as the "bocce elders" hold an impromptu bocce lesson for my adorable girl.

As I watch, I cannot help asking myself, "Why me?" Why am I so lucky to be loved by this woman? I am facing the deep mystery of love.

The lesson is over and the elders each, in turn, kiss Krissy good night in the European manner on each cheek, lightly, but three times. I'm not sure of the significance of that extra kiss, but all four of her instructors do the same.

"Oh, Michael. That was such fun!" Krissy says throwing her arms around my neck. "I think I will remember this evening forever." Over her shoulder I can see some of the departing players watching us and flashing me thumbs-up signs, acknowledging my good fortune. I smile back at them.

We walk back to the parking lot. On the way, we pass a van beside which a man is looking through a large reflecting telescope. I know enough about such things from what I remember from high school...that the large cylindrical shape houses not a lens, but a mirror. I have never seen this kind of telescope in real life. I suppose the man is taking advantage of the lack of light-polluting street lamps in the darkened parking lot to see what he might see. We walk over to him. With his telescope pointed directly at the moon, I ask stupidly, "Hi, what are you looking at?"

The man pulls his head away from the telescope and with a good-natured smile looks at us, looks at the direction of his telescope tube, and looks at the moon and says, still smiling, "The moon." We all laugh.

"Would you like to take a look?" he asks me.

"Of course," I say.

He steps aside and helps orient me so I look correctly through the scope.

"Wow. It's so clear. And so rugged. Who'd have thought?" I step aside and the man offers with a gesture for Krissy to take a look.

He orients Krissy as well and her reaction is the same as mine. Delight.

"Do you mind?" Krissy asks, and who can refuse her, "What else can you see?"

"Hmm. Would you like to see Jupiter?"

"Really?" Krissy asks. "Of course."

The man points to a bright spot of light in the sky. "There it is. That's Jupiter." He pauses and we are both a little disappointed until he breaks into a smile and says, "I'm only kidding. Let's take a real look." With that, he begins moving and adjusting his telescope until it is arranged to his satisfaction. Motioning to Krissy, he says, "Come, take a look."

Krissy looks through the scope and registers her amazement at seeing a discernible disk for what to the naked eye had always been just a brighter point of light.

"By the way, my name is Phil," he says to us. We introduce ourselves. I then take over Krissy's spot and gaze at Jupiter as well.

"Now, are you ready for something really amazing?" he asks as I continue looking at Jupiter. "Do you see those dots of light near Jupiter? They are some of Jupiter's moons. You are watching a whole little planetary system."

I step aside so Krissy can see as well.

After a few moments of careful observation, Krissy steps back, silent.

"What?" I ask, looking at her.

"Phil," she says earnestly, "thank you so much for sharing this with strangers. It's so amazing. We read about this and study the planets in school, but to see this, to really see it. It's just wonderful. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure," Phil says.

I take Krissy's hand and thanking Phil again, we continue walking to my car. Before opening the door for Krissy to slide in, I take her in my arms and smiling, just look at her face, look deeply into her eyes. After a few moments, she puts her lips gently to mine and gives me a light, barely touching kiss.

As we sit in the car, I just look at Krissy. I'm not ready to start the car.

"Do you know how long it took me to fall in love with you?" I ask.

Krissy just smiles at me.

"About ten seconds after I saw you at Cooky's." I reach over and take her left hand in both of mine. "But why you?" I ask.

"Because I'm so cute?" Krissy says, smiling.

"Yes you are, my adorable girl. But that's not what I mean. Why am I so blessed to have you in my life? What did I do in a former life to deserve you? Because I can assure you it was nothing I did in this life. Guys must hit on you all the time. So why me?"

"It's very simple, Michael. They were just keeping me busy while I was waiting for you, my darling."

"Krissy, seriously. Why me?"

"Michael, Michael, Michael. Why are you so hard on yourself? Don't you realize what a wonderful man you are? You're kind. You're gentle. You're sexy. You're loving. You're funny. You're honorable. Michael, I trust you with my life."

"Why don't I feel like that about me?" I ask. "I don't see these things in me or if I do they don't seem near big enough, in my view, to explain...you."

"What's wrong Michael? Why are you so sad? It's been a wonderful night."

"I guess I'm just afraid of jealous gods, gods who will not tolerate a happy me. And I am happy, my sweet Kristina. I'm just being ridiculous. Ridiculously, inexplicably, unexpectedly, riotously happy."

*

The trip to Brooklyn is finally here. Bargemusic, I now know, having looked it up since Krissy first made me aware of it, is a converted barge docked at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge on the Brooklyn side. It was converted from a coffee barge to a floating classical music concert hall and has slowly built a loyal following. It holds about eighty patrons and typically offers chamber music. In the winter a great fireplace blazes away inside, casting its warm glow over the whole assembly.

Krissy offered to drive as part of the Bargemusic treat she arranged for us, but I have my own surprise in store and insist that I drive. I asked her a couple of days ago if we could each take a half-day off so we could leave earlier on our trek.

I stop at Krissy's place to pick her up and off we go. We should be where I want to go first in about an hour and a half. We fill the time with small talk.

*

"This is it. The scene of the crime," I say to Krissy as I pull to a stop against the curb on Van Cortland Street, Brooklyn.

"What do you mean?" Krissy asks.

"This is where I lived until I was ten years old."

"Wow. Lovely, Michael. Thank you so much for sharing this with me. How long has it been since you were last here?"

"Good question. Thirty-seven years. I can't believe it's been that long or that I'm here now." I get out of the car and walk to Krissy's side. "Let's walk," I say to her.

The recent late snowfall has melted from the sidewalks, though there is a residue on the grass strip where the snow was piled higher. "Let's walk to the beginning of the block," I say. "This street holds amazing memories for me."

Pointing to the southwest corner, I say, "This is the grade school I went to and here, near the corner, is where the police car would be standing at the start of the school day and at the end. In those days the police were our friends. I remember one day walking to school with a schoolmate who had a box of cookies and as we passed the patrol car he asked the officer if he would like a cookie. The policeman, of course, said yes. I

was so impressed that my friend would share a cookie with anyone. We didn't have money for cookies when I was very young. If I had a box of cookies I don't think I would have shared it with anyone. I admired my friend's generosity. It's funny that after all these years, I still remember this incident."

I point to a grocery store on the southeast corner across the street. "That grocery store, it amazes me to say, was here when I was here. My mother would frequently send me to the store to get some last-minute items for dinner or whatever."

We turn and retrace our steps towards the car. "And here is the old homestead," I say. I stand in front of a three-story brownstone building looking up at the upstairs apartment. "I remember it all, Krissy. One year we had such a bad blizzard and we were left with about three feet of snow. It was soft and powdery. We soon realized we could jump off the landing at the second-floor entrance onto the snow without getting hurt. It was like flying. I thought we were so cool."

"Do you think we can go inside? Maybe they'll let us come in," Krissy says.

We ring the bell, but no one answers. We try downstairs and no one answers there either. "Probably out to work and school," I say. We continue walking. "We used to play games against that fire hydrant, lining up against it or something. I don't remember the rules anymore. My brother broke his leg once playing that game and he leaned on me to get home. I was scared to death because he was in so much pain. But I was his crutch and got him home.

"Next door here is where Sandy Gennero lived. We used to play doctor." I look at Krissy and she gives me pinch on the arm. "Well, didn't every little boy with access to a willing little girl?" I say with a smirk.

"My grandmother, Olga, on my mother's side lived at the other end of the block. I'm sure I told you about her. Well, there it is, right where she lived sputtering her crazy Yiddish and Russian all mixed together. I never really knew what the hell she was saying since it was almost never in English. I don't even know if she spoke English.

"There was something about her, though, that I admired. She was tough. And a survivor during very difficult times. We loved each other in a crazy kind of way. I would come to visit her by myself. It was safe in those days, oddly enough, more so than now probably, for me to walk down the block alone as a child and work with her in the vegetable garden in her backyard. How we communicated I have no idea anymore.

"I remember one time we were just sitting on the front steps watching people, not really talking. A mounted policeman came by just slowly patrolling. As he moved by us I stood up and moved to the horse. The policeman saw this and stopped and turned his horse to me. Grandma quickly went into the house while I petted the horse. When she came back out, she had an apple in her hand. She gave it to me to give to the horse. The policeman told me to hold my hand flat and put the apple in the center of my palm. When I held my hand to the horse, it took the apple clean as a whistle without even touching my hand. I was so thrilled watching the horse eat my grandma's apple."

Thinking about my old grandma and I start to tear up suddenly. "I wish you could have met her...and my parents, too, for that matter. I hate that they are not real for you."

Krissy takes my arm again and leans close to whisper in my ear. "Michael, you're my hero." She gives me a gentle kiss. I smell her hair. It smells shower fresh.

We have plenty of time for dinner before going to the barge. The night is young. I decide to drive to several other old haunts. A trip down Memory Lane.

March 18th

I really suck at keeping a journal. Spring is almost here. Sky still gray. Does this entry count? Well, the guilt will prompt a better entry next time. Or not.

*

Late again. Sharon and her stupid games. I've been waiting here parked in front of her house for forty-five minutes. She's supposed to have the kids ready for me at six o'clock. It is now a quarter to seven and still no Sharon and still no kids. It's cold in the car. The dinner reservations are for six-thirty. Kiss that goodbye. I guess it will be pizza from the take-out place tonight. The movies, too, are now in doubt depending on when Sharon finally gets here.

This late season snow is getting heavier and I begin to worry about driving if the wait goes on much longer. Also, I don't trust Sharon to drive in this weather. She doesn't have a good record for looking around, for being aware of her surroundings when she's driving.

The snow is beautiful though. It hushes the sounds of the world and covers all its imperfections. Too bad there isn't a psychic equivalent, something that can mask or muffle our character imperfections, at least for a while, like snow. I decide to get out of the car and make the best of a bad situation.

I make a game of my footsteps in the snow. Not a game exactly, because there is nothing to win, but an exercise in thinking outside the box. The obvious things to do would be to use my footsteps to create a path or to write my name or an SOS or to create a diminishing spiral or some other geometric form in the snow. It's about an inch deep right now and suitable for such things. I want to do something different. I decide to make a fire breathing dragon in the snow beneath my car with a flame shooting from the mouth towards the street from the rear end of my car and a wagging tail protruding from the front end of my car. Nothing Freudian there, right Michael? I'm talking to myself. Not a good sign.

I try to use this activity as a way to keep a sense of humor so that I don't fall into the argument trap Sharon delights in setting. It will just ruin the rest of the weekend. I promised the kids that we would see the new Superman movie, but I don't see this as possible now or, at least, the window of opportunity is closing rapidly

To my surprise, I'm enjoying this artistic outlet for my frustration. The dragon has a long, spiked tail and a round body showing on either side of the car, with spikes along the top ridge and an elongated neck leading to a head with floppy ears and bulging eyes. The mouth is wide open, and a great sheet of flame shoots streetward from it. The legs are short with claws. A fearful beast indeed, I judge. Something to be reckoned with. As if on cue, as I step back to appraise my work, Sharon pulls into the driveway, evidently oblivious to my welcoming dragon. Her car covers the dragon's flame and head.

Meredith and Allen quickly get out of Sharon's car, and waving a perfunctory goodbye to her, quickly walk to me and my car. We exchange hugs and the kids get in the car. Merrie sits in the front seat with me and Allen takes his usual seat in the rear. I don't say anything as we pull away from the curb, but after turning the corner I go another block before deciding to stop. I pull over to the curb and turn off the engine. I look at the kids silently.

Allen, looks at me looking at him and says, "What?"

"You guys are an hour late," I say. "Again."

"It's not our fault, Daddy," Merrie says, defending Allen from what she must have seen as an accusation by me. In a way she is right.

"Sweetheart, I don't want to talk about fault or who is to blame or anything like that. But I do need this to stop. Either you guys want to spend time with me or you don't. If you do, you need to pay attention to the time and let your mom know that she needs to get you home on time...before it gets late." I stop and give both kids a look to check whether they are hearing my message. I see I have their full attention. "You're both in high school now. You know where you are at all times, how long it will take to get back to your mother's house from wherever that is and when you are supposed to meet me." I pause for a moment, "Am I right?"

Both kids shake their heads "yes."

"I don't like putting you guys in the middle between your mother and me, but this wasting time and not respecting my time has to stop."

Merrie's eyes start to water. "But what if she won't listen to us?"

"Sweetie, I know you can't control your mom's behavior. I just want you to make sure she knows what you want. You both have to be clear. You're old enough now to say what you want to happen. Otherwise this will go on forever and it's not fair to any of us. Okay? Okay, Allen?"

"Okay, Dad."

"Good. Now we have to decide what you want to do. The movie starts at seven thirty. There's just enough time to make it if you want. We'll probably only miss some of the coming attractions. Or we can go to Angelo's Pizza for dinner, but we won't have time for the movie. What's your choice?"

Allen says, "Mom got us something to eat at the mall. So we can still go to the movies, if that's okay with you."

"Okay, the movies it is!" I say with enthusiasm. Sharon knew I had plans to take them to dinner.

A light snow continues to fall and I become a little concerned about how things will be after we get out of the show. I decide to stick with the movie plan. I don't live that far from the theater and I should be able to get us back without any problem. I have good winter tires and the car rides high.

We get to the theater at seven twenty-five. Just in time. The young man selling tickets seems surprised to see us. When we enter the theater there is no one in the lobby and I figure the movie has already started. I will get the kids settled and then get some popcorn. What's a movie without popcorn? When we enter the venue where our movie will be playing, we stay in the back near the door until our eyes adjust to the darkness. It then becomes clear that the theater is empty. The coming attractions are still playing. I choose seats in the middle section at about the middle row near the right side of the row, maybe five seats in. I take all our coats and pile them on the seat next to me.

"Who wants popcorn?" I ask. Both kids raise their hand. "Okay. I'll be right back."

When I return there is an older woman inexplicably sitting in the seat on the other side of the one I used to store all our coats. I'm a bit surprised and wonder if perhaps she knows Merrie or Allen. As I slide by her, she looks at the coats all piled on the chair and then at me with what seems like a disapproving frown. I decide I am being paranoid.

I turn to Allen and Merrie on my other side and whisper, "Do you know this lady?" Both shake their head "no". I shrug my shoulders.

As the movie progresses both Merrie and Allen are drawn more and more into the plot. However, at one point Merrie leans over to me and asks, "Dad, why do they hate Superman so much?"

"Good question," I say. I think about what would be a good answer and decide less is more. "I think it's just that they are the bad guys and he is the good guy and bad guys always hate the good guys. It's just the way it is."

The woman sitting next to us turns to me and shushes me, putting a finger to her lips. Even though she is older and I almost always make allowances for that, the stress of waiting for the children earlier has left me cranky.

"Madam, the theater is completely empty. If you're not happy sitting here, change your seat." I wave my arm, emphasizing the vast field of empty seats available to her. She takes my suggestion and gets up and moves to a seat quite far from us. The situation seems absurd to me and I just don't have patience for it tonight. Why is she here anyway? This is obviously a kids' movie.

Merrie doesn't ask me any more questions and I am angry that the confrontation with this silly woman has stifled Merrie. I put my arm around her and she leans her head on my shoulder for a few minutes before getting caught up in the plot again. Soon she and Allen are exchanging comments about the special effects and the storyline. I relax a bit.

It's the expected Superman plot with just enough complexity to keep the kids engaged without losing them. The special effects really are special. Great photography. I'm happy to see that the kids are still giving the movie their focused attention.

When the movie is over, we all applaud. It was fun, but we don't stay for the credits. I'm concerned about the snow.

"So, what do you think? Did you like the movie?" I ask when we get to the lobby and begin preparing for going outside into the chill, wind and snow.

"It was good, Dad. Thanks for taking us," Allen says while helping Merrie on with her coat.

"I really liked it, Daddy. Thanks," Meredith says earnestly.

"Well, no accounting for taste," I say laughing.

Allen is pulling on his gloves when he turns to me and asks, "Can I drive to your place?" trying hard to look serious. He is proud of having recently obtained his learner's permit and is looking for every chance to drive.

"Sure," I say with exaggerated enthusiasm.

Merrie looks shocked. "Daddy?" she questions with some alarm in her voice.

"We're just teasing, sweetheart. Not to worry. I'm driving."

Allen goes into drama-king mode, feigning great disappointment.

As we leave the building, the initial cold blast is a refreshing change from the heated movie theater. The snow has obviously been falling at a steady rate and has accumulated about four inches of light powder during the movie. I begin to question whether it was a good idea after all not to have gone straight to my place after getting the kids. However, getting into the car I realize it's too late for second guessing now. I just have to be super careful. The plows have already done a pass on the main roads and my street will have been cleared.

There are practically no cars on the road so I don't have to feel pressed to go faster than what I feel is safe. I leave plenty of time to brake when approaching a traffic signal in the event it turns red as I approach. And the car seems to be handling the raw conditions well. I feel in control.

Wow! Talk about jinxing yourself. That was close. I lost focus for a second and the corner light near my apartment changed unexpectedly. Brake and risk a spin-out or go through the red light. I decide to go through since there is no one else on the road. I can feel both kids looking at me with a combination of surprise and alarm. I don't react to their reaction.

I open the door to my place accompanied by the sound of feet stamping the snow from our shoes. As soon as we enter, I offer some warm herbal tea for everyone, readily accepted. I prepare a big pot of chamomile tea. It's about nine thirty and the kids will hit the sack by ten. This gives me just enough time for my talk with them.

While they're sipping their tea and discussing the movie, I prepare their beds. The apartment only has one bedroom so I pull out the sleep sofa and get that ready for Merrie. Next I open the cot for Allen. Merrie

is too old now to share sleeping space with her brother. Allen understands this and is a pretty good sport about sharing my bedroom with me. He's a good kid. Responsible and very mature for his age.

I suddenly think about a woman, Leslie, I briefly dated last spring. I met her through a "women seeking men" personal ad in the Post. Seemed like a good fit at the time. She was acceptably attractive, shorter than I, dark, curly hair, intelligent face, good body and had her own practice. She had a PhD in family counseling, so of course she was divorced with children. She had been divorced a bit longer than I when we met, about two years for her and a little over one year for me. So we had that and several other things in common. Her kids, boy and girl, were both slightly older than mine. She was single and horny. We got along very well. Her kids were a problem for me, however. Out of control.

They were spoiled, disrespectful when speaking to her, full of attitude, especially the girl, who was about sixteen. They both refused to take responsibility for keeping their rooms straight, demanded instead of asked for things, never showed any gratitude for all the shlepping their mother did for them, and generally maintained and supported a large cloud of negativity that hovered like a foul smell over all their activities. The divorce had left an unfortunate residue of bitterness that flowed from the parents to the children as well.

I tagged along when I could while Leslie chauffeured them from music lessons, to sports practice and games, to ice cream outings and other praiseworthy attempts at single parenting. I think the daughter liked me, which I surmised by her failing to treat me like I had a contagious disease. I was happy about her showing some sign of acceptance towards me since her younger brother seemed to take her lead on relationships, and, so, it was a twofer. She seemed to appreciate that I treated her as an adult and included her in conversations. She was a pretty bright kid and what she had to say, when she was not being snotty and hostile about either her mother or her father, usually made sense. I think we had a good relationship. But, in general, she openly expressed a lot of anger towards her dad.

One memorable day over lunch at The Magic Wok Chinese Restaurant, Leslie asked me if I wanted to move in with her. I have a very limited apartment while she has quite a nice house in a good neighborhood. I was not prepared for what should have been a tempting offer and blurted out, "I can't move in with you." I remember Leslie was surprised.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Leslie, I'm sorry, but everyone in your house is angry. I couldn't live with that as a steady diet. I like you. A lot. You know that. We get along great. I like your kids. But the atmosphere in your house is just toxic."

Leslie dropped her spoon.

She looked at me without speaking as her eyes began to water. She covered her face with her hands.

"I'm sorry," I said.

We finished lunch more or less in silence. Afterwards, we went back to her house. Leslie was making me tea when her son came home, angry about something, and slammed his bedroom door as he disappeared inside. A few minutes later her daughter came home slamming the front door as she entered. She walked past us on the way to her room and made no sign of acknowledging us. I looked at Leslie and her eyes began to water again. I put my arms around her and tried to comfort her.

"I just don't know what to do," she said to me.

I distinctly remember her saying that since it seemed so bizarre to me at the time. This was what she had a friggin' PhD in. She's supposed to know what to do. It surprised me, this disconnect between giving advice and help to others and knowing what to do in your own life. I think that is one of the reasons, I mean that scene, that I never, ever give relationship advice to other people. We all just stumble through life, doing what we think is right at the time.

One time, before Leslie and I drifted apart, I asked her daughter, when we were alone in the kitchen, why she was being so difficult.

"Come on," I said. "You see how hard your mother is trying. It's not easy having a business, raising two kids and trying to have a life. Why are you being so hard on her?"

She said, "Because I can," as if she had been waiting a long time for someone to ask her this, so she could give this answer.

I looked at her for a few seconds, not knowing what to say or even if it was my place to say anything. Finally, I just shook my head and said, "I'm really sorry you feel you have to do this."

During spring break Leslie took her kids on an eight day trip to the Bahamas and those eight days were, for us, too much time away from each other. We spoke briefly over the phone, but when she returned I had already moved on.

So why am I thinking about this? I guess I am just grateful that Sharon and I never fought about how to raise our kids. We showed them both unconditional love, were clear from the start what our values were and they have both turned out pretty well. Sharon was a crappy wife, but she was a good, devoted mother. In parenting, anyway, we were an effective team. Merrie and Allen are living proof of that. I am so proud of them.

"Guys, I want to talk with you about something."

God bless these kids. Right away they stop their chattering and look at me alert to something in my tone of voice. They seem to intuit when my voice means they are in trouble about something or when it is something entirely different about which interest rather than anxiety is called for.

"What's up, Dad?" Allen asks with a smile.

"Hmm. How do I start this? Okay. It's not bad. It's good. So just say it, right?"

"Daaaddy, yes. Just say it," Merrie offers by way of encouragement.

"Okay. So here it is. I met a woman. I have been seeing her for a couple of months. You know that. You know her name is Kristina. Krissy. What you don't know is that I really, really like her and want you guys to get to know her and if you can, really like her too. I want you to think of her as someone very important to me and therefore I hope you, too, will see her as important.

"You know I haven't done things with all four of us because I don't like to introduce women to you who may not stick around for one reason or another. But Krissy is different. I would like us all to go camping together. I'm thinking Bear Mountain. There will probably still be snow on the ground. It will be fun and you can get to know her. And, of course, she can get to know you first hand to cancel out all the horrible things I say about you to her.

"So that's it. That's what I wanted to say. Whew. There it is."

Right away Merrie chimes in. "Daddy, that's so sweet!"

"When do we leave?" Allen asks with a grin.

March 28th

Out-of-season camping with the kids and Krissy was amazing. The drive from Benton to the Bear Mountain region was a bit long, but everything was covered by a fresh dusting of snow so the scenery almost the whole way, especially up the Taconic State Parkway and across the Hudson into the mountains, was so picturesque, like calendar photos. Once we got solidly into the Bear Mountain region I took the abandoned road that I was aiming for off the main road and drove into the forest for about a mile before I felt it was safe to stop and set up camp without being detected. Thank goodness for the Ford Club Wagon. It can easily carry four people as well as all the gear needed for comfortable camping.

I could tell that Allen was impressed by Krissy's beauty. Teenage boys have their ways of embarrassing their fathers on a "meet the girlfriend" outing. Thumbs up, smirks, finger in the ribs. They have their ways. Merrie was just happy, I think, to have another female along and effortlessly attached herself to Krissy. Krissy, of course, was being a good sport helping to set up the tent with me, room for four, laying out the sleeping bags, blowing up the air mattresses, and setting up all the cooking gear. Allen and Merrie were put on firewood and kindling hunting duty.

It was a crisp, cold, clear weekend, perfect for winter "stealth" camping (so the park rangers don't spot us).

Since I seem mostly unable to create lengthy journal entries, I will cut to the chase for the most dramatic few moments of our camping adventure. On the first evening we were sitting around the bonfire we made from wood the kids found, singing songs and roasting marshmallows. Everyone was having fun and we all had marshmallows roasting on the end of sticks of our own discovery and design. To my Merrie's surprise, her marshmallow burst into flames. Merrie reacted reflexively pulling the stick quickly to her face to blow out the flame. However, she pulled it too quickly and the flaming marshmallow ended up stuck to her nose! There was stunned silence for an instant and then Krissy, bless her heart, jumped to the rescue in one quick motion grabbing the burning marshmallow with her hands and pulling it off of Merrie's nose. She just as quickly buried her hands in the snow at our feet.

Luckily, Merrie's nose had been encased inside the marshmallow where the temperature was much less than the burning exterior. After I quickly put some snow on Merrie's nose we checked on Krissy's hands. Fortunately, her actions were so quick that she was not injured. She carefully brushed off the now cool marshmallow that had stuck to her hands. Finally, Allen, who sat stricken mute and motionless during the few seconds of the "event" burst out laughing. The rest of us turned from Merrie, the logical center of attention, to Allen, at which point we all, including Merrie, burst into laughter as well.

We proclaimed Krissy the hero of the moment and praised her for her quick reflexes. Krissy praised Merrie for being so brave about the whole thing by not crying. Krissy said she would have been in tears if that happened to her. At which point we all checked Krissy's hands again to make sure they were not burned. Luckily nothing there either. I loved watching my kids holding Krissy's hands looking for damage. There is nothing like being in the trenches together to create the bonding moment. Merrie became Krissy's little shadow for the remainder of our trip and Allen, I think, no longer viewed her after that as simply a "dish."

*

"You're kidding, right?" Terri asks incredulously. "Onto her nose?"

"Exactly." I shift a bit on my barstool to get a better view of Terri. It's so noisy in the bar that watching her lips as she speaks makes it a bit easier to understand what she is saying.

"And it didn't burn her skin?"

"Thankfully, no. And Krissy gave Merrie's nose a little kiss afterward, 'to help it feel better,' she said. Krissy was so good with Meredith. She told Merrie a story about when she was a young girl visiting her grandmother. Her grandmother was quite old and a bit infirm, unable to get around easily. The family frequently visited to keep her spirits up. Anyway, Krissy was playing with her other cousins who also were visiting. They were in her grandmother's bedroom getting as far away from the adults as they could, she was about nine or ten at the time she said when she realized she had become quite thirsty. She didn't want to bother her grandmother and she saw a glass of water next to her grandma's bed. It had gradually become early evening, she said, but no one bothered to turn the lights on, so it had become dark in the room. Krissy said she picked up the glass not clearly seeing it and tilted it up for a big swallow. Except that at the same time her grandmother's false teeth banged into her teeth. It was the glass her grandmother was using to soak her dentures."

"Yuck! It's not true."

I shake my head. "Yes. She swears it was true. Of course, we all cracked up when Krissy told the story."

We both relax onto our stools a bit, tired, with all the noise, from the effort of communicating.

Terri looks at me with one of those inscrutable girl looks.

I say, "What?"

"I'm so pleased for you both," Terri says.

"I don't know, Terri. I keep expecting something terrible to happen."

"No, Michael. Sounds like wedding bells to me," she says, smirking.

*

April 5th

Dear Journal: I know, I know. I'm not keeping you up to date. Things are moving right along with Krissy. What to say? All good. Risk avoidance is no longer in my calculation. In fact, there is no calculation. Every decision I make involving Krissy comes straight from my heart. I've stopped worrying about why I am so lucky. We're both lucky. Lucky we found each other.

*

"How much do you share with your friends?" Krissy asks me. Hmm. Is this one of those does-this-dress-make-me-look-less-fat questions?

"Umm. What do you mean?" I say, stalling for time and information.

"You know, guy stuff about their girlfriends."

"You mean about you to them?" I ask with some trepidation. What dumb things have I been saying on our car rides to work? Have I been inappropriate and somehow this got back to Krissy?

"Well, yes," she says.

Trying to sound flip and less vulnerable I say, "Only good things, my darling girl," sporting a broad grin as I try to laugh off where this may be going. I suddenly remember the five worst words a man can hear. Dear, we need to talk.

"Would you like to hear some music?" I ask by way of diversion.

To my delight and surprise Krissy says, "Yes, that would be lovely."

I get up from the couch and find a Nat King Cole album and put it on, playing softly.

"Need a refresher?" I ask, pointing to her wine glass.

"Yes, please." Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I refill her glass.

"So what do you guys talk about on the way to work?"

"You know, stuff."

"Girls?"

"Well. Sometimes."

"Intimate stuff? Ever?" Oh god, here it comes.

"You mean about you? With them?"

Krissy just smiles. Why do I get the idea she is enjoying this?

"Never!" I assert forcefully, showing shock that she would even ask the question.

Krissy just sits there circling the rim of her wine glass with her index finger, legs curled under her, looking steadily at me, but now without speaking.

Finally, I say, "Why do you ask? Have I done something wrong?"

"Because girls talk, you know, Michael. We talk about lots of stuff. We talk about our boyfriends. You would be surprised by the things you find out and the advice you get."

My brain is racing. What did I do? I can't think of anything. Not recently anyway, since I've known Krissy.

"I'm confused. Is this about my conversations or yours?"

"Actually, it's about my conversation, Michael."

"Okay," I say, noncommittal.

"Remember when we were together at my place two nights ago?"

Quickly I do a mental inventory of that night. It was lovely. I stayed over and thought everything was good. "Yes, I remember. Is there something wrong?"

"Do you remember I left early for work the next morning? We didn't get to say goodbye?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, what you don't know is that I had trouble walking that morning. Marcy asked me why I was walking funny. And you know how girls like to talk. I said I was sore."

I look at Krissy, confused.

"Between my legs," Krissy says, a slow smile beginning to blossom on her face.

"Do you know what Marcy said to me then?"

"No. What did Marcy say?" I ask, a smile beginning to form on my face as well now.

"Lucky girl! She said, lucky girl."

I let out a sigh.

"You are so cute, Michael. You were worried that I was unhappy about something you did, weren't you?"

Feeling on safer ground now, I say, laughing, "All men have a dark soul that does not bear the light of day. We are born guilty." I am relieved. However, I am feeling a little drained, too, by all this.

"You are so sweet, Michael." Krissy slides next to me on the couch and takes my head in her hands and gently brings my lips to hers. She kisses each of my eyes and my nose and my lips again. "You were worried. That I was unhappy."

"If I say yes, will you keep kissing me?"

"Yes."

"Yes!"

*

I have to find a new job. Shit. I hate the process. But I won't leave myself so far from the children and from Krissy.

*

Well, Doc, I'm looking happy because I'm feeling happy.

Because I am happy and yes it's about Krissy
she makes me happy
me
she makes me happy
all the time with Sharon I felt I was constantly being
You know weighed in the balance
and found wanting always proving myself
and failing

How is it different with Krissy?

For me, it's all about touching
physically and spiritually
Krissy is a toucher
she puts her arm around me when we walk
or she holds my hand
she holds my hand without waiting for me to hold hers
she puts her head on my shoulder when we sit or snuggles close
she kisses me without waiting for me to kiss her
when I'm dressing she will walk over and button my buttons
especially the cuff buttons they make me crazy
if we are waiting for something together she will turn
and smush her body against mine
her arms folded in front of her
so I can wrap my arms around all of her
by god, I think if I was peeing
and she was in the bathroom with me
she'd hold my dick for me
how can you not love a woman like that

Yes, I know. Love is not fifty-fifty.

It's a hundred a hundred.

I worry about that sometimes because I don't know
I don't know what she sees in me that deserves such affection
I've talked with her briefly about this you know
why me
and she is so sweet and tells me how wonderful I am
how glad she is that I accepted her phone call

how glad she is that her friend talked with her about me
how I am a diamond in the rough
she says that
I'm a diamond in the rough
she says anyone who just polished me rubbed me a little bit
would see how much there is to love

I don't know I just take her word for it now
and consider myself lucky
I'm so used to trying to prove myself
I don't know how to deal with a woman
who doesn't need convincing
you know this is not the first time something like this
has happened to me the disconnect I mean
between how others see me and how I see myself
I'm often told that people like my sense of humor or
my positive attitude or my generosity or whatever
and I totally don't see it in myself
I just don't get it
am I gaming the system you know gaming life
fooling everyone except myself

Well, that's where Krissy comes in.

I'm just happy with myself when I'm with her
I've started putting my doubts about myself aside
suppressing them
no not suppressing them
that would mean they are still there only masked
my doubts are melting away
from the warmth of her trust in me
wow did I just say that
but I guess it's how I feel when I'm with her
confident romantic loved accepted
Doc, after a lifetime of self-esteem issues
Krissy's trust in me makes me feel like
what
I don't know
a man
in the most positive sense

You know, it's funny about happiness and unhappiness
they don't have equal impact
I mean it doesn't take ten years of happiness to undo
ten years of unhappiness
sometimes you hear of a person

who had been unhappily married
for example for many years
and their spouse either dies or they get divorced
and afterward quite unexpectedly
finds his or her soulmate and remarries
and knows real happiness I mean true real happiness
for the first time
and then tragedy happens and their partner dies
and they have had only two years
or whatever short period together
I wonder
does the person feel bitter and cheated and just destroyed
I don't think so

I think the two years or whatever of real unadulterated happiness
more than offsets the long years of unhappiness
and even the pain of a sudden death
the person may not feel that way right away but
sooner or later and probably sooner
they cherish the joy
resurrect it as it were
they forget the sorrow and the unhappiness
happiness is a powerful medicine

And hope
hope is a powerful medicine as well
I learned about hope in a very strange way
it's a bit of a story but I have time right
I learned to read at a pretty young age and loved reading
and this was well-known in my family
when I was about ten one of my uncles died
quite unexpectedly and early in his forties I think
my aunt knew I liked reading and so she gave me
his entire collection of Charles Dickens' writings
twenty volumes

Over the years I have been working my way through them
and what I found is this
almost every story starts out bad for the main character
and then just gets worse
but by the end something always seems to happen
something unexpected comes around the corner
or things unexpectedly go the right way when all indications
suggest more pain and disappointment
not all of them but a lot of them

What I learned from these stories is hope
you never know
what's coming around the corner or over the next hill
no matter how bad things seem
things might always be better or different tomorrow
hope keeps you in the game

Yes, I am feeling very philosophical today.

If you will pardon me for saying so
you therapists have a good deal going
you never give a diagnosis or a treatment plan
or criteria for success
not that you are not doing good
but it is a bit of a scam in a way
you're smiling
is it because I caught on to your game
I'm only half kidding
I am grateful to you for listening to me without judging
even though I know it's what you are supposed to do
not judge I mean
and I'm grateful for our sessions
but I've been thinking about taking a break from seeing you for a while
maybe permanently I don't know just yet
but I feel I'm okay
not without challenges but okay
there is the job search but I'm a big boy and can deal with that
and there is my unexpected happiness and I can deal with that too
so I guess this is it.

Addresses. Possible leads. Resumes. Cover letters. Fold, lick, seal, stamp. Ugh. Plus I am mentally preparing myself for the inevitable onslaught of rejection letters. 'Thank you so much. Your credentials are most impressive. We have no need at the moment but will certainly keep your resume on file in the event an opening occurs'. Blah blah blah.

The one good thing is it's always better to look for a job while you have a job. Much less pressure, for sure. But it's a delicate balancing game. When you are looking for a job you want to tell everyone you know so that they can all be looking out for you. But you don't want your current employer to know so you have to be careful at the same time whom you tell and how you instruct them to make inquiries so they don't give away your game prematurely.

I call Herb.

"Herb, Michael here. Can you talk? Okay. Can I come over tonight to speak with you? I need your help. I'm looking for a new job and I want to talk with you about strategy and contacts... Okay, good... Please don't say anything to the other guys for the moment. Great. See you about eight?... Terrific. Thanks."

Terri, same thing. Gotta call her and see who she knows. I have to spread the net wisely. Not too quickly or it will get out of control.

*

April 29th

Well, dear journal, why am I doing this again? I'm not sure what I am supposed to be getting out of these entries. "Out of" and "entries." Strange juxtaposition of opposites. Words are amazing. Maybe that's what I'm supposed to get out of this. Simply working with words. But does happiness kill the writing spirit? The will to penetrate deeply? I don't know. I'm thinking too much. I'm happy. The kids are happy. Krissy is happy. All is well with the world. Perhaps my entries, dear Journal, will be better now that I am no longer seeing my shrink. Or not. I think I will take the kids botanizing at Devils Den this weekend. Spring wildflowers are beginning to pop. I think Krissy will come and we can show off to her how much we know about forest and meadow plants. We're pretty good, but not so good with mushrooms. I just don't see the little buggers. When I have gone mushrooming with mushroom people I'm always amazed how they spot those little 'rooms from among the dead leaves and debris and the shadows. Anyway, I like color better and so wildflowers are my first choice. Sorry for rambling. Bye for now, dear journal.

*

May 2nd

It's not what you know, it's who you know and Herb got me two leads and two interviews. He was amazing. He got my foot in the door. Now it's up to me to sell myself. One place is in Norwalk and the other is in Kent. Kent is a bit far but doable if I live somewhere between Kent and Benton. We'll see first how the interviews go. Norwalk first. Kent if I need it.

The Norwalk company is a real estate appraisal and title search firm with satellite offices all around

Connecticut. The corporate headquarters is in Norwalk. I will be applying for the director of operations position. The current director of operations is moving to a position with another firm in Europe. They need someone by mid- to late-May so the turnaround for a decision after the interview should be pretty quick. The timing would be very good for me. It would give me time to tie up all the loose ends at work before I leave. Off to the library this afternoon to do some research on the company's management, services, financials, and long term prospects. So far I like what I know about them. How lucky is it that Herb has a good friend there!

*

Okay! That's settled. Great interview. They didn't waste any time. I was shocked to get an offer before my visit was done. A little worrisome, actually, to move so fast. But I did my due diligence on the company before the visit and they seem solid. I know they're in a hurry to replace the director, who is moving to Europe, so what the heck. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. I don't have to move and the pay is twenty percent more than what I am getting now. Nice perks as a director. Life is good again. No. Life continues to be good. Now to celebrate.

*

"Hi, Merrie. It's Dad." Allen hates picking up the phone.

"Hi, Daddy. I'm watching this really funny movie on TV."

"Great. Merrie, when I pick you up this weekend, wear something nice. I have something to celebrate and I want to share it with you and Allen."

"Okay. What are you celebrating? Ooooh! Does it have to do with Krissy?"

"Partly. But it has to do with you and Allen also. I want it to be a surprise for all of you so I'm not going to play twenty questions with you. You just have to wait. You'll tell Allen to dress up too, right?"

"Okay, but I'm going to call Krissy to see if she'll let me know."

"No problem. She doesn't know either."

There is a moment of silence on Merrie's end.

"Hmmm. Okay. Love you, Daddy. I guess I'll have to wait."

"Love you, too, three, four, five, plus one." I hang up. She's such a sweetie and growing up so fast.

I call Krissy.

"Hi, may I speak with Miss Edwards please?"

Click click click.

"Hello. This is Kristina Edwards. May I help you?"

"Yes, hello. I'm doing a phone survey. How are you with heavy breathing phone calls or do you prefer house calls?"

"Oh, definitely the house call. I think heavy breathing is best face-to-face," Krissy says with an obvious smile in her voice.

"Just as I expected." Okay, down to business. "Hi gorgeous. I want to ask you if you would like to join my kids and me for dinner this Friday night? I can pick you up about seven-thirty."

"Oh, lovely. Yes of course."

"Can you wear something special? It's a celebration."

"Oooh. What are we celebrating?" I am enjoying the knowledge that her female curiosity has kicked into high gear.

"It's a surprise. And Merrie may call you to see what you know about it, so don't tell her anything."

"No problem, since I don't know anything either."

"True. Seven-thirty, okay?"

"Okay." I pause for a moment. Before I can say what is on my mind, Krissy says "Michael, I love you."

"I know, sweetheart. Plus one. See you Friday."

*

Well, progress on all fronts. Sharon's car is in the driveway so the kids are home. This is a record. The door is opening and there they are. Six o'clock as required. Finally. Allen is wearing a suit and looks so handsome. He is now several inches taller than me and a strapping young man. Merrie is wearing a dress with a shawl over her shoulders. I recognize it as one of her mother's shawls. This is a new Sharon. Helping her look good for her father and his girlfriend.

"Wow. You two look so handsome. I mean beautiful. I mean handsome. Okay. Allen, you are handsome. Merrie, you are beautiful. There. I think I got that right now.

"Daaaddy!" from Meredith.

"Okay. Okay." I open the front and rear doors for the kids and they take their usual seats. "We'll head over to Krissy's and pick her up. First I want to get some flowers."

"Is it Krissy's birthday?" Merrie asks.

"No." That's all I'm going to say. Suddenly I am beginning to think I am building this up to something bigger than it is, or at least how it will seem to the kids. Well, I'm in too far to stop, so change the subject.

"What's going on with your mom? How come everything went so smoothly this evening?"

Allen leans forward. As the elder sibling, he seems to be stepping up here.

"Dad, after you talked with us last time about being late so often we sat down with mom and explained that we needed her to pay more attention to the time and the schedule."

"That was very responsible of you both. Thank you. And your mom seems to have taken your conversation to heart. Good for her."

"We were a little anxious about talking with her about it. Sorry it took so long before we did it. When we finally did, mom was pretty receptive."

"How come?" I ask.

"She seems happier these days, Daddy," Merrie says.

"Is she seeing someone?" I ask.

I can see in the rearview mirror that Merrie and Allen are looking at each other. Again Allen takes the lead. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Okay. Good for her, again. Do you want some music?" I put on a station I know they like.

"Okay, there's the florist." I pull over. "Do you want to come in or wait in the car?"

Merrie is first. "No. We'll come in."

The kids look around at all the various flower arrangements. I let them explore for a while as I pick out a group of long stem red roses. The ever-faithful choice. You never can go wrong with long stem red roses.

"Wow, Daddy!" from Merrie as she watches the sales clerk arrange and wrap the roses throwing in some angel's breath, some fern leaves, and a couple of plant food packages.

I pay and we return to the car and are quickly on our way again.

It's only a few minutes more to Krissy's place. When she opens the door, once again she takes my breath away. This time she is dressed more daringly than is her normal habit. She's wearing a metallic-silver silk dress, nicely form-fitting her slender body, with a cautiously revealing neckline, sleeveless, the gold necklace I gave her for Valentine's Day, a forest green sash tied around her waist, and her emerald earrings that I admired once on a previous occasion.

"Hi," Krissy says, but we are all speechless.

"Well, that's a nice reaction," she says. "Come on in." She takes Allen by the hand and leads him in. I watch him turn red, blushing. I enter last, carrying the flowers.

"Flowers? Is this my celebration or yours?" she says, taking the flowers from me and placing them on the dining room table, next to a bouquet of cut spring flowers already there.

"I got these for you. I thought it was *your* celebration." Krissy points to the bouquet. We both laugh. I give her a quick kiss. "Thank you."

While I sit in one of the armchairs, Krissy is putting the roses in a vase and the kids sit on the couch.

"How about a toast? I think there is a container of orange juice in the refrigerator," I say.

"Come on dad. What are we toasting?" Allen asks. "Krissy, do you know?"

"Nope," from Krissy in the kitchen working the roses.

I get four wine glasses from the cabinet and pour the orange juice.

"Okay. Everybody gather." I hand everyone a glass and then raise mine. The others follow, still with questioning expressions. I am in real fear suddenly of having totally overplayed this.

"Here's to my new job as operations director at Metric Realty Solutions, Norwalk, Connecticut, starting May 21st."

Everyone looks at each other. Exactly as I feared. It doesn't seem to merit all this fuss to them. However, they all follow my toast with a "Here's to your new job," and all take a swig of their juice.

"Uh, Daddy. That's it?" Merrie asks with evident disappointment in her voice..

"Okay. Here's the situation. I was offered a promotion where I am now, but it meant moving to Hartford." Allen looks at Merrie, beginning to understand.

"There was no way I would move to Hartford and be so far from all of you. But if I turned down the promotion I would be labeled as not ambitious. There would be no more promotion opportunities coming my way if I turned that one down. Not good. So my only option was to find a better job here and that's exactly what I did. Now, what do you think of that?"

Allen, the true young man that he is, pumps my hand. "Congratulations, dad. Way to go."

Merrie just gives me a big hug, her eyes tearing. "You almost had to move away?" she asks. "Daddy, that was a close call."

"Never gonna happen, my darlings. I never said anything because I didn't want anyone to worry. But I took care of business."

I look at Krissy who is now sitting quietly in the other armchair. I walk over to her and bend down to whisper in her ear. "I could never leave you. I didn't want you to worry." Krissy turns her head to me and kisses me lightly.

"I love you, Krissy."

"Too," she whispers back.

I stand up. "Okay," I say. "Let's go to the restaurant."

I smell apples again. Is this an auspicious aura?

*

My brother had not been to my apartment before. Ever. He stopped speaking to me at mom's funeral and I never understood why. That was eight years ago. He stopped coming to the house and he never came to my apartment. I am happy he is here now. Especially for the reason he is here. When I called him I didn't know how he would react. I told him I am going to ask Krissy to marry me. The first thing he asked me was "is she Jewish?" A tricky question with my brother who is very Jewish. I thought for a moment, during which I could imagine him expecting the worst. I finally said, "She's as Jewish as I am." He sighed and I think he took that as a "yes." I left it at that.

Brothers should not be estranged from each other so I am glad he is here now. He said he had a gift for me. I cannot imagine what that could be or why he wants to give it to me now. Leon doesn't smile a lot. I can't read him, but still, I'm happy he's here.

"You know how many years I'm married, Michael?" he asks me.

"I guess about twenty-five."

"Twenty-seven years now. No divorce. No thoughts of divorce. But you...you shocked the family. You shocked the children."

I was silent. I did not want to argue with my brother. I learned to avoid certain subjects. Religion was one of them and divorce to him is a religious issue. 'What God has joined, etc.'

"Alright," he continues. "What's done is done. You have a right to happiness and if this Kristina Edwards will make you happy, then that is good. I don't understand how Kristina is a Jewish name, but these are different times and she didn't name herself. So, *mazel tov*. Do you have any wine in the house?"

"Of course, Leon. Let's drink to the future, to love and to family."

"Never mind your wine. I was only teasing. I brought my own, from Shapiro's in Manhattan. Kosher. I never trust when I visit." He goes back to his coat hanging in the closet by the front door and pulls out a bottle of wine from the side pocket. It's labeled 'Red Table Wine' with no year. I brace myself for a sweet wine that tastes like grape juice with alcohol added. I know this wine. But, I'm happy he wants to share my celebration with me. I get two glasses. We sit at the kitchen table. I open the bottle and pour two healthy portions for us. After I pour and we are just sitting there he reaches into his trouser pocket and pulls out a bulky wad of tissue paper. Carefully, almost reverently, he places the package on the table.

"This is for you or really this is for Kristina."

I look at him with a questioning expression. "May I unwrap it?"

"If you want to know what's inside that would be one way," he says with a smile now.

I open the folds of the tissues and in the center is an old white gold setting with eight diamond chips, probably about a karat or a karat and a half altogether, in a setting where they are clustered to look like one stone. I look at my brother with a questioning expression.

"It's for Kristina's engagement ring. You need an engagement ring, yes? Well, I don't know what your plans are, but I would like you to use this ring. It's Grandma Olga's engagement ring. When mom died, she left it to me. No daughters so she gave it to the eldest son. Me. I know it's an old fashioned setting. I don't expect you to use it as it is, but I would like you to use the stones. Be creative. Make any setting you like, but use grandma's stones. You will make grandma and mom happy, they should rest in peace, and you will make me happy." He stopped talking and waited for my response.

"Of course I will!" I say instantly. "Leon, you've made me very happy. I had no idea this ring even existed and Krissy will be so thrilled and honored when I tell her the significance." I get up and go to my brother and hug him, not waiting for him to get up. It's awkward, but I don't care. "Thank you," I say again.

"Okay, okay," and he pushes me back gently towards my chair. "Is there a picture of this girl who is making you so happy?"

"Of course, of course. What's the matter with me?" I rush into the living room and retrieve a portrait I had taken of Krissy and me when we were shopping recently. The store had a portrait special. Mostly parents took advantage of it to get portraits of their kids. I talked Krissy into letting the photographer take our portrait. Store special or not it came out beautiful, so I framed it nicely.

"Here's my Krissy," I say handing the picture to my brother.

"Okay, a face now belongs with the name. And such a *punim*. She is a beauty. What she sees in you I don't understand." He says this with a smile so I take no offense.

"Leon, I often wonder the same thing."

"And she's a good person besides having bad taste in men?"

"Okay, that's enough of that," I say smiling.

"Then let me ask you, what about her heart?"

"Leon, she has a heart of gold. The kids love her. She is so kind and gentle with them. And you can tell, I am a changed man. I'm happy. Happier than I have ever been. And I know you. I believe some time in the past you must have prayed for your brother. Let me tell you that your prayers have been answered. And also she brings us, you and me, together again. She is my good fortune, Leon."

"Yes, I see that. And what about her family?"

I knew this would be coming. I sigh deeply. "Krissy's mom has passed away and her dad remarried and lives in Las Vegas. They don't often see each other."

My brother is silent. I know he judges people. I think it is in the nature of religious people to judge other people. At least that's my observation. They are so sure of their beliefs that their 'rules of behavior' seem like laws of nature to them and not subject to speculation or nuance. They are final.

"She has lots of aunts and uncles and cousins, but they too live pretty far from here. Pennsylvania, Florida, Texas. When she was growing up she was surrounded by family. But now it's all mostly by phone. She feels the separation keenly. It hurts her."

I knew part of his vetting process would include "meeting the family". He is a firm believer in the idea that the apple does not fall far from the tree, despite two such different apples having fallen from our own parents' tree. I am silent. I don't know what to say.

When the silence becomes intolerable I say, "Effectively she has no immediate family nearby."

"Oh!," he says. "Oh dear."

"Well," he says looking at me with his serious face. "Then we shall be her immediate family."

I don't know what to say. I am stunned. I never expected this. I just stare, blinking.

My brother tries to wave the mood away with his hand. "Come, come. Of course we will be her family. What did you think I would say?" He is smiling broadly, very pleased with himself.

I stand and raise my cup of wine. "Leon, first I drink to you. You are not the big *schmuck* I thought you were for so many years." Laughing, we click glasses to salute the sentiment and take a sip of the wine.

"And you, my dear little brother, are not the know-it-all *shmendrik* I thought you were." We click again and take a more bountiful sip of the wine.

"But as the eldest son, and all kidding aside, let me say, Michael, I truly wish you and Kristina countless years of continued happiness and may the light of that happiness be a blessing to everyone on whom it shines and may you both be a source of pleasure and righteousness that overflows to everyone you touch from the bottomless spring of your love for each other. *Baruch hashem!*

My eyes flutter open. I am coming from a place of complete unconsciousness. But now I am slowly becoming aware of myself first. Gently, gently I tell myself. You will figure it out. Just slowly. Then I hear words, a man's voice.

"What's your name?" A man is leaning over me, looking intently at me, asking me my name.

"Michael Roth," I say.

"What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"Where are you?"

I'm not sure how to answer this. In general? Specifically? So I just look at him.

He loosens the bicycle helmet strap under my chin. I am lying on the ground. My bicycle is lying on the ground beside me. I see several cars stopped nearby.

"You've taken a pretty bad fall," the man leaning over me says. "I think you have a concussion and probably at least one broken rib. Don't try to move. An ambulance is on the way."

I see several people standing, some by their cars, some behind the man speaking to me. Someone is directing traffic around us. I lie still.

"My bike?" I ask.

"It's okay. Can you tell me your address? I will drop it off at your place when you go to the hospital."

"You're being very kind. Let me think for a moment." I can't quite remember the details of my address. This scares me a little. No doubt from the concussion, I decide.

I hear the siren approaching. People begin to rearrange themselves, to make a place for the ambulance. It pulls in and two paramedics emerge and quickly come to me. The man speaking to me has moved aside to make more room for the paramedics. They are doing what they do, checking me out, asking questions similar to what the good Samaritan asked me.

Now the rear doors of the ambulance are opened. The two men pull out a stretcher. They carefully place me on it and then into the ambulance. Once in the ambulance, one of the men is taking my blood pressure. The other seems to be getting an IV line ready to start fluids into me. I suddenly remember my address and ask the man taking my blood pressure to get the man who was leaning over me when they arrived. That I had something to tell him.

When he comes into the ambulance I give him my address.

"What's your name?" I ask him while he is writing down my address.

"Frank O'Malley," he says.

"Frank, you got good karma points today. Thank you so much for all your help. I'm very grateful. Please leave a way to contact you when you drop off the bike. Seriously!"

The paramedics are now evidently ready to roll. They give Frank my helmet and shoo him out of the ambulance, close the doors, secure my stretcher and off we go. It will not take long to get to the hospital. My usual bike route is circuitous, but never really more than five or six miles from home and home is not more than about a mile from the hospital.

When we arrive at the hospital, I just close my eyes and embrace the flow of whatever process will get

me into the emergency room and hooked up and attended to. I feel my sneakers and pants coming off and my shirt unbuttoned. Doctors and nurses are fussing all about me. When asked questions, I answer quietly and slowly. A woman arrives with a clipboard and asks me to sign an avalanche of forms. I only partly understand what I am signing, but I think it has to do with giving various permissions and insurance related information. She asks if I would like my wallet to help me with some of the questions. I say, "Yes."

A nurse arrives carrying a little box full of vials and gets busy right away taking blood. This has never bothered me as I have prominent veins and it is always easy for them to get my blood.

I am feeling pain when I breathe and when I rotate my body.

After a while a technician uses a portable x-ray machine brought to my bedside to take a chest x-ray. They find that indeed there are two broken ribs. Instead of pulling my shirt off, they cut it off. I am gently introduced to a hospital gown, but not before an EKG is done to check my heart.

The ER physician tells me that they are working on two pathways. One path to find out why I passed out on my bicycle and the second path to see what damage was done by the fall. He says the second path is easier. Except for a mild concussion and the broken ribs there was nothing life threatening or even serious going on as a result of the fall. He says, however, he is stumped for the moment about why I fell. Frequently, he says, when exercise is involved, it's dehydration, heat exhaustion, or a temporary heart episode. He says it does not seem that any of these caused the fall.

"Since you lost consciousness," he says, "we need to do an x-ray of your brain as well."

They bring the bedside x-ray machine again, this time to take a picture of my head.

When a nurse comes in after they wheel out the x-ray machine, I ask her if I can make some phone calls. She tells me that my family physician has already been called. I ask her if I can call my ex-wife and my fiancée. The nurse says she can call for me. I give her Krissy's phone number and Sharon's phone number. The nurse assures me that she will not frighten anyone with her calls, that she will be very gentle with her messages.

I close my eyes and drift into sleep.

My doctor arrives and I am awakened by the new movement around me.

"Doctor Glassman, hi!" I say.

"Hi, Michael. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, sore, angry with myself, hating all the fuss."

"I can imagine. As for the soreness, there's not much we can do for broken ribs except give them time to heal. I can prescribe some pain medication that you can take when you feel the need. As for the passing out, that is a bit more troublesome. Right now I'm waiting to see what all the tests so far have revealed about why you fell. I think I want to admit you at least for two or three days just to get a better handle on this."

"Is that necessary? Sometimes you do a lot of tests and never find out what the passing cause of a problem was. Does it really matter why I fell? And I can't help much. I don't remember anything."

"Absolutely necessary, Michael."

Well, that sounds pretty unequivocal.

"Okay," I say, reluctantly.

*

May 22nd

Three days of non-stop tests and as I predicted I am okay and they have no idea why I fell. No dreaded tumors. Nothing. Okay, right?

*

Why am I dropping things?

Is it just nerves from all the testing they put me through? Last night was awful. I made such a mess when I dropped the wine glass at the restaurant. It just fell out of my hand. I didn't knock it over. It just slipped from my grip. It's the second time this week. Krissy is worried. I can see it in her eyes. But nothing is showing in the tests.

Did I mention my auras to the doctors? I don't remember.

Again the family joke about my father comes to mind that when he dies it won't be from anything serious because he looked so good for his age. But I'm only forty-one. This is no joke. Is something going on?

I go to the desk in my bedroom and open the drawer holding my writing projects. There is a poem I suddenly remember. I want to read it again. I wrote it several years ago, near the end of my marriage to Sharon. I was in a grim mood then. I am not in a grim mood now. But I am in some kind of mood. And this poem is calling to me.

I find it.

For every living thing
our days are numbered.
And no one knows
the number
he or she is up to.

Yet we shed our moments
with abandon,
our goals upon the wind,
our plans upon the tide.
No sense of urgency.

Strange,
such indifference
in the face of death.

Reading it out loud calms me for some reason. It's an issue everyone faces and I am probably overreacting to the present uncertainty, the lack of closure concerning my medical diagnosis. I'm too young to be worrying about my mortality. Let it be.

I can't. I decide to go for a walk along the river. It's a clear night without a cloud in the sky. Still, I cannot see many stars, only the brightest, because of the light pollution from the street lamps. But it's enough. Memory fills in the rest.

There is a pleasant nip in the air tonight that refreshes. I'm glad I wore a jacket. Walking is how I managed when a couple of years ago I was having infrequent, but scary panic attacks, until my doctor prescribed an anti-depressant. Get ahead of the attacks before they get firmly established, he said. The little pills became my lazy man's solution. Tonight I will walk it off.

Nature abhors a vacuum. With no diagnosis, if I let myself, I will fill the void with all kinds of worst-case scenarios and I don't want to go there. I stop, close my eyes and breathe in deeply, filling my lungs with the good air and slowly exhaling the bad. I repeat this for several cycles. I am becoming friends with the idea of cycles and let myself go, simply enjoying the in and out of my breath. A passing car surprises me and I open my eyes and watch the red tail lights receding like some angry omen, only moving away rather than towards me. I could take this as a good sign, but I don't believe in signs. Or omens.

Continuing my walk, I try to focus on my senses rather than my thoughts. The sights, the sounds, the smells of the river and the evening fill me with an unexpected gratitude. Gradually, the panic, the fear of losing control, diminishes and I bid it goodbye like a troublesome neighbor who finally brings her visit to an end and leaves.

*

At my new job one week and I tripped walking to my car. Can you believe it? Tripped and broke my wrist. Luckily the left wrist. The VP of operations was very supportive about it. Stuff happens, he said. Just do what I have to do to take care of myself. The president of the company called me at home to ask how I was doing, even though he could have called me at work. I think he wanted to send a message that I was part of the company family and not just a person to care about only when at work. At least that's how I took it. I was very pleased. I only missed one day of work, but I was impressed with their concern and support..

Krissy, of course, is my Florence Nightingale. I will see her tonight. She wants me to move in with her. Her place is larger than mine and she thinks we should be living together now that we are engaged. I think partly it's love and partly she wants to be able to help me if I need it. With my wrist, washing and dressing and all that is a bit tricky and an extra pair of hands would be helpful for sure. But mostly I think it's love. I want to spend more time with her, too. Someone once said love is when you are happier when the person is with you than not with you. That certainly applies to us.

When I am not with Krissy, I'm thinking about her. Thinking about hope and about how life can always surprise you. Thinking about how happy she seems with me, without me even trying. I have given up proving myself because everything I do with her is an act of love. I never understood when people said they would give their life for this or that person. Now I understand.

My office phone rings.

"Hi, Daddy," Merrie says, her voice bubbling with good cheer. "I just called to say Hi."

"That's very sweet, darling. Hi back to you. It's nice that you called during the day, but don't you have school?"

"Yes. I'm in between classes and Allen gave me the money for the payphone. He says, Hi, too."

"Okay. That's nice. Thank him for me, and thank you both for thinking of me. I have to get back to work. Was there anything else?"

"Not really. I just wanted to call." She pauses. "Daddy, I really like Krissy. Really a lot. She's so nice. I'm so glad you guys are getting married. That's all. I just wanted to tell you that. Oh, and Allen too."

"And you know she loves you guys, too, don't you?"

"Oh yes. But mostly, we're happy for you."

"Thank you, sweetheart. I think we have a mutual admiration society going here. All good. By the way, how is your mother taking all this?"

I hear Merrie laughing. "Well, if you guys were friends, I think we could have a double ceremony. She and Matt are getting pretty serious, too, I think. So I don't think she's jealous or anything like that."

"Good to know. Should I invite her to our wedding?"

"Naaah, I don't think so. You're kidding, right?"

"Of course. Okay. I love you. I love Allen. Now back to class and back to work."

"Bye, Daddy. I love you too."

*

May 30th

I told Doctor Glassman about my auras and he did not seem pleased. When I told him I thought they

were a gift and not a symptom he said, "We'll see." I didn't like the sound of that. He also seemed unhappy with how long I have been having my auras. I like Glassman. He is limited in some ways. He won't lance a boil, for example. "I don't cut," he says. Or set a broken bone or really do anything except for the three things he does do. He is a great diagnostician. He makes great recommendations for specialists when he thinks I need one. And he is very good at prescribing just the right medication. One more thing. He is no bullshitter. The last time I went to see him, my symptoms were all over the map. High temperature, then low temperature, then diarrhea, then no diarrhea. I like what he said. "Michael, I can't prescribe anything because I don't know yet what you have." He ordered blood tests, but by the time I gave the blood, and he got the results, it was clear I simply had the flu. Prescription: plenty of fluids, bed rest. Aspirin and two weeks to recover. He said if I didn't follow his advice it would take fourteen days instead. I like his sense of humor too.

Anyway, for my auras he sent me to an imaging center to get something new called a CT scan of the head and more blood tests. He still doesn't know why I fell off my bike and evidently won't let it go without an explanation. I have often admired his intuition, but right now I wish he would just stop. Instead, my aura confession made him even more determined than ever. I'm feeling fine now.

*

June 10th

School's out, and I am really looking forward to taking Krissy and the kids on another outing. It's been too long since our winter camping trip, and the weather for tomorrow is predicted to be fair and uneventful. It's been quite a while since I was sailing, but I'm sure my days in the Queens College sailing team have left me skilled enough still to handle a small sloop. Everyone seems excited and happy about the whole idea, and I like that they all trust that I am up to this. I will turn them quickly enough into sailors. Motorboats! Yuck! Foul smelling, noisy monsters. Back to being one with nature. Can't wait.

*

Who needs to own a boat when you can always rent one? The weather on the Sound today is perfect for sailing. All day long a steady fifteen knot breeze from the southeast with only a slight chop. The sky is a clear pale blue.

When we get to the boatyard, Allen gets the cooler from the trunk and Merrie gets the towels and the beach bag. It's filled with sunscreen and various girl-stuff items to keep them beautifully groomed and smelling floral. Also, there were items for keeping us all free from sea sickness and infection from injury as well as a small first aid kit.

I point out to the kids the boat we will be renting and tell them to wait there for us while Krissy and I go to the office to take care of the paperwork. I watch for a moment as Merrie and Allen, bubbling with excitement, carry their assigned loads to our sweet sloop.

I watch as the motion of the mast reveals the gentle pulsing of the water. Already, I am feeling that primal pull of the sea. I can't wait to be out on the water, with only our wits and the wind driving us. A powerboat is certainly the more dependable for getting from here to there by water, but a sailboat is the only way actually to be alive to the water and the wind and the rhythms of the nautical world. It is food for the soul. I can't wait to share this with the people I love most.

With the formalities over in the office, Krissy and I rejoin the kids at the boat. It's a twenty-four-foot sloop with a well organized cockpit in the rear, a comfortable cabin amidship, a clear deck for sunning forward of the cabin, and a full set of sails, including a spinnaker. I invite everyone aboard and begin the

safety discussion. The issues are simple, but essential and must be understood before we push off from the dock.

Follow my orders promptly and without hesitation. Understand the what and the why of the kinds of commands I am likely to give. Understand how to execute them. Always wear a life jacket. Follow exactly the man-overboard procedures. Be calm and happy, but alert. Remember, we are in a partnership with nature. It is not a master-slave relationship.

I have not sailed in a while, but my training as a member of my college sailing team comes back quickly. It's like riding a bicycle, as they say. Once learned, never forgotten.

"Okay. Come on, Dad. Let's go. I promise we'll listen to you, Captain." Allen is eager to get underway.

"And don't you forget, once we leave the shore, I am lord and master of our ship. My word is law."

Just then, Krissy decides to poke me in the ribs and throws me a feigned haughty look.

"And, pay attention. Krissy is my first mate. She is in charge of any punishments for infractions, disobeying my orders, getting seasick and other high crimes and misdemeanors." Krissy puffs herself up and pretends to be twirling the ends of a long mustache. Then she leans towards me and whispers in my ear, "I don't know a thing about sailing." I assure her that I don't know anything either. With that, she gives me another poke in the ribs.

"Okay," I say. "Let's get going. What are we all waiting for? Allen, cast us off."

Allen jumps back onto the dock and unties the forward line. He tosses it to Krissy who is standing on the foredeck. I ask her to curl it neatly and place it near the bow of the boat. Next, I explain to Krissy and Merrie which is the main halyard and which is the main sheet, the difference between a halyard and a sheet, and what they do. Pointing to the main halyard I shout to them to haul up the mainsail. Once the mainsail is fully raised, I tell Krissy to tie the halyard to the cleat on the mast, making several loops like a figure eight. I tell her to neatly curl the remaining length of line near the bottom the mast, below the cleat. I warn Krissy and Merrie about standing on the free end of the main sheet. I say we want to let the sail flap freely in the breeze for now.

Then I point out the jib halyard, used to raise the jib, and the cleat to secure the halyard once the jib is fully raised. I have them raise the jib and then tie off the jib halyard to the jib cleat. The jib sheet is really two ropes, secured to the bottom rear of the jib. One rope will pull the jib to port side and the other will pull the jib to starboard side of the boat. I tell them that for now the jib as well will just flap in the breeze. Again I warn about keeping all the sheets clear. No standing on them. I take a careful look around, and everything seems shipshape.

"Okay, Allen, untie the aft line and toss it to Merrie." Merrie catches it and curls it neatly, copying Krissy's work with the forward line. "Okay. Good girl," I say.

Allen is holding the rear end of the boat against the dock.

"Allen, give us a little push away from the dock as you jump on board."

There is an inboard engine, which I hate using, but the harbor is crowded with boats, both anchored and under way. It's safest to motor out first to clear water. I put the key in and turn on the bilge fan. I will give it several minutes, during which time I'll explain that the fan will clear out any gasoline fumes that might have accumulated in the bilge so that we don't blow the boat up when we start the engine. Everyone agrees this is a good plan.

"Okie dokie, Captain. Permission to get comfortable?" Krissy asks. Merrie gives a little giggle.

"Permission granted."

With that, all three move to the forward deck, shedding their shirts and shorts on the way. Krissy lifts the forward hatch and tosses all the clothes into the cabin. It's the first real opportunity to enjoy a day in the sun and the ladies have come prepared. Krissy is wearing a white two-piece bathing suit with a blue floral pattern. Even though I have seen her nude so many times she still takes my breath away. I can just look at

her forever. I almost forget where I am and what I'm doing. I turn the engine over and let it idle for a few moments. I look at Merrie. When did she suddenly grow up? A freshman in high school, well, rising sophomore, and she has become a real beauty. I was very pleased when Krissy took her shopping for her bathing suit and it's a two-piece suit. Of course. A teenage girl would rather be dead than be caught in a one piece. Only now I can see that she is growing into a credible threat to the boys at school. I decide I will have to lock her up for the next four or five years.

"Merrie," I call out to her. "This is your captain speaking. When did you get so beautiful? Where did my little girl go?"

Merrie giggles and tries to hide behind Krissy, who shields her protectively.

"Don't worry, Dad," Allen says. "I've got her back. Everyone at school knows she has a big brother with a good right hook."

Krissy puts her arm around Merrie. "Okay, you guys. Stop teasing her. And why shouldn't she look as good as she wants to?"

"Absolutely," Allen says and lies down on a towel. "Let me know when you need me, Dad." Krissy and Merrie look at each other and stretch out as well. With a silent nod to the universe, I acknowledge that I am the luckiest guy on Earth. I push the throttle forward, and off we go. Working my way through the traffic is not difficult. It just requires some focused attention. In about fifteen minutes, we'll be in open water.

Well, maybe not so focused. I can't help watching the three most important people in the world to me lying peacefully on the front deck of this little sloop. Everything about the day is perfect.

Finally clear of the harbor, I ask, "Okay, time to get real. Who's ready to set sail?"

My crew of three simultaneously jump up and yell, "Me!"

"Alright." I see that the sails are flapping nicely in the breeze. The wind direction indicator at the top of the mast is pointing directly backwards. I kill the engine.

"Krissy, Merrie. You sit on the starboard edge here in the cockpit with me. Allen, when I say 'now,' you hold the end of the jib sheet out over the water about forty-five degrees to the boat on the starboard side. Keep the jib sheet clear."

I take a last look at all the lines and pick up the main sheet. "Okay, now."

Allen holds the jib away from the boat and it begins to catch the wind. Slowly the boat drifts to port and the mainsail begins to fill with air. The boom of the main sail slides to port as well, and I gradually let the sheet out until the sail takes on the airfoil shape I am looking for. I begin to hear the gurgling sound of the water as the headway gradually increases and the boat begins to list to the port side.

"Aye, captain," Allen says as I tell him to haul in the port jib sheet and to make sure the port jib sheet is clear and free. When the jib makes just the right channel for directing the wind over the mainsail, I tell him to tie the jib sheet off using the cleat on the port side. Merrie and Krissy are looking a little apprehensive as the boat begins to heel more and more as our speed picks up. They both look at me for reassurance.

"Not to worry. Hold on, but lean out a little more. It's your job to keep us from turning over." Their eyes instantly go wide open.

"Just kidding. The keel under the boat really keeps us from rolling over, but your leaning out helps, and it's fun. You don't have to worry unless you see me worry. And you won't see me worry. So enjoy how man has partnered with the wind." I give them both a broad smile. With that, they visibly relax.

The wind is steady, and the sea is nothing to worry about. The sails are set well and the girls are beginning to have fun hanging over the edge of the boat. It's time for some sailing lessons. Allen is now controlling the jib line from the cockpit and with everyone near me, I begin. I explain that a sailboat can run with the wind behind it for obvious reasons, but also with the wind before it by taking advantage of the airfoil shape of the main sail. We just can't sail directly into the wind.

I then practice changing direction from a port tack to a starboard tack and back, with the wind both

coming from behind us and coming towards us. My crew are all fast learners.

"Allen, you take the tiller. Merrie, you control the main sheet. Krissy, I will take Merrie's spot next to you. Your job is to kiss your captain."

"Aye aye, Captain." Merrie giggles and Allen looks pleased as he checks us out while he is monitoring the shape of the main sail. "Pull the main in a little tighter," he calls to Merrie, who quickly obliges. I decide we will head to Long Island. At our current speed and heading, we should be able to make it in about two hours. Maybe less. I tell everyone my plan.

"You guys all take turns at the tiller and the main and jib sheets while I relax and enjoy the ride. Allen, you make up the rotation schedule." As first mate this would be Krissy's job, but Allen is being so much the young man, I decide putting him in charge is just the thing to do. Krissy understands immediately and squeezes my hand in silent agreement.

I don't believe in the whole concept of god or soul or afterlife, so my recourse is to live in the moment and try my best to chew each instant of life thoroughly instead of in big, tasteless gulps. I am in one of my carefully chewing moments now in this little sloop, feeling the power of the wind on the sails and the boat. I love the sound of the water pushed to the side by the plunging hull, and the sight of the main sail rising above me filling my field of view with white. The familiar sound of a gull following, hoping for some scrap of food, makes me smile inside and out.

I watch my fourteen year old daughter suddenly blossoming into a young woman with her whole life ahead of her and my sixteen year old son, already a young man, reliable, sensible, strong and...Krissy. Every moment with her and every moment without her, the same. She is a gift that never stops giving, just as present in my mind as in my arms. While I happily foresee the fruitful years ahead for each of my children, I also cherish my remaining years growing old with my heart's desire, my Krissy.

What was that line in James Joyce's *Ulysses*? 'The sun shines for you today, he said.' Was there ever a more lovely turn of phrase? I watch my daughter studiously observing the shape of the main sail, drawing the main sheet cautiously in and out, testing the effect, the sun shining on her young body glowing with health and vigor. Every few minutes she looks my way for approval and I just smile at her growing confidence. Turning my head, I watch for a moment the sunlight dancing on the water, scattering sparkles of light.

Allen is a steady hand at the tiller. His body is strong and dependable. A rising senior now and before I know it, he will be off to college. I think this is as scary a prospect for parents as it is for children. But Allen has character and values I admire. He is a young man I would trust with my life. He is a natural leader.

I watch as he tests his ability to heel the boat, driving it to the edge of his comfort level. Krissy looks at me when she thinks he has the boat heeling over too far. I maintain a passive, confident expression and she gradually relaxes, even shouting encouragement excitedly as Allen shows he is in control. All goes well.

I feel myself slowly drifting off to sleep.

*

"Daddy. Daddy, we're here." Merrie is shaking me awake. We are indeed on the Long Island side of the Sound and running smack into a small regatta. I quickly take the helm and say, "Prepare to come about." Allen unties the jib sheet and Merrie and Krissy look to me. I give them instructions on where to sit.

"Hard a' lee," I shout and push the tiller over strongly while Allen switches jib sheets and begins to haul in the leeward sheet. We change course, running parallel to the regatta. They slowly pass us by, with their spinnakers set.

One sailor shouts to us, "Where are you from?"

"Benton," I shout back.

"You better head back. There's a storm on the way." He cups his hands around his mouth to increase the

range of his voice as he pulls further ahead of us. Everyone looks at me anxiously.

"Not to worry. We have a stout ship and a pirate crew. Storms are nothing to us."

Everyone seems a little less rattled.

"On the other hand, let's get the hell out of here and head for home. Allen, break out the spinnaker pole. I can show you quickly how to use it. The spinnaker sail is in a big bag up forward in the cabin, all the way in. With this wind and all sails set, we should make good time."

I get everybody busy so they have less time to worry. The sky is still clear, but far off to the west I can see dark clouds forming. I have no idea how much time we have before the storm hits us, so there's only one thing to do. Press on.

With the spinnaker set, we now have three sails up. The spinnaker is a huge sail meant to catch the wind when the wind is coming from behind. The main and the spinnaker extend broadly from the centerline of the boat, puffed out to starboard and capturing the wind. I have Allen haul the port jib sheet so that the jib extends on the opposite side of the boat from the main and spinnaker. I tell him how to use a whisker pole to keep the jib out on the opposite side from the main sail. The maneuver is called "wung out" because it looks like the wings of a bird, catching the wind on both sides of the boat. The sea has developed a chop and the rise and fall of the hull creates a cyclic puffing giving the distinct impression that the sails are alive and breathing. Allen lets out a wild, excited whoop as he feels the pulsing of the sails and watches the water swiftly streaming behind as the sloop powers forward.

Krissy snuggles next to Merrie, her arm securely around Merrie's shoulder. I yell to them that at this rate, we will be home in well under two hours. Krissy looks up in awe, sails everywhere, as our sloop slams through the water.

Just stay the course.

I suddenly realize we have not eaten lunch.

"Anybody hungry?" I ask. Everyone turns to me in amazement.

"You know, food?" Utter silence.

"Well, I'm hungry. Krissy, can you please get me a sandwich and a drink? I better stay on the tiller."

The wind is picking up and Krissy steadies herself. "You're kidding, right?" she says.

"No, seriously. The cooler is just inside the cabin. You guys feeling a little funny?"

"Not me, Dad," Allen says enthusiastically. "Krissy, if you don't mind, I could use a sandwich too, please."

"I guess me too," Merrie says.

Krissy gets up and with a slight smirk says "Okay, Captain. Cold rations for everyone."

*

The storm is coming faster than I figured. I think it will hit us before we can reach the safety of the harbor, perhaps another half hour away. I see Allen nervously eying the dark front of clouds filling the sky from the west.

"Dad, what do you think?" Allen asks.

I lean back against the wall of the cockpit. "About what?"

"Daddy! About the storm!" Merrie says, nervously

Krissy gives me a worried look. "Michael, should we take in the spinnaker?"

"Now stop worrying everyone. It's just wind and rain coming. You won't melt. Hell, it'll be fun."

I'm not really sure about the spinnaker. Maybe Krissy is right. "Allen, what do you think? Take in some sail? We want to get home as fast as possible, right?"

"I don't know, Dad. Whatever you say."

Whatever I say. Suddenly I don't know what to say. Merrie is looking at Krissy. Why is Merrie looking so scared? Krissy too, for that matter. We can haul in the spinnaker and reduce sail area on the main, but that will slow us down. Or will it, if the wind is stronger? Or maybe we should drop all sails and motor back the rest of the way.

"Dad, maybe we should take in all the sails and just sit and wait it out until the storm goes by."

Allen is speaking to me, but I don't understand what he is saying. Suddenly, the wind hits us and we haven't done anything yet to prepare. The tiller is fighting me.

"Dad, I'm going to take in the spinnaker."

I just look at Allen. Something about the spinnaker.

"Allen, yes," Krissy says. She gets up to help Allen. She looks at me. "Michael, are you okay?"

"Yes." But I'm not sure. What tack are we on? On a reach, before the wind, isn't it? Allen and Krissy are hauling in the spinnaker. Okay.

Allen comes over to me. "Dad, do you want me to take a turn at the tiller? It's getting pretty wild."

Do I? The boat is really more like a roller coaster. Up a crest and down into a trough, then up another crest and down again. Maybe we need the engine and the sails to keep control. I can't remember.

"No. I'm okay."

At the next crest we are suddenly slammed with a very strong gust and the main sail swings wildly. The mainsail boom zooms across the cockpit and I see it hit Merrie in the head, sending her over the side. Krissy, who had hunkered down in the cockpit to avoid the wind and spray, lets out a terrified scream.

"Allen, quick, untie the jib," I yell. "Let it flap." We need to spill wind. I unclamp the main sheet to spill its wind as well. We all turn to look for Merrie. Thank god she is wearing her life jacket. But what about the knock to the head?

"Dad?" Allen yells to me. With the sails flapping in the wind I don't have any steerage. I watch Merrie. Is she conscious?

Krissy lets out another scream and I turn just in time to see Allen dive overboard. When he surfaces I am pointing to Merrie so he knows which way to swim. He's a strong swimmer and reaches Merrie, but she does not look conscious. Allen keeps her head above water and slowly fights his way back to the boat. Krissy and I haul Merrie back on board and then help Allen back into the boat.

"Is she breathing?" I ask. "Put her on a bunk in the cabin," I yell to Krissy and Allen.

Krissy is over Merrie, looking closely at her. "Yes, she is breathing, but she's unconscious, Michael. What should we do?"

"Krissy, keep her warm. Allen, lower the sails and tie them down. I'm starting the engine."

Don't forget the bilge fan. Don't forget the bilge fan, I tell myself. Don't blow up the boat. I wait a few minutes until I am sure it is safe and I start the engine. Which way? I check the compass. North. Head north. Radio the Coast Guard.

*

Why am I in bed? In a hospital. Where is Merrie? Allen? Krissy? Why am I in a hospital? Wasn't it Merrie who got knocked out cold by the main sail boom? Or was it me? I can't remember. I look around. Krissy is sitting in a chair watching me. She still has the clothes she brought for our day of sailing.

"Hi, darling," she says to me. "I'm going to get the nurse. I'll be right back."

In a few minutes Krissy is back and a young woman is leaning over me.

"Mister Roth, I'm Doctor Takawa. Do you know where you are?"

I look around. "In a hospital. Krissy, where is Merrie? Is she okay?"

"She's in another room. With Sharon and Allen. I think she's okay. She just got a bad knock on the head and they want to do some testing. But listen to Doctor Takawa right now. She wants to check you out. Okay,

my darling? Please."

Check me out? What for?

Doctor Takawa? Is she really a doctor? Or are they just trying to make me feel safe? I want to see Merrie.

"Is Merrie really okay," I ask.

"Yes," Krissy says. What happened? Where is Allen?

"Allen will be here in a minute. I asked the nurse to get him." How did Krissy do that? Is she reading my mind? Can she do that? Is that a good thing? And what is the doctor saying? I can't understand what she wants. Was it Merrie or Allen who fell overboard? Or was it me, since I'm lying in a hospital bed? Why can't I remember?

"Krissy, where's Allen? Is he okay?" Did I ask that already? Then I remember what I forgot to ask. "Krissy, are you okay?"

"Well, you sure know how to show a girl a good time. Yes, I'm fine, darling. I just don't know who to worry about first."

I see Allen walk into the room. Doctor Takawa steps aside. She is watching me now.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hi. You're okay?"

"Yeah, for sure. Don't worry about me."

What does he mean by that? Is there someone I should be worrying about? Why is he staring at Krissy?

"Is Merrie okay?"

"She's fine. Really, Dad. She's fine."

I turn to Krissy. "Krissy, why am I in bed, in a hospital?" I see the doctor leave the room, like she knows something, but won't tell me. Or anyone. I don't like her.

"Krissy?" I ask again. "Why am I here?"

"Don't worry, Michael. You were naturally very upset about Merrie and acting strangely and the doctors, when we got to the hospital, wanted to check you out too."

"Strangely? What does that mean?"

"I don't know. You know how doctors can be. We made a pretty dramatic entrance to the hospital. Police escort. It was quite a show. And Merrie looked pretty scary. A lot worse than she actually was and I think it scared you. I know it scared me. Allen called Sharon and she came right away. She's with Merrie right now." Krissy's looking at Allen, but she's talking to me. Are they passing signals? What's she leaving out? I just look at Krissy. I don't know what else to ask, but I'm convinced that I'm not getting the whole story.

"I want to see Merrie." Allen and Krissy exchange looks. What are they hiding?

"Okay," Krissy says. "But not right this second. They're still doing tests. Maybe later you can go to her room. I'll ask Doctor Takawa."

"I don't like her," I insist.

"Miss Edwards, first let me say that Mister Roth has given his approval for me to discuss with you all medical information regarding his condition. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course, doctor."

"Okay. Sorry, but that's a formality I must deal with. You are Mister Roth's fiancée? Is that right?"

"Yes."

I hate when people talk about me as if I am not there. I can see Krissy is scared. That's why the short answers from her.

"Good. Now, you're sure Mister Roth wasn't struck in the head as well? Only Meredith?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"And he never lost consciousness? No unusual behavior?"

"No. He never lost consciousness, but he did get a little disoriented and confused by the time we got to shore. Under the circumstances, I can understand that. Doctor, I don't know how he even got us back in one piece. The wind was so scary. I thought we were all done for, you know. But he got us back."

What is she talking about? I'm not confused. I wasn't disoriented.

Doctor Takawa is silent, observing. What is she thinking about? Everything is fine. I was concerned. That's all.

"Doctor, what? What's happening? What's all the fuss?"

"Mister Roth, there is some concern about your health at the moment. When you arrived at the hospital you didn't seem to know why you are here. Do you know why you are here?"

"Yes, of course. Merrie fell overboard and when we got her back on the boat she seemed to be in distress. Krissy thought we should go to the emergency to check her out."

"Do you remember how she ended up in the water?"

"Not really. Not in detail. It was pretty windy and I was paying attention to the sails when I heard Miss Edwards yell. That's when I realized Merrie was overboard." Didn't I tell them this already?

"So you decided it was a good idea to go to the hospital. Do you remember what you did after your daughter was back on board?"

Hmmm. What did I do?

"I think I had Allen man the tiller and I tended to the sails. It was blowing pretty strongly. We had the spinnaker out and it can be tricky in a high wind."

"Do you remember coming in under sail or under power?"

What was it? What would I have done?

"It all happened so fast. Let me think. We had a strong wind behind us and we were making good speed. I came in under sail to take advantage of the wind. I think...I'm pretty sure that's it. We dropped sails in the harbor, of course, and motored to the dock."

Krissy is giving strange glances to the doctor and to me for that matter. Did I remember it wrong? Is this what I would have done or what I did.

"Krissy, am I getting this right?"

Krissy looks at Doctor Takawa. Why does she keep doing that?

"Not really, Michael. Don't you remember dropping sails and motoring in once Merrie was on the boat? Do you remember the boom knocking Merrie into the water?"

What? The boom! I look at Krissy and she turns to look at Doctor Takawa again.

"Mister Roth, I think there is probably nothing more serious, as Miss Edwards suggests, than normal confusion in the face of a dangerous, fast-moving situation. But, and you know there is always a 'but' with doctors, you are still showing some signs of confusion and forgetfulness. I think the safe thing to do is to keep you and your daughter here overnight so we can monitor you both. We want to get you both out of these beds and home as soon as is prudent, believe me. But prudent is the key word here."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense. Better to be safe than sorry. Krissy, are you okay with this?"

"I think you should listen to Doctor Takawa. Also, she called Doctor Glassman and he agrees that staying overnight is a good idea."

"What about Sharon? Does she agree about Merrie staying overnight?"

"I haven't spoken yet with Sharon. She's been with Merrie and I've been with you?"

Doctor Takawa puts her hand on Krissy's shoulder. It seems to calm her.

"Mister Roth. I have spoken with Meredith's mother and she agrees to have her spend one night here for observation. Not to worry in that regard."

Doctor Takawa now is giving me her undivided attention. What's that all about?

"Mister Roth, I would like to take maximum advantage of your stay here. I am asking Doctor Sand to examine you. He is the psychiatrist on duty. I think he will help decide if we need any further testing. I think we will need a neurologist as well. Just touching all bases. By the way, did you eat or drink anything unusual today, or are you on a particular diet? Vegetarian, for example."

I quickly review the menu of lunch foods and drinks that we brought.

"Nothing unusual or that I haven't had a hundred times before. And I am not a vegetarian."

I'm feeling no comfort from the list of specialists Doctor Takawa is calling in. I guess it's good that she knows when she needs help, but not so good that she thinks she needs help. Have I noticed anything strange before today? Not really. A little forgetful, but that's just me doing my middle-aged male thing. I have been a little clumsy lately and between dropping things and tripping, maybe I've been too casual about those things.

"Doctor Takawa, can you make sure Doctor Glassman gets copies of all the test results?"

"Rest easy, Miss Edwards. I will inform Doctor Glassman straight away and he will get both the written test reports and I will personally stay in touch with him on how things are going."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Sharon is walking into my room.

"Hello, Michael. How are you feeling?"

"Probably better than I look." Lying in a hospital bed with wires and tubes does not present me at my best. Also, the doctors think I'm crazy."

Krissy starts to object, to defend me of course, bless her heart.

"Well, it might have been a little bit crazy, anyway, to go sailing in a hurricane," Sharon says, but with a smile, so I don't take it as an accusation.

Again Krissy jumps to my defense. "The weather report was for wonderful weather, Sharon. We never would have gone out if the weather had been threatening. It just came out of nowhere."

"Actually, Krissy, I know Long Island Sound can do that. I'm not blaming anyone. I'm just trying to see if Michael is well enough to get a rise out of him. Lucky for him he has you here."

Sharon smiles benignly at Krissy. This is new.

"How is Merrie?" I ask.

"She seems a lot better. She's talking with Allen. Perfectly lucid, thank God."

Sharon turns to the doctor. I stop listening while Doctor Takawa fills her in. Hospitals must give the

same feelings to everyone who enters, a mixture of comfort, anxiety, and resignation.

Is there something going on that I should be concerned about? Okay! Let the doctors do their thing. It just could be anxiety over the change in job and even good change is stressful. I read that somewhere. Our engagement is stressful. Good, but stressful. I'll probably feel better in a few days. That's probably why Doctor Takawa is bringing in a psychiatrist first. Check out the easy explanations first. The neurologist is scarier. There's no tumor or at least not one that showed up on the x-rays. That's a good thing. But what else could be going on?

Sharon turns to Krissy as she is listening to the doctor. She suddenly gives Krissy a strong hug. Why? Is it something the doctor said?

"Don't worry Krissy," she says. "Michael is a very strong guy. I know he can overthink things sometimes, but when push comes to shove he will push back as hard as he gets. He'll be fine. The doctors will figure it out and they will deal with it and he will be fine."

She is hugging Krissy. I suddenly feel like I'm in an alternate universe. Sharon is being so unexpectedly kind to Krissy. Krissy! My Krissy! I suddenly imagine the thought of losing her, of my death. I realize that tears are welling up. My god, I love her.

"You be strong. Okay?" Sharon says to Krissy as she leaves the room.

I am stunned by how sweet Sharon is being.

Kissy turns suddenly to Doctor Takawa.

"Doctor, I want to stay in Michael's room tonight. I don't want to leave him alone."

Krissy is not asking. She seems pretty set on this. Doctor Takawa is putting on one of those it's-against-the-rules looks.

"Doctor Takawa, I won't get in the way and I will sleep in the chair, but there is no way I will be leaving him tonight. This is not negotiable. Please, just make it happen."

"As you wish," she says with a sigh.

"Are we done for now, Doctor?" Krissy asks, seating herself in a chair beside my bed.

"Yes, but please continue to watch Mister Roth carefully for signs of anything unusual about his behavior. He will see Doctor Sand shortly. I don't yet know who the neurologist on duty is, but he or she will see Mister Roth as well either tonight or first thing tomorrow morning. I will inform both doctors that you are to be allowed to stay during their examinations. I will see you both later."

I am starting to warm to this woman.

"Why are you staring at me? Stop worrying. I'm perfectly okay." But she can't help worrying. Yes, after the doctors had their fun testing me for everything under the sun, they released me when they found nothing wrong. But Krissy needs more convincing. Her faraway stare is beginning to get on my nerves.

"Krissy, you're not here with me. You're somewhere else. Is it somewhere nice where I would like to be also? With you?"

She shakes off her mood and gives me one of her charm-bomb smiles and I can't help but smile too.

"You do seem better," she says.

"I am better. Stop worrying. Life is good again."

Krissy makes me a Dewars with two cubes and a splash of water. Scotch is not usually Krissy's drink, but the last few days seem to have altered her taste in booze.

"Honey, I think it was what the psychiatrist said. Just a temporary reaction to all the recent stress. Merrie's accident just knocked me over the edge."

Krissy is beginning to bite her nails. I don't remember her doing that, ever.

"Krissy, we must stop having this be the center of our lives? I want to move on."

She picks up her scotch and takes a sip. I get up to put some music on.

"Michael, when is our appointment with Doctor Glassman tomorrow?"

She knows exactly when it is. Just checking me out. Clever wench.

"Doctor Glassman? Who's he?" I ask, but before she freaks out, I smile.

"Just kidding. Tomorrow at 9 AM sharp. With my sweet Kristina by my side doing all my worrying for me."

*

For once, we are called to see the doctor almost immediately after entering the office. Is that good or bad? I woke up with a blazing headache and I think that has sapped some of my bravado. Come on, Michael. Not everything has to have a meaning. We walk down the narrow hall to Doctor Glassman's office. The walls are covered with certificates. A few family pictures. On his desk is a bronzed golf ball on a wooden base with a brass plaque, but I can't read the words. A low bookcase against the outside wall of his office is filled with leather-bound volumes.

We wait. I look at Krissy and she smiles at me in a way that I know is meant to be reassuring. Is there some Buddhist trick I can do to stop looking like I need reassurance? From now on I am Suzy Sunshine. Not a care in the world. I give Krissy my best smile in return. She takes my hand and gives it a tender kiss.

Doctor Glassman enters his office carrying a thick file that I guess is all about me.

"Hi," he says shaking hands with Krissy and me on his way to his chair. We both mumble a cautious hello in response.

"Well, Michael, how are you feeling?" A good question, one doctors don't ask often enough. I hate the way patients are simply the accumulated results of all their tests and histories. He does glance at Krissy, though, right after asking me how I feel as if he expects her to verify what I say—to keep me honest.

"Great. I feel great."

I really do feel great. I have become once again my normally forgetful male instead of the what-the-heck-is-going-on forgetful male. I haven't dropped anything lately, at least that I know of. Krissy stares back impassively at Doctor Glassman. At least she isn't contradicting me.

"Good. So, the test results are also good in a way, and let me say, you had a determined bunch of doctors trying to figure out what happened. You got a clean bill of health. Nothing is standing out to explain what happily now seems a temporary cluster of symptoms. Michael, to be honest, if they had persisted, they would have become quite worrisome."

I admit I am relieved to hear this, but I can see that Krissy is suddenly looking concerned. I take her hand and squeeze it and smile broadly hoping to get a smile in return. I don't.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but what do you mean by 'good in a way?'" Krissy asks.

I missed that. I'm impressed that Krissy didn't.

Doctor Glassman settles back into his chair. Well, the accumulated incidences of disorientation, forgetfulness, dropping things, tripping, occasional moodiness, and paranoia, and let's not forget the auras, these all taken together paint a worrisome picture, especially at your age. They would be easier to diagnose and understand in an older person. But the tests are clear of any obvious culprit. No tumors or other abnormalities. Your reflexes are normal. Your blood tests were all within the normal band for each indicator. Except for the auras, everything can be explained by the recent elevation of stress in your life."

Doctor Glassman pauses to give us time to digest everything he said. However, I can see that he wants to continue.

"The best news of all is that your symptoms have largely disappeared. So unless they return, I will invoke "the simplest solution" principle we doctors sometimes rely on. The simplest solution to your problem is we don't know why you were having your cluster of symptoms, but as long as they are gone, case closed, happy ending."

I have to stifle my satisfaction with what Doctor Glassman is telling us because I can see that Krissy is not done. Something is still bothering her. Doctor Glassman notices Krissy's concern. "What?" he asks her.

"Doctor Glassman, indulge me a bit, please. I would be thrilled with what you just told us except for the auras. I know they can be a symptom of something more serious, a tumor, of course, or epilepsy. Perhaps other things as well. Let's assume for argument's sake that the symptoms return. What, specifically, would we be looking at? What condition?"

Oh my god. Why is she going down this path?

"Krissy, can't this question wait if or until we really need to ask it? You know, if my symptoms return."

"I just think we ought to know, so we keep a responsible watch on things. That we stay motivated to be alert."

Thankfully, Doctor Glassman interrupts us.

"Miss Edwards, I think I agree with Michael here. Why don't we hold off discussing issues that might just bring unnecessary stress into Michael's life right now. Let's all enjoy the good news."

The office falls silent. Normally silence makes me fidgety, but now it is bringing me peace.

Doctor Glassman gets up from his chair. Instantly, we are alert to see why.

"Michael, Miss Edwards—may I call you Kristina?—would you like a few minutes of privacy? Just poke your head out the door and someone will get me."

Before I can say anything, Krissy agrees and thanks Doctor Glassman.

I wait for the doctor to leave. Then I say, "Krissy, I'm not just being a wuss about this. I'm not just being unwilling to talk about death or whatever you have on your mind. I don't want to go into this. I believe if we talk about this, it will happen. We will jinx ourselves."

"I don't believe in jinxes."

"I do. In my heart, no good will come from this conversation you want to have with Doctor Glassman."

Krissy seems stuck now. I wait and let her think. When she's ready, I guess she will say to me what she has to say.

"Michael, I have another reason for asking these questions. You have to hear me out with an open mind. Before I say anything, I know that you love me and want to marry me and spend the rest of our lives together. Everything is the same for me as well. But here's the thing. We are engaged. Not married yet. Suppose something bad is coming. How can I help you if we aren't married? I will always be at the mercy of your approval. Suppose you aren't capable of giving approval. I don't know why, but it could happen. If something awful is a possibility, even a small possibility, maybe we need to get married sooner than we planned. Just in case."

Hmm. That puts a whole new light on things. I realize Krissy's position, what she's possibly getting herself into by marrying me.

"Krissy, my love. Of course we need to think this out more carefully than I have been. Now that you raised the question of worst case scenarios, you need to think about what you might be signing up for. Love and hearing chiming bells and the sweet smell of roses is all great unless what you are also signing up for is taking care of an invalid or a crazy man or who knows what for the rest of my life. That's not what I want for you. You do need to see what might be in store for you before you decide about marrying me. Stop! Don't look at me like that. You think love is all you need. No, not really. You need a reasonable prospect for a long and happy life. You. Both of us. You're right. We need to consider all the possibilities."

Krissy is suddenly overwhelmed. She begins to cry and I feel like a rotten shit for causing her pain. I pull her to me and try to comfort her with hugs

"Why do you doubt me?" she manages to ask between sobs.

"Never do I ever doubt you. I trust you with my life." I suddenly realize the irony of that statement. I kiss her head, her cheek, her face, her tears and she starts to regain control of herself.

"Thank you, Krissy, for waking me up. Now trust me. If you are going to be my wife you have to trust me."

I open the door and stick my head out. I see the doctor at the end of the hall talking with a nurse. He sees me and his eyebrows go up in a questioning gesture.

"We're ready, Doctor Glassman."

*

I sit quietly, my hands folded in my lap, fingers nervously intertwined, waiting to see where this will take us..

"So, Doctor Glassman, what we would like to know is what conditions would a return of my symptoms suggest? Worst-case scenarios."

Doctor Glassman sighs and studies us both. His gaze lingers on me.

"The problem, Michael, is that the worst-case conditions are not easily diagnosed. For many of these illnesses, the diagnosis is based on behavior and exhibited symptoms. Most cannot be detected by blood tests or x-rays. A definitive diagnosis may have to wait until the disease has progressed to an already dangerous, but observable stage."

"When you say dangerous, what do you mean?"

"Life threatening."

Oh my god. I must not react. This is important and I must be strong.

"What diseases are we talking about, for example?" I ask.

"Well, let's see. Multiple sclerosis, early onset-dementia or Alzheimer's disease, ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease, even vitamin B12 deficiency."

Krissy gets up and stands behind my chair. She rests her hands on my shoulders. Her touch is like an elixir, like a bond with life. It sends me confidence and love. Just from her touch.

"Is it possible I have any of these diseases already and that I'm in remission?"

Doctor Glassman looks at me with strong eye contact. "Do we keep going?" he asks. I give a slight nod, yes. We're into it now and there is no turning back.

"Yes, it's possible. Multiple sclerosis has similar early symptoms to those you exhibited and can come episodically. There may be substantial periods between episodes. However, the disease itself progresses more aggressively following each episode. The other diseases I mentioned would require the onset of more or less continuous symptoms to narrow the diagnosis. As for the vitamin B 12 deficiency, your blood test shows a normal amount present."

"So, if I have this straight, I could have MS now and not know it, but likely do not have any of the other diseases unless the symptoms return and progress in a recognizable pattern. Is that about it?"

"That's exactly it, Michael."

"What about the auras?" Krissy asks.

"The auras are a complete mystery. They can be a sign of anything and nothing."

I get up and stand beside Krissy. I put my arm around her waist. Looking at the doctor, I say, "Okay, that's what I needed to know. Thank you for not pulling any punches."

"Michael, this all theoretical, worst-case stuff. We are a long way from going down any of these paths, I assure you."

*

July 1st

Why am I still doing these dumb journal entries? I will never look at them again. Force of habit now. Must get a grip on my life or at least my attitude towards crises. Must think! Now I'm getting these damn headaches. A quick shot of bandy seems to help. I won't waste my good scotch, but the brandy seems to help. What the hell's going on? Now I remember, my father used to take a shot of rye whiskey when he got a headache. Maybe that's why I thought of the brandy. I don't have any whiskey, just good scotch and a bottle of cheap brandy.

*

It's a good thing Krissy stopped me this morning. I would have gone to work. "Michael, where are you going?" she asked. I completely lost track of the days. I thought it was Thursday and it's Saturday, of course. Boy, that hasn't happened in a long time. I was all set to get showered, shaved, and on my way. Naturally, Krissy gave me one of her looks. Okay, I said. It happens. Relax.

It felt good to go back to bed, but we were both wide awake even though it was six-thirty. So, not to waste a good crisis, we made love. Will that ever get old? I don't imagine how brain dead I would have to be for that to happen. The question, however, does remind me of something Herb said a long time ago. We spilled a lot of random wisdom during our rides to and from work. I do miss those rides now with my new job. Different direction. Anyway, waiting at a light we encountered a beautiful young woman walking past us along the street. Stunning, actually. We all simply stared in amazement at the gifts nature had given her. It was another one of those moments designed for silent appreciation when Herb said, "Just remember, guys. Somewhere there's a man already tired of fucking her." I thought at the time that probably he was right. I don't believe it now. Yet another sign I tell myself of how in love I am with my Krissy.

My mix up of what day it is and Krissy's apprehensive looks prompt me to bring up her suggestion that we move our marriage date forward. I figure discussing this over breakfast is a civilized program.

"Well, girl, you missed being a June bride. How about being a July bride? It doesn't give us a lot of time, but I think we can do it."

Krissy comes over to my chair and hugs me energetically.

"Oh, darling, I thought you forgot and I didn't want to stress you out. Is it really okay with you to move it up?"

"Sweetheart, I'd do it today if we could accept no friends or relatives being there. But, I don't want to do this like a thief in the night either. How about the last Saturday of the month? What is that, the twenty-sixth?"

Krissy is bouncing up and down. "Oh my god. Oh my god. Don't worry about a thing. I'll take care of everything. All you have to do is show up and ... well, that's not exactly true. We need to sit down and make a guest list and, and ... and that's it. That's all you need to help me with. I will do everything else. You won't have to worry about anything. Oh. Do you have a tuxedo? No? Okay, I will take care of that as well. And just one more thing. Religious or civil. No, no. Civil, of course. We just have to get the license and the blood tests and I will schedule the ceremony. Oh. It will have to be on the last Friday, the twenty-fifth, if we do civil. My family will object, of course, to no big church wedding, but they will see how happy I am and get over it quickly. I'll figure out where they will all stay. Don't worry about a thing. Did I say that already?"

Krissy stops to catch her breath. She looks at me and sees a look of admiring amazement on my face.

"You're okay with a Friday civil ceremony?" she asks.

"Whatever you say, boss. Whatever you say!"

Krissy pulls me from my chair, jumps into my arms, wraps her legs around me and kisses my face all over. I wonder, can we do this marriage thing every month? I love it.

"I've got a great idea for relieving even more stress. You want me to stay healthy, right?"

Krissy is a smart girl and knows exactly where I am going with this. We are mostly through with breakfast anyway.

*

I forget. Did we decide I would call the kids to let them know our plans or was it Krissy? No, it had to be me. Of course. My kids.

When I call, Merrie answers. "Hi, gorgeous," I say. "Can you talk? Is this a good time?"

"Hi, Daddy. Yeah, it's good. Is everything okay?" All my women worry about me. How lucky can a guy get!

"Everything is wonderful. Is Allen home?"

"Yes, do you want to talk with him?"

"No, with both of you. He can get on the extension. I have some good news to share."

I hear Merrie calling for Allen and telling him to pick up the phone.

"Hi, Dad," Allen says. "How are you feeling?"

"Good, good. Wonderful. That's why I'm calling. Krissy and I decided not to waste time. We're moving our wedding up a few months. We set a July twenty-fifth date. It's a Friday. It's a little short notice, but there it is. You're both invited."

Merrie is the first to react. "Oh, Daddy. That's so great. I love Krissy. It's going to be so fun." She pauses for just a second. "Can Krissy take me shopping for a dress?"

"Why don't you call her and ask her?"

Allen jumps in here. "Dad, that's so—I don't know—great. You two are so good together. So good to each other. Honestly, you're my hero."

"Thank you, son. That means a lot to me. Speaking of heroes, the way you saved Merrie when she fell out of the boat, well, you were a real hero!"

I pause and clear my throat. "One more thing. Allen, would you be my best man?"

"Dad," Allen instantly responds, "what about your friends? Shouldn't one of those guys be your best man?"

"Allen, in any group in which we find ourselves, to me you will always be the best man there. I'm so proud of you. Please say yes."

"Dad, if that's what you want, of course. I'm honored to be your best man. Really, Thanks, Dad."

"Merrie. I would ask you to be the maid of honor, but that's Krissy's choice and I think she has someone already in mind. You don't mind do you?"

"Of course not. Krissy has to choose her own maid of honor. It's not a problem for me at all. Don't worry about it. Seriously."

"Okay then. I'll pick you guys up next Tuesday. Love you both."

*

July 10th

I'm still a young man, but this whole medical drama has left me once again thinking about my mortality sooner than I ever expected. I'm not a religious man, so I can't count on any comfort from that direction. I sometimes think there is something wrong with me. Why do I reject god and religion so confidently? How did this happen? I don't even question my assessment of the human condition. When you're dead, you're dead and that's it. I don't like it, but it's just the way it is. I understand. I get it. I don't need any more explanations of what can't be explained. I came to terms with this in my youth when doctors thought I had leukemia and it turned out to be mono. But I dealt with the possibility of death then. Since then my lifelong goal has been to live my life with no regrets.

About god, there is no definitive proof one way or the other. It's just a question of what makes sense to me. Being an atheist is not better, it's not worse. It just seems to follow the principle of science called Occam's Razor, the simplest solution, the one with the fewest assumptions that explain the data, is probably correct. For me, atheism is far simpler than theism. Not better, just simpler and therefore probably closer to the truth. For me, God is not an explanation. God is the acknowledgment that as yet there is no explanation. We call that lack of explanation 'God.'

All my young life I tried to be a good little Jewish boy. As I got older I realized more and more that I was just going through the motions. There was no conviction behind all my effort. I remember the exact moment when I became an atheist, when I said I can't do this any more. For me, that was the only comfort religion ever brought me, the day I gave up trying.

"Michael. Michael! Where are you?"

I hear Krissy, but for some reason her words are not arousing me to action. I'm just looking at her. I do that often because it is such a pleasure. But something seems wrong here. She seems agitated.

"Michael!"

I shake my head to re-center myself. "I'm sorry, darling, were you talking to me? I guess I spaced out."

"Where were you? Should I be jealous?"

"Krissy, any place I go where you might be jealous, well, you would be with me, so there would be no need to be jealous."

Krissy is giving me one of her sly little smiles. "Okay, you smooth talker, you."

"Not to change the subject away from me, darling that was the best chicken. So moist. And I love the marinade."

I refill Krissy's wine glass. I still have some.

Krissy, now, is starting to get that faraway look.

"Okay, okay, what were you saying to me while I was on Jupiter?"

"I was just asking you about wedding bands. Do you want to wear a wedding ring?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I wear a wedding ring? Silly girl. What are you thinking?"

"Nothing. I'm just checking off my mental to-do list. Shall we go together and pick them out?"

"That's not a bad luck thing," I ask, "is it?"

"Nooo...just seeing your bride in her gown before the wedding. Rings are okay."

"Well, then let's do it together. Sounds like fun. I love doing things together. You know that. More mashed potatoes?"

"Michael?"

"Yes."

"Where were you when you spaced out just before? And don't say Jupiter."

I was hoping she wouldn't go there, but it is what it is, I guess.

"I don't remember. Honestly!"

Krissy fiddles with her vegetables a bit. So far, so good. I've done that for years. It doesn't mean a thing.

"I wish you would try to remember," Krissy says.

"It's gone, honey. Wherever it was, it's not important I guess. I just don't remember."

"Okay," Krissy says brightly, changing her mood. "I saw Terri yesterday. She was so sweet. She's so happy for us. She loves you, you know."

"And I love her, too."

"No, I mean she really loves you. I thought I would be jealous, but strangely I'm not. I'm proud that such an intelligent, beautiful and goodhearted person like Terri also loves you. You're so precious to me, Michael."

"Hmm, why am I sensing possible land mines ahead?"

Krissy gets up from her chair and comes over to me and starts rubbing my head vigorously with her knuckles, laughing.

"Because I *am* the jealous type and Terri is just lucky I don't have to kill her."

"Well, that's a relief. What did you two talk about?"

"You, of course!"

I begin to squirm, ostentatiously.

"She told me all your bad habits. She's known you a long time so she had plenty of ammo. I wonder what some of your guy friends can offer in the way of a Michael 'quirks and secrets' inventory. Should I call some of them? There's still time for me to back out."

"Oh, no. We have a verbal contract. This is America, capitalism, the sanctity of contracts and all that. My lawyers will hound you forever. You *must* go through with this. It's the American way. Aren't you a patriot?"

"Oh, well. If it's a question of patriotism, then I'm your girl. You can count on me, kind sir. A contract is a contract." Sealed with a kiss.

*

I'm at Sharon's house at seven sharp and the kids are waiting for me in the driveway. It's such a pleasure to have those constant battles over with. Sharon's boyfriend, Matt, comes out as I pull in. He walks the kids to the car. I get out of my car. Things have become surprisingly civilized all around. Matt seems like a nice guy. A little low key, pliable in fact. Just the type Sharon needs and if it works for him, good for both of them.

"Hi, Michael. Sharon's on the phone with her mother. How are things going? I guess you're pretty excited."

"Hi, Matt. Good to see you. I think excited is too small a word. Sharon seems pretty happy these days, too. So you must be doing something right. Keep up the good work."

We shake hands warmly and Matt opens the car door for Merrie, who always takes the front seat. Allen helps himself to the back seat. I check that the kids are buckled up. I don't go anywhere unless the seat belts are attached.

It's a beautiful summer evening. I put the top down. Too nice to be inside. I think we'll do miniature golf tonight since the kids already had dinner.

*

I'm lying on the putting green. I can feel the rough, artificial turf on my face. Have I tripped again? I see my putter lying on the turf next to me. I can see the light coming from the other side of the tunnel through the bottom of the castle.

"Daddy. Daddy! What's wrong?"

Merrie leans over me, holding my hand. I don't know what's wrong. People are starting to gather around us. I look at Merrie's face. She is frightened and it's my fault. Come on, Michael, get up. But I can't.

Someone tries to push Merrie aside. I don't like that. I try calling for Allen, but nothing comes out. Stop pushing her! Allen, where are you?

"Someone call an ambulance," I hear a voice call out.

Merrie covers my chest with her body and yells at the people pressing in on her. "No, he's okay. He's just resting. He's okay." I see her looking around in all directions. Then I hear her scream, "Allen!" I see Allen pushing through the people. He kneels next to me.

"Dad, I called Mom. She and Matt are coming right now. Matt said to call an ambulance. I called the police and they're sending an ambulance. Dad, what happened?"

I look at Allen and then at Merrie who is crying and holding on to Allen. I try to reassure them both, but I can't seem to form any words. A man in the crowd tries to lift Merrie up, but she twists free and Allen says to the person, "Please, she's okay. I'm her brother and it's better if she stays with me. I called for my mom and an ambulance is on the way." The man steps back. Someone else is placing what I guess is a rolled-up jacket under my head. I hear the word "stroke" from one of the onlookers. I couldn't understand the rest of the sentence, but stroke suddenly makes sense. Could be.

"Dad, can you move anything?" Allen asks me. I look at him, not sure what he is asking me to do.

"Dad, try. Can you move your head?" Nothing. I seem to have lost the connection between wanting to do something and being able to do it.

"Try to wiggle your fingers." Nothing, again. I'm staring at Allen, trying to figure out how to reassure him. What? About what? I forget.

I hear a siren. I close my eyes.

Merrie begins to cry again. "Oh my god. Oh my god."

I hear Allen say, "Merrie, help me roll Dad over a little bit. I want to get his car keys and wallet from his pockets. I don't want them getting lost." I close my eyes and let them do what they want to do.

How much time as gone by? I don't know. For some reason, I feel very calm. I accept that for the moment I can't do anything to help myself, so I just let the process unfold. My sense of touch is almost nil. My eyes are closed and now I am slowly tuning out the sounds around me. Perhaps sleep is a good idea. When I wake up this may all turn out to be a bad dream. Or like so many other things in my life, it may just run its course and move on.

What sounds like Matt's voice gets the better of me and I open my eyes. I am in an ambulance. I look at Matt leaning over me and wonder how he got here and how long have I been asleep? I move my lips, but no sound comes out. Matt looks closely at my eyes. I can move my eyes and see that there is another person with us. I don't know who he is.

"Merrie is following with Sharon in our car," Matt says to me, "and Allen is taking your car and will meet us at the hospital. We're still trying to find Krissy. Michael, do you understand?" I think so. Something about travel arrangements. And Krissy.

I close my eyes again, but this time there is a terrific pain in my head just above my eyes and I guess Matt reads my expression. He looks at the other person in the ambulance. Mister X. He is on a walkie-talkie or something and seems to be getting instructions. I see I have an IV in my arm and the man is now adding something to the flow. The pain is getting worse. Feels like my head will explode. I cannot keep my eyes open, but it's from the pain. The calm has vanished in a flood of focused agony.

Awake again. Now I'm in a bed. I don't feel any pain. Actually, I'm back again to where I don't feel anything. I can't move anything. But no respirator, so I guess I'm breathing on my own. Everything else seems to be doing a very good approximation of dead. I am more or less shut down. What the fuck happened to me?

I think, therefore I am. Thank you, Pascal. No. Not Pascal. Who said that? Never mind. Some Frenchman. Think. Stay calm. Descartes! It's Descartes. Okay, my brain is still functioning at least at some elevated level. I think, therefore I am not dead.

The room is dimly lit, probably to minimize any headache-related pain. Thinking. That's a good sign, right? Keep that baby working. Paralysis means stroke. I think that's pretty clear. From the extent

of paralysis, probably a severe stroke. I probably look like shit and scaring the hell out of everyone. Nothing I can do about that. Nothing I can do about anything, actually. I have gone from being a verb to a noun. A lump of clay.

I scan the room as best I can by moving just my eyes. They and my eyelids seem to be the only parts of me that respond to my will. It's not really a room, but rather an area enclosed by curtains. The curtains are open in the front but closed on either side. There is a lot of activity, movement across my field of view, back and forth by nurses and doctors I presume. Soft, but persistent and annoying moaning is coming from one of the other patient spaces to my left. This must be Intensive Care. Where is Krissy?

Think. And what do I think? Life as I knew it is never going to be the same. I don't know for sure, but I don't believe a person fully recovers with this degree of paralysis. Shit. Fuck. Okay, say it. Why me? There, that's out of the way. The answer? Just because.

Karma? Something I did in a previous life? How many times have I joked about karma and about how I would do things better in my next life? I wasn't thinking about my past life. I wish I could take all that Buddhist stuff seriously. It might provide some comfort now. But only as a joke did it ever provide me any comfort.

I don't really look for reasons. Life is random. There's comfort in that as well.

Why me? Just because.

Tragedy is relative. No matter how bad I have it, I know there is someone somewhere who has it worse. I am trying to be philosophical while my body has become my enemy.

I close my eyes. I know there are people near my bed doing medical stuff to me, but I can't seem to focus. Or maybe even care. Just do whatever you have to do and get on with it. In a way, I have never been more comfortable. Nothing feels bad or bothers me now. I wonder what's in that drip. I like it.

I can hear them all bustling about and that's okay. I'm glad they are trying so hard, but I'm pretty sure the prognosis is not good. I think I'll sleep. The worst that can happen is I won't wake up. At least it's a peaceful way to go.

Krissy. My Krissy. I hear her voice. I open my eyes. Can she see how much I love her and how happy I am to see her? What am I thinking? I can see she is terrified. She must have been given some pretty bad news about my condition. She sees I am awake and puts on a brave smile.

"My darling, I'm here. I'm here my sweet boy, my love. I love you. I pray for you. Everyone is praying for you. Can you feel it? Can you feel the energy from all the people who love you, Michael?"

I try to smile, but I don't think I pull it off. Only my eyes are greeting her. She takes my hand and kisses it over and over. I don't feel the kisses or her tears on my hand. But I remember. I remember what they feel like and that's something, anyway.

I look at my hand and then at Krissy's face. That's all I can manage. Krissy gets up. Is she leaving? I think she sees in my eyes that I am thinking this.

"I'm just going to speak with the doctor. Allen and Merrie are here and want to see you. We need the doctor to approve. We can't stay too long. I'll be right back. I promise."

I move my eyes from her to the front of my curtained area and then back to her. Krissy smiles and leaves. I close my eyes.

I hear Merrie's voice. "Hi, Daddy. Daddy, Daddy, I love you. Please, please get better. Please." She puts her head on my chest and hugs me, sobbing. There are tubes and wires everywhere and Allen, who came into my area with Krissy, gently pulls Merrie away. She falls into Krissy's arms. Krissy leaves with Merrie. My poor daughter. My little girl. I hate that I'm putting her through this. I

can feel my eyes begin to water thinking about her pain and the life I just gave her that she never expected to have, a life without her dad.

"Hi, Dad," Allen says. "The doctor told us you probably can hear what we say. Just can't show it. Dad, everyone is here. Uncle Leon. Work. Friends. Everyone. They all came as soon as the word got out. Even people from your new job. Everyone is sending you strong healing energy. Even I can feel it. Me too. I'm sending it to you. I love you, Dad. Please, please try hard to get better."

Matt comes into my area. He looks at me for several seconds then he taps Allen on the shoulder. "Allen, the doctor says we need to let your Dad rest now." Allen leans over me and kisses me. "Dad, I'll be back as soon as they let me." He leaves with Matt.

I close my eyes.

When I open them again, Krissy is back sitting next to my bed. Nurses are hovering over me doing their nursing thing. I think I remember being wheeled out of my secure little world to some other part of the hospital for more testing, but I'm not sure because I'm back in my area in the ICU. I'm not sure of anything. How can so much of my body be AWOL without my brain, my mental capacities also being affected? I feel like I'm thinking with undiminished capacity, at least so far. But I still can't escape the reality of being trapped in my body, a ghost in a box. I begin to sense the start of a panic attack. Powerless, no way to communicate, my future undoubtedly grim. I need an anti-depressant and there is no way to let them know. I will just have to ride it out. I want to sleep.

*

The door to my room opens and Krissy walks in. How long have I been in this room? At least I'm out of ICU. Krissy sees that I'm awake and leans over and kisses me.

"Michael, the doctor made a suggestion and we want to try it out with you. He says that in stroke cases like yours where you can't speak, it doesn't mean you're not aware. He says we just have to find some way that you can signal us besides speech. He says you still have control of your eyes and your eyelids. Let me get Doctor Glassman and he can explain it. But it's really simple."

Yes! Bring it on! If there's a window, if not a door, to this mess of a body I'm stuck in, I am going through it. Krissy is back and speaking again. Pay attention, Michael.

"Allen and Merrie are outside your room and they want to be here too with the doctor." Krissy goes out and returns with Allen and Merrie. She has her arm hooked around Allen's and Merrie is holding on to the waistband of Krissy's skirt, being led in by her this way, her eyes downcast and wary it seems to me. Krissy quickly leaves, I guess, to get the doctor.

"Hi, Dad. You still look pretty much like a nuclear power plant with all that stuff plugged into you." He smiles. He's excited about this. I don't think he would have made a negative comment unless he also thought something good was coming to replace it. Merrie is silent and is holding on to Allen's arm now. She looks terrified.

Krissy comes back in with Doctor Glassman.

Doctor Glassman studies me for a few moments making strong eye contact. He walks to my bed and sits on the edge, still looking at my eyes.

"Michael, I want to repeat a very simple test with you. Our first priority up to this time was stabilizing you medically. Now I want to see if we can open a communication channel to you and get a read on how your brain is doing. We can only get so much from instruments."

He's taking his pen from his shirt pocket. "Michael, I want you to follow my pen with your eyes."

He moves his pen to my right. I am easily able to follow it. I hear Krissy give a little gasp. Doctor Glassman moves to cover the other directions, left, up, down.

“Okay, Michael. Excellent. Now let’s check the eyelid control. Blink your eyes once. Good. Now twice. Excellent. Still good. So, we have some dependable motor control that at least is not getting worse and you are able to follow simple directions. That’s a very good sign that your brain is functioning conceptually.”

Krissy walks to my bed and holds my hand. Merrie has let go of Allen and has both her hands pressed to her heart. I see Allen is just focused on Doctor Glassman.

“So, here’s the deal. It’s going to be one blink for ‘yes’ and two blinks for ‘no’. Do you understand?”

I give one blink.

—Yes

Krissy lets out a gasp and collapses on my chest, sobbing.

“Dad, it works! It’s just like in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. There’s this grandfather who has a stroke or something like a stroke and he can’t move anything. Anything except his eyelids that is. His granddaughter learns to communicate with him by asking the right questions and he blinks yes or no. It’s one for yes and two for no, exactly like Doctor Glassman says. The granddaughter got really good at what to ask and how to zero in on what her grandfather wanted to say. We can do that.”

Of course, I remembered that from the book. It was one of my favorite books when I was a teenager.

Doctor Glassman stands up. “Michael, I think your family wants to talk with you. I’ve got some other patients to visit now, but I will be back to see you this evening. Okay?”

—Yes

“Excellent.”

He turns to Krissy. “Don’t try to do too much today, Kristina. But this is all good.” Krissy walks with him to the door and gives him a big hug as he leaves.

“Can we give it a try, Dad?” Allen asks.

—Yes

“Allen! Allen, did you see?” Krissy gives Allen a big hug. Then she turns to me, “My darling, it’s a miracle!” Krissy takes a deep breath to calm herself. “Are you okay with this? It’s not too tiring?”

Allen jumps in here. “Krissy, it’s got to be only one question at a time.”

“Okay, okay, I promise.”

“Should we go on, Michael?”

—Yes

“You’re not too tired.”

—No

“Oh my god. Allen, Merrie. Ask your dad something.”

Merrie cautiously comes to my bedside. “Daddy, I was so scared it wouldn’t work. I love you so much.” I see Allen put a hand on her shoulder. She looks at him.

“Ask a question, Merrie,” Allen says.

I can see Merrie is stumped for a second. “Do you know how much I love you?”

—Yes

Krissy puts her arm around Merrie and then looks at Allen. He seems to be thinking about what to ask.

“You want me to behave myself with Cyndi.”

For a moment I forgot who Cyndi was. Then I remember his dangerously attractive girlfriend.

—Yes

Pause.

—Yes

Everyone laughs. I couldn't show it, but they knew I am laughing, too.

Then Krissy turns to me again looking serious. "Do you want to know what the doctor told me about your condition?"

—Yes

"Do you want me to tell you now?"

—Yes

Allen asks, "Do you want us to leave?"

I look at Allen for a moment and then decide.

—No

Krissy takes a deep breath. "Okay. You don't want me to pull any punches, do you?"

—No

"You know I love you. I would lie to you if I thought that was the best thing for you, but I know you want the truth. It's not good, my darling. Doctor Glassman says you are lucky to be alive and I am so lucky you are alive, my sweet man. So it was and is very serious. He says the loss of speech is common with this severity of stroke, but the cognitive skills are a different story. Neurologically your brain is functioning properly. In other words, your thinking ability is intact and I think he just verified this from when I spoke with him earlier today." Krissy stops. "Am I going too fast?"

—No

"Do you agree with Doctor Glassman? Do you feel you're thinking normally?"

—Yes

"Do you notice any impairment?"

I think for a moment.

—Yes

A quick look of disappointment clouds Krissy's, exuberance. "Is it your memory?"

—No

"Is it your reasoning?"

—No

"Does it have to do with your speech or lack of it?" Allen asks.

—Yes

"Hmm. Allen, help me out here."

"Is it finding the right words, at least in your mind?" Allen asks.

—Yes

Krissy takes over the questioning again. "Okay, we'll try to help. We have to be smart about what we ask you. Do you want to hear more about what Doctor Glassman had to say?"

—Yes

Allen steps next to Krissy. "Should Allen and Merrie leave us alone?"

—No

"Allen, Merrie, do you want to stay?"

I see Allen nod, yes. Merrie buries her face in his shoulder and does not leave.

"Okay. You want the prognosis, right? Where this is all going?"

—Yes

"He just doesn't know. The best case is you get some mobility back, but not a lot. The worst-case..." Krissy is being a real soldier here, but I can see it's not easy. "The worst case, my darling, is another stroke that kills you." Her eyes are watering despite her strength. Allen puts his hand on her shoulder. My god. When did my son grow up to be a man? I'm so proud of him.

Krissy is not finished. "That's not all, Michael. Doctor Glassman says if you have another stroke you could have it at any time. It could come tomorrow, next year, or never."

We are all silent. I am not blinking.

Krissy lays her head on my chest, crying softly. "May I lie down with you, just for a little while?"

—Yes

Allen says, "Krissy, we'll wait for you outside, in the hall. Dad, I'll see you tomorrow. I love you."

Merrie comes to me, picks up my hand, and kisses it. She turns and walks out taking Allen's outstretched hand.

Krissy carefully pushes the wires and tubes aside and lies down next to me. She asks me if I am okay.

—Yes

"Can you feel me?"

—No

For a moment she tears up again but shakes it off.

"How's your memory then, sailor? Good?"

—Yes

"Very good?"

—Yes

Krissy snuggles closer against me. I see a nurse open the door to check on me. She looks at Krissy and then closes the door and moves on.

Krissy moves her body so she can more easily look at my eyes. "Is there something else you want to talk about?"

—Yes

"Let me guess. About us?"

—Yes

"Michael, I am with you forever. And that's that. No more discussion on that. Period. I love you in sickness and in health. Is there anything else about us you need to discuss?"

—Yes

"Are you going to argue with me about what I just said?"

—No

"I'm afraid you are getting tired. Can it wait until tomorrow?"

—Yes

"Should I tell the children not to come?"

—No!

*

Mental Journal Entry: July 22nd

My kids were thrilled when they learned that what I wanted to talk about was Krissy and me and our getting married. The kids were instantly excited and happy, but Krissy surprised me with what I could only see as some reluctance. She sensed, I think, that this would be a difficult discussion. However, the prospect of imminent death definitely warrants one of those we-have-to-talk moments for all concerned.

Krissy, in her generous and goodhearted way, was only concerned that, as she put it, "If you died, god forbid, where would that leave the kids if we were married?"

In our damned but blessed blinking code, I was able to get out that when we should become husband and wife I would trust her to think of Allen and Merrie as her children as well as Sharon's and Matt's, whether I died at forty-something or at eighty-something. But I could not stand the thought, if things turned bad quickly, that she would be standing on the side with no voice in my care, my wishes, and even my disposal, if necessary, having no say except if people invited her opinion. As my wife, she would be treated with the respect and deference due her position and I would be able to count on my wishes being followed. So you see, I told her in my blinking way, I could not die peacefully knowing she would feel like an outsider in any aspect of my life, even my death. We had to consider this a real possibility. The wedding is on, as scheduled, for three days from now, but in the hospital room. Krissy would pare down the list to about ten. When I go home we can think about a bigger party. Krissy said she would arrange everything.

This talk of the death contingency was so difficult for Krissy, of course, and was especially difficult for Merrie. But I knew that years from now Merrie would be glad she had been a party to this discussion and maybe she might even cherish it and besides, I knew I could count on Allen to help her through the immediate pain of the discussion.

I made it understood that I also would like Terri to come by. I figured to get her view of how Krissy and the kids were doing. Allen, I know, would fill her in on how we are communicating. Doctor Glassman was also being a real trooper, not giving up on me, telling me everything he and his specialists could think of trying to get some mobility to any part of my body. He's my guardian angel.

Mental Journal Entry: August 19th

Normal is one of those relative words, highly dependent on present circumstances. My new normal is a reclining chair in Krissy's home and now our home. I gave up my apartment. On July twenty-fifth, as planned, Krissy and I became husband and wife.

Following the wedding, through our blink-talk I made it known that I want to talk soon with everyone all together and then separately with just Krissy and me.

*

Everyone is here. I am sitting comfortably in my recliner. Merrie and Allen come into the house and give Krissy and me a kiss. Allen has brought his girlfriend, Cyndi, with him.

It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining and I can see a clear blue sky through the open window. It's the kind of day in the past I would say is a great day to be alive. That kind of comment was tossed off so easily. Now I have to be more intentional about such statements.

Allen will be a senior next Fall and looks every bit the part. He's six feet tall and solidly built, both externally and internally. Merrie will be a sophomore and there she stands, a beautiful young lady with a kind and generous heart. She is looking so much more mature. I will have to talk with Allen another time about making it clear she has a big brother with a short fuse if anyone bothers her.

Allen asked if Cyndi could come today so she can learn how to communicate with me by watching how we do it. I think that was very sweet and readily agreed. Things seem to be more serious between those two than I imagined. Krissy made lemonade for everyone and they all take seats in the living room. Krissy comes and sits by me on the arm of my recliner. When everyone settles in, Krissy begins.

"Your dad and I talked last night about the blink code we are using. Your dad asked me to read the chapters in *The Count of Monte Cristo* where the blink code is used and it was very helpful. Just as with the grandfather in the story your dad is capable of quite a vocabulary of eye movements. Left eye closed, right eye closed, both closed and held, one blink, two blinks, look left, look right, and so on. Doctor Glassman says it will be very helpful to make a list of all of them and discuss with you suggested meanings for each gesture. We would like to fine-tune the meanings with you guys so we make the best use of what your dad can do. It doesn't have to be just yes and no. Does that make sense?"

"Absolutely," Allen says.

Merrie looks at me and says, "Krissy, it's a great idea. I'm going to borrow Allen's copy of the book and read those chapters, too."

"Great," Krissy says. "It's chapters fifty-eight and fifty-nine mostly. I'll write it down and give it to you before you leave."

Krissy turns to Cyndi. She's a sweet girl and I'm really warming to her and getting less concerned about unintended consequences of a high school romance. She seems sensible and polite. So far my kids are behaving exactly as I knew they would.

"Cyndi, would you like to work with Allen and Merrie about what meaning to give to what gesture? The more points of view on this the better. You could bring a helpful new perspective."

"Of course, Mrs. Roth. Thank you so much for asking me."

I watch contented as Allen takes Cyndi's hand and smiles at her.

It's crazy. Every day since my stroke I keep asking myself what I did to be so lucky, to be so lucky to have these people in my life. I must have been doing something right. Even Sharon and Matt came over to visit and see how I was doing.

Surprisingly, I got over the trapped-in-a-box feeling pretty quickly after the stroke when I realized my brain was functioning much as it was before the stroke. I knew it would only be a matter of time before we figured something out to communicate. Communicating has been the easiest part. It's all the physical stuff we take for granted that I knew would be difficult and expensive.

Krissy has been brilliant about handling that with the home service agency the insurance company recommended. It amazes me how one can get used to what formerly would have disgusted or humiliated me. But it is what it is and thank god there are people who will step up. Of course, Krissy has to work, and arranging coverage and physical therapy for me has tested her strength and stamina beyond anything I could have expected. However, necessity has certainly expanded our understanding of what's possible.

Krissy turns to Allen. "I think your dad wants to start with you, Allen."

I see Allen take a deep breath and slowly let it out.

"Okay, Dad. Do you have something special you want to tell me?"

—No

"Is there something you want me to tell you?"

—No

Right away, Allen is stumped, but Merrie jumps in to help. "Daddy, is there something you want Allen to ask you?"

—Yes

"About you? You know, your condition and all?"

—No

"About Allen?"

—Yes

Now Merrie is stumped. Well, no one said this would be easy.

Krissy gets off the armrest and kneels in front of me so she can more easily see my eyes.

"Michael, is it some specific question you want Allen to ask?"

—No

Krissy tries again, keeping calm and thoughtful. "Any questions he has about how your health or condition affects him?"

—No

"About Allen?" Krissy asks.

Evidently, I am capable of more expression than I realize. Allen seems to read my eyes showing that Krissy has gotten very close.

"About life?" he asks.

—Yes!

Everyone is silent. I want Allen and Merrie to know, to have faith that even with just our yes-no code I am not lost to them on complex issues, issues that any father might discuss with his children.

Krissy says, "You want the children to ask you questions about life that may be troubling or confusing to them?"

—Yes!

My Krissy hits it right on the head.

Silence again.

"But darling, how will you answer them?"

No response from me. My eyes scan the room.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I didn't ask that correctly. Will you answer them?"

—No

I can see the shock and disappointment on all their faces. Silence again.

Cyndi suddenly gets an idea. Why did I forget about her?

"Excuse me, Mister Roth, do you mean we will know the answers ourselves once we have asked the question? I mean, if we ask the question correctly the answer will kind of be obvious to us."

—Yes!

Everyone claps. Cyndi girl, you're a keeper. Allen gets the idea and runs with it.

"You want us to do this so that we will think about the answers ourselves? Sometimes we will be able to figure it out for ourselves if we ask the question correctly. Okay, that makes sense, I think. But sometimes you will suggest an answer we might not have thought of, right?"

—Yes

Merrie leans against Allen. She looks stricken suddenly. "Daddy, I don't know how to do this. I can't."

—Yes!

Allen turns to Merrie and then to me. "Dad, let me start. I think I know what you want us to do."

—Yes

Allen sits quietly for a few moments thinking, then he begins. "Next year is my senior year and I don't know if I want to go to college. I mean, it will be so expensive and the time I spend in college I could be making money on a job. I don't know what to do."

—No response

"How do I decide what's best? What would you tell me? You know, what would Jesus do?" Everyone laughs. I'm so glad for Allen's sense of humor. But I make no response except for a possible crinkling of my eyes.

"You would probably tell me to follow my passion. But I don't really have a passion yet." He pauses for a split second before saying, "Except for Cyndi, of course." Nice save as she pokes him in the ribs.

"Then maybe I should get a job after high school and see if I can discover my passion. My career passion, I mean."

—No response

He's doing fine without me.

"Maybe I'm the kind of person who will never have a passion about anything. Just go with the flow and do what I need to do to get by. Maybe I don't need a passion."

—No response

I'm just listening to Allen work this out for himself.

"But I think that would be letting you down, disappointing you. Dad, I don't want to disappoint you. I know, I know you would say don't live for other people's dreams. I know. And I want to have a dream, a passion, not just for you. I really do want to have a dream. And the dreams don't always have to be about a job or a skill of some kind. You had a dream. Krissy was your dream. Is your dream!" I see Krissy lower her head and smile. "It's about being happy, isn't it, Dad? It's just about finding what makes you happy."

—Yes

I guess it is clear from my eyes that Allen is not all the way there yet.

"How do you know what makes you happy and then how do you find it? Is it just having a good heart and being kind and helpful and generous and it will come to you?"

—No response

Allen is thinking.

Cyndi gets an idea, obviously wanting to help Allen communicate with me.

"Is it time, Mister Roth? Do we just need to grow up a little before we can recognize the difference between a cheap thrill and real happiness? At least that's what our teachers and parents tell us all the time. 'When you grow up some more you'll understand.' Maybe they're right."

—Yes

This girl continues to surprise me.

"Do I need to just be patient with myself?" Allen asks.

—Yes

Allen is not satisfied. "How will I know if I'm making the right decisions? Will I just know?"

—Yes

"What if I make a mistake?" Thinking. "That's where the people who love me come in. Right? You, Mom, Matt, Merrie, Krissy, Cyndi. I actually have a big support system, don't I?"

—Yes

"So making a mistake is not the end of the world. Just let the people who love me help me and move on. Right?"

—Yes

Allen settles back into the couch. Cyndi puts her arms around him and hugs him.

"Dad, can I ask you a very personal question?"

—Yes

Allen seems uncertain now whether to continue. I wait for him to decide.

Krissy turns to Allen and says, "It's okay, Allen. I think your dad wants you to feel you can talk with him about anything, that you can ask him anything."

Allen is still not sure, then he seems to just blurt it out to be done with it as if it has been troubling him for a while.

“Would you have rather died than live the way you are now?”

“Allen! What are you saying?” Merrie is shocked by the question, but it’s a good one. They all look at me to see if they can read my face.

—No!

“But why?” Allen continues. “Is life so precious even now for you?”

—Yes

“Why? I mean, of course, I don’t want you to die, but I don’t know if I could say the same thing if I were in your place. Is it because of all the people you love and would miss?”

—Yes

Of course! Just doing what we are doing now gives me so much pleasure, just being with them. Not jumping out of planes or sailing around the world or whatever. Just this.

“Is it also because of all the people who love you and would miss you?”

—Yes

When did Allen get so mature? How did he have the courage to ask these questions of me? And the pain I know my kids would feel, my Krissy would feel—I can feel it myself. Just the thought of their pain is almost unbearable for me, that I would cause it, that my death would cause it.

Merrie runs to me and throws her arms around me. “Daddy, I don’t think I could survive you not being here.”

Krissy gently takes Merrie by the shoulder and moves her from me.

“Michael, are you getting tired? We can schedule another talk. Yes?”

—Yes

“Tomorrow?”

—Yes

“Is that okay, guys?”

Merrie and Allen nod eagerly.

“Me too, if you don’t mind, Mister Roth.”

Krissy jumps in here for me, putting an arm around Cyndi. “Of course, Cyndi. It’s so sweet of you to want to. Allen, you’ll bring Cyndi with you tomorrow, okay?”

Allen just comes up behind Cyndi and puts his arms around her.

Cyndi looks at me and I keep my eye contact with her.

She comes and stands in front of me.

“Thank you so much, Mister Roth, for letting me come and share this with Allen. I can see how special this has been for everyone and I feel very honored that you included me. You’re all being so good to me. Thank you.”

I see her eyes start to water. No longer able to control herself, she bursts into tears and turns to bury her face in Allen’s chest. My god, I’m beginning to love this girl myself. Such a sympathetic heart! Well done, Allen! Krissy, however, breaks the drama of the moment. All for the best.

“Okay, everyone. I think this went very well. I made some cookies, so grab those on the way out. We’re going to let your dad rest now.”

Hugs and kisses from Merrie and Allen. Cyndi stands next to Allen, obviously not sure what to do, then she decides to hug me, too. She smells very nice. Like gardenia.

On the way to the door, Allen turns to me.

“Thank you, Dad.”

*

Merrie has been at this for about a half-hour now. She had so much trouble, at first, thinking of what to ask me. Then she couldn't stop. Now, I see she is tiring, but soldiering on. I look at her and try to visualize her a decade from now. What will she look like? She will be taller, her body more complete, her will stronger and more confident. There will be less deference, more self-assurance.

I can't help noticing her hands. Already they are not the hands of a child, but of a young adult. Long and thin and expressive. I love the way her hands move when she is thinking. Movements that are slow and seemingly absentminded. But if I look assuming there is a method to her movements, it's clear the hands are closely in harmony with her developing thoughts. There is a surprising repertoire of gestures. Doubt, discovery, and decision are written by her hands as she follows the path of her thoughts.

Yes, it was easier for Allen, but more remarkable with Merrie as I watched her grow before my eyes. Witnessing this, as a parent, I have to ask myself, when is it a good time to die? How many life experiences like this must I accumulate before I can say, enough, I had my share?

“It's so complicated. Life is complicated,” Merrie says, breaking into my thought excursion.

—Yes

“At least I realize that I have to be more careful, more selective who I trust and who I love. Right?”

—Yes

“And I will probably make mistakes?”

—Yes

“That's when the support system Allen talked about yesterday comes in, isn't it?”

—Yes

Merrie finally seems to have run out of steam. She relaxes back into her place on the couch.

“I'm done, Daddy. Braindead. Did I do okay?”

Before I can answer, Krissy, Allen and Cyndi give Merrie a standing ovation. Merrie blushes and hides her face in her hands.

“Okay, guys. Another terrific day! Michael, do you need a rest?”

—No

Allen disagrees. “Dad, I think you need a rest. We'll come back tomorrow if you want.”

—No

Krissy rushes to explain. “Your dad wants to discuss something with me privately tomorrow. Right?”

—Yes

“Why don't you talk about it with Krissy later today?” Allen asks.

“This is still pretty tiring for your dad, Allen. Your dad and I will talk about whatever is on his mind tomorrow.”

—Yes

“Okay, guys. But you don’t have to leave right away. Your dad can rest while we all have lunch. I made lamb chops. That was always the meal in your dad’s family for special occasions. And Cyndi, I called your mom, and she said it was okay for you to stay for lunch.”

“Thanks, Missus Roth. Can I help?”

“Girl stuff!” Merrie says jumping up. “Allen, you keep Dad company while we get everything set. Krissy, I love lamb chops.”

“And my favorite vegetables,” Krissy says, “spinach and lima beans. Yay!”

There is a sudden silence as the kids look at each other.

“I’m only kidding,” Krissy says. “It’s really green beans with sliced and toasted almonds and coleslaw and potato salad.”

The kids show enormous relief.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” Allen says. “What about Dad?”

“Your dad wants to eat later. Yes?”

—Yes

I watch as the ladies hustle and bustle getting the table and food prepared and ready to serve. I can smell the lamb chops and they transport me back to my home in Brooklyn when I was just a young drip of water and our apartment was filled with the very same odor. Sabbath dinner was chicken, steak, or fish. But special occasions beyond the Sabbath we celebrated with lamb chops. Birthdays, anniversaries, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, graduations, weddings. I was very happy then. They were carefree childhood days for me and my brother.

I remember the smoke that would occasionally fill the apartment when some of the lamb fat burned, as it inevitably did. I remember vividly the opening of windows, the fanning of the air, and even one time when the fire department was called when the interior of the oven turned into a flaming eruption. When the firemen arrived, one of them quickly put the flames out by pouring salt on the burning fat. No fuss, no mess. Amazing!

Lamb chops were not for our Sabbath meals. When I think about the Sabbath meals I remember my mother lighting the candles, reciting the appropriate prayer, watching the candlelight reflected in her upturned fingernails, gathering the candle heat with her hands sweeping gently over the flames, gathering in the heat and its blessings. I remember my father giving my brother and me each a shot of Canadian rye whiskey every Sabbath evening. He died before I was smart enough to ask him why he did that.

As Allen walks over to me, I wonder what Merrie and he will remember, what memories they will recall years and decades from now?

*

It’s been a quiet day and I want our talk to be the last thing we discuss before sleep. Krissy brushes my hair and wipes my face with a cool, wet cloth. I can feel that now, another of the small, occasional victories over my condition. Krissy lowers the lights and sits facing me, next to my recliner. We’re ready.

“Michael, darling, do you want to talk about me?”

—No

She takes my hand and gently massages it with her thumb. I still don't feel it. No Matter. What do the Quebecois say on their license plates? *Je me souviens*. I remember.

"About you?"

—No

"About us?"

—Yes

"Something good?"

—Yes

"Something good about us. You think we're doing amazingly well?"

—Yes

"But that's not it?"

—No

"Something more we should be doing?"

—Yes

"Sleeping arrangements?"

—No

"Food?"

—No

"Let's see. Shall I do the alphabet?"

—Yes

"A."

—No

"B."

—Yes

"Hmm. A is for apple. B is for baby."

—Yes

Krissy sits upright with a start.

"Michael, what are you thinking? Is it possible?"

—No response

"You want us to have a baby?"

—Yes

"Wow! I hadn't even been thinking in that direction."

She is making strong eye contact with me.

"It would be nice. What am I saying? It would be fantastic. Can we do this? What do you want me to do? Shall I talk with Doctor Glassman?"

—Yes

"Do you really think it's possible?"

—Yes

Krissy takes my face in her hands, looking intently at my eyes.

"Really, really possible?"

—Yes

“Michael! I’m speechless.”

Krissy looks at me with a broad smile.

“I guess you’re speechless, too!”

I just look at her. Once again, what did I do to deserve this woman? Nothing in this lifetime!

POSTSCRIPT
by Kristina Roth

My husband lived for another twelve years. He died almost instantly from a massive brain aneurysm.

Michael and I conceived a baby, a beautiful baby girl, now ten years old. We named her Olivia, after his maternal grandmother, Olga. Olivia, of course, is our miracle child and was a constant source of joy to Michael. Michael lived to see Allen and Merrie happily married with children of their own. He could enjoy the love of our three "gorgeous and brilliant" grandchildren before he died.

Life was hard for Michael and me. What we found was that where love is strong, it's like the roots of a tree that can break through concrete. Our love never wavered, even when sorely tested by the many challenges of Michael's condition.

Michael's son, Allen, once asked his father if his life was worth continuing with all its difficulties, pain, and frustration. He said then and repeated to me in so many ways during our amazing twelve years together as husband and wife that the answer would always be an emphatic "YES!" Michael's gift was the surprising joy his condition produced and the confidence we all gained in both the intended and unintended consequences of all our unconditional love.

Over our years of determined struggle, technology, both medical and electronic, advanced to where our Guardian Angel, Doctor Robert Glassman, with his team of specialists, could bring some slight motor control to the fingers of Michael's left hand. With that and with the aid of a sensing pad and a computer, he could type messages. Of course, that greatly facilitated communication. It also allowed Michael to write this memoir. He worked on it for seven years. It was almost in print when he died. He did get to see the galley proofs before his death. This, my postscript, I added for the final printing.

Michael's memoir stops at the point in our lives when we decided to try to have a baby. I asked my husband why he did not continue his story, to be closer to the actual time of his writing it. He said he felt that the life that came to us after our decision to conceive was like a new birth for him and therefore was the story of a different life. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to write the story of his second life as well.

I am so blessed to have had this man in my life. He is still in my life, in my heart, safe and healthy once again, where he will remain until I die.

THE END...
...of the beginning