

RUN AWAY

Another birthday has rolled around. I've chalked up a few, and I'm selfish enough to want to chalk up a few more. This is not a distinctive birthday, not a zero or a five, one of those other numbers. An underwhelming birthday, so to speak. But not the champagne. I opened my last bottle of Desjardin-Libera, a label almost impossible to buy outside of France, and I'm making sure I take time to enjoy every sip. I'm sitting in a Queen-Anne-style chair that is probably twice my age, a chair I, as a child, sat in, actually on the lap of a spinster lady, who taught me the US Presidents by the time I was eight.

I'm always happy to celebrate others' birthdays but less interested in celebrating my own. I'm not unhappy when people acknowledge my birthday. With one exception. I'm always happy to hear from a former lover from a few years back. She called this afternoon and teased me endlessly about how much older I am than she is. The difference in years is significant. We broke up not because of a difference in age but because of a difference about commitment. As much as I enjoyed her company and her sex, I was not ready to sign on some dotted line. Alas, after we parted, she ended up with a cool guy who became her husband, and I, always in search, ended up empty-handed. Not the first time.

As a kid I had several odd birthdays. I don't remember the exact years. On one birthday I was standing with my fellow choir students on some risers, and while we were practicing a piece to be sung later in a school concert, I began to throw up. The student in front of me suffered the most. I was helped down and then escorted home, no more than five minutes from the school. The diagnosis: scarlet fever. I was quarantined, the house was off-limits, so stated a sign at the door, and my father who continued to work at the mines each day, was not allowed in my bedroom where the blinds were always pulled – too much light was thought to be dangerous – and I listened for hours to the radio, to programs like The Breakfast Club early morning and It Pays To Be Ignorant late evening. My mother brought me meals, and every few days the doctor made a house call – his case when opened showed a row of vials with different-colored pills, none of which he prescribed. I had no idea then what the risks of scarlet fever were, and I wonder if my parents had any idea either. By the time I got better without any complications and the quarantine was lifted, several weeks total, school was out and I joined my friends in our summer play. I suppose I could look up scarlet fever on the Web and learn all that I needed to know about its dangers, although I doubt that I'll do that. It is not a childhood disease I hear much about today, and I don't remember that any neighbors or friends, especially Tommy, the guy I threw up on, ever contracted scarlet fever.

The second odd birthday, a couple years after the scarlet fever attack, when I must have been about 12, was a stomach malady that kept me home from school. I was again under the watchful eye of the only family physician I knew as a child. Sometimes I walked a few doors to his office and other times he came to the house. Suddenly the pain grew worse, and I was rushed to the local hospital, more like a clinic, owned by the town's surgeon, on the edge of town. The diagnosis was acute appendicitis, and I was operated on hours after being admitted. I'm not sure how far to trust my memory, but what my memory bank tells me is as bad as the pain was before surgery it was nothing compared to what I went through in OR and after.

Ether was the anesthetic, and when Doctor Vogan placed the mask over my nose and ordered (he never asked) me to breathe in and out. He began to count one, two, three..., and when we got to

about fifteen or sixteen my arm came up out of wherever and knocked the mask off my face. The mask was returned with gruff instructions to behave, and my arms were strapped down. The next thing I remember was waking up in my room with a nurse, who was a neighbor, hovering over me. And I really hurt, the worse nausea imaginable. She inserted something in my anus to help release the gas. I think it was called a triangle but don't hold me to that. Anyway I was in the hospital about two weeks, a long time by today's standards, and I learned subsequently that my appendix was found not where it was supposed to be but near or behind my liver and I was on the operating table for a couple of hours. My system was filled with ether, and when I wasn't throwing up or experiencing dry heaves my right lower abdomen throbbed with pain. I recovered, though, without any apparent complications, and once again I missed all the exams and celebrations that marked the end of the school year.

I don't remember any discussion around the table or in the kitchen or on the porch, any discussion at all about my medical condition or my medical future, but that's not to be taken too seriously because my family, as far I can remember, never engaged in any discussions. I still marvel at the fact that as a kid of nine and then twelve, the ages at which I acquired brother one and then brother two, I have no recollection of my mother being pregnant. It was more or less announced, you have a new brother.... How could that be? Was I so disconnected that the most obvious things around me escaped my attention? Was that the consequence of a family custom in which silence was preferred to the exchange of rumor or information? I don't remember much talk about family matters, world problems or anything else, and yet I don't remember feeling deprived, alienated or dispossessed.

From my early teen years I knew I would not stay in the town I was growing up in. I had no idea where I was going. I was expected to do well in school, but I was never a serious or stellar student. Eventually I came to realize that the way out was college. I don't remember discussing colleges with my parents or my teachers or my friends. My father had quit school in the eighth grade and my mother had attended secretarial school in a town not far from the farm where she grew up. Had my mother been born fifty years later she would have been a feminist. She had an independence of mind that was totally lacking in my father. Living with her mother's sister and learning dictation and other secretarial skills were for her an escape from farm life that she never fully embraced. Although she never used her skills and became, as was common for her generation, a fulltime housewife, she showed her independence from time to time. I've always thought I inherited more from her than from my father. It's worth noting for the record that she occasionally chastised me, as an adult, for being too independent-minded. I had strayed too far, and yet I think she understood whereas my father remained baffled.

The problem with another birthday is that another year of things has to be processed – is that the appropriate word? I'm counting on the champagne to activate whatever memory chip in my brain is responsible for the processing. In truth, the past year has been less eventful than other years. Lots of reading and writing, concerts, galleries and a couple of trips to NYC. Minor relationship messiness. No relationships at the moment. One former lover whom I ran across by accident on the Internet after an absence of many years told me to get lost when I sent her an email. Another woman I'd known for years during my marriage and after surprised me – and I like surprises - invited me to spend a few days with her at my favorite West Coast city. I hesitated, although I had long wanted to date her. She was still struggling after five years with the fallout of a second divorce because of her husband's peccadilloes. We'd made other such plans several years ago

but they got canceled because she more or less dropped out of sight. That's not quite accurate. I always knew how to contact her, but I also knew it was futile to do so because she wouldn't respond to calls or emails. I once asked her about this, and the answer was an angry not so.

I decided to take a chance with her again, although for the first time in my life I bought airline insurance. I did not know what to expect, and when I arrived I found myself in a studio apartment not much bigger than my study but with a bed that occupied half the space. It was pretty evident where I would sleep unless she had arranged to put me up in a nearby hotel. I'd been afraid (my usual stance) to ask ahead of time. For five days and nights we did it all, and I told her at the end it was as good a time as I could remember. When I returned home, I sent her a note with a gift, and again I told her how wonderful the time together was. I would have been willing to give it a go. I was not surprised and not deeply disappointed when her response was total silence. I haven't heard from her since, and I've added her to the list of women I've know, some of whom I've also loved, who preferred a black hole to any further contact with me.

With old folks the memories just keep piling up. Do we seniors all have the urge to unload the memories into memoirs and stories? Actually I don't have a very good idea what old folks think because I don't hang out with many folks my age. What few friends I have are a generation or two behind me. I should have a lot in common with oldsters, but I don't want to.

I was reminded why this last week when I had my semi-annual appointment at the hospital and the cab picked me up about eight-thirty in the morning. The cabbie, it turned out, was about five years younger than I am, and when he found out my age (by asking) the conversation I dreaded began. By the time we got to the hospital, twenty minutes away and after weaving in and out of rush-hour traffic I knew his cholesterol levels, good and bad, his Tri's, plus his ninety-one-year-old father's cholesterol levels. I also learned how much he drank and his father drank, precisely how much each day and how many glasses. His father unfortunately has had three different cancers, all of which are apparently in remission. That was good news, certainly. The final chapter before reaching the hospital was the cabbie's own prostate problems: the size, the spots, the pain of the biopsy and PSA figures (from a high of seven point two to five point one – not good numbers he confessed) for the past three years. In the course of the prostate story he asked me about mine, to which I replied slightly enlarged with no memory of PSA figures (actually I knew – they were much lower than his). Then came the inevitable question: how many times do you get up to piss, to which I responded some nights not at all, not often more than once, usually toward morning. You're either lying about your age or your pees, he burst out. The honest-to-goodness truth, I said, adding I had been on Flomax for six years. Ah ha, he said. I can't afford it, but I just learned that CVS to compete with Walgreen has a new generic or something Flomax-like pill for twelve ninety-nine compared to eighteen-seventy-five for a set number of days and at least five more prices that I tuned out. As we pulled into the hospital driveway, he shot out that he couldn't afford the four hundred dollars a month it cost for Flomax. I had decided the conversation was over so I didn't have the heart to tell him that Flomax was indeed expensive, especially without insurance, but not four hundred dollars, and his figures didn't add up to anything close to four hundred dollars.

I'm guilty of having regaled friends and enemies with stories about my health, but as I have gotten older I've tried to tamp down on the health stories because after so many years the whole business exhausted me. But my cabbie peer told his stories with an exuberance of a novelist. I felt defeated as I entered the clinic. After 20 minutes with a cabbie who had far too much

medical/financial information for his own good, I could look forward to two more hours of conversations with two or three different physicians and residents. This trip, I soon realized, had more medical people than ever before including a stunning-looking woman from pharmacology. An intern from pharmacology had already introduced himself in the waiting area (much bigger than the old-fashioned waiting room). He apologized for running late and said it would be another 10 minutes or so. When he finally led me into the examining she was waiting for us. She was not a doctor but a nurse who was mentoring the resident. I had gone through this with dozens of interns over the years but never with the boss in the room at the same time. I couldn't take my eyes off her as I struggled to listen to the intern's questions, which should have been a breeze to answer since I'd been asked them so many times before.

In my hands I had what was my personal BP database. For more than a decade after a battle of words with an earlier cardiologist I took up his challenge: buy a BP machine and take your BP's as many times during the day as you want and we'll examine the results. I did that, and I now had more than 10,000 observations. This was meant to be a dismissive gesture by the cardiologist – it will shut him up, the cardiologist may have thought – but over time he became fascinated with the results and especially the charts I could create given my background in analyzing numbers. The resident who would actually conduct the examination and who had already been exposed to this mania of mine never expressed much interest in the data. I handed the packet to the intern who knew nothing about my database. As I explained what it was, he looked at it quickly and then handed it to his mentor. I could see immediately she was interested. She began to ask questions as she turned the pages, and eventually I learned she was heading up a hospital BP study and she had never seen anything quite like this from any patient. She asked if she could make copies, and I replied this copy was for my already-bulging clinic file. The intern finished up, and they left with the usual refrain the doctor will be in shortly.

I knew he wouldn't be, and I never went to the clinic without reading material, which I pulled out of my bag. She returned twice to tell me the doctor was delayed and with another comment about the database. She was poised and cool like most nurses I've know, but she was also smart and inquisitive. Her presence certainly made this clinic visit more pleasant than any other. Eventually the resident showed up, asked me the usual litany of questions again with which I was familiar and then he discussed the results of the blood panels. He said there was one small change that would require a new medication that the head of the clinic and the attending physician for this resident would explain to me. He left to get Dr Karl, and when they returned they were accompanied by two other residents, one of whom would be taking over my file at the end of the month. The nurse I so admired was not among the crowd in the examining room, regrettably. Dr. Karl told me why it was important to add another medication, even though he knew how I tended to be rather belligerent about adding more pills without trying a non-medication approach. With this condition he did not know of any change in diet or life-style that could accomplish the goal. I was not particularly reassured to be told for the umpteenth time that for my age I was in good health – hadn't the cabbie said something similar and without charge - and this medication would serve as an enhancement, whatever that meant. I was in no mood to fight, so I acquiesced. My pill repository rose by one, now five instead of four, and after a trip to the pharmacy I discovered the addition was another two-tone capsule. I caved without a word of protest, and in so doing I had enhanced the array of color in my plastic pill box even if I didn't feel especially enhanced.

The taxi-ride home thrust me into another world. For the entire trip the cabbie talked about his love life with two other women in the cab, women he knew but I didn't, and since I was seated next to him in front, he included me in the conversation as if we all knew each other. What a story. When he was twenty-five he married a sixteen-year-old and they lived in her mother's house and then in his grandmother's house. Before they got married they lived somewhere else, and one morning, he said, he was awoken by a very large man standing at the foot of his bed. The man had a message for him: he could get out and be thrown through the window. The cabbie soon learned that the very big man was from social services, and while the cabbie had been sleeping, his girlfriend had been partying on the porch and in the street. Not surprisingly that brought the police who brought in social services to handle the minor. The cabbie said he chose to leave by the door. A few days later the two met again and fled to Tennessee where they got married, had a child, shuttled between the two family homes, separated and divorce. The cabbie ended up in the city where I lived and told other stories about two more recent romances, both of which ended badly. I marveled how much had happened to the cabbie in his first thirty years, how the two other women passengers, one as old as me with her daughter, enjoyed the stories and teased him about an overactive libido but did not condemn him for his apparent lack of judgment. He wanted us to believe – and perhaps we should - that he was conscientious about child support for his natural daughter as well as an “adopted-unadopted” daughter. He loved telling the stories – that was obvious - and no doubt he had told them many times before. They were well-honed. I could only wonder what his stories would sound like twenty or thirty years hence.

This happened to be the fiftieth anniversary of my college graduation. I did not return. I hadn't been back and I hadn't stayed in touch since graduation. If I had returned and had been asked what was memorable about your college years, I'd have to answer not much. I don't often think about those rather wasted years, at least from an academic standpoint, but my college years figured in my recent physical exam. Out of the blue Dr. Karl had asked if I thought of myself as a person with a nervous stomach. How odd, I thought, but in fact I was once considered in my late teen and early adult years to be such a person. I've outlived my nervous-stomach syndrome, but, yes, it once preoccupied my life. I told Dr Karl and the assembled doctors and nurses – there was always a crowd during my exams - that until I reached middle age, whatever my outward appearance, inside I was running scared. A nervous tummy was another way to describe it. I tried to anticipate the future and control for every eventuality. I outgrew it, although it took decades and lots of experiences I found I couldn't control so I more or less gave up. At an early phase failure could tie my tummy in knots. When it was knotted, I could feel – at least I thought I could – feel the juices splashing up against the stomach walls.

I then related medical tale I had not discussed with any doctor in decades. In college that nervous tummy was diagnosed as multiple duodenal ulcers. There was no record, I said, because our family physician wrote down a few comments on five x eight cards that he kept in the upper left drawer of his desk along with the cards for all his other patients. I was only reporting what I was told and was trying hard to remember because I had never seen a written diagnosis. While in college I began to wake up in the middle of the night with stomach aches. During a vacation I saw the family physician about my stomach pain and he ordered a barium test, better described as the gag test. The ulcers showed up in the fluoroscope examination. I was put on a special diet and instructed to take Maalox or something similar several times a day plus a small white pill, perhaps a sedative. I went through several more gag tests over the next couple of years until no

further active ulcers were noted, although lots of scar tissue was apparently visible. The pain dissipated, and soon the whole ordeal was forgotten. When I was called up for military service in my mid-twenties, however, after my student deferments had run out, I had to provide a letter, which I did, from my physician about my medical history. I was ordered for a physical with another twenty or so guys, and at the end the attending military physician informed I did not qualify because of my ulcer history. I expressed my disappointment, but inside I felt anything but disappointed. I had actually prepared myself as best as I could for induction, but it didn't take much to unprepare myself. As much as being on the move appealed to me, the military was not a part of my road agenda. Four-F was not a brand that bothered me. Several years later Vietnam began. I opposed the war from the outset. The French had screwed up, and I saw no reason why we wouldn't suffer the same fate. I would probably have finished my service before Vietnam, but I knew I'd been spared in ways others hadn't. I don't know what caused the ulcers, but I was led to believe it was stress or more precisely I didn't handle stress well. Did I still suffer from a nervous stomach, Dr Karl asked me after I had described the ulcer years, and I said almost never. He then reminded me that nowadays ulcers have been linked to viruses and stress less important. He said the blood work had not revealed any evidence of viruses, but they might decide to drop a light and mirror down my throat just to be sure all is well, given my past history. That was not a pleasant prospect, I said to myself. As we walked out of the office, I asked him if a virus, what causes the virus? And should I assume it was a virus instead stress? No way to know after so many years. Ulcers will be ulcers, and we'll deal with them if we have. He then added don't be afraid of a little stress – it's part of life. We shook hands after one of the longest exams I'd ever had.

Whatever the cause, the ulcers had disappeared. I had assumed that a healed duodenum meant that I had found a way to reduce the stress in my life. The link I had created in my mind acted like a placebo. The truth was I grew more confident about things that I used to knot up over; indeed in the eyes of some I was not so confidence as arrogant. Still, I knew far too well that there were areas where neither confidence nor arrogance ever set foot. It was ironic that since my teen years I had consciously chosen to add stress to my life by not following any prescribed route. Even now in those areas where I was hardly surefooted I kept diving in when I should have been lounging about. I could assure Dr Karl that a little, perhaps more than a little, stress will continue to infuse my life.

I finished my champagne, darkness had filled the room, I was doing what I often did lately - sitting, recalling, musing, rearranging, worrying – a constant rerun. I have a secret, which no one knows about. When recalling my past or writing about it, I tear up. I can't explain this odd behavior even though I've thought about it a lot. I seem almost more fearful of the past than the future. I'm sure the mental-health people have an explanation, but I doubt if I'd ever believe them. Another odd trait is I like darkness. I only turn on lights if I must. Just the opposite of my mother who turned on every light she could as darkness set in. Our house was always ablaze with light. I often wondered if her love of light arose from what I remember in the farm house she grew up in and I spent a lot of time in with my grandmother and my uncles. It had no electricity until after World War II. The main source of light after dark came from oil lamps. They were hard to read by, but worse they left a stench throughout the household. The routine after supper, almost always at 5:30 pm, was to clean up the dishes with water from a pump in the kitchen sink and warm water from a tank in the wood-burning stove, to wind up the RCA Victrola and listen to some music and to retire by 9 pm, winter or summer. Lighting up our electrified house in town

was perhaps an act of rebellion against the darkness of the farm house. Conversely for me darkness had long been a friend. When I awake in the middle of the night, I have a way of pulling the darkness in, conversing with it (as nutty as they sounds) and letting sleep return when the conversation runs out. Most nights I wait as long as I can before I turn on any lamp or fixture, although to be perfectly honest at this stage of life I need powerful artificial lighting sooner than later to read or climb stairs.

Tonight, though, I'm not reading or climbing so the lights remain off. I don't need any light to think or to muse or to write in my head what may never appear on screen or paper. I've written thousands of pages in this manner. It's not that I'm a frustrated writer. In recent years, since retirement, I have made a small living writing. What I write about professionally, if that applies, is not what I write about in the dark.

One of these days, I say to myself, one of these days....And my cell issued a messaging-arriving sound. I looked at the screen. A text message. I opened the cell, clicked on the appropriate button and what came up was immediately mysterious.

“This is from Belle. Do U remember a Belle? W/ all your web pages, N hard to find Y cell #. I hope Y don't mind. CM, Belle.”

I've only known one Belle in my whole life, and I haven't seen her or heard from her in a half century. This has to be the same Belle.

On went the lights. With the laptop on my lap, I typed in her name, her married name, Callahan, and up came a list of business sites but no personal sites. I sifted through the list and learned that she had her own business, had never left the city where I knew her and in a recent photo with her husband she was certainly older-looking like all of us but had that round face centered by a big smile that still drew one in. No doubt, it was her. Besides the number she called from appeared on her web page. I was stunned. She arrived back in my life unannounced as years before she had arrived on my doorstep.

I decided I was not ready to call her so I sent a short text message in which I suggested a time for the next day. Within minutes I had a reply that she would expect my call.

I went back to the web pages. I couldn't recall the name of the man she was going to marry when I knew her, but it wasn't her current husband's name. He was a businessman with a string of retail establishments from restaurants to cars dealerships and delivery services. Her business was networking, web-authoring and advertizing. Her address was different from the auto businesses so I concluded that she had her own location. I looked at the picture again, and not having thought about her in so long I began trying to reconstruct where did it all begin.

Belle was an undergraduate at the university where I worked briefly. I had agreed after finishing my MA and before starting a PhD to accompany a law-faculty friend – he and I became friends in spite of the fact that he thought I was gay but I wasn't - to accompany him, as his administrative assistant for a year, to the university where Belle was a student. My friend was to be the new dean of the law school where Belle worked under a work-study program even though she wasn't enrolled in the law school. Few law students could ever find the time to accept work-study programs. Belle worked in the law school admissions office opening mail, creating files for applicants and assisting the staff in whatever way she could. She occupied a desk in the outer

office, and since my boss was trying to raise admissions standards, I had numerous occasions to be in the admissions office.

Belle was the friendliest of all the clerks, bubbly as one described her. Students arriving for interviews or other reasons related to their applications were always warmly greeted by Belle when she was on duty. In addition she was a knockout. Well-endowed, only slightly stocky, chatty and smiling, all the characteristics of a healthy All-American farm girl – and that’s what she was, her father farming hundreds of acres not far from the university. I always stopped to say hi and if she wasn’t busy to talk about her undergraduate life or about the admissions business. She had told me she was not an eager student and was not sure she would finish. In the summer ahead she was marrying the guy she had dated since high school. Her parents were not happy about this, and while she enjoyed her sorority life and hanging out at the university, she knew she was an uninspired average student. We had numerous conversations along these lines, seldom lasting more than a few minutes. I could not help but observe how attractive she was, but that’s as far as it went. I made no overtures, no intimations, nothing more than friendly exchanges. Besides I was busy as hell, mainly cleaning up the messes that my friend created for himself and his staff, and making plans to return to grad school in the fall. He had asked me to stay on another year, and I had declined. I learned early in my adult life that like my mother I could organize and manage intuitively; but unlike her I didn’t enjoy it.

My social life was virtually non-existent. I lived in a dingy second-floor apartment in an old private residence that my friend’s interior decorator had filled with expensive furniture that fell somewhere between traditional and contemporary. I had met a young woman, a public school teacher, at a local bar, and although she was engaged and would decamp at the end of the school year for somewhere in Wisconsin to marry a dentist, we hung out together, no fucking, but some kissing and hugging and lots of talk about our lives and hopes. I had asked if she was happy with the dentist – of course I wanted her to answer no way and throw herself on top of me – but instead she put her hand on my cheek and said not a question I should ask and not one she would answer. In her public demeanor she was certain about what she had to do, and yet I knew and she knew I knew that she had a longing for what she couldn’t do. I could almost feel the longing when we sat close or made out. On our last night, after drinks and dinner, we went back to her apartment – she didn’t like my apartment – where we sat on the bed, fully clothed, trying to say good-bye without actually doing it. Finally the time came – it was very late for both of us, and she was leaving the next afternoon – we embraced and kissed in the French style no less – and as she pulled away she said she was not sorry we met but she was sorry it had not been earlier. That said it was over, sadly so.

A few nights after this farewell I was home. I have no recollection of what I was doing when the doorbell rang. As I started down the interior stairs, I kept hoping it wasn’t my boss with an assignment due by 8 AM tomorrow morning. When I opened the door there stood Belle. I was speechless.

---“Hi. I should have called,” she said sheepishly.

---“Not a problem, come in, come in,” I finally got out.

I led her up the flight of stair and asked how she was and whether she had driven and had found a parking place – all small talk as I was asking myself why is she here?

And she responded in a more relaxed tone than I could muster that she was OK, had driven from her parents' home and had found parking. Inside the apartment I removed the papers spread all over the sofa, motioned for her to sit down and asked what would she like to drink. I didn't have much, but I was able to pour some juice for both of us. I put the glasses on the table in front of us and sat on the other end of the sofa. She obviously had something to say, and as she grew closer to saying it, she became noticeably nervous. In the very first sentence it all rolled out.

---"You know I'm getting married in a couple of months, but I've fallen in love with you."

I was speechless, more so than before.

---"Ahhh...", and nothing else came out. She slid over next to me and put her arms around me.

---"I've known for a while this was happening," she whispered softly. "I kept fighting it, and I can't any longer. At least I have to tell you, and for a while tonight I want to be with you," she added.

---"I don't know what to say," It was clear that none of this was rehearsed. I could feel a slight quiver in her body and I could hear a slight hesitation in her voice. I finally got out. "I mean, it never crossed my mind that you had any feelings except for your fiancé. I mean, you're a dreamboat but I never thought I was free to dream about you..." I never finished the sentence. We began a long passionate kiss. Her breast pressed against my body caused almost an instantaneous erection. As the kiss ended, she pulled her body away and curled up against my shoulder. I was over six feet and was broad across the shoulders from my baseball-playing days.

---"Can we talk for a while? I know I want your body – that's long been churning away inside – but I need to talk. Maybe what I need is for you to talk me out this?" She said looking up into my face from an angle.

I was transfixed so close up by her deep blue eyes, her natural blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and her fair, smooth complexion. Beautiful and haunting at the same time. Her usual trademark, her smile, was gone. I touched her cheeks with my long, thin fingers, and she closed her eyes. I could feel her body relaxing as she pulled her feet up under her butt.

---"Talking is what we need to do," I said without any idea how to proceed. I had almost always had a girlfriend since I had discovered girls in college. All my romances had preliminary stages. I knew something was happening either on my own initiative or through my reaction to a woman's initiative. But I always knew something was happening or made it my business to know something was happening. This romance, if that's what it could be called, came at me out of the blue. While my mind was turning this over, I heard

---"Are you Jewish?"

I couldn't afford another speechless interlude, but that's was the situation.

Finally after a few second I said, "Never asked that before."

---"Maybe I have offended you," she queried.

---“Not at all. There is a Jewish whisper in my family. My family was anti-Semitic to the core, as they were anti-Negro and anti-foreign. An uncomfortable world for me because my own experiences have forced me to confront and discard what I’d grown up with. I don’t share my family’s politics – I haven’t since the Dewey-Truman contest and of course I was a minor foot soldier in the 1960 JFK campaign – nor do I share other views or values held by my family. Quite honestly I don’t know where I stand on lots of questions, but I can’t go back to what I grew up with. Their anti-Semitism has an interesting context because the whisper I referred to was that way back a converted Jew had married into the family. I really didn’t know any Jews until college. My roommate one year was Jewish and we remain friends. He took it upon himself to straighten me out about this Jewish stuff, and that included visits to his family and home on high holidays. Then during my MA studies I fell in love with a Jewish girl, Sandy; I was head over heels; I think she was too but I never found out exactly how she felt because a month or so after we started dating her father ordered me out of her life because I wasn’t Jewish. I couldn’t help but think how my family reacts to Jews and now I was suffering the reverse because I wasn’t Jewish. In my agony I wanted the story about our hidden Jewish past to be revealed as true and save our romance. The long answer to your question is I don’t think so, but I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

---“Have you heard the rumors about you and Hank, your boss?” she asked.

---“No, I haven’t. What am I missing?”

---“Isn’t Hank Jewish?”

---“Part Jewish. Is that a concern?”

---“I don’t know if it’s a concern, but it’s talked about in the office. I can tell you this, can’t I, because you’re leaving and we’d never let this conversation leave this room?” she asked warily.

---“Let’s consider this bedroom talk even though I doubt if you’ll ever end up in my bedroom,” I said, trying to lighten up the conversation.

She kissed me, she curled up again and said,

---“I wouldn’t bet against that,” and then she continued.

---“The law school has a few Jewish faculty and some Jewish students. But the office staff is all non-Jewish, and when Hank became dean there was a fear about how he would treat the staff. My upbringing was not different from yours except for geography, and like you being at the university has caused me to rethink these prejudices, and like you I’m confused. I’m not sure I’ll ever think it through as I should. I’m aware of what’s going on in my head, but that’s where it stands now. I may choose not to figure it out because it’s too hard. The appointment of Hank brought out the prejudices we all grew up with, and you became a part of the prejudicial conversation because of your name, Aaron Miller, and also because you were Hank’s assistant. Besides I’ve never had a Jewish guy to fall in love with, and that in itself only added to mystery of how I felt about you.”

She stopped, looked up at me with a wry smile and added, “Some people think maybe you and Hank are..., like a couple – homosexuals– not a term I’d ever heard until I arrived at the university.”

She could see that I had broken into a smile. “How long have you been thinking about these things?”

---“For weeks, probably longer. It happened one day when you stopped at my desk. I just wanted you in my arms then and there. I can’t explain where it came from or why it happened on that day. You’re often pretty serious – working for Hank I can understand that – but on that day you were so funny and jovial,” she replied.

---“Not a good idea to fall in love with funny guys – they’re unreliable,” I said.

---“So you don’t know if you’re Jewish, but are you a couple?”

---“Hank is what is known as a bisexual. I met Hank in a bar where I worked pouring drinks on weekends to earn some extra money to stay in grad school. I had a mediocre record in college, was admitted to grad school on probation, and while I got a TA my second year it wasn’t enough to cover my expenses. At the time I met Hank I was living in a garret that was worse than this. I’ve moved up the lodging ladder. One slow Friday night Hank, who was a regular, usually by himself, struck up a conversation. After introductions, I was surprised to discover he was a full professor on the law faculty. He was only in his mid-thirties. He had degrees from the best schools and had already made a name for himself. I was impressed because I wasn’t sure I had what it took to finish my master’s. Anyway, I learned he was unmarried, and in a subsequent conversation he asked me directly if I had ever known a bisexual. I said I had because several homosexual friends from college dated both men and women. And I told him these things were never discussed openly so I didn’t know much about their lives. He chuckled after I told that, and I asked why. He said he was masking his disappointment. He was hoping I wasn’t straight. Then it was my turn to chuckle. I told him he was not the first to be disappointed, but I was as straight as they come. We remained friends, we hung out together when we could and we learned a lot about how we had gotten to where we were in life. I gave up my bar job and dingy apartment when I was appointed a resident-hall director, but Hank and I stayed in pretty close contact. Before he was appointed dean, he asked me if I would consider joining his staff as an administrative assistant. I was at the end of my master’s and was still not sure about the doctorate. I proved to be an able manager of the residence hall, a fact that Hank knew because he knew my boss who was also gay. I knew Hank was in between lovers. I had met and socialized with both his male and female companions. During my masters’ years I had bounced from girlfriend to girlfriend with utterly no prospects. Hank was both more worldly and cosmopolitan than I was, but I had come to know his worst fear. Just between you and me, a disorderly personal life that could spill over into his professional life. Superbly confident about everything except how to order his day or manage his life. His personal adventures have always put him and his career at risk. What you know or observe is that I organize his day. What you don’t know, at least I don’t think you do, is that I also try to keep his personal life within bounds. I’ve never slept with him, but I know who has and how many close calls he’s had with lovers. I haven’t the slightest idea what he’s going to do when I leave. I’m not being arrogant. It’s a simple fact – he needs a manager. Somehow we connect on that level. It might help if he could find a partner to live with, but I doubt if that will ever happen. For all his smarts he needs someone at his elbow

just about 24 hours per day. With Hank I've discovered managerial skills I didn't know I had, and skills I'm not particularly enthralled with. Coming here was a one-year deal, and even though he dangled a big raise in front of me, a raise that would have gotten me out of this apartment, I'm heading back to grad school.

There was a pause. She had listened intently, her face turned toward mine, almost immobile.

---“I guess I don't like the sure thing. This is one of those near sure things – if Hank stepped down or moved on, the provost has told me privately he'd add me to his staff in 24 hours. You can't really trust comments like that by deans or provosts, but I have no doubt I could be an administrator for the rest of my life. I'd need to get the doctorate to go big time, but I could finish a doctorate at some second-rate graduate school and fall back on my work experience thus far as a record of accomplishments, so to speak. But I know it's not what I want, even if I don't know exactly what I do want. Some things about my life I don't yet have the guts to change; other things I can't resist changing. I almost never know where my choices will take me. I can feel insecure and panicky. I'm feeling a little that way right now. I don't know where holding a gal named Belle in my arms for the first time will lead, but the longer it goes on the more I want it to go on. As startled as I was when I found you on my doorstep, I'm not about to let go until I have to. I'm in the giddy phase, I can't believe it's happening, but it's happening and I don't want it to end. I'm falling fast. Holding you like this is about as sweet as it gets. But I can't help but feel nervous about what then.”

We kissed for longer than before. We both felt the fever. We parted, she moved over and pulled my head down onto her lap. I could feel the vibration below me as she bent over and gently used her hands to press my head against her body.

She broke the silence. “I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm engaged to marry a man I've known for years. The wedding is weeks away, the invitations have gone out – should I send you one? – and here I am on the sofa in the apartment of a man I'm gaga over in a way I've never been gaga over anyone. Is it pre-wedding jitters? Maybe? If they were just jitters, couldn't I eventually deal with them? I've tried, believe me, I've tried, and I can't. As I drove over here I said to myself don't do this, get back on track, don't make matters worse. I drove around the block and up and down the street for a half hour, and then as if some other force took charge, I found a parking space almost directly in front of your door...you know the rest. All I know right now, Aaron, if I may call you that, is I want you and I'm almost willing to push everyone else out of my life to have it.”

The sobs were audible, and when I tried to pull her head down she resisted.

---“Let me cry, and please I want your head against a part of my body – the no-no, right – that aches for you.”

I did what she asked, and I tried to think what I could say. Before I could get anything out she said

---“I am jittery. I'm jittery because of what's going to happen to me. It's not that I'm jittery about getting married – I've been thinking about that since I was a kid and I know how to be married – I'm jittery because I don't want what's going to happen. I never thought I wanted something different from what I've known, but I do, at least I want to try something different. You know

what a dry well is – you told me you spent your youth on your grandma’s farm – I remember that conversation as if it happened an hour ago....”

---“It didn’t happen an hour ago. Necking, to use the student term, is preferable to my farm stories....”

---“And I’m going to kiss you again, but there’s more,” in a slightly scolding tone even as her eyes sparkled from the tears, “there’s more.”

---“A dry well, that’s what I’m going to fall into. Except for creatures I don’t like and dead leaves I don’t like any more I’m going to live in a hole. I’m more than jittery, I’m terrified.”

I decided to take a shot. “So how do I figure in this?”

---“I’m not sure I know. Other guys have turned me on in recent months, as if one last fling before my marriage would make my marriage healthier. I’d get all the cow-shit – what a farm girl is allowed to say – cleared away before taking the vows and tying the knot. The ‘I do’ speech has been drilled so deep into my consciousness by my pastor, my parents, even my sorority sisters I get nauseous when I think about it. Imagine if I start throwing up while I’m saying it. And you, if you’re sitting in the church you’re ordered to say ‘I object’ because I haven’t the willpower. You and I, we’ll jump through the window and be out of sight before they know what’s happening. It’s hard to pin down feelings, even though it’s easy to make fun of them. But whatever it is about you, you unlocked my heart in a way I’ve never felt before. You took me some place I’d never been, and after while that just ate me up. The simple answer is I like the way you are. And sitting here in the dark with your head resting on my no-no I love you even more. I know I’m not wrong.”

She slid down and rolled on top of me. She kissed me passionately and then propped her elbows on my chest and dropped his chin into her cupped hands.

---“Tell me I’m wrong, please, tell me I’m wrong,” she implored quietly. “As much as I want to screw you, it’s not going to happen tonight. But I’m going to hold my no-no against yours for as long as I can. Now, tell me, I’m wrong.”

---“Nothing wrong with this. You fell in love, and you’re sure making a believer out of me. It’s full of mystery and risk, and yet it feels pure and honest. I don’t know where it’s going, and despite your entreaty I’m not going to end it.”

She dropped her elbows, wrapped them around my chest and lay her head on my chest. She started to move her body ever so slightly up and down against mine. I simply closed my eyes and let her go. I didn’t want it to end, I knew where I wanted it to go, but I also knew it would end, and it did.

---“I knew I could trust you. I’m not teasing. I just can’t let myself go all the way. I just want what little I can have. Kiss me.”

And we did. And we continued until I heard her say, “I love you, and I’m coming back.” It was finished. She stood up, she extended her arms and drew me up. “Walk me to the car, please, and not a word,” she said.

---“No instructions needed.” I got her coat and purse both of which she carried. With the other arm around the small of my back she said “com’on, my man, into the dark we go.”

At the car door she turned and kissed me lightly on the lips. Once seated behind the wheel, she rolled down the window and spoke almost inaudibly, “Talk to me tomorrow, please, I love you.” I stood there long after her car had disappeared. I felt both exhilarated and scared. The sound of a motorcycle knocked me out of my reverie.

Off and on over the years I had conjured up pieces of the Belle story, but this was the first time since the events themselves when I tried to pull all the pieces together, tried to recall all the little details. And of course I knew my memory was fully capable of playing tricks after all these years. I certainly was making up some of the conversation. But what I knew was absolutely true was that she showed up unannounced, we talked, kissed, cried and she drove off into the night. She showed up because she had to tell me how she felt. She had more courage than I’ve ever had. More than once I’ve wanted to do exactly what she did, but I couldn’t. In some circumstances I could throw caution to the wind. With women I couldn’t. Even though the details of our brief romance have fallen victim to time, I have never forgotten Belle. I’ve never told this story to anyone, and I don’t know if she has. It has been one of those beautiful secrets that would be spoiled if I told someone about it. There have been times when I wished she would once again reappear unannounced. And now in a totally different electronic world she has reappeared on my phone screen unannounced.

I knew how to walk to the kitchen in the dark without tripping my way into the hospital. I got some water and return to my chair. I might as well finish the story I thought to myself.

Although I saw her every day in the office, we both played it straight. We didn’t change the usual patterns. The visit I was eagerly awaiting came a week later. It started with a phone call. She said she was in town, she was calling from a phone booth in a small retail area not far and she wondered if she could hide her father’s car somehow because she may have been followed.

---“Followed.” I repeated.

Not to worry, she tried to reassure me, and then asked again where she could park out of sight. I told her to drive into the alley behind my building where I’d be waiting for her. I had a garage, and I’d let her park her car in the garage, and then I’d park my car in front of the garage door. That’s what we did, and fifteen minutes later we were embracing each other in the living room. She looked worse than any time I had seen her since our last meeting. She was very tense and started to cry after we sat down.

---“I...I asked the family if we might not delay the wedding because I needed time to think about some things. They were aghast and, then they became angry. Except for my finance who sat silently they began to shout at me. And what they shouted about was them – how embarrassing for them – and no one asked about me. Finally my finance spoke up. He asked everyone to calm down and leave the room so we could talk. And we did for an hour. I had no idea what the others did during the hour, and I didn’t care. Your name never came up. You and I are still a secret know only to us. Quite expectedly he asked if there was someone else. I had to lie. I tried to make the point that I wasn’t sure I was ready to commit myself to the life that we had both grown up with and had innocently embraced. It was as honest a conversation as we could have.

We'd never had it before. I had assumed and they had assumed I would just march down the aisle and into a married life."

It was utterly quiet except for street noises and the thumping of our hearts as we held onto each other. I more or less intuited what would come next.

---"I love you more than the last time, I've barely slept for days, this is how I look when I'm down, down, down, I look like a mess and I am a mess, but I can't stop the marriage. I want us tonight right now to pack our bags, hop in a car and drive away, but we can't because I can't. I want to lie in your bed, as close as I can get, I want your kisses, your words, your heart, for the rest of the night, week, year, the rest of my life, but I can't stop the marriage train. I shouldn't have come here a week ago, and yet I came and I'm glad I did. It may sound as if I have regrets, but I don't. You know how I feel, and I hope you will lock that away forever."

She stopped, took my face in her hands and gently touched my lips with hers and then let go with passion I'd never known before or since. I don't have any recollection how long it lasted. But the kiss ended when she unzipped my pants, lifted my stiffer than stiff penis into her hand and kissed it until her sobs overwhelmed her. With her head on my shoulder she began to sob violently for more minutes than I can remember. I held her as tight as I could and tried at the same time to whisper how much I loved her and I would always miss her.

After an hour or so she was calm again. She said our love-making was done, but she wanted to look into my eyes – the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen – for a moment and then she had to leave. Her eyes began to sparkle with tears as mine may also have done. It was ending almost as fast as it had begun, but in between we had both gone some place we had never been. We walked to the garage without any bodily contact. She backed the car out as I stood next to mine and was gone. I moved my car into the garage and closed the door. The tears were pouring down my cheeks. I did not come from a crying family, but I'd always known I was a crier. I locked the garage door, and as I turned, I could see a car coming down the alley. It was hers. She stopped, jumped out. Ran over, threw her arms around me and said

---"One final kiss, make it quick, I saw his car. Please run away with me...."

Not waiting for an answer she was gone in the flash of a minute with me standing there unable to execute her request.

A few days later the university's summer break began, and she was no longer employed in the office. I did receive an invitation to the wedding with a note enclosed, please have the engine running. I was uncertain about attending and, if I did, about letting the engine run. At Hank's request I had put off my departure until August. He asked me to train my replacement and gave me a sizeable bonus plus a huge sendoff, much to my surprise. I knew he couldn't plan a gala, and I assumed someone else was in charge. Belle and his fiancé were in attendance, and I learned who the someone was. She confessed that the Hank had asked her to organize the event and had paid her handsomely for a couple days work. This was nothing compared to a wedding, she added humorously. The office staff read a testimonial that made me blush - I knew the lines that Belle had edited in.

When they were leaving, she gave me a hug and he shook my hand. No sign of any suspicion. Then he said, you know were looking for an apartment in town near the university. A change in

plans for us. We're not going back to our hometown. I'm entering a bank management training program. Belle will finish her degree. I could see Belle was watching me closely. I said that sounds like a good plan. Should I call if I hear of anything bear the university? That would be great, he said, and he gave me his number. I could see in Belle's eyes that she approved. I shook hands with him and embraced her again.

Two weeks later because one of the law faculty decided to buy a house a rather comfortable and not-too-expensive apartment was available for sublet. I called the number that Belle's fiancé's had given me, they showed up a day later, and signed the lease on the spot. Belle and I were standing in the kitchen while her fiancé was discussing terms with the agent, and she said

---"I'm not really OK but I'm going ahead with it. I want you to come. Please come, and don't object." She had a smile as broad as mine.

---"I love being ordered around," I replied.

I went to the wedding about an hour and a half west of the university in the flattest and richest agricultural region in the state. I watched the ceremony as my stomach turned flip-flops. I may have to buy some Maalox on the way home, I thought. I was sitting in the next to last row, and she knew where I was because she looked straight at me as she walked toward the pew. I attended the reception, met their families and drank a toast along with everyone else. For me I had reached the end. I walked up to say good-bye, a final good-bye because I would be gone before they returned from their Caribbean honeymoon. She walked me to the door. And as we parted she said,

---"One more kiss for the lockbox," and after the kiss she turned without a word and walked away.

That was the last encounter until the text message a few hours ago. What will tomorrow hold, I thought, as I headed upstairs.

She had been looking at his web pages for the past hour. The coffee was no longer fresh, but she refused to give up on it. This was the third time she had scrolled through the pages, having run across the link accidentally several days ago. She was able to track down his cell through a search service that her business subscribed to. She had delayed sending him a text message, and then decided what the hell. He had responded, as she hoped he would, and later today she was to expect a call from him. She was not nervous about the phone call. In her business she talked to strangers several times a day, and while Aaron was not exactly a stranger, they hadn't been in touch for decades. What did worry her was where the conversation would go once they got reacquainted. She had memories, but they had been buried so long she couldn't be sure what was real and what wasn't.

Being a diary keeper when she had known him, she pulled the appropriate volume from a box stashed away in an upstairs closet. She reread those entries from her days of turmoil and tumult that involved Aaron, and she was amazed to find that what few things she had stirred up out of her memory were confirmed in her diary. She had fallen in love with him, and she remembered and had written that once he knew how she felt he was a goner – what was the word she was

searching for – smitten, perhaps. Even though they never fucked – her church friends would not approve of her using that word – they both felt an uncontrollable passion flowing between them. It probably would not have lasted, but it was real for the moment, it happened once in her life, not before Aaron and not after. She had been married to good men who had loved her and cared for her, but it was Aaron she wanted to run away with. What will he remember, she thought, and do I really want to know? A week ago he was out of mind and out of sight, but now he preoccupied those spaces, and given the new technology she had on her computer and perhaps he had on his, he might also come back into view.

She pulled up picture on the home page. He was lean and trim and definitely older but still handsome. His hair was white and in disarray and the look in his eyes was what she remembered the most about him. She had written in her diary something like “I just melt when he looks at me”, rather teenagerish, and yet that’s how she felt now, when she was about as far from teenage as she could get.

Everything she had read on the web pages suggested he was not married, and a couple things suggested he’d been divorced. Nothing about kids and other family ties that people often put up on their web pages. His scholarly life was there in full view, and while she knew little about the stuff he did, she had concluded that he was a big name. Many of his publications could be downloaded, and she had downloaded one to read but had not gotten past the first page. She thought to herself, if I remember anything about Aaron, he will not be offended if I tell him that. In fact he may say why the hell bother. In the year I knew him he almost never talked about himself. In fact, I had no idea what he had studied or was studying or was going back to grad school to study. It never was important when we had those times together.

His web pages had a lot about him, though. Where he had traveled or lived, what he was thinking about, crazy or memorable things that had happened to him along with some of his friends and above all the arts in his life. Restlessness more or less came through loud and clear in his personal web pages.

She knew she had emails and other matters to take care of. She closed Aaron’s site and went to work on the things she wanted out of the way before she talked to him. Just then she heard her cell. It showed a text message, which she opened. It asked if 4 PM would be a good time to call her. She had calculate – 4 PM his time would be 2 PM her time, and yes, she said to herself, my calendar is open. She replied with that information, and he replied expect a call. It was going to happen. In some ways this had the unknowns she remembered feeling as she rang his doorbell on her first visit to his apartment. The difference was that all the life-experiences had washed away the innocence, the giddiness, the daring that they had known as young adults. They were now two seniors who were becoming reacquainted without any prospect of recapturing the sheer joy and pleasure as well as the deep sorrow and pain they had endured over a week’s time – would she tell him how long she had to work at erasing him and that as a result she had never thought much about him over the intervening years – she knew she would because in the short time they had been lovers not much was hidden.

She finished what few business matters were on her agenda for today. She had sold her share of the business to her partners, and she had agreed to stay on until a couple of projects that she had initiated were out of the way. By the end of the week she was to be completely liberated. She had thought seriously about what she should do and had made plans accordingly.

Starting the business had been a spur of the moment thing. Selling it and arranging for the future had been much more thoughtful. Her husband had bankrolled it, and she had enough savvy (and money) to hire two able networkers who actually made the business work. She made the contacts – lots of her husband’s business associates and their country-club friends – and the networkers, who had become her partners, built the services. They made money almost from the beginning, she paid back her husband in less than a year, and the business had filled her life for almost a decade.

She had decided to get out before her life had become so topsy-turvy in the last month or two. Her partners as well as her closest friends assumed she was simply announcing her retirement. She had proven to herself and others she could do more than join and entertain. She had stayed home to raise two kids, both of whom were on their own, living on the West Coast, totally uninterested in their parents’ business lives or social circles and possessed of a commitment to change that she recalled was becoming a driving force when she was in college. A farm girl from a very conservative family and community, she had chosen to embrace the world she already knew. Her boyfriend from high school was her fiancé when she first met Aaron and belonged to the same world she did – patriotic, church-going, don’t-rock-the-boat, hold the status-quo - and after they were married they continued to live in that world even though they had decided to settle in the university town than return to their hometown. He died suddenly from a cardiovascular condition, first discovered when he had tried to enlist during the Vietnam War. He was rejected for service, and although under treatment he had a massive stroke that killed him. Those were difficult years because of the threat overhanging their lives, and yet they had tried to build a life together. All their friends shared their conservative views about the war and the need to tamp down the protests and demonstrations and to return America to its traditional ways. She did not begin to date her second husband, who was fraternity brother of his first husband and a flamboyant but shrewd young local businessman, until many months later. They finally married a few years later. They had ample money, supported conservative causes and politicians, were active church members and often barbecued with their well-to-do neighbors, many of whom like her husband had been born, raised and educated in the city where they now lived. No doubt she had wanted to run away with Aaron. Had she done that she would certainly have lived a life with Aaron that she had trouble even imaging.

She had an unexpected urge to drive through the neighborhood where Aaron’s apartment had been. Over the years she had driven through it without paying much attention. She could not recall ever having driven through the alley since the night she had parked her dad’s car in Aaron’s garage. She gathered up his purse and headed to her Porsche, a gift from her car-obsessed husband. It was fun to drive but noisy as hell. She would get rid of it in due time. As she drive up 3rd Avenue in the neighborhood she realized the house with Aaron’s second floor apartment was gone. Instead that block had a series of low-level apartment buildings, one which he husband may have owned. How could she not have noticed this before? But the truth was she hadn’t.

At the next light she turned left and then after a short distance turned left again into the alley. She slowly made her way along the paved surface until she was behind the apartment building where the house had once stood. The old wooden garage was gone, and in its place was an asphalt parking lot with signs warning away non-residents. She stopped and thought, how unromantic. One might feel the urge to run away, not for love but to escape the numbness of this place. The

details of that second night as she tried to drive away only to find herself driving around the block, stopping again at the garage, jumping out of the car without turning the engine off, kissing Aaron open mouth, tongue-to-tongue, and finally resisting the an overwhelming urge to drag him into the car and escape. As she left the neighborhood for a café where she had promised to meet some friends for a light lunch, she replayed that night over and over again in her head.

Marci and Lynn were already at the table when Belle arrived. They were well-turned out in clothes that could never have been bought in this city. They embraced and sat. They had known each other for ages as had their husbands. They had dined together, vacationed together and survived kid-rearing together. All three marriages had gone through rough patches but unlike many of their friends' marriages theirs were still intact. They also knew that was changing.

---“Margaritas? Dare I ask how your day is going?” asked Belle.

---“Best left unexplained,” replied Marci.

They ordered their lunches and tried to relax with their drinks. Belle, who was not a margarita fan, had a white house wine. She was beginning to feel more nervous about the call later in the afternoon. She was nervous because she couldn't talk about it with two women who knew all her secrets and because she was just tense. A little wine would help but too much alcohol could make matters worse.

---“So, Belle, you're near the end. Any thoughts about where to next?” asked Lynn.

---“End is a bit strong. Not sure how to describe it. Another phase in a life that keeps evolving. Just think where we were 20 or 30 years ago. We still go to church and vote Republican and drink margaritas at noon, but we act and think in ways that would have been branded heresy then. A new phase, that's the best I can do now. Selling the business is only part of what may be in transition. Ask me a year from now,” answered Belle.

---“You know, Belle, I've always been envious that you branched out on your own even though you had all the material comforts you'd ever need. You have your money now, and how I wish I had more of my own. I never thought I'd say that,” said Marci.

Curious thought Belle. Marci's husband inherited money and made even more money, and although he had been caught with a young tootsie years ago Belle convinced herself they'd never break up. Marci loved his money, and he loved the fact that she loved his money. Besides they both knew that the aging process had favored her and not him, and she was more likely to have someone to walk out the door to than he was. He was about as sexy as a snail and not much taller. He would do all that was necessary and all money could buy to keep her around.

---“I have had these thoughts – heretical you would call them – that I may vote for Obama. I was full of disdain for JFK and Democrats when I was young because I'd been taught to be that way. I remember a lit class with Professor Charles, such a sad face covering such a keen mind, where we read *Letting Go* by Philip Roth. I'd never read so much about sex and despair, and I kept thinking that's what happens when people are liberated. They behave badly. But Professor Charles kept reminding us to look behind the obvious and use the messiness to deepen our understanding about human existence. Don't professors get frustrated trying break through all those barriers and boundaries that students bring to their classes? We fought him tooth and nail

over *Letting Go*, and yet that in itself meant it was having its desired effect. We had to write a short paper about the success or failure of the character Gabe. God, that was hard. I swung back and forth between being pulled in and trying to keep my distance. I finally wrote more about how the character worked, but that's not where I started in thinking about what I was going to write. That sounds naïve, but the first step was to fight it and then come to terms with it. I did that, not with great flare but I did it. I still have the book and the paper, and I've read a couple other Roth novels, but his later writings and my life seemed at such odds that I was skimming not reading. I was comfortable in my life – his characters were not - and I thought being comfortable was perfectly desirable and acceptable. I didn't want or need to be told anything differently. Marrying a rich guy had removed all that angst that we were all feeling when we read *Letting Go*. I could hire a therapist for myself or my kids, I could take off to the islands to get away, I could turn to my like-minded friends for support. 'Having' makes a difference. But...

---"Having distorts, Marci," interjected Belle. "How amazing that you remember so much about *Letting Go* after a life that hardly shadowed that story."

---"I'm not sure I ever read Roth," venture Lynn, who read very little fiction or anything else. "Were they straying because they were simply exercising their privilege to do so or was something bigger going on?"

---"I doubt if we could be like Roth's characters at this stage in our lives. You're right, Lynn, it was something bigger, and it had to do with the fear of what was expected," said Marci slowly. "We accepted what was expected including the privilege to stray. Not sure that was the best decision...." Marci's words tailed off.

Silence enshrouded the table. Marci had always been unpredictable. Belle knew that she was the brightest of the wives or husbands, although she had never felt threatened by that. These remarks were more surprising than most.

---"Have we ever had this conversation before?" broke in Lynn. "Must be something in the water."

They all laughed, but they all knew that instead of tying up the loose ends in their golden years they were accentuating them.

---"But we're supposed to be Hillary fans...." And before Belle could finish Marci shot back,

---"I don't want to be reminded I'm an old white woman, and I don't want to be reminded that I'm not an old white working woman. Four or eight years more of the Bill and Hillary show would be enough to drive me to France. Bill can't keep his pecker in his pocket, and Hillary can't think straight. Republicans can be mean and nasty out of fear that we'll have to change our ways, but at least we can also turn on our own in ways the Democrats haven't learned to do. Obama, it seems to me, has decided to ignore all the crap that has dominated Democratic and Republican politics since Reagan. At this point in my life that word hope, never in my vocabulary, has some resonance. It sounds crazy from a country-club, life-long Republican."

---"There is definitely something in the water," reprised Lynn.

They automatically joined hands and smiled. This ritual had another version – standing on tiptoes with hands stretched overhead and shouting “don’t mess with us” – and it was reserved for their private times.

---“Gotta run,” said Belle finally, as she stood and placed \$30 on the tray with the check. They never looked at the bill because they always know how much it was with tip.

---“I think, ladies, we have lots of unfinished business to deal with,” said Marci as both she and Lynn looked straight at Belle.

---“You’re right,” said Belle, “but not today. Perhaps later in the week we should fly to New York and sort it all out.”

---“Shall I make the reservations?” announced Lynn almost too eagerly.

They parted without further plans but with the understanding not to make any other plans. On the drive home Belle was trying to prepare for the phone call now just two hours away. She wanted to talk to Aaron more than anything and to fly to the other side of the globe more than anything. Her kids would know how to handle this. She hadn’t a clue.

I had sat most of the morning mostly paralyzed. Even after two pots of Peet’s. Well, not exactly. I woke up early, as I knew I would. I didn’t bother to try to fall asleep again, my usual routine, and rolling out of bed between nine and ten. I finished my first pot by 7:30 and was now at the end of my second at 9:30. It was a beautiful, sunny but cool morning, and I had walked out onto the balcony several times with cup in hand. I was surprised that I sleep as well as I did, but since my divorce eons ago I had sleep well most nights.

I kept asking myself what should I be thinking about, and I kept answering I don’t know, but, of course, I knew what I’d been thinking about for the last four or five hours.

Do I tell her that for weeks after the wedding I replayed the moments I’d reconstructed last night over and over. Now after all these years I could still replay it, but I wasn’t sure of the veracity of details. It got easier after grad school started because I was so busy, but for a couple of months it was hell. It also got easier after I met Meg. Meg was smart but crazy. She was from New York City, Queens, although she spent more time in her father’s midtown apartment than in her mother’s place. We slept together the first night we went out, and almost every night thereafter for a couple of years. I learned more about sex from her than anyone else, and she once told me she liked my moves, from a woman who was sparse with compliments. The sex was traditional and experimental. What I remember most about her shapely and near-perfect body were her hands. For a painter and sculptor – that’s what she was – her hands moved effortlessly across my body and always knew the right place to stop and the exact pressure to apply. Belle became a passing memory. Eventually I concluded that it was just one of those chance encounters, although the part I’d never forgotten was ecstasy I felt when she explained why she had showed up at my door. Much of the rest was packed away, and for the first time in years if not decades, I had tried to unpack it last night. At this point I wasn’t sure what I should believe about those few days together.

Marriage with Meg was not in the cards. She opposed it. Not even a contract or agreement or any acknowledgement. We'll break up and go our separate ways, she told me often. You'll be better off and so will I. But not yet, so baby, make love.

And we did on a level I'd never known before or after. No human can sustain such love-making.

What did us in were drugs, her drugs. Perhaps the love-making gods would have eventually claimed their victims. In her case it was cocaine. I smoked cigarettes then, but I refused any and all drugs. I could never figure out why people spent so much time justifying why they needed them. Of course, I knew why I needed cigarettes, which I still miss. Cigarettes calmed me down, or so I thought, and, as Meg was quick to point out, drugs might also. We had some bad times over her drugs, but I thought I had learned how to cope. When we first met, she was a moderate user. I didn't want to face the reality of what could happen. I kept telling myself it was working. What I didn't see coming was the cocaine. Nor did I understand that once cocaine entered the picture, the user needed other users. She found those users and ended up sleeping with them as well. I was aware of a mood change, but I thought it was the developing artist. She was enormously talented, and her student shows won considerable praise. In fact she had sold more than a dozen pieces, paintings and sculptures. She very much belonged to the abstractionists, but she had a discipline in executing a canvas or a sculpture that made the wildness of the subject matter strikingly beautiful. There was an incredible delicacy to her work. In some ways I saw in her art what she was looking for in life – beauty that can arise from raw, nasty, obsessing emotions.

Looking across the room at the one painting of hers I owned and cherished – untitled but she had allowed me to call it “The Gift” – I saw what I had seen for years now, a dark center that you could not avoid looking at and, if you were in the painting, you would walk to and enter. As you walked toward it, your eyes would be momentarily diverted by all the brilliantly-painted objects, especially that purple dancing ribbon, but in the end you would enter and disappear behind the black opening.

Tears came to my eyes, as often happened in moments like this. I still miss the painter, and I'm still moved by her painting. She had ordered me out of her life, as if nothing had ever happened between us for two years; she went to live with her coke buddy and then disappeared. Her works continued to circulate, but unfortunately she had quit before the maturing process was allowed to run its course. I had thought about her constantly over the years, hoping against hope that she was alive, well and working like mad. Belle made my heart vibrate, but Meg made it stop.

And yet she was right. We broke up, she disappeared, I lost myself in my work. I quickly finished my dissertation, which won considerable praise from the committee, and I secured a position at a major university where after a few years of teaching and publishing I was back in administration, albeit at a much higher level. The basic managerial skill I had developed was to neutralize the opposition in those constant scuffles that go on between faulty and Old Main without yielding except around the edges and without the opposition knowing it was happening that way. I had few friends and seldom talked to anyone about my administrative life. I can't say I didn't enjoy it. Most of the opposition to Old Main came from the least distinguished: complainers about their rank or salary or teaching loads or our indifference to their very existence. I took great pleasure in figuring out how to cut them off at their knees. There were many faculty members I respected, and with them I took care not to become the opposition. It

was always a game of being smart and smarter. I soon learned that the louder they talked and the angrier they got the quicker they fell. I've lost track of how many said, "Aaron, we'll get you for this". What got me was not one them but sleeping with a graduate student.

She was not a student in any of my advanced classes, which I continued to teach. I had more students than I could ever handle, and I wasn't always as careful about how I dealt with them. I assumed we were all adults and could separate our professional and personal lives accordingly. Some lines between faculty and students had to be drawn and maintained. I knew that. I had little interest in gossip unless it had some bearing on university policy. I knew rumors of liaisons between male and female faculty and students, but if it remained strictly personal I never followed up. It was easy to draw the line with faculty and students enrolled in their classes. It was harder in other circumstances. The university could try to decree that no relationships except academic were permitted between faculty and students. In a big university in a big city it was almost impossible to enforce unless the old seventeenth-century religious ideal of "self-rule" to achieve a moral life was practiced by all. It wasn't.

I should have known better. Students enrolled in my classes - that was a definite taboo. Outside of class but in the department - that was a grey area. Up to this point I hadn't been involved with any students. The women I had dated were either faculty or from outside the university. Stacy was admitted to the graduate program because of her math skills. She had an AB in math and some economics, but she was pretty green in applying math skills to economic problems. I had been one of her champions during the admission process because I felt the department needed more math-oriented students. We had very few. We could teach her to become a good analyst. Her verbal scores were almost as high as her math scores. She was admitted, grudgingly on the part of some committee members, and it was not hard for me to come up with some money. I added her to a research project that I was working on with a colleague, but I made sure that she was assigned to him and not to me. He was impressed with her skills as well, but he was so thin-skinned when she questioned some of his equations that they never developed a very close working relationship. I found myself having to referee squabbles between them. As I said I was not as sensitive to what was going on as I should have been. She ended up working more and more with me, and since I was not a math whiz and equally important since I had long considered all those equations and models simply as tools, I got along with her just fine. I let her plow ahead on the math part and I worried about the analytical part. We actually worked well together. And she was learning economics fast enough that I could let her take a stab at some of the tangential analytical issues.

We often met in my faculty office in the evening after I had finished my stint in Old Main. And one night she came up behind me, turned my chair around, sat on my lap and kissed me. And that was the beginning of the end. She came back to my apartment, we made love for hours and she fell asleep in my bed. She had a runner's body - having run relay in college and was now training for endurance runs - and I could feel every muscle. I was a tennis player, and neither of us carried any extra weight. She said once that our bodies fit perfectly and need no mathematical explanation. She loved to fuck, but so did I. Pretty soon she was living in my apartment, and not long after that I got the phone call.

I knew the risks. We were consenting adults, but that was not a useable defense. A high-ranking administrator did not fuck students in his own department, period. Sometimes when I think back, as I'm doing now, sometimes I tell myself I had let this happen because I wanted out. What I did

know was that once it started I wasn't going to stop it. I assumed since she was ten years younger she would stop it, and shortly after I resigned, she took off, to where I never found out. Unlike Meg who absolutely disappeared, Stacy got in touch a year later. She said she couldn't deal with it because she felt guilty for getting me fired. I tried hard to assure her it was not her fault, and I had landed on my feet. She asked I'd like to come to New York where she now lived, and I said I'd love to except I'd have to bring Michelle. She said, no thanks, but if things changed to give her as call. Things did change many years later, but I didn't call.

So, I thought to myself with an eye on the clock, I was unemployed in my mid-thirties. I had a long résumé and a letter of dismissal in my file. I had money in the bank since I had always demanded that I be well paid. In addition I got severance. I decided to go to Paris where I dumped economics for a few months and took up sitting and looking. I also spent a lot of time in museums and galleries. My interest in art had been growing since my days with Meg. She taught me how to let my curiosity become my guide. It was never how to make a critique but how to satisfy my curiosity. It worked remarkably well for me, the hard-headed analyst. Curiosity was part of what drove my work as an economic historian, but the difference was that as an economist I was seeking results, explanations, etc. With art my curiosity stopped short of that. I could mull it over and then just leave it at that. The joy and satisfaction of the experience was in the mulling over. That was still the way I spent time in museums.

When I got back from Paris, I knew what I was going to do and I set out to get it done. My research served me well. I was better at analyzing numbers, especially their historical significance, than at developing the models for that analysis. Why not, I speculated, create a business out of providing such information to companies or individuals who needed it. I contacted several people about my plans, which I had sketched out during those long hours I sat in Paris cafés, when I wasn't watching the street traffic. Being an administrator for the past decade had taught me how prepare and peddle such proposals. Within a few weeks after my return to the city where I was viewed as nuclear waste, I had developed a plan and had circulated it among a few acquaintances. Much to my surprise I received a phone call a month or so later from an economist I had once met but did not know well. He had seen my proposal through a mutual acquaintance, and he asked if I would be interested in joining a small consulting firm in this city as director of research. He was the director of the institute but not its founder or benefactor. A month later I joined this non-profit institute. It became a dream job for me because I was able to spend my days thinking about economic problems that interested me and directing a small staff of researchers with few external concerns. The founder and his staff lined up clients and raised the money needed to keep the institute going. The founder was a man of considerable wealth, and while he also ran for-profit businesses, he'd long had a fascination with how research could be used to make economic decision-making better informed. After 20 years the founder, having retired from his for-profit businesses, decided it was time to close down the institute. It was a complicated transaction because the institute's "name" and "expertise" were purchased by a for-profit service. The staff could either join the new company or retire. I choose the latter. I had just come through a wrenching divorce after a 20 year marriage, and I was ready to change paths. I knew I wanted to expand my research into areas that were not relevant to the institute's agenda, and since I was financially secure I chose to make the results available on-line at no charge. And for much of the next decade after retirement, as I continued my research, I built three web sites where my research and the research of others could be accessed and downloaded, and they had proven to be popular and useful. In the last couple years I had added a

personal web site where I posted comments and videos on subjects that interested me outside the world of economics and history, including a lot about art, but I had not turned to blogging because I wasn't very good at doing what bloggers do. I saw myself in a different mode. I was late in life trying to connect the dots. I'm here, and this is the journey I'd taken. That's how Belle found me.

That recurring thought in my later years was how I had bungled so much of my personal life. I couldn't escape that. It was a mess. My professional life had turned out OK in spite of my preference not to maintain or cultivate those ties and contacts that were necessary to bolster one's reputation. I had done the work I had enjoyed doing, and I had never seen much value in attending meetings, reading papers, scoring points. I remembered what my mentor, a distinguished professor and former president of our association, told me when I had a conversation with him shortly before he died from leukemia. I had been asked to write a piece about the impact of his research for a *festschrift*. I had asked him how he would appraise the very active professional life he had led. Without a pause he said it wasn't worth it. He went on to say that he had learned very little from attending meetings and giving lectures. I could not put that in my summing up of his scholarly life, but I never forgot it. It certainly reinforced a view I had developed from my earliest years. If I'd stayed in academe, I would probably have been penalized far more than I was at the institute for my go-it-alone (as a rather small-minded colleague once described me) ways. I was less the maverick when Belle knew me, but I had become more the maverick since then. Jousting with faculty day in and day out can do that to you. My "maverickness" was driven first by skepticism and then cynicism. I'd often wondered if those qualities also drove my personal life. I could be the maverick in my professional life, but it proved to be disastrous in my personal life. I was too distant and unengaged, perfectly suitable academic traits but sure trouble for the romantic world. I'm not sure I'd always been that way, but that description seemed to fit now.

In almost every case where I've fallen for a woman, she's initiated the relationship. Women seem to appear in my life simply by announcing themselves. I could never figure out how to do that. I stumble, stutter, and always end up embarrassing myself. I'm not embarrassed to let the woman take the lead. I become more assertive once the relationship is underway. But the initial phase even after so many years and dates befuddles me. A few never got out of the initial phase because I was such a klutz.

I'm even more of a klutz when a relationship ends. I've never learned to argue and shout my way to some resolution. More often than not my relationships end without any resolution. Most of the time I don't know or haven't been told what needs to be resolved. I can't recall how many times, as with the West Coast lady, women just vanish. I once described some of these experiences to my hair stylist – where else does one talk about this - and she laughed and said she used to do it frequently but she couldn't explain then or can't explain now why she did. My stylist is one of my favorites, but I had to think how odd. Sadly I want to know and I don't know how to find out. More to the point I want to try to stay friends, although there are some exceptions. That was true of my last love affair a couple years ago when another painter, probably too young for me to date and certainly too temperamental, simply packed her bags and walked out the door without a word. She had a mean streak but I had, I thought, figured out how to deal with it. I would enjoy one more dose of that temper after she left. I found her new email address with the help of a

friend, and in response to my query she fired back, I knew you briefly, we were not friends, and don't write again. I had a new definition of two people occupying the same space.

On the drive home Belle could not help but think after that luncheon conversation, that behind the veil, below the surface of these three lives was a potential explosion. Each woman in her own way had lit the fuse, and whether or not there is an explosion will depend on the length of the fuse. Perhaps the length of that fuse had grown so long over the previous three or four decades that having been lit it would just burn on. She knew immediately, as she pulled into the driveway, her lit fuse was scarily short, maybe totally used.

How much to ask Aaron, how much to tell him? As she had learned from her experience as a businesswoman, let it unfold gradually. At some point you'll know whether the ground is perilous or safe. As she threw down her purse and hung up her jacket, she saw from the clock she had about an hour to pull her thoughts together.

She actually poured herself a glass of wine, not often a pleasure she allowed herself in the middle of the afternoon. She had never made up her mind if alcohol calmed or agitated her. She wanted to think that this time it would calm her. She remembered in the brief time she had spent with Aaron they had never drunk alcohol together. She knew from the web site that he knew something about wines and champagnes, and had for some years been a modestly successful home winemaker. Entirely possible he had poured a glass as well.

As much as she wanted to concentrate on what was coming up, she became more occupied with what had been happening. As she sat down on the sofa and put the glass of wine on the table in front of the sofa, she recognized the big manila envelope lying there, unopened, even though it had arrived yesterday. She didn't need to open it. She knew all the details, and in addition she knew that all the dotted lines had been signed it. It included two pieces of property, the house she was living in and would soon try to sell, and a house in Colorado that she had no interest in and had signed it over to him, and a cash settlement already in her bank account. No further claims against each other. Since the kids were on their own, they were not parties to the agreement. What had happened to her husband wasn't yet public knowledge, much to her surprise. She felt some satisfaction that she had managed to stop the flow of information with some help from the lawyers and his family. No one had yet guessed they were actually divorced and that he wasn't on a world cruise but in a psychiatric clinic in California. The news would be released in a couple of days after she had started a long sabbatical from the city and the crowd. Not even Marci and Lynn were yet privy, although Marci had made some comments that suggested she had come across a few pieces of information.

As she thought about herself, she could not help but reflect back on the luncheon conversation. She didn't know if those two "solid" marriages, as hers had been described many times, would survive. Her best guest now was that they would at some cost to husbands who were known to be wayward. It was not the waywardness that was eating away at her friends; rather it was a sense of incompleteness after all these years of doing, organizing, entertaining, buying, selling, acquiring, arguing and now feeling unfulfilled despite the effort. She thought to herself we all had chances to push the boundaries, and we chose instead the safe zone. We simply lived a more expensive version of our parents' lives. What kind of stories can we tell? Stories that had no

color, no drive, stories that had predictable endings. She wanted to ask Aaron about his stories and did they have predictable endings. The phone rang. The screen showed his number. She opened the Bluetooth.

---“Hi Aaron, how are you?” she spoke softly into the air that connected her phone and her Bluetooth.

Her voice startled me after all these years.

---“Hello Belle, in uncharted waters, otherwise I’m well. How about you?”

---“I tried to rehearse these first few minutes, but nothing worked. So I guess we just start, right?”

---“I think so. I must confess I wouldn’t have recognized your voice if I hadn’t known who was on the other end of the line,” I replied, feeling somewhat more relaxed.

---“I don’t think it’s a line anymore, is it? I’ve got this gadget stuck in my ear, and the thing I’m supposed to talk into is lying on the table in front of me. But no line.”

---“A gadget in my ear as well,” I said after a laugh. “The only line may be that old phrase – line of...”

---“I can’t imagine we’ll get through this conversation without some bullshit. What do you think?”

---“The question is will we know when the bullshit begin or ends? After living as long as we have you’d think we’d know, but I have my doubts.”

---“Somehow this conversation has begun along a line I would never have anticipated. That must be a positive, no?” she interposed.

---“I’m just relieved I haven’t stumbled my way into disaster yet. Sincerely, Belle, given how long it’s been and that we’re no longer 20-year-olds, I feel like a young kid trying to navigate his way.” I declared.

---“You’ve just made your first stumble. I don’t want to think about how long ago it was. But I’m feeling the same way. To shift gears, I must say you look damn healthy. Are the pictures deceiving?”

---“That’s what I look like I guess. I think I look terribly old, the way my father did when he was ninety, although he lived even longer. I have a few medical problems, all fully manageable. At last count five different pharms with names I can’t pronounce if I could remember the names at all. But I can still do weights every day, walk to store with my little red cart and laugh at Jon Stewart’s jokes.” I said.

---“No car? Why? Bad eyes? Something worse?” she asked with some concern in her voice.

---“Nothing more than I decided driving no longer interested me. Since my retirement I’ve lived in Europe for periods of two to fourth months and there I depend solely on public transportation. A half-dozen years ago after returning from one of those trips I looked around the city where I live and decided I could get by fairly easily without a car. The last vehicle was leased, and when the lease was up, I returned it, got on a bus to the DMV where I exchanged my license for an ID and have been carless ever since. You may or may not remember the apartment, but it didn’t have a lot in it. Being carless sort of fits the pattern of not possessing too much. My condo has books, CD’s, pots and pans, certainly comfortable furniture, but not a lot of stuff.” That was my longest contribution yet to this conversation. I was definitely feeling more relaxed.

---“I can’t imagine getting through my day without my P-Mach,” she said.

---“P-Mach?” I asked.

---“Porsche Machine, my car, about 10 years old, bright red, too noisy to carry on a conversation in, and fast as hell,” she spun out without missing a beat.

---“I’m impressed. Wouldn’t have thought of you in a Porsche. They are noisy and fast. I had a friend who owned a Porsche and a café. The café, it turned out, was a front for some shady business going on in the back room. Anyway he invited me to take a ride once or twice, and my recollection is that I was petrified at the speed we reached. The noise made me fear we had already crashed. He was bent over the wheel, but what I remember most was the curled-up smile, almost a sneer, as if he was not driving a car so much as goading an adversary. I was damned glad to get out of the car and never rode with him again.”

---“I’m afraid I drive too fast sometimes, but nothing like what you’ve just described. Would you ride with me?” she asked, almost slyly.

---“Can I take that under advisement?” I replied, reaching for some humor. “Do you feel transformed in your Porsche, as if there’s another personality to let loose?”

---“I suppose it is the nature of the beast – power, speed, recognition, competition – I know some of the other Porsche owners, and while we do not ever race, we do rev our engines when we meet at stop signs or in parking lots, sort like the Harley duds with their hand signals.”

---“I once owned a Harley, but I never learned how to ride it well. Since I was always in fear of what might happen, I quit riding and sold it,” I recalled with some reluctance.

---“So why did you buy it in the first place?” she inquired.

---“It was for the love of a woman. She owned it and was upgrading to a faster and bigger model. I thought if I learned to ride I might win her heart and who knows what might have happened after that. I should add she was married, and even though I knew my chances were next to zero, I took a chance. What the hell. I ended up with another story to tell.”

I could hear her light laugh. “Fill me in, Aaron, what is your situation, as they say?”

---“Do we have enough talk time? It’s what I call relationship messiness. I’ve been totally unattached for the last year except for five days with a woman I’d known for 20 years, a woman who decided without any prodding from me she wanted to sleep with me, and after we did, she

decided the relationship was scary or I was scary and promptly disappeared. I wasn't at all disconsolate about that. I'll spare you the details. But mostly unattached for the past decade. And you? Married aren't you to a local businessman?"

There was a pause, and now I began to tense up again.

---"I'm going to ask your indulgence. As you would say, there is a story to tell, but not today, not over the phone. What I will tell you is something that only a few people know – my kids, my lawyers and two or three others – my marriage has been terminated. Can you live with just that little bit of information for now?"

---"I can, of course, I can," I may have said with too much enthusiasm.

---"Were you married?" was her next question.

---"I was for about 20 years. It ended badly. I think we both knew it was coming, and yet it took far too long for the end to be reached. No kids. We both had our own careers. We're seldom in touch now. It's sad but could be worse," I explained in a rather measured tone.

---"Does messy refer to your marriage or other ventures?" she asked, a question that sort caught me off-guard. I guess I was surprised how closely she was listening.

---"Am I allowed to talk about us umpteen years ago or is that forbidden, before I try to answer your question," was my response. Where it came from I wasn't sure.

---"How much of 'us' do you remember?" again, another surprising query from her.

---"Well, in the last 24 hours I concocted a terrific and long story. I suspect some of it is made up, but I want to believe the basic outline is true. How about you? Do you have a story about our intimate two days?"

---"I do but let me hear your answer to 'messy' first," she replied.

I noticed that the cell bars had fallen to half. So I decided to make it very brief. I also wasn't sure I wanted to track through all the shit I had managed to pile up in my life, well, my romantic life.

---"I suppose the most honest I can be is that I don't know why it's been so messy nor do I know if it's messier than others, but I do know I feel as if it's been messy. In short I can't seem to find the right combination if that is what is needed. One of my defects is that I don't like relationship arguments, accusations, confrontations, etc., and I do everything I can to head off any potential shouting match. I watch friends engage in these tactics or antics within regularity. I want to leave the room, and sometimes I choose to exit from their lives altogether. I finally came to the conclusion I was the outlier, and I wasn't ever going to be anything else. I've grown more reclusive with age. I should add I'm relatively content being a recluse."

---"Hmm," I heard on the other end. "I never thought of you as an outlier, but, you're right, you're not the confrontational type. I remember you listened to me and you seemed to absorb what I was saying rather than finding a bone to pick. I just remember feeling very close to you those few hours. Like you I'm not sure what I remember."

I was a bit taken aback with her remark. I was thinking how to respond when she continued.

---“I think you being a recluse is not what I would have expected either. But the two roles are actually complementary, aren’t they? If you don’t like confrontational and that’s what you find yourself falling into all the time, you’ll become reclusive. Diagnosis done! Except I don’t believe it,” she added quickly.

---“How about you? Do I get a recap?” I asked just as quickly.

---“No more than a recap. Not as complicated as yours. I knew I was attractive and sexy when I was young. Men ogled me from all directions. It drove my first husband – the one you knew who died a few years after we married....”

---“I had figured out the current was at least number two,” I broke in.

---“Anyway, it drove him crazy. I was never sure you saw me that way. Did you?”

---“Yes and No. How could I not notice your physical attributes? But I don’t think that why we became office buddies. I certainly had no insidious intentions because I had no intentions whatsoever.”

---“I love the world insidious. I have no doubt you can be insidious, but most of the time you were too preoccupied with work to have time to be insidious.”

We both laughed. I liked that diagnosis.

---“Anyway I’ve played the role of good wife, supported both husbands, kept mostly to the background, behaved when I had opportunities not to, stayed home and raised kids, entertained, entertained, entertained – all the stuff expected of church-going, middle-class folks. Between husband one and two, a period of a couple years I dated and slept with several guys. I could have married them, but they had no prospects. I knew I had to have prospects, and that’s what I got with number two. He came from money, and he knew how to add to the pot. I’m no longer sexy, probably not even attractive in the eyes of most men, but I know myself in a way I certainly didn’t then. I thought I was on the permanent glide path for life, and then the path began to evaporate and I can’t say exactly when that started. A decade ago I started my own business and turned it into a money-maker. I wasn’t competing with anyone but myself. Lord knows I didn’t need more money. Whatever changes were occurring to me, they came about slowly, sometimes imperceptibly. You may not remember, Aaron, but when we parted you said something I’d never forgotten, partly because, I discovered, I had written it down in my diary. You said I think you’ll surprise people as your life unfolds. I don’t remember asking what you meant, and maybe you were just being kind, but that’s one of the few things I remember from those days of talking and kissing.

I didn’t remember saying that to her. I did remember the talking and kissing.

---“And how did you end up with me back in the mix,” I asked having waited for such an opening.

---“To give you another chance to run away with me? What do you say?”

---“Do you have any pull with the airlines?”

---“You better think it over. I’m not the gal you knew. But what we talked about then makes more sense to me now. I’ll let you decide if that’s bad or good.”

---“Perhaps I’m the one who should show up on your doorstep.”

The phone went blip. I explained I had to hang up and recharge the phone.

---“Do you want to talk later?” I asked.

---“I do, and I’ll call you. There are some things you need to know, well, I want you to know. In a day or two?”

That’s what we agreed on and clicked off.

She sat for moment. She hooked her cell to the recharger that was lying on the table next to the sofa. She picked up her wine and finished the last little bit. She had things to do, she knew that, but right now she needed time to try to absorb what had just happened. When she wrote that text message, she knew that this was what she hoped would happen. Hoping and then absorbing, two different actions. She also wanted to fuck Aaron. Unfinished business? Not really. New business.

She thought about her own body. She was always shorter than she had wanted to be, and aging had only made her shorter. She was still buxom but not in the way she was at 20. Then she had a body despite her size that turned men’s heads. Not now. She had worked on keeping her weight down but had filled out anyway. She had male friends and admirers because of her personality. She could still flirt but no longer as a come-on. She didn’t think much about sleeping with guys especially old guys. Right now, though, her body was astir. If Aaron were here, she’d try to fuck him.

She’d had a hard time recalling all the details of those few days with Aaron. Her diaries had helped refresh her memory. But she hadn’t recorded everything, so she wasn’t sure when she dredged something up if she was remembering or fantasizing. One thing she remembered without any help from her diary was that last kiss – at the doorway of the building where the reception was held – the last kiss on his lips accompanied by the desire again to runaway with him. She had tried to tamp down that feeling into some irretrievable place and that was where it had existed for most of her life since. It had sprung back into her real world again as if coming from nowhere. Would she have preferred to run away with him and then fuck him or fuck him and then run away. That was moot.

She wondered about Aaron’s romances – disasters he rather implied – because he should have found the right one and never did. Well, maybe not. She no longer believed in the right one. She lost her virginity with her first husband a year or so before they married, always counting the days before and after ovulation, a crazy way to have sex, and during the few years they were married their bedroom life was hardly inspiring but at times satisfying. Once his illness was diagnosed they had other things to think about besides sex.

After his death and a time of grieving – she was serious about that – she had dated a few local single guys and had turned down all the entreaties from local married guys. Too much potential trouble. The sex with these guys, whose names she couldn't remember, was also not memorable. They were guys she would never marry, and yet she continued to think that she was supposed to be married. She knew her second husband before she started dating him because he and her deceased husband had been fraternity brothers. He was well-known around the city and had the reputation of a playboy, a reputation, she came to realize, that was underserved. Their dates were fun, in some cases even memorable, but away from the party scene he was deadly serious about building a business career that would distinguish him from his family. Eventually marriage felt like the right thing. She knew he loved her, and she assumed she'd learn to love him. Because she was a widow, she had convinced herself that falling in love with someone else would take time and maybe effort. Her second husband seemed like the right guy to do this with. She remembered saying to herself then she was betting on the future.

In the past months as this second marriage collapsed around her – the bet had ultimately been lost – she was startled to find a reservoir of strength that had its origin, she concluded, in the loss of her first husband. She was tested then and was being tested now. She was ready for the new test in ways that she'd lost track of. It had helped to have her own business because that's how she put in her days and often her evenings. But the strength she called upon came from somewhere deep inside. She felt it before she could explain it to herself. There was grieving with her second but different from her first. The events that precipitated her divorce were yet unknown outside a tiny circle. She was relieved that she was close to the end without any public disclosures. Her lawyer, a woman she had never met before this started, was one of a kind. She had read once that when you need the best lawyer you can find, don't hire a friend or a family member. Belle had done some research on-line, and the name of this woman turned up. She was a criminal lawyer and former police investigator, who had recently set up practice in the city. She was not a matrimonial lawyer but specialized in criminal cases that involved lots of digging and investigating. The woman agreed to meet Belle, and after their initial conversation she agreed to take the case. They had discussed divorce simply because it had to be considered even though Belle had not yet started any proceedings. The lawyer had a partner who would handle the divorce and whom Belle also met with. The lawyers quoted a fee in the tens of thousands of dollars, but surprising herself Belle was not upset about the cost. Her second husband was still living at home then, and while Belle knew nothing about what the investigations would turn up, she knew something was seriously out of control in his life. Belle'd asked how hard it would be to keep the matter quiet until it was resolved, and the lawyers' answer, which Belle liked, was leave that to us. They had managed it superbly, and the results were in the manila envelope in front of her. They had gone over the contents several days ago. They both knew that it would soon become public because sale of her husband's businesses would be announced tomorrow. Belle had decided to fly tomorrow to the West Coast and from there to a destination outside the US. She had talked herself into thinking that she was running to, not away from something, but she knew the truth. Her bags were packed, and Will, the grounds-keeper, had agreed to look after the property while she was gone. On the West Coast she would spend a few days with her kids, bring them up to date and then head off to a destination where she could let others manage her life. He had thought about inviting Aaron to come to the West Coast for a few days but almost as quickly dropped the idea. For the third time, maybe the fourth time, she had to restart her life on her own.

I wanted to believe that the call had gone well. I had my doubts, as usual. I never learned how to take the initiative. And when the woman takes the initiative, I'm often befuddled, or at the very least not sure what to do next. I remember to this day how I panicked in the back seat of a friend's car when Gail tried to undress me. I wanted to make out with her but I hadn't come to terms with the necessity of disrobing. I never saw her after that. She didn't want to see me. But in an ironic twist her friend, Mitzi, did want to see me. Did she know what had happened in the backseat? I always thought she did, but I was afraid to ask. We dated the summer before I left for college. I had met her through Gail, but we started to date after we both had won roles in *You Can't Take It With You*, a summer-stock production organized and directed by my high-school drama coach. I was Grandpa Vanderhof, and Mitzi was Essie Carmichael. Over ten performances she emerged as the star in a cast of very young performers. The drama coach said she would write Mitzi a glowing recommendation to any college or university she was interested in. Every night after the show in my dad's car we drove to a drive-in, ate hamburgers and drank milk shakes and talked about the performances and the thrill we felt being on stage. I don't remember feeling any jealousy because of her emergent stardom. My drama coach, who once told me she had plans for us after I finished high school, had been honest about my chances. My stage voice tended to be high and squeaky and didn't project well. It would take a lot of work to correct those defects. Her criticisms didn't upset me because college was my escape. I really didn't care what I studied.

It was different for Mitzi. Her parents had quashed her entreaties to attend a college or university away from home. She was expected to commute to a nearby college, none of which had good drama departments. After burgers and shakes we drove to her house in a town near mine and a few blocks from Gail's. We always made out for a while within the confines of the front bench seat of the Green Hornet, a '48 Ford Sedan, but she never tried to take my clothes off and we never came close to fucking. Making out was only part of how we spent time together. Talking about the performances and our futures seemed to interest us more than sex, surprising for a couple of teenagers, both of whom were still virgins.

Our last night together was sad. As we talked about staying in touch and getting together on vacations, she began to cry softly. Although she was capable of high drama on stage, she was in person rather shy and deferential. I'm not sure she wanted me to know she was crying. I don't remember exactly what I said to try to calm her. Nor do I remember how the evening ended. I do remember I never saw her again. Neither did I ever see my drama coach again because she was fired for "unbecoming behavior". I learned later from a friend that Mitzi's parents had more or less arranged a marriage for her. What became of her life I do not know. I wonder now if I was so caught up in my own escape to college that I was pretty insensitive to how other people felt. Not unusual, I suppose, for an eighteen-year-old. I wonder also if I wasn't scared to take chances with other people. Eighteen-year-olds should be scared but...

I wasn't eighteen when Belle showed up on my porch. If I had taken charge in the way that some can do could I have changed her world that appeared to be preordained? I have told only one friend my Belle story, a woman who knows I want to run away with her but I won't ever show up at her door because I respect the fact that she's happily married. Her response – just a few words so typical of the leanness of her language – why didn't you run away? Why didn't I say, let's go, the two of us, come what may. I was overwhelmed by the way in which she entered my

life. I hadn't expected it and didn't know what to do with it. When she said the second night she would get married as planned, I acquiesced. Wouldn't another have protested, turned the declaration into a dialogue, a confrontation – I love you and will not let you... - smothered her in kisses and taken her to bed. Maybe only in novels or on TV. It didn't happen that way upstairs and it didn't happen that way in the alley when I had a second chance. Even at the door of the reception hall I might have taken the offensive in some way, although decades later I hadn't a clue what that would have been. My romances flashed before my eyes back and forth, round and round, every once in a while Belle was in his frame of vision, until I blinked, got up and walked to the balcony. I shook slightly but not dangerously. Still I sensed discomfort for no reason I could pinpoint.

Belle got up from the sofa, picked up her purse and the large envelope and began to walk across the living room – her design years ago but too traditional now for her tastes – to her office when her cell went off. She backed up, looked at the number only to discover it was Marci and resumed her walk without answering.

Once in her office she pulled the papers out of the envelope, read through them quickly just to be sure, double-checked all the signatures and then added them to a folder marked "Termination" in a plastic case filled with personal and business files. She opened her purse and found her Blackberry, which she used primarily for business. When she turned it on, it began ringing or singing according to its ringtone, Marci plus five or six others had left messages. As she began to listen to the messages, it rang again. Marci's number so Belle sat down at her desk and hit the talk button.

---"Hi..."

---"What the fuck's going on?" came Marci's voice, which when stressed sounded like a booming baritone. "I'm five minutes from your house and don't even consider trying to flee. Your Porsche is no match for my Mercedes." And Belle heard the click. She began to laugh, and in a way she was glad this was happening.

She heard the arrival of the Mercedes – the biggest they sold in the US – and by the time she reentered the living room Marci was already inside.

---"I don't know if this calls for the mood-altering qualities of Champagne but that's what we're drinking. Open it while I get the flutes."

---"The modern flutes. I'm not in a traditional mood," said Belle, somewhat surprising herself.

Then the commotion momentarily stopped as they looked each other in the eye. Belle knew without being told "What the fuck's going on?" was a question to.

Little was said while they readied the champagne, and after they sat on the sofa they clicked their glasses and sipped.

---"It's out," said Marci in a voice of deep concern.

---“It had to happen sooner or later. I was hoping it would happen after I left,” responded Belle softly with her eyes on her flute of bubbly. “Damn good champagne, as I might expect from you. Did you have it stored away just in case?” asked Belle.

---“I could not have prepared for this. Jake had it in the cooler for some other event he couldn’t remember. It’s not hard to talk him into selling anything in his shop,” said Marci, clearly more relaxed than when she arrived.

---“OK, where do I start with a woman I’ve know most of my adult life? A woman who knows what’s in my underwear drawer. Where do I start?”

---“Why don’t I tell you what I know,” proposed Marci, who was often several steps ahead her friends.

---“OK, shoot,” responded Belle, as her cell rang. She put up her hand, looked at the number, clicked it on and said,

---“Hi Pat, and I know why you’re calling. Are we in trouble?” she asked her lawyer.

---“No legal trouble but be prepared. There will be queries. Feel free to direct them to me if you wish. My advice is to release as much information as we can to slow down the rumor mill. I can do that with a press release that my assistants have drawn up in the last 30 minutes.”

---“I’m not in the mood to read the release now and I implicitly trust you on this. Send me a fax but go ahead and put it out. Right now, Marci’s here, we’re drinking champagne and talking and as soon as I hang up I’m turning off the cells. Is that OK?”

---“Absolutely. Leave them off all night. If I need you, I’ll fax or email, OK?” said Pat reassuringly.

---“Great, Pat. I’ll call later,” and Belle hung up.

---“OK, Marci, what do you know?”

---“Not much actually but enough to know all is not well. Your husband is in a clinic far from here, he’s a risk to himself, you and others and he’s broke. That’s about it.”

---“That’s all the grapevine has – that’s it? Pat me on the back, my dear. It’s worse than that. I have no idea how we got this far without the whole thing blowing up in public. And you’ll forgive me if I don’t open Pandora’s Box all the way tonight - one bottle of champagne won’t do the trick – it may take a second or a third, each ever pricier!” said Belle.

---“I can’t believe you’re this calm? inquired Marci.

---“I’ve been living with this for a while and Pat, whom you met because you happened upon us at a local watering hole, laid out a near-perfect strategy. I’m also calm because I’m finished with this marriage, my financial independence is unassailable and I’m leaving tomorrow night for a destination I cannot disclose. I will be in touch, but please be patient. And tell Lynn the same. In fact I may make an effort to talk to her tonight or tomorrow. If my closest friends feel a bit ignored and ungrateful, remember, this is not the first crisis in my life.”

Marci refilled their flutes.

---“First, he is under care and more importantly he’s safe. The diagnosis is complicated. I doubt if he’ll ever recover enough to be on his own. Six months ago I noticed changes in his behavior – more secretive and less responsive. He was never mean to me – never had been – but I had the feeling that I was being closed off from something or other. You and I – and Lynn – have talked about our bedroom frustrations. Yours were different from mine. My husband seldom if ever strayed. You know I had come to the conclusion that he was simply not as interested in sex with me or anyone else as he was in what he did all day. I had learned to live with a down-sized sex life.”

---“For the record,” said Marci, “I haven’t.”

---“Just to finish up the bedroom part, he has been diagnosed as impotent, a condition that has been evolving for a long time. But since his current condition is worse than impotence, it’s unlikely he’ll receive Viagra very soon.”

---“Did you ask why?” queried Marci.

---“I did, many times. We seldom lost our tempers with each other, and despite the scariness of this we managed to keep our discussions civil and unacrimonious. His answers were almost always the same: he was trying to decide whether to expand or cut back, where to reduce costs, how would an economic slowdown affect his businesses, etc. Our social life continued, but at home the dynamics were changing. Even the kids noticed, and when they asked me, I was truthful in my answers: this is what your father has told me, and that’s all I know. You may have noticed, Marci, he was on the road more than usual. The thought occurred to me that there was another woman, but my instincts told me that the outside signs did not support that. There was something else.”

Belle paused for moment. She realized that telling the story to a friend was every bit as exhausting as living with it for the past months had been.

---“Pat went to work on the investigation about six weeks ago. She quickly confirmed the absence of any extra-marital affairs. Her principal focus was what was he doing with his companies? You know that all the companies are solely owned by him. Nobody else including me owns any shares. Therefore, he never had to report on their financial operations, and I never asked about them. He paid his taxes regularly, and, as we have since discovered, fully. No hanky-panky whatsoever. You’ll recall, he was trained as a tax accountant – remember crusty but crafty Professor Carruthers - and he probably knows more about tax law than many local tax lawyers or accountants. He never hired an accountant; he was his own accountant.”

---“I’m beginning to get a sense of where this is heading,” said Marci.

---“No doubt you are except I doubt if you have yet figured out what triggered the collapse. From the beginning of our marriage we have maintained separate financial identities. The insurance settlement upon my first husband’s death – ironically sold to him by my second husband – was substantial. It has remained strictly under my control. I don’t believe that my second has ever once asked a single question about it. I hired a good financial advisor, and today it’s worth many times the original amount. Tragedy has made me rich. When I set up my business, I did so with a

small personal loan from him that I paid back in less than a year. I was the sole owner of my business until I added two partners who then bought me out. We owned this house and the Colorado house jointly until the last few weeks. I now own this one, and he owns the Colorado property. Before I started working and even after, he wrote me a sizeable check each month for household expenses. He was a generous man. To my credit, even though you've often complained about the sorry state of my bedroom closet, I was frugal with his money. What I did not spend each month was subtracted from the next month's allowance. Never any complaint or question about how I spent the money but once in a while he would say you're a damn good homemaker. This marriage never was never in financial crisis until now, at least on his side, not mine. We also agreed never to discuss our finances publicly or with the kids, although in the latter instance the taboo has been lifted recently."

---"It's true you never discussed your finances. That in itself caused people to speculate, not always kindly, I might add," interposed Marci.

---"Never a matter of concern to us," said Belle. After a sip of champagne she continued.

---"A month ago shortly before my husband informed everyone not in person but by email he was going to realize a lifelong dream – a cruise around the world as well as to each pole...."

---"In all the years I'd known him," said Marci. "I'd never heard him express that dream."

---"Right on," said Belle. "It was made up. The reason was information that Pat had developed. It was news I was hardly prepared for, let me assure you. Any guesses?"

---"You've already ruled out the one I would have guessed," answered Marci. "So what was it?"

---"Gambling debts, huge gambling debts, in the hundreds of thousands."

---"Gambling debts!" cried out Marci.

---"Gambling debts. I must have shouted those words across the desk at Pat just as you did now. Of course we played the tables when we went to Vegas or the Caribbean, but the thought that my husband was a high-roller almost made me laugh. Pat caught the humor I felt momentarily because she said in a serious-friendly rather than a serious-lawyerly voice, 'He's gambled away everything. The companies will be sold to pay off the debts.'"

---"Then I turned numb. Generous though he was he had been a tight-fisted businessman. He treated his employees well – several of them in fact are buying out the companies – but he knew where every wasted dollar was. He had worked diligently only to squander recklessly."

---"After a pause I said to Pat, 'I had no idea, and further I have no idea what I'm going to say to him tonight.'"

She came around and sat next to me. She put her hand on my arm and said,

---"I knew this isn't easy. I admire you as a client because you have been a straight-shooter and you have shown nerves of steel. You've said several times that this was not the first crisis, and while you weren't sure how strong you were, you've turned out to be as strong, perhaps even stronger, than you were 30 years ago. Let me explain what's ahead for you tonight. I have been

in touch with his lawyer. They have a proposal to make. I have cleared my calendar so I can accompany you home where they're waiting for us. I know what the papers contain and I will as your lawyer urge you to accept.' She stopped and waited for me to reply.

---"I knew almost instantly what to say. 'Let's go.'"

"When we arrived here the driveway was filled with cars. I could tell who was in attendance – my husband, his lawyer, his physician and Willie, his assistant, who I automatically assumed was leading the buyout. Also sitting in the living room were two people I did not know. They were from the clinic. I was introduced to them after greeting everyone else. Only my husband remained seated on the sofa. I walked over, sat down next to him and kissed his lips. It was a kiss I'll never forget. I had just kissed utter numbness. Except that he was breathing, his eyes were moving, he moved his legs, there was no life. I described this to Pat later, who incidentally spent the night, and she responded that may help with the grieving. He was pretty much gone, out of touch. Two hours later the meeting finished. Everyone left the room except for us – we sat quietly, hand in hand, and finally he spoke, very slowly pronouncing each syllable: 'I'm sorry, so terribly sorry.'" With tears rolling down my cheeks I embraced him, but again numbness. I'm sure he meant what he said, but he had nothing else to say. It was the saddest moment in my life bar none. It was surreal but paradoxically real."

Belle continued. "He left that night for the clinic on the West Coast, a site chosen so the kids could visit him. The packet of papers included a divorce settlement. It was my choice whether to proceed with a divorce. The court was prepared to grant it immediately. I asked if I could speak to his doctor privately in my office. I've known Cary for how many years. We sat down, and I poured him another drink from the decanter. He had tears in his eyes as did I."

Belle began to tear up again. "I asked what had happened, and he laid out in broad outline what his diagnosis was. He had actually consulted some rather prominent medical people. That was how he had found the West Coast Clinic. Whatever the cause – brain chemicals gone astray or something else - my husband, he said, was not now competent and would probably never be competent again. Some evidence of a family malaise, but too slim to rely on. I asked what he thought about the divorce. He thought it was the best course, although he suggested that I not sign those papers yet because I needed time to process all this, and I may feel some genuine guilt later if I did sign them tonight. He assured me that everyone including my attorney was in accord with a delay on that score. He paused, and then he said an astonishing thing – my husband had confided in him years ago that he would not treat me as well as I deserved. The doctor had asked why, and my husband simply responded he did not know himself as well as he should. The doctor said that he'd never forgotten that conversation. Obviously he couldn't share it with me or anyone else, although he did suggest that my husband might want to see a therapist, not likely given what we all know about my husband. Cary said that he asked questions and made notes after each annual physical about my husband's mental state. In all those years he never noticed anything that would indicate serious deterioration in his mental capacity. I assured Cary, with whom we often socialized, that my husband was never cruel or abusive toward me or the kids. Cary was silent after my comment, and finally I asked what if anything should we have been looking for. He took a few seconds to answer. Staring at his drink he said quietly rather than with the self-assuredness that was his trademark that despite his attentiveness over the years he had not observed anything that would have raised a red flag. As if in need of a confessional he turned toward me and said that he had asked himself a thousand times, what had he missed and still did

not know what if anything he had missed. Then the financial roof caved in. My husband had days in which to pay off his debts, which surprisingly had grown because of recent clandestine trips to Vegas and other nearby Indian casino, and no cash to do so. I knew the rest of the story. About the same time my attorney had discovered the details, and since his attorney and mine knew each other from other cases, they set about to work out a solution. Cary finished his drink and we embraced. We were both thinking about the dark side in the human personality that no one can predict.”

Then Belle said,

---“I can say I gave it my best shot. Some things could have been better but until now nothing was so bad as to create a crisis. I had decided somewhere along the way I couldn’t have it all. It was a marriage of contentment. I’m very sad, but I can move on because I know he is being taken care of. I told the assembled when Cary and I returned to the living room I would delay the divorce for a few weeks but probably not beyond that. What I felt at the time and still do, Marci, is that life had been drained, almost completely, out of this robust man I had known for so long. That it would return later was unlikely, and if it did, the tie between has been broken beyond repair. After the final goodbyes, he was driven to the airport and then flown to West Coast clinic where he was admitted twelve hours later. We all agreed to keep it private for as long possible, although we all knew that once the sale was announced it would become public information and subject to public speculation and scrutiny. That why you gals were not told. It’s the way it had to be. I’m sorry.”

---“Believe me, no hard feelings,” said Marci. “But how can he afford the clinic given the financial fiasco?”

---“If you think for a moment, what was one of his businesses?”

---“Insurance...,” as that proverbial light bulb went on.

---“He was smart enough to insure himself far beyond what most rich people think is necessary. It was untouchable and has been turned over to the clinic. I don’t know how long he will live, but upon his death the kids will inherit a sizeable amount. Part of the agreement was that I would remove my name. I was happy to do so. I don’t need the money.”

Another silence before Belle said

---“That’s the story. I’m not looking forward to the forthcoming publicity hurricane. I fly out early in the morning. Who knows, maybe I’ll sleep at the airport or more likely just hang out, have a drink, walk around, watch the take-offs and landings until my flight in the morning.”

They both heard the fax machine turn on.

---“I still don’t know how strong I am,” whispered Belle, trying to ignore the sounds coming from her office.

As they walked toward the door, Belle stopped, turned around, walked back to pick up her cell and joined Marci again.

---“A favor to ask. Will you call this number on the screen tomorrow. The owner of the number is Aaron, Aaron Miller. Tell him I’ll call in a few days. He knows something was cooking with my marriage, etc., but not the details.”

---“Aaron, Aaron who? Another secret?” asked Marci incredulously.

---“Alas, another secret. Someone I almost ran away with more decades ago than I care to count. He popped out of the memory bank a few days ago, I looked him up on the Internet out of curiosity, I had no trouble finding him, I sent him a text message and this afternoon we talked for an hour.”

---“Ran away with?”

---“It was my idea, but it wasn’t going to happen with a wedding just weeks away. I’ve thought about him from time to time. Quite honestly I’d forgotten more than I could remember. Some old diaries I’d saved helped with the recovery process. Why now after all these years? My head was swirling with stuff I couldn’t deal with when I wanted to run away with him, and my head is swirling again. Maybe that’s the connection. I can say I’m fascinated and intrigued. He’s had a hell of a gig. Check out his web page.”

---“And may you be trying to run away again?” asked a bemused Marci.

---“Probably not. His romantic life has been messy - his own words - and the idea of running away with me now probably doesn’t have much appeal. I’m not the buxom beauty I was then.”

---“Nor is he whatever he was then. Maybe I’ll run away with him.”

---“That bad, eh?” asked Belle softly.

---“Not good right now. No comparison with what you’ve been through, but slowly I’m going crazy.”

---“Aaron was a sweet person when I knew him, and all these years later with both of us hardened to the core, he still sounds like the guy I knew. Give him a call, make an offer....”

---“Thanks,” said Marci with a squeeze of the arm. “What do I tell him?”

---“No script. Whatever you think he should know. I will call next week but not before then. Gives you seven days – you could probably get a flight out tonight,” replied Belle as she threw her arms around Marci at the car. Then she whispered in her ear, “Watch out, you may find me in bed with him....”

---“*Ménage à trios*, a dream I’ve long given up on,” shot back Marci with a mischievous glint in her eye.

I decided to eat out. Not much in my fridge and not in the mood to walk to Plum and fill up my grocery sack. A glance through the window indicated the weather had turned rainy and windy. I donned my raincoat and much-beloved floppy hat and took off to Earle’s Café, about a block and a half from my door. Earle’s has been one of the constants in my life for the past decade or so. I

was relieved when I opened the door and saw it had not yet filled up. Some of the tables I preferred were free.

Maxine, one of the owners, saw me almost immediately and waved me toward the far side where the glass wall looked out on the street. I was a street-traffic guy, and on my way I greeted some of the staff and patrons and waved at Greg, the other owner and Maxine's husband.

Maxine gave me a peck on the cheek and took my coat and hat.

---"How are you, my favorite sad old man," as she put my things on the hook next to the table.

---"Thanks, I needed that slap in the face from a woman who never ages and is eternally happy," I said in faux anger. I sat down and placed the book I had brought with me on the corner of the table.

---"You know what my Jewish mother said to you more than once – stay single and get sadder and older than you should be."

---"Ah, your mom, I miss her. She was the only senior I ever got along with or ever wanted to be seen with. Yes, she is missed."

---"Another time, another place, the two of you might have hooked up," said Maxine.

---"Probably not, my dear," I countered, "unless I had a total personality redo. I could never have kept up with her. I was always playing catch-up. To my credit, perhaps, there is whispered Jewishness on my patriarchal side from way back."

---"Aaron, everyone has whispered Jewishness. I think whispered Jewishness or not, you two might have hit it off. So, a book of poems. That can only mean you're feeling sadder, older and lower than usual tonight. I uncorked a fairly good Bordeaux a few minutes ago, will that cheer you up?"

---"Remains to be seen. I will take the Bordeaux, but I can't promise any good cheer. Actually, contrary to your diagnosis – I've been through several diagnoses today but yours is the first face-to-face one – I'm feeling less of all those than I look."

With arms folded and totally unaware of what was happening behind her in a room that had filled up with almost a half-dozen new patrons – one of Maxine's charms was, don't rush me – she drilled down on what I had just said to her.

---"A woman, another woman, has screwed up your day, right?"

---"Not only a woman, but a woman I knew a half-century ago." I answered firmly.

---"This is a story I have to hear...but later. You need Brenda to take care of you tonight," as she turned and left.

In minutes Brenda, my favorite "serveur", was at the table with a glass of red.

---"Hi, my love," she intoned as she bent over and kissed my cheek.

---“It’s been a while. Are you OK? The family?” I asked because I had not seen her in a couple of weeks.

---“All’s well. Dear Maxi and Greg gave me a week off so my husband could finish his exams.”

---“And he did well, I’m sure,” I could say with some assurance because her husband, Eric, had an excellent undergraduate academic record, not having started college until he was 25 and a father.

---“Yes, very well, and you know, one more semester and he’s done. It’s been a crazy ride for the three of us. But we’ve stuck it out with lots of help from everyone, and we’re almost at the end.”

---“And Sammy? I haven’t seen him for a while either,” I inquired.

---“Fine except for the usual kids’ illnesses, colds, sore throats etc. So, my dear, you’ve got your wine, and I can recommend the Café’s roast chicken and mashed potatoes with awesome gravy – from what Maxi, who knows all, told me, that’s what you need to deal with a romance from a half century ago.”

We both laughed.

---“I’m amazed, truly and continually amazed, how much information is processed in this room after a few sentences pass from one person to another person.”

---“You knew her mom – she still roams around in this room and Maxi has become her voice. I’d stay on her good side....”

Just then the volume in the room was suddenly turned up, and when Brenda and I looked across at the doorway there stood Jeremy embraced by Maxine and Greg. Jeremy was back after an absence of six months. I knew he was returning but not when precisely.

---“Should I seat him with you if...,” but before Brenda could finish her sentence Jeremy and Greg were standing at her side. Embraces all around, and in answer to the expected question, I said by all means.

---“I’ll bring the Bordeaux and a glass,” said Brenda as she left the table with Greg.

Jeremy and I stared at each other. We had become good friends over the past few years partly because we shared common interests – poetry and opera – and partly because, as sometimes happens in life, we could converse with ease and for hours without any one-upsmanship.

---“You’re back earlier than I expected. Tough time in the Bay?” I asked gently.

---“You’ve got it. I had to leave. It’s all settled, and once done I had to leave,” came his reply.

---“I always thought the few weeks before and the few weeks after a divorce were the worst – first not knowing if it would ever get done and then not knowing what to do after it got done. I took off for the same reasons you’ve left. I was warned not to by my therapist, but while he was not often wrong, he was wrong on that count. I began to thrive after I left – well, for me, the non-thriver, it was thriving.”

Brenda put the carafe of Bordeaux between us and a full glass in front of Jeremy.

---“Thanks Brenda,” we said almost in unison, and we lifted and clicked our glasses.

---“Should we be drinking champagne instead?” asked Jeremy.

---“Later,” I responded, “when the rawness has been rounded off a bit and a shine has begin to reappear.”

---“How did you arrange accommodations on such short notice?” I asked since three weeks ago he was still undecided.

---“Gladys, whom you do not know but the name tells you everything you need to know, Gladys, the chair’s secretary, had it wrapped up in a matter of days. My accommodations aren’t actually far from here. I should have written you, but then I thought a little surprise in your drab life wouldn’t hurt, unless this was not a surprise you weren’t eager to embrace,” he answered with that cheeky smile.

---“I’m delighted to be surprised, but let me warn you, yours is the second surprise in the past 24 hours.”

---“You have a story to tell, don’t you?” he said without missing a beat.

Just then Brenda arrived with the most luscious-looking plates of chicken, potatoes, gravy, green peas and piping-hot rolls – so common and so perfect.

---“Comfort food for two guys whose comfort zones keep getting screwed up,” she said with obvious bemusement.

We could not help but smile. Our lives were almost an open book in this Café. Was that what kept us coming back? Everyone needs or wants a place of comfort even when fighting comfort seems like a natural path. Does comfort derive from somebody else knowing enough but not all so that some bonds can form and keep us from spinning out of control?

The table was quiet as we tested the food. It was more delicious than it looked.

---“They just keep outdoing themselves,” said Jeremy. “I wasn’t hungry when I arrived, but somehow their food makes me hungry.”

---“And it doesn’t include dry ice or nitrogen gas,” I added.

All at once two glasses of a white Chardonnay showed up at the table, delivered by Gil the bartender.

---“Compliments of the house,” he said as we shook hands. We thanked him and resumed eating.

---“My colleagues here did not endorse my return, but the chair overruled them, as he has done before.”

---“That’s what good chairs are hired to do, beat back the nincompoops and elevate the stars, and from what you’ve told me your boss is about as good at that as they get.”

---“I think so because he’s so damn smart and creative himself. Why he stays in that job is beyond me,” Jeremy volunteered.

---“I don’t think it’s because he craves power. More likely he understands that he has the power to do some things that might push the scales in favor of good and away from evil, if I may take an uncustomary moralistic stance.”

---“My, we’re sounding a bit priestly tonight,” said Jeremy.

---“It may be I’m in need of a priest,” I responded with a grin.

---“Are you enjoying this food as much as I am?” asked Jeremy.

I shook my head in the affirmative.

---“My question to you is not about food but why did you come back early when you could have spent a couple months in one of your favorite places?” I inquired as I set my fork aside.

---“Good question. I obviously thought about all the options. Money has never been an issue, as you know. I’m better off than most and certainly better off than many fellow poets. Sometimes I worry that my well-offness will sap my creative energies. I have this old-fashioned idea that artists need tension to be creative. They need money problems above all. So after the papers were signed and we made our farewells, more amicably than they should have been, I weighed the options and chose, curiously, to get back to work. Perhaps not so curiously, perhaps exactly what I should do.”

---“I don’t find getting back to work so curious, rather getting back to work here curious,” I offered.

---“I think Brenda hit the nail on the head, comfort. I know it sounds contradictory to say I crave comfort and tension, but in some ways this place always has juxtaposed the two and always will. I met Hartley here. That yielded a mixture of comfort and tension. Probably more tension than I was prepared for.”

---“I remember. I worried for your and her sanity for a while. But Hartley is not here. What am I missing?” I was puzzled.

---“What I haven’t told you or anyone, she’s coming back,” he said looking me straight in the eyes.

---“Whoa,” as I poured some more red. “I hadn’t heard, although you’re my only conduit to the university.”

---“No one knows, outside a very small circle.”

We had both finished, and we could see Brenda on her way with desserts and the espressos we always ordered.

---“This is the way Heaven should be,” said Jeremy. Brenda found room for more plates before removing the ones we were finished with.

---“We think both you guys, especially the skeptic here,” as she pinched my cheek, “are badly undernourished. Besides Mr. A, you can’t keep lifting those weights at your age without lots of protein and sugar. How big is your neck now?”

---“Actually it has shrunk a little along with the rest of my body, but thanks for caring,” I replied.

In a few minutes Jeremy brought me up to date on the Hartley matter. Her former companion in research and in bed had announced his resignation late in the Spring Semester. Hartley’s affair with Jeremy had produced a minor scandal even though they were consenting adults and Hartley was not married. Her partner was a chaired professor with a big research grant. Hartley had her own grant but worked alongside his team. She was up and coming, and unfortunately, despite a big name, her former partner was fading fast because he lacked the skills to do research at the level that all the young Turks around him and in his own lab were closing in on. Hartley’s department chair, another smart administrator, saw a golden opportunity to invite Hartley back as a research professor to fill the void with a promise to set her up with a lab and staff, all of which would cost less than her departing ex-partner. The chair negotiated a contract favorable to all parties, overrode internal opposition and cited cost-benefit figures to Old Main, those being the only data central administration understood.

---“Hartley and I had several long, not easy, conversations,” said Jeremy, not one who liked to admit to such conversations, “and to my surprise, maybe now because of my divorce I was thinking outside the so-called box, and further to my surprise we were working out a plan. Mainly the plan is one-step-at-a-time. You’ll understand that given what we went through last year. One further piece of news for you, I’m here for the year, not just one semester. I have an NEH grant that will cover the Spring Semester, when Hartley will return, and....”

Jeremy quit mid-sentence, but I knew what was going through his mind.

---“Are...are you scared?” I asked timidly.

---“Not a word, but I am,” he said turning his gaze toward his espresso, “and I don’t know why exactly. I should be thrilled, but the jitters I have are not those of joy and anticipation.”

---“You remember your latest *New Yorker* contribution, of course I know you do, but there was a line that caught my attention, ‘After the fire more fire’, welcome to the world of your own creation.”

There was a pause and then an interruption. Greg had delivered some Armagnac and pulled up a chair. He was a person we both liked and enjoyed. He was smart, shrewd and totally disarming.

---“Am I breaking into a very serious male bonding moment?” he asked with full knowledge that he was and he was welcome.

Simultaneously Jeremy and I put our hands on his shoulders. More than once we had drunk together and spilled our hearts out on the beer- or wine-stained tables. Both Jeremy and Greg were Jewish but with very different backgrounds and personalities. Jeremy came from money and was for no particular reason scrappy; Greg came from near-poverty and also for no good explanation either was smooth, seldom if ever ruffled. I loved talking to them because I never

had to say much. Besides they always seemed to know what I was going to say or what was bothering me.

---“Guess who’s coming back to town?” was Jeremy’s first remark.

---“And if I told you I knew, will you ever speak to me again?” announced Greg.

---“How did you know?”

---“She was in town a month ago before everything was settled. She stopped for an espresso and swore us to secrecy, and Aaron can attest we obeyed. Jeremy, let me say unequivocally, this will take time, like reading one of your poems. Take time to think and reflect but don’t let the initial thrill of language and imagery pass unnoticed. You’ve already written about it, Jeremy. Listen to yourself.”

Both Jeremy and I were once again bowled over by this tavern-keeper had to say, as if he had just stepped out of Chaucer.

---“Thanks, Greg, well worth thinking about. I have not seen her since the blow-up last year, although we’ve talked. I can’t imagine she isn’t on top of everything, but...,”

---“Almost everything. Maxine has more insight and information than I do. But she won’t, as you know, betray any confidences between them. I do know Hartley’s struggled with whether or not to return, but in the end the offer, as I’m sure you know, was too incredible to turn down. I really believe she’s made up her mind that this is what she needs for her professional life but equally important what she wants for personal life. Jeremy, you were smart to let her work through it on her own. I wasn’t sure you could do that. OK, your time at the booth is up,” as he turned to me and asked “how’s Eyeore?”

That elicited male howls.

---“Eyeore has reattached his tail,” Jeremy interjected.

---“So, are you going to fess up? You walk in with a book of Galway Kinnell poetry, so we’re not to ask what the hell happened today or yesterday?”

I knew it was my turn. I described the text message, the phone call and briefly the muddling around in my memory bank.

I was amazed how intently they had both listened. I think they were amazed that I could summarize all this in fewer than five minutes. I had developed a reputation for long stories.

---“You want to see her,” inquired Greg, who almost always spoke first in such situations – summing up precisely and following with - “but will you? Why are you uncertain?”

---“Thrilled and scared,” said Jeremy gently. “I know that feeling.”

---“Exactly,” I said nodding to my friend across the table.

---“Oh Greg, front and center,” boomed out Maxine’s voice.

---“Booth closed,” said Greg, “I’ll send a bill. A final thought, don’t be afraid to loosen up, let go, it’s going to be harder for you, Aaron, than for Jeremy, but we haven’t given up on you. By the way I have a new shipment of Bordeaux if you’re interested – tomorrow night, not here but at the Speakeasy.” Handshakes all around, and he was gone.

---“How do you account for all that damn wisdom,” asked Jeremy feeling a bit jealous.

---“You tell me. I’ve never figured it out except he is one of the most centered people I’ve ever know. I’m not and never have been. I’ve given up trying.”

---“Is that why he can read my poems with more intelligence than I can?” threw out Jeremy.

---“Maybe. In my dotage I sometimes pray for some centeredness just to know how it feels. Jeremy, do you remember Robert Hass’s “Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer”?”

---“Indeed I do. I had coffee occasionally with Robert and others in Berkeley. I knew he had written a long poem after his divorce, but until I heard him read it at a small gathering I had no idea how much depth he could give a poem.

---“I heard him read it at Squaw Valley Writers’ Workshop at one of their public lectures the year I was in Tahoe. Rick, who owned the gym where I worked out, was an enthusiast of the poetic arts, his favorite being Gary Snyder. He often went to local poetry readings, something I was too impatient with to enjoy. I invited him to join me at the Hass reading, and he did. Neither of us knew anything about “Regalia”. It took Hass about 10 or 15 minutes to read it. Once or twice he broke in with a comment, and when he did so because the spoken poem had such a cadence with the mood he was trying to convey he would back up and start over at a natural break. My sense was that every time he read that poem something heartfelt was happening inside him again. Rick was in the middle of his second divorce, it was harder than the first, and he was probably not ready for “Regalia”. As I listened to Hass and watched Rick, I could see the tears beginning to form. By the end even I was moved to tears. Rick simply put his hand on my shoulder, got up and left without a word. And not a word the next day at the gym. The evening was never a part of any future conversation.”

After a few seconds Jeremy said as if talking to himself: “the osprey’s cry, actually a yelp, and the heart’s lament.”

---“So there were these two emptinesses: one made of pain and desire and one made of vacancy,” surprising myself I could remember.

---“Such simple language ‘there were these two’, ‘one made of’ spoken twice, few of us can do it that way, squared off against a word I wonder if anyone else has ever used, ‘emptinesses,’” opined Jeremy.

---“The emptiness of pain we all know to some degree, but the emptiness of vacancy, that is almost more chilling,” I said.

---“Hard to feel centered amidst either emptinesses,” murmured Jeremy.

---“You’ve read my mind.”

---“OK, let’s pay the bill. I’m never sure how these times come about, but they do and I cherish them,” he said as he put his arm across my shoulder and we walked to the exit where the cashier’s desk was. The bill was far less than what we had consumed, we gave Brenda the tip she desired, said good-by and left. At the corner where I turned right and he turned left, we agreed to meet at the Speakeasy tomorrow night.

---“Run away with her, Aaron, I’ll miss you but do it.” And Jeremy was soon out of earshot.

I had slept well in spite of a rather intense day yesterday. It always amused me to recall how much my sleeping improved after my divorce. Only a few nights in the last decade could I remember being sleepless. Sorry Seattle.

After arriving home I watched The Daily Show and some of the Colbert Report before drifting off with the TV still on. At some point in the night I must have gotten up and turned it off. As I sat with my trusty cup of Peet’s in the mid-morning light – I had pretty much lost track of early morning light – I hadn’t had time or reason to turn on my brain when my cell rang with a text message. Not a name or number I recognized.

The message confirmed that:

---“Y do not know M. Friend of Belle. Will call this # soon. Marci”

If Belle had said something about Marci or Marci calling, I’d missed it.

I poured another cup of Peet’s and grabbed a couple of Oreos, having made up my mind years ago while lacking any nutrition they could help switch the brain on. Besides breakfast cereals of all sort just plain tasted like inventions of the devil.

Shortly after that the cell rang and the screen showed the Marci’s number.

---“Hello,” I said, “I’m assuming it’s Marci and not my escort service.”

---“It is indeed, but isn’t it a trifle early to be escorted?”

---“Only too early before ten and two cups of Peet’s.”

---“I had assumed you were a late riser, and I wasn’t wrong,” she said boldly.

---“You couldn’t be more wrong. It’s now eleven in my kitchen, and I’m almost always up before eleven. It must be midnight where you are.”

---“Cloudy enough to be midnight, but alas we homemakers lack the luxury of you late-rising bachelors. If I don’t have breakfast on the table, I lose points. By the way any chance you have an Internet phone connection?” she asked.

---“I do. I’ve only had it a month and used it maybe twice. Give me a few minutes to start up the computer. It’s a different number,” and I repeated the number. She said she’d wait 15 minutes, and we hung up.

I was interested in seeing her. Curious what Belle's friends might look like.

I had no justification for getting a computer phone link, but now I was glad I had. I turned on the computer, inserted the video cam and waited for her call.

When it came, I clicked the mouse and his face showed up on the screen.

---"Well, well, I'm surprised it worked. I know a lot about crunching data but not much about exotic extensions," I spoke into the computer.

---"I think you know more about exotic than that because I've checked your web site, and it's pretty revealing," she said.

---"But not exotic. Yes, I do know something about web authoring, although the site was designed by someone else..."

---"A Psycho Kitty, I can see."

---"Am I on Marci's screen or is this Psycho Kitty?"

---"You're on the computer I'm talking to and the Kitty-designed site is on my other computer. I hate to admit it, but the Internet is not only my virtual life but my real life. The house is wired from top to bottom. Potentially an electrocution hazard."

---"I'll keep my distance since I've been known to set off all sorts of alarms," I responded.

---"I hope not. But until then let me tell you why I called. Belle promised to call you, and she will but not for a week or so. She left town last night, unexpectedly for you and me, but not for her."

---"Is she OK?" I asked worriedly.

---"Depends. She said I should tell you whatever I thought was necessary."

For the next 15 or 20 minutes I learned the story. I asked a few questions, and Marci answered straightforwardly. I was impressed how well she told the story, even though it wasn't her story and she had just learned the details last night. I decided she was smart, and she was also attractive. I assumed she was about the same age as Belle. At one point she got up and walked to a nearby desk, and I could tell she had kept herself in shape. I learned she was a serious club tennis player as I had been. After telling me the Belle story she said she'd have to take off soon for a tennis date.

We chatted for a few more minutes. Out of the blue she asked

---"Any plans to see Belle?"

---"None that I know of. In fact Belle and I made no plans to get reacquainted face-to-face. Someday maybe, but not immediately. It's been a long time, and neither of us is quite certain of what we're remembering. Besides she apparently has a full agenda right now."

---That's for sure, and I don't know where she's headed to after visiting her kids and her husband on the West Coast. Perhaps she'll eventually let us know. My feeling is that while she's handled the past few months better than most of us, she's anticipating a letdown, more appropriately another period of grieving. Be careful, though, she might try to try to run away with you again."

---"Not sure what I would say or do. Actually that's no different from 50 years ago. I didn't know then what to say or do. I got a bit of a tongue-lashing from my local friends last night about not taking risks. The risk-taking I'm know for has little to do my romantic ventures."

---"Risk-adverse, then?"

---"Worse than that. Utterly immobile."

---"I understand more than you realize. I've always stuck to the plan because I feared being off the plan. A good reason for us to talk again, no?"

---"Absolutely," I almost shouted into the computer connection. I rather liked Marci and would welcome another call.

We hung up or more accurately disconnected. I contemplated the appointments and errands I had a head of me before meeting Jeremy.

She had not slept in the airport or on the flight. Here she was in California, and after no sleep for more than 24 hours she wasn't feeling especially tired. Running on adrenaline, no doubt. She had yet to talk to the kids, although they had received text messages upon her arrival. She was staying at the Mark Hopkins in downtown San Francisco. That was the only hotel she knew in the city because they had always stayed there. She sat in a wingback chair, looking across the cityscape through her open window. Her suitcases were unopened, and the only personal item visible was her cell, lying on the end table. She wanted to call someone, probably Aaron, but she wouldn't. Where, where, where am I going, she asked herself without moving her lips. Long term it was too soon to decide, but she knew that would weigh on her for weeks to come. If she had to write down a plan on a piece of paper, all that would show up now would be "I'm in the city by the bay now, I'm heading to a place in the far Pacific I've never been to, I may not never go back from whence I came from." That's all she could write now.

She had fanaticized on the flight she would take on a lover, a young man with few prospects. They would live somewhere way off. A small bungalow, a big castle, who knows. They would spend their days caring for each other, youth admiring age, and age instructing youth. Almost as if she wanted to relive her life through him, and he tasting what was ahead.

She also wanted to fuck Aaron. A different fantasy, one that will probably never happen. He has seen one picture of her, not at all flattering, but he had not seen her in person. She told herself firmly that she did not know how he might feel after seeing her. She reminded herself that few men ever made eyes at her anymore. She had allowed the thought that her husband's condition had grown worse because she had lost her physical attraction and he had channeled his urges into other, more destructive activities. Of course, she also knew that was not very solidly grounded since she had learned he had been gambling since his early twenties, as had his father before

him. She wanted men to look at her again, the way they looked at Marci with her lean body and blond hair. Marci like Belle was a true blond but they had diverged on how hard to work at keeping blond blond. But she wasn't Marci, and she was set on a path to find out more about who she was or wasn't. This meant she had to break away from the circle she had known and loved for decades. She had to do this on her own, absolutely on her own. Where she was headed after visiting her kids and her husband was to a South Pacific spiritual spa recommended by Pat. In their time together she had learned a lot about Pat's troubled life, especially in her early years. Pat believed her success in law stemmed from a spiritual-spa experience. At a low point with little else to fall back on she enrolled in a program that she had often ridiculed. It worked. But, like any good lawyer, she warned Belle it might not take in her case. Pat had said quite frankly that she thought Belle needed some time to grieve and after that she might be ready to push ahead without a spa experience. Belle thought that was possible because of what she had gone through years ago, but what appealed to her was the idea of something totally new, something totally different, something she had never thought of doing. In her religious circle a spa experience was an excuse for some kinky sex. So here she was, on the first leg of a kinky-sex experience.

A week later after some exhausting traveling, consulting and sobbing – a roller-coaster in every sense - she was back in her hotel room. Her bags were packed for a morning departure to Sydney. She had spent two days at the clinic including one day with the kids present. His condition had worsened. The doctors including an outside psychiatrist that the clinic routinely added to the roster in any such serious case, all agreed his mental state was deteriorating, although his physical state had not changed much. She had told herself and her kids she could never have prepared herself for what she saw. Her kids agreed. Never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined anything like this. The kids encouraged her to stick with her schedule and promised they would stay in touch with the doctors. Staying in touch with their father was of no benefit. He was thoroughly unaware.

The time had arrived to call Aaron. He had been on her mind, but, as the kids had counseled, she had to stick to her plan. She dialed his number, half hoping his cell was shut off. It wasn't.

---“Hi Belle, unless you're an imposter.”

---“I am an impostor, but who are you?”

---“I'm posing as an innocent waiting to be imposed upon. ”

---“I have no ideas what that means....”

---“And neither do I,” I assured her. “How's it going?”

---“If I know Marci, she's filled you in with several phone calls....” Belle heard him laugh “and so I'll just say he's almost completely gone, and unless they can reverse the chemical imbalance he will never be well again. I know I've done the right thing, and I also know my immediate plans, which I'll clue you in on, are the right course.”

---“Let's set the record straight on Marci – only two calls plus some briefs emails, mainly about you. I did not know your husband, but the whole thing saddens me. I don't know how you're pulling it all together the way you are, but I am ready to pitch in if ever needed.”

---“Thanks, Aaron. The immediate future is a spiritual spa. Shall I await for a reaction before I continue?” she asked jocularly.

---“Proceed, not sure how to define spiritual spa.”

---“Please, let me do the favor. A very comfortable place in the far Pacific with warm water, blue skies, good foods and personal redemption. Well, I’m not really sure about the last item. Words drawn from a lifetime of church attendance.”

---“Whether personal or not it sounds redeeming. Will there be a quiz at the end?”

---“Ha-ha, Mr Skeptic, if there is, can I count on some tutoring?”

---“Sorry I quit the redemption business in swaddling clothes. There may be a cliff-notes edition, however. But, on a more serious note, I don’t think this sounds all that bad.”

---“Agreed. I’m glad to hear you say that. I want to say to you in all sincerity, Aaron, as much I would like to become reacquainted again, I need to do this for myself.”

---“I feel the same urge to become reacquainted, and yet I’m afraid that the memories I have won’t line up with yours, and we’ll spend our time together trying to solve the puzzle. And yet I really do want to see you.”

---“Same fears and same desires,” she added firmly.

An hour later as our cells were dying I told her to stay in touch from the Pacific if she could and she said she would.

I poured myself an Armagnac and sat by the sliding glass door. Night was closing in and I had no plans. Not in the mood to watch Olbermann, one of those times when I wanted to sit and to mull. I’d been recollecting and reconstructing so much I wasn’t sure what world I belonged to. Besides the fantasies I had conjured up alongside of the remembrances were so at odds with my bio that I had begun to question my own sanity. My favorite philosopher, first discovered in Bob Harding’s PHIL 101, had introduced me to the idea of evil and the struggle it entailed far more powerfully than any preacher ever had. Camus’s evils remain but under different guises and seem less threatening now than before. Even Camus grew more optimistic after the demise of the Third Reich and before the Cold War. Those were cosmic events. On the personal level feelings of disorientation, uncertainty and emptiness – the yelp of the osprey – were less cosmic but no less monstrous. Time after time and even now I tried to keep the faith – soldier on. But soldiering was not getting any easier. Actually I had taught myself to soldier on without trying to figure out how to do it. That’s what I would fall back on again. Mulling is what I called it. Mulling allowed the muddling to continue with less intensity.

I was a historian as well as an economist, and yet I knew very little about how the concept of personal relationships had evolved over the ages. I knew some historians who studied relationships, but I had convinced myself that dramatists, poets and novelists had a better angle on them than the fact-seekers. I recalled a scene from Emmanuel Le Roy Laurie’s study of Montaillou, written when I was in grad school, about a male peasant and a female peasant, not married to each other but to others, and how they spent part of their illicit hours in a ritual of

picking lice from each other's body. Picking lice must be preferable to pecking away at each other's heart. Have we lost something in the last millennium?

I was subjected to a steady ribbing from Jeremy, Greg, Maxine and others last night at Speakeasy to the extent that they were making odds whether a 50-year-romance had any chance at all. The odds were not encouraging. I suddenly realized that tonight by myself, exhausted from trying to add up columns that didn't add up, I could sit with a sniffer of superb Armagnac in my favorite chair by the open door that allowed for a view across the city being engulfed in darkness without having to talk in relationship jargon or to resolve relationship messiness. Whatever burden I may have felt minutes ago had dissolved, thanks probably more to the Armagnac than any power I could summon. Maxine's mom was right – thinking about relationships only made them messier. The fewer questions asked the better. Of course she spent a good part of her marriage shouting with disdain and occasionally with anger at her husband – a good man but rather obtuse. I now knew I was sleepy, the best cure for bothers humans and animals.

The knock on the door startled me. It seldom ever occurred. Walking to the door I said to myself - have a peep-hole installed, someone could be gunning for you.

---“May I borrow a cup of sugar?” she asked as I open the door.

I shook my head back and forth as if trying to awaken from a deep sleep.

---“Marci? Have I got the name right?”

---“Indeed you do! Sorry, the sugar thing was just a ruse,” she said in utter confidence.

Somehow I got out “You're still welcome to sugar. Come in.”

---“May I bring my bags?”

I hadn't seen any bags, and then I realized the two bags were lined up against the wall of the hall.

She crossed the threshold with one bag, and I retrieved the other one.

We set down the bags, and like two high school kids with hands clasped in front we waited for the other to speak. She took the initiative.

---“I'm running away and I'm running to, that's the theme of my story...do you want to hear the rest?”

I knew I did, and I said so but, I added, not in the entryway.

A few minutes later we were sitting on the sofa, with glasses of champagne (always a bottle in the fridge but no time to warm up a bit), both feeling more comfortable than at the door.

---“Did it worry you I wouldn't be here?”

---“No really. I knew you had no plans to leave the city, and if worst came to worst I'd sleep in the hallway or in the JC.” With her hand on my knee, she inquired, “Have I upset you?”

---“Not in the way you’re using the word. But I didn’t have a chance to do what my mother always said had to be done before guests arrive – clean the bathroom.”

---“Would it help if I took care of that?” she asked, as she appeared ready to grab a mop and a bucket.

---“You came all this way to clean my bathroom?”

---“Not really,” as she sat back and turned her face toward mine, “no, I came to find out for myself who you are or aren’t...I couldn’t resist any longer. I had decided weeks ago, I’m not sure when, maybe months or years ago, my marriage was done. I couldn’t live with it any longer. I haven’t wasted my life as much as I missed the chance to do what I wanted to do. I love my two friends – you don’t know Lynn – I love my friends but my mind was always in need of more nourishment than I got. I simply learned to live with it. Then something happened or was happening. When I heard Belle’s full story a couple weeks ago, I began to cross that line once and for all. I’ll be perfectly honest, Aaron, once I started talking to you, I knew I wanted to cross the line come hell or high water, and I wanted to be with you even though I didn’t have the slightest idea what you’d be like in person or whether you cared to be with me even for a few second. I must say, in person you exceed expectations.”

I knew what was going to happen, and I wanted it to happen.

We “necked” on the sofa, a word describing an experience from our youth, an experience that today’s youth probably wouldn’t have time for or interest in. And we moved from the sofas to the bedroom, and we fucked away the rest of the evening and into the night. It was lovely in every sense. Our senior bodies melded together, we tried everything without any reservation, she was as passionate as she was attractive and when physical exhaustion set in, we talked for hours more. I’m amazed how after intense fucking anyone can have the mental energy to talk coherently about anything. A synopsis of two lives that had no past together but much in common.

I figured out sex with her husband had ended a while back. I didn’t have to ask. He had several different lovers during their marriage. Not even their friends knew. Each time when confronted he refused to stop playing around, always ready to remind her that she had no future without him. Ironically he developed impotency and his philandering stopped. Meanness became his trademark. In public and among families and friends they kept the façade intact. It was so debilitating that she decided whatever the risks she had to make her exit. She was smarter than he thought she was. She had figured out how to take a small family inheritance plus some of his money that was just sloshing around and to establish her own financial independence. She knew that on her own she was no longer rich and that he would contest for her money in any divorce, but she bolted anyway. She could end up being both poor and free, but at least the nightmare would end.

---“How did you manage to hold it together so that no one knew?” I had asked since I was never known to hold it together under similar circumstances.

---“Rich people are just not curious. If they start asking about others, they’ll end up asking about themselves. They don’t want to do that. Belle belonged to that contingent. His husband’s behavior had raised eyebrows just as my husband’s behavior had, but that’s essentially as far as

it goes. As torn up as I was on the inside, and surely it had to show from time to time, I was never asked and therefore I never had to explain. It might have helped if someone had asked or I had just decided to lay it out. That didn't happen. What mattered was the next event, never the past one. And the past, as it has turned out, particularly for Belle and me, is what finally caught up with us."

She asked about my messy love-life, and I told her all she wanted to know. About Belle, I said I was ambivalent about seeing her now, even though I couldn't e

ver forget what happened a half-century ago. It had never happened to me before – someone showed up on my doorstep because she was in love with me – and it hadn't happened since until tonight.

---"Is this teenage love in our golden years," she asked with humor in her voice..

---"As screwed-up as our relationships have been, we deserve some teenage puppy-love. Arf-arf."

Our lips locked as she slid under me. Another explosion after which we finally fell asleep.

I did not expect it, but my life changed after that night. It has been months since Marci arrived, and I can't remember that any past relationship ever went as smoothly as this one. At breakfast after our first night of love-making we drank Peet's (because that all I had) and ate donuts, a food passion we shared, in this case a passion for Dunkin Donuts that we could walk to a block or two away. I heard the rest of her departure story. She had retained the same divorce lawyer in Pat's office, and after several consultations in which the lawyer wanted to be certain that Marci was ready for what was ahead, they drew up the papers for divorce. Marci confronted her husband, and then with the help of her lawyer she moved to temporary quarters. Several days before she arrived in the hallway outside my door, in an apparently raucous session in which according to her she must have repeated No a hundred times, the papers were signed and the divorce was initiated. He could still cause her much, but she was utterly and unalterably determined to see it through. They had never had children so that was an issue that never had to be dealt with. She told her lawyer she was leaving town and had arranged to have her things stored – mostly personal things she had removed from the house – and she intended to begin her life somewhere else and possibly with someone else. She could deny her husband's accusations that there must be a third party – who was it he kept asking. She finally blurted out, Yes, there are many third parties from all over the Internet and maybe I choose one of them. He was so taken aback that the issue was dropped. Her lawyer told her that was a memorable performance. And there she was in my kitchen, having made her choice.

Over the next few weeks, with some rearrangements and purchases, she settled in. She met my friends, who were wild about her. Maxine took her in like a long lost sister, and to a degree that surprised me, because Maxine could be aloof. I asked Marci about that, and she laughed. Not to worry, she said, the boundaries were intact. Greg whispered in my ear one night, I take back all those comment, Eyeore. He and Maxine (and Maxine's mom) had fallen in love with this woman, as I had. Was I scared, was my stomach in knots, was I looking for an exit? Yes to the first two, No to the third. It was working, and I was willing to let it keep working. (And who's

advice was that?) Did it matter, I asked myself, that she was someone my age, or close to my age, and someone who was eager to explore rather than to demand and pronounce. Besides the future looked far different at my current age from how it looked when I was younger and they were even younger. I was tempted to speculate that had Belle and I run away we might have had a relationship like this. Who is to say?

We ate with Jeremy once or twice a week, and while Marci openly admitted her ignorance about contemporary fiction and poetry, she was making strides. Surprisingly she knew how to talk to Jeremy about Hartley and all the issues that kept rising to the surface. She had met Hartley, and they had hit it off. Not surprisingly Maxine and Marci became close female friend (as did Maxine's mom). From totally different backgrounds they came together at some basic level that worked like glue. Indeed Maxine convinced Marci to become a part-time cashier at Earl's. Marci's circle of friends only grew as a result.

Our time together was rich and full. I asked her once why me, in the eyes of my friends, an Eyeore. She said straightforwardly she was hooked after visiting my web page. How could she not be curious about a guy who wrote absolutely impenetrable, dense economic tracts but spent hours walking through museums and writing about what he saw.

And what did I see? A woman so centered that I could not resist taking the ride with her. And we both said that we loved the love-making. We had been in touch with Belle. Belle was not coming home anytime soon. She too was moving along a different plane that would not for the foreseeable future include anyone from her prior circle. She was in a place where the expectations for her matched up with what she was comfortable with. Yes, she said, I'm jealous, and watch out, Marci my dear, when I leave here. We continued to talk to her once a month or more.

Marci had made it clear no marriage, but a commitment. Was I up to that? She had no interest in playing the field. Not a sense of contentment for her. I agreed, and that's how it was evolving.

We both thought out loud from time to time, does the running ever stop? Possibly not. At the moment we were content to be running in place.