

WIDTH AND WISDOM

VIDTH AND VISDOM

by

JAMES R. KINCAID

“You think so now,” said Mr. Weller, with the gravity of age, “but you’ll find that as you get vider, you’ll get viser. Vidth and visdom, Sammy, always grows together.”

The Pickwick Papers

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people to mention with gratitude and so many legal requirements pressing on me, not to mention obligations I am imagining, that I will be sure to make a mess of this, and hope you stop reading right now. That's enough. Thank you.

Some of these stories have been published, some not. I have received permission to republish in some cases, not in others. Actually, realizing permissions were automatic (as were denials), I have decided to save everyone considerable time by doing just as you would have done.

I would (now that I think of it) like to thank my wife, Nita Moots Kincaid, who has read some of these and offered criticisms (unnerving) and no encouragement whatsoever. I'd thank others, too, could I recall or even imagine others who have shown what might be taken as interest. The life of a great artist is lonely. So I've heard.

PRELUDE

Collections of short stories tend to be, said an old friend of mine, too much like minestrone: throw in whatever is around that likely hasn't yet gone smelly-bad. No coherence is required, even were such a thing possible. I am happy to say that this collection goes against that observation straight and is carefully unified. You will be happy, too. I won't insult you by making explicit the ties that bind, the patterns that thread, the tonal and structural recurrences (none obvious but unmistakable).

Apart from spotting the connections, there are many other pleasures to be found herein. I trust you will let me know what these are and how you enjoyed them, sparing no adjectives and worrying not at all about repeating yourself. Half the joy of reading well, reading me, you'll find, is telling others of the magnificent wonders therein. I am here for you.

BETTER THAN NOTHING

“I want to leave behind me the name of a fellow who never bullied a little boy, or turned his back on a big one.”

Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*

“Hey, dickhead, your name Jack?”

“What did you call me?”

“You deaf or just stupid?”

“Who ARE you?”

“Your worst nightmare, Jack-off.”

“Yeah, sure. No, tell me, shithead, who ARE you?”

“What do you care?”

“I want to know whose ass I’m kicking.”

“You think you can kick my ass?”

“Oh, Jesus, yes. But how’d you know who I was?”

“I asked.”

“Asked who?”

“Never mind. You ain’t hard to locate. I just called out, you know, ‘Who’s the biggest asshole in this school.’ The answer came back loud and clear: ‘Jack, champion asshole.’ They must have had an election. Congratulations.”

“Kid, you know who I am?”

“Not hard to recognize. They said to look for the ugliest jerked meat around.”

“You really want to die, right?”

“Oh yeah, like you’re so going to do that.”

“Meet me after school?”

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“What’s wrong with right here, right now, badger?”

“Badger? You even know what that means?”

“You wanta see?”

“Fuck, kid, leave your pants on. Just meet me outside.”

“Oh yes! Where?”

“I’ll find you.”

I’d accomplished what I set out to do, not thirty minutes into my first day here at James Madison Junior High. My only worry was that this Jack character might be reluctant to beat the living shit out of someone smaller, lots smaller. Of course he’d said he’d do exactly that, but there was something about the way he looked at me, almost as if I amused him. That’d be terrible. My goal was to infuriate, to make him reckless, homicidal—well, almost homicidal.

The next class was History. I wasn’t sure what kind of History and wish I could say I was so cool I didn’t care. But I did care. World History, turned out. I raised my hand several times during the period, you know, the way geeks do. I wasn’t the only one to do so, though, and that’s some comfort.

Rest of the day didn’t go as planned, exactly. Somebody even sat next to me at lunch. But I’d fix all that, count on Jack to fix all that.

Soon as the bell rang, I headed for the exit so I could make myself conspicuous. That should have been easy, only it wasn’t, as there were about five exits, seemed like. I had to pick one and stand in the middle of whatever I found there—the lawn.

No Jack. Ten minutes I waited, trying to isolate myself somehow. I considered climbing this statue thing

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and also considered circling the building screaming for him. Both seemed excessive, uncool.

People cleared out fast, and there I was, waiting to get my ass kicked with no ass-kickers volunteering for the job. Nothing for it but to go home.

Next day I didn't see Jack until after third period, and there he was. Now I'd fucking get him!

"Hey, dumbass!"

"Huh?"

"Chickenshit loser! Where were you?"

"Oh yeah. Forgot all about you, kid. Go away."

"Go away? You wish!"

"Look shithead, you really want messed up, cut out of lunch. See me on the West Parking Lot."

"Where's that?" (I shouldn't have asked.)

"On the East side of school, moron."

So there I was, waiting. The only thing missing was a crowd of kids, jeering and maybe joining in. I stood there so long I got worried this'd be a repeat of yesterday, but then here he comes, only alone. I was hoping he'd bring along his thuggish buddies.

I was waiting with my rehearsed string of abuse until he got closer, but he beat me to it:

"You gotta tell me your name, kid."

Before I thought, I said it, "Billy. Shit! I mean, Will."

He may have smiled, which pissed me off considerable.

"You think it's funny?"

"No, Will, I run into this all the time, people anxious for misery."

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“Misery, huh? Prepare yourself for a world of pain, prickhead.”

“That’s a line from a movie, right, ‘*The Big Lebowski*’—are you The Dude?”

“I’m your worst nightmare.”

“Another movie line, Billy. You got anything original to say?”

That sort of stopped me. Original? I mean, how original was any of this? I wasn’t after original. I wanted to be Something. I figured I could at least be this. Not much of a role, but better than an emptiness, disappearing. Not a zero.

I knew some good abusive material would spring to mind, but nothing sprung, so I had little choice but to rush at him. I mean, we could hardly just stand there mute, twenty feet apart, intent on looking menacing. Jack was giving no signs of initiating anything; therefore, I began a savage onslaught. Only trouble was, I tried to move too fast or something and tripped, just fucking tripped. I tried to catch myself, but succeeded only in lurching forward, off balance, and right into Jack’s belly.

That would have been OK had I had a fist swinging or a foot kicking, but I only went into him like a clumsy piece of pathetic, my head into his gut and my arms waving about, trying not to fall down.

Worst thing happened: he caught me. Just caught me and held me away from him, didn’t even so much as punch me or spit at me. He finally did lower me to the ground—or maybe I tripped again, but there I was on the ground. He stared at me for a minute, silent. I didn’t

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know what to say, was hoping like hell he'd speak or start kicking me.

Finally: "Look, imbecile, you're not worth fighting here. They might catch me ripping you apart and I'd get suspended. Come by my house after school, unless you get some sense in your head and fucking chicken out. We'll stage your murder there."

I couldn't look too threatening splayed out on the ground, so I struggled up and tried a spit of my own, tough as hell—not on Jack, just on the ground—and it wasn't much of a spit, turned out, kind of dribbled.

I figured I'd be best served just stalking away, but then realized I didn't know where he lived, so had to ask: "Oh, ah, Jack."

"Huh?"

"Where do you live?"

"Jesus, buttface. 136 Fourth Street, not very far."

"OK, jackoff, I'll be sure—" But he'd already left.

I later asked directions (discreetly) and finally found my way to 136 Fourth Street. I was a few minutes early, so I took a tour around the block, tried to, got lost and had to break into a run, ask directions again, and manage to arrive only three minutes late. It was a proper hoodlum's house, only it wasn't. That's OK. Who gave a flying fart about his house anyhow?

I didn't hesitate, walked right up to the door and, ignoring the doorbell as too pussy, knocked real loud.

"Oh, hello, you must be Will. Do come in."

Son of a bitch! His fucking mother!

"Jack is so glad you're coming over to play. He'll be right down."

Over to play? Jesus on a stick.

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Then a voice behind me. “Hey, Will. You like the new ‘Destiny’?”

YOU WIN SOME

Nobody gets justice. People only get good luck or bad luck.

Orson Welles

“Justin?”

“Hi, Marcus.”

“Is this Justin?”

“What?”

“Is this Justin?”

“Wanna see my birth certificate? I can run it right over.”

“That’s OK.”

“Something wrong? You’re screeching. I thought you were your sister.”

“Anybody on the extension?”

“What?”

“Is there anybody on the extension, Justin?”

“Who’d be on the extension? I’m the only one here, like always after school. You know that. Extension?”

“Would you check?”

“You worried the cat’s listening in?”

“Listen, you gotta promise me not to say a word about this.”

“Huh?”

“To anyone.”

“A word about what?”

“Promise?”

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“OK. What is it?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“I oughta be able to keep that promise.”

“I don’t mean I can’t tell you ever.”

“That’s a relief.”

“I mean I can’t tell you right now.”

“It hasn’t happened yet?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just promise. Did you check the extension?”

“I’ll do it now. There, I did it.”

“You did not.”

“I can see it from here.”

“Oh.”

“You want me to promise I’m not recording this call?”

“I never thought of that.”

“Son of a bitch, Marcus.”

“You won’t breathe a word of this, right?”

“What a line: ‘breathe a word of this.’ You been watching old movies?”

“This is no laughing matter.”

“It’s not a matter at all. What are you talking about?”

“I don’t think the phone’s safe. I should have thought of that.”

“Well, you can’t think of everything, Marcus. And yes, I promise to let them torture me and steal my girlfriend before I talk.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend. Can we meet someplace?”

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“Meet someplace? Your house, my house? Wait, I know: not safe. How about we go way up on the trail, half way up the mountain?”

“Why’d you say that?”

“Because—oh hell, Marcus, meet me at the playground. I’ll be the one with the padlock on his lips.”

“You think it’s safe, Marcus? There’s a suspicious looking little girl over there. Maybe the monkey-bars are bugged.”

“This is serious, Justin.”

“OK.”

“I couldn’t bring it along, though.”

“What?”

“It wouldn’t be safe.”

“I see.”

“Good.”

“Of course I don’t see. Bring what along? What wouldn’t be safe?”

“Shhh. The money.”

“What money?”

“You know. That I found—up on the trail.”

“Oh, THAT money. Wait, you found money on the trail? What trail? How much money?”

“Mt Wilson Trail. About an hour ago. Maybe longer.”

“How much?”

“I’m not sure. I counted real fast. \$970,000, I think.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Shit.”

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“I need your help.”

“Spending it?”

“Yeah, that too.”

“C’mon!”

“I mean it. I owe you. You helped me out a lot last week with Todd and last year, too.”

“I’m good at getting my ass kicked by bullies you fuck with, yeah. What’s that have to do with money?”

“You’re my friend. Justin.”

“Jesus!”

“You are.”

“Of course, but you don’t need to go saying it.”

“I know.”

“You know, but you did it. So, tell me what you’re talking about—and don’t tell me to keep quiet, or I’m out of this geeky little-kid place.”

“Wanna do the see-saw, Justin?”

“I should’ve let Todd have a go at you.”

“OK. I found this money in a big bag on the Mt. Wilson trail, the part that’s closed off as unsafe—you know, where the rock-slide was.”

“You were up there by yourself, dumb ass?”

“Yes, DAD, and I know it was ever-so-fucking dumb. Now can I go on, or you got a lecture to give?”

“Yeah. I mean, yeah—go on.”

“I already said. I found this sack of money. I slipped a little, kind of fell, dislodged a rock and there was this sack, filled with money.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, so I took it.”

“Where is it now?”

“At home, inside my closet on the floor.”

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“Nobody’ll ever find it there. You gotta move it.”
“Fuck, Justin, you think?”

A passer-by would have noticed nothing unusual: the two boys were older than ordinary playground kids, but maybe they were bored, giving their old haunt a go until embarrassment took over. Truth was that they’d mounted the teeter-totter so as to stay alert in their up-and-downs to the surrounding areas, while appearing natural—not at all like kids discussing how to deal with a million dollars.

Though Marcus was the one who had found the sack stuffed with hundred-dollar bills in neat \$10,000 wrapped packets, 97 of them, it soon seemed to both of them a mutual find—and problem, especially as this windfall began shifting in their minds and talk away from a “discovery” to a dangerous “theft.” Who had left the money there? Why? Were they morally right or within the law or wise or safe to keep it? What should they do now?

Neither mentioned telling parents or police, the two being linked in their minds: “You just take that money right down to the. . . .”

The first problem: stashing the bag, not a small one, somewhere safe, which Justin’s closet sure wasn’t. Solved pretty easily.

“I know, Justin. Put it back where it came from, sort of.”

“Right. On the same trail. Off the path a little, so no footprints.”

“They’ll never suspect that.”

“Hide it in plain sight.”

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“Exactly, though not exactly.”

“There’s good places about a mile or so up, all those rocks.”

“Rain we’ve had lately will help. No dirt on the rocks, no marks.”

“Perfect. You’re an old hand at this.”

“I’ve been sneaking all my life. Should we both go?”

“More chance of screwing up.”

“So you do it, Justin. In case I made boot marks or something the rain didn’t erase—they won’t be looking for yours.”

And that’s what they did, or Justin did. They kept themselves from celebrating, though it was a temptation. The money might be safe—possibly. But were they? And, even if they might be, for now, what would they do with money, never mind how much, they could not access, much less spend.

“I know, Marcus. Talk to Mr. McClellan.”

“You think?”

“So do you.”

“Why did you boys come to me, for Christ’s sake?”

“Because we trust you.”

“You know I’m obliged to report this. Otherwise, I could lose my job.”

“You could pretend we never told you.”

“You mean, lie.”

“Why not?”

“You guys are something. Holy Hell.”

“Why do you have to report it, anyhow?”

“Any illegal activity. . . .”

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“What we did was find money. That illegal?”

“No. Not reporting it sure is.”

“If I find a quarter on the street and keep it, that gonna land me in prison?”

“Justin, you didn’t find a quarter.”

“What makes the difference? We didn’t steal it.”

“Hmm. I guess I really don’t know. It’s not your money. I know, I know, neither’s the quarter. Let me think.”

He did think, thought long and hard, and came up with nothing. Then he checked the Internet, which, as always, gave him several sets of firm and wholly contradictory assurances: tell the police, leave a note at the spot, call an attorney, ignore the whole thing, keep it. Most sites mandered on about finding a wallet and identifying the owner, picking up cash in a store and alerting the manager, recognizing that laws varied by state and calling your very own attorney general to check and make sure. Finally, he found a long and confident essay by “Jeff“ (sounded official) discussing many scenarios that didn’t apply, finally winding round to “cash in a public place.” On this point, Jeff was clear and persuasive:

If there is no identification and I’m in a public place, like a sidewalk or a park, something like that, I pocket the money. There is no simple or effective way to return the money in this situation because there is no effective “lost and found.” I view it as owner’s irresponsibility and feel no guilt about pocketing it. Of course, if someone returns while I’m still there and is searching for the money, I’ll

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ask them what they're looking for and if they tell me, then I'll give them the money that I found.

Seemed reasonable, maybe. He arranged a meeting with the boys to talk it over.

“What do you think, kids?”

Justin and Marcus agreed that Jeff made a lot of sense, seemed ready to leave it at that. Then Marcus cut loose:

“I have a few questions, Mr. McClellan.”

“Shoot. Oops, that’s not the best term in our situation.”

“Who’s Jeff? I know, you said he had a website; but he doesn’t seem to say anything about it being legal.”

“Well, Marcus. . . .”

“Also—sorry, Mr. M—even if he knows the law, isn’t he talking about little bits of money? Shouldn’t we check with the police or something?”

Before McClellan could respond, Justin broke in, “That ship has sailed. Call the police and you know where that money will end up. Jeff don’t know dick, I suppose, but he’s as good as anybody, since those who know will just fucking take the money from us, right Mr. M.”

“I imagine so. I did try to find out where money seized in drug busts goes, but that runs into the same problem. The officials are close-mouthed about it, so if you try to find out from them they’ll wonder why you’re asking. Leaves us in the dark, unless you want to put the money back.”

“Fuck that,” said Justin, then, “Sorry about the ‘fuck,’ Mr. M.”

“Yeah,” said McClellan, “and I guess that ship has

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sailed too. Try to put the money back and you run risks worse than those posed by the police. Where do you suppose that money comes from?”

“A birthday present to a mountain man, got dropped on the path and worked its way under a rock.”

“Right, Marcus. We all know this is criminal loot, drug money maybe, and that whoever put it there isn’t whistling it bye-bye. They’re looking for it, and know how to look better than any cops.”

“You suppose, Mr. M? Like we hadn’t thought of that.”

“Let’s try to be civil. You two little shits got me into this, remember.”

“And we do appreciate your help, Mr. M. Don’t pay any attention to Justin. You know how he is.”

“Not until recently. Marcus, did you see anybody when you were up there?”

“See anybody?”

“Anybody at all? Think hard.”

“Yeah, I did. A guy and his kid—I guess it was his kid.”

“Well, let’s hope it was his very own. Anybody else?”

“Not in the marked-off, illegal place. The guy and his kid weren’t there either. They came by earlier—on their way down. But wait. There was this group of women, exercising together, I imagine.”

“OK. That it, Marcus?”

“No, there was a guy by himself.”

“Glad you saved that for last. What did he look like?”

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“He had on this trench coat, big scar on his face, a shiv in his hand.”

“You’re as bad as Justin.”

“Thanks.”

“So there wasn’t any guy?”

“Yes, there was. Just a guy.”

“How far from the marked-off area.”

“Maybe half a mile. He said, ‘Hi’ and asked me if I was going to the top. He was on the way down.”

“Would you recognize him if you saw him again?”

“If he had the same parrot on his shoulder and said AARRGGHH.”

“Damn, Marcus. Do you kids have any idea what you are up against? I don’t mean to scare you, but there may have been a camera with a trip there by the money, or they may even have had a telescope trained on the site with a recorder. You imagine they would put nearly a million dollars there without some security?”

The boys were silent, McClellan instantly feeling like a bully. Well, he hadn’t asked to be part of this and . . . Try as he might, he couldn’t walk away from his involvement. Nothing for it now but to help these two boys, children.

“You know, Mr. M, I don’t think they’d have put a camera there. It’d be just one more thing to attract attention. As for a telescope, I imagine that could be, but it’s a squirrely place where I found it, and I don’t know where they could have put a telescope so as to see it. Maybe. I guess they could have done that. You think?”

“Nah, kids. I don’t think that.”

But he did.

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Two days later they had advanced not an inch beyond this point, which was nowhere. The money, they assumed, was secure in its new mountain hiding place, parents and everyone else but the trio, the now-frightened trio, in the dark. At least that's what they figured, hoped.

Then it happened. Marcus hadn't been home from school more than ten minutes when the phone rang:

"Hello."

Silence.

"Hello."

"Who is this?"

"Who is *this*? You called me."

Silence.

"Who were you calling?"

"Wrong number."

Marcus wasted no time phoning Justin and, then, McClellan, who was at first more nettled than worried. Then he sensed the boy's fear, told Marcus to get Justin and meet him at school next day: back door, by the delivery station, he'd let them in.

"You boys want to get out from under all this, give the money to the police? Tell them you found it today?"

"No," both said. Despite being ready to pee themselves with fright, they were not going to abandon this exciting tale they found themselves in because of a wrong number.

"OK. I kind of admire you, though I think you don't recognize what a chance you're taking."

"We know, Mr. M, but we don't want to quit now."

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“Quit? I see, sort of. What do you want to do?”

“We’ve talked about it, Marcus and me, and we were wondering about leaving with the money, getting the hell out of here.”

“Justin, you simply can’t. Where would you go? How would you live and with whom? Besides, it’s crazy. You’re both, what, fourteen?”

“We could support each other, me and Marcus.”

He paused; struck by whatever it was the kids had together, and for a moment wondering if maybe that wouldn’t be enough for them to draw on, survive. But all that was crazy. To what remote land could they flee and survive? And how would he feel serving a thirty-year prison term for aiding and abetting?

Marcus put his hand on McClellan’s own, as if to comfort him, protecting him from the dark and all the demons hiding there.

“How about we figure another way for you boys to keep the money, evade the mob, stay here?”

Both looked at him as if he were, at last, on their side. Justin spoke first:

“Here’s how I see it: there’s got to be ways we can put the money somewhere, a foreign place like a bank. You can do that for us, Mr. M.”

He had no idea he could accomplish any such thing, but he smiled. What was he doing?

“The big problem,” Justin continued, “is the mob. We think we should set a trap for them.”

“The mob? You guys gonna take on the Cosa Nostra? That’s a good idea.”

The kids stared at him, and he recognized the accusation in their silence.

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“How you going to do that?” he substituted, now genuinely intrigued.

“We don’t know yet,” Justin said.

“We need more information,” Marcus added, very coolly, McClellan thought, considering there was no way he could think of to get information in this situation without risking imprisonment, broken kneecaps, or death.

He said as much, but the boys still seemed unfazed, said they’d get back to him shortly, remembering to thank him several times for all his help. What help?

Two days passed without anything much happening, though the boys seemed to be gaining assurance as fast as their adult advisor was losing his.

Then the phone call came, as good luck would have it, when they were both there at Marcus’ house, alone, plotting.

“Hello.”

Silence. Marcus, hand covering the receiver, said to Justin: “It’s him.”

“Tell him you know it’s him.”

“Listen, I know it’s you.”

“What do you mean? Who do you think this is?”

The voice on the other end, surprisingly high-pitched, seemed uncertain, nervous. That was good.

“You want your money. We know that.”

“What money? Who’s we?”

“We’re here alone, so you don’t need to pretend, right Justin?”

Justin hissed: “Tell him my name, why don’t you!”

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Marcus hurried to make matters better. “And my name’s Marcus.”

“I think I have the wrong number.”

“No you don’t. You want your money, and we’re right about that.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Let’s meet and talk about this, OK?”

Silence.

“You want your money, you better meet us”—long pause—“or you’re never going to get it, not a dime.”

“You kids know who you’re dealing with?”

“No. What’s your name? We told you ours.”

“Mother of God. OK, kid, you got me. Mine’s Montague.”

“Hi, Montague. Now, you’d better meet us, you’d just fucking better.”

There was a muffled noise on the other end, sounded like a laugh almost.

“Will I be safe?”

Marcus looked at Justin, who was sharing the earphone but not, until now, speaking:

“You might be. We might be. None of us might be. That’s why we meet, see.”

“I don’t know what the fuck that means, but OK, how about right there in your backyard, that restaurant called ‘The Only Place in Town.’ How about that?”

Marcus looked at Justin: “You know where we live?”

“Somehow I do.”

“Oh. Never mind. We decided we’d meet you at Venice Beach.”

“What? Where’s that?”

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“You can ask somebody.”

“Venice Beach. Jesus, kids. I’m not much for beaches. You got some reason for this?”

“Just do it,” said Justin, breaking in. “We’ll meet you outside the show with the two-headed rattlesnake and the bearded lady.”

“A freak show?”

“They don’t call them that. They’re entertainers, not freaks.”

“I call them freaks. You kids freaks too? That how I’ll spot you?”

“We’ll spot you. What will you be wearing?”

“A carnation in my buttonhole. Before your time. A Dodgers ball cap.”

“Too many of those.”

“Shit. OK. A Hawaiian shirt, bright blue.”

“What’s your name? You know ours.”

“Betsy Ross. I wrote the Star Spangled Banner.”

“No she didn’t. That was. . . .”

“Not much of a sense of humor, kid. So when, what time we meeting?”

“Saturday. 1 o’clock. We’ll go for a beach walk.”

“Bullshit. I haven’t been on a beach in thirty years, and I’m not. . . .”

“You want your money, you’ll do as we say.”

The tone was no longer nervous: “You start giving orders, kids, you’re going to find out who you’re up against.”

Marcus started to say something apologetic but Justin broke in: “No need for that. We’ll see you Saturday. You’ll be able to identify us pretty easy.”

“I can do that now.”

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That last would have been frightening, had not both boys figured right away it was meant to be frightening and just didn't matter. As long as they had the money, they had control. Maybe.

They had arrived at the same point without much talking back and forth, confident that they had the upper hand, were engineering a plan, more exactly, a "trap." That had been the word all along. It wasn't the only thing bolstering them, but it gave them a story they could live inside, a plot with an ending that might be unclear but that promised to be satisfactory.

It hadn't started to wobble, just yet, but their story seemed in danger of receding, slipping round the corner. Time to strengthen it, bring it back into focus.

"So, Justin."

"I know, Marcus. What exactly do we do now?"

"First thing is to stay in control."

"Right. We know where the money is. They don't."

"You think it's 'they' and not 'he'?"

"Sure."

"OK, no matter. We need to get them to commit, right?"

"Right, Marcus. They're the ones feeling time pressure. We can let the money sit as long as we want. They can't. That much money must belong somewhere, be owed to someone, someone who isn't going to wait long."

"Exactly. So we play along, pretend to be ready to give them the money, see how desperate they are, what they're willing to do."

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“We know they’ll say they’re going to kill us, but why would they do that? They’d never get the money then.”

“What if they go after Mr. M, Justin, or our families, or maybe cut off our fingers?”

“We have to make them believe they don’t need to, that we’re just scared kids wanting an out. Make them think they have us trapped; that way we can trap them.”

“I know what.”

“What, Marcus?”

“All we need to do is tell them we have instructions on where to find the money hidden away in our school lockers or some such place, so if anything happens to us or Mr. M or our families, they won’t get anything.”

“Good one.”

They had no trouble recognizing one another. Marcus and Justin were the only kids hanging outside the sideshow, and Montague looked just the way a mobster should: loud Hawaiian shirt, a hat suitable for anywhere but the beach, oxford shoes with black socks, and shorts that at one time were probably called Bermuda. His face looked as if it’d been used for drag racing, and his stomach was so out of proportion to everything else about him it seemed prosthetic.

The kids spotted him first, or at least were the ones making the approach. Mobster scowled a really good scowl and then smiled. But he remained mute.

“We’re Justin and Marcus from the phone. You the guy wants the money?” said Justin, not in a whisper.

“Fucking Christ,” said Montague, “shut up, shut the fuck up. Why don’t you just carry a sign, ‘Illegal shit

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going down?’ Where can we go to talk? And shut the fuck up ‘til we get there.”

Marcus was thinking of other things: “Glad you could find us. Guess you had no trouble finding the sideshow.”

“Matter of fact, I did. This whole place is a freak show. You see that guy on roller skates and a guitar with a fucking python or something around his neck? Damned near ran into me, said he hoped I had a happy, hugging day. No shit.”

Justin seemed amused: “And you said, let me guess, ‘Fuck off.’”

Montague studied him: “I didn’t hug him.”

“It was the python,” Marcus said; “otherwise, you’d have hugged him.”

Justin looked a little alarmed, but Montague only rolled his eyes.

“OK, so where do we go to talk, as I asked half an hour ago?”

“Just cross over the bike path behind us. Be careful about the bikes and roller-bladers. We can take a walk on the beach.”

“Fuck that. I told you, I ain’t been on a beach since I was ten, and I ain’t. . . .”

“You haven’t walked on a beach?” Marcus asked.

“Not exactly where my line of work gets done, kid.”

“You been here to Venice Beach before, though, right? Not to the beach part but to the boardwalk?”

“Why you asking? No, I ain’t. Actually enjoyed it. That black comedian over there, he’s pretty fucking

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funny. Passed the hat and said put something in, since at least I'm here and not robbing your house. That's good."

"You give him some money?"

"Why you care? Yeah, I did, a twenty. He wanted me to be in his act, but I backed off that, you can bet your ass."

"You probably don't want to be recognized."

He looked at one kid and then the other, seemed to be thinking of some kind of violence, then shrugged: "Like the FBI is here, right."

"Or the rival mob."

Now he for sure wasn't smiling: "What do you know about rival mobs?"

"Don't get touchy," Justin said, "We ain't as dumb as we look."

Montague looked startled, then actually giggled: "OK, you got me. No way I can fool you two birds. Let's go torture our feet in that fucking sand."

They crossed the path, got to the as-always-uncrowded beach and strolled maybe half a mile without talking.

"You kids come here a lot?"

"We do when we can. We live about an hour away, so not as often as we'd like."

"You go swimming?"

"Swimming with the fishes, you mean?" said Marcus, giggling.

He didn't say anything.

"Well," Justin said, "Marcus was just giving you shit. We do go swimming here, like most kids."

"Yeah," Montague said, "like most kids."

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The silence and the walk extended itself for some time.

“You could go with us sometime,” Justin finally said, then immediately felt stupid, knowing that’d sound sarcastic and would bring down on both of them some murderous action.

Montague didn’t look up, said nothing. More silent plodding.

Finally, Marcus could take it no longer: “We going to talk about the money and whether you’re going to torture us?”

Now Montague did look up.

“I been thinking, kids. Here’s what I think.” He checked around to see nobody was close, then made a motion as if to grab the boys, pulling back almost as soon as he started. “Sorry. I was going to check and see if you was wired, but I can see you can’t be, wearing that next-to-nothing you got on.”

Both kids seemed a little embarrassed, a point Montague noticed: “That’s OK. ”

He was quiet again some more. They’d reached a jetty, not far from a long dock and had stopped.

Finally, “I’ll tell you what. I shouldn’t say this, but I’m clearing out of my organization, going where I might have a beach nearby. Anyhow, I just want to keep moving. You figured, you smart guys, that I’m not from around here.

He paused for a minute but clearly didn’t want a response. Then, “There’s \$970,000 there, right? Don’t answer. I know that’s it and I know you wouldn’t take any or lie to me. So let’s cut the part where I threaten you,” here he smiled broadly, “set you to swimming

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with the fishes. How about we split the money ten-to-one, gives you some and me a lot. But I'm the one who earned it—or got it. Right? No questions asked. You can set yours aside for later on, college, I suppose.”

He paused again and looked at them more closely: “Go to college, boys. Wish I had. I know college about as well as I do beaches.”

Justin and Marcus spoke almost at once: “We really don't need that much, and you might, off on your desert island.”

He brought back his scowl: “If it's a desert island, stupid, what would I spend it on?”

Neither kid could think of what to say. Finally, Justin said, “Are there any desert islands left?”

“Fuck if I know, kid. I didn't really mean that. I got plans, though.”

“Can we help?”

“Thanks, kids. You can help by forgetting all about this.”

“Best way for us to do that,” Marcus said, “is to not take any money. We have no way to explain how we got all that dough anyhow.”

Montague looked worried, then: “I know. You gotta have a batty aunt or grandma, everybody does. You can figure a way to convince them it's theirs and they want to leave it to you. Make sure they're old—or maybe sick as hell, so you don't have to wait too long.”

The kids looked puzzled, way out of their depth.

Montague was reassuring: “Hell, that'd work.”

There didn't seem any way out. They looked at one another, agreed, trying to imagine the batty-aunt plot working.

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Montague gave them a look that was hard to decipher. Then continued, “So, same time tomorrow, only let’s start not at the freaks but here, right here.”

They had talked that night about various plans, but they knew there was only one plan, giving the money back. They thought about asking Montague just to take the whole thing. But they knew he wouldn’t.

Next day, there was no talk to speak of, just handing off the loot, as Justin said, making sure no dicks were around

Montague took the bag but didn’t leave right away, seemed as if he wanted to say something but didn’t know what.

It was Marcus who spoke: “Let’s go swimming some time. Just come by or call, tell us which desert island or, you know, mob hangout.”

Montague looked at them, turned and scuffed slowly through the sand.

“Think he’ll call us, Justin?”

“You crazy? Maybe he is, though.”

CASEY AT THE BAT

**Then, from all the throats, there arose a mighty yell;
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the
flat.**

For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

The room was less sterile than most he had been in, somehow more comforting. Or maybe he just felt such a need for comfort he was flooding the room with what he so wanted and knew would never come.

Sure enough.

“I’m afraid I haven’t very good news, Mr. Casey.
On two fronts.”

“Oh no. Surgery?”

“No, not that.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Well, in a way.”

“Just tell me, doctor.”

“You have a form of Stagardt’s Disorder, one called fundus flavinaculatus. Stagardt’s disease is mostly found in children, fundus flavinaculatus in older teens and middle age.”

“I see.”

“Sorry. It’s a progressive eye disease, you see.
That’s what causing your problems.”

“Not being able to see.”

“Yes. And it’s progressing, I’m afraid, rather rapidly—seems to be accelerating, I’m sorry to say that.

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We'll have to monitor it very closely—weekly, even every-other-day.”

“And the treatment?”

“That’s the other bad news.”

He was 2-15 in the last four games, not up to his usual level, of course, or he wouldn’t be here in the majors, though he wasn’t setting any records, even before his slump. This was only his first season with the Pirates, making more than he ever imagined he would, even if it was the official minimum.

And having fun he didn’t know was available anywhere in the world. It wasn’t supposed to be fun; it was supposed to be pressure-packed, anguishing. Not for him, Antonio Casey. His name helped, as his clubhouse mates picked right up on the poem and the unlikely conjunction of Italian (his mom) and Irish (Pop): “Porco cazzo!” “Casey, Mighty Casey, is advancing to the bat!” “Mama Mia!” And, of course, “Mighty Casey had struck out.” He’d heard that with increasing frequency, maybe because the ball became harder and harder to spot, not disappearing but somehow becoming smaller, spotted, distorted by flashes of light.

Fundus Flavinaculatus. No cure.

He considered telling the manager, one of his teammates, the batboy. What would be the point? Just get him more useless medical attention—and then released.

What would he do then? Get a tin cup, a dog, a white cane?

All of that still seemed a joke to him, making no contact with his life, with his exhilarating life as a major

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leaguer, a second baseman with some range and a bat that would come alive once he got used to the pitchers. It was much quicker up here than at AAA, faster-paced: the pitchers had better control, threw harder, commanded more speeds and spins. But he'd catch on.

Or would have done.

He decided he'd get a second opinion, meanwhile hoping the eye drops his mother (of all people) had sent him would help. Maybe if he upped the dosage.

Meanwhile, there was this crucial game with the Phillies. Really, it was. Not many of the hundred-plus baseball games in a season are truly crucial; but it was now September, only six games left, one game behind this very team.

He'd arrived early. He always did, eager to dive into the clubhouse atmosphere, be with teammates who had been so unexpectedly helpful and—he admitted the word—kind. He'd been in the minors for six years before his elevation and had experienced nothing even close. Truth is, Antonio had found nothing like it ever in his life: not in school, not even at home. It was more than acceptance, more than friendship.

How could he even think of living without this?

But now for the Phillies and their twenty-game-winner, Moses Abraham, on the hill today. Casey had faced him four times this season and managed two hits. He wasn't especially proud of that: both had come with two out and bases empty—harmless singles. Still, it showed something, something Sam Wills, his manager, would note carefully, maniac on stats and computer studies as he was.

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Soon, teammates started drifting in. First was the shortstop, Bailey, who never failed to have some of the poem to throw at him. Today it was, “And now the pitcher holds the ball and now he lets it go. And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey’s blow.” Nothing mean. Bailey helped him regularly with everything from his stance, to the best restaurants, to ways to deal with Wills: “Just keep your goddamned mouth shut and nod.”

There had been no hazing, no hurt. From day one, he was where he needed to be, needed to stay.

“Casey, my office!”

He snapped to attention, hiked up his pants fast, and made his way to the manager’s little cage. It really was a cage, something below unpretentious. He’d found it easy, homey. Mills had seemed to have made him a special project, or, if not that, a player he had no interest in humiliating.

He found a seat, easy enough, as there was but the one. He also kept his goddamned mouth shut: that much of Bailey’s wisdom he had absorbed.

“Casey, son, I think you’re pressing just a little. I do.”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s why I’m going to give you a little rest, just for today. You got me?”

“Yes sir.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way. I’m not trying to skin your ass, just doing what seems best for the team, giving you this little rest, like I say.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Rodriquez will start.”

“Yes, sir.”

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“But you’re not on vacation, Casey. I expect you’ll get into the game. I figure you will.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You understand me, son. This is no punishment. We’ll need you for the post-season, the World Series. Yessir.”

He knew it wasn’t a punishment, but he also knew it was no reward. He’d stopped hitting, stopped helping the team. He’d snap out of it, he knew. He had to. He had nowhere else to go.

The only place he could go right now was to the bench, the one spot that made him feel uncomfortable, an outsider. He figured there was no chance he could get into the game, no chance when the dugout steps were swaying before him, dancing in uncertain lights and flares. He felt himself becoming a little dizzy, slid onto the bench and gripped it with both hands.

The dizziness came and went as the game moved in and out of rhythms mostly bad for the Pirates. Phillies were up 2-0 after half an inning and stayed there through six, before adding another run then and another in the seventh. 4-0.

Casey now had forgotten his dizziness and was inside the game, inside the efforts of his teammates, even more fully when those efforts produced nothing at all in the way of runs.

Bailey slid in next to him as the bottom of the seventh, stretch time, began,

“We need you out there, Case.”

“Thanks. We’ll get ‘em.”

“You OK? You look funny.”

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“I’m dandy. Just waiting for our comeback.”

Looking funny? How? He didn’t dare ask, but his dizziness came back and he quickly turned his head away from Bailey, imagining he’d somehow feel fine if he forced himself to look out at the field, the distance. That was it. He could hear his dad in the car, twenty years ago: “Look way off at the sky or those hills over there. That’ll make you feel better.”

It hadn’t then, hadn’t stopped the nausea or the vomiting it produced (once all over his dad’s back and neck) but maybe it would now.

What did help was a small Pirates rally in the 7th, making it 4-2 and then another in the 8th, tying it up, by God, and leaving things to the bullpen, the strongest part of the team.

Casey felt as if he were a member of the excited crowd when the team clambered in after an easy top-of-the-ninth and got ready for a win. Just needed one run.

But then, hell’s bells, two quick outs.

“But when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same

A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.”

The patrons maybe, but the dugout was noisy, never giving up. And, sure enough, Harrison singled, as did Fowler, and Rodriquez, his own replacement, beat out a little roller to third. Sacks jammed.

“Casey, you’re up!”

Mills didn’t even look his way, just barked it out. Nothing he could do but hope he could produce something. But first he had to make it to the plate—almost didn’t when he rose too quickly, had to grab onto the dugout roof and then Bailey for support.

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“You OK?”

“Just stood up too fast. Where’s my bat?”

Somehow he made it to the box, took a warm-up swing (one was all he could manage) and moved into the box. Looking out at the Phillies relief ace—or trying to—he saw a starry blur; and he didn’t see the ball coming at all.

“Steerike one!”

He squinted, trying to focus, wishing he had those eye drops right now, which was foolish as he’d never be able to. . . .

“Ball one.”

Thirty seconds later:

“Ball two.”

“Good eye!” a fan yelled, somehow making himself heard about the general level of cheering. Casey actually chuckled at that. If he only knew.

Suddenly he could see very clearly, so clearly he could count the stitches, as they say, on the ball curving in, an off-speed pitch that was going to travel right into his sweet spot. So he swung away.

“Strike two.”

Crowd groans.

By then, there was only a form on the pitcher’s mound, shaky and far too mobile. Not that he could swing now, no point.

“Ball three!”

The crowd was now uproarious with hope, and so was Casey. He stepped out of the box and rubbed his hands on his knees, suddenly without dizziness, suddenly focused and confident. He stepped back in and looked out to where the pitcher should have been.

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*Oh somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining
bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts
are light;
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere
children squawk
And there's joy awash in Pittsburgh: Mighty Casey drew
a walk!*

UNFIT

Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing.

Sylvia Plath

**There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at
a typewriter and bleed**

Ernest Hemingway

Writing is hard work and bad for the health.

E. B. White

“Anything hot in your server?”

“Just the usual cheerleader porn.”

“That pay well, you suppose?”

“Oh, yes! That’s how they can lure away
Hollywood stars.”

“Think I’ll look into it. We could use the income.”

“Put that idea on your bucket list. You’re not near
old enough to meet their standards.”

“Truly? Well, you’d know. They put our elders in
cheering costumes, tiny skirts?”

“Teeny-tiny, but they be soon—you know—on the
way off. And honey, I caught that dig about income.”

“Did I say anything about income?”

“You did. Back there where you were talking about
displaying yourself to the multitudes, a select group of
them.”

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“I have a select group as it is—and I didn’t mean to gouge you about money.”

“I know substituting doesn’t pay much.”

“But there’s your writing.”

“Maxine!”

“Sorry, John. I know you’re working devotedly at your craft—sending out those short stories by the score.”

“Just sent one out about a guy puts a contract out on his wife, has second thoughts, and then doesn’t.”

“Doesn’t what?”

“Have second thoughts.”

“Any of these journals pay?”

“Well, their contests have prizes, sometimes big ones.”

“You enter those?”

“No.”

“And there’s a good reason, right?”

“They charge to enter, much more than the \$2 or \$3 I sometimes pay, not often.”

“Often. I do the finances, remember?”

“Oh.”

“John, I know you have these lists—hundreds of journals and just as many stories under your belt.”

“I know where you’re going with this.”

“And?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I’m not publishing much.”

“Much?”

“Four stories, kind of.”

“I won’t pry into it. But those ones who didn’t publish your stores—what do they say?”

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“Thank you very much, John, for your submission. We value your support, without which our journal and others like it could not long endure.”

“Polite.”

“Yes.”

“And heartfelt. They go on to say?”

“We much enjoyed your superb, heart-rending, pulse-pounding writing, exhibiting craft not seen since Nabokov, and. . . .”

“What do they really say?”

“Alas, your story does not fit with our current needs.”

“You figure you know how to make some of them fit?”

“No.”

“You don’t?”

“No.”

“Oh. You gonna quit then?”

“No.”

DUMB CLUCK

I think, therefore I am single.

Lizz Winstead

I'm just a person trapped in a woman's body.

Elayne Boosler

“Jeff, are you really, truly stupid, just deeply stupid? Is that your secret? Tell me. I’ve been assuming you were sly, sarcastic, charmingly naïve. Could it be you’re a plain old moron?”

Some might be insulted by that question, but me? Nah. I know Sasha so well, you see, know her inside out, you might say, though that’s an ugly way to put it. Anyhow, I know when she’s kidding, which is almost always. How do I know that? You are going to say it’s “intuition,” but it’s not “intuition” at all. It’s “trust.”

Sasha and I have always had a relationship built on trust. Once we had a moment only lovers, the lucky ones, know: out of the blue, you find yourself thinking the same thing at the same time. I don’t mean “I’m hungry!” or “That man over there’s fat!” I mean, “Our relationship is built on trust.” When that thought hit me, I said, “Sasha, you know what?” “What, Jeff?” she said. “Our relationship is built on trust.” “Uh-huh. I was just thinking that,” she said.

Sasha and I are able to look beyond appearances. True love, we agree, is founded on depth. I have had

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relationships based on appearances only, and they've never lasted. Sometimes it's been me attracted to another person's appearance and sometimes it's been another person attracted to mine. Same result. People who bank on appearances are headed for a fall. I'm not wishing bad things for them, mind. People are different, and what's good for couple A is not necessarily good for couple B.

Our ability to overlook appearances is important to us personally, too. I mean, I don't look a lot like Brad Pitt. That no longer bothers me. It doesn't bother Sasha either. That's what she says. Well, even if she doesn't say it, I can tell. Only a shallow person is consumed by appearances, puts it at the top of their "Here's What I Want" list.

There was a time when I did worry. I used to fuss with my externals, going so far as to spend perfectly good money on fancy hair stylists. I now see that I was trying to be somebody I wasn't. It worked; I won't say it didn't. There's a reason fancy hair-stylists get away with charging so much. Not like all they're doing is feeding off insecurities; they're onto something. But that's not the point I'm making. What I'm saying is that, for me, Supercuts is fine. I'd go so far as to say that Supercuts is good enough for any truly secure person. Spending big money on haircuts and blow-dries is a good way to lose touch with your basic self. Especially blow-dries. I can blow myself dry with a common hair-dryer, which comes pretty cheap at any consumer-friendly store, or just stick my head out of the car on the freeway and spend nothing.

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Sasha jokes about my views on this point, feeling easy about kidding me, as you know because I said so earlier. You'll notice quite a few couples aren't free to do that, and experience has taught me that couples without enough mutual trust to joke do not know true love. You may disagree with me, but I must tell the truth as I see it. If you have a problem with that, maybe you should look to your own values. I'm just saying.

For example:

"Jeff, your hair looks like shit. Could you once, for me, get a decent haircut?"

"Sasha, you know how I feel about being a phony."

"Jeff, I know how you feel about spending money."

"On myself."

"On anything."

"I try to be careful."

"That's certain."

"Honey, I think you're a little unfair. Just a little."

"Honey, I think you're tight, and not just a little."

"My hair is OK."

"It looks like you cut it yourself—when you were drunk, bad lighting, dull shears."

You see: more kidding. Our love is easy. Like the song says, "The sunbeams that shine—they're yours, they're mine. The best things in life are free." How true.

Sasha and I have started a small therapy group, online. It offers valuable help to other couples or, as we put it, "the uncoupled hoping to couple." "Free to be honest!" is the name of our group. Unlike other operations, this one won't eat up all your savings—and, uniquely, ours WORKS! We help our clients to see that finding a mutual honesty requires being honest with

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yourself. You can't have one without the other, as the song says. Not many people recognize that honesty is a two-way street, which is one reason so many relationships go sour.

Before getting to the slight bump in our own relationship, Sasha's and mine, her (alleged) pregnancy, let me speak a bit more about our business. Right up front, I'll say that we do make money from helping others, by way of our very modest sign-up fee and advertising revenue. We haven't yet sold much (any) advertising, but of course that'll come. We will be very scrupulous in monitoring ads, though not censoring them. For instance, no ads from drug companies, as we think drugs are a temporary solution to long-term problems. When the ad money starts to come in, I can leave my current position, which is as a counter person at a convenience restaurant, all right, a fast-food restaurant, all right, McDonald's.

Right now we are charging \$25 as a sign-up fee. That was Sasha's idea. Seemed to me modest, ridiculously modest. Here's how I developed my views on that: "Sasha, I think \$500 is about right."

"We agreed on \$25."

"Your idea of agreement is, 'I said it.' That's not agreement, that's dictatorship, Ms. Josef Stalin," I laughingly said.

"\$25."

"\$300."

"\$25."

"\$30."

"\$25."

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“People will think we don’t offer professional responses to their problems. They’ll think ‘you get what you pay for.’”

“We can’t pass ourselves off as professionals. It’s not like we’ve been trained.”

“Not by books, but we have training money can’t buy and books can’t sell, the training of life.”

“Which is what every bozo has, including our suckers.”

“They’re clients, and you know very well we have priceless counsel to offer.”

“Not priceless, \$25 worth – at a stretch.”

Sometimes Sasha can be so stubborn it’s like arguing with a stone. Or Mother. Mother was like that. Sometimes I think it’s a lucky thing she had that accident in the bathtub. But never mind that. Sasha isn’t much like Mother in most ways.

Mother’s favorite song went like this: “Remember we found a lonely spot, and after I learned to care a lot, you promised that you’d forget me not, but you forgot to remember.” There’s nothing like old songs. I made that remark to Sasha, and she countered with, “There’s plenty of things like old songs: the ice capades, reality tv, the right to life people, scabies.”

We have eighteen clients so far. Not a huge income. I mean, you do the math. So it’s still “want fries with that?” for me.

I’ll illustrate what we do in our group, since our motto can tell you only so much. The names here are disguised, not that there’s anything risqué in the therapy we offer. We’re not voyeurs, probing other people’s

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lives with prudence in our hearts. We have a zero tolerance policy for anything dirty.

Clarice entered the group, feeling that no one took her seriously. Several of our clients express feelings like that: nobody remembers what they say, even when they get to finish a sentence, which isn't often. Or that's their perception.

Sasha: "Why do you think people don't want to hear what you have to say?"

Clarice: "Because people are mostly a bunch of assholes."

Sasha: "And?"

Clarice: "Let me see. Because people are, one and all,—what's that word again?— assholes."

Sasha: "And?"

Clarice: "Are YOU fucking listening to me, Sasha? I told you why."

Sasha: "Did you really tell me why or did you just give me the dishonest excuse you tell yourself?"

Clarice: "You're so judgmental. Now it's MY fault."

Sasha: "So why do you think people don't want to hear what you have to say?"

Clarice: "Because I haven't fully absorbed the twelve clichés you offer."

Sasha: "It's good you're being defensive. Do you know why?"

Clarice: "Yes."

Sasha: "Tell me."

Clarice: "OK, bitch. I don't know."

Sasha: "As our defenses crumble, we get closer to our core, and that really scares us. Only when we live

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inside our core can we find honesty. Only when we are fully honest, can we live with deep and true authenticity. Your defenses are crumbling.”

Clarice: “Oh.”

Sasha: “Go on. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Clarice: “I’m trying to decide whether you are stupefyingly banal or. . . .”

Sasha: “Or what?”

Clarice: “Or capable of helping me. I wouldn’t be here if I trusted my own judgment and wasn’t so fucking lonely I can’t stand it.”

Sasha: “Trust us.”

You see how we operate, or rather how Sasha operates. She uses indirection to allow clients to open up, begin the healing process. I have the same aims and obtain results at least as gratifying. I won’t say I have more success than she, because that would be defensive, and defenses (based on competitive impulse needs) have to evaporate before honesty can be achieved. But I do have more success than Shasha. Perhaps it’s a matter of gender that makes me go right to the heart of a problem rather than teasing it out.

Here’s an example. Teresa came to us with a deep self-esteem issue connected to her inability to form lasting relationships with men, and not just lasting relationships—any at all. Teresa is Latina, not that I think that’s necessarily important.

Me: “So, Teresa, how has it been this past week?”

Teresa: “Oh, Jeff. Like every other week.”

Me: “Have you followed my advice, Teresa?”

Teresa: “Mostly.”

Me: “What’s that mean, Teresa?”

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Teresa: "I tried."

Me: "You tried? Just what the hell's that mean?"

Teresa: "Don't be mad at me, Jeff. I tried."

Me: "Explain yourself."

Teresa [whimpering]: "I don't like hiking, Jeff. I get so tired. And I sweat and last time on the Sierra Club Singles Outing I fell down this embankment."

Me: "Good! Did you fake an injury so some hunk would carry you back and you could seize the opportunity to use all your feminine wiles and to get him to ask you out?"

Teresa [whimpering louder]: "No, Jeff."

Me: "Jesus Christ, Teresa! What wrong with you? What'd you do, lie there like a wounded sow, sweating away?"

Teresa [sobbing]: "Oh Jeff, don't."

Me: "Teresa, stop crying. STOP IT! You suppose you're ever going to attract a man by feeling sorry for yourself? And do you know how you must look right now? Get a mirror! Look at your blotchy awful face!"

Teresa: "I'm sorry."

Me: "Stop wasting my time, Teresa. Work out, go on group hikes, wear those slutty clothes to a bar. Do it!"

Sasha and I work well as a team, though I'd bet a whole lot of money, if I had it, I get Teresa laid before she makes the slightest dint in that tense neurotic Clarice. I've had so many women like her in my own life that I'm something of an expert on the Clarices of this world, those uptight bitches who can't get anybody to listen to them because nobody's stupid enough to cuddle up to a piranha.

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If everything between Sasha and me worked as well as our business. . . . Funny how you start sentences with confidence and then, oops, realize you're off on the wrong foot. I almost had myself convinced that our business was going well, but it isn't. The truth is that we aren't doing so great in either department.

Our relationship is no longer built on trust. It's not that I don't trust Sasha or that she doesn't trust me; it's that the trust we have for one another is no longer what keeps us together. As a result, I don't really trust her. That's just what happens when one party breaks the bond that should bind.

It started about a month into our group therapy venture, when I told Sasha I had planned a weekend camping trip for just us two. I knew she'd love it, and I even went so far as to go online, study local campgrounds, and get a buddy to lend me his sleeping bag, that I then aired out. I admit it wasn't a terrific bag, but she said that wasn't it.

"It's not the bag, Jeff. If it were only that smelly bag, we'd be OK. I told you. It's not that."

"I aired out the bag."

"It's not the fucking bag."

"So what IS it?"

"It's camping."

"I arranged it so it wouldn't interfere with our therapy sessions."

"It's not the timing. It's not the bag."

"It's me, isn't it?"

"Don't go there. I'm pregnant."

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“You don’t want to go camping? Just say so. You told me once you liked camping, and I trusted you to mean what you were saying.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“If you were a client, you know what I’d tell you, Sasha?”

“Jeff, for Christ’s sake.”

“I’d tell you straight out that you were asking for attention and needed to trust yourself to be able to get that attention without violating your inner being and making things up.”

“I’m pregnant, Jeff.”

“There you go again. Look, Sasha, I can work with you. It’s a matter of realizing your own self-worth, contacting that core of personal integrity, which depends on honesty.”

“I’m pregnant, Jeff.”

“Sasha, listen to me now. You’re a fine person, but you’ve got to let up on the self-pity. That’s the key.”

“How can I penetrate that blather, Jeff?”

“Abusing me is your attempt to manufacture some inauthentic self so you won’t have to face your problems. You need inner-confidence.”

“Jeff, listen to me. Stop talking.”

“Get a spine, woman. You want to be my client, you need to face some rough times. But it’ll be worth it. Tough love, baby.”

“Your client?”

“Client and lover, the way we both are to one another and—to the world.”

“Jeff—never mind.”

“Where are you going?”

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“Away.”

“Sasha, I’m familiar with that maneuver, which is all it is. Oh yeah.”

“Bye, bye, Jeff.”

“Sasha, are you pregnant?”

“Am I pregnant?”

“Yeah.”

“No. Bye, Jeff.”

I see right through that drama queen stuff. I used to do it myself until I opened a pipeline to my inner honesty. She’ll be back.

CHEATERS NEVER WIN

I would prefer even to fall with honor than win by cheating.

Sophocles

If you're not cheating, you're not trying.

Eddie Guerrero

“Mom and Dad would die if they knew.”

“Hell, Ralph, not like Mom and Dad are going to. . .
. Fuck it! Why did I ever ask you?”

“I’m your big brother who loves you, and also I’ve cheated on tests. You knew that, which is why you came to me.”

“Yeah. Not because I thought you’d bring up our parents, sanctimonious asshole. Where were Mom and Dad during your years of fraud and deceit, highly successful though it was.”

“Successful! You knew I was caught, right?”

“Caught? No. That why you’re against it?”

“Of course, dumb ass. Not like I have moral objections. If there were no dangers, big dangers, I’d say go right ahead. Absolutely. But. . . .”

“I know. Perils unimaginable. What happened when you got caught?”

“I had to re-take the test.”

“Oh my Jesus! Not re-take the test! The iron maiden, fingernails extracted, a Scarlet ‘C’---nothing to

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having to re-take the test.”

“Listen to me, Mark. True, my penalty was no penalty at all, but I had to spend a whole evening bargaining, begging. The first penalty threatened was expulsion, which got lowered to failing the course, which finally. . . .”

“This bargaining and begging. What’d you have to do?”

“Huh? Oh Jesus, Mark. No I didn’t have to perform unnatural sex acts on Professor Wilhelm.”

“Too bad. You’d have enjoyed that. Anyhow, I see what you’re telling me: you got off easy but almost certainly I wouldn’t, which would kill Mom and Dad and land me in a hopeless situation, a life spiraling downward, branded as a cheat. Better just to flunk honestly, right?”

“That your only option? How about studying. Just a wild suggestion.”

“I’m so far behind, Ralph, so far behind. And it’s a tough class, really. God, please help me, Ralph. If I flunk this class, I’ll be outa here anyhow, probably.”

“Too late to drop?”

“No, but my scholarship won’t let me. And without the scholarship—you know.”

“How the fuck you get so far behind?”

“I been real sick. I don’t want to go into that. And don’t tell me to talk to the prof. He already said he accepts no excuses, illegitimate or more illegitimate.”

“That last was his little witticism, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like a prick.”

“You have no idea. He comes late to class, a couple

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of times didn't show at all. He ridicules kids openly, makes sexist jokes, even one racist one. Want to hear it?"

"No."

"OK. Here goes: 'Studies show that ninety-eight percent of blacks enjoy sex in the shower. What about the other two percent?'"

"I don't want to hear this."

"They've never been to prison."

"He told that in class? All his jokes about blacks?"

"Nope. How is Donald Trump going to get rid of all Mexicans?"

"I don't know. How?"

"Juan by Juan."

"Yeah. Have you even tried talking to this guy? Office hours or anything?"

"Early in the term. I went to Office Hours, advice somebody had given me—just to introduce myself, tell him I was looking forward to the course. You know what he said?"

"He said, 'That's nice.' Something like that?"

"He said, 'Why should I care?'"

"Nah."

"I swear."

"So, how you plan to cheat? And how can I help?"

"Tell me what works best."

"Not cheat sheets. Too easy to detect. Two questions: he give multiple choice exams and is there more than one section?"

"Yes and yes."

"There's a section meets before you? Say 'yes.'"

"Yes—and I'm ahead of you. Get a buddy—and,

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yes, I do have one—in the preceding section to smuggle me a copy of the test. But wait, how'd he get a copy and how'd he smuggle it? The test is the answer sheet—you know, fill in the blanks.”

“This buddy of yours smart.”

“Yeah. Very.”

“He like you?”

“We don't do romantic weekends together, but, yeah, he does.”

“At the end of the test, he takes a picture with his cell phone—not of the test but of his answers.”

“YES! That'll work.”

“Mr. Ruston isn't it?”

“Ralston, Professor.”

“No matter. You cheated, you stupid immoral asshole.”

“Oh, no, sir. I just studied hard. I know you might be suspicious of my high score, perfect score, but it's the result of hard study, that's what it is.”

“Every answer is wrong. 0%.”

“How could that be? I am sure. . . .”

“You're sure the prick who fed you the answers from Section 101's test got 100%, which he did. But—even you should be able to figure this one out.”

“You switched tests. The answers I had—none of them fit.”

“You're a genius.”

“Please, sir, let me explain.”

“Fuck you. It's 5 o'clock and time for drinks, not for listening to your sniveling. Besides, what do I care why you did it?”

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“But if I flunk. . . .”

“I didn’t say you would flunk.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t say you would flunk, now, did I? You hear me say that?”

“No. I just assumed. . . .”

“Well, don’t assume.”

“So. I pass?”

“Did I say that?”

“Then what will happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Excuse me.”

“No, I don’t excuse you, but I am putting the ball in your court. It’s up to you what happens. Meet me tomorrow, right here, at 11 p.m. You have some engagement will interfere with that?”

“Oh, no sir. But what will happen then?”

“Simple. You will tell me what should happen.”

“Just tell you?”

“Not quite. You will tell me what should happen and also why what you say should happen makes sense—makes sense to me. I don’t care if it makes sense to you, only to me. Get inside my head, my desires and fashion your proposal to fit them, fit them perfectly. Surprise me. Make me ecstatic. Raise me to the stratosphere.”

“So, I need to tell you why you would benefit from passing me?”

“That’s altogether too blunt. Think in more subtle, nuanced terms. What would cohere with what I’ve always wanted, always needed?”

“Always?”

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“Always—even or especially if I haven’t been aware of it.”

“Come in Mr. Ralston. See, I got it right.”

“Yeah.”

“Who are you? You’re not Ralston. I have an appointment with Ralston, so you’ll have to get the hell out—right now.”

“I’m keeping the appointment. Didn’t know Ralston was rich, did you? Rich and pissed. He said I should give you what you always needed.”

“Wait. Oh, Jesus. What’s that you have?”

“You’re the professor. You tell me. Got any last words? No. I thought not. Bye, bye, asshole.”

RED MENACE MOM

I state these differences, not to draw issues of belief as such, but because the actions resulting from the Communist philosophy are a threat to the efforts of free nations to bring about world recovery and lasting peace.

Harry S. Truman

Let's get this straight. Mother is not now, nor has she ever been, a member of the Communist Party. That's the standard formula, and the story I tell. Mother a Commie? She is a member of the First United Methodist Church, of Teacher's Local 417, and of a bridge club that meets regularly and never plays bridge. That may sound suspicious, that "bridge club," but it's my opinion it is not a cell, not a front for anything more than unrestrained personal gossip.

Until recently, Mother was not what most people would call political, not at all. She always seemed to me to exist in a world bounded by comfortable prejudice on one side and ill-considered catch phrases on the other. She regarded all politicians, from the President down to her City Councilman, as uniformly bumptious and idiotic, beyond the reach of common sense and good solid Christian morals. Her idea of their selfish bumbling, though, didn't reach much beyond the construction of a new road in one place and not another—"What are those bozos thinking? Lining their pockets, that's what they're doing."—and the irksome

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intrusion of election posters and television ads—“I think I’ll sit this one out. They’re all the same, those guys.” Mother was one of the few citizens who could spot no difference between Eugene McCarthy and Richard Nixon, between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, between her ass and her elbow, one might say. One might say that, but not Mother who lets no foul word pass her lips, no word that might reflect the slightest swerve from the predictable.

You recognize Mother from this description? You know her? Then you are as outraged as I at the charges brought against her. Subversive activity indeed. Mother was a loyal American, insofar as she ever pondered what that might mean. Probably as much as the next person, which isn’t much. Consider, though. She always stood for the national anthem, not in her home, I mean, but at football games. She forced her fourth-grade students to pledge allegiance, even though the school board didn’t insist, frowned on it even. True, she did that for forty or so years and it may have been no more than stubborn habit. But it’s a habit worth honoring, possibly. She paid taxes, more or less; she set off sparklers on July 4; she honored the Pilgrim Fathers with traditional Thanksgiving meals; she often lent her cheering support to our athletes in the Olympics, though she has been known to waver there, being only human.

I recognize that such things do not amount exactly to evidence, not the sort that would persuade a jury. That just shows you how inhuman and willfully blind our judicial procedures can be. Sane people would dismiss these charges out of hand. I mean, just take one look at Mother, engage her in conversation for three minutes—

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hell, ask her directly about Bakhtin or Lenin or Chomsky, any major Communist thinker. It's not that she doesn't have views of sorts, but who could regard them as a danger, I mean a danger in the same way a true anarchist would be? Mother will, I know, recklessly identify herself as an anarchist. I wish she wouldn't and have told her so. But does she listen? She goes on yammering about it to anyone who will listen, which of course the cops have done. Do they care that she is way out of her depth? Will they throw her a life-preserver? Don't even ask!

That she can be kind of interesting on anarchism, I will be the first to admit. But it's a bad idea these days to have views on anarchism, any at all, especially interesting ones. That's like having an intriguing position on child-abductions. Mother would be much better off sounding just like everybody else on anarchism and communism and how countries caught in their snares simply envy our freedom. She does, indeed, sound just like everybody else on all other subjects, so why not these? Like talking to your back porch to tell her that, though. Mother can be downright perverse, not even recognizing her own self-interest.

She tells me that self-interest cannot interfere with truth. Where'd she get that? I'd like to know. No I wouldn't, as I know where she got it, from the travel group she joined for a trip to—get this!—Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam.

“How about Hawaii, Mother?”

“How about two weeks of boredom, you mean. I'm not interested in hulas and luaus, and volcanoes.”

“There's lots more than that in Hawaii, Mother.”

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“Like what?”

“Pineapple plantations, for instance.”

“Oh well, then, that tips the scale. Always wanted to see exploited workers up close.”

“OK. But don’t expect me to go along.”

“Who asked you?”

Of course I did go, just to protect Mother, which obviously I managed not to do.

You can see from her remark about “exploited workers” that Mother had the seeds of ignorance in her even before the trip to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. But they would never have sprouted had she not been unlucky enough to get herself involved there with a lot of bad influences. I don’t mean by that to blame her fellow tour group travellers, though I can tell you that some were doozies. For all I know, however, only Mother reacted to the tour highlights in such a lunatic way.

I’ll get to details later, maybe, but I’ll say in advance that nothing in this account is disloyal to Mother or to The United States of America. I’ve said before the worst that can be said about Mother’s so-called “subversive” positions: “lunatic.” And some would not go even that far. Still, for the sake of argument, let’s admit that much—lunatic. But just ask yourself, is lunacy perilous to national security? If so, I think there’s several million Americans would be convicted, starting with a good many (most) preachers, residents of Roswell, New Mexico, white supremacists, and New England Patriot fans (and their coach).

I know I should stick to the story and not be so opinionated myself, as you couldn’t be expected to be

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swayed by my views, not matter how well-considered and often objective they might be. You'll discount them because of my familial tie to Mother, not imagining that it's precisely that tie that makes me the most valuable witness. But I can say that till the cows come home and it'll not do the slightest good. So, let's turn to the bare facts. Mother dislikes that term, by the way, because "bare" makes one think of unmentionables. As I say, a ridiculous view; but is it one held by a fire-breathing, bomb-throwing terrorist? How likely is that?

So, off we go on this sixteen-day, three-country trip, complete with optional extras I wish hadn't been there. But that's getting ahead of myself.

We get to the airport and Mother, usually so compliant, insults the security guy at the checkpoint: "Oh come now," she sneers, "lighten up, rent-a-cop, and go have a smoke. True, I got reefers, dangerous books, heroin, and bombs tucked in my girdle; but you got bigger problems than them if you try and search me." Wonder of wonders, the guy just grinned and let Mother through, which does make you wonder about how safe our travelling in this country really is. Who do they let on planes, anyhow? I'm certainly not one to object to strenuous security measures, but then I'm not the issue here. Mother is, and Mother is another matter.

I'll never get this story told if I go step-by-step, so let me hit some highlights and then get to the legal stuff—the arrest, not to put too fine a point on it.

First, was the Landmine Museum and the COPE Visitor's Center in Cambodia. For those who don't know these places, they are both concerned with landmines. So far, so understandable. But they seem to me both pretty

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Anti-American. After all, we were fighting a war against Communist aggression, a holy war, you might say, trying to help the local inhabitants, not just of Vietnam but neighboring countries too, of which Cambodia is a prominent one.

What the museums said was that American bombers returning from sacred missions over Vietnam and flying back to bases in Thailand, simply dropped excess bombs in Cambodia (and Laos, too, but it's Cambodia were focusing on now) so as to minimize the risk of landing and maybe setting them off. In other words, they make it sound purely selfish: just dump 'em and kill—better you than me! I should have mentioned that these were cluster bombs, spraying out small and medium landmines, which, I gather, buried themselves. They also say that this bombing took place despite the neutrality of both Laos and Cambodia, as if that mattered. Hey, there's always some collateral damage in such times, war times, I mean. Anyhow, these museum places are set up to show the horrors of these landmines, even to this day, buried a little in the earth and lying in wait for poor farmers and little children, who imagine they are toys. The Landmine Museum is pretty restrained in its denunciations of Yankee inhumanity, but CORE is all about prosthetic limbs and whatnot, grisly and graphic in its statistics—thousands of victims overall and hundreds a year to this day—images of the hurt and crippled and dead.

I'm not saying they are lying but I make some allowances for telling only one side of the story. Not Mother. She swallowed it whole. Her entry in the Visitor's Book makes for uncomfortable reading that I

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don't recommend. As it was used as part of the evidence against her, though, I'll reproduce a little:

I am so ashamed of my citizenship, though that was forced on me by the accident of geography. Not like I chose it, nor would I do so now. How anyone can see all this and not take active steps to help these enlightened countries and do battle against arrogant, imperialist America is beyond me.

I admit that's intemperate, but Mother is incautious, prone to excess. Are such heat-of-the-moment scribblings worth anything at all? Are they (a word I learned recently) revelatory? I think not, even if one adds in the post-script, where she gives all her personal information and invites the like-minded to join her in taking action. Those are the terms she uses, but c'mon! Who hasn't sometimes said such things—when annoyed by the IRS, say, or potholes?

Had Mother's activities stopped there, it's possible nothing would have happened. But then, there were similar aggressive guest-book comments at The Museum of American Atrocities in Saigon (OK, Ho Chi Minh City) and every hotel and restaurant we found ourselves guests at. Even all that, I feel sure, would have passed unnoticed or waved aside with a tolerant sigh by understanding American officials.

But—understand it's hard for me to write this—things didn't stop there. While in Vietnam, Mother wormed some sort of information from our local guide, who openly admitted he was a Communist. (I am amazed the Tour Company would employ him, and I later let them know what I thought about it in a letter, a fiery one I can tell you.) Turns out Mother was hoping to

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locate not just information on what anarchic communism was all about but to find meetings she could attend, right there. Not like she was hoping to learn either. It wasn't curiosity: she was anxious to sign up. Jesus Christ.

Had I known about this—well, needless to say—but I didn't. She snuck off two nights running—to shop, she said. I should have known something was up, as spending money on frivolous things is not among Mother's faults. Anyhow, what she actually was doing was going to these meetings, hanging out at some sort of headquarters, you can imagine what sort.

Worse is to come. When it was time to go home, no Mother. Tour guide waited and waited, but finally had to leave. I was tempted to leave myself, having lost patience, but was persuaded to remain there and check on her. Long story short—more of the same, only with membership cards and an armband.

Finally, two weeks later, we fly back, Mother in full regalia, mouth flapping to one and all. With predictable results. Wouldn't have been so bad without all those letters to the editor and public appeals to bomb the Pentagon and, for some reason, the fucking St. Louis Arch.

The people at the prison are very courteous, I'll say that, courteous to me and to Mother, more courteous than she deserves, I might say, were I a neutral observer. Her lawyer, though, is not so patient. I tell him just to wait Mother out, that she'll come to her senses. Hell, is he getting paid or not? As it happens, no. He says professional ethics forbid him to charge when the client is so unwilling to listen, so determined to lose the case.

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I'm often asked by friends of mine how I'm doing myself. Terrible. They ask how I think the case will come out as things stand. A clear loss. They ask what it would take to bring Mother to her senses. I do have an answer for that, but I will keep it to myself—for now.

GOD BLESS THE PHILLIES

**Love is the most important thing in the world, but
baseball is pretty good too.**

Yogi Berra

“And now, to honor America and all those fighting so courageously to protect our threatened freedom, please rise, remove your caps, and join with our special guest Marcella Gamboni in singing ‘God Bless America.’”

“Be god-double-damned if I will. What happened to ‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame’?”

I should have known it’d be a mistake to bring Arthur, loud-mouthed commie atheist that he was. Somehow, though, I’d forgotten the patriotic ceremonies, the parade of veterans hauled out on the field before the game so the Star Spangled Banner (also featuring Marcella Gamboni) could ring in our ears. That made Arthur squirm, but now we had this bonus in the seventh inning, when we should have been content just to stretch, according to Arthur.

Arthur had grumbled his way through the National Anthem, keeping his hat on – worse, taking it off and then putting it back on with a grand flourish worthy of an Elizabethan courtier. But he’d joined the standing herds, more exactly, kept standing, since he was already upright, trying to signal to a beer vendor when Marcella started O-say-can-you-see-ing.

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But now he decided to take a stand, rather, take a seat. That seemed to me a good line, so I tried it on Arthur, thought it might neutralize his puffed-up plan to launch a one-man protest against the rising tide of aggressive religiosity. I knew Arthur from way back and was absolutely confident that his sense of humor would outweigh his blind rage and ludicrous egoism. He'd see right away how absurd it was to try and start a liberation movement among Phillies fans (already a little grumpy at being four runs down) just before the bottom of the seventh, lower end of the order coming up. He'd laugh easily and relax.

“Hey, Art, you gonna take a stand by not standing?”

“Huh?”

“You gonna take a stand by taking a seat? Ha ha.”

I really amused hell out of myself.

But not Arthur.

“I'm going to do what's right, follow my principles.”

“Jesus, Art, it's a ballgame.”

“Look at those bozos, chests swelling, hands over hearts, sniffing. It's like The Republican National Convention. Worse.”

So much for his sense of humor. But did I give up? Not when Arthur's principled squat conflicted with my fear of embarrassment. I was thus busy collecting arguments that would make Art rise and sing, when a guy behind us growled loudly, just as the singer was asking God to stand beside her (“her” being America, not just Marcella).

“Somethin wrong with your legs, buddy? If not, git yer ass up right now and respect yer country and its

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veterans.” This from a portly fan directly behind us here in Section 247.

“Somethin wrong with yer brain, asshole? If not, sit yer ass down right now and try and think fer once, lessen thinkin’s beyond ya, which I can tell it is, you right-wing turd.”

Guess which one of us said that?

I figured it was time for me to intervene. One look at the fat guy, though, showed me two things: he wasn’t so much fat as muscley-huge; he looked nettled, make that infuriated, and wasn’t going to be easy to mollify.

“Don’t take my friend seriously,” I tried; “he’s always been a great kidder.”

That worked only to draw the attention of angry fella toward me, and it wasn’t what you’d call polite attention, either. He seemed to feel I was erring in my timing or the tone of my participation, that I should wait for a better opening, try a different approach.

“Shut the fuck up or I’ll break your nose!” was the way he put it.

Seemed to me he had a point.

I hadn’t mentioned that Arthur numbered among his most cherished delusions the idea that he was both courageous and really tough. “I’ve always known how to handle my fists and there’s plenty of guys can testify to that!” Utter nonsense, but I hadn’t bothered to argue with him, and now wish I had, though it’d have done no good. Arthur was, you might say, attached to his delusions, composed of nothing but them, you might also say.

He at least saved me from having Bluto’s can of whoop ass immediately opened on me. Arthur was

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standing now and initiating what might have been a punch or a shove but came out as just a lurch, so delighted to have this opportunity to use his fabled fists that he'd started to put them in operation, at the front of a big swing, before he had gotten himself properly upright and turned around. The result was that he tripped, dangling his not very impressive body over the back of his seat and banging his jaw on the metal support. The guy he was trying to punch into next week got only a slight graze of Arthur's left hand, flying out as Arthur was descending. Unluckily, this graze located itself right on big guy's crotch

“How bout I get everybody a hot dog?” I tried.

“White with foam!!!!” trilled Marcella.

“And a beer?” I added.

Assaulted guy looked at me, then at Arthur, clearly weighing which target to demolish first. I hadn't insulted him, of course, but I was the only one of the two upright, Arthur still hopelessly tangled in the seat.

“My home sweet home!!!!!! God Bless. . . .”

To save us all trouble, I gave in to an inspiration: “Look, we're bothering our neighbors. Why don't we take this outside—I mean go outside and discuss it, calmly, like reasonable. . . .” The word escaped me.

Arthur was beginning to rise, I think, but he seemed not to notice what I said. Other guy did and made a move toward peace and concord. At least he agreed with my plan to forge a truce. “Fucking A!” was his conciliatory message.

I helped Arthur untangle, just as Marcella was giving us the some of the traditional: “Buy me some peanuts and crackerjack!” Guy led us all up the steps and

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to the rear passageway, where the stadium exit was and where we were by God all set to “take it.”

A difficulty at once presented itself, a sign right before the gate leading out: “No one exiting the park will be readmitted.” That struck me as needlessly picky, so much so I decided to protest, more like “inquire.” After all, how were we to take it outside, if that meant not returning. Wasn’t like we planned to spend a lot of time out there—at least I didn’t—and there was still plenty of baseball left to play.

“Wait a minute, you guys. Just hold everything.”

A smiling small fellow was standing by the exit. “Thanks for coming,” he said, “and have a nice day.”

“We’re not leaving permanently,” I said, smiling back, “just need to go out there—in the street but right there—and, you know, discuss something, discuss and then return.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that’s not possible, not according to regulations.”

“But if the regulations make no sense, are arbitrary and contrary to reason?”

“There’s nothing I can do about that, sir.”

“You mean, you’re a helpless stooge, an unquestioning tool of the capitalist machine, a . . .”

My attempts at persuasion, at gaining us egress, within moments of succeeding, were at this point foiled by both Arthur and Big Guy, who said, more or less in unison, “Shut the fuck up!”—said it to me.

I had little choice but to come up with an alternative and fast. I figured a public brawl, probably ending in homicide, would not be in my own interests, even if I were not one of those disposed of, which I might indeed

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turn out to be. Quick thinking led to: “Restroom. We can go there and settle the whole thing.”

Neither of the ferocious boys seemed wild about the idea, but I didn’t mind that, as I had no other to haul out. So I turned to the smiling exit keeper: “Restrooms nearby?”

“Right behind you. See those signs? Look for the one that says M-E-N?” His politeness seemed to have diminished. I’d report him had I not more important things on my plate.

Crowd roars. Damn. A Phillies comeback!

No time for that now. I located the signs the attendant had indicated, saw “WOMEN,” turned back to my companions, and politely held open the door on the adjacent room.

More crowd roaring. Shit!

I figured I should start right in, so didn’t attend as I should have to our surroundings. “Now, let’s discuss all this like the adults we are.”

Both were staring at me, more like over my shoulder. I ignored that. Now was no time for hurt feelings.

“Here’s how I see it. Our friend sitting behind us. . . .” (I should have said we’ll be headed back to our seats in a minute to watch the Fighting Phillies pull this one out, but I was committed to attacking the issue head-on. Unwise, but that’s what I did.) “Our friend is patriotic and is hurt, no, **offended**, by what he takes to be marks of disrespect to our flag, our country, our fighting men, and. . . .” I had run out of steam, but surely my meaning was clear, so I hurried on. “Now, let’s consider, though, that at the very heart of our vaunted freedom is our

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pledge to see protected the views of all citizens, all of them, even those who disagree with us. Right? Am I right?”

Neither seemed to respond—to me anyhow—but neither was launching punches, so I must be doing something right.

“So you two disagree, am I right? Obviously, I am, so there’s a start. In another country, say Russia or Iraq, you’d probably try to shoot one another, but here, in America, you can embrace, rejoicing in your hard-won right, made solid by our fighting men and women, to have different views, even preposterous views. Isn’t that why we have had all these wars?”

They still didn’t respond. Had they suffered simultaneous strokes?

Then it hit me: “I didn’t mean embrace in a literal way. I meant you could share a moment, share your joint belief in being different, even if you both irritated the hell out of the other, to the point of wanting to send the other’s nose through the back of the skull, and gouge out eyes, and eat livers.”

I was starting to get a little irritated at the lack of response.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you guys? You know what, you deserve one another. I’ve had enough. Come and get me. Fire away. Your best shots.”

I’m not sure what possessed me, but once started I couldn’t seem to find any brakes to apply.

“You miserable assholes draw me out here, embarrass me, make me miss the best part of the best game of the year. Well, I’ve had enough. Who wants to go first? I’ll ring both your chimes—I mean, clean both

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your clocks. Want to come at me together? Fine by me, you twiddling sissies.”

Even as I was saying all this I was thinking I was bound to enter a world of pain. Certainly Big Guy would have no trouble bussing me there. Arthur neither. I wasn't what you would call tough.

But I'd reached my limit. I just didn't care. I wanted satisfaction, even if it meant the hospital, permanent scarring, death.

You think they gave it to me, this much-deserved satisfaction?

Jesus on a motorcycle! They just kept staring. I finally noticed it wasn't me they were locked in on, but did I turn around and look? Not wary street fighter me. What immediately struck me was that they were trying to distract me, set me up for a sucker punch, several sucker punches.

So, what I did was I reached back with my left hand—I'm right handed and wasn't going to put my best weapon out of commission. That left hand immediately made contact with something soft and warm, igniting at the same time a voice, a woman's voice, a loud woman's voice, “Hey, watch it, buddy!”

That was so unexpected I dropped my guard, spun quickly around, displaying considerable agility in executing the spin but catching my hand on something and flinging it into the air. It was something not too heavy but not real light either. Not to keep you in suspense, it was a baby. Went flying up, straight up, which was good as it gave the mother time to position herself under it like a center-fielder (the Phillies have a good one) and make the catch.

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You got it figured out, faster than me, I'm sure. The family changing room. The warm smelly goo, fresh baby shit, probably once belonging to the very kid I launched into flight.

I was so busy warding off the fury of the offended mother (and father) that I clean forgot (not the best phrase) my befouled hand and almost smeared the angry father trying to pat him on the shoulder. He drew back quickly and turned away, giving me time to observe the original combatants, now somehow reconciled and giggling like two fucking Mets fans.

They didn't even wait for me but headed back to their seats, while I was left to curse them, the Phillies, and, most of all, the idiocy of babies, of imbeciles who would cart them to ballgames, and of the management who erected family restrooms to encourage baby-bringers in order to spoil others' fun.

I mean, what happened to being an adult, a man, pissing in a trough, belching and spitting, swearing at the umpire? Those were the good days, the happy days, the real article. Bring em back, I say, the times when men were men, the Phillies were---well, better than now, and our nation had not been overrun by the family restroom crowd. God Bless America!

OUT OF STEP

It wasn't that no one asked me to the prom; it was that no one would tell me where it was."

Rita Rudner

I could have managed a date for the senior prom had it suited my purposes. I don't know why you're thinking otherwise. Some might be insulted. For me, it's a trivial matter; besides, I don't care what you think. I'm not a violent person by nature, but even the most gentle can be pushed too hard. All I'm saying is that I didn't have a date to the prom and that you're not going to discover why in your common stock of ready reasons. So forget it.

But you won't, and so the question lingers: how was it I did not have a date? I'll address the issue. I did not want a date for the senior prom. I made that clear enough, by indirect means, to the one-hundred-seventy-four boys and nineteen avowed lesbians in the class. Why? Still want to know? I'll tell you. I had begun leading my life on a new non-plan, one dedicated to maximizing risk, minimizing predictability. I was courting surprise. I was in no way you could comprehend "without a date."

You don't buy that. I know you're wondering if I was seeing an older fellow who wouldn't feel comfortable, or a disabled student unable to dance or too embarrassed to set foot (had he one) in public, or my

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brother. I guess it's nice of you to invent excuses, but don't bother. You'd be better off keeping your guesses to yourself, if you cannot understand what I said about living an unplanned life.

Of course, I had **some** plans, that is, I was ready to spring into any plan that might pop up, so long as it opened up into the unpredictable.

"Terry," said some fat girl whose name I can't be bothered to record, "I didn't know you were coming. Who are you here with?"

I studied her until she began to squirm: "Up yours!"

"No, really," she pursued stupidly, "who? Let me guess. Want me to guess? OK, I will."

"Want to dance?" I rejoined.

"Do you think we should? Oh well, why not?"

"Are you crazy? Go join the other freaks in the stag line."

"Terry, you are so witty!"

I stared at her.

"Where are you going to school next year, Terry?"

"To Kiss-My-Ass U."

"No, really, where?"

I trod hard on her toe, twice.

"Ouch."

"Oh, sorry, did I step on your foot?"

"That's OK. I know it was an accident."

"Go to hell!"

"I love your sense of. . . ."

"Shut up, or I'll cut out your stomach."

"Oh, Terry! You are such a kidder."

I had to move away swiftly, a little short of a run.

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Soon it happened, the worst thing. But before that thing happened, another thing happened, which I'll deal with first.

This boy who thought he was very cute, Trent, came up, tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

"Watch who you're touching!"

"Sorry, Terry." He grinned. I expect he knew he had a charming grin. Well, so he did, and that's honest and true. He wasn't thought of as the hottest kid in school for nothing.

"You want something, Trent?"

"I want you to be my date."

"Don't you have one with you?"

"I won't lie to you, Terry."

"You'd better not."

"Yeah, I do."

"Who?"

"You care?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

"Right."

"So will you?"

"For what purpose?"

"For the purpose of being my date."

"So we can be crowned King and Queen of the Prom?"

"Yeah."

"How about so we can have sex-u-all intercourse?"

"What?"

"I said, Trent, 'how about so we can do the old hobble and gobble?'"

"Oh."

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“Should I repeat?”

“No. I heard you, Terry.”

“Well? You don’t know if you want to?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Not sure if you’re up for it?”

“Ha.”

“So, what is it? You want me to answer for you?”

“OK.”

“It’s because we don’t need to bother about dates, if all we plan to do is arrange some kind of mutual assault.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what you meant to say?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t you think that’s rude, Trent, almost impertinent?”

“Gee, I . . .”

“You think I’m that kind of girl, Trent?”

“Hey, Terry, I . . .”

“You think I’m just an everyday slut who mounts someone who lacks the decency to ask her for a date?”

“Of course not, Terry.”

“Then, what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Trent, you have a rubber with you?”

“Huh?”

I spoke much louder. “I asked if you had a rubber with you.”

“No. I mean yeah.”

“You confused? It’s a matter of some importance to me.”

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By this time, several people had edged closer, a small crowd.

Trent was opening and closing his mouth without any sound coming out, a freshly-landed fish, flopping on the dock.

I didn't help him out. Why should I?

Finally, a voice from the crowd: "If you don't, Trent, I can lend you mine. It's only been used twice."

Very funny. Actually, I thought it was. I laughed.

Trouble was, I didn't recognize the kid who'd said it.

"Who are you?" I asked, pointedly.

"My name is Corey."

"Is it? And you carry around used rubbers, Corey?"

"Not really. I was just. . . ."

"Kidding? That's too bad. You have any fresh ones?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Planning to score, were you? Who's your date?"

"Jennifer."

"Which Jennifer? There's about seventy Jennifers here at Washington High."

"Jennifer Donnally."

"You plan to seduce her?"

By this time, the group around us had grown nicely.

"No, no. It's not that."

"Why'd you ask her then? I thought that was the point."

"I didn't ask her. I mean. . . ."

"She asked you? Well, well—that's intriguing. You from somewhere else. A rival school? That why I didn't recognize you? So, what is it, outsider from a rival

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school, not even interested in pronging one of our best Jennifers? You choosing to get your ass kicked real bad or have your way with me—employing a fresh rubber. So, choosey stranger, which is it?”

“Well, OK. Maybe do it with you?”

“What did you say?”

“I mean. . . .”

“Change your mind? You backing out—after all this? After I went so far as to ask for it? You turning me down?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just I don’t mean to be disrespectful.”

“You only have sex with girls you respect.”

“I guess.”

“Let’s put that to the test. Who you had to this point—before me, I mean? List them.”

That’s when Mr. McCloskey and Ms. Barnett-Spokes came up. They were chaperones, I figured right away.

“What’s going on here?” One or both of them said that.

“Hello, Mr. McCloskey, Ms. Barnett-Spokes. This boy here, from a rival school, was trying to get me to go out to the parking lot with him and enter his car, with the purpose of tricking me, enticing me to have—can I say it out loud?”

“No,” said one or both of them.

“I don’t even know his name, though he says it’s Corey. He may not be entirely honest. I have deep suspicions.”

“Terry, what are you up to?”

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“I mean,” I went on, “you’d think he’d give me his real name before proposing such a thing. It seems only civilized. At least, he could make up a name more plausible than Corey, don’t you think? To pretend to be ‘Corey’ seems, I don’t know, unmannerly.”

“Terry . . .”

I was way too quick for them. They were not a major challenge, of course, being teachers: “Not that I mean to be judgmental. Perhaps they do these things differently at whatever school this boy is from, if he goes to school at all.”

“Terry . . .” they started in again.

I cut them off. Easy to do. I think they were uneasy in their roles. I mean, what exactly are the duties of chaperones? Breaking up fights? Overseeing the pre-sexual goings-on, with an view to maximizing quantity and quantity for all?

“You know,” I added, rather loudly, “before this stranger made his very personal proposition, our own young student leader, Trent Carter—there he is—offered to add me to his list of conquests. He claims to have overcome the resistance of upwards of thirty-seven young women here at Washington. I think he is proud of that record and feels I should feel honored to swell the total. Plans to put up a plaque honoring his lays in the front entrance showcase. Front and center. Big one. Brass of the highest quality. He’ll even pay for it.”

“Terry, you really must. . .” they started to say.

I picked right up on that. “—must be going. You’re right. Thirsty girl here needs to get some of that punch.”

That’s the thing that happened before the worst thing happened.

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I was making tracks toward the refreshment table, nicely decorated, when a voice close at hand brought me up short.

“What’s wrong with you, Terry?”

I knew without looking who it was. I looked anyhow.

“What’s it to you, William? Is it your business?”

William was the smartest kid in school, apart from me. Maybe even. . . . He was a geek, of course, only he wasn’t. He was just different, which naturally made everyone shun him.

“It’s my business, Terry, because I am in love with you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“And I figure you’ll learn to love me, too.”

“How you figure that?”

“I just do.”

“Oh.”

Of all the lousy things.

And he was right – but you had that figured out. Way ahead of me. Next time, write your own story.

MARY SUE FINDS BDSM

**From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were – I have not seen
As others saw – I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.**

Edgar Allan Poe, "Alone"

To play it safe is not to play."

Robert Altman

**It's been so long since I made love I can't even
remember who gets tied up.**

Joan Rivers

"Excuse me. Hi! I'm here doing a school report,
you see, and was just wondering."

"Wonder drives lots of people to visit, kid. School
report?"

"Yeah, for this class."

"Must be some class. What were you wondering?"

"Whether I could come in."

"You bring your own whip or need to rent one."

"Oh, my."

"Just kidding. Come right in."

She'd thought about this building all the way over
from school—from USC to Venice, a long bus ride, bus
rides, really, as she had to change twice. Anyhow, she
had managed to imagine and then fix the building
precisely in her head: color, shape, surroundings. Only

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she could not have been more wrong. She'd imagined defiant shabbiness, a place determined to be assertive and timid at the same time, saying, "We are not ashamed—well, kinda, a little bit." Instead, here was Main Street U.S.A. plopped down in funky Venice Beach territory, white picket fence even, for God's sake. Do Marcia, Peter, Jan, Greg, Cindy, and Bobby live here?

"My name's Mary Sue Daniels, and I do thank you for letting me visit."

"You are very welcome, Mary Sue, though there's no need to thank me. We're always happy to have visitors. I'm plain old Jane."

"Really, Jane?"

"Not what you expected? Figured my name would be O?"

"Oh yeah, I read that."

"Enjoy it? That's what you were looking for?"

"I don't know what I was looking for, am looking for." That wasn't true, of course, as regards the outward forms, but it did match her cluelessness about everything else: who was there, what they did, why in hell they did it.

"Would you like to look around, talk to some of our friends here, talk just to me, beat it back to Loyola Marymount?"

"USC."

"Nah! Really? USC? Women's Studies class?"

"English. It's called 'Constructing the Outsider.'"

"I'll be damned. Class in freaks, huh?"

"Nope. Class in why we need freaks, what we do

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with them once we've made em."

"Very enlightened. Anyhow, what would you like? A tour, interviews, a beating?"

Jane didn't seem frightening, exactly. She was small, pretty, young—not unlike her friends back at school, with this one big difference. Was it a big difference? She could hardly ask that, not exactly that. So she did

"I guess I want to know why you do this."

"This'? Don't you want to know what it is we do? Don't be so sure you have a good line on that."

"OK. Let's start there."

"You wanta see or have me tell you?"

"I don't know. Watching seems sort of. . . ."

"Pervy? Kinky? 'Kinky' is the approved term here. But anyhow I wasn't really serious about guiding you into advanced voyeurism. Anyhow, you asked why we do what we do, right, skipping a detailed description—or video presentation—of what that is?"

"Yes, please."

Jane seemed to be relaxing a little, lowering the voltage on the sarcasm. Mary Sue was trying hard to appear interested (moderately), non-judgmental (enthusiastically), open (within limits). She was startled, though, when Jane lead her to a small inner room, more like an alcove, that had, swear to God, some sort of velveteen walls, bright red and, just in case you needed more clichés, mirrors on the ceiling.

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“This what you were expecting?”

“I didn’t know what to expect, not at all. I know nothing.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, Mary Sue. You’ve read some, I’m sure, some BDSM apologists, perhaps pro-sex feminists?”

“That’s true.”

“But they avoid specifics, right?”

“Yes.”

“And it’s specifics you’re after.”

“I guess.”

“The thrill of lash on ass, clip on nipple.”

What was she supposed to say to that? She sure as hell wasn’t here for the pain, just to ask about how in God’s name any human would bring themselves to seek out misery. Of course, she was fully ready to discover that these SM folk were just doing what they wanted—no harm, no foul. She had already decided she was all for their right to cut and rip at one another, scream and moan. Good for you! She was determined to regard all that, and probably much more, as just fine, perfectly fine, and to get the hell out.

Only, if that were true, if she felt that way, knew what they’d say, why had she come?

“Jane, I . . .”

“I understand,” Jane said, now smiling and warm. “Almost all of us were curious about what the hell other women were doing, never imagining that we might enter in, that our curiosity was mingled with something else.”

“Yeah.”

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“No pressure. Let’s find a better room—we have an office, regular old office—and talk a little.”

Mary Sue was so grateful, grateful Jane hadn’t said, “Talk a little, before you get down to the actual. . . .” That actual what?

“So, Mary Sue, what do you suppose goes on here.”

“What I’ve read, Jane, says lots of different things go on for lots of different reasons, but. . . .”

“But?”

“Yeah, what interests me is the BDSM theory, all the costumes and the theatrical settings, the safe words, the acting. . . .”

“Go on.”

“Well, I read somewhere that one version of all this is very self-conscious play, unmasking the power that is hidden but controlling in what some might think of as ‘normal’ sex.”

“That couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Huh? Oh, shit. Sorry.”

“Just kidding, Mary Sue. You’re dead on. Continue.”

“OK. Whew! Thanks! By dressing up and creating a drama of extreme power—domination, slavery, absolute control—women can take back the power so often (always) ceded in other common forms of sexual engagement. I know some women do actually enjoy pain, giving or receiving, but many do not. Either way, there is present here the possibility of making not so much pain as Power subject to other ways of thinking and acting.”

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“Uh huh.”

“You mean I got it all wrong.”

“No, Mary Sue. That’s very good. Power gets turned into theater, into play. That’s what a lot of us do—and love. I include myself.”

Now, where was she? She’d bumbled out the theory she already knew, received the confirmation she knew she’d receive. So, why had she come?

“Thanks, Jane. I think I have what I need for my report.”

“You bring your own costume? If not, I have several back there.”

“Well, I really just. . . .”

“I got this wonderful Cruella outfit—mask, feathers, hat, real tight suit. Just your size.”

“Bring it on.”

COME UP AND SEE ME SOMETIME

You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.

Mae West

George pressed the call button and said, "Mrs. Whitfield, you have a visitor."

"But George, I'm not even dressed."

"Would that matter?"

"Depends on the visitor."

"This one—just my opinion, now—you'd wanta be dressed for."

"Stuffy, boring? A preacher, a do-gooder, a Republican?"

"An old guy. Nondescript. Maybe neither selling—nor offering much either. Just my guess. Anyhow, a guy who we're keeping down here in the vestibule, shuffling around, where there's nothing to see. I keep telling them to put magazines out, already-read ones, you know, and maybe a second chair. I got mine, you understand, 'But when Mrs. W,' I tell them, 'gets to conversing, the hours go by and callers either give up or starve.'"

"Well, I do love our chats, George, and don't give a damn about any visitors who are old and ugly and want something from me—and not something it'd be fun to give. Why don't you come up yourself, let my visitor man the door, do your job: ejecting criminals and attracting the worthy?"

"Nobody can do this job but me, Mrs. W, and I

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can't desert my post. The guy had this job before, Carl, you remember him?"

"I do. He was from Jamaica, he said, though why a Jamaican would be named Carl I could never figure out. Lovely man. Not as lovely as you, but he had that accent, you know."

"Huv sum bananus, mun. Yeah. He was OK, had great jokes, though not fit for a lady's ears."

"Of course not. Not mine, certainly, well-brought-up dame like me. You remember those one-liners?"

"I try not to."

"C'mon, George. 'What's the difference between women with PMS and a terrorist?' What is it? C'mon."

"I forget."

"You can negotiate with a terrorist. What's your favorite of his?"

"What did one saggy boob say to the other saggy boob?"

"I don't know. But don't be insulting, George."

"Ha! Like you'd know about that, Mrs. W."

"Thank you, George. No surgery either, just God's handiwork."

"Well, that's good."

"I'm embarrassing you, George."

"Well, I don't know. . . . Back to the joke."

"Let's see if I remember the punch-line. One saggy boob. Hmmm. This isn't the one about the difference between a 75-year-old woman and a 25-year-old and what the 75-year-old has between her breasts that the 25-year-old doesn't. But that's a good one. You know the answer?"

"I don't."

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“A navel.”

“Good one, Mrs. B. As to your visitor, now. Should I tell him to come up?”

“Oh bother him. So, George, what **does** one saggy boob say to the other?”

“If we don’t get some support, people will think we’re nuts.”

“George!”

“Sorry, Mrs. W. I wouldn’t offend you for the world.”

“You couldn’t offend me, George. Just having you on. Here’s a raunchy one: “What’s long and hard and full of seamen?”

“Mrs. W!”

“C’mon, George. You oughta know this one. I’m absolutely sure you do. What’s long and hard and full of seamen?”

“A toilet plunger?”

“A toilet plunger! God, George! What sense does that make? No, it’s a submarine.”

“Shit, Mrs. W. Sorry. OK. I shouldn’t do this but you got me started. What’s the difference between your boyfriend and a condom?”

“Ho! George, you devil! My boyfriend and a condom? Let’s see. My boyfriend and a condom. I can think of things but not joke things. What’s the answer?”

“Condoms have evolved. They are. . . . Wait, sir, just a moment. Mrs. W, your visitor is getting ready to leave. Sir, please. Only a moment.”

“So, George. Condoms have evolved. Finish the joke. Don’t leave me hanging.”

“Mrs. W, should I send your visitor up now? I

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really think he's leaving in less time than it takes to
What is that expression?"

"Less time than it takes a tear to fall."

"Oh, Mrs. W. That's so sad, breaks my heart to hear you say that, even as a joke."

"I'm happy as a clam, George. So, what about condoms evolving, as opposed to my boyfriend?"

"Condoms are no longer thick and insensitive."

"Got that one right. Though my boyfriends, my dear boyfriends, are all locked into the past, lost and gone forever."

"Sir, please. Ah, hell. This one really is a goner, Mrs. W. A gentleman caller, too."

"Just a lawyer, George. Wanted me to sign papers, lose something more."

"The asshole. Can I help, Mrs. W?"

"Thank you, George."

"Really."

"Like Mae West says, 'Come up and see me sometime.'"

"Ah, Mrs. W, I would if I could."

"I know, George. And I must let you go. You're the man all the love songs are written about, you know."

"You say that to all the boys, Mrs. W."

"Keeps me young---keeps me alive."

"Young. Young, Mrs. W."

"A final joke, George, and I really will let you go."

"OK."

"Why don't orphans play baseball?"

"I don't know."

"Because they have no home."

FLYING COLORS

If stupidity got me into this mess, why can't it get me out?

Will Rogers

“You seen this?”

“The on-line class, that what you mean?”

“You seen this?”

“You already asked me. Yeah, the session on workplace sensitivity.”

“Couldn't they think of something sillier? I took one of those before anyhow, didn't we?”

“I didn't. You may have.”

“I'm sure I did. Wait a minute. Maybe what I did was on race, affirmative action. Was it?”

“How would I know? Anyways, we no longer have affirmative action.”

“Oh yeah, I did hear that. So this is something different.”

“Sexual harassment.”

“Wishful thinking, eh?”

“God, Harold!”

“No more harmless kidding. Oh, no! Let's make life a little more solemn. That's true progress. It's what happens when the university adds administrators like they were planting petunias. Sexual harassment! Glad I'm within a decade of retirement.”

“Ain't so bad. You do it on-line.”

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“I can forget it altogether.”

“If you want to forget your pay-check.”

“Fucking hell.”

Harold went on-line that very afternoon, though he was given a full eight weeks to complete the training. Truth was, he enjoyed such encounters. One of the irksome things about being a faculty member was that he couldn't take his own exams, or anyone else's. He had gone to all the trouble of getting a Ph.D. so he could be in a university, realizing nothing in life had been so rewarding as his time in school, his very long time in school. All his conscious life, pretty much, had been spent there. His early summer excursions into the worlds of sales and do-gooding had made it clear that he, Harold, belonged in a university. Unhappily, what he hadn't recognized was that his love for the university was rooted in being tested. Maybe it was the feeling of self-verification he missed or the delicious certainty that life was divided into small, measurable segments, each of which could be mastered with a pencil, close attention, and obedience to rules. At the end of every question, victory. Clicking boxes on line worked, too. Harold had adapted smoothly to the electronic age.

That this test dealt with sex and aggression was a dream come true: it honed in on his deepest interests, and, when he could manage it, activities.

The screen took a while to display the introductory material, explaining the purpose of the training – “obvious!” – the history of these tests – “like I care!” – and how, despite improvements in workplace sensitivity, we still had a long way to go. Then came a surprise:

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“You may, if you choose, enter your name. This is not required, nor is it recommended. We offer this option only because some faculty and staff have requested that this choice be made available for those who regard anonymity as against their principles.”

Harold thought hard about this. Was anonymity against his principles? Well, why not? Good thing to be a man of courage and integrity. He checked around to make sure he was alone, and then boldly entered, “DR. HAROLD S. McCONNELL.”

The test was designed for fifty-five minutes, and it was impossible to finish it in less than fifty, the pages holding steady for a pre-determined time to discourage rushing. Harold didn't mind, had, in fact, counted on a full evening of activity. He'd take what he could get.

As expected, the first ten pages were designed to weed out raging psychopaths, with questions like: “Agree or disagree – all people are entitled to respect, regardless of race, class, or faith.” Then there was a level only slightly more interesting: “Melissa's supervisor says to her, ‘So, what's it like being a Mormon? Would you object to being wife Number Four?’”

Finally, things escalated to a point Harold could pretend was challenging: “Dr. Rosenstein, a physics professor, illustrates the laws of friction and its relation to temperature by making a joke about intimate relations. Is this:

- (a) proper
- (b) improper
- (c) not clearly improper but ill advised.”

Harold marked (a), regretting that the joke had not been revealed, imagining what it was, and then wishing he

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had some call himself to illustrate the relationship between friction and heat. But wait? Rosenstein! Anti-Semitism? Nah. A fake clue, a trap for the unwary – so (a) it was! This was physics, after all.

“While at work, your employee asks you out on a date. This employee depends on you for merit increases and continued employment. Assuming you would like to accept, should you

- (a) decline with the explanation that it’s improper for you to date an employee
- (b) accept
- (c) suspend the employee and file a candid report with the affirmative action office.”

Harold spotted the canny twist of having the employee do the asking. Date an employee? Harassment, pure and simple! He marked ©.

Then a visual. Several employees around a water-cooler, four males smiling and laughing, one woman laughing slightly, another woman with a pained smile, another woman scowling. “A suggestive joke has just been told. One employee is clearly offended. Noticing this, you, as supervisor:

- a. ignore the situation
- b. reprimand the teller of the joke
- c. call the offended employee into your office and ask her if she would like you to take action
- d. call the offended employee into the office and talk her out of filing a report
- e. call the offended employee into the office and encourage her in a friendly way to

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develop some ease and tolerance, just to get along in the work-place.”

Harold hesitated here, moving his cursor back and forth between (a) and (d), gradually recognizing what those test-makers were doing: tempting testees into forgetting what supervising means, how vital it is to maintain a collegial atmosphere: (e) for sure!

“A student in your class is being disruptive, talking loudly to a companion, distracting other students and you as well. A warning does no good. At this point, should you:

- a. call security
- b. leave the room yourself
- c. firmly escort the student from the room, using light but reasonable force if the student is slow in moving or uncooperative
- d. ignore the disruptive student.”

“Hell and damn! The student’s sex?” Harold shouted at his screen. “Shit! Female? Everybody knows you shouldn’t handle girls, but boys are OK—just common sense.” The more he thought about it, the clearer the answer became, sharpening into focus with a clarity he admired but never took for granted: ©. My responsibility is to the class as a whole. And the answer doesn’t suggest I rough up the little shit, not too bad, just gently guide her/him out, removing the disruption and clearing the way for learning.

“A female employee comes to work in an attractive new dress. Which response is appropriate?

- a. ‘You look hotter than hell!’
- b. ‘I told you you’d look better in a lower top.’

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- c. 'I'm glad your thinking about your appearance.'
- d. 'You look very nice today.'
- e. No remark is called for."

Harold at first thought this was a gimme, knowing that the most prudish, least realistic answer was almost certainly the right one. But was (e) a trap? This is *my* employee, after all, and what kind of boss would I be if I didn't say something, again on the grounds of keeping morale high, not to mention assisting another human being on the rough road of life. (And it is rough for women, Harold knew, particularly for plain women like this one.) But which is the best, the kindest response? No brainer: (a).

"An employee comes into the common room with his fly open. Do you:

- a. ignore it
- b. make a joke about it, such as, 'Hey, Marty, the barn door's open.'
- c. Indicate by a discreet pantomime the nature of the problem
- d. Putting your body between the employee and the rest of the room, quietly zip up his fly for him"

Harold gave this problem all the attention it deserved, wishing, as he often did, that the test-makers had not left out vital information: was the employee his personal friend? Was the person's dick exposed, in which case (a) would be cruel. Were others in the room all male, making a joke the only reasonable option? Taking one thing with another, he decided he couldn't go wrong being a Good Samaritan and marked (d).

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“A woman comes into the commons room with her slip showing. Do you:

- a. ignore it
- b. make a joke, such as ‘It’s snowing down south.’
- c. Indicate by pantomime the nature of the problem
- d. Putting yourself between the person and the rest of the room, adjust the slip yourself.”

Harold hadn’t been born yesterday and saw through this one right away: the same situation, genders reversed. Harold, a step ahead, knew he should not be putting his hands into women’s shirts, whatever might be the case with male zippers. In this case, a joke would be best, though who in Christ’s name was writing this? “It’s snowing down south”? He hadn’t heard that since the fourth grade. So he marked ©.

“An openly bisexual employee tells you of a painful personal experience and you feel both pity and compassion. It is fine to give the person a hug if:

- a. you regard the person as primarily of the opposite sex
- b. you and the person have often hugged before
- c. you have a sexual interest in this person
- d. it is never proper.”

For a moment Harold felt stymied. Hugging was always tricky, as he knew from bitter experience, but never mind that now. None of the answers seemed very good to him, though he recognized that feature as common to all tests: give the poor bastards no real choices and watch twist in the wind. OK, dig in. First

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off, ignore the bisexual business. Whether a freak or a liar, this “bisexual” is important only as huggable or not. The more he thought of it, the more he felt drawn to the answer he had at first rejected – ©. Come to think of it, wasn’t it the decent thing, the honest thing? Hugs were never just hugs. Harold knew that it wasn’t fair to lead people on, dangle before them lures you had no intention of reeling in. More plainly, don’t hug in the kitchen unless you intend to walk to the bedroom. That was blunt; but he saw that it was precisely this principle, dressed up in squeamish language, guiding the test-makers. He clicked on ©.

“Thank you for coming in, Professor McConnell.”

“Always so very glad to see a Dean or two. Not like faculty has anything else to do.”

“Well, I don’t know. . . .”

“I realize you imagine you are central to our functioning, forgetting what a university is: teaching and research. Only those things, only those.”

Silence.

“Just wanted to make that clear, so we know where we stand.”

“I think we see where YOU stand, Professor. And that’s why we are here. This is Dr. Stevenson, Director of Testing; Dr. Blumen, Associate Vice-President; Professor Morton Cole, President of the Academic Senate, with whom you are doubtless acquainted. I am Dean Margaret Wilkinson, as you know.”

“I didn’t know that. I do know Mort Cole, one of those faculty members playing administrator. I’ve

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always thought that was like a respectable theologian dropping into Scientology.”

“McConnell, try to keep your mouth shut a minute,” said Cole; “nobody gives a damn what you think.”

“Let’s try to keep our tempers,” said Wilkinson; “this is uncomfortable enough.”

“Oh yes, let’s not make things worse, Dean whatever your name is,” Harold offered. “I have classes to plan, a book under contract.” He was enjoying himself.

“No need to extend this,” Vice-President Blumen offered in a commanding voice.

“So?” Harold sneered.

“So,” Blumen sneered right back, “your score on the workplace sensitivity program forces us to take action, not the drastic action some have urged but action certainly. We would be remiss if we ignored this.”

“Damned right,” said Cole.

“Screw you, Cole,” said McConnell, minus his earlier bravado.

“Here’s what will happen, Professor McConnell,” continued Blumen; “You will be relieved of duty altogether for one semester, during which period you will enroll full-time in a residential rehab program in New Mexico. The University will pick up the tab for this and even continue your salary. Upon return, your salary will be frozen for one year, which you might regard as a probationary period. Did you say something?”

“It’s only a test! Let me retake it.”

“In other circumstances, we might. I think you know why we are doing this.”

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“I certainly do not!” Harold said, trying to pack into his voice a confidence he could not find.

“You really want me to say?”

Harold was never able to switch tracks quickly, so he stayed put, dimly realizing he was heading straight to hell: “I certainly do!”

“First, your score on the test is the lowest in school history, probably in the history of the test, not that we had any interest in inquiring. Second, three separate complaints from staff and from students have been issued against you in the past academic year. Would you like me to enter into the details of these allegations? You know them well, having promised on each occasion. . . .”

“Oh God, have mercy!” he whispered, loudly enough to halt things.

“Do you still wish to protest?”

“No,” Harold moaned. As the Vice-President spoke, Harold had slumped slowly forward, burying his face in his hands.

“Is our decision clear?”

Harold said nothing.

“Professor McConnell, I need you to say that you understand, or do not.”

“Please.” Harold managed, after a minute more of silence.

“Do you understand?”

“I’m so sorry. Oh God, I am so sorry.”

“Try to regain your composure, Professor,” said Blumen, relaxing in his sternness not one whittle.

“I can’t stand it!” Harold blubbed.

“I am afraid you will have to stand it, unless you’d wish to resign.”

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“Resign? Oh God!”

“Well, then, I take it you accept these terms.”

“Don’t fire me, please.”

“Then cooperate with the program.”

“You won’t be sorry,” Harold said, standing and shaking hands with each of the assembled bosses. He then beat, or tried to, a slobbering retreat, hitting the wrong door and entering a closet, banging around there some before finally getting out of the room, none of his dignity intact.

Harold safely gone, the assembled four sat quiet, waiting for someone to seize the obvious line. It was the Dean, lowest on the pole and the only woman present, who got it: “Harold says we won’t be sorry. I already am.”

WILLY NILLY

Cambridge, Mass. (CBS CONNECTICUT) — A new study asking “Am I Normal?” is the largest body of research analyzing penis size for 15,000 men and uncovers that most men “believe they’re smaller than average” – something experts are calling a perceived distortion of masculinity

In another study:

No link was found between penis size and race, or penis size and footsize, The Guardian reported.

“There is not a ‘right’ penis size for a man of any height, just a range of ‘normal,’” Muir told Reuters. “A bit like shoe size, really!”

In yet another:

For one-night stands, size does matter, but it’s not penis length that women are concerned about — it’s girth, a new study suggests. In the study, 41 women viewed and handled penises made on a 3D printer. The models were blue, and ranged in size from 4 inches long and 2.5 inches in circumference to 8.5 inches long and 7 inches in circumference. They were asked to pick which of the 33 models they would prefer for a one-time partner, and which they would prefer for a long-term partner. For one night stands, women selected penis models with slightly larger girth, on average, than those they selected for long-term relationships.

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Professor Lawrence said we could call her Connie. Connie runs the class. It doesn't bother me at all that she's a woman, since it's a question of scientific know-how, not a special intuition limited to males. You either know what you're talking about or you don't. Most men don't, in my opinion. This woman does, which is good enough for me.

She said it wasn't wrong to think of it as your friend, not an "it" at all. She said friendship was healthier than objectifying. "A friend! Name him if you like."

"Is that recommended?"

"Entirely up to you. Consult your own feelings. If you feel good about it, by all means, by all means." She has this habit of repeating herself that might be irritating to some. I find it reassuring.

"Can you give jokey names or is that disrespectful?"

"Do you think it's disrespectful?"

"I guess. Nah."

"Then it isn't, and you should use any name, any name."

"Can I use my Mother's name, or would that be too Freudian?"

"I think that would be fine. Your Mother is important to you and so is your friend, granted not in the same way – pardon me?"

"Mother's dead. Sorry to interrupt."

"No, I'm the one's sorry. You must feel her loss."

"Yes I do. Well, some, I guess. Mother lived in a different state. Not that we fought. It's just what came

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into my head, “Rose.” My Mother’s name was Rose.”

“That’s a very pretty name. Will you use it?”

“It’s up to me? Maybe not. Sounds like inflammation. I’ll keep thinking.”

“How about ‘dip stick’? That too disrespectful?”

This question did not issue from me. Nor was I the one with the Mother fixation, not to be judgmental.

“Not if **you** don’t find it disrespectful. Use any name that seems to you right and fully resonant.”

“OK. Dipstick doesn’t resonate. Back to the drawing board.”

I had kept quiet myself, trying to think, but it was hard to concentrate, as the names started to pour forth from the group, like ketchup from a bottle, once it gets unclogged.

“Upright-citizen, dangling participle, doodle dandy, ba-donk-a-donk, one-eyed Fred, pumping pole of penile power, Russell the muscle, hammer of Thor, thrill drill, pocket rocket, the early riser, trouser trout, tiddlywinker, zipper-ripper, Old Drizzly, The New York Post, Donald Pump.”

Finally, they shut up. Giggling like a group of schoolgirls—or boys. I don’t think girls are gigglier than boys.

I finally got an opening: “Ms. Lawrence, can you talk more to us about dysmorphophobia?”

Amidst a predictable chorus of “What the hell’s that?” and “Dysmorpho-what?” she looked at me with what I recognized was a new respect. She had found amidst this group a genuine thinker, one who could converse with her without misinterpreting her own expertise, making all the wrong adjustments for gender

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differences. I made no adjustments.

It was a penis, that's all, the cause of so much woe and so much pride, but also a flabby muscle that better belonged hidden, tucked inside the body completely, where, in the goodness of time and evolutionary change, it will be. That day I will not live to see. I do not fool myself on that score. So I come to this group and to Connie, seeking the most up-to-date wisdom on what to do in the meantime.

“For those of you who don't recognize the term that was introduced by Paul”— we were wearing name tags, but she knew my name without looking—“it means a worry about the size of your penis, its size. It's been estimated that almost no male in our culture escapes some form of this malady at some stage, and most, I say MOST, males never completely escape it. Some are consumed by such worries, their lives saddened, even ruined, yes, even that.”

“How many here have examined their penises?”

After a silly bit of hesitation on the part of more than you would suppose, we all raised our hands. I was the first.

“How many have measured them?”

Same thing happened, even more hesitancy. But not by me.

“How many have examined their penises from the side, not the top, but the side?”

Everyone looked around to see if they ought to raise their hand, but nobody had— so nobody did. How would you examine your penis from the side, anyhow? I guess you could lean down and scrunch over cater-cornered, or maybe take pictures.

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“You’re wondering why I ask? Well, here’s the thing: a cylindrical object always looks much smaller when viewed from the top. When you look at your penis from above, from above, it is foreshortened, a term painters use when doing views of a body seen from the bottom up. They have to make the legs unnaturally short. You follow what I’m saying?”

We all nodded.

“You all imagine that your penis is much smaller than it is, much smaller. I know you’ve measured, but what does that mean? You may have measured, say, five inches, which is perfectly average, but you imagine that five inches is much smaller in appearance than it actually is. You follow me?”

Nodding like geese walking along.

“When men are asked if their penises are too little, overwhelmingly they say ‘yes.’ They do. When their partners, male or female, are asked whether these very same penises are adequate or better, they overwhelmingly say ‘yes’—overwhelmingly they say ‘yes.’”

Nods and smiles.

“So, let’s all go home, having learned that it’s all in our heads, and we are now just fine.”

Laughter. Nice the way she included herself with us. She wouldn’t have had to do that, but she did.

“Of course, it helps very little to learn what I’ve just said. Probably all of you knew that before, in one shape or another. What matters IS precisely what you think about your own penis, and that’s what we are going to deal with and why the very first step is to stop regarding it as an alien fixture, something that embarrasses you

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without quite belonging to you. It's your friend."

"My friend," we echoed.

"Later on, we can drop that, if we want, and accept the penis as an integral part of us, neither friend nor foe. For now, friendship is an advance for most of us, right?"

We assented as one.

My friend (I decided not to name him, not yet) and I shared a history – not to be silly about it. I had expended considerable energy and drained financial resources in making my friend's life easier. It was my aim to give him more room to move and breathe, while increasing his sense of self-worth.

I hadn't gone so far as surgery, which might seem to mark my commitment as less than whole-hearted. But extensive research had forced me to abandon this particular pathway to increased size and vigor. Oh sure, wild claims were made for surgical techniques, and I believed most of them. I think anybody would, as they were backed by research, proven results, and testimonials—pictures attached. It was all very convincing. The most common process is lengthening by way of – I love the sound of this – supra-pubic skin enhancement. Enhancement sounds good, but when you look into deeply, as I have, you discover soon enough that these methods of enhancement may not lead to euphoria.

Let me back up. If something is to get bigger, it must grow: there must be more of it. You follow me? Where does that "more" come from, and what exactly constitutes this additional penile material? Nothing can come of nothing, as King Lear rightly observes; penal

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bulk doesn't grow on trees. Nor, as it happens, does it grow on penises. It is carted in from other quarters and drilled into place in order to push the whole phalanx forward. From whence? From the buttocks usually, though some practitioners use cadavers. Strictly on the up and up, and no pun is intended here or anywhere else in this account.

Most surgery necessitates cutting the main ligament, allowing the penis to extend more naturally away from the body and thus present more usable material. Though the penis does not actually grow, it looks longer and is, we might say, EFFECTUALLY lengthened. There are several problems, though. For one thing, any time you start cutting you run the risk of screw-ups, in what they call "unintended negative consequences," the exact nature of which, beyond infection, are not wholly clear to me.

The Mayo Clinic, while not campaigning to prohibit this operation, does note, humorously I think, that cutting the ligament "can cause an erect penis to wobble and position itself at odd angles." Whether words like "wobble" and "odd" are quite in keeping with scientific disinterestedness is an open question, I suppose, but I am not prone to being touchy on this point. Still, you must admit it's not an encouraging picture—my old wobbler positioning itself at strange drunken deployments.

I go into this adventure of enlightenment with problems not unrelated to those the Mayo Clinic says may actually be caused by the corrective technique: the wobbles and the angly-danglies. Why would I want to spend all this dough—and I assure you it isn't cheap—only to come out from under the knife with a condition

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like the one I had going in, only times two?

I don't know if this talk about odd angels is vividly picturable by those who don't have the problem or haven't had a family member so afflicted. The angles are odd, but they aren't always odd in the same way, even for the same person and friend: one time she may be pointing south, the next North-Northwest. This is a problem that can lead to genuine heartbreak.

There's nothing to be gained by reticence, so I'll offer this little personal anecdote as an illustration. I was out on the town with a very presentable young woman from the office. She's still employed there, so I won't go into names, especially as our office is small and her identity might be guessed, not the toughest of mysteries to solve, as we have, to tell the truth, only eleven employees, three of them female.

"Paul, I've had such a lovely evening."

"Me too, Clara [not her real name], and I say, 'So much for the chestnut about not mixing romance and the workplace.'"

"Paul! Are we in the midst of a romance?"

"Let's see, shall we?" I quipped, hastening to undress on the spot, the spot being her own living room.

"Mother!" Clara hissed.

"Where?" I said, now nearly naked (not altogether) from the waist down and unable to get my clothes hiked up very quickly.

"No, no. I mean, she's upstairs, Paul. We simply cannot do that sort of thing here in the living room. Also, this is rather sudden." She seemed confused.

I had read that women on the brink of agreeing to sex, balanced on the knife edge of yes and no, can be

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tipped over by a prompt and unembarrassed display of the persuader. So I tried it, whipped down my shorts and let my exposed magnificence do its work.

Instead of signaling that her wavering days were over, she let forth a little scream, retreated a step or two, then, just as suddenly, knelt down, and began a close examination of what was now not so much the Persuader as the Freak Show.

“What makes your penis lead off in that direction?”

“What do you mean?” I said. I had noticed such things several times before, but felt I had to pretend that this was an anomaly.

“What do I mean? God, Paul, just look at it, like a divining rod, telling us to dig over there by the television set!”

I know this is more than a simple illustration might require, but I wanted to drive home the point about not wanting to aggravate a condition to which I was not wholly a stranger.

It was at this point that jelqing presented itself as a way to improve my life. It wasn't that I imagined that situations like those with “Clara” would arise, probably ever again, few women being that coarse. I'm not paranoid, and I'm not the sort to go to great lengths to ward off the highly-unlikely. Earthquake insurance, for instance. In California, certainly, but why here? I have my share of quirks, but I did NOT take up jelqing because that Catherine L. McPherson (clp@yahoo.com) had shown herself to be a cruel bitch.

Jelqing is, of all techniques invented to deal with this problem, the most misunderstood. Sick jokesters litter the already-befouled Internet with fake “scientific”

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advice on jelqing. They imagine it's sidesplitting that the legitimate massaging exercises remind them—oh tee hee—of masturbation. OK, so the techniques are designed to stretch vigorously and promote the growth of new tissue through periodic extension that comes from rushing blood to the penis. Who in their right mind would find that funny, or set up web sites that ridicule those in pain?

This technique involves back and forth hand-on-penis movement. Granted. Jelqing also uses collars that allow the tiniest of electric currents to enter into those areas most capable of new growth. It is essential that the exercises be done regularly, of course, and my question is whether those devoted to it, who want nothing but good health and reasonable self-esteem, deserve ridicule?

I refuse to give these irresponsible blogs even more publicity, which is what they are looking for. One in particular features what looks like good advice, all about not injuring yourself or over-doing it. That's all up front, luring us in. Paragraphs of sensible material, presented in a sober tone, make you susceptible to nonsense. Animals, in this case, chickens. Use an ordinary supermarket chicken, warm it up slightly, "so as not to lose the natural and organic lubrication," and then slip it over the penis, "experimenting to find the right fit in terms of weight, roasters of between 2-3 pounds generally providing the right cavities."

That might seem harmless, but the fool goes on from this to "advanced techniques, recommended for those not satisfied with a total growth of between one-quarter and one-half inch." Here, I simply cannot be

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explicit, aggrandizing this sick individual; but I will leave it to your imagination to picture what he has in mind by “advancing” from dead chickens to live ones and then to. . . .

“Professor Lawrence, may I ask you about jelqing—your professional opinion?”

“Of course you may. So long as it does not involve strong chemicals, masking as lubricants, it is harmless. Physically harmless, physically that is. What it does to men who are led to expect results, often-spectacular results, I cannot say. But you can imagine. Potential psychic problems aside, though, I can affirm that it is the least harmful of all these techniques, because it is least dangerous physically and may lead to pleasurable results.”

“How so?”

She smiled. “Masturbation. You here are enlightened, but it’s a sad fact that up to 1.4% of adult men do not know how to masturbate, suffer in silence at all the jokes. You remember from grade school: If your uncle Jack were stuck on the garage roof, would you help your uncle Jack off? Extremely painful to these thousands, and there’s a chance jelqing may help measurably in this area. No increase in length is likely, though, so balance the fun and educational gains against disappointment for those out for other things, increase in length, as I say.”

I wanted to ask about extenders, having had some experience with them myself, I should be ashamed to say, were it not that Dr. Lawrence says shame is something we check at the door. I was about to ask, when somebody else beat me to it.

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Connie almost lost her cool on extenders. I got so excited myself I may not have this accurate, what she said.

“Here’s where the greatest damage is done and the most misinformation propagated. Dirty bastards. [I can’t imagine she said that, but it’s what I wrote down. Maybe it was my introjection.] They lean on a quack, yes a quack, Dr. John Ege Siana of Denmark. This so-called Dr. had the bright idea of lengthening the penis by stretching it. That’s it. Like it takes a medical degree to tell us that we can make something longer by hanging weights on it, hour after hour.”

“Now, listen to me, class. Extending has what looks like a reputable background and can, let me emphasize, provide results, where other techniques (surgery aside) generally do not, seldom do. Extenders have been shown in reputable tests to add penis length, but how much? An average of less than one-quarter of an inch!”

“This dangerous technique works, when it does, by causing slight ruptures in the tissue, forcing scar tissue to fill in the tears. It’s barbaric and, even when it works, works so minimally as hardly to answer to the needs of those who in good faith took it on. The downside is frightening: infections, painful lacerations, and in three documented cases injuries so severe as to necessitate removal of the penis.”

I raised my hand: “Dr. Lawrence?”

“Yes?”

“I heard from a friend of my cousin’s about another danger if you wear the extender in the ‘down’ position. You know there’s an up position and a down position.”

“Yes I do, Paul; yes I do.”

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“Well,” I continued, encouraged, “try wearing it in the down position by mistake at a party. See what happens!”

“I see,” she said, her beautiful green eyes full of understanding sparkle.

“It’s about the worst thing that could afflict a life, my cousin said.”

The class moved on to other matters, but I remained stuck at that point, captivated no longer by my penis. For all I cared, it could wobble and shrink down to mini. I was freed, freed by Connie and her warmth. She made me see that there were other things that mattered, that I could cover up my pecker, forget about it, park it and move on. I mean, how much of life depends on penises, and even in that arena, how much depends on size? I sort of knew all along that it wasn’t all that important, but Connie verified it for me. She stamped with approval my very being.

I felt renewed, dizzy with freedom.

Soon as class was over. “Professor Lawrence—Connie—I know it’s against your code and professional ethics, and everything. I know that, but would you go out with me? I know I shouldn’t ask. Would you?”

“Yes I would, Paul. Yes I would.”

MEETING MOMMA

I was at a magic show, when, after one particularly amazing trick, someone screamed out, “Wow! How did you do that?” ”I would tell you,” answered the magician, “but then I’d have to kill you.” After a moment’s pause the same voice screamed out, “Can you tell my mother-in-law?”

I took my mother-in-law to Madame Tussaud’s chamber of horrors and one of the attendants said, “Keep her moving sir, we’re stocktaking.”

Fred and Rick were in a pub. Fred says to his mate, “My mother-in-law is an angel.” Rick replies, “You’re lucky. Mine is still alive.”

I live in constant fear that Trump will deport my illegal-alien mother-in-law who lives at 1944 5th Street in a white house with a blue door. She gets off work at 6PM.

“Do we really have to meet your parents?”

“It’s YOU meeting them. I have a prior acquaintance.”

“You haven’t made them sound too inviting, you know.”

“My dad’s easy. You can talk to him about sports shit, that sort of thing.”

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That made it clear enough. Dad was OK, within limits, Momma was another story. No need to press the issue—so he did.

“Well, I haven’t forced you to meet my. . . .”

Just then he remembered, too late. No need allowing her to score points, pointing out that they had spent a few hours, maybe more, albeit unplanned, with just that duet of obnoxiously friendly embarrassments, broadcasting with every word and gesture just how anxious they were for their little Carl to be “settled,” didn’t much matter with whom.

“OK. Why don’t we invite them here?”

Again, he saw at once what a terrible idea that was. Not only were there the posters on the living-room wall—hilarious but, Julie had once said, “juvenile”: pictures of dogs in jock straps, that sort of thing—but neither of them could cook very well and would be reduced to what they could do: chili and spaghetti with canned sauce.

“Right,” said Julie, meaning, “What an ass you are!”

So, there it was—there *he* was, hooked and being reeled in, set to flop on the dock of the Wineberg’s dining room in a short three days—unprotected, gasping for air, no water, no help, no rescue anywhere.

“Dad, this is Carl.”

“Hello, Carl.”

“How are you, Mr. Weinberg?”

“You tell *me*. How should I be?”

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What could he say to that? Fine, recovering nicely, dead? Nothing seemed to fit, so he giggled. He had a winning giggle, he hoped.

But Papa turned out to be not too bad, just as Julie had said. After some awkward mumbles on the way to the living room, Carl had chanced a “How bout them Royals!” You could tell that Papa was considering some witty and paralyzing rejoinder but probably saw how ill-equipped Carl was for that, so, instead did something far worse:

“You know, Carl, I got two tickets for next Wednesday. Faye has no real interest, and it’d be great to have a knowledgeable fan along. How bout it?”

Carl was so busy wondering how he had managed to suggest that this “knowledgeable fan” was he, that he couldn’t bring his mind to land on the real issue, wrapped around “next Wednesday.”

“I am sure I cannot begin to come up to your standards in the knowledge—ah—game, Mr. Weinberg.”

Silence. He had to say something.

“Oh, no. Not even close.”

“You mean ‘no,’ you can’t come?”

“Oh, I can come for sure—and thank you—I only meant. . . .”

Just then a female form appeared in the doorway, blocking all the light and rendering it unnecessary for Carl to clarify what he meant, which, in itself, was lucky.

But what followed—not so much.

“What’s this one’s name?”

She didn’t seem to be addressing him, but nobody responded, so, just to break the silence and give

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everybody a break, he decided to ignore the viciousness and proceed as if they could all be friends. He'd assume the best until it was clearly demonstrated that. . . . It had just been so demonstrated, of course, but he felt he had to say something. Why?

"My name is Carl, Mrs. Weinberg. I've heard so much about you from Julie and I am super glad to meet you."

"Carl, it is? Goody."

"Thank you." Why in God's name had he said that?

"Oh, you are so very welcome, Mr. Super-Glad. How do you earn your keep, Carl?"

He paused to look her over, also to gain some time so he could answer this delicate question both honestly and impressively. He was surprised that she wasn't short and fat, as dragons ought to be, that she was thin and looked so much like Julie. Of course she did, and looking-alike didn't mean. . . . But he had to answer the question about how he was supporting himself, a form of "How do you plan to keep our daughter in the style to which she is accustomed?" and therefore one he should answer with a pre-formulated and smooth assurance. Only he had none.

"I don't right now, not so's you'd . . . not what you'd call exactly 'earning.'"

"What exactly do you call it?"

"Well, I call it spending."

"I see. Which is more in your line than earning, is it?"

"Yes. I mean, I am a student still, I'd guess you'd say."

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She stared at him as a eagle might at a diseased rabbit, wondering if it was worth its while to attack. And where in hell was Julie in all this—or even Papa?

After a few minutes, maybe 30 or 40, she stopped staring and invited him to sit down, though it was more a beckoning and a shove than an invitation.

For at least five hours nobody said a word. Maybe ten seconds. Carl again responded to his instinct to fill in the blank, trusting his always-ready charm.

“Mr. Weinberg and I are going to the game in three days. I hope that’s OK. He said you didn’t so much care for football—baseball. I hope that’s OK.”

She didn’t attack him, not physically. Just glared.

Finally, Julie: “Should we eat?”

At last, Papa, with what seemed to be his accustomed mode of yukking it up: “I don’t know, should we? Why? What? Where? When? Whom?”

Only Carl laughed—immoderately.

“I thought you were bringing dinner,” said Momma, looking not at Julie, who was the one to answer, but at Carl, who almost started crying.

He managed not to do that but managed also not to remain silent. “Were we expected to? I can run out and get tacos or something, anything you say. Please.”

It may have been the last word, desperate and unmanly, but he would never know if that’s what did it—if anything was done at all. Anyhow, the room seemed to exhale, or maybe just Momma. She didn’t rush to embrace him; she didn’t even smile; but the glare seemed to lose some wattage and she even stood and seemed about to advance on him.

A hug?

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Nah, but she did wend her way to the kitchen to tend to what she had cooking there, taking Julie with her and leaving Carl and a more relaxed Papa to chat, which they did, with something camouflaging as ease.

The dinner somehow passed, Momma even once asking Carl what he was studying. She may have made a vomiting sound at his response, but he chose to view it as, if not acceptance, exactly, a step along that road.

Maybe it was. On leaving, still hug-less, Papa reminded him of their plans and shook his hand, heartily even. Momma, who had disappeared for a bit, now was suddenly on him, very close, wearing (maybe) no scowl.

“I am glad you came over, Martin,” she said.

“It’s Carl,” he said, “not that it matters.”

“Huh?”

“My name’s Carl.”

“I thought it was Martin. You sure? Never much liked that Carl.”

FULL DISCLOSURE

I always tell the truth. Even when I lie.

Al Pacino

I didn't get what you would call directions for this assignment, not that I'm trying to evade my clear responsibility. If nothing else, I know my own interests well enough to see that they would not be served by dodging. But I sure hope there is something other than self-interest at work here, at work inside me. While I do not want to lay claim to virtues you think I do not possess, it would be dishonest of me not to report that I've grown as a result of this ordeal, now see myself more clearly. I would definitely go so far as to say that I'm a different person. But perhaps that's not for me to say.

Let me be direct. I did molest the boy, a student entrusted to me.

At the time this happened I had developed the ability to blind myself to the truth or hide it behind a nearby bush. What I am **not** now is what I was then: evasive. I don't mean to excuse anything by forthrightness, just indicate that there were many mistakes, large mistakes, I made, and evading things was one of them.

(I will try not to be long-winded. I really wish there were instructions on how much background you require. I'll just have to guess. And I'll try to form shorter

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sentences. I always tell my students that there are no prizes given for sentences taking longest to cross the finish line.)

I'll start wherever it seems to me most reasonable. That OK?

I don't know who is to give permission, there being nobody here but me and this recorder: well three of us, really, me, the recorder, and my honor. (I omit the person behind the glass, as I was told to ignore him.) Anyhow, I plan to connect a pipeline directly to my conscience and let it flow.

Excuse me while I take a drink. Oops! After they told me they'd take down every word so I should not prattle. I'll do better. I certainly have gotten way, way beyond wanting to hide anything. For [unintelligible.]

Here goes: straight to what I know you want to hear about, and that's as it should be. I've been spending long hours recently talking about my past, my childhood, both to the officials here, the doctors, and my friends, those I have made in the last several weeks. "Friends on the inside," as they say. Those friends have become dear to me, showing more understanding than I had ever expected, more than I deserve. And these are supposed to be hardened criminals. I think the people who are in here with me are better than I, and I also think they have taught me to be better, which I take the risk of saying I KNOW I now am.

What I set out to say was about my childhood, but I got sidetracked talking about these dear friends. You will think that I am not counting Terry as a dear friend, fearing your opinion on that count. But that's not so. I am eager to be honest here. It's true that I stopped

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thinking of myself as teacher or older even, with him I mean. That was wrong. More than just a mistake: wrong, wrong, wrong. I know that now.

OK! Time to roll out the required equipment. I WILL get to my childhood. Terry later. I'm not avoiding that. My childhood was like that of most white, middle-class, unspecial women my age, I would guess. I think my parents were OK, treated me well in the way they figured they should. They aren't dumb people, though not educated. I was the first person to complete college in the family. My parents were religious in a moderate way, Methodist, and they made sure I had the kind of home where my friends felt welcome. My childhood was happy.

They didn't molest me. I feel sure about that. I did read a pamphlet here that said the answer to whether or not you were molested had to be either "yes" or "I don't know," that nobody could say for sure they weren't. I guess that's what the latest research shows, but I would be lying if I didn't answer that such a sweeping generalization seems to me nonsense. Spend a half hour with my mother and father and you'd see how ridiculous that idea is.

I'm mentioning this about my parents not because it's relevant to my incarceration but because it just came up.

Ha—choo. Excuse me.

I have a brother, younger than me. I know some people have suggested there was something in my relationship with Rich that could maybe say a lot about Terry and me, a forecast of things to come. I've tried hard to think about that, and I can honestly say that there

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might be a little something in it. I loved Rich and felt responsible for him, for his happiness. I don't anymore—feel responsible or anything like that. He has graduated from college, has a good job, and a wife who is expecting their first. He and I are still close, but only in ways—err—that fit a brother and sister. You know.

Anyways, there may be something in my feelings back then for Rich that gets replayed with Terry. The difference, of course, is huge. I didn't comfort Terry or feel responsible for him—perhaps I should have.

[Unintelligible, static.] I don't mean to avoid the big difference, which is sex. I can honestly say that no shadow of sexual feeling ever entered my love for Richie. I've never denied that sexual feeling came to occupy an important, if certainly secondary, position with Terry. I want to be frank about that.

Richie and Terry look slightly alike—not much, but a little. I admit that, too. But I don't see how this connection is helpful in explaining what happened. Maybe the doctors can see it. All I can do is to be honest and leave it to others for thorough analysis.

To sum up: my childhood seems to me to have been unexceptional. I went to summer camp, was a cheerleader, attended LSU and graduated with a degree in education, had boyfriends, a few who seemed serious at the time. (I'm trying to overcome my embarrassment at talking about sex. I think it's a natural reluctance, but I have a feeling you might want to hear this, so I'll say it: I did have sex with five boys, two in high school, two in college, and one after college, then one for a period of two years. Very OK sex. I didn't rebound to Terry from unsuccessful adult sexual relations.)

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The first several weeks of the school year in question went along as usual, though what is usual in my classrooms doesn't fit what most people have in mind, what is conventional and commonplace, so I should explain. Hope the tape doesn't run out, and I'll try to be brief on this, my theory of teaching. It's vital in understanding what developed, so I'll just go ahead and explain fully.

What? I don't get you. Read the note? "Forget the theory and get to the criminal activity."

Nineteen second of silence.

I guess that puts it on the line, though I thought I had free reign here to explain myself and wasn't going to be. . . . Gotcha. No need to rap on the glass. I'll do as ordered. Excuse me. I need a drink of water.

I imagine it's permissible to say that it is a tribute to the power of the theory I am not allowed to explain that, in seven years of teaching, I have been the recipient of several notable awards for teaching but never one significant complaint. Students know sound practice when they see it; they recognize healthy physical expression when they feel it.

But that's not what happened with Terry, I admit.

One day in the third week, Terry lingered after school, dawdling at his desk in a way most unlike him. I noticed, of course, but pretended not to, knowing he had some reason to lurk. I won't soon forget what happened that afternoon. [Unintelligible.]

Finally, when everyone had left, Terry abandoned his charade of gathering belongings, sat back at his desk, and looked up at me with eyes so full of pain anyone would have responded, not to be making excuses.

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Whatever other people might or might not have done is not the issue, and I certainly am not pretending that “other people” would have found themselves having sexual relations with a thirteen-year-old.

I went back, scooted up a chair and pulled him to me, out of his chair and onto my lap.

“What is it, dear? You can tell me.”

“I know I can, Ms. Belty.”

“Ms. Belty!”

He smiled a little and snuggled close. “I’m sorry. Ann.”

“That’s better. Now what is it?”

To be honest, Terry **was** attractive to me at that moment, though that attraction had nothing to do with his vulnerability. I was drawn to Terry at least as much out of my vulnerability as his. What I mean is that it was his strength that drew me. I am fully aware that this is difficult for most people to understand, filled as they are with false notions about the immaturity of children.

The idea that children are “immature” arises as a natural error, mistaking what we want to see for what is there. Put another way, “immaturity” is a disguise kids adopt to get by, a survival tool. Adults are so sure kids are one way that almost all kids find it easier to play along.

So [unintelligible] and [unintelligible] where were we? No need to rap the glass. Oh yeah.

“I am fine, Anna, really. It’s just. . . .” He didn’t seem confused, more like trying to gauge my response.

“Go ahead,” I said, trying to encourage him.

“Well,” he said, “I guess you know that I’ve gone through puberty, physically I mean.” He broke off then:

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“Of course you couldn’t KNOW. What am I saying?”

To ease his embarrassment, I smiled. And. . . . I don’t quite know how, but we soon found ourselves embracing, our cuddle having, without warning, turned into full-fledged passion.

Before I knew it, his hands were all over me and—
[unintelligible.]

It was out first time having sex. Yes, on the floor there in the classroom and, yes, both of us fully unclothed. [Unintelligible.] I don’t want to hide anything, but I don’t want to be lewd, certainly. Let me say this: the sex was a part of all this, certainly, but it wasn’t by any means the center. It was there; but it was also on the periphery, if you follow me.

If anything about this was unremarkable, even routine, it was the sex. It’s ironic that this feature attracts all the attention. I imagine hundreds of thousands of people have had sex pretty much like we had. Ho Hum. With the one difference.

There were times when we were together, alone, and got so involved in our conversation that we forgot to have sex. That sounds odd, but it’s true. Our relationship was much more intellectual and emotional than it ever was physical. I don’t expect to be believed here, but I’m not going to lie just to sound more convincing to those who think they already know all the answers.

I was asked to indicate how I feel now about all this. OK. What I think is—I think [unintelligible].

I’ll restart. Wish I could rewind and back up this machine.

It was a giant mistake and I apologize to all those I let down. To Terry and his parents, to all my students, to

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all those uncounted numbers of completely responsible teachers whose careers I have made a little unsteady by my self-indulgent activities. Faced with a similar situation—and I don't pretend that a similar situation might not arise when I return to teaching and [unintelligible], I would act differently because I **am** different. It is my fondest wish to return to teaching, to do what I love best and am, if I do say so, immensely gifted at.

Those who make mistakes fall into two categories: those who have tapped into some permanent defective part of themselves and will continue to behave in that way AND those who learn from their mistakes. I know in the deepest part of my being that I am of the second category: it's hard for me now to recognize the person who raped that little boy. I recognize that it was rape, had to be, as how could a thirteen-year-old child give consent? It's legally impossible and also violates common sense (as well as [unintelligible] human decency).

I'm not asking for another chance, as I'm not the same person who did that unspeakable thing. I want a **FIRST CHANCE** for the entirely remade Anna Belty. Please let this person, talented and chastened, back into free society and back into the classroom where she belongs.

[Pause.]

[Forty-seven seconds of static and unintelligible sounds.]

I see. There's the off button. Fucking assholes. Bite your tongue, fool. How can I—[Unintelligible]

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[Twenty-two seconds of unintelligible sounds and disconnected speech.]

Off? Whirring piece of shit. Yeah. Off, for sure.

[Eleven seconds of static.]

Hope this works – didn't overdo it. Stupid fucks – that's my cushion – bottom-feeder psychologists. I feel like throwing up. How could I have said all that? Oh me oh my, how perverted I was, but ain't now, no sir. I just couldn't help myself. This beautiful boy. [Laughter.] Hope they see it, the recognizable Oprah type: obsessed but redeemable female pedophile.

Bull-fucking-shit! [Unintelligible.] Beautiful boy? Take a look at him: uni-browed moonfaced shit. Seduced me with his helplessness. Oh how he needed me. How could I ever have fallen for that?

Then he wormed his needy little self into my sympathies, ripped my clothes off, slugged me, raped me. That's impossible, right? Why? Because I'm eighteen years older and you can't imagine a poor little thirteen-year-old could do such a thing. Never mind that the thirteen-year-old is a snorting, rutting pig. In the eyes of the law, he has to be an innocent little child. "Little child" my ravished ass! He outweighed me by a good thirty pounds, a tough specimen of trailer-trash selfishness. He wants what he wants, he says, suckin on his teeth, and by lordy jesus is gonna jes take it.

They asked me what I'd do if I got out, clearly worried I'd be drawn back to him. They should worry. I get released I'm going to hunt him down. The family was moved "for his safety" by do-gooding morons. But I'll find that bastard. I'll find him and cut him into bits,

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slowly, starting with the one part of him that truly is
little.

GOOD HUMOR MAN

**I'm your ice cream man—
Stop me when I'm passing by.
All my flavors are guaranteed
To satisfy.**

Van Halen

It'd make for good stories on down the line, right? Meanwhile, he told himself—actually did tell himself, speaking out loud right there in his bedroom, his roommate no more than a paper-thin wall away. Meanwhile, as I was saying and he was also saying, he told himself it'd be an agreeable summer job.

Straight off, though, it didn't seem as if it'd exactly make for an agreeable summer job—even had to supply his own white pants.

“You probably got some white pants, right, white tennis shoes, shirt. We supply the cap.”

“I don't have any white pants. Who does?”

“You want this job or not? Get some.”

He did. Found a pair for \$10. \$10 wasn't bad, were that no also only \$1.15 more than he made the first day on his route.

He mentioned his take to the manager.

“Some of the schools are still in session. It's still cool out. They aren't used to you. You probably screwed up the route. You gotta hit the same streets, the same time every day. They get used to you. You get used to them.”

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The manager had one of those drifting eyes that you had to learn not to follow. It could give you motion sickness.

“OK,” I said. I didn’t want him inviting me to quit, which is what he would have done, probably, if I’d gone on. Besides, \$10 wasn’t bad for 13 hours work. That didn’t count getting to the lot, loading the truck, donning the uniform, driving to my assigned route over on the other side of Cleveland (Lakewood), driving back, undressing and taking a shower (only that’s just a joke as they had no showers, only a locker room, very clean, mostly), getting back home.

“You can make a fair amount of money, if you’re good at this,” the manager had told him when they had first met. “Once you learn the ins and outs of the game, settle in, master some tricky maneuvers, get to know the route and your customers, do that little bit more, go that extra mile, you can make a fair amount, a fair amount. Now, don’t think of it as an hourly wage. I don’t suppose you would, but I don’t know you well yet. I hope to. I will say that. I hope to. But I will stick to what I’ve said about considering the earnings in your pocket as a total sum. Any sensible fellow would do that anyhow. You agree? Do you?”

I agreed.

“I hope so,” he said, suddenly earnest, as if a lot depended on me agreeing, vowing that I should consider what was in my pocket as a total sum.

I tried to look and act just as a convert might, enthused and unreservedly on board.

The rest of that first week was better. No, it wasn’t. It was up and down, but never very far up. Best day was

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\$16.15. And my total for the week (6 days) was \$37. 85, once I deducted the pants.

Still, I knew that the hot weather, just around the corner, would make all the difference. I also knew that the unrelieved tedium of the job, skulking along at a snail's pace and pulling at the bell chord right above my head and, irritatingly, often in my line of vision—I knew that the crushing monotony of this work, much like a pony on a treadmill, would melt away once I got to know customers and form those fun ties and learn the ins and outs, those maneuvers that'd spice things up.

Actually, things did pick up when school was out and I got used to the kids who came running up with their pennies, really their pennies. The cheapest things we sold were "nickel sticks," crummy popsicles. The regular ice-cream bars were \$0.15, which was a lot of dough in 1961. And most of the kids, the little ones, didn't seem able to count to fifteen. Or they were deliberately screwing me over. Or, the truth, they didn't have much money and were hoping I wouldn't notice.

The manager, who turned out really to be the assistant manager, warned me about kids trying to scam me. It was a funny sort of warning, though: "You'll run into kids, sometimes the same ones day after day, don't have the money for what they order—or pretend they don't. Mostly they really don't. They're just poor kids, or stuck with tightwad parents. Up to you what you do about that."

He looked at me strange, as if trying to gauge exactly what I would "do about that." I took a chance, knowing this guy didn't like me at all, a mild way of putting it.

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“Too bad we don’t have spare stuff or left-overs or seconds I could give them.”

I knew he’d have something sarcastic to throw at me. He probably did have, but he didn’t release it, for some reason, just looked at me, odd again, and said, “Yeah.”

So, he was no help at all to me in dealing with this dilemma. I wasn’t surprised.

Anyhow, left to my own devices, I sentimentalized. I mean, who could resist a ragged kid with two pennies held out in an open palm, looking hopeful, knowing I’d be like most adults, ready to deny anything, say “no,” even when “no” made little sense? But this wasn’t really the slums, these kids mostly weren’t ragged, and I figured I was being played for a stupid jackass. Well—OK by me.

Only it shouldn’t have been, as I really needed to save up some money for school in the fall and wasn’t earning enough, even had I been getting full fare from these cheating little shits. So, I did what anybody would do, I asked the kids themselves how I might sell more of the ice-cream, the classy stuff, \$0.15 a bar, and not just the nickel sticks at cut rates.

“So, Buster, how can I make this a going concern, move up to the big time?”

Buster, maybe seven years old, knew just what I was talking about.

“Go into Manner’s Big Boy over there and sell booth-to-booth.”

“Damn, kid, they’d kick my ass out and right into jail.”

He giggled, knew that right along.

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“C’mon, where could I go and avoid the law?”

“The swimming pool.”

“Huh?”

“Up 122nd Street. Over there, you know. Keep going a block, about, past where you stop, turn one way, I think it’s left but you’ll see, and there’s the swimming pool, right ahead. The guy had your route last summer—he was an asshole—sold through the fence. Go up in the afternoon and do that. Right through the fence.”

“How do I squeeze ice-cream bars through the fence?”

“Ah, hell.”

That’s all he said, said with so much contempt threading through his voice and with such a disdainful frown that I told him I knew just what he meant and, by Jesus, went and did just as he said.

The fence had some open spaces, like I figured. No, I hadn’t, but there they were.

It worked so well I felt like cutting Buster in on my earnings, only I blocked that impulse right away. I was working for commission, 35%, which sounds pretty good until you calculate what 35% of \$0.15 is, or a hefty percentage of a nickel.

Anyhow, after a few adjustments for timing and knowing just where to park, I started to clean up, was making, some days, \$15-20, one hot day, \$22.20. Of course, there were not-so-hot days or, worst of all, rainy ones. Even really lousy days we had to go ding-dinging up and down the streets until 10 p.m., sometimes selling next to nothing. Actually, I never did have a complete washout, my worst day (steady rain, dark, dismal) netting me \$1.82.

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But I was talking about the swimming pool and the bonanza it was.

Was for a little while, at least. About a week and a half. Then the swimming pool official caught me, actually appeared on my side of the fence, coming up from behind and scaring the shit out of me by grabbing me, rough-like, on the shoulder.

“That’s enough of that! What you’re doing is a major criminal offense.”

Had I had a little time to think, I’d probably have realized it was not all that criminal to sell ice-cream through a fence, much less a high-level felony. But I didn’t have time to think, in any case, didn’t think, partly because he had more horrorshow stuff to throw at me.

“Just called your manager, and he’ll be here any minute.”

I knew I’d had it. Here would come Mr. stick-to-your-route guy, who’d team up with aquatics supervisor and yell at me, yell at me a lot and then fire me. I hated being yelled at, hated it so much it was a minute before I realized the more serious consequence would be losing the job and having no way to pay for books and supplies in the fall, which would mean dropping out, or. . . .

My list of agonies-to-come was interrupted by the arrival of assistant manager guy, who actually brought his company car to a screeching halt, shot out of the driver’s seat, and headed straight for me, red-faced and huffing. I was trying to think fast of apologies, ways to propitiate him and save my job—promises to mend my ways, a manly joke, a warm embrace.

“You see, sir. . . .”

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He rushed right by me, barreling straight for his managerial counterpart. I didn't catch a lot of what went on. They were loud enough to have been heard over on the other side of Lake Erie, but they were yelling at the same time, often sputtering.

What I did catch all came from my guy, for now he **was** my guy; I could tell that even though only random words and phrases hit me: “not right to bully him,” “you pompous dick,” “only a swimming pool,” “wages are low enough.” Even more remarkable—was I hearing this?—“one of our best,” “needs the money,” “good kid,” and then, unbelievable, “a friend of mine.”

When it was all over, he came back to me, still angry as hell, but not angry as hell at me.

“Better stay away from that son of a bitch and his fence, kid. I know you were just trying to sell more, make enough to keep from starving. What an asshole!”

I didn't know what to say.

“Not you, kid, not you. You're no asshole.”

That was over fifty years ago, and it remains the finest compliment I've ever received. Even if it was undeserved.

WOMEN'S STUDIES

All the men added together made the solid world-- they were the marbles in the jar, and women were whatever sand or water or air claimed the space left between them. That's how I saw things as a young woman, that was my *women's studies*. Now I've come to know that women are like vodka poured over men, who melt away like ice cubes.

Bonnie Jo Campbell

“So, you see, the natural place for us to look for a qualified professor to do the ‘Women in Literature’ course was in a Department of—literature.”

Silence

“Which is you.”

Silence

“How about it?”

Tom was trying his best to become even more invisible than usual, usual being natural to his position as most junior member—might as well say man—in the department of 60-odd.

More silence.

“Surely there is someone? You see, we have been fully funded, and until we are able to make suitable joint appointments, why, you see, we are. . . .”

“Forced to rely on men,” said the Department Chair, Dr. Wiggins. And “Dr.” was the term to use, if you knew what was good for you, at least as the most

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junior of the Department. No other member of the faculty called himself “Dr.,” feeling it was not only superfluous but a little—well—bush-league, a mark of desperation. People used “Dr.” in schools of education and in vocational dumps such as business and social work; but in real academia, which this certainly was, you’d better believe it, one used “Professor,” since of course everyone was a “Dr.” Everyone was a “Professor” too, at least everyone at this meeting, all the males in the department, the regular department. But Tom had learned in graduate school, right along with things like *The Faerie Queene* and the great vowel shift, that the proper term of address was “Professor.” He got that much right.

But Dr. Wiggins was the exception, make no mistake, and Tom wasn’t about to make any mistakes with his boss. Actually, he had made several, the most recent involving a bathroom mishap where he had trod hard on Dr. Wiggins’ foot while trying to back up from the urinal in the small-closet space allowed for Faculty relief. Worse, he had been so eager not to occupy the urinal the boss was waiting to use that he had been somewhat hasty in finishing and. . . . But that wasn’t the worst, really, though there was no point in thinking of all that now. Dr. Wiggins didn’t like him, but he had reason to believe that Dr. Wiggins liked women, all women, even less, and was not about to buckle under to even the politest request—and polite it had been—from the newly formed Division of Women’s Studies to help them staff a class or two while they got their feet on the ground. Though this was 1975, not an unenlightened era, the Division of Women’s Studies had been formed only as a

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result of a threatened law-suit and in the face of a manifestly absurd problem: there were no women on the faculty to speak of, anywhere, not even in the English Department, which might be thought of as a little girly and attracted about 80% female students.

But here she was, this representative, who called herself, “Ms. Dela-something,” acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world for one of the men present to step in and raise consciousnesses, fight the patriarchy, and make the personal political by way of an undergraduate class in “Women in Literature.” Dr. Wiggins would be the last person on earth, at least the last person at this university, to help along such a project, the last. Tom felt some security in his boss’s misogyny, one of his many colorful bigotries. Go away, Ms. Dela-something: you’re fishing in the wrong pond here.

But she wasn’t.

“The Dean mentioned something about this to me, the law-suit and all,” Dr. Wiggins growled, peering out into the room, but luckily only on the left side, nowhere near Tom, who shrank further in his seat, hiding behind rotund Professor Zacher, who would block the view and save him.

“That’s good,” said Ms. Dela-hum-hum, just to fill the empty space.

“Thomas, you’re just the person.”

Tom, certainly not the person, sat up and looked around the room, trying to spot another Thomas, hoping. . . . But he was the only so-named in the department and he immediately realized he was hooked, like it or not.

Not.

“So, class, what is the central conflict, would you say?”

Silence.

“Well, notice how the story is structured to make us feel contempt for Francis Macomber, only to spring on us a surprise ending.”

Silence.

“Well, what does Hemingway mean by the first part of his title, ‘The Short Happy Life’?”

Silence.

“Well, we can see that it’s short. But in what way is it happy?”

Silence. This was a rout.

“Well, what do you think of Francis Macomber?”

“I was married to a sonofabitch pretty much just like that!”

“Oh, were you now?”

“Bet your ass.”

“Did you shoot him?” This from another class member. Now things were going, Tom guessed, though hardly in the way he was used to.

“Should have, the asshole.”

Then followed a spirited discussion, not so much of the story, but of a large number of men who, in the opinion of members of the class, deserved to be shot. Tom figured any discussion was better than none, so he let it go, glancing surreptitiously at his watch from time to time to see how much of the forty-eight minutes was left, allowing himself seventy-five seconds at the end to wrap-up and give a paper assignment for next time.

Suddenly things got raucous:

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“You seen that movie ‘Deliverance’?”

Most had, it seemed. Tom had himself, and found it terrifying. The mention of it now, even here in class, caused his sphincter to tighten involuntarily.

“You remember one of those hillbillies says, ‘I’ll shoot your balls right off?’ Remember that?” said a voice in the back.

They did.

“Well, that’s what you should a done.”

General assent.

“You know, that movie is important in a way,” said a woman to Tom’s left.

Tom wondered what way that might be.

“It’s the first movie I know about male rape, after about thirty thousand movies celebrating the rape of women.”

“I think this movie is about what men really want to do all along—go at one another.”

General assent. Tom didn’t agree, but he knew nobody cared what he thought.

“Raping women is just an acceptable substitute for it.”

“And rape is what the patriarchy does.”

“It’s what the patriarchy IS.”

“Well, I think we are about out of time today, class. Remember for Thursday to have your Paper #2 ready to hand in and to read carefully-----.” Nobody was listening, though. Everyone was on her way out of the room.

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The woman next to him had introduced herself as “Helen.” Did that make it OK to call her “Helen”? Everyone else in the room was “Ms.” Something or other, though Tom knew it wouldn’t do to call them “Ms.” without some surname. That would be rude and the last thing he wanted was to be thought rude. He didn’t want to be thought anything; he didn’t want others there to regard him as present at all. Certainly, he didn’t want to speak, even in a murmur, much less erupt with an opinion, certainly not a clear opinion. Muteness was his first object; invisibility the second.

But what about “Helen”? Was she different from the rest? Tom didn’t mean to generalize about this “rest,” certainly not as a bunch of man-haters, nothing like that. He had no idea whether they hated men or not. Others said they did, but then others didn’t know them as Tom did. Only he didn’t know them at all. He certainly didn’t think they were identical, though the truth was he couldn’t tell them apart in any useful way. All he knew for sure was that the meeting had lasted only 4.3 minutes and he was terrified, thoroughly but in an unfocussed way that made everything worse. At least he didn’t have an erection; that would make things worse. But why in hell did he think of that? It was as if his mind had a “what’s the most inappropriate thing you can think of” door that opened every time he was in a tight spot.

He looked shyly, more like stealthily, at Helen, who of course noticed and then smiled. Maybe it was a smile. She was wearing a button—“Women need men like a fish needs a bicycle.” Tom found that amusing, whispered as much—“Love your button.” Helen didn’t

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smile, perhaps, but did whisper back: “You a fish or a bicycle?” What in God’s name could that mean? She was looking at him expectantly, so he had to whisper something, which he did: “Ah, you tell me.” Helen seemed to find that funny, laughing out loud in a way that brought the meeting to a halt and directed everyone’s attention to them, not to Helen, goddamn it, but to Tom.

“What do you think of the idea, Tom?”

Maybe he could say it gave him an erection, this idea. Holy hell. What was there to say? Nothing. So he said it:

“You know, I’m just here only to learn. It’s only my second week in the Program—er—helping out in the Program—and I don’t feel qualified to—so I’m just—you know—here to learn.”

“We don’t do that.”

This came from a Ms. sitting to his right. Tom craned out to see her face, which was probably a mistake, as it gave him no clue as to what she meant or what he should do.

“I see.”

“No free rides, buster. We don’t need note-takers or coffee-makers or doughnut- fetchers. No fucking secretaries. We need participants.”

“Oh. You do?”

”Participants.”

“I see. I’ll try, but. . . .”

“Not good enough. What do you think of the idea?”

“Well, how about if you give me a pass right now, if I promise to participate, really participate soon – very soon – once I know my ass from my elbow. Sorry.”

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“Oh Jesus, don’t apologize. You have some idea we’re delicate here?”

“No, I don’t.”

Luckily, everyone laughed, mostly anyhow, and he was, indeed, off the hook temporarily.

Thirty minutes had gone by, and all Tom had said was, “Well, what is Edna Pontellier’s dilemma and how does she solve it?”

Two months of this class had finally taught him something: that this was as good as it got, ever; and wonderful it was. He had gathered from staff meetings that some Women’s Studies faculty were concerned about the way classes could turn away from disinterested analysis into highly personal, often heated blab session; but Tom had studied “the personal is political” mantra, really studied it. Literature was not any longer an object for him, an aesthetic structure, but a potential energy, setting off, when it worked, not just isolated explosions but a mega-power that was much more than temporary, that made each of them individually slightly different, but, far more important, bound them together in the way Nietzsche says the Greek chorus molded all those many spectators into one. When this class worked to allow such a thing to happen, they made manifest in the room nothing less than the God Dionysus, the divinity of intoxication, community, annihilation, and exaltation.

That is to say: some classes were not as bad as others.

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“So, what’s next on the agenda?” said Professor Frashdrund, Chair of the Women’s Studies subcommittee that had welcomed in Tom as a member. Tom was on plenty of committees in his official English Department, of course; but this one was different. For one thing, they talked about interesting topics; for another, they really did get stuff done; for a third, they had an agenda and followed it; last and most important, they did let Tom talk, not a lot but as much as he wanted, and they really did listen. It’s not that Tom was exactly what you would call “influential”; he was what you would call a passive or merely agreeable member of the committee. He didn’t fool himself. Although other members very often asked him openly what he thought or, once or twice, folded their own comments into his—“I agree with Tom” or “As Tom was arguing”—he didn’t fool himself. He was a body, a Prufrock, there to swell the scene. But inside this committee, inside the whole Division of Women’s Studies, his body found an ease and welcome nowhere else available at this university.

Imagine that.

Helen was on this subcommittee, too, though she wasn’t sitting beside Tom, who’d arrived early in hopes she’d plop down next to him, either side. Trouble was that two other people had chosen to do just that, the very next two into the room, in fact.

Their names were Mary and Susan, first names now obviously being OK. Tom knew that because they had told him so:

“Tom, stop the Mizzing, for Christ’s sake!”

“Oh, sorry, just meant to be. . . .”

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“Well, don’t be. You want us calling you ‘Professor’?”

“Dr. to you!” Tom immediately regretted saying that, but the humorless feminists turned out to be forgiving—and not at all humorless:

“Like that asshole Wiggins. We heard about that. Nah, Tom, we’ll call you something more fitting to your dignity.”

“What’s that?”

“Sister.”

They were kidding, of course, probably mocking him, but Tom felt happy all the same, glowing in fact. Even better when Helen looked at him across the table and smiled—or so it seemed.

It was quite a large subcommittee, as were they all. In fact, Tom had been unable to detect any difference between the Division, its dozen or so committees, and the scores of subcommittees. Everyone seemed to come to all the meetings, as far as Tom could see, though he could also see that the meetings were brisk, efficient, and good-natured, altogether out of the reach of the small groups gatherings in English, which were disorderly, inefficient, repetitive, and rancorous.

“So,” said Professor Frashdrund, “let’s discuss our picnic potluck. I’m afraid I forgot to bring it up last week, and now we’re only four days away. Think we can do it?”

We could do it, everyone thought and said, Tom not joining in, not exactly knowing what it was they thought they could do in such a rush. He found out.

“Tom, dessert OK?”

“OK by me.”

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“Which means what, asshole?”

“That you want me to bring some dessert, and I will, yes I will.”

“Good, Tom. Doesn’t have to be elaborate.”

That was lucky, as Tom knew but one dessert that he couldn’t simply get from the Von’s bakery.

“So, Chef Tom, what’ll it be?”

That was from Helen, who had glided up to him as the meeting dissolved, almost linking her arm in his but seeming to reject the idea at the last second.

“Meringues, I think I’ll do meringues, Helen. Yes, I think—what do you think?”

“That sounds hard, Tom.”

Hard or easy, it was the only dessert Tom knew how to make, serving it at each of the infrequent dinner parties he felt compelled to give. Even the fillings didn’t vary: vanilla ice cream, berries, canned whipped cream. Eleven-thousand calories per serving, given that the meringues always expanded way beyond expectations, though you’d think that the thirty-fifth go-round would have taught him something.

“Yeah, but I’d like to try it. Want to help?”

“Considering that I’m burdened with bringing plastics utensils and napkins, I ought to be able to wrap that up fast---so sure, hun. I’ll be there—when—10?”

“Oh boy.”

Ten o’clock came and went and no Helen. Meanwhile, Tom had not only completed the basic meringues but had them in the oven, baking at the required very low temperature and not, when he checked, improving any in appearance. Tom had hoped

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the baking might make them, somehow, less unappetizing, less blackish-purple in color.

The color had been developed by Martin and Susan, children of his landlady and Tom's constant companions. Mixing all the food colors together had resulted in this shade, somewhere between bruised and sanolet-bottom. Tom had set aside a few he had then tinted red, blue, green, yellow; but very few. His were also dessert sized, unlike those of the kids, which, when oven-puffed, were generous dinner-plate monsters. But they had so much fun, the kids; and, after all, what did it matter? He had plenty of ice-cream (bargain-priced tubs of it) and berries that were maybe not so fresh but still only soft, not what you would call rotten.

"Think they're done, Susan?"

"Yeah."

"Martin?"

"Yeah."

"I agree," said a new voice, not strange though, wonderfully familiar.

"Helen!"

"I just slipped in, like a burglar, unnoticed amidst the noise of your merriment. Hi there, kids."

"You like our desserts?"

"I do. Tasteful, ample, sugary: just what we feminists were hoping for."

"See me on [^@!\(day](#) at 2 to discuss appointment. Thank you sincerely. Dr. Arthur Wiggins, Chairman, Department of English."

"Hey, Bart. You know what this means, this note from ass-face?"

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“Better keep your voice down, Tom; we’re only about ten feet from the fucker’s door.”

“You think he—?”

“Nah. You’re supposed to see him at 2.”

“Thanks, Bart. I got that much. What day?”

“No fucking idea.”

Nothing for it but to beard the lion in his den.

“Yes? I said 2 o’clock. Occupied now with important matters. The Dean. . . .”

Tom couldn’t help interrupting, knowing it was a mistake as he did it: “Yes, my apologies, Dr. Wiggins, but I had to ask you to decipher your note, so I know on which day the 2 is?”

“What?”

“Which day?”

“Which day what? I’m a busy man.”

“To see you. You said to see you at 2, but I can’t make out which day of the week. I can read the “day” part clearly but not the prefix, which would. . . .”

It says “Today.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You telling me I don’t know my own calendar?”

“Maybe you do, but. . . . OK, today at 2 it is.”

He retreated in panic but at least kept himself from bursting into tears.

At 1:55 Tom was back, waiting to be called in, having learned his lesson about interrupting the good Dr. Finally, at 2:11, having heard nothing, he worked up the courage to ask the dragon guarding the gate if Dr. Wiggins might be in.

“Is he in? This is Thursday.”

“I know, Ms. Alda, but is he in?”

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“I am not a ‘Mizz,’ to you or anybody else.”

“Sorry. But is Dr. Wiggins in his office?”

“I told you he was. Hearing problems?”

“Might I go in?”

Blank stare.

So he decided to try it. Knocked. No answer.

Knocked louder. Same thing. So, after glancing back at Mrs. or Miss Alda to see if she could give him a clue (ha!), Tom just turned the knob and walked in.

“Hi, Tom! Great to see you. Thanks so much for coming by!” Wiggins not only was smiling, but was standing, advancing on Tom with his hand out, not obviously in an attack mode. Tom instinctively retreated, banging hard against a coat rack and nearly upsetting it, Wiggins grabbing it at the last moment in an unexpected show of athleticism. More surprising and somehow alarming, he was also making a show of good nature, friendly good nature.

“Whoa, Nellie! Tom, I’m sorry about all this clutter. Makes it somewhat hazardous.” He was pumping Tom’s hand, steering him meanwhile to a dangerously low easy chair in the far corner. No escape. Having slung Tom into the lower reaches of the velveteen monster, Wiggins pulled up a straight-backed wooden chair and gazed at Tom, smiling with what Tom hoped was not a maniacal grin.

Silence for a good twenty seconds.

“So, Tom, I wanted to ask you how things were going in the Women class.”

“Oh, well, actually. . . .”

“Excellent, excellent.”

“Uh-huh.”

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“That being the case, Tom, the Dean and I think it would be altogether suitable to arrange an advantageous joint appointment for you, advantageous all around, I might say, and just the thing for your career. You know these things are not easy to arrange, but I think we might be able to pull it off. Yes, I think so—just might be able to do it, pull it off. What would you say to that, huh?”

“I don’t. . . .”

“Before you sign on the dotted line, as it were, I’d be remiss if I didn’t say that I think this would be a shrewd career move, speaking now as your friend and mentor, if I may assume that title, and not just your Chair. Shrewd, Tom, shrewd. Speaking now as someone with many years of experience and with your best interests at heart, I do not hesitate to use that word.”

“You don’t hesitate,” Tom said, realizing how idiotic he sounded.

“Would you?” said Wiggins, totally unaware of how idiotic he sounded.

“With respect, sir, I think I would. You see. . . .”

“Perfectly understandable, Tom. Yes it is. What we’d do is work out a 50-50 arrangement you know, flexible but still split down the middle, like a watermelon at a family picnic, more or less.”

“Well. . . .”

“The Dean and I have worked hard on this, Tom; but of course it’s your decision, altogether yours.”

“In that case, sir. . . .”

Tom made the mistake of raising his eyes from the purplish arm-rest, which had to this point frozen his attention, and saw that Wiggins’ smile was gone, altogether gone. What was there in its place was a look

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of unutterable contempt, hatred, disdain, get-the-hell-out-of-my-office potential violence.

“You really think I should, that it would be in my best. . . .?”

“I am absolutely certain of it, Tom. No question. None.”

“Well. . . .”

“Splendid, Tom. Congratulations. Here let me help you: that chair’s a bit awkward for some, I know. No need to thank me, Tom. No need.”

Certainly Tom saw none.

He decided to ask someone who knew better:
“Helen, hun, what’s going on with this joint appointment, do you know?”

At least she didn’t seem to mind the “hun”: “Jesus, Tom, you must know more about it than I. It was sprung on us, more or less. Not that we don’t want you, but we figured we should be initiating such moves, not rubber-stamping them. And you can imagine that we had figured our appointments would likely be women. That only makes sense. Nothing personal.”

“Oh.”

“But we found that our hand was forced. The lousy pricks. How was it presented to you?”

“All I know is that that double-dyed fool Wiggins forced me to agree without me knowing anything about what I was getting into.”

“You don’t want to be associated with Women’s Studies?”

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“Shit, Helen—excuse me—it’s not that. I’m really enjoying the class and even the staff meetings—I mean, everything. I’m enjoying everything. That pot-luck was the best ever.”

“But?”

“I just meant I have no idea what a joint appointment involves. I don’t at all mean that I don’t enjoy and respect. . . .”

“I see, Tom. Well, I think you’re being dipped in hot grease now, tell you the truth.”

“Really? Don’t you have a joint appointment yourself?”

“Two major differences, dearie. Mine’s in art history, which is much less rigid and fucked up with jerks than English.”

Tom was so caught by the “dearie” he hardly followed the rest of the sentence, but he heard enough to know she’d only mentioned one thing of the two, even if he didn’t know what the one thing was.

“Oh,” he said; “I’m sure you’re right about that, Helen.” He rejected the idea of returning the “dearie,” trying hard to remember enough of the conversation to keep it going. Helen had wonderful green eyes.

“Yes, I am.”

Then it struck him. “And that’s one major difference between your joint appointment and mine. What’s the second?”

“Tom, hun, I’ve known you two months and have had no reason to suppose you’re obtuse—not until now.”

Hun! Helen had beautiful long black hair, reaching way down to below her waist. He forgot to say anything.

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“Tom, are you having a stroke or something? The difference, sweetheart, is in gender, which is what you’ve been teaching about all fall, lovely idiot, and ought by now to recognize it when it’s gnawing on your ass.”

“Helen, I really really like you.”

“In that case, my liker baby, listen to me. That asshole Wiggins is pushing you into a terrible trap. The university has to make joint appointments, so as to populate the faculty of Women’s Studies and avoid a lawsuit. Naturally, everyone assumed these joint appointments would be women—everybody but Wiggins, who is trying to outsmart us, throwing you to the wolves in English and thereby avoiding hiring a woman. You suppose anybody’s going to support you for tenure in three years, what with you being half over here with the Women Are Human people? Don’t you see, Tom? Huh?”

“You know, it’s not that I like you, Helen. I really like you.”

“You hear what I say, Tom?”

“I more than like you.”

“Tom! OK, I do you too, like you, but you’re going to be sweeping streets if you don’t. . . .”

“It’s OK, Helen.”

“It is?”

“I’ll ask to go full time in Women’s Studies. That is, I’ll ask Women’s Studies—not the Dean, not English. Fuck Wiggins. Sorry.”

“Oh.”

“Yep that’s what I’ll do. If. . . .”

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“I’ll be damned. Well, why not? Guess I can stand having you around all the time—somehow. Won’t be easy.”

“Oh boy!”

KEEP COMING BACK

An alcoholic is an egomaniac with an inferiority complex.

Alcoholics Anonymous

To this day, I am amazed at how many of my problems - most of which had nothing to do with drinking, I believed - have become manageable or have simply disappeared since I quit drinking.

Alcoholics Anonymous

“Dear, may I ask you something?”

We have been together, if that's the word I want, for several months. June and I met at a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. My name is Harry and I am an alcoholic. You probably wouldn't regard that as a pick-up line, but it is in fact so powerful in that department AA finds it necessary to warn against developing relationships between two recovering addicts. That makes no sense to me, since it's also central to AA views, to which I subscribe 100%, that one is always recovering (if you work the program) but is never cured. So, what does the silly prohibition of dating say? So long as you're recovering, you can't connect, and you're always recovering? Where's that lead us? A lifetime of lonely self-congratulations, as one day at a time I avoid drinking? That's what I'd call living negatively, not that

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I am one of those reluctant AA members looking for reasons to be critical, which is the same as looking for reasons to start right up drinking again. I'm good at catching myself as I drift toward self-deception and denial; but any non-stupid person has to wonder if AA has really thought this through. Still, I'm willing to acknowledge that there are traps aplenty lying in wait for those going down this road.

June helps, too, though she's anxious to work her program on her own terms, which is only right. I think she could be a little more open with me, not that I'm being judgmental. I'm not one who is anxious to put myself between another person and her or his pursuit of sobriety.

My views of AA are orthodox entirely. I'd be a fool to imagine that I could out-think the Big Book and those millions who have proven this system. It works!

June says we need to put our developing sobriety first. I try hard not to smile when she says automatic things that. AA can be irritating from time to time, as people with no lives APART FROM IT chirp away with these half-dozen phrases, as if they constituted the beginning and end of human wisdom. Even if they do, they don't make for graceful and sophisticated conversation.

My sponsor, devoted and well meaning, though one of the chirpers, says that the first year or two of sobriety is no time to be making big life decisions. He says people are vulnerable and can easily be sucked into deep trouble, deceiving themselves into mistaking temporary exhilarations for deep commitments.

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June likes my sponsor more than I do. For one thing, he has about four teeth. I'm not a person who goes by appearances, but come on! I'm supposed to be taking life lessons from an unemployed garage mechanic? How could a mechanic not get work?

June refuses to go on dates. She'll take walks, go to movies, watch television, eat. But not dates. I don't see much difference. Yes, I do. The difference is sex. Not to be gross, but I can't see why June makes a big deal about sex. I tell her she's has an unhealthy fixation on sex, not wanting to do it. That's not what AA had in mind discouraging relationships, I'm sure. June made me ask my sponsor. I told her I had and he said AA didn't disapprove of consensual sex between adults; it was live-ins they forbade.

I didn't ask my sponsor. That was a little white lie. I didn't ask him, because who'd go to Gomer Pyle with this? My lie didn't help my cause. June said sex wasn't right for her, would get in the way of her developing sobriety. Snore!

"You have a more modern, liberated attitude toward sex than I, Harry."

"It's pure AA."

"I wish you could just accept my position, Harry."

"You're obsessed with sex, June."

"OK, so let's not bring it up again."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Sometimes I think June is obtuse. I wouldn't say that, though. June has a fine spirit and an amazing body. I won't give up trying to free her from what we used to call hang-ups. She means a lot to me.

"You mean a lot to me, June."

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“Thanks, Harry. Your friendship has been important to me.”

“Good.”

“Are you working your fourth step still? Can I help?”

“My sponsor told me to try and find healthy substitutes for all those hours I was accustomed to spending in bars.”

“Uh huh.”

“Dating isn’t against AA, June.”

“Harry, please. It seems as if every conversation winds down the same trail. And I think you twist some of the things your sponsor says. Not that you mean to.”

“Judgmental! That’s not AA!”

“I guess you’re right, Harry.”

June might appear flexible. But she isn’t.

“Yes, Harry. What is it?”

It isn’t perfect between June and me. No relationship ever is, and if you think it’s going to be, then you’re in for a rude awakening. June and I recognize that we really can’t help the other; that’s a fundamental mistake. You start thinking you can help somebody else and you’re back on a bar stool, downing boilermakers, waking up in Galveston three days later, no idea how you got there, lying in your own puke.

Still, without putting it into words, we are helping one another. June thought we should keep our focus on that part of our lives dealing with sobriety. I told her that was bad AA: drinking hadn’t been “a part” of our lives but everything, top to bottom and morning to night,

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often through the night. Who among us hasn't awakened at 3 a.m., no booze in the house, reduced to mouthwash, rising in the morning wanting to die? Since drinking had been everything, so was our need for help and for one another. That's where June didn't understand AA. We didn't have anything BUT our sobriety, which was like saying we didn't have anything but one another, so where do you draw the line?

June was afraid of commitment. It didn't take any wizard to see that. Ironic, as it's supposed to be the man afraid of commitment.

I just didn't see why we couldn't be friends and have sex. It wasn't like I was asking for a lifetime of mowing grass and changing diapers. One step at a time, was how I put it. June could be annoying in her failure to grasp this.

I didn't know how much of June's problem was timidity, how much was being screwed up by too much alcohol in the recent past, how much was having a lousy childhood, how much was being a prude, and how much was not understanding what I was saying. That part about her lousy childhood was partly a guess and partly connecting a few things she had let fall. But we could work through all that together, if she would only allow it.

June's legs were not her best feature, not that I ever got to see much. She wouldn't go swimming, so I had no direct evidence; but in slacks and jeans it seemed like they might be a bit thick.

"Let's go swimming."

"Thanks, Harry. I think I'll pass."

"You'd look terrific in a bathing suit."

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“Thank you, but no.”

“Nobody’ll care.”

“Harry, what are you talking about?”

She never was quick on the uptake. You’d think she’d be a little insulted. She never got mad. That’d shown a spark of feeling.

Not that she couldn’t display temper. She could be a fireball when she got worked up. Over Christianity, for instance. I’m no religious fanatic, but I think that AA without Jesus is like orange juice without vodka—ha ha.

June didn’t see it that way, just because she hadn’t thought about it. I didn’t say that to her; I have more tact than that. But it’s the truth: she absorbed the shallow agnosticism around her the way some people absorb viruses.

“Just try church, June. It’s not going to hurt to try. You might be surprised.”

“We’ve been over this, Harry. Leave it alone.”

“Higher Power.”

“Don’t lecture me. Attend to your own sobriety.”

“There’s a cliché for you.”

Silence.

“Sorry, June. Just give it a try—for me.”

“Harry, I’ll do a triathlon with you, but no church.”

“Lots of intelligent people have no trouble going to church, June.”

“I’m sure that’s true.”

“Intelligenter than you.”

“Harry!”

“I’m just saying.”

“And I’m saying drop it.”

“I’d think you should see what you’re rejecting.”

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“I know what it is, Harry. If you want it, fine. I don’t.”

“How can you be so sure? God works in mysterious ways.”

“You can be an irritating asshole sometimes, Harry.”

“What did you say?”

“What did I say? I said shut up about religious shit.”

She walked out of the room then, like a child throwing a tantrum. I don’t know what it is with her. If our situations were reversed, I’d go to church, give it a try. But will she?

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying she’s irrational, like ALL women. I realize that’s sexist, and God knows I’ve known plenty of irrational men, starting with my father, who probably had good points, only seeing the rational side of things wasn’t one of them.

June seemed a little cooler after the flare-up over church. I’m sure she felt guilty about being so childish. Some people are like that, express their shame by being cold. But I knew it was temporary and that June and I were close. This was only a blip in our relationship, and I knew that once she thought about it, she’d come around and go to the church of her choice and worship according to the dictates of her conscience.

“Will you marry me?”

Funny thing is, I’ve been in this situation before, proposing marriage. Not to June, not to a woman of June’s quality, even remotely. I’m not ashamed of what

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happened, exactly. Like AA says, it's one thing to make amends, and it's another to wallow in unproductive guilt. God help me to change the things I can AND ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE. Real wisdom. It's also a cliché, as it really boils down to "no use crying over spilt milk." I'm not being critical.

I wonder how June gets through the serenity prayer, what with the talk of God. I wouldn't have thought you could work your program AT ALL without the serenity prayer, which closes every AA meeting, as it should.

God wasn't what came between me and my first girlfriend, and God won't come between me and June. I'm a big enough man to change, and I have faith that God will work His magic with June. If that doesn't happen, then that's OK, too. June's a whole lot more important to me than the First Presbyterian Church. I told her that, but I didn't tell her she was more important to me than my sobriety. Is she? Well, of course! But she wouldn't approve of me saying that.

What happened the first time I proposed was that we were sort of tipsy, me and this other girl. New Year's Eve, and how predictable is that? I'd been going with this girl about a month. At first, I was dating her roommate, but I started talking a lot not to the other one, but the one I later on proposed to. I am getting confused. First, I was dating Barbara, and then, after that, her roommate Marjorie, and it was Marjorie I proposed to.

Marjorie and I were out on New Year's Eve, throwing them back and having a good enough time. Actually, we weren't "out," but in her apartment, the one she shared with Barbara. Marjorie worked in an office.

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She had one terrific ass, not that her ass played a central role in our relationship. Her ass was fuller than June's.

We were on the couch talking and doing what kids of my parents' generation called "necking." My mother actually gave me a lecture once on necking. Talk about embarrassing. My Dad had been assigned the job of talking about sex, baby making and the crabs and contraceptives, which he called "rubbers" and told me how to put on. That was bad enough, but Mom cornered me on the couch, said I should know about "necking" and proceeded to talk about gentleness, which was not so bad, and also about unhooking bras and where to rub and clitorises, which was so awful I thought I'd die. Not like it was useful either, as I was too embarrassed to pay attention.

My mother was a very attractive woman, making allowances.

So, Marjorie and I were half-reclined on the couch, with my hand inside her shirt but only on her stomach. Pretty tame. We were having a nice time, though, drinking seven-and-sevens and laughing. All of a sudden, she pulled her hands out from around the back of my body, put one hand on my chin, in order to kiss me, and with the other hand, unzipped my fly and groped around inside.

It was a very nice thing for her to do, so I said, "Marjorie, would you marry me?"

She didn't stop what she was doing; but she did raise her head and look at me when I said that. I couldn't decipher her expression, don't know if she had an expression; it was more as if she were trying to focus.

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She kept studying my face, maybe wondering if I were serious. She was quiet so long, I repeated it:

“Marjorie, would you marry me? Really.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“Does that mean no?”

“Do you customarily ask girls on the verge of giving you hand jobs if they’ll walk down the bumpy road of life with you?”

Marjorie was always saying things like that. They seemed to me witty usually, though not on this particular occasion. She wasn’t witty, just a smart-ass, but I was young then, young and a drinker, on the verge of being an alcoholic. What I mean is that I WAS an alcoholic all along but hadn’t realized it yet, since it hadn’t taken over everything, the way it is sure to do. That’s AA: being an alcoholic isn’t acting a certain way; it’s what you ARE, from the inside reaching out.

So when Marjorie said what she said, I felt foolish, like she’d sawed off the limb I was sitting on. So I repeated myself. Maybe having a buzz on made me a little dim, unable to think of anything else to say: “Yeah, walk together down the road of life, Marjorie. I’m asking you to marry me, yes I am.”

I won’t repeat what she said, as it’s painful. Yes, I will: making a complete inventory of your past means being honest and not ducking those times when you made a fool of yourself or hurt others. At least I didn’t hurt others on this occasion, though I can’t make that claim generally. I’ve hurt many people, some of whom deserved it but most of them not. Marjorie deserved it, and I kind of wish I would have done something to her,

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nothing horrible, maybe broken a finger, bent it backwards hard.

In the interests of honesty, I'll report what she said: "Judging from what I have my hand on now, we'd have a sorry sex life; and I can't imagine casting my lot in with a nice enough guy who is, through no fault of his own, cursed with a limited intelligence and a deficient. . . ." Marjorie either couldn't think of the right insult or got to laughing so hard she couldn't get the word out.

I chalk it all up to a learning experience. We are the sum of our experiences, and that's the way it is, God's mysterious plan. I can't blame Marjorie, even for the heavy drinking I started to indulge in right after she was so cruel and threw me out of her life. It's not Marjorie living my life but me. We all run into heartless assholes, but we have to take responsibility for our own lives. That's not to say we can do it on our own. None of us can, and certainly not drunks like me. First step in AA: we are powerless against the cruel and wily agent of alcohol. Powerless. Which is why we need that Higher Power.

I have no doubt my Higher Power threw Marjorie in my path for a reason. I certainly can't see any good reason, but it's not my place to question. I have faith in God and I know things happen for a reason. My faith is strong and I feel sure June will come to rest in the lap of God, too.

"No."

MISREADING

**Calm soul of all things! make it mine
To feel, amid the city's jar,
That there abides a peace of thine,
Man did not make, and cannot mar!**

**The will to neither strive nor cry,
The power to feel with others give!
Calm, calm me more! nor let me die
Before I have begun to live.**

Matthew Arnold

**But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.
Shakespeare**

I have this neighbor. Even at the first, we chatted, Bram and me, and were in each other's houses from time to time, not a lot.

One reason had to do with our different educational levels. Bram went to college, has a Master of Arts degree in sociology. Me, I barely got through two years at the local community college, which was about the happiest time of my life before Claudia, but that was all I could manage, what with my folks both getting sick and then my wife shortly after. But I wasn't Harvard material to start with, unless they gave a Master of Arts in plumbing, which is what I do and love.

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Bram did all that schooling after he was married and had kids, too, which must have been tough. His wife was also in school, getting her own degree: get this, a Ph.D., in English, studying William Shakespeare. I shouldn't have suggested that their kids were a load; it just made it harder on Bram and his wife, Lou, short for Louise. Those kids—Miriam, Louise, and Hal—have done so much for me, and that's the truth. I don't mean they've helped me carry in groceries and do lifting, though that, too. I mean something I can't explain very well. Let's just say that I didn't have kids of my own, a long story I'll get to maybe and maybe not, and that those kids of Bram and Lou let me in on something I didn't know was there. I don't mean to be all sappy, so I'll leave it at that.

Bram and I almost got off on the wrong foot. Here's how it happened: first time I met him—I was living by myself, had been for fifteen years, after my Claudia left. I might as well tell you now. Claudia and I were as happy, I think, as any two people ever, and maybe we were too happy for it to last. After a year, we were talking about having kids when we got the news that this little spot on Claudia's chest was more than a spot. I don't want to talk about it, but that's why I was living here alone: we didn't have time to have the kids we hoped for.

The couple that had been living across the street moved, said the house was getting too small for them, which means they had got money and were snobs, seems to me. On the day Bram moved in, I saw the truck across the street and went outside and across. It was a Saturday and I wasn't working that day. Plumbers work a lot on

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Saturday, because they can get time-and-a-half; but I never liked that, as we charge plenty and some people have trouble meeting their bills, without being thrown into the poor house every time their drain backs up. I don't criticize my fellow plumbers, many of whom have families to support, while in my case there's only me. I don't have expensive tastes and wouldn't know what to do with a lot of money. Buy six tv sets? Take ballet lessons? Anyhow, I trotted across the street when I saw the movers pull up, though I'm not really a trotter. I didn't want to stick my nose in; I just thought I could welcome them and see if they needed a strong back or some tips on the neighborhood. I try to make myself known to new people—not like this is Mayberry, where everybody knows everybody else's business. It's not like that, though it's getting too close to suit some, such as the departing owners of Bram and Lou's house. For me, I'd not mind living right there with Aunt Bee and Gomer and Floyd the barber.

So, here was Bram. He was standing there, not really having anything to do except watch and look anxious. His wife, Louise, was too busy to talk then, being occupied making decisions on which things went where, while Bram was shifting from foot to foot, the way you do. It's pretty embarrassing for men in such situations, as those of you who are men know all too well and those of you who are women probably rejoice in. I've heard, actually, that most women don't like men all that much, pretend to, just to get by. I can't really say. I do know that Claudia, before she met me, had had some rough encounters along the way, though she didn't want to dwell on such things, understandably. The

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wonder is she hadn't been turned off men for good. Claudia was so glad-hearted you'd think she had never run into anything but good men. I really wouldn't blame women if they disliked men. But I have a hard time thinking they do. Women are better than men, which sounds dumb, but it's what I think, down deep.

Back to Lou, who was busy directing traffic and had so much to do you'd think she'd be short-tempered. But she wasn't. Bram once said to me, "Women like Lou not only change their own light bulbs but can wire the whole damned apartment." He was laughing as he said it. I could tell they had a great relationship, partly by the way they talked to one another but more by the way they listened. When one of them was talking, the other one—didn't matter which one—would look at them with such pride.

After Claudia went away—I know it is silly but I have trouble saying the word, "died"—I didn't see any women for some time, years really. I knew that Claudia wouldn't like it that I was alone. So I tried going out, meeting women my friends knew or I met somehow. I think I put them off, though it wasn't like I was gloomy all the time or talked about Claudia. Maybe they could tell. Several of these women, all very nice, said they liked being with me, but I sort of thought they didn't, couldn't really tell. It was like being back in high school again, almost.

I never know when women are being straight, I guess you could say. I don't know if that's me or women, but I'm pretty sure it's me. It seems like other men can tell when women are fooling with them or being evasive, out of kindness. Not me.

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But this isn't getting my story told, which is not about me and women but about me and Bram. Here's what happened: Bram asked me if I wouldn't like to be a member of his book club, one he belonged to. This was while we were both watching the movers and not finding a lot to say. I think he made the offer to fill in space, the way you do. My first thought wasn't a thought at all but panic. But I was so unprepared for that sort of thing I said, "Sure."

Not that there's anything dramatic here—or in this story, really—but somehow the book club turned out to be even more like a horror movie than I thought. It probably didn't help that the first meeting was only ten days away—and not even at Bram's house. Turns out I was there at his house for lunch three days after their move-in. I'm not sure Bram and Lou were thrilled to have me, but they were kind, and the lunch went on for two hours. I didn't realize it at then, but later checked my watch and saw I had stayed and stayed, the way you do when you feel welcomed.

But the reason I wasn't too sure about Bram and Lou was that they didn't invite me. Here's how it happened: I was fiddling in my yard, crouched down getting my hands dirty planting something, when I saw all these feet in front of me. It was Miri, Lou, and Hal, standing there grinning with a basketball.

"Wanta play?"

Before I thought about it, I said, "Sure," and there we were before you could say, "What's that old fool doing?" having the best time. We played two-on-two, shifting around to try and find a balance of talent. We never did, largely because all three kids were so much

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better than me. What I soon noticed, though, was that they adjusted downwards. I figured at first it was to make the games close, but when I thought about it later, I could see it wasn't that.

After we had played for a long time—I forgot to say it was a Saturday—Lou came out to yell at the kids about lunch, coming in for it. I started to beat it, when I felt this tug on my pants and then a hand curling right into mine. It was Miri, the littlest one. She didn't say anything, just pulled me in the house and to the table. They didn't eat lunch in the kitchen the way I do (I eat all my meals there) but used this dining room. I felt like an intruder—for about three minutes and then had the best time. I realized after I got back home and stopped feeling bad about how long I had stayed that I had almost never been in anybody else's house except to fix toilets since Claudia had left.

None of that has anything to do with what I started to talk about. I hope you'll pardon the way I tell stories, which is the way my parents did, like a bird dog circling round and not getting to the point for the longest time, if there is any point, which in my case sometimes there isn't—or I forget it.

But after Bram invited me to this Book Club meeting and I accepted, I went home and wondered what to do now. And you know what? I had forgotten to ask what book. Nothing for it but to go back and find out. *The Virgin Suicides* was the title, he said. "I have an extra copy, Jake, if you want it." You know what I said? I said, "That's OK. I'm pretty sure I have it." Now, it's not like I don't have any books. I read a lot, really, just because I prefer reading to lots of other things. Claudia

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got me into it and we used to do it, you know, out loud. But we hadn't read this book. I'd heard of it—maybe there was a movie version. I found out later that was it. Anyhow, I still feel bad that I was so pretentious there at the beginning, pretentious or ashamed.

I ran out and bought a copy and then read it, read it three times before the meeting, not that multiple readings were going to help me. I did what I could. Actually, I loved the book, loved it more than I could explain, once I got beyond the horrible events. I never did get beyond them, but I started to see how it was the boys in the book were frozen in the past, caught by these beautiful girls, so close to them, even in their suicides. Close as they seemed to be, they were also as far away as the stars. I couldn't explain it, but those boys, now men, were never going to get out of that tree house, where they went, had to go, to hear the girls calling to them, even if the calls had long since gone away, even if they had never reached them and never would.

The book was so mysterious I thought about telling Bram I was sick or admitting I didn't understand it so I wouldn't have to go. I didn't do that. He'd been nice to ask me, and I wasn't going to back out. I figured I could keep my trap shut around all these educated people. I guessed they would be educated, like Bram, and I was right, too.

The house where we met was a lot like Bram's house, nicer than mine but not scary. The first bad thing, though, was that there were only four others there, two men and two women. I was hoping for twenty or thirty, which would make it easier to hide.

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I don't want to talk much about the early part of the evening, which was nice enough. They had food and a lot of chat. At first I figured I could hide, but all four, and Bram too, kept talking to me and kept me talking so much that hiding was out of the question. It was very friendly, but I was, inside me, scared about what was coming.

I knew what it'd be, a circle in the living room. I was right. My plan of keeping shut up worked pretty well for maybe an hour. Now and then I agreed with somebody, but mostly I could just nod, sneak peeks at my watch, and say nothing or next to it.

But, after one hour and four minutes exactly, something happened to me. I want to apologize for it, but that'd do no good, so I'll just tell it. Others in the Club were taking turns saying smart things about teen suicide and reasons why young people might do it or be driven to such things. Then, when everything got silent, I don't know what happened, but I just started talking and couldn't stop.

"There aren't any reasons," I said. "The boys in the story find that out, and it's just the older people who think they can find reasons, feel they have to. Those girls, those Lisbon girls, didn't kill themselves because of anything. They just did. It dishonors them to say they did it because. It dishonors all those who leave us that way."

Then, to keep from making a fool of myself, I said, "Listen to this," and read the ending of the book, which seemed to me so beautiful and true and almost more than I could take. But I somehow made it through:

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It didn't matter in the end how old they had been, or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us, up there in the tree house, with our thinning hair and soft bellies, calling them out of those rooms where they went to be alone for all time, alone in suicide, which is deeper than death, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.

I got through that, but couldn't have said another word if somebody'd offered me a million bucks.

Everybody was quiet, embarrassed, I guess. I know I was, though it was a lot more than embarrassment I felt, a lot deeper, if that doesn't sound phony. Finally one of the Club group, a woman whose name I had forgotten but now know was Joan, said, "That's beautiful, Jake, so beautiful. I don't think there's anything to say after that."

And that was it, as if I'd broken up the meeting, maybe the Club.

On the way home, Bram and I didn't say much. Hardly anything. But he drove into my driveway, which was odd, living right across the street as he did. I said, "Thanks, Bram!" and got out of the car pretty fast, but somehow there he was beside me. It should have seemed peculiar but somehow didn't when the next thing I knew he had me in the tightest hug ever.

All he said was, "I'm sorry." But I knew.

And, oh yeah, I'm still a member of the Club. The next meeting is at my house.