

## Balls in the Air

“It’s almost over,” I said, motioning to Hamburger Haven, the eatery down the block whose second floor dining room the sober drunks rented weekday nights for our recovery meeting. I had just come from there, my eyes now tearing from the January cold and my breath visible.

“I got stuck on the subway,” Jenny said, sounding winded, as a commotion of wailing police cars wove their way through traffic down the avenue.

“Can you shut up, please? I’m talking here,” I shouted at the vehicles. “So inconsiderate.” My Rico Ranzo impersonation gained from her a smile, even if, as I guessed, she had never seen *Midnight Cowboy*. She had her arms wrapped around her, shivering, in spite of the raspberry-colored wool coat she wore.

A lean young man in a spotless white T-shirt stared out through the window of the pizza parlor while stretching a mound of dough into a wider and wider circle. On his grizzled, appraising face was an expression of unsmiling appreciation of her power.

She didn’t look like a drunk. Not that I could tell you what a drunk looks like, not after all of them I have seen in those rooms. Young and old. Fat and thin. Plain and beautiful. Jenny? Jenny was a room changer. She turned men into swivel heads. She was just that way.

“Look. Let’s get together tomorrow night. See that restaurant across the street? I’ll meet you there. How’s seven o’clock?”

“Sure,” she said. She looked startled.

“Great.” I gave her a light pat on the shoulder, and took off before she could change her mind.

Not bad, Mark, not bad, I thought, given that I had never spoken to her before.

I seated myself at the restaurant the next evening with my back to the entrance, so as not to be caught staring anxiously at the door. I liked the idea that she would be coming to me, even if my

anxiety had compelled me to arrive with time to spare. Early arrival is nothing new for me. An abandonment issue, possibly. I do sometimes have an image of myself as a squalling infant, left unattended for sufficient time by my mother to work myself into a desperate state.

The restaurant had that buzz that small, packed places do. As time passed, I glanced up at the line of patrons standing inside the door waiting for tables and began to worry that I was taking up space. My greater worry was that she wouldn't show. By now, it was 7:10 pm by the wall clock I had tried not to look at.

And why should she show? Had I so much as spoken to the woman before the previous night? No. The moment I first set eyes on her at sitting at the Hamburger Haven recovery meeting several weeks before, I saw immediately that she was unattainable, a woman from some league far above my own

"Busted. A clock watcher. Did you think I wouldn't come?" she said, arriving at just that moment when my eyes had once again gone to the clock.

"Am I under oath?"

"The whole truth and nothing but the truth."

"Well, then, my faith was beginning to waver."

"Have you been stood up before?"

"By the best and the worst and the ones in between."

"Am I in the winner's circle or what?" Jenny laughed.

"The adventure will be in finding out."

"You may be just the kind of man I can do business with. By the way, what kind of place is this?"

"It's Polish. Their kielbasa is great. I come here when I want to fall off the vegetarian wagon."

"Is it a hard fall?"

“Well, I have some buyer’s remorse the next morning, but nothing too serious. There is just something heavenly about slathering mustard on a piece of sausage or a hot dog, for that matter. Every two weeks or so my body says it needs animal protein.”

“Interesting. A man whose body talks to him,” Jenny said.

“Well, yes. So to speak.”

“I like men who say so to speak, even if I don’t know too many of them.”

“Actually, I don’t know if I have ever said ‘so to speak’ before.”

“You do look like a so to speak sort of person, if I do say so.”

“If I do say so. That sort of goes with so to speak.”

It would be an understatement to say I was enjoying her company, as it would be a cliché to say I didn’t want the evening to end, but both are true. She was warm and lively as well as pretty, the kind of woman I had hungered to meet in the difficult stretch of months and years I had been experiencing. A woman who made me feel important and funny.

“Let me contribute,” she said, when the waiter later came with coffee and the check.

“Why not let me just put it on my card.?”

“Thank you,” she said, placing a comical stress on the first word.

“Let’s do this again,” I said.

“Well, I should tell you that I am seeing someone,” she replied.

“Yes,” I said, reflexively, feeling myself deflate in front of her.

We walked north. The cold wind drew tears to my eyes, the traffic lights along Lexington Avenue a blur of reds and greens. At Forty-second Street we sought shelter in the grimy granite mass of Grand Central Station, where, on the concourse, tranquil in the aftermath of the rush hour, I gave her my card.

She studied it carefully as we stood by the information booth. “It has no center,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, your name is in the upper left-hand corner and your contact information in the lower right-hand corner, but there is nothing in the middle.”

“I’ll have to work on that,” I said.

She lived outside the city, in a river town called Dobbs Ferry. I walked with her through the gate and watched as the train she had boarded left the station and entered the dark tunnel on its journey north. My eye focused on the red lights of the end car. I stood there until the darkness of the tunnel took even them from my sight.

The following night I had dinner with Celeste at a neighborhood restaurant on the Upper West Side. Celeste was my wife. She drove in from Tenafly, New Jersey, where she now lives, to see me. Our life was heaven before it became hell. We had spent seven years living together in a SoHo loft and had a weekend place in Rhinebeck, New York. Celeste was an artist and needed a big space for her work. What she didn’t need, as it turned out, was me. My mentor, Zed, told me not to take her rejection personally, and Lily, our marriage counselor, told me pretty much the same thing. All I know is that the situation was baffling and extremely painful. Zed once said that fear is a form of prayer, and if so, my worst fear—that I would have to leave—came true when I moved out.

“I only see Lily because you get something from the sessions,” Celeste said over dinner.

“Right. I know. You’ve said that before.”

“It’s obvious she’s on your side.”

“I haven’t noticed that,” I said.

“Of course she is. She believes in marriage. She said so at the first session.”

“What I heard her say was that marriage is hard and living alone is hard.”

“I guess she’s all right.”

“I guess so.”

“Do you think she likes me? Isn’t she beautiful?”

“I don’t know is my answer to the first question and she looks OK to the second,” I said.

“There’s so much I want to tell her, but I never do. It’s always you who does the talking, isn’t it?”

At our first counseling session, about a year before we actually separated, Lily said, “Did either of you experience abuse as a child?” I relished coming forward with a fuller account than Lily needed of the transgressions of adults in my formative years: the savagery and treachery of my older sisters; my father’s violence; the man who lured me into a phone booth in Times Square, back when there still were phone booths, and threatened to hurt me unless I masturbated him. But Celeste lacks my confessional nature. All she could tell Lily was, “Yes, sure. Nah. I don’t know.” Celeste didn’t wear the things that happened to her on her sleeve. She didn’t easily talk about her stepfather and the nights he came to her room when she was a child. She didn’t speak of her mother’s emotional collapse in that same period, which left her a virtual invalid in her own home. Celeste didn’t tell Lily what she told me when we first began to see each other, that her stepfather was not who I thought he was. Not that she ever told me more explicitly in the years that followed. Or if she did tell me, it was in an understated way, befitting her subtle intelligence, as when she said, “I wasn’t a virgin when I slept with a boy for the first time.”

There was no beef on the menu of Burl, the restaurant we patronized that night. It was a haven for the macrobiotic crowd in this land of carnivores. The only flesh being served was salmon. Otherwise, it was tofu and seitan and bean sprouts and burdock roots and hijiki all the way. My penance for the kielbasa of the night before was gomulka, a plateful of steamed greens and yams, with a modest portion of brown rice and a comforting cup of mu tea.

My apartment was only a block away. Celeste came over that night and we went directly to the bedroom and made love. Yes, I know. How could such a thing be? The only answer I have for you is that Celeste asked that we resume a while before. To be honest, it sounded to me as if she thought I was more eager to sleep with her than I truly was. After all, well over a year had gone by since my departure from the loft. There had been a lot of pain and lots of tears. It was a year into the separation before I could even take off my wedding ring and contemplate seeing other women, though Lily and Zed had made clear I was free to do just that. And in that time I had begun to value my freedom more than I regretted not having my past life with Celeste, even if I couldn’t contemplate the dreaded “D” word. What would it mean if I did consent to

reestablish physical intimacy with Celeste? As if she were reading my mind, Lily reassured me in one of our joint counseling sessions that sleeping with Celeste did not cancel my right to pursue other relationships. At any rate, it didn't feel like it was for me to say no to Celeste.

I have this notion that I know why Celeste made the proposal that we resume our sex life in the first place. We had seen a film that night. It was about a wealthy woman who helps a struggling photographer. I wondered if somehow she saw the two of us in that film. I can't really say. But money had been a big thing in our marriage. She had a lot, and I had precious little.

A candle flickered on the bureau, providing the only light. I lay on my side next to Celeste on the queen-size bed. Something more than mental and emotional change had occurred in the couple of years since I had left the loft and moved to this one-bedroom apartment. It seemed harder to get aroused. But Celeste had expert hands, and my poor, hopelessly limp member responded. Soon her legs were over my shoulders, just as when we were together. It went on for a long time. Celeste lay there with her eyes closed, her arms extended and her fingers curling and uncurling. A low murmur of pleasure came from her.

Afterward, she lay with her head on my shoulder, just as she used to do. A sense of satisfaction filled me. I had been able to give her something. I had been able to navigate myself past all that internal resistance to lovemaking. It didn't matter that I hadn't reached completion. It didn't matter at all, at least to me, and Celeste didn't call attention to the fact.

On the wall in front of me hung one of her reliefs. It was a carving of a horse, which she had painted a vivid red. The background was lighter, a pale blue. There were these tiny cross-hatchings, her signature style. It seemed to contain her sweetness; she struck me, when I looked at her work, to be from a culture that no longer existed. The relief took me back to a childhood memory of an elderly woman standing at her easel with paintbrush in hand in the building where I had grown up. I had come to her before going off to school with a plate of pancakes and lingonberries as a breakfast offering from my mother. The woman's name was Miss Kindelberger. Several of her watercolors hung in the lobby of our building. For some reason I had thought of Miss Kindelberger when I began seeing Celeste. I guess I imagined Celeste

growing old, like Miss Kindelberger, and of myself growing old with her. And in growing old with Celeste, I would somehow become that boy delivering his mother's pancakes.

Other things of Celeste's hung on the walls as well, including a couple of oil paintings in the living room. Actually, the apartment was furnished with my wife's things, not only her artwork but in the kitchen a spice rack that she had made during a period when she was exploring furniture design and in the bathroom a lovely set of shelves from that same time. And there were the wing chair and Morris chair and sofa in the living room from our country place, and the dresser and the bed from that same house in the bedroom. She had left me with things to remember her by.

I walked with Celeste to her car, a red Subaru with those boring pale yellow New Jersey plates. As she got behind the wheel, I moved my right hand diagonally across my chest. She saw me and buckled up. No one likes to be told what to do, Celeste maybe more than most people. But she saw my gesture, smiled, and put on her seatbelt. As she maneuvered out of the parking space I gave a final wave, but she was too focused on entering the flow of traffic to respond. I thought of her drive home: the West Side Highway and then the George Washington Bridge. The river was like a moat. She needed one, I suppose. Not from me necessarily, but from the dark past that was chasing her.

My mind turned to Jenny. Actually it had never left her, not since our dinner the night before. She was there in my consciousness, a living, growing presence.

I was standing on a dark patch of Amsterdam Avenue. The block contained a large housing project. In spite of the cold, a few homeboys were out, wearing those unfriendly-looking baseball caps, the large ones with flat bills, and their baggy gear. I walked west to Broadway, an avenue that ran parallel with Amsterdam. I needed to buy a few things for the next day: a bottle of water, soy beverage, some fruit, peanut butter.

"Oh, dear," I said, out loud. "Just oh dear."

That weekend I called **Zed**, in Los Angeles. He said the East Coast was too cold for his old bones. Besides, he couldn't afford to pay the heating bills living in a house here in the Northeast required.

I said the Serenity Prayer before I dialed. I always did.

"Do you have a couple of minutes? Are you busy? Should I call back?"

"I'm here," Zed said.

"I'm in trouble."

"Is that something new?"

"In my mind I'm in trouble."

"Where else do you ever get into trouble?"

"I'm doing OK with Celeste. She came over last night."

"And?"

"It's more of a 'but.' I met this woman. Her name is Jenny, and now I'm in conflict. I feel like I am betraying Celeste if I continue to see Jenny. Not that anything has happened between us."

"We've been down this road before."

"But I feel like I will die if I hurt Celeste."

"Step on a crack. Break your mother's back."

"What?"

"Superstitious dread."

I knew what he meant. I just needed to hear him say these words. My emotional landscape brightened instantly.

"Thank you," I said.

"Just put a check in the mail." Zed laughed. Zed laughed a lot.

"I love you," I said. The words just flew out.

"I love you, too," Zed said.

I couldn't stay with that kind of intimacy. I had to get off the phone. We both did.



Most recovery groups have the diversity of a New York City subway car, but the Hamburger Haven group drew a working crowd because of its time and midtown location: men in suits and ties, women in dresses. I had been coming to the group for several years, always with great anticipation. Like the others, I had been given a second chance at life, and I understood and embraced the simple truth that, where alcoholism is concerned, I would need my support group if I wanted to avoid relapse and the devastation that would bring. I had been sober long enough to see what happened to those who strayed too far from the flock. Many never made it back.

A peaceful hour passed, in which the speaker told his story of what he had been like before he drank, what happened, and what he was like now. If it was a story I had heard thousands of times, given the regularity with which I had attended meetings in the fourteen years I had been sober, it was also a story that I never tired of, as I never tired of the Preamble that was read, which defined our purpose, or the brief passage from the recovery literature that was also read. I had the same feeling that I had had at my very first meeting, those years before, a terrified newcomer unable to stop drinking. It was a feeling that I had come home.

But now I was in attendance not simply to participate in the life of the group but for another reason. In spite of my best effort, my eyes would turn to the door with the entrance of each new latecomer, my disappointment and anxiety only growing as the meeting reached the halfway point and Jenny still hadn't arrived. And then there she was, shedding her coat, and I turned from her to the men in the room: Hank, in the silk suit, with his giant portfolio, and his florid face and lecherous gaze; Sammy, the former hit man with the tree trunk neck. Her beauty may or may not have been a virtue, but it was a power. Married or single, rich or poor, the men were drawn to her helplessly.

"I was thinking of you," I said, as we sat at a booth in a nearby coffee shop after the meeting.

"I was thinking of you, too. What did you do this weekend?"

"Nothing special. I saw my wife."

She put down her cup of coffee. "Excuse me?"

"It's not what you might think. My wife and I have been separated for a couple of years."

"Yes?"

"What I mean is that we are friends. It's kind of a long story."

"And the short version of your long story is?"

"It's like this...."

"That's a good beginning." She laughed, which was something of a relief.

"The truth is that we did fine for several years. We were very much in love, or at least I thought so. But in the fourth year something happened. We explored the Southwest that summer, and suddenly, during a visit to the Grand Canyon, I realized that she was bone-thin, that frankly, she had come to resemble an inmate of Dachau or Buchenwald. And then, over dinner, one evening, she said she was full. How could she be full? I asked myself. She had nibbled on a piece of lettuce. I could define anorexia but that didn't mean I understood it. I told her she had to eat or she would die, but that wasn't terribly effective. And she was in the care of a therapist who seemed to have no better understanding of the problem than I did. That fall, as I recall, things took another turn. She began to wake me in the middle of the night. She would be trembling. She would talk of dying. Clearly, she was in the throes of some night terror. Within a few months, it seems to me, her personality changed. Her amiability turned to rage, and most of it was directed at me. 'You're sucking my blood....I can't breathe when you're around.'"

"Whoa! Whoa! Time out."

"I'm sorry."

"Information overload."

I had pressed a button, and a prerecorded message had begun to play. It was just like me to talk carelessly. I wondered, not for the first time, if the narration of my marital situation was a means of distancing myself from women. Or maybe it was a subtle form of bragging, an intrusion of the drama of my life into the conversation, and a means of portraying myself as a victim.

A few months before, over dinner, I had shared the same information with a woman over a first-date dinner. To that point she had been packing away her swordfish, but now her fork froze halfway to her mouth.

“I would never have gone out with you if I had known you have a wife.”

“I do have a wife, but we are separated, as I just said.”

“That doesn’t matter. I want to be with a man who is available.”

“I’m available. I’m right here reporting for duty.”

“Don’t get smart with me, mister. I want a real relationship.”

“Have you ever had a real relationship?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want one,” She said, her voice tinged with bitterness.

And so it went. I had been with a woman who, lacking any real capacity for relationship, was also deprived of the empathic range to comprehend and accept that a forty-six-year-old man was bound to have some complexity in his life. She had seemed to me a woman who embraced her rectitude as a means of preserving her dismal solitude.

But I did not imagine Jenny to be from the same mold. Whatever her issues, she seemed built for connection. “What about you? What was your weekend like?”

“I saw Kyle.”

“Kyle?”

“My boyfriend.”

“Oh yes, right. Sounds like something big, the way you say his name.”

“Oh, it’s big, all right. It’s a big question mark,” Jenny said.

“What’s the question?”

“The question is marriage, and when that is going to happen.”

“Do you want it to happen?”

“The old biological clock is tick-tocking.”

“I would think you’re a ways from the midnight hour.”

“Let’s just say evening is approaching.”

“How long have you two been seeing each other?”

“I met Kyle eighteen months ago. The attraction was instant. Instant.”

That repetition of words. “Everything seems to start there, with physical attraction,” I said.

“It’s definitely a no-go without it,” Jenny replied.

“So how did you meet him?” I asked, giving way to my curiosity.

“At a party my husband Ned and I gave. But Kyle and I didn’t do anything right away. It wasn’t like that. I was married.”

“Right.”

“But the marriage was ending. It had to. Ned and I weren’t a good match.”

“Those things happen.”

She had left a husband with whom she hadn’t had a child. Now she was with a man with whom she might or might not have a child. Yes, a definite question mark.

I walked with her back to Grand Central Station. The romantic allure of the trains inside, preparing for their journeys to far-flung places, could not distract from the fact that we were in a harsh urban area, the sheer mass of manmade artifact unmitigated by a stand of trees or a patch of grass. Rising above the station, like a cheap bauble, was a hotel of glass and steel, a thing of frighteningly impermanent appearance.

There was a story I felt an impulse to launch into right then and there involving the hotel that had once stood on the site. The hotel, unlike the current glass and steel monstrosity, had been built of thick slabs of masonry. The story would have been drawn from my urchin childhood and of filching money. But the timing was wrong. Another time I would tell Jenny. Maybe. But only if it fit. I had already wandered down the path of inappropriate disclosure once that night.

Against the light and beyond the crosswalk and with cars bearing down, we crossed the street to get to the terminal. I took her arm as we stepped off the curb. Safely on the other side, I

could feel satisfaction that I had managed a small intimacy in the guise of being helpful. Not that I didn't want to be helpful. It was just that I wanted the other so much more.

In the huge concourse of the terminal, bracketed with marble staircases at either end, the arrivals and departures board was chattering, the compelling realignment of white letters and numbers on the black background like the frenzy coursing through me, even as I maintained a placid exterior.

"Sisterhood is powerful," Jenny said.

"Somewhere I have heard as much," I said.

"A cardinal rule of sisterhood is that a woman does not take another woman's man from her."

As I could find nothing to say on the topic of sisterhood, I simply kissed her quickly on the cheek, said "To be continued," and made my way home.

Celeste and I went to see the Oiseau the next week. Yes, I know, it is a strange and even disrespectful name to give your marriage counselor, but something about Lily did bring to mind an enormous bird with a colorful plumage whose sheer mass had snapped the branches of many a tree she had perched on. A completely idiotic depiction, it is true, and particularly to assign one who, for so long, I was sure had considerable capacity to influence the fate of my marriage.

Her office was just inside the front door of her apartment. Two side chairs were set out for Celeste and me to sit in as we faced her. I placed the check on the table as the Oiseau fussed with her appointment book. I thought of our sessions as being like a vending machine. No product until the coins got deposited. As for that fussing, I wondered, not for the first time, if it was some sort of ruse of hers to feign distraction from the ultimately financial basis of our relationship.

"No one wants to start? Everything's OK in both your worlds? Nothing going on worthy of mention?"

“I don’t see why she can’t be on time. It’s as if she does it on purpose to annoy me.” As was my way, I had arrived early, sitting in the lobby of Lily’s East Side high-rise building, one of those white-brick things that featured terraces where you could sit and catch the fumes from the traffic below. And as was Celeste’s way, she wandered in about a minute before our session was to begin, letting me know once again that she could take or leave the 45-minute hour the Oiseau allotted us, just as she often told me.

“OK. Now let’s stop there. Am I the one who is not on time? Am I the one who is annoying you? Because If I am, then we need to address that.” The Oiseau was in a real flap.

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to her.”

“Well, if you are talking to her, by which I assume you mean Celeste—is that correct? Do you mean Celeste by her?”

“I don’t know what I mean when I come to see you,” I said.

“Well, hold that thought. We can come back to it. We’re still trying to determine who ‘her’ is. So is her me?”

“Her could never be you.”

“So if her could never be me, then who could her possibly be?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. You tangle me up ten times to Sunday with all your talk.”

“I have tangled you up?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, that’s a start, isn’t it?”

The Oiseau was like that. Your sentences couldn’t get any traction. The woman was one big roadblock with her interruptions, her interjections, her pointless clarifications. And that chintzy forty-five-minute hour.

“Sometimes I hate you,” I said.

“Well, now, that’s a strong word, wouldn’t you say?”

“Which word? Sometimes? I? Hate? You?”

“You tell me.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Is this some kind of reenactment from childhood? Is this how you behaved with your mother? Your father?”

“Leave my mother out of this. Leave me out of this, if you don’t mind. You’re not a marriage counselor. You’re a sadist.”

“A sadist? Can we explore what you mean when you use such a term?”

“I’m not exploring anything with you.” Turning to Celeste, who wore a dopey Stan Laurel smile on her face, I said, “Do you suppose you could say something? Anything?”

“*Exactly*. All this pain and anguish you have put yourself through, when all you needed to do was turn and address *her*.”

It wasn’t always that way, just some of the time. Oiseau, galoot, flibbertigibbet—I didn’t know what the woman was. Sometimes I saw her mind as being like one of those wall-length boards in a traffic control tower, with lines going every which way to chart the path of all the planes in the air. She just had a lot of things she was trying to keep in play as a way of schematizing her patients’ thoughts, and all it often turned into was a big bag of shit.

“Yes, of course.” I didn’t say, you’re right, you’re always right, as that sort of sarcasm would only have started another round of verbal nonsense. Or maybe it wasn’t nonsense. After all, I wasn’t in the state of complete terror that Celeste’s edict that I leave the loft two years before had thrown me into. Just because the Oiseau was verbose didn’t mean she was a fool.

Actually I liked the Oiseau. What was not to like? She was tall and attractive. Still with the slender figure at probably the half-century mark, and those long legs she remained proud of, given the short skirts she favored, like the one she was wearing now. My eyes went to those legs, and she pulled her skirt, as if stretching the hem above her knees a millimeter could give her more protection from what she wanted you to see in the first place. It was not hard to imagine how all the volatility could be channeled in the bedroom. She was a woman who would come alive at a man’s touch. If it wasn’t all right to say that, it was all right to think it. The problem was, I suspected, that she had no one to touch her, or not with the regularity of a husband. He had

left, or she had asked him to leave. So I suspected. She wore no wedding ring, though maybe counselors and therapists, like some female waiters, chose not to, if for different reasons. Still, the apartment had the feel of a woman who lived alone. Always the same pile of books on the big heavy table that served as a divider between her “office” and her living room, which somehow didn’t look very lived in. And the faint smell of Lemon Pledge. And the sheet music on the upright in the corner. Good God, the thought of the Oiseau sitting in her nightgown at the keyboard belting out Broadway show tunes.

“So where are we now? Are we OK?”

“I have to use your bathroom, if I may,” I said.

“First door to the right,” the Oiseau said. It was the same thing she always said when I took my leave.

“Thank you,” I said.

Maybe my brief departure was more anxiety than urgency. She was probably interpreting it that way, entering it into her database as an expression of desire on my part. A desire for exploration, for intimacy. Her bedroom door was ajar, and I caught a glimpse of a plain white spread on her big bed. We had things in common. In my mind, at least, we did. We both knew what it was to be left. We were both sexual and deprived of steady mates.

I was careful to raise the seat cover and then to lower it so as not to leave my mark in the immaculate bathroom.

“So should I take a different tack? Should I just ask how each of you is doing? How would that be?” the Oiseau said when I came back.

“I’m doing fine,” I said.

“How about you, Celeste? How are you doing? Are you OK with what we have discussed so far?”

“I guess so.”

“You only guess so?”

“I don’t know.”



“What don’t you know?”

“I...I feel that things are being torn out of us or that some relentless drill is being applied. I feel like I’m being bullied.”

“And who is bullying you? Can you say?”

“It’s nothing. Really, it’s nothing.”

“Being bullied is nothing? I would think that is more than nothing.”

“I feel you don’t stop. I feel you go on and on and I don’t know what you want.”

“How do you feel about my not stopping and not knowing what I want.”

“I feel like your hands...I shouldn’t say anything. You’re fine. Everything is fine.”

“Everything is fine?”

“I don’t know.”

Celeste and I went to a coffee shop down the block afterward.

“Are you going to order the rice pudding?” Celeste asked.

“Maybe.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“But you like the rice pudding. You said so.”

“I said maybe.”

So the waiter came and I did order the rice pudding and a cup of herbal tea. Celeste didn’t order anything more than tea for herself. I had learned not to press her to eat.

“The woman is so awful. Why do we see her?” Celeste asked.

“I don’t know. Here, try some of this.” The waiter had brought a second spoon, which I handed to her full of rice pudding.

“You should have it.”

“It’s too much,” I said.

So she took the spoonful and then I gave her a second. It went that way sometimes.

“We don’t need her. We do fine without her,” Celeste said.

“I don’t feel ready yet.” Overall the Oiseau was fair, an impartial listener. True, she didn’t have a good day, but she had been helpful in the past. Without her I felt the weight of Celeste’s judgment and condemnation, her skewed version of the truth. Not that there was any objective truth as these things went. But there had been that one session where the Oiseau asked us a question: How would we rate our marriage on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the high end of the scale. I had gone first and given us a 7.5. My assessment was that the first few years had been great, but the last few had been trying. As for Celeste, she didn’t want to give a rating. The numbers didn’t mean anything to her, she said, as the whole marriage had been terrible from the start. She added that she had only married me from a sense of obligation, and had picked out the thickest wedding band so she could feel like a slave. The Oiseau pressed her. Had there been no happiness in the marriage? Celeste acknowledged that there had been five minutes of true equality on a drive back from the country one weekend. Beyond that, she said our seven years under the same roof had been a nightmare.

I saw her to her car and kissed her on the cheek before heading over to Eighty-Sixth Street, where I waited for the cross-town bus. When it didn’t come, I began to walk, pausing to look back over my shoulder. I wanted the bus to come. I didn’t want to walk. But the bus wouldn’t come, so I was forced to walk. But I didn’t want to be forced to walk. I wanted the bus to come. So I turned back and stood at the bus stop. This went on for a while, until the stupid bus came and I got on it.

Someone with knowledge of these things, judging from his success with women, once suggested to me that the best time to call a woman at her office was 11 a.m. Any sooner and they would be caught up in morning workplace anxiety, get the impression that you were over-eager, or see you as a slacker or a man with an undemanding job. Guided by my friend’s wisdom, I called Jenny at just that hour.

“I’m wide open,” she said. Not “Hi” or “How are you?” or any such thing.

“You’re what?” I said.

“I said I’m wide open.”

I told myself her words were a figure of speech and not as sexual as they sounded. Even if they were, what was I to do? I wasn’t wide open. I had things between me and her.

When you are sober for a while, you do things that weren’t part of your former life. You do an inventory of your past and present behavior. You make amends for wrongs done. You pray and you meditate. You help others with the same illness that you suffer from. And in doing these things you don’t do some of the things you used to do. In the drinking life, if you thought about booze, it was for sure that you would soon be drinking booze. But in recovery some buffer is provided between the thought and the action; some mysterious and invisible barrier comes between you and the drink, provided you continue applying the principles of recovery and remain with the community of recovering drunks that you have found. And you don’t reach so impulsively for sex. You begin the process of settling into yourself. In a very real way, it is a coming home to yourself—your higher self.

The other thing you don’t do, if you are wise and have a degree of integrity, is to get into a romantic or sexual entanglement with a newcomer. A person who is new in recovery is emotionally vulnerable and needs time to get his or her bearings, as the transition from the drinking life to the sober life is dramatic. For this reason those newly arrived from the drinking wars are encouraged to stay out of relationships for the first year so they can firmly establish a beachhead on sobriety.

Jenny was four months shy of one year of recovery, while I had been sober for fourteen years. A stronger man would have stayed away entirely, but I was not a strong man. Or maybe it was simply that Jenny was a powerful woman. All I know is that she exerted a magnetic pull. If I had any sort of strategy, it was to keep her close to me until she was over that one-year line. Seen in a certain light, it was the strategy of a drunk who says he will carry about with him a bottle in his pocket but he won’t drink from it until a specified date.

I had been asked to lead a meeting that night, not at Hamburger Haven, but in the basement of an East Side church farther uptown. I was grateful for such opportunities. Beyond

the superficial and obvious desire for attention and recognition, there was a genuine need to share with others about where drinking had taken me and the miracle of recovery, and so I laid out the progression of the illness: the elation I felt as a fourteen-year-old that led me to buy and drink a six-pack in Riverside Park with my best friend, Jerry; the daily drinking that began at age twenty-three when a doctor suggested wine instead of tranquilizers as a remedy for the anxiety I was feeling; and the solitary drinking and frequent and terrifying blackouts that inevitably followed. In the time remaining I discussed the transformation that recovery had brought. If booze led me on the path to extreme isolation, recovery had set me on the path of connection.

About halfway through my twenty-minute share, Jenny joined the thirty or so others scattered about in folding chairs in the basement room. A feeling not of joy but unhappiness came over me, as if I were now being burdened with an oppressive weight. I suddenly felt as closed to her as she felt “wide open” to me, if that is in fact what she had meant that morning.

As we walked back toward Grand Central Station along Third Avenue, she threw her hip out playfully, so as to bump me from my course. Or maybe she was showing not playfulness but annoyance that I had entered her life in this complicating way—the same annoyance I was seeking to hide from her.

After a few blocks we headed west along a side street before turning down Park Avenue. It was dark by now, and most of the lights in the office buildings, the newer ones boxy towers recessed from the street, had been turned off. Walking had become a form of meditation for me, a means of alleviating the stress and distress of being apart from Celeste and the life we had had together. But it had also become slightly maddening, as often I had the expectation of finding something, someone, if not on the streets themselves, then in the recovery meetings where my feet led me. But I never seemed to. All I found in the rooms of recovery was recovery itself, not any of the attractive women I would stare at, or spend the meeting trying not to stare at, and who, when I had the nerve to ask them out, would generally turn me down. One went so far as to suggest that if I were really serious about going out with a woman, I might consider removing my wedding band.

But now my fear that I might become invisible to those whom I wanted to see and receive me seemed a thing of the past. Below us we heard the rumble of a Metro-North train, the sidewalk shaking slightly from its powerful vibration.

“That could be yours,” I said.

“What could be mine?” she said.

“The train that went by.”

“There’ll be another.”

And of course there was another, and many others after that. I watched Jenny as she boarded one of those commuter trains, noting her slow, deliberate walk, and the large red knapsack she carried on her back. As I stood there, I wondered why a thirty-four-year-old woman in a beige trench coat should look so much like a schoolgirl trudging home with a bag full of books.

The snows melted away and the harsh arctic winds had turned to soft spring breezes, but my obsession with Jenny remained, for what else was I to call this preoccupation that compelled me to keep the decks clear in my admittedly simple life so nothing could come between me and her? On the rare occasions I was unable to get to the recovery meeting where we had first met, intolerable pain would set in that I would be deprived of her company along with uncontrollable fear that some of the male members of the group might begin to make inroads with her.

A call from Celeste may suffice as a gauge of my need to maintain full availability for Jenny. Celeste asked that we meet on Friday of that week rather than on Saturday, our customary evening together. A girlfriend had an extra ticket for the theater. By this time I understood that Jenny’s weekends were occupied with Kyle and there was no possibility of seeing her. But the workweek was another matter. I agreed to Celeste’s request, but the rage I could barely suppress was that of a dog toward someone who has come between a wolf and its meal.

In this way did I come to see that if Jenny was wide open, so too was I.

But Providence was smiling. Jenny rang me at work that Friday. She couldn't be at Hamburger Haven that evening, but could we meet on Saturday afternoon? Kyle was going to be away for the weekend, she explained, and she had to come into the city to take care of a few things at work in the morning.

In my years living with Celeste, there had been thoughts of other women, but I had never gone outside the marriage. My sense was that such extracurricular activities might eventually destroy me as well the marriage by sooner or later causing me to drink, as I would not have the anesthetic of alcohol to soothe my conscience.

Saturday morning I was barely able to get out of bed. There was tightness in my lower back, such as I had not experienced since a spinal injury years before. Bent over, I struggled to the bathroom and spent a miserable hour trying to shower and shave and get dressed.

That morning I wrote in my journal in the form of a dialogue.

*I:* I feel afraid that Celeste will die if I see Jenny. I feel afraid that I will die if I see Jenny. I feel this intolerable pain in my back. I feel I can't go on."

*The Voice:* Step on a crack, break your mother's back?

*I:* Yes?

*Voice:* Let go. Let go. Your mother is gone. No one is dying but your old self. Live your life. Enter the sunshine. Come to me now. Come to me."

I've come to believe that voice has always been there. If the reception has been poor, that I attribute to the worldly clamor that makes it hard for us to hear.

And so I did the voice's bidding by putting aside time for meditation. In that hour new peace and perspective and understanding came to me. A door eventually opened and I entered. There is a house with many mansions, and it is there within us. You can be sure that this is so.

It seemed to me that the sun so brilliant in the blue sky was no greater than the light within me as I walked, delirious with happiness, down Broadway, the ache in my back a thing of the past.

Jenny was sitting on the outer rim of the Pulitzer fountain on Grand Army Plaza when I arrived. With Bergdorf Goodman and Saks Fifth Avenue and the Plaza Hotel nearby, the site conjured in my mind Audrey Hepburn *in Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the height of New York elegance. Across the street the carriage operators awaited touring couples willing to spring for a slow, romantic lap of Central Park powered by clip-clopping horses. Such a ride I had never contemplated for myself, nor could I say that in my forty-six years on the island of Manhattan I had ever booked a room at the Plaza or bought an item at Saks or, for that matter, been to the top of the Empire State Building. On this bright and glorious spring day did I see the vastness of life and the smallness of my own. If Central Park, which we crossed the street to enter at its south end, was an urban sanctuary, with miles of majestic trees and breathtaking lawns and old bridges and footpaths you could tread and be truly alone with yourself, then radiant Jenny was the heart of the America that had always somehow eluded me, the America of Cary Grant and Doris Day and the cornfields of Kansas. I was with a blond and blue-eyed girl in a blue gingham dress who, not merely by her dimensions—oh, that extra inch of slender leg—but her lightness of personality, caused me to grow dizzy, crazed, hysterical, at the very thought of her.

At the park's zoo, we watched as sea lions with wise, whiskered faces and sleek bodies slid off the rock crop into the water, and then moved on to the tropical environment of the temperature-controlled aviary. And there were the polar bears, whose coats were not a luminous white but the color of three-day-old city snow.

"This is an extraordinary development," I said, as we rested on a bench, an uncontrollable urge to share some new insight bursting within me.

Jenny sat slumped, her legs spread. Her body language aroused but also frightened me. "What is an extraordinary development?" she asked, in the voice of a child made cranky by a parent's excesses of enthusiasm.

“The whole thing. Don’t you see?” I said, placing my hand lightly on her knee. “I’m learning how to live in the gray area. I’m learning about ambiguity. All my life things have been black and white, right or wrong. But here, with you, I’m involved in an unfolding.”

“You sure do talk funny, mister,” Jenny said.

“Yes,” I said, and talked some more, causing her to throw back her head and laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I said. By now I was laughing too, an involuntary response to her own. But she was laughing too hard to explain, and maybe didn’t need to, as it was there for us both to see that she was laughing at my fear.

I was wearing a brand-new pair of white chinos, which I had purchased from Banana Republic especially for the occasion. No matter how tight I pulled the belt, I felt like I was swimming in them. Long gone was the thirty-inch waist of my youth, but I still had the same skinny legs, which seemed to float in the wide cut of the cloth. Since early childhood, when my mother sent me out on an errand in a pair of shorts and I could go no farther than a few steps to the corner of Broadway before racing back home for my jeans, I had lived with the difficult problem of being a narcissist lacking a body I could be proud of. Other old memories began to find me: those summer outings to the beach at Coney Island, my stick-thin frame seemingly made of discarded parts, and the envy I felt of those tanned kids in tight bathing suits showing off their lean, well-proportioned bodies; the white socks I wore back in high school to make my legs look heavier in my gray flannel uniform pants and the excuses I made to not go swimming with the rest of the kids (“What’s the matter, Markie? Afraid to take off your shirt?”); and on and on.

Having exhausted the zoo and the park, we wandered east, toward Second Avenue. “It’s nice. I’ve been there before. You’ll see,” I said, of the café I had in mind, That I had been there with Celeste several times I found no need to mention.

If Jenny’s tired and bored expression meant anything, she was less thrilled than I with the café’s al fresco dining area out back and the view of surrounding tenements and laundry set out to dry on clotheslines several stories above, a remnant of old New York each day giving way to



modern high-rises. Though I felt the anecdotal urge, I managed to hold my tongue and spare her stories of the alley-climbing days of my urban childhood, as she did not seem like the kind to have a heavy investment in the past.

“Are you OK?” I said.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she replied, an answer that did not comfort me. Her laughter was gone by now. I sensed in her the slow buildup of peeve.

It was late afternoon when we left the café. Along the wide boulevard of Park Avenue we walked, passing a string of closed showrooms with glitzy cars—Porsches and Mercedes-Benzes and Audis. They were a reminder, if I needed one, of the higher income realm some people lived in. But really, my mind was focused on Grand Central Station, looming in the distance, with the MetLife Building rising over it. Every block brought us closer. Soon Jenny would board her train and leave me as well as the city behind. As we came within a few blocks of the terminal, I was in a state bordering on panic. Either I gave her something more than gaseous rambling or I would lose her forever. No more talk. No more nothing. We needed to kiss. But where? How? We were on Park Avenue. There were pedestrians. Not many, but enough to remind me that we were in a public thoroughfare.

A sculpture caught her eye, a tortured piece of metal in the plaza of a deeply recessed building. She wandered over. With the sculpture as a partial shield from passersby, I touched her on the shoulder gently and said, as she stood with her back to me, "Can we kiss?"

"Good idea," she replied, turned to face me, and rose up on her toes.

And there it was. It was happening. The kiss grew bolder, more exploratory. And then we stopped, because of where we were. And now there was silence, different from the sullen silence in which she had been holding herself. We resumed our walk, each in our own space but together in a new way. We had gone to a different place, and we had entered it together.

We went into the station through the carriageway on Vanderbilt Avenue, pausing at a plateau in the marble staircase to stare at the information booth and the travelers queued up at the

ticket windows on the concourse below. Several of her fingers lightly walked over the back of my hand as it rested on the retaining wall before her hand fully covered mine.

After a while I saw her to her train. As I turned back, a song went through my mind. Suddenly there was the long ago sound of Dion and the Belmonts singing "Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love?"

It came as no surprise when she called me the next afternoon, as the air had been pregnant with such a possibility. "I had a dream last night. A scary one. All these spiders were coming out of my mattress. Soon they covered my whole body. What do you think it could mean?"

"Well, according to Freud..."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid my knowledge of dreams stops there."

"Hey, you look smart."

"Well, so much for looks," I said.

"That was nice yesterday. I like the way you kiss."

"We'll have to try it again. Practice makes perfect, and all that."

Jenny had to work late the following week, and I went down to see her one evening, stopping on the way for a half dozen roses from one of the ubiquitous Korean delis. It occurred to me that the flowers, particularly roses, might be a little much, but I couldn't recall ever having been hurt by a generous impulse, and so, as Zed would say, I allowed love to be my guide.

Her office was way west on Fourteenth Street, a ragged strip featuring outdoor displays of two dollar shirts, ninety-nine cent sandals, and all manner of discounted merchandise. The attendant snoozed in his chair in the lobby of the old building on the corner of Ninth Avenue, a day-old *New York Post* covering his chest. His slumber and the surrounding stillness suggested the building had emptied out for the night. I took the elevator to the ninth floor, rang the bell, and shortly, through the glass door, saw Jenny coming toward me. She wore her blond hair up, a red

barrette holding it in place. “Oh, Lord,” I thought, dizzied by the sight of her, a fear running through me once again that I was out of my depth.

“For me?” she said, placing both her hands on her chest above that amazing cleavage.

“Yes, for you,” I said, wondering whether her gesture was exaggerated or genuine.

“I need you to stand guard while I go in and pull up my socks. I don’t always feel safe here,” she said.

Her ankles looked bare to me in the flats she was wearing. Some Midwestern euphemism, I concluded, as she let herself into the ladies’ room with a key she carried on a small hoop.

Some people indulge their fear, but I didn’t have that sense about Jenny. If beauty had a downside, it had to be the endless unsolicited attention from men of all stripes that someone with her allure surely received. She spoke as if there had been incidents to make her afraid that went beyond mere verbal propositions. Or maybe I was now conditioned to see things that way, given Celeste’s experiences.

Minutes later, she unlocked the glass door and led me through a maze of offices. She was some kind of administrator of a program for the poor and the needy, though I had thought there was a good chance that if you were poor you were also needy, and vice versa.

She placed the flowers on her bare desk, still in their paper wrapping.

“I’ll leave them here for tomorrow. They’ll be a visual treat,” she said.

“But don’t you want to put them in a vase? They’ll die without water.”

“They’ll be OK for the night. Don’t worry so much.”

But she saw that I was worried and found a vase. After filling it with water, she inserted the roses.

“The stems are too long for the vase,” I said.

“Really. You are a most attentive man,” she said, seeking to be light but giving off a vibe of impatience.

I took a pair of scissors and snipped the stems. As she turned off the light, I realized I had not seen a photo of her boyfriend on her desk, or anywhere else.

In the elevator going down we resumed what we had started on Park Avenue days before. And then, in Union Square Park, the same thing. We found a pocket of seclusion on a bench. “This is crazy... We can’t... I can’t... I have a boyfriend...” Jenny said, between kisses.

Perhaps a more moral person would have listened, nodded in agreement, and walked away, but the generosity of Jenny’s kisses, the fact of her hand in mine, the increasing familiarity with each other’s bodies—it was all too much to resist. “We’re OK... It’s just tonight... Tomorrow we’ll see... Exploration is good... Some things were meant to be...” These and other things I whispered.

“Kyle and I are going away next week to discuss marriage and our future together...”  
Kiss. Long probing kiss. My hand grazing her breast.

In fact, she and her boyfriend did go away to an island off the coast of Maine. I felt no fear or jealousy. If anything, I harbored an attitude of skepticism about this New England powwow. People who were serious about moving forward together had no need for weeklong discussions about marriage on some remote island but chose such islands for their honeymoon. My impression was of ditherers, dawdle dancers on the one-yard line who could not carry the pigskin into the end zone.

When several days passed and I hadn’t heard from her, I remained relaxed, my confidence unshaken that soon the phone would ring and she would be on the line. The sense of connection was palpable.

The Oiseau had suggested that in any relationship, there is the person who needs distance and the one who pursues. The cardinal rule in any relationship is to never pursue the distancer but to allow her or him to come to you, the Oiseau had instructed. And Celeste was a primary example of the efficacy of that rule. It had become a sort of spiritual exercise to not pick up the phone and call her when everything in me was screaming for her. As a result, Celeste began to come back, if in a different way, when I didn’t give chase. And now I could apply the same concept with Jenny.

But by Saturday, my confidence had begun to erode. Perhaps I was wrong and nuptial vows were imminent. Perhaps they had taken them on that very island.

Celeste was not feeling well, and so I was alone that weekend. Maybe I could walk cross-town through Central Park and wander the rooms of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Staring at paintings by old masters or sitting peacefully among the towering Buddhas in the Asian wing would get me out of the apartment. On my way back, I could stop off at OrganicOnly and put together a cheap dinner of tofu and sprouts and spinach leaves and yams at the half-price salad bar. Maybe listen to the too breathy voice of Garrison Keillor on *Prairie Home Companion*, even if it was a show that could make me feel old and sad, and then lie alone in bed listening to some do-wop songfest on Channel 13, geriatric rockers singing their oldies but goodies.

As I was gathering my wallet and my keys, the phone rang. The answering machine kicked in, and there, on the tape, following the beep, was Jenny's voice, sounding small and timid. I snatched up the receiver.

"Have we become a screener?" she asked.

"I was afraid it was some American huckster with an offer I couldn't refuse."

"Do I sound like a huckster, American or otherwise?"

"No, you're the real deal."

"There isn't a second of a minute that I haven't been thinking of you. Can you come over?"

Just that.

Within a half hour I was staring out through the fogged window of the Metro-North coach car at the gritty streets of Harlem while imagining Cary Grant, in *North by Northwest*, meeting Eve Marie Sainte on the New York Central's Chicago Limited out of Grand Central. A beautiful adventure, the kind that doesn't come along often, was unfolding. I was heading north, along the magical Hudson River, away from the city, where, at the Dobbs Ferry station, a beautiful woman wearing cutoff jeans and a tight maroon sleeveless top awaited me.

“Nice car,” I said, as she stood outside the red Saab.

“It’s my ex-husband’s. The car. The apartment. Everything’s my ex-husband’s. Except for me.”

I couldn’t tell if she was bitter or simply being matter-of-fact.

Her apartment was vast, the vestibule alone the size of a small studio in Manhattan, and with a striking view, through the casement windows, of the Hudson River, where, in the darkness, the lights of a tanker that had dropped anchor could be seen burning. There was a dining table that seated eight, but which I sensed was rarely used, even by her. The apartment struck me as that of someone in a holding pattern.

Evidently, love had not ruled the day during her island stay with Kyle. There had been no romantic strolls along the shore or harmony-filled lobster dinners by candlelight. Instead, there had been recrimination and accusation, at least on her part. He had not presented the ring he had promised, and placed the blame for his balkiness on his mother. His mother liked Jenny, Kyle had assured Jenny, but she also had reservations. Jenny was a year older than her precious son and wasn’t herself a Catholic. Left unspoken by Kyle, Jenny suspected, was the fact that she had been married and divorced, whereas Kyle had never been married at all, unless it was to his mother.

“She would hold your divorce against you? Divorce is pretty common these days,” I said.

“To her, it means that I am damaged goods. Some man decided he didn’t want me. Which isn’t true. I didn’t want him. I had never wanted him.”

“You married a man you didn’t want?”

“I had to. Clarence went down on one knee to me. A ridiculous sight. What was I to do? I was twenty-three years old. I warned him that my only relationship was to the bottle, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“He wouldn’t listen?”

“He kept up his pursuit and would present me with lavish gifts. And so I thought, well, why not? He owns five houses, six cars, has 150 employees. He’s powerful.”

“And what happened?”

“I wound up marrying a man I didn’t love and couldn’t love. We remained strangers to each other. It was kind of sad, when I think about it.”

“How long have you been seeing Kyle?” I asked, my hand now on her knee.

“Too long,” she replied, as we kissed. I touched her breast and her hand went immediately to my groin, as if a switch had been thrown.

“We should go slow,” I said.

“Slow?” she said, incredulous.

“Don’t you think?” I was too cowardly to say what was really on my mind, that I was in the sexual ring with a woman who might be too strong for me. I stared nervously into the unused fireplace.

“Think?” She uttered the word as if it too were utterly strange and incomprehensible.

From the sofa I could see into the bedroom and the king-sized bed on which she slept.

“Maybe more action, less thinking,” I said, placing my hand inside her blouse.

Instantly we seemed to be naked and transported onto that bed, where she reached an outstretched arm behind her to the headboard for a condom with one deft, practiced motion. I hadn’t worn one since back in high school. The thought of my poor penis sheathed in latex did nothing for my confidence.

You have probably seen those advertisements in which a man lies with his face down in a pillow, the picture of shame induced by erectile dysfunction. I was that man that evening. There are some women, I have learned, who are gracious about their partners’ sexual failures, but Jenny was not one of them. She tried to be understanding, but questions in her mind about her own sexual appeal got in the way. The whole concept of body image deserves exploration, a person has to believe, when he hears a woman with mesmerizing dimensions—a model-thin figure and Hooters-qualifying breasts—ask if he finds her unattractive.

“Are you sure?” she said, in her little girl voice.

“You’re amazing. I’ve never been with anyone like you. Never. I’m stunned. It’s me. It may be that I’m frightened. It may be that this is also new. I think I just need time.”

We lingered in bed, touching each other and kissing, always kissing, as if, having established physical contact, we could not stop. The hours passed, and my familiarity with her body grew. To compensate for my limp member, I learned how to touch her, to run my hand gently down her back and how to bring her to a point of arousal.

Outside, in the darkness, a strong wind was blowing and rain began to beat against the windows, but we were sheltered from the elements and the world.

The phone began to ring and continued with an insistent urgency somehow sinister and threatening there in the dark, the only light coming from the phosphorescent green digits of the bedside alarm clock. Who called at half past midnight?

“Oh, my God,” Jenny said, as if to echo my concern, and reached for the receiver.  
“Hi...Yes, I was, but it’s OK. I’ll get back to sleep...Oh, great...Sure, OK.”

I had turned my back to her when she answered the phone to give her space, but now that she had hung up, she pressing herself up against my back.

“Are things all right?” I asked.

“Not to worry,” she said, kissing the nape of my neck.

“Was it him?”

“Sure was.”

“There’s no possibility he might, um, stop by? He’s not in the habit of making late-night calls?”

“Not to worry,” she said.

“Not to worry?”

“Not unless you want to worry about a man who is three thousand miles away,” she said.

“What is he doing three thousand miles away?”

“Overthrowing some government probably. He didn’t say.”

“He overthrows governments? Is that for a pastime or for a living?”



“For both, maybe. I do believe his heart is fully in it.”

“What is he? CIA or something?”

“You got it.”

“Jesus.”

“Don’t worry about it. Our secret is safe with me. I’m one code he can’t crack.”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a CIA agent.”

“Kyle says they’re all around, and where you least expect it.”

“You mean the motorman on the number 2 train could be CIA?”

“If they need someone to keep an eye out on stuff going on underground, why not?”

“Jesus.” Now the primal fear of extinction was large in my mind. I saw blood everywhere, her suitor entering through the front door with a .44 Magnum equipped with a silencer in hand and coolly dispatching me and perhaps Jenny to the afterworld.

“Stop saying that word. Tell me what you want, baby. Tell Mama,” she whispered in my ear.

It was everything not to say Jesus after that.

Blond and corn-fed, Kyle looked pretty All-American to me in the framed photo on the mantelpiece, the picture of moderation and geniality. A man who wore Izod shirts and Dockers and penny loafers.

“How did you meet him?” I asked the next morning.

“At a party my husband and I gave. He was our next-door neighbor.”

“He lived next door?”

“Yes, but he was gone for long periods of time.”

“Out there doing his dirty tricks?”

“He lives in a different world from you and me. Anyway, I was attracted to him right away.”

“Um, who lives there now?”

“A Korean couple.”

“How can you know they’re not CIA, too?”

“Mr. Wang is pretty nine-to-five, or nine to midnight anyway. He owns a grocery in the center of town. Don’t worry. He’s too tired to kill anyone by the time he comes home.”

“That’s good to know.”

She began to laugh.

“What?” I said.

“You should see your face. Don’t you know when I’m kidding you? Kyle is not in the CIA. He’s the captain of an oil tanker.”

I checked my impulse to ask in which of the Seven Seas this oil tanker might now be.

I didn’t get home on Sunday either, having passed most of it in Jenny’s bed. We had every intention of getting out and seeing the sights, such as there were in Dobbs Ferry, but the hours would just slip away, as they do for someone rendered drowsy and weak by illness. But we weren’t enervated. We were simply stuck to each other, as a drunk is to a bottle. It took being famished to drive us from her bedroom, and by then it was nightfall.

The next morning we caught the 7:28 into the city, Jenny running for the train with a container of coffee in her hand. “I’m not civilized without my joe,” she said. Sleep-deprived and wearing the same casual clothes as when I arrived in Dobbs Ferry, I stood with Jenny in the packed commuter car among the power drivers of America, men in expensive pinstriped suits, some wearing suspenders with their brilliant white shirts and pinstriped suits. Like bloodhounds racing for the Big Apple, only it was money, not flesh, that they were on the trail of. A rail car full of hard-core capitalists with the steely resolve for financial warfare. The presence of Jenny diverted a number from their morning editions of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Before them, I suspected, was the trophy wife they dreamed of, these titans of finance wondering what a woman of her caliber was doing with an impotent sort like me, a thought fed by the sexual failure I was fresh from experiencing in Jenny’s bed.

I went home and changed my clothes before heading for work. Something was different, I thought, casting my eye over the tired furnishings, especially the clunky and worn beige sofa. Whatever the weekend with Jenny had been about, it had given me a frame of reference by which to see the meagerness of the life that I had been living.

“I’m terrified. How can I hold onto a woman I can’t make love to?” I said to Zed that evening.

“Isn’t the idea to let go, not hold on?” Zed said.

“But at some point I have to be able to make love to her, don’t I?”

“You just gave yourself your own answer. At some point. And you haven’t reached that point.”

“How can you know that?”

“If she is reasonably solid, this won’t be a concern to her as much as it is to you.”

“I sensed before Jenny and I even started that I would be impotent.”

“Are you really impotent? I seriously doubt that. I would think you are protecting yourself.”

“Protecting myself?”

“In your own way you are proceeding cautiously.”

“What am I doing in this relationship anyway? Celeste called me yesterday. A message was waiting for me when I came home to change my clothes this morning. I don’t want to hurt her. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Changing your clothes. Changing your life.”

“I’m not sure I want this change. I want to stay safe. I, I don’t know.”

“Something in you does, my friend.”

“Something in me does what?”

“Knows where you need to go.”

“Now you’re scaring me. I don’t want to leave Celeste. I don’t ever want to leave Celeste. Ever.”

“Your mind is running against you. It is confusing change with leaving. Did you leave behind your alcoholism when you got sober?”

“Are you equating Celeste with my alcoholism?”

“As I said, your mind is working against you. Did leaving your life of cohabitation with Celeste mean you left the relationship?”

“No.”

“Then draw on that experience when your mind tries to attack you and fill you with fear.”

“Yes. I guess. I don’t know.”

“Stay in the day, my friend. Stay in the day.”

It wasn’t all my fault. That’s what I want to say. Sometime before, at a session with the Oiseau, I had warned Celeste that she was seriously frightening me.

Tom Timmons. To Celeste he was nothing but a friend, or maybe only an acquaintance, but to me he was the wrecking ball that would demolish our life, a source of torment.

I first heard his name in connection with a dinner party given by Celeste’s longtime friend Maude. “He basically invited himself. Maude says he’s very pushy. When he learned that I’m an artist, he decided that I should do the illustrations for a book project he is working on. But I don’t know if I want to work with him. Do you think I should?”

Expressions of ambivalence about people in her life were frequent with Celeste. Maude was selfish and dropped her in an instant if she had better things to do. Connie, her art dealer friend, was forever praising male artists they both knew but consistently overlooked Celeste’s work. Friends like these she needed? Celeste asked. I had learned to just listen, understanding that what I was hearing from Celeste was a verbal record of conflict and ultimate resolution that would allow these people to remain in her life.

But if I could claim to understand Celeste, she could claim the same about me: my self-doubt, my excesses of temper and the things that set it off, and definitely my insecurity about

potential rivals. And now, seated at a booth in a West Side restaurant, she was bearing full witness to that discomfort—if turmoil of the magnitude I was experiencing could be called that.

The pressure was greatly on me to be good to Celeste, and more importantly, to be good for her. Celeste was my court of opinion, the only opinion that mattered. The power of dismissal is a vast power.

If her opinion mattered, then it was important that she not see my jealousy. And yet see it she did, as she was able to read every nuance in my face, having become sensitized to all my moods. The word that Celeste had hurled at me during our years together was “possessive.” “I can’t even go to a party without you going to pieces. For God’s sake, if I’m an hour late you call Maude and ask to speak with me. Do you know how embarrassing that is? Maude couldn’t believe it, and she likes you. There I am enjoying being out with people and you suddenly have to rope me in, as if I were your property.” And she was right, as far as these things went. Except now, in that time we had come to, it was as if I were living with a perfect stranger, a woman who said, when I stepped in the door after a weekend away from her, that I was sucking her blood. The time away from her had fostered the foolish hope that she would miss me and welcome my return. Instead, I was likely to hear, “Your slave. That’s all you want me to be. You know it and I know it. You want to be lord and master.”

Zed’s viewpoint was that I shouldn’t take the things she said personally and that she wasn’t really talking to me. “A dog walks across the road and a house falls down. Is the dog responsible?”

“No. Of course not,” I said.

“Nor are you responsible for her condition.”

But her words had a cumulative effect. They had to. You couldn’t walk away unscathed from a two-year verbal barrage such as Celeste had unleashed, no matter how much detachment you practiced.

And Tom Timmons' name did surface again. In restaurants. As we waited for the curtain to rise at off-Broadway plays. In bed. Tom Timmons. The alliterative name spilling out of her mouth like nonsense syllables, each time throwing my fear machine into gear.

"Tom Timmons is so pushy. I don't know if I want to work with him," Celeste said, in the restaurant where we now sat, in regard to the book project he had proposed. There went the nice dinner I had been having with her.

"You don't have to."

"But it could be so interesting. I've always liked the idea of doing book illustration." Her inheritance had allowed her to sequester herself from a dangerous world in which too many hands reached out for her. The workplace would have meant a male boss whose bidding she would ultimately have to do. Wasn't that the way of the world, to submit to male authority?

"Right. It could be."

"But I don't know if I even like Tom Timmons. He can be pretty mean."

"You'll find a way to handle the situation." I could say the right words even if I didn't feel them.

The man's name could enter my mind but it did not have to come from my mouth. And it didn't. And I didn't have to say "he" or "him" either, as a pronoun would just bring him one step closer to reality.

"See it as an opportunity."

"He wants me to show him sample sketches."

"So? Show a few sketches."

"He wants me to bring them to his apartment next week. He lives on the Upper West Side, not far from you. Eighty-second and Broadway."

Celeste's openness should have told me she had no amorous intentions regarding Tom Timmons. She was simply seeking strength and reassurance from me as she walked through her fears, but since she couldn't speak for Tom Timmons' intentions, all I could really give her was my insecurity.

And that insecurity went through the roof when, the next week, I saw Celeste's Subaru parked outside his building as I was heading for the Fairway market for groceries. And then it went through the stratosphere when she told me, a week later, that Tom Timmons would be throwing a party to celebrate their collaboration.

"You're invited, of course," Celeste said, without requesting my attendance. But my fear was out of control by now. My presence at the party would have meant surrender on my rival's turf to the new reality that Tom Timmons and Celeste were partners, not Celeste and me. She would make a comparison, decidedly unfavorable to me, between her deflated husband and her confident collaborator.

"Actions have consequences," I said, during a session with the Oiseau, referring to Tom Timmons and his party.

"How do you hear what he is saying to you?" the Oiseau asked, seeing that Celeste stared at me with a look of incomprehension.

"He's bullying me again. He wants to put me in a box and keep me there," Celeste said. "It's the way he always acts."

"Remember what I said about 'always.' Let's try to keep to a specific time and place and not broaden into generalities."

"I can't be more specific. He has always been this way. For a while, since I asked him to leave, I had some hope that he would change, but he doesn't."

"Remember that you have a complex history together."

"Complex is not the word that I would use," Celeste said.

"What word would you use?"

"Hellish? Brutal?"

"That's pretty bleak," the Oiseau said.

"I don't say he isn't trying. I do appreciate his efforts."

The party only grew bigger in my mind. Driven by a deeper sense of abandonment, I pursued other women with a stronger resolve. The evening of the party I sat in an East Side

movie theater with a woman who sang along to the soundtrack of *Carlito's Way*, and not so *sotto voce* that heads didn't turn.

The pressure seemed to build as the evening progressed. Back home that night, I wrapped my arms around my sides, as if to hold myself together, and stayed away from the windows, in fear that I might fling one open and take the plunge. The lights were a torment, and so I turned them all off and went about in the dark. On my knees I tried to center myself in prayer. Out loud I asked that Celeste and Tom Timmons have love and joy and peace and happiness and the companionship they sought in their lives in the same measure as I wished these things for myself. A hundred times I repeated these words until they became an incantation. There in my bedroom, my forehead touching the hardwood floor, it came to me that what I had read is true: if duality is the source of all pain, then oneness is the answer. A great peace entered me, a happiness and sense of wholeness beyond words. Right there on the floor did I fall asleep.

The Oiseau and Zed had recommended an individual therapist for me when Celeste and I separated, and Dr. Tobin had proven to be a lifeline. By now I had assigned to him a realistic identity. He was not a serial killer, a sadist with a secret hack shop. Nor was he gay or solitary, as I at one point had come to believe. I saw him now as a family man with teenage children, which in fact he was.

“I have a theory as to what underlies the enormous anxiety you have been experiencing your entire life. Imagine you are being fitted for a suit. The tailor has you try on the jacket and pants. Maybe the seat of the pants is too baggy. Maybe the sleeves need to be shortened. Maybe there is too much room under the arms. Alterations will be made to ensure that the suit fits properly.

“Suppose that as a young child you were close to your mother and even came to have the idea that you were indispensable to her. And yet your father arrived home every night and occupied her bed. His frequent explosions of anger filled you with the dread of reprisal for wanting your mother all to yourself. Suppose that in your relationships with girls and later women the same dynamic established itself. Suppose you were still the little boy in relation to



these women and living in fear that someone would come, a man you knew or didn't know, because he was bigger and stronger, and displace you, just as your father had done?"

I looked back on my life. There was that intense relationship through all four years of high school with Jane Thayer, and the pattern that developed in which I would torment her with accusations that she was interested in some other boy until she in fact would take up with someone else for a time before coming back to me. Or the years of terror I let myself in for when, as a college sophomore, I fell in love with a girl in her last year of high school who then went off to college in another state. The threats. The anger. The accusations. The surprise visits to her with the single purpose of catching her in the act until I did catch her in the act. All that volcanic emotion, all that dread, depriving me of the peace of mind that might allow me to do something with my life. And all of it going back to my mother, my childhood.

"It's getting harder to write out those checks to Dr. Tobin," I said to Zed the following week.

"Then why are you writing them?"

"Because I have to."

"You have to?"

"I need to get better. I can't just let him go."

"Why can't you just let him go?"

"He needs me. I need him."

"Oh, really?"

"You're frightening me."

"I'm frightening you or your own strength is frightening you?"

In this way did Zed speak to me.

And so, some days later, I said to Dr. Tobin, "I'm thinking of leaving."

"Why would that be?" Dr. Tobin asked.

"I just feel led to." I would not bring Zed into the discussion.

A week passed. I began to wobble about the decision I had made. You want to go back to Dr. Tobin so bad? I said to myself. Then go. Pick up the phone and make an appointment. Then imagine yourself walking into his office. But I couldn't. I just couldn't. It would have been like putting on an old shirt that had hung in the back of my closet for two years.

About this time I met my friend Gert for dinner at a Japanese noodle shop. He had been a wise older brother type for many years, someone I turned to frequently with my marital woes and other difficulties. I pulled out a chair from the table so he could sit. He looked at me with fear, clearly startled. Some suggestion of strength had emerged from my fecklessness, my sycophancy. Those are big words to say that something instantly altered.

"You're different," he said.

"Yes," I said.

A week later, I met Jenny. Jenny Caitlin Gresham.

"Never pursue a distancer," the Oiseau had said, but what were you supposed to do when the distancer was no longer distancing herself but in fact was becoming the pursuer, or if not quite that, nevertheless wanted to see you more than you wanted to see her, or if not that either, wanted to see you at a time when you didn't want to see her, and if that wasn't quite it either, wanted to see you at a time when you *couldn't* see her?

"I have two tickets for a performance of Schubert lieder at Carnegie Hall. Maude gave them to me. She hasn't been feeling well. Do you want to go? It should be great." Celeste had a knowledge and greater appreciation of classical music than I would ever possess. However, I had taken to listening to art song in the morning, as I prepared for work. Strange to listen to songs in German whose lyrics I didn't know and delivered in beautiful soprano voices, but they entered me into a calm, reflective place that raucous rock never did.

"I can't," I said.

"That's too bad."

"I just can't," I said.

“It’s OK.”

“Is it OK? Is it?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me.”

It was not a small matter to turn down Celeste. Any harm I did to her I did to myself. This goodness thing. It was a real problem. An hour dragged past. My mind was fixed on how to make things right with Celeste. As if she hadn’t left me. As if I were the one leaving her. As if she could see Tom Timmons, whatever they were doing, but I couldn’t see Jenny.

But the fact was she wasn’t doing anything. She had nothing to hide. Not that she would be obliged to hide it if she were. But I had everything to hide, as I wasn’t born to hurt Celeste and would have to die if I did. Though I had nothing to hide either, since she had left me. Only she hadn’t left me. She had just asked me to leave.

It went on like this.

All I wanted was for Celeste to leave me alone so I could be with Jenny, and she had to come along with those damn concert tickets.

I turned to my journal. The same old stuff. Celeste, emotionally speaking, was my mother, and my mother was dead, and no one should live his life trying to satisfy his dead mother. After all, death was the ultimate departure, so who was leaving whom here, Mother?

Celeste and I needed to get stronger. For that to happen, we would have to pursue the things in life that interested us and not hold back.

“I can’t go on this way,” I said to Zed. “I can’t. I just get so angry at Celeste if there is even a remote possibility that seeing her will reduce my chance of seeing Jenny.”

Zed didn’t laugh at me. He didn’t give me his famous chuckle. “You’re very kind,” he simply said.

The weekend Jenny and I had spent together changed things. It moved us beyond the public places. The next week she came to my West Side apartment. “I love schwinging,” she whispered, lying naked on my queen-sized bed. The onomatopoeic word rang in my ears. And

though we couldn't *schwing*, my failure once again leaving me with my face buried in the pillow and feeling it was the end, we somehow found a way to go on.

I found myself putting aside art song and listening to loud rock music. I bought new clothes. I rejoiced at being seen with Jenny by neighbors—the looks of envy on the faces of men and the spark of interest in me shown by some of the women, as if Jenny conferred a newfound legitimacy on me as a viable male. Mostly I saw the influence of Jenny on my own mind, the image of her in an ice-blue bra or the way her body shuddered when I gently probed her sex with my finger or the feel of her tongue when it came fully into my mouth, or the way she had of spreading my semen all over her breasts. Or the way she sometimes said, “Come in my mouth,” when she was excited.

“I have something I need to say,” I said.

The Oiseau did not interrupt with her patented cross-checking. She gave me her silence, as did Celeste.

“I don't want to say it, but I have to say it.”

The Oiseau knew. I knew she knew. “Go on,” she said.

“I met someone. I didn't mean for it to happen this way. It just did.”

Celeste was doing some busy stuff with her fingers, pulling at the skin around the tips of them. “It's all right,” she finally murmured.

Celeste and I went to the coffee shop. I began to cry into my rice pudding. She waited for me to stop. Then we left and she got in her car and drove away.

My life was pretty simple. I liked to take walks and sit in the park in warm weather. My apartment was rented, not owned. I had a modest salary and overdressed for my job, some days wearing a suit and always a tie. The bag I toted to and fro contained not important work documents I would slave away over during non-office hours but the latest novel I had pulled from the shelf of the New York Public Library, my lunch, and my own personal scribbling. My

boss was a pint-sized woman named Miss Glonk (never *Ms.* Glonk) who apportioned work to her staff the way a miser apportions money. So habituated to this free time at company expense had I become that any infringement on my down time I received, at least inwardly, with extremely bad humor.

“You always look so rested after a workday, while I am worn out. I wonder why that is,” Jenny mused, one steamy July evening after the recovery meeting at Hamburger Haven. She was wearing a blue gingham dress. Surely I had seen Brigitte Bardot, with her sultry lips, in that same dress. Not every day did Jenny wear it, but she did again on the day we strolled through the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. And there was the ensemble that placed me even deeper in thrall to her, the khaki short shorts and sleeveless red top she showed up in the day we met in Carl Schurz Park, near Gracie Mansion, where we sat looking out on the East River and she put her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. And the cream-colored slacks she wore with a white blouse the day of the San Gennaro Festival down in Little Italy, where we ate sausage sandwiches and cannolis and other things I normally didn’t touch, and tried to throw balls through hoops for prizes neither of us really wanted. But the thing I did want she wouldn’t give me, a photo that would freeze time with tangible proof that I had briefly been here on this earth with this beautiful creature. She wouldn’t say why, and I didn’t ask, feeling as I did the firmness of her resolve not to give in to the coaxing of the vendor at the photo booth. But there was no need to say why. It was understood, at least by me. A photo of the two of us together would have given our relationship a reality she was unwilling to commit to.

An urban summer, not the kind that she was used to, but the kind that I could offer. The kind that did not cost too much or cause anxiety-inducing dislocation.

And yet Celeste was still there. Daily would internal flares of concern burst forth. I saw and heard her in my mind. An image would form of something pulled out of shape, of words unspoken that needed to be spoken. But that time was not at hand.

At an outdoor café on Mulberry Street, I told Jenny everything that had happened between Celeste and me. In more detail did I go over the horror Celeste’s stepfather had visited

on her and the slow process of these recovered memories and the nightmare they were for her to recall. I wanted Jenny to understand that Celeste was not cut from the same cloth as those who wore their personal tragedy on their sleeve. And in a general way did I talk about my contributions to the marital rupture: my tendency toward anger and to pick on Celeste. And about the liberating discovery Dr. Tobin had made about my mother and me and how that had carried over into my adult relations with women.

I told Jenny I was engaged with life and the process of living. In so many words I told her this.

“It is beastly hot. *Beastly*. Would you agree with that assessment?” she replied. She could be that way sometimes, holding a tight rein on discourse when her level of peeve had risen.

The Canal Street subway station was an inferno, and the engine heat as the train arrived only made things worse. *Beastly*, I thought. *Beastly*.

Fifteen minutes later, granted the reprieve of air-conditioned cars, we were on the Upper West Side. A weary-looking man caught my attention on Broadway. There he was in the scorching heat with his head sticking out of a signboard advertising a computer store front and back.

“That is one sad sight,” I said.

“What’s a sad sight?”

“A man having to be a human billboard.”

“He’s making an honest wage,” Jenny said.

She had steel where I had only liberal softness. To that point it hadn’t occurred to me that our politics might not be the same. I felt rebuffed, but also that I was with someone capable of original thinking, a bracing and invigorating way of looking at the world. I felt a lot of things.

In my apartment I kissed Jenny’s knee. “It’s the most beautiful knee I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“Only God can make a knee.”

“Is that right?” I asked.

“So my grandmother said.”

“What about the rest of you?” I asked, as I unzipped the back of her dress.

“She had no stated opinion,” Jenny whispered, turning and bringing her face to mine as her dress slid from her shoulders.

“I want to be here in your apartment when it rains and thunders. I feel safe here.” This too did Jenny whisper.

“If you get involved with someone who is also in recovery, expect to live your life in a goldfish bowl,” Zed said. My involvement with Jenny did not exactly constitute a goldfish bowl, but people at Hamburger Haven were noticing. “Where did you find her?” “You’re a lucky guy.” Things like this I would hear. And if I was lucky, that meant there were others who were unlucky. Alcoholism is a rough, progressive illness. In the room were men who had drank into their forties and fifties, men who had lost their jobs and their wives, their homes and their health. Men who had no women. Men shut off from the touch of women, except as that touch recalled itself in their minds. Men who stood in the solitary way men can stand smoking their cigarettes out on the sidewalk after the meeting, trying to hide the look of hurt and anger and envy on their middle-aged faces as I walked off with Jenny. Men trying to regain the lives they had lost to the bottle. Men living to good purpose with less than they had once had, but that did not mean they didn’t want more than they now had.

And then there were the men who hadn’t lost everything to the bottle, and who were closer in age to Jenny than to me. And they too looked at Jenny in a certain way. I was not used to feeling envied by others, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t recognize it when it was happening.

Toward summer’s end the group organized a picnic in Central Park. Everyone was to bring some food or drink (nonalcoholic). “We should go. We never get to see these people. We’re like outsiders,” Jenny said.

Gwen and Lucy tossed a ball, and Fred and Andy and Liz were having a Frisbee party all their own. And there was Glen, standing in the shadow of a plane tree, his face ashen and his own thick hair fast leaving his scalp. The dead in life had come back to life, or were trying to.

“There’s Mac,” Jenny said. And yes, there he was, coming toward us across the worn-down grass, that wise-ass smile on his narrow, feral face.

“Is this guy robbing the cradle? These gentle sorts can be the worst hounds,” Mac said to Jenny, before darting off. Fish-like he was. Slippery, and always changing direction.

“What’s he mean, robbing the cradle?” Jenny asked.

“It’s hard to know what Mac means. Surprise attack sort of person. Hits you with something and then moves on before you can respond.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but what did he mean about robbing the cradle?”

“Something about not getting involved in the first year.”

“Why not?”

“Well, some people feel it distracts the newcomer from recovery.”

“Oh,” Jenny said, not as if the subject was now closed but as one she would continue at another time or in her own head.

“Should we go?” I said.

“Why? We only just got here. Say, you’re not afraid of them, are you? You act as if these people are going to bite you.”

“Why should I be afraid of people who are helping to save my life?” I said.

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

I wasn’t the best at social integration. No one had to remind me of that. I didn’t tell Jenny that my high school girlfriend, Jane Thayer, had used the same expression when I balked at joining her and some of the neighborhood kids for an outing to the beach at Coney Island.

One of the women, Lucy, had a Polaroid camera. “Let me get you two lovebirds sitting on your blanket,” she said. A minute later she let us see her artistry. The color photo was a contrast of age and youth, relatively speaking, a thin, pale man with a tanned and beautiful



woman, in whom the life force was so much more abundant. It showed the difference between a woman who lived for the out-of-doors and a shut-a-way. I saw my vanity, the ridiculous vest over a red T-shirt that I had chosen to wear that summer day. I saw my reed-thin neck. Oh, Lord, the things I saw.

Mac was back. "What have we got here, Beauty and the Beast?"

"Oh, Mac," Jenny laughed.

My mind went back to that lost photo opportunity down in Little Italy. Be careful what you wish for, I thought. Oh yes.

Then one day she came to my place of work. She hadn't asked to. I simply invited her.

Once, years before, I had gone out with a woman who invested heavily in her appearance. Then one night I came calling on her, and she had rollers in her hair and her face was purged of makeup and slathered with beauty cream and the yogurt she was eating out of a container with a tablespoon had coated her tongue white. She had given me her beauty, and now she wanted me to see her other side.

But I wasn't asking Jenny to see my unattractive side. I was only asking that she see my life and to take me as I was, the thing everybody wants when image becomes too wearisome.

Her manner was one of sullen assessment as she stood in my cubicle. A narrow corner cube that could barely accommodate two people was not the same as a corner office. It was as if she was measuring the small space in her mind.

"Who might that be?" she asked, pointing to the framed black and white photo on my desk.

"That's Celeste," I said.

With that she walked off. I caught up with her by the elevator bank on the landing.

"What's the matter?"

"You keep a photo of the woman you're separated from on your desk and ask me what the matter is?"

The photo did not capture Celeste at her best. In fact, it showed her at some early point in her disintegration the summer her anorexia manifested so acutely. I had been able to remove my ring, but I had not been able to remove her photo.

“You are the only woman I want to be with now.”

“I don’t think so, Mark. This just isn’t good enough. Now don’t follow me into the elevator.”

*This* had a missing antecedent, but things became clearer that weekend. She called and summoned me for a powwow. Whatever she might have in store, it had to be better than the anguish I had experienced during the exile she had imposed, and so I raced down to Grand Central and caught the 2:05 to Dobbs Ferry.

If I thought she was going to berate me further for daring to have a photo of Celeste on my desk, I was mistaken. Whatever consternation the photo had caused her was evidently history.

“I want to know you for the rest of my life, but you are not marriageable,” she said. “When people are young, they marry for love. But at my age, given that my biological clock is ticking, I have to make sound decisions. While you wear a suit, it is clear to me from your freshness in the early evening and your availability when I call you at the office that you have a less than taxing desk job. Essentially, you are one of those men who walk about with an attaché case that contains nothing more than the daily newspaper and your lunch. It also occurs to me that you are looking for a woman who will take you away from your present circumstances because you don’t have the power to do this on your own. Don’t ask me how I know and don’t feel bad that I am taking stock in this way. But it is best to be honest and look at things with clear eyes and a strong mind.”

Her tone was different, as if I were being spoken to by some prim, exacting taskmaster. Though her words hurt, I couldn’t say I felt devastated. The idea of being a financial titan in her life held no particular interest for me. Responsibilities more than I had seemed like an unwelcome burden. All I felt was drowsy. I lay down on her sofa and closed my eyes.

Jenny came and sat beside me.

“Thanks for the powwow,” I said.

“I have a second powwow tonight,” she said, laying her head on my chest. “A big powwow.”

“What kind of powwow would that be?” I asked sleepily, my eyes closing and my hand stroking her silky hair.

“The biggest kind. With Kyle’s mother.”

“Kyle’s mother? Where will Kyle be?”

“He’ll be there too. We’re trying to work things out.”

“That does sound pretty big,” I said.

“She’s putting me through another of her tests. The jury is still out on me so far as she is concerned.”

“A jury of one is tough as well as unusual, isn’t it?”

“It’s the rules of this particular court.”

“What are her reservations again?” I asked, running my hand up Jenny’s skirt on the inside of her thigh.

“She has a religious criterion when it comes to marriage, as I have told you. Divorce is incompatible with virtue in her book,” Jenny said, moving my hand farther up her leg to her wet sex as she pulled her blouse over her head and unclasped her bra.

“Yes,” I said, my mind unwilling or unable to fathom the strictures and rigor of religion. I had spent the early years of my life in a holy roller hullabaloo at a Pentecostal tabernacle that I fled from at age thirteen. All the pronouncements and admonitions about drinking and the fleshpots of Egypt had only made me want the forbidden fruit of the world even more.

“She is concerned that I won’t be a good mother, or any mother at all, to Kyle’s children. But you have no such concerns about my mothering ability, do you?” she said, offering me her breast.

“None at all,” I said.

We did some things that afternoon we hadn't done before. I gave her a gentle slap on her bottom and then another. She responded by raising her rump higher. The hours slipped by. She unzipped me as we headed for the door and dropped to her knees. Wantonness was in the air. She left me off at the train station and I gave the whole matter to providence.

"How was your weekend?" I said to Jenny a few days later.

"The woman did everything but inspect my teeth."

"That doesn't sound like fun."

"She had me set the table. I think she wanted to be sure I knew how to line up the silverware and properly fold a linen napkin. She asked me if I liked to cook, and what sorts of dishes I prepared. Did I attend church regularly? Did I believe in marriage?"

"And did you pass?"

"There is no passing with a woman of her kind. She has her thirty-five-year-old son on a short leash. He is all she has in the world."

"I see."

"On the subject of seeing, Kyle saw a thing or two as well."

"What might that be?" I asked, in a voice I didn't quite recognize as my own.

"Bruises. Discolored flesh."

"I don't understand."

We were in my apartment. She stood up and removed her skirt and then her panties.

"My God," I said, startled by the sight of black and blue patches on each tanned buttock.

"Exactly what Kyle said when he saw them."

"And what did you say?"

"That I took a fall and landed hard on my keister."

"And did he accept your explanation?"

"He didn't not accept it. How can I say this? Kyle is not, um, adventurous in bed. He's not exploratory in the way that you are."

Maybe. But he was a bright man. Though it was currently beyond his grasp to imagine anyone whaling away on his girlfriend's bottom, someday the real cause of the bruises would occur in a flash of understanding. The unfathomable would float up from the depths of his consciousness, where everything is known. Contemplating Kyle's clean-cut image, as it appeared in my mind, I felt like a different species of being, someone dark and staining.

"Aren't you going to kiss the boo-boo?" she said, placing my hand on her injured bottom.

And so we were right back at it, and if I should have felt bad for unsuspecting Kyle, I couldn't bring myself to that place. In spite of his clean-cut image, who knew what he might have been up to in some of his ports of call? And wasn't it a matter of what goes around comes around? He hadn't shown any qualms about taking up with Jenny while she was still married to her then husband.

"I didn't understand sex in my twenties. There was no pleasure," she said afterward.

"When did it begin to change?"

"When I turned thirty. I found myself missing it. Not with my husband. Him I didn't want. But it I wanted. Do you know what *it* is?"

"Show me what it is," I said.

Inspired by her girlfriend, who made love on the carpeted floor of her office next door, Jenny had me visit her at the lunch hour the next week. There we were, she with her skirt hiked up and her panties down and leaning on her desk as I took her from behind.

We began to talk dirty on the phone, a new experience for me. She opened that door one evening when I called her up in Dobbs Ferry and asked her what she was wearing. "Just a bra and panties," she said. "Can you guess what color?" she whispered into the receiver. In this way did it start.

And yet there were the times when our eyes met and it was as if we were strangers.

Or the time she said, "We don't really ever do anything in your apartment but take our clothes off." Now and then I would make dinner, but she was right, we didn't have much of a life

beyond the bed. And just as I was dragging myself out of that lake of shame, she added, “You know, I used to think you were Seinfeld. Now I’m beginning to see you as Kramer.”

Yes, I was jarred at first. But then, what was she to say of a man who had a sock pile on his bedroom floor—socks he had worn once and so not clean enough for the dresser drawer but also not dirty enough for the hamper. Or who thought it interesting to share with her that he had to put a slight tear in the first square of toilet paper that hung from the dispenser in the bathroom? Or who had to sleep with his underwear clutched in his hand on those nights when he slept alone? Or that sometimes he would be brought to a sudden standstill as he was walking along by the recall of an embarrassing or humiliating experience, his only recourse being to shout the nonsense mantra “Honduran national economy”?

In September I spent a week on Block Island, an hour’s ride by ferry from Point Judith, Rhode Island. If there were others who were alone, they didn’t appear to be many, at least to my eye. Young families and college-age kids. I felt like an outsider in their midst, and that they could see in my vulnerable face the history of defeat that had led to my being a solitary among them.

And if they had been aware of my history, they would have known that I had been to the island before, but that those summer visits had not involved Amtrak or staying in a small efficiency in a private home. They would have known that Celeste and I had driven up by car and rented a small house. They would have known that we had good times as well as bad and that, after a big fight, she had run into the rough water off Mohegan Bluff and nearly been carried away by a riptide.

It did my heart good to lie for several hours a day on the state beach. Block Island. It sounded good. It meant that I was partaking of life, in the way that I could, coming out of my indoor existence.

As I lay on the beach, I listened to Emmy Lou Harris on my Walkman and cried, the tears burning my face. Something about giving her heart to someone and then watching him walk away. Then a jubilation song about the Crescent City. I bought Jenny a postcard and wrote her a

note, then tore it up because my handwriting was bad and wrote a second one. I bought her a Block Island T-shirt. And I thought of her without me among those wolves, especially Mac, at Hamburger Haven.

“I almost came up to be with you,” she said, on my return. I didn’t press her as to why she hadn’t. In a way, I was relieved. Sun and surf over the course of a week might have highlighted my deficiencies, physical and otherwise. She might have given more serious pause. Besides, a full week was a long stretch over which to be perfect.

Fall came, and she spoke Kyle’s name quite frequently. He seemed to me a season that had come and gone and come again. I began to wonder if her involvement with me was allowing her to stay with him.

That same month, for my forty-seventh birthday, she asked to take me to dinner.

“There is no need for that,” I said.

“I’m taking you to dinner. Now get over it,” she said.

I laughed, as if she had caught me, had fathomed a self-pitying aspect to my character and knew the tone to take to shock me out of this lifelong emotional pattern. This was not Celeste, as Celeste had been. This was a woman who could stand up to me and breathe fire.

She had gone and cleared out Arnie’s Ninety-Nine Cents Store. One gift for each year I had been on the planet, each carefully wrapped and tied with a bow: a multicolored dish towel; two fish-shaped vessels for oil and vinegar; a scented candle; a keychain; a pocket calculator; a night light; four one hundred watt bulbs; an extension cord; a bag of BIC ballpoint pens; four nine-volt batteries; a spatula. On and on. I struggled to keep a smile on my face as the deluge of gifts continued.

Alone at home in bed that night, I talked to myself, as if something had happened that I couldn’t quite understand. Why should something good feel like a mockery, a violation? In the morning it came to me that the gift-giving was less an expression of love than of guilt for giving me less than she imagined that I wanted. It felt to me like she was squaring a debt.

In October, I went away again. My solitary travels had begun with my separation from Celeste, and were fed by the belief that stepping out of my narrow routines would be strengthening as well as adventurous. The afternoon of my departure day I showed up in Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library, with my Samsonite hard shell suitcase and carry-on bag in tow. The park was an oasis of green in midtown Manhattan, with a giant expanse of lawn and plane trees around its perimeter, but on this overcast day it was as gray as the library itself. Jenny sluggishly approached from the other end of the park, as if she had been dragged from her office, and we sat for a while on those little green folding chairs that were everywhere. Things were going her way. So it seemed. She was beautiful, she had two men, and there were more who wanted her.

“I remember when this park was overrun with drug dealers and Times Square was a seedy strip,” I said.

“Things change.”

“I’ll miss you,” I said.

Jenny didn’t respond right away. "I feel like the girl who enters high school and falls in love with a senior who’s the captain of the football team," she finally said.

“Yes?”

But there was no need for her to say the rest. I headed down to the Grand Central Station area to catch the airport bus and a plane to Paris.

For two weeks I was a boulevardier, using the fifth-floor room in a walkup hotel in the Quartier Latin mostly for sleep. From the Luxembourg Gardens, where the old men played boules, to the Eiffel Tower, and from the banks of the Seine to the Louvre I wandered.

I had no one to be with, no one to see. The buildings were not indifferent. They were just French. Everything was French, even the sun and the noise of traffic. The smell of Gaulois was everywhere and entirely French.

You are a man alone, I said to myself. You are an austerity measure. This too I said to myself, as I itemized every expenditure and added up the total each night.



On one of those boulevards I saw a woman with a beagle one Friday night. I approached her with some idea of bursting beyond my enveloping aloneness and said what I could in French, but she shook her head no with a smile, my intent having transcended any barriers of language, and I eased myself away.

My father entered my consciousness. He had been a diaspora boulevardier, an exile from Turkey, where his Armenian community had been decimated. This would have been back in the second decade of the twentieth century, when the world was at war. Like my father, many of his Armenian compatriots who had survived found their way to Paris (and Marseilles and Nice). There they had dressed like men and talked like men, hardly needing to forget what their minds couldn't bring into consciousness, that they had lost everything. They gathered and gabbled, not grasping that however they dressed, they were unseen presences in the City of Lights.

Mac, the fellow with the feral face from my recovery group, was a constant torment in my mind. He was as scary to me as Tom Timmons had been, but I was not without answers. "In this moment I have everything I need. In this moment I am being held. In this moment I am, I am." These words I spoke on the streets of Paris. On the banks of the Seine and in the parks and in the privacy of my room I closed my eyes and meditated. Three times a day did I commit myself to my breath.

Reader, we have resources we have not yet dreamed of. If you believe you must live under the dominion of women forever and ever, such a belief is false. All you must do is die and die and die to all you held dear for a bigger reality to assert itself.

Jenny's idea of travel was a trip to Disneyworld, or Disney Land, or whatever that place in Orlando, Florida, is called. When she and Kyle were not out there with Mickey Mouse and Goofy, they were in their hotel room watching soft porn because they made the harder stuff off-limits to themselves.

Several times I called her, once with the Eiffel Tower in full view. There it was, suddenly appearing over residential buildings and higher than you might have thought, a latticework of steel injecting itself into the sky.

“Hello?” Her voice was tentative, far away.

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle. C’est un jour tres jolie en Paris.” A few more such phrases would have exhausted my supply of conversational French.

“Oh, hi,” she said, as if I were a forgotten relic of the past. “How’s your trip?”

“It’s good.”

“What are you doing over there?”

“I walk around and see the sights. I’m less than fifty yards from the Eiffel Tower,” I said.

“Walking around is all you ever seem to do.”

I thought of my father. “I guess. Of course, I used to be a sitter. Do you remember those days of just sitting and sitting and drinking and drinking? So walking around is pretty good. There was a time when all I could do was stare out the window with a dirty glass wondering how people got to walk around out there...”

“Are you going to tell me your life story, mister? Haven’t I already heard it? That would make for a pretty expensive phone call, I would think.”

“No. I’m not going to do that,” I said. “Say, how are you? I miss you.”

“I’m doing fine. I went out with Mac and the gang after the meeting yesterday. We all went to a Chinese restaurant. It was nice to hang out.”

“That’s great.”

“It doesn’t sound like you think it’s so great.”

“No?”

“That’s not what I’m hearing.”

“Well, anyway, I hope you have a good weekend.”

“Kyle’s coming over.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Which reminds me. I have to get on the stick and do some shopping.”

“Right,” I said. But the line had gone dead.

Well, yes.

Such locutions are useful. They point you in the direction of acceptance. They are a lifeline to the comfort of God.

That day, on the Place Vendome, a photographer took a Polaroid of me standing in an olive drab army jacket. The color ran dark; the focus was blurred. Yes, this is what it means to be forty-seven, I thought.

On the tip of the Peloponnese, several years before, I had traveled to a town called Gythion. “You want to spend your time looking at old rocks?” a scornful beachgoer on the island of Naxos had asked, when I told her I would be catching a ferry back to the mainland. Gythion was a slip of a town where no one but the clerk at my small hotel seemed to speak English. He pointed to my name in my passport. “Turkey you no go,” he said with a grin. Yes, Turkey I no go, I thought, amazed that history could be applied to me personally and that my American citizenry could not shield me from the horrors of the past. As a child, I had shunned my father’s Armenian heritage, seeking refuge in my mother’s Swedish ancestry. And as I grew older, I developed an attitude of quiet disdain and even contempt for those who displayed their ethnic pride, dismissing them as possessors of a tribal mentality. A fire ringed the hills surrounding the town, slowly denuding them. The acrid smoke from the fire became a constant, stinging our eyes. I swore as a depressive loneliness engulfed me that I would never take people for granted ever again, that they were as basic to me as food and air and water.

I did not take people for granted in Paris, and yet I slept alone and ate my meals alone, choosing restaurants at other than the peak dinner hour so I would not be conspicuous among the couples and families. I went within a lot to find my true source of happiness, and yet there were times of longing.

I brought my hunger back to New York City with me. In Paris, my tourist status had mitigated the chances of my meeting anyone, but that would not be the case in my hometown. I still wanted Jenny, but she was being careless with my affections, something that no birthday bonanza of ninety-nine cent gifts could compensate for.

Not that she had disappeared from my life. Every two weeks or so, she would find a way to fit me into her evening.

“I feel like a man who has been anticipating good news. I feel like I spend my days waiting for her to call, but when the phone does ring, it’s nobody I want to hear from on the line,” I said to Zed.

“You’ve got some more letting go to do.”

“Letting go of what?”

“Time will answer that. And pain.”

“Pain?”

“When the pain of drinking outweighed the pleasure, what happened?”

“I let go of the bottle.”

“Exactly. You let go of the bottle.”

I hated Zed in that moment. He was bullying me with his experience and would deny me any pleasure in life. Zed was an envious old man. The only satisfaction he could any longer derive from life was from his unfounded pose of omniscience.

One Friday night, with another weekend alone confronting me, I approached a woman named Felice after the recovery meeting and asked her if she had plans.

“Plans?” she said. “My plan is to go home.”

“Home is nice,” I said.

“Home could be nicer, but it will do,” she said. “Now that I’ve told you about my plan, maybe I could hear about yours?”

“My plan was to go to dinner. I was hoping you would join me.”

“Sounds like a nice plan. Let’s do that,” Felice said.

As we walked downtown toward Union Square, I marveled that life should have possibilities I could not have imagined a few hours before while languishing in my work space. Felice was someone I had wondered about in the few years I had been seeing her at the meeting,

a slender, attractive woman with a mirthful smile and arch manner of expression. She also had, to my surprise, a stunningly confessional nature. In the span of three city blocks she told me that she had worked her way through college as a call girl before entering the world of real estate and spoke openly of a marriage marked by frequent spouse-swapping.

The information aroused me. Would dinner simply be a prelude to something more? Some delusional thinking was going on. Because she had gifted me with her presence, an instant inflation of my appeal to women had occurred, cancelling out all evidence to the contrary.

The waitress arrived, an impatient young woman who seemed to have her mind on things other than our order.

“Where is your friend Jenny these days?” Felicia asked.

“She’s been busy,” I said.

“Too busy to see you?”

“Well, sort of.”

“A man on the rebound. The most dangerous kind,” she said, smiling her way into my deepest recesses.

“Why dangerous?”

“Revenge is always dangerous, but also delicious.”

Like Jenny, Felice lived outside the city, and so, after dinner, which she allowed me to pay for, we headed to Grand Central Station, where she would catch her train to Pelham Manor. An amorous impulse seized me in the back seat of the cab. It was my belief that the fierce-looking Sikh with the red turban holding to a stony silence at the wheel would have no great interest in the doings of his passengers.

"Can we kiss?" I said. Felice seemed startled and laughed nervously.

"Well yes, all right," she said.

And so we did.

"I thought Sikhs wore white turbans," I said, referring to the taxi driver, as we walked through the main concourse toward the gate.

"He must be a Communist Sikh," she said.

I gave her my personal card.

"You're the man who has everything," she said.

"Yes?" I replied.

She handed me her number on a piece of notebook paper. "Call me," she said, kissed me on the lips, and joined the flow of commuters passing onto the platform and into the sleek steel cars of the Metro North.

Jenny didn't show at Hamburger Haven the next week, nor did I hear from her, and so I arranged to see Felice. Her quick acceptance promised good things for the weekend.

But a qualm of conscience followed. My "Jenny sense" told me she would be contacting me soon, and if so, was it sensible to be mixed up with Felice when and if she did?

But then there was another voice that said unless I went through with my date (that word) with Felice, there would be no call from Jenny, who would feel my absence.

An unusual greeting awaited me on Felice's answering machine. "The General and I are presently engaged and so cannot come to the phone. Please leave your message and we will respond with all appropriate speed."

I did as I was instructed and Felice, true to her word, responded quickly.

"Who might the General be?" I asked.

"The General is my Black Labrador and the faithful, enduring protector of my realm."

"Of course," I said.

"And I assure you he knows good character when he sees it, and men from the lower realms when those approach as well."

"I am sure his vigilance quotient is quite high."

"Now, was there something you needed to say, or were you simply calling to say hello?"

"It's only this, Felice. I have been feeling overwhelmed—"

"Is this buyer's remorse I am hearing? The cold, clammy feet of a would-be suitor?"

"I'm having some difficulty. I'm afraid I wouldn't be much fun."

“Having a ball in bed wouldn’t be much fun?”

Her words were like fire shooting through me. What happened next was the verbal equivalent of a frantic broken U-turn.

Felice, not put off in the least by my vacillations, said, "Good. And while we're on the subject, let's move up the date and meet tomorrow."

And so the next evening I was at Grand Central boarding the Metro North. As the door closed and the train eased through the tunnel and then beyond to open space, slowly shedding the urban scene, I tried in my way to leave behind the sadness I felt that someone other than Jenny would be waiting up the line. But it wasn’t so easy. On the train journeys to Jenny, my heart had been wild with happiness, compared with the compromises with myself I knew I was making to see Felice. I wanted to believe that I could carry on with two women, and perhaps that would have been so, had I not given so much of myself to one.

Felice was not waiting with her car, as she didn’t own one. But she had said her home was in walking distance and provided me with careful directions—the parking lot, the small park with the narrow pathway through the middle, the white clapboard house with the green trim where I was to make a left turn. A Lexus sat in one driveway, a BMW in another, and the smell of burning logs from the chimneys of the well-kept houses brought memories of the country home in Columbia County where Celeste and I had spent weekends and summer vacations over the years, before she asked me to leave. That would have been the summer George Bush was preparing to spank Saddam Hussein very, very hard for his incursion into Kuwait. I remembered being at that house and then suddenly not being there, as if I had instantly vanished without so much as cleaning the brushes with which I had been painting the garage, and all those painful years of adjustment that followed.

Felice’s house was at the top of a steep set of stairs and crammed with small objects-- *chachkas*, she called them—and a small army of cats, who seemed to appear and disappear mysteriously and used the tired sofa for a scratching pad. An hour into my visit and new ones kept arriving.

“You have won over the General. He does not give his affection so easily,” Felice said, citing the Labrador’s suspicion of previous guests. “And it takes a special man to get him to roll over on his back.”

To be honest, I liked the General more when he stayed down. Upright he showed a fondness for nuzzling with his wet snout, leaving a stink on my hands and clothes.

"He misses not having a man around. I truly believe that," Felice said.

The red light on Felice's answering machine held steady. People didn't call her. They didn't seek her out. It was up to her to engage. I thought of the marital debris following a separation that only time could clear away before you had enough room to allow others into your life. It had been that way for me.

"Nice place," I said, surveying the homey room.

"More than I should be spending. And there’s no equity. I’m just a renter.”

“Me, too.” In my life with Celeste, I had heard one member of the upstate community where we spent our weekends say of another, “He *rents*,” as if it were the ultimate putdown.

“The great and departed Mr. Dimones and I had spent our married life in this community, as property owners. Perhaps the next stop will be an apartment the size of a closet in Manhattan. And it will be if I don't have something better than this wretched sales job at Bergdorf Goodman when the alimony runs out in two years. Why I ever left real estate I don't know—well, I do know, I married the director of the company—but surely I can do better than \$35,000 a year now that I'm back in the workforce.”

I shuddered inwardly in uneasy identification with Felice. I too was hitched to someone more materially well off than myself, having been reminded of the financial safety net Celeste provided.

But I had come for sexual adventure, not Felice's cutting, bitterness-laced marital reminiscences and tales of financial scarcity. Those years of monogamy living with Rachel had offered the great spiritual reward of union and peace of mind, and yet the power of sex was such



that I had followed women into subway cars, drawn by their beauty, torturing myself with the knowledge that because of the marriage bond I would never be able to touch them.

As if she had read my mind, Felice said, "Shall we go upstairs?"

The sexual allure of Celeste had been in part—always these things could only be in part; it wouldn't do to insist otherwise—that I could feel powerful in bed with her, and the same notion had drawn me to the slightly built Felice. But Felice's pointy tongue in my mouth was not Jenny's tongue, and her small breasts were not Jenny's breasts, and there was the turnoff of the white body suit she wore beneath her slacks and blouse instead of Jenny's more erotic attire and the solitariness of her life and the personality that had begun to define itself by her acid comments about her ex-husband and her financial plight.

I was unable to enter her. While gracious, she did use the word "disappointed." I tried in other ways to bring her to a climax but only came close.

"You'll be easier than me," she said, before taking me in her mouth.

The General was a monster of revenge that night. Felice had closed the bedroom door on her feline entourage, in consideration of my allergies. But the General barked and the cats set up a meow chorus until we had no choice but to let them in, and so I spent the rest of the night wheezing and scratching.

In the morning she served tea and a muffin. With the depressed thoughts that came with a lack of sleep, I stared at the copper cookware hanging from hooks in the kitchen, the pots dusty with disuse. Then my attention went to the paper napkin with the name Wendy's stamped on it that she handed to me.

"I have stacks of them. Why waste good paper?" Felice said, with an insecure smile. She was on her feet all day at her job. She came home tired. Easier to stop off for takeout than to shop and cook. An image of bagsful of greasy hamburgers and French fries presented itself.

"I'm a saver, too," I said. "I should say something to you," Felice said. The gray bathrobe and the thick reading glasses that had replaced the contacts she had worn the night before did not become her.

“What would that be?”

“I know you like Jenny. It would be no problem for me if you chose to see the both of us.”

“I don’t see that happening.”

“Just remember what I said.”

Though she had plans for us to spend a leisurely day together, I was counting the minutes until I could leave, longing, as I had all night, for the sanctuary of my own apartment.

“It’s been nice, but I really should go. I’m afraid I’m not feeling well,” I said, and soon did just that, carrying her small displeasure onto the train with me.

When I told Zed about this new woman in my life, he replied, “You have a few balls in the air.”

“I have to do something. I can’t just wait for Jenny to call, can I?”

“Did I say you had to wait?”

“You said I have a few balls in the air.”

“Isn’t that a fact?”

“I guess so. But what’s wrong with that?”

“Did I say there was anything wrong with that?”

“I’m not sure what you are saying.”

“Don’t those balls eventually have to fall to the ground?”

“Zed, I love you but I don’t like you,” I screamed.

Zed just chuckled. “I understand, my friend. I truly do.”

There was no choice to make the next week. Jenny was at the recovery meeting, and Felice was not. I approached her nervously after the meeting ended. Yes, she had time for coffee.

On our way to the diner, Mac came up behind us. “Let me get between you two before you become too much of a couple,” he said, and followed with a hysteria-driven verbal barrage. He wasn’t hard to understand. He wanted Jenny, and hadn’t given up hope of getting her.

Alone again, Jenny and I took a booth at the diner.

"Wuz up?" she said, going street on me.

"Everything's fine."

"You don't look fine."

And so I said what I had promised myself I wouldn't say. "Well, it bothered me that we were descended on by Mac that way. Did you hear what he said? 'Let me come between you two before you become more of a couple?' What the hell is that about?"

"I like Mac," she said, as if that answered the question. "What's happened to the old Mark? You used to be so relaxed and secure." Her smile suggested that she knew the answer.

"I am what I am," I said.

We sat in silence for a while.

"I miss you," I finally said.

"I miss you too," she said.

"We should do something," I said.

"Can't," she said, spreading out the "a" to the width of the table.

"You know what our problem is?" I said. Our fingers found each other's across the table.

"What's that?"

"We have the emotional vocabulary and the body language of lovers. Sex will always be part of the picture for us." If I was overstating my case, maybe that was what desperate people did.

"I know," she said, and put her head down on the table.

We walked over to Grand Central Station. On the corner of Forty-Second and Lexington the din of chatter and music spilled into the street from a dark bar crammed with office workers. The scene didn't look appealing. The drinking life seldom did anymore. I had drunk myself out of the bars and into solitary drinking the last few years I was on the bottle. I knew what the loneliness of those years toward the end had been like, feeling that life had left me behind and

then drinking the thought off my mind. I didn't want that feeling back, or any of the chaos that went with it.

Just past a sporting goods store there was an indoor mall about that led into the terminal. Jenny's hand found mine. It was about eight in the evening and all the stores in the space had closed. We went to our spot, a little nook to the side of the thoroughfare, and there we dawdled. She opened her coat and we kissed, and more. It was the kind of thing I would see teenagers doing in subway stations.

"What should we do?" she asked.

"You tell me," I said, my hand on her breast.

"I can't do this anymore. I just can't."

I walked with her into the concourse, where she broke into a run. I ran with her for a while, but then stopped. I kept my eyes on her as she sped through the gate and onto the platform, where she boarded the train without looking back.

If that certain spark was missing my first night with Felice, then there was no good reason to expect it to be there on the second night. And yet her availability, the freedom she had granted me, and perhaps simple denial led me to ask her to come into the city the following weekend.

"I was concerned that you might live in the projects across the street," Felice said, on arriving at my apartment. A public housing complex took up half the next block. Between two of the buildings hung a giant black banner with white lettering: "Drug Dealers Get Out!" The words had a red circle around them and a red X through them.

"And if I did?" I asked.

"I would wish you a very nice life and keep going," she said, coolly, casting her eye around my living room.

"Really?" I said.

"Quality of life and self-preservation are important to me." Before I could reply, she said, "That's a nice piece," referring to a wing chair in which I often sat and read.

"Thank you."

"Your sofa, if I may say, looks like it comes from Sears."

"It does, as a matter of fact," I said, staring at the clunky beige thing with its nubby fabric.

She inspected the bathroom and the bedroom. "Cute," she said. "Very New York. A lot going on in a small space."

"Would you really not visit me if I lived in a project?" I asked.

"The home of the young scholars?"

"Young scholars?"

"I lived for a time with Mr. Dimones in a co-op near Union Square. Not far away was a public high school, and you learned not to be out on the street at 3 p.m. when they were let loose for the day by the school authorities. They would snatch your bag and knock you down and plunder the stores. As protection, the owners began to lock their doors to protect themselves from the mayhem-minded horde."

We had dinner at a local Italian restaurant that used linen tablecloths and linen napkins. I buried my face in the menu, still thinking of her remark about the "young scholars," and wondered what I had done, sitting there over dinner with a woman I had prayed would not show up.

I told Felice a story. "One morning, I was waiting in the lobby at the building where I work, along with a small group of men and women of color. Suddenly I was seized with anger and wanted them gone from my sight. Later, when I reflected on the moment, I saw that the surge of rage had been fueled by fear that I would have to live in reduced circumstances should Celeste and I divorce. I had projected myself as a displaced white male approaching fifty for whom there was no longer any room in the corporate or quasi-corporate world. For me the antipathy came down to financial insecurity," I said, trying to sum up.

"Is there a point to this story?" she asked.

"I think I am saying that prejudice often gets activated by fear."

"How profound," she said.

The coldness in her voice told me it was a subject to now leave alone.

When the bill came, I placed a credit card over it.

"I feel you pay for everything." Felice said.

"I'm better able to pay at this point. That's all it is."

"Mr. Dimones would say to me that a meal ticket was all I was looking for." Her voice dropped and she lowered her eyes.

When I said nothing, she continued.

"Don't you think he owes me something for leaving me just as I was getting sober? Don't you think he shouldn't have just ditched me?"

"I don't know. But there's one thing I do know."

"Please do tell," she answered brightly.

"That you're strong and resourceful and being ditched, as you put it, may turn out to have been the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Please do explain."

"You were dying in that thing you had with him."

"Dying with the great Mr. Dimones?"

"Listen. When Celeste told me to leave, I took a sublet. In the morning, when I woke, there would be a grace period of a few seconds before I realized where I was and the pain would find me. I remember thinking, this one morning, 'Why me, God?' and the answer I got back was, 'Why not you?' The point is that what I thought was a great tragedy, and on some level it was a tragedy for both of us to have such a marital rupture, still turned out to be a great blessing."

"Of course. What greater blessing can a man receive than to be told by his wife that she doesn't want him anymore?"

"That's not true. Celeste had to be alone."

"Well, it still sounds like a meager blessing to me."

"The blessing was that I found myself and that our relationship entered a new phase. Now it was on a different basis. I stopped being so needy and demanding and could give back to her. We became friends, and our communication has become more and more honest. In some way, and I don't mean sexually, we grow closer and closer."

"So close that she doesn't even speak to you. I'm quite impressed."

Felice's dismissive response served me right. It was stupid and self-centered to share such a thing about myself and Celeste with this woman. What did she care about the spiritual progress I was making with my spouse? Would I have listened any more receptively to someone else going on in the same vein? Besides, she was right. Celeste and I had not spoken in some time.

We attended a candlelight ceremony at an Episcopal church down in Chelsea, squeezing ourselves into a third-row pew. I reached reflexively for a hymn book with a faded cloth cover but dropped it back in its slot unopened. A choir three rows deep belted out "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" and other carols. Some in the pews joined in, and I tried to, but Felice, whose idea it had been to attend the ceremony, could not bring herself to raise her voice in song.

A good-looking young man with curly hair, whom the pastor introduced as a star of daytime TV, gave a reading of "A Night Before Christmas." Evidently, Felice found him hammy, for she passed me a note that read "Please make him stop." I started to laugh, and had some trouble stopping.

But her humor was not the necessary bridge. We stopped at a coffee shop afterward, where I presented her with a gift in a small, flat box to which was attached a ready-made bow with an adhesive base.

"You didn't have to," she said, her hands busy with the wrapping. I couldn't tell her that the gift was the result of my concern that she would be hurt or angry if I allowed Christmas to go by without something for her. Nor could I share the lack of enthusiasm I had as I went about the stores in search of a purchase that would meet her critical standards.

"Charavari. A fine store," she said, reading the name in white on the black box.

The leather gloves had a cashmere lining and met with her approval, though she could only jam her hand halfway in.

"No problem. I shall simply take them back for a more comfortable fit. And I promise not to inquire about the price when I do. Now we should hurry if we are to catch the 10:05."

Some minutes later a taxi left us at Grand Central, though this time there was no kissing in the back seat. A smell came from the track as we entered the platform, the same unidentifiable smell as when I was a child exploring the railroad tunnel that ran under Riverside Park in on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Some amalgam of human waste and dirt and oil and grease that served not as a deterrent to adventure but in fact revived in me the romance of the rails.

The coach car was in need of a cleaning. Newspapers had been left behind on the vinyl seats. There were food wrappers and empty bottles and drink containers that would roll around on the floor once the train began to move. The pitiless lighting exposed the detritus..

"Can I say something?" I asked, sitting with her for the few minutes we had before the train departed.

"I know what you're going to say."

"I've grown used to my own company," I said,

"Liar. You've grown used to her company."

"This is true," I said.

"Don't worry. Another time," Felice replied.

And in fact there was another time. I suppose I thought I might begun to see her differently.

We were to have dinner and see a movie in the city, but the hour arrived and there was no Felice. Finally, she called to say that the allure of the shop windows along Broadway had impeded her progress. Would I please meet her by Frankie's Shoes on Eightieth Street and Broadway in the interest of saving time so that we could fit in both dinner and the movie, as planned?



Her face was just about pressed to the glass of the store window when I arrived. On our way to a Thai restaurant over on Amsterdam, other store windows exerted a magnetic attraction on her.

"I'm paying," she said.

When I replied that I would be more than happy to take the check, as I had asked her out, she wouldn't hear of it. Though she didn't say so, she was responding to her ex-husband's characterization of himself as a meal ticket. His words evidently continued to sting. She was a woman claiming her dignity.

But her harshness made an appearance again. At a nearby table was a young boy in the company of his parents. The boy, whose head barely rose above the level of the table, was struggling with his noodle dish, the food going everywhere but in his mouth.

"I have an ex-stepson named Jeff and he had terrible table manners. I was raised properly. You don't simply sit at a table eating like a pig, at least in my house." She demonstrated Jeff's piggish ways by huddling over her bowl of sweet and sour soup and making wild spooning gestures.

I had my own forms of harshness. It wouldn't do to say I didn't. But an adult mimicking a child did not seem in the natural order of things. I remembered my older sisters and their verbal taunts. Things I didn't really care to remember.

In the movie theater, she showed another side, exploding with laughter during the light comedy, each burst seemingly punctuated with the question "Am I bothering you?" She was high-spirited and intelligent. She wanted a good time. It was just that conditions in her life were hard.

Afterward, I tried to lose myself in a book on the Metro-North to Pelham Manor, but Felice was feeling chatty. Companionship and an evening out had boosted her spirits, but I could not come close to matching her good mood. That night she gave me an expensive umbrella with a wood handle and a plaid canvas fabric, something more than the flimsy three-dollar ones I

would purchase on the street. The gift-giving seemed sad and crazy. The umbrella was light but felt like a colossal burden. I wasn't ready for Felice. I wasn't ready for anyone this available.

"Would it be OK to use the phone?"

"Expecting to hear from someone in particular?" There was amused laughter in her voice.

When I dialed my number and the code, I got that beep as satisfying as the bite of a fish on a line. And there it was, the angel voice of Jenny, saying she missed me and would I call and was there any chance that we could have Christmas night together?

At five in the morning I left Felice's bed. With the stealth of a prowler, I felt around for my possessions in the dark. At the side of the night table I remembered that there was a large flashlight. Turning on the beam and keeping it low to the floor I found my clothes and wallet and keys.

"Felice, are you awake?" I whispered, putting my conscience ahead of her rest. There was no snoring, light or otherwise, coming from her, and the fragile silence was soon broken.

"I am now."

"I've got to go back to New York."

"Perhaps you've left something cooking on the stove?"

"No, it's not that. It's just me."

"You have to go back to New York because it's just you?"

"Felice, are you angry with me? Would you care to beat me? I would understand."

"I am astonished by your weirdness."

"All I can ask is that you not be angry at me."

"Thinking you're odd is not the same as being angry. Do as you like."

Pooch began to bark. "The General is reassessing your character. He is noting some worrisome signs," Felice said.

Strings of colored lights, emblems of yuletide cheer, blinked on and off in the windows of the private houses while far above stars shone in the firmament as I streaked toward the station.

The only sound was of my own footsteps. I understood why people chose to live in such communities rather than the high-intensity city to the south, but it wasn't for me. I would only die of loneliness in these parts. I remembered once again the country home where Celeste and I would spend weekends, and how I swore for several years after my abrupt departure that if I ever returned to the beautiful property I would kneel and kiss the earth in gratitude. Everyone should get his heart broken, I thought, and maybe everyone did.

A highway ran past the station, trailer trucks tearing along in the predawn bleakness. Locked out of the waiting area, I sat on a bench on the platform. About a hundred yards away, a red neon "Taxi" sign softly glowed in a shop window, outside of which three young men in tuxedos hung about waiting for a lift. Preppies returning from a wild party. Where else could they have been? Suddenly, and for no good reason, I was afraid of them. They would make eye contact and wander over. Trouble would start. I just wanted the train to come. This place was not my home.

The gleaming silver rails looked cold and part of some harsh structure entrenched in a desolation no life would ever again find. Back and forth I paced, trying to keep warm, against my will my head turning to advertisements for Broadway shows. It was a while, but the light of an engine finally showed itself in the distance.

On the ride back I read in a discarded magazine on the next seat an article about Islam in America. People were finding answers for every living problem in the Koran. Those interviewed suggested that it was proper and necessary for women to be subordinate to men and to wear clothing that would obscure rather than accentuate their figures. The article claimed that everyday Americans were converting to this misunderstood religion. There were photos of a beautician in North Carolina and a traffic controller in Dallas. I read the article with some uneasiness, as if the world I knew were slipping away.

Then I read an article about AIDS by a pwa, or a person with AIDS, as the author explained. He himself was a pwa and had found, along with many others, immense spiritual value in his affliction. AIDS had compelled him to grow and open to new perceptions that would

have been beyond him before contracting the virus. The article seemed a glad tidings on that Christmas morning, and put me in mind of the writer Flannery O'Connor's assertion that sickness should be considered a blessing. And of course I related the article to myself, to the fear that I wasn't practicing sufficiently safe sex and would become one of the victims of this contemporary plague, so it was a relief to read that even this overwhelming attack on the body could be turned to spiritual profit.

As the train entered the city, I felt all the horror of it I had as a child returning from camp in the long ago—the crumbling infrastructure, the refuse by the side of the tracks, the slums.

On the edges of the concourse of Grand Central Station and in the arterial passageways, homeless men and women slept under pieces of cardboard or old blankets or rags that they had collected. My heart was frozen at the sight of them. They seemed like a problem too monumental. I found my mind reducing them to an eyesore, to human litter awaiting the broom.

A skinny man with crazed eyes and a bulging Adam's apple followed me onto the subway. When the doors closed, ensuring him a captive audience, he began his tale of misfortune: pounding the streets fruitlessly looking for work, three very young children at home scraping the peanut butter jar because there was no food in the house. As the train rocketed north, his ranting escalated, his own dire version of a Christmas carol.

Past deserted local stations the train flew: Fiftieth Street, Fifty-ninth, Sixty-sixth. All my life I had been traveling north and south on that narrow corridor of track: as a crew-cut child in my sailor suit heading to the church where my family worshiped near the old Pennsylvania Station; as a young man in bellbottom jeans sporting a white man's Afro in my late teens; now in my forties as an office drudge. Manhattan was my center of gravity. What could I do but be there and go away and then be there again? Not for the first time did I wonder if there was something wrong with me that I couldn't leave. But who had called me away? Not college, not the army, not a job, not a talent scout. Invisible had I been on the earth and bound to the familiar through all these years.

The lights of the Christmas tree shone warmly in the building lobby. A communal tree. A communal girlfriend. Both were just fine. How good to be riding the old elevator, with its walls of baked green enamel, to the safety of my apartment, knowing my own bed awaited me, where I could continue to savor the gift of Jenny's phone call the night before.

"Were you out last night?" Jenny asked. My strategy has been to wait until 9 a.m. to return her call.

"It was too late for me to call you back last night."

"Too late?"

"I didn't want to wake you."

"I was really hoping to talk with you. I feel you let me down by not returning my call."

"I'll see you tonight. We'll have fun."

"What kind of fun?"

"All kinds of fun. You'll see."

I sat and meditated for a few minutes. That image Zed had given me of balls in the air came to mind. Well, it was nothing for me to concern myself with. The balls were doing just fine.

"There is a gift receipt, if it's not quite right," I said.

"Oh, it's perfect," Jenny replied, wrapping the bright red cashmere scarf around her neck.

"And I have something for you as well."

I removed the wrapping on the box she handed me. Inside was a green chamois shirt. I held it up against my chest. The same one hung in my closet awaiting the thrift store bag. I had never had much luck with L. L. Bean items. Their pants were too big in the legs and their shirts too boxy. She had gifts for Kyle in one of her closets, I was sure. They would have been better, more expensive gifts. It occurred to me that the shirt had even been a minor gift for Kyle, but that she reallocated it for me with her change of heart.

"Great," I said. "The chamois is so soft."

“Chamois usually is,” she replied.

We had just settled in to watch a video of *The Age of Innocence* when the phone rang. “That’s good...Great, great...Fine....Sure...that’s funny.” In this terse way did she converse.

“Was it him?” I said, when she returned to the sofa.

“Was it who?”

“Your friend.”

She rested her hand on my leg. “Your thighs are so firm I could bounce quarters off them,” she said.

“Are we changing the subject?”

“Don’t you want the subject changed?” she whispered.

That night she modeled the scarf for me, coiling it around her neck while wearing nothing else.

In the morning I lathered up using Kyle’s shaving cream and, staring at myself in the mirror, wondered if I was insane.

I spent a quiet New Year’s Eve at home and the next week attended a meeting at Hamburger Haven. Mac was there, with his narrow, weasel face and toxic eyes. Now in middle age, he was one of those Joes who had been drawn to New York by the fantasy of sporting a Ford model on his arm but all he had was himself and his jealousy, which was on full display when Jenny arrived and sat with me. I knew what that feeling was about. I had felt it many times myself.

Across the room sat Felice. Normally a slight smile played on her face, as if she possessed a certain knowledge about the world around her and its inhabitants that could only be cause for amusement—a Margaret Atwood face it was, requiring a special intelligence and personality. But now things were going on internally that caused a subtle but unmistakable alteration in her expression. Her assertion of a carefree attitude toward my seeing Jenny meant nothing now that Jenny and I were sitting together in plain sight of her. The scale of her hurt was a complete shock to her system and tore away her mask of insouciance. I felt like I was

committing murder and that I should die for my cruelty. She didn't deserve such humiliation. No one did.

"I'm so sorry," I said to her after the meeting.

"I know you are," Felice said. "I am a bit upset. At the same time, and I don't mean this in an unkind way, you weren't exactly the love of my life."

"Ouch," I said, which caused her to laugh.

Jenny and I had a short coffee shop visit after the meeting. She wouldn't be able to come to my place, she said, as Kyle was in town for a few days.

"I saw you talking with Felice," Jenny said.

"Yes."

"What were you talking about?"

"Just saying hello to her. She's a nice woman," I replied.

"There's something I need to know, because it affects my future," Jenny said.

"What is that?"

"We're not exactly practicing safe sex, if you know what I mean."

"I guess not," I said.

"You've had an AIDS test, right?"

"Not exactly."

"What's that mean, not exactly?"

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, I haven't had an AIDS test."

"Why not?" There was concern in her voice now.

"I was married all those years. There was no sex outside the marriage," I said.

"And there's been no sex outside the marriage since?"

"With you."

"And no one else?"

“I’ve been with you,” I said.

”You really must promise me that you will get tested. You owe me that,” Jenny said.

“Yes, of course.”

“Because, as I’ve said, I do have my future to think about.”

That biological clock of hers. A dismissive attitude would have been easy, but that would have meant ignoring the importance the issue of a child was in the early years of my marriage to Celeste and how bitterly contentious it had become. I remembered being at our country place, alone for a weekend, as I often was during the latter years we lived together, painting the shed, trying to preserve the weathered wood. Suddenly I became aware that there would be no baby, not ever, by Celeste, this woman whom I loved. I dropped the brush and walked into the house and knelt on the living room rug and began to pray, asking God to remove the whole issue from my consciousness. It was a different kind prayer, one driven by extreme desperation. The loss just seemed too monumental to bear. For several years thereafter I was not able to easily look at fathers with their young children in hand.

Over the next few days Jenny’s question about my sexual history stayed in my mind, slowly becoming a torment. The new ethics, driven by the reality of an illness as life-threatening as AIDS, required frank sexual disclosure.

“Look, I have something to say to you,” I began, on another of those evenings when the only time we could have together was in a coffee shop following the meeting.

"Has the time for true confession come?"

“It’s not the kind of thing I would normally bring up.”

"I am listening, my son.”

“The truth is that I did have some meaningless, brief thing while we weren't seeing each other.”

“Meaningless, brief thing?”

“I saw someone.”

“The merry mailman, perhaps?”



"No, a woman."

"And?"

"And, well, one thing led to another."

"You work fast."

"Fast? You and I hadn't been together for six weeks. What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have waited if you cared about me."

"You told me it was time to put all your energy into your relationship with him."

"You were supposed to tell me if you were interested in seeing someone else."

"I was?"

"You know you were. I've been perfectly honest with you about Kyle. You could have done the same. Instead you acted like a creep."

"I don't agree," I said.

"Well, agree with this," she said, and threw the remains of her cinnamon apple herbal tea in my face.

Another man might have shown anger. Instead, a smile came to my face, summoned by the feeling that she cared. But the smile came at a price. It gave her license to go on unchecked with her bad behavior, as sometime ago I had given Celeste the same license.

"Fuck you, you bastard. I have the most intimate moment of my life with you. We finally connect sexually after months of nothing, and you destroy it all by telling me this stuff about another woman."

"Honest, Jenny. I didn't want to. She just about propositioned me."

"Double bastard and sexist pig, putting it on the woman like that. She was really asking for it. Is that what you mean to say?"

"Not exactly."

"Who was she?"

"That's not important."

"Someone I know, Mr. Cock a Doodle Doo?"

"That's something I don't think we need to discuss."

"Discuss this," she said, and threw her spoon at me. "I hate every last thing about you, you *jerk*." And with that salvo she grabbed her bag and ran off.

The eyes of the coffee shop were on me. Waiters, customers. They had all tuned in to the spectacle. Some of the folks from the meeting were among them, including Mac. He nodded his head a few times. "Yep," he seemed to be saying. Just that.

I ignored the Oiseau's cardinal rule and called Jenny, and then a second and third time when she didn't call me back. Finally, she showed up at Hamburger Haven, and my campaign of face-to-face entreaty could begin.

"It's painful being in the doghouse. I deserve a bigger accommodation," I said.

"Don't make light of this, mister. Do you know that I almost drank the other day? Do you know that Kyle had to restrain me from pouring a glass of wine at his mother's house? Do you even care that what you did threatened my sobriety?"

No one can make another person drink. That is a truism. And yet it frightened me to think that she had come to the drink brink, and that only the presence of Kyle had held her back.

"I wish we could marry."

Jenny's head shot back, as if she needed a new angle of vision in which to see me. "Has the boy gone nuts? Marry me? You don't even *know* me."

"I don't?"

"Did we not already establish that you are lacking certain financial necessities to make me wish to bring this marriage search to a successful conclusion?"

"Well, yes. I suppose."

"There you go. Now you're thinking, big boy. Now you're thinking."

Jenny was right. Marriage to me was out of the question. But if I was to be honest, it wasn't truly a wish of mine either. I had felt the falseness of my words even as I spoke them. They aroused fear in me. It had something to do with Celeste.

A member of the group threw a party that weekend. Jenny and I arranged to go together.

“We’re going as friends. You understand that, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

“This will be a test. We’ll see if you have any real regard for me in you.”

“You bet,” I said.

“Your tone of voice is not convincing.”

“I will rise to the occasion. You will see.”

“All right, then. Let’s do it. “

And so we did, but the party experience wasn’t a happy one. Jenny drifted from room to room, never quite able to engage anyone in sustained conversation. Her social anxiety was comforting; she wasn’t as poised as I had thought. Maybe she wouldn’t so easily step into a bigger circle and leave me behind. But then, as we were preparing to leave, Mac locked onto her. Minutes passed, and then it was a half hour of excluding and intense chatter. Jesus, we had been just about out the door.

“I’ll be going,” I said, when I could take it no more.

She grabbed her jacket and split with me.

“Were you really going to leave without me? Why would you *do* such a thing?” she asked incredulously. We were standing on a subway platform on a cold January night far out in Queens. I did not tell her anything of what I was feeling, the sense of inevitable doom. If it wasn’t Mac, some other man would come along to take her from me. I tried to present a veneer of rationality, saying that we had agreed to leave, and then a half hour passed and we were still there. I didn’t tell her that I felt like I had already lost her.

In Grand Central Station we kissed lightly on the concourse, as we rode up and down on the escalators. And then we went home separately because something unspoken between us suggested we should.

She called the next morning. “I’m very disappointed in you,” she said.

“Why would that be?” I said.

“You know why.”

“I do?”

“You acted like a complete bully. You strong-armed me out of that party like you were some Italian gangster and I was your property.”

“That’s what Italian gangsters do?”

“And now you make fun of me. You like to present yourself as a sensitive person, but you’re not. Now I know what your wife had to put up with. I was actually thinking of going home with you until you started acting that way.”

A succession of warm, beautiful days and the soft air brought the unrealistic hope of an early spring, but did little to brighten my mood. Jenny didn’t come to the recovery meeting as frequently, or when she did, she went off to coffee with the group. It could seem to me that my life was about an hour of pleasure with her in exchange for a month of pain.

Then one night I met a woman while standing on line at the grocery store. We continued to chat outside the store and agreed to meet that weekend for dinner. It was as if I had been at the bottom of a deep well and nobody could find me, and now I had been lifted out of it.

And yet, sitting across from Sally Ringner at the Broadway bistro and exchanging bio background blather, I felt in a state of loneliness more acutely than if I were alone, just as I had with Felice. Sally had tales to tell of her travels through Africa for UNICEF, but what I saw was a woman plainer than I had remembered her. For my impulsiveness I was now paying the price of uncomfortable, forced conversation. Though she offered to contribute, I waved her off. “I was bad at math. Simpler for me to take this,” I said, placing a credit card over the bill on the table.

“Well, the next time it will be on me,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. If that constituted a lie, so be it.

As Jenny’s distance from me continued to grow, I slid into a sustained funk.

“How much dying do you have to do? Only you can answer that,” Zed said, preening in his prophet’s robes.

I would stare at the phone, trying to will it to ring. Could she not spare me one lousy phone call?

And yet, my brief encounter with Sally Ringner had given me some hope. If she and Felice had been available, then other women might be as well.

And maybe Jenny was still sufficiently in my orbit, even if that orbit had a wider and wider arc. Maybe she would come back to me if she sensed I were slowly becoming willing to explore other possibilities.

One morning, just like that, she called me at work. As if we had not been apart for weeks, she suggested we have lunch at a coffee shop she favored down on Nineteenth Street.

She arrived smoking in dark sunglasses and short yellow skirt and tight leather jacket, her blond hair piled high on her head in a complicated weave. Men placed their conversation on hold and stared, taking in that extra inch of sculpted leg as she cut a swatch up the aisle to the booth where I awaited her.

“I’ve missed you,” I managed to say.

“I’ve been *very* busy,” she said.

“Busy at work?”

“Busy with my *life*.”

“I don’t remember you speaking in italics like this.”

“This is the new me. *Ms. Intensity*. Can you deal with it?”

“I’ll adjust.”

“Good. And you could use a little intensity yourself. You’re sitting over there like Mr. Sad Sack. Forget about Kramer. You’re looking more like Eeyore.”

“I have my bright moments.”

“Well, try having a few more of them. Because I have been having a *very hard time*.”

“I see.”

“Do you see?” She removed her glasses. Her eyes were red-rimmed.

“I believe I do.” And I did. “Have I ever told you that eating makes me happy?”  
Because it really does. I am feeling very adventurous today. I believe I will have a Belgian waffle.”

“For a growing boy, you don’t eat very much,” she said, her tone softening.

“I have my moments of indulgence. But right now my fortitude will be on display when you see me forego maple syrup and butter.”

“Don’t forego too much, my little bodhisattva.”

We walked silently back toward her office, down a side street clogged with heavy trucks and sweaty workers loading and off-loading boxes. Our hands lightly touched, and then we were kissing in the middle of the long street of bustling commercial buildings, kissing with all the hunger of our month away from each other.

“I’ll be home. Come tonight,” I said.

“OK,” she replied.

Nothing more needed to be said.

We continued as soon as she was in the door of my apartment. "Six times. Do you realize that?" she said, winded, trying to regulate her breath, as she lay on top of me in bed. Each orgasm left her gasping, as if they had been torn from her body and would cause her expiration. To answer her question, yes, I did know, or thought I did. I had found myself counting.

We met again, this time in Madison Square Park, down near Twenty-third Street, for lunch. We weren’t alone. Office workers, idlers, the elderly, the indigent—everyone had been drawn by the refuge from concrete the park’s greenery offered.

“It is hard being with Kyle. He seems to be coming undone. He says he feels all alone in the universe. Really, I’m tired of him.”

“Maybe he’s telling you this is as far as he can go. Is that possible?”

“What made you an authority on relationships, mister?”

“I didn’t say I was an authority.”

“You sure act like you’re an authority.”

“I know this. You’re with me, not him, at least sexually.” The statement was bold, as if the assertion itself could make it true.

“You must think you’re very powerful that you could say such a thing. You’re my bottle. Don’t you get it?”

“Your bottle?”

“That’s what Mac says. That’s what everyone at Hamburger Haven who cares about me says.”

Along the east side of the park the limestone mass of the New York Life Insurance Building rose.

“That building over there? The one with the tower seeking to reach higher into the sky? It gives me great joy. It takes me back to another time in the life of the city—my childhood and Superman and Perry White and Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen. Park benches have a way of taking me back to my childhood, too. That’s not a great crime, is it, when great love wells up in us from an unknowable source, though seemingly triggered by a memory of something that possibly never was?”

“Later for your musings. I’ve got to go.”

She bagged her soup container and deposited it in the trash.

“Hey, wait for me,” I said, following after her as she began her confident strut along the park’s pathway.

“That’s just it. I can’t wait.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because someone has been asking me to go out sailing with him, but I’ve been reluctant to tell you. I haven’t known how this would impact our relationship.”

“What’s that have to do with me?” I said, reflexive words meant to hide my hurt and shock.

“We’ll see what it has to do with you,” she said.

Tom Timmons to the nth degree, it felt like. With that one admission she had turned the tables on me completely.

The next day she told me she had also informed Kyle that she would be seeing other men.

“Actions have consequences. Or results. Or something,” I said.

“Are you threatening me, mister? Are you? Because actions have consequences or results or something for me, too.”

“Not threatening. Just saying.”

“You with your saying, never with your doing.”

“OK,” I said.

“OK, what?”

“Just OK.”

“I don’t like the sound of that OK, mister. Not one bit.”

“I’m leaving this bar. I’ve been drinking here long enough. Is that a better sound?”

“That doesn’t do it for me either,” Jenny said.

“Off the hook. Have you ever wondered about that saying? I mean what does it really mean? A phone can’t really ring off the hook. It can’t ring off the hook at all, in fact. So really, we aren’t to take this American idiom literally. It suggests that the party in question is so sought after that he or she has taken the phone off the hook and yet it is still ringing.”

“My biological clock is ticking, mister. That is the only sound you should be hearing this minute.”

“Suppose there is no baby, Jenny. Suppose that you’re the baby. Only now you’re a big baby. As am I.”

“I am completely finished with you.”

“Yes,” I said.



It was only a matter of going away from her, the sound of her, the smell of her, the radiant look of her, just departing from the concourse in Grand Central where we stood having our little talk and merging with the anonymous horde descending into the subway system of New York City.

That night I called Lurleen.

“How may we pray with you?” she said, in her sweet voice and as if she was speaking from a place of boundless peace.

“Lurleen, I want out. Out, I say. I want to be gone from this woman and I want her to be gone from me. Are you hearing me?”

I'd been calling that number for a long time, talking to Lurleen and others about Celeste and my job and just about everything that troubled me. I had the knowledge that things would work out when I called that number.

"Let us go right into prayer," Lurleen said. "The love of God enfolds you. The peace of God surrounds you..."

I sensed something big was going on. When Lurleen was done, she said there would be continuous prayer support twenty-four hours a day for the next thirty days. These people were not fooling around. They prayed not from the standpoint "Oh, Jesus, I am a worthless sinner" but envisioning you in God's love.

"*Thank you, Lurleen.*" I took a Post-It note and jotted down the date and in code the nature of the call and stuck the note on my calendar in the kitchen, so that no one would know what the note was referring to if he or she should happen to see it. But I would know. I definitely would know.

That night, on my knees, I repeated my message to Lurleen, and so lent my voice to the prayer choir. "I do not want this anymore. I do not want it. Please take it. Now. Forever." God knew what *this* and *it* were. God had always known what *this* and *it* were.

Actions have consequences? If so, I couldn't say exactly what they would be. But at the end of the next workday my feet, which on other days would have led me to Hamburger Haven, now took me in the opposite direction toward the tumult of Times Square and beyond. Each block I passed on my northward trek beneath the bulging marquees of the Great White Way strengthened my resolve. I saw clearly that I couldn't let go of her without letting go of the group. In the state I was in, I saw that going to Hamburger Haven was like going into a bar and picking up the first drink.

The next day came and I made the same turn out of my office and just kept walking north. There were other recovery meetings for me to attend, right there in my own neighborhood, meetings that I had never been to. And each time I did, I felt like I was getting a little of myself back.

She called that week. "Hey, where are you?" the voicemail message said. There was no response to make. What would I say? That I could not bear to suffer the humiliation of seeing her sitting with some other man at Hamburger Haven, as Felice had watched me do? Tell her how much I loved her but how much that love was obviously in vain? That I lacked the wherewithal to stand and fight for her or that the experience of letting her go as a necessity for my own survival nevertheless felt like some colossal destruction, as of a beautiful temple? That one day she would regret how she had treated me and that absenting myself from her life in this brutal way would cause her to see how much she had lost? No, there was no need to inform her of any of the emotions that were roiling me. Anyway, I couldn't. I was afraid. I was angry. I was vindictive. For a full year I had been "perfect" for her and now I would be perfectly absent.

She rang me up again and left a second message, which I did not save for all time in the Jenny Hall of Fame. No more dressing in suits and ties to impress Jenny. Not knowing, even as I knew, that I was dying to this kind of life, this world, this light she represented.

Summer came. I went to movies and in the darkness of the theater felt so safe and protected realizing that no one at Hamburger Haven had any idea where I was.

I went to the library and museums without the fear that I would miss a call from Jenny. I sat in a chair at home and read a book luxuriating in my Jenny-free zone.

A gray metal box sat atop the bookshelf inside my door. In the top was a coin slot. All the change I had accumulated in the course of the day I would deposit in that box. I associated the box with savings and security, the finish line I had once had with Celeste but could no longer be certain of. The idea of savings excited me. I wanted to save more, but I couldn't. I still had a right, I guessed, to live on the money of the marriage, as Zed called it, but I certainly had no right to stash any of it away. Besides, Zed assured me that when and if the time came to dissolve the marriage, Celeste and I would easily reach an amicable settlement.

Riverside Park drew me to it a lot that summer. Down a serpentine path I would trek to sit by the boat basin and stare out over the Hudson River to the New Jersey skyline. Young rollerbladers glided past, their arms gently swinging. They looked so free, and yet I feared for them. Some had no helmets, no kneepads, no wrist gear. Frightful injuries occurred, the kind that dismayed toughened emergency room personnel, I had somewhere read. The bladers lost their balance. They couldn't brake in time and came in harm's way with large vehicles. Safety. That was paramount at the age I had come to. And yet, was physical injury more debilitating than the emotional kind? It was the kind of question I could ask but not easily answer.

The water was a natural tranquilizer. Toward the middle of the river, beyond the moored and pristine white cruisers, a tanker slid past, heading north. Surely there had been an ocean crossing. The crew would have docked in far-flung ports in Africa and India and all along the China Sea. These men had cast their lot with the world's oceans, and in so doing had tethered themselves to its calming power, its vastness and mystery. In so doing they had gained some perspective on the world—on life—that no words could express. The world was big. That is what I saw when I came down to the riverside and stared up at the planes gently gliding in the blue sky and looked north to the silver majesty of the George Washington Bridge.

Sitting there, my mind knew some temporary relief from the terrible rancor, the self-righteous rant, that had accompanied my act of independence from Jenny. Thoughts came into

my head about Celeste. She was somewhere now on the other shore. I had not been good to her. I needed to make things right between us. There would be no happiness unless I did.

One such weekend afternoon in the park a woman gave me a warm smile as she passed by my bench. Rescued from oblivion, I thought to catch up with her and introduce myself, but a feeling of fatigue kept me in place until she was the barest speck in the shimmering distance. Finally, I struggled forward after her. At a half run I closed the distance to within fifty yards.

She turned left past the baseball diamond, where a little league game was in progress. Fathers stood behind the batting cage shouting encouragement to their uniform-clad sons, as if in a universe far from my own. What would I say to the woman? What would I do? She was halfway up the steep stairs when I arrived at its base. Contemplating the ascent was enough to weary me and I slid to the steps.

“Are you all right, mister?” a man said. I recognized him as the father of one of the boys.

“Mister? Did you call me mister?” I said.

“Are you all right is what I said.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I closed my eyes, in no hurry to get up. Somewhere nearby a train whistle blew, below the complicated girders supporting the West Side Highway. A railroad line ran under Riverside Park. Those trains had been coming and going for a long time. Nineteen thirty-seven, to be exact. Trains were a constant, but they never brought peace, only longing. “Mister,” I said, repeating the man’s word.

Some weeks later I sat alone on a Saturday night in a cushioned orchestra seat of a midtown theater, pretending to immerse myself in the Playbill while the couples around me chatted. Finally, the curtain parted. A blown-up photo of a residential building with casement windows and bricks of two different colors in an art deco motif hung from the ceiling above the stage. The prop had a strong effect, arousing in me a longing for the past, a time in the life of the city before I was born that I associated with splendor and beauty and order.

Then something happened. The prop was the same, but now there was Jenny herself superimposed in front of the building, as if she were an image in a double exposure through which I could see the structure as well. Her hair was up and she was wearing that blue gingham dress that took me back to those summer days of the year before. I groaned, audibly, causing the man to my right to give me a sideways glance.

At the intermission I left, wandering here and there along the Saturday night streets of midtown, seeking an answer for the internal commotion the prop had unleashed.

At home, I turned to my composition book. I wrote fast, seeking to leach the pain onto the page. What emerged was a sense of the building in the photo as representing my childhood and the world of failure and renunciation and poverty that I came from, whereas Jenny, or the image of her over the building, was emblematic of the bounty of America. She was the cornfields of Kansas and the Fourth of July parade. She was glorious sun-filled days on beautiful beaches. She was lemonade and cocktail party laughter. She was glamour and high spirits and all my heart had yearned for sitting as a child in a stuffy Pentecostal church Sunday after Sunday listening to a pastor drunk on his own words.

"It sounds like you're better off without her," Celeste said. The café where we had met was just west of Broadway. A peaceful place with small marble-top tables. You could sit there for an hour and not get the bum's rush, at least in the off hours.

"That guy with a boat. I couldn't take anymore."

"You don't do so well with relationships. They cause you too much anxiety."

"I guess," I said, not entirely comfortable with her assertion.

"You'll be fine."

"I do feel a burden has been lifted. I feel like I can have my life back. I do feel angry, however. I guess that will take time to pass."

I had called Celeste and asked that we meet. She was understanding, more than she might have been if I were still seeing Jenny, although I couldn't be sure. Her ex-husband, Peter, had left

her and took up with a male lover, a situation she managed to accept without seeking out the divorce lawyer. She could more easily tolerate people distancing themselves than coming too close.

She came back to my place and went straight for the sofa, where she lay with her head on the throw pillow, as she used to do.

“Your apartment looks so neat and beautiful,” she said. “It always does. My house is such a mess.”

I had not visited the house she had bought out in Teaneck, New Jersey, after selling the loft. But I had no doubt it was messy. She had turned the living room into a studio, she said. I pictured wood shavings covering the floor from the carvings she worked on relentlessly. There had been a one-person exhibit of her paintings while she was still in her twenties at a prestigious SoHo gallery, but then she went in another direction with her wood figures of animals. “I didn’t know you would pull a Brancusi on me,” the flummoxed gallery owner said, having expected her to build on the success her paintings had met with. The owner didn’t know he was like a giant hand reaching into a small cage for a frightened bird.

“I need to feel my environment is orderly. Sometimes I wish I didn’t,” I said.

After a while she said she would be going. If sex had been on my mind, it was how much I didn’t want it. I could not speak for Celeste, but the thought of physical engagement with her now seemed incestuous, as horrifying in its way as the idea of sex with my mother. A prohibition had come to be in place.

“That’s my savings bank,” I said, pointing to the little gray coin box atop the shelf by the door. “I’m thinking of putting some money aside. Not a whole lot. Just a little. You remember our visit to your accountant when we were newly married and he was amazed that I had absolutely no investments? Maybe I could start a small saving account. Something.”

There was some fear in my voice as I spoke. Maybe that triggered the blowtorch anger that came next.

"Listen, I'm sick of this. I never wanted us to have a joint account. I want us to separate the money. I won't have you taking advantage of me." Her words were like a hard slap. The element of surprise left me feeling pushed too far back to say anything. Some whole other being, tough and angry, not sweet and mellow, had emerged in Celeste. It had been a while, since the last years of our marriage, that I had seen this side of her. I could only watch as she stepped into the elevator and the door closed.

The next day she called me at work. She said she was relieved to be hearing my voice because she had feared I would never speak to her again. She said she was having a hard time forgiving herself for her outburst.

But her tough words about separating the money were not out of line with feelings of my own. At a bank ATM near my place of work the week before, I had withdrawn some cash from our joint account. Normally, a feeling of happiness rose in me when I saw that the money market fund was high, but now the green numbers on the small screen brought only a sense of oppression, as if I were clad in a preposterously padded overcoat. The uneasy sense came that Celeste's funds were trapping me, providing insulation from life rather than integrating me into it.

In the fall I attended a wedding, dressed in my only suit, gray and of tropical wool, which I had worn at my marriage to Celeste. As I waited for the express bus at Eighty-sixth Street and Third Avenue in the early evening, I stared across at the Papaya King on the opposite corner and remembered the first few months of my separation from Celeste and how two of their "filet mignon" hot dogs, slathered with mustard and topped with onions, would serve as my dinner on those days when I was able to eat. I had come a long way, I thought. I was no longer eating croak food. I was taking care of myself. There was a newfound strength and an ability to be where my feet were. I could embrace the sad, Hopper-like stillness of the early evening street scene.

As the bus coasted through northern Manhattan, a fantasy bloomed, in which I saw myself as the owner and operator of a taxicab. For six months, back in my youth, I had, in fact, been a hackie. Someone said you had to be certifiably insane to drive a cab in New York City in the nineteen seventies, and in fact there had been some scary moments, such as dealers with guns doing business out of my cab on a Harlem side street they themselves had blocked off for their drug bazaar. So certainly I didn't romanticize cab driving. In fact, loneliness and despair had compelled me to quit when I realized that the passengers were not seeing me as an interesting young man who drove a cab but simply as a driver, if they even saw me at all. But here I was with this fantasy, which progressed to ownership of two taxis. Since I couldn't be behind the wheel of both at the same time, I had to hire a driver. And then I owned a third cab, and that required an additional driver. And so it went; I soon imagined myself owning a whole fleet and employing not only drivers but a manager and a bookkeeper and a secretary. Suddenly, my life was not my own but this blossoming business. And then I thought of the building where I had grown up, my distant father working as a cashier at some restaurant downtown while my aunt and my mother managed this huge property on the Upper West Side, and how, in truth, it had managed them. And so I thought, that is the choice I made, the choice I have been making my whole life, to be just like my father with the little jobs I have had and to leave the heavy lifting in life to women so as to remain unencumbered.

The ceremony took place in an old Anglican church on a tree-lined street with private homes. Not for the first time did I wonder at the miracle of this world, that I should be discovering such a serene sight. I could live here. I could die here, I thought, a havoc of emotion having been brought on by this urban yet rustic setting.



They were a handsome couple. In middle age the groom still possessed thick curly blond hair, which extended over the collar of his tux; she was shrouded in white, her hand on her silver-haired father's arm. Flower-bearing maids of honor brought up the rear, the bride's silk wedding gown trailing on the floor and paving their way. The gown made a case for purity, but the bride was not young. She had some hard living on her, as did the groom, both having done the things that active drunks do in fulfilling the dictates of the id. The priest, in surplice and cassock, awaited them, then spoke, in a voice clear and strong, giving each word their full measure:

The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Therefore, marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God... Will you have this man to be your husband; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?... Will you have this woman to be your wife; to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her as long as you both shall live?

Oh Lord, weeping was I in my pew, that purity of heart and devotion should be laid out in language such as this.

And later weeping once again as a singer offered his soulful rendition of "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?"

That night I danced with a woman to the loud sounds of the DJ, Mix-Master Supreme. I did the back and forth. I did the side to side. I did wild waving of my arms and sudden turns. My partner had her own movement thing going. Only our eyes connected us, and when they met it was for me to deal with my fear that she would burst out laughing at my preposterousness. The longer we gyrated, the more I thought she was the one and couldn't help but wonder if we would continue the night elsewhere. She had been blessed with a full figure and pretty face. The gods were smiling.

But I had succumbed to my usual foolishness, imagining a woman of her quality would be unattached. “I’m here with my husband. There he is now,” she said, after we had stepped off the dance floor. And so she went off to be reclaimed by him, leaving me with my unwanted but familiar partner, shame.

If one thing stood out, it was that as the party wound down, many already having left, the bride was still standing in the middle of the dance floor looking desperately sad that it had to come to an end, the way that drunks can be desperately sad when the bartender announces last call.

I told Celeste about the wedding: the beauty of the vows and of the setting. I thought it would have special meaning for her, as she had been born and raised in a fieldstone house in Riverdale and had attended the exclusive Riverdale School.

“I wish you could have been there,” I said, forgetting for the moment the woman I had been enthralled by and inviting Celeste to rise up and smite me with that iron bar of anger she reserved for special occasions.

“This has to stop. It has to. We are finished. I’m filing for divorce.” And with that she hung up. This time there was no follow-up call of contrition on her part.

One evening in the following week I received a letter from her lawyer. The letterhead claimed offices in New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C., London, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing, and Hong Kong. The lengthy list of names included several well-known public figures. The letter was like a mechanical fist sprung from my mailbox.

...has asked us to advise you that she plans to seek a divorce from you on the grounds of abandonment, in that you have lived apart for more than two years....We propose to prepare a separation agreement providing that each of you waives maintenance

(alimony), all pension and estate rights, and all rights to a division of property...If you or your attorney, if any, have comments...”

I headed uptown along Broadway that evening. At Ninety-sixth Street I paused in front of the discount clothier, where sometimes I found good bargains. Diagonally across the street rose one of those boxy high-rise luxury rental buildings. Once upon a time the marquee of the Riviera and Riverside movie theaters had billowed out over that same stretch of sidewalk. Farther up, at One Hundred Seventh Street, a discount drugstore stood on the site of the old Olympia movie theater, where fistfights were guaranteed to break out among the rowdy neighborhood kids who flooded in during Saturday matinees in the long ago. And at One Hundred Tenth Street, the old Nemo Theater was now gone, replaced by a supermarket.

Things came and went. That was all. But love, love wasn't supposed to come and go. Love wasn't supposed to be the hardness of high-powered lawyers.

Several blocks north rose a twelve-story building, adjoined by a considerably smaller building. A large portion of the windowless south wall of the taller building was visible from where I stood, the sort of space that might often feature an advertisement of some kind. But in place of a commercial display, a verse of scripture from the New Testament had been painted in pastel Gothic lettering on the wall.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that  
whosoever believeth in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

John 3:16

Actually, the sign was barely legible, having peeled and flaked in the years since my childhood, when it had been painted, with two Corinthian columns flanking the Gospel message.

How mortifying, as a child, that my family would proclaim its faith in such a bold way, as if to poke a stick into the eye of the intellectual community around us, Columbia University being only a block away. Now everyone would know that I belonged to a family of Bible thumpers, as they would know that the woman the fire department and the police were trying to coax in from the ledge on the eighth floor was my considerably older sister. Or that the woman running drunk and naked down Broadway was another considerably older sister. Everyone was gone now, laid to rest in scattered burial grounds in the metropolitan area: my intemperate and unstable Armenian father, who died when I was twenty-four and whose funeral I showed up for drunk; my mother, who would warn me about the perils of alcohol, quoting the proverb “Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging,” and tell me stories of being dispatched by her mother to find and rescue her inebriated farmer father back in Sweden before he froze to death; my two institutionalized sisters, both of whom committed suicide.

I stood there for a while, remembering the rundown apartment I hadn't wanted my friends to see and those older sisters I had been ashamed of. My family had been a death trap. So I had felt. I saw my strenuous efforts to effect an escape through education and relationships with women unlike those troubled siblings. But now I also saw that there was no place to run and no place to hide. I saw that the only thing saving me from the fate of those sisters was the recovery I had been blessed with.

I had been an ungrateful child, too busy shunning my father's foreignness (my Swedish ancestry I had no problem with) to see what he and my mother were trying to give me through their narrow, somewhat condemnatory religion. “I saw at an early age that the world had nothing that I wanted; I saw that I had been a sinner.” Harsh, renouncing words my mother had spoken.

But I could understand now something of what she had meant. You reached for the world, and eventually it lashed you.

I walked east a block to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, a gloomy mass of stone to ponder or ignore in the winter darkness. The sober drunks had arranged for a dance in the basement of the nearby synod house, where I chatted for a while with an old hippie all in black who was there to boogie on his two new knees. My sense was that we didn't like each other too much. We were different. That was all. Or maybe we were too much the same. Talking was a strain over the thumping bass, but it was better than standing alone on the fringes, like some dorky high school student.

Then the woman I had danced with at the wedding arrived with a couple of her girlfriends. Her presence seemed magical. A gift.

"I hadn't known you were married," I said, referring back to the wedding.

"We live separately and are divorcing," she replied. A luminous white barrette lay aslant in her shiny black hair. I liked holding her, when the opportunity came for slow dancing; her carefully made up eyes received me. You could sit in meditation all day long and focus on the spirit, but the warm feel of a body pressed to yours brought you back to the glory of that lower realm.

"I was happy to see you come in," I heard myself say.

"I was happy to see you, too," I heard her reply.

I stayed a while longer before walking south, in the direction of home, her phone number in the fold of my wallet. I walked slowly. It didn't feel like I had anyplace to really be. Nothing was rushing me. Not anymore. I headed over to one of the traffic islands in the middle of

Broadway. I just wanted to sit for a while on the wooden bench, there in plain sight, in slumbering, nocturnal Manhattan.

Wide open, as Jenny used to say.