

## ON TRACK, OFF TRACK

---“You’ve lost your way.”

That’s useful, thought Joel, as he stared at the hole in his jeans. I told myself that, my friends have told me that, and now I’m paying \$200 smackers an hour for her to tell me that.

---“But that’s what you prefer.”

Suddenly the hole disappeared as he looked up and turned toward the therapist.

---“What?”

---“Joel, most people want a track and they come to see me when they can’t find the track. In your case you want an area, to wander through, for the lack of a better expression. You could put down a track, but you’d probably be unable to ride it now because you prefer not to.”

---“Is this dangerous? Should I be working on laying a track or on learning to wander?” asked Joel, now having spoken more words than in the previous 15 minutes.

---“I’m not sure you can decide yet. You’re not clinically depressed and certainly not suicidal. You’re fighting your way through a thicket right now. I suppose the risk exists that the thicket may gobble you up. But you’re in the business of risk so you can answer that question better than I can.”

---“I am in the business of risk, but I trade with discipline and knowledge, and I generally know where I’m headed. My job is to keep the downside surprises to a minimum. This wandering business sounds like the very opposite of that.”

Joel ran a hedge fund, and he had done well. His father was also a successful broker, but he had left all the high-risk betting to his son. For a hedge-fund manager Joel was more thoughtful and soft-spoken in demeanor than many of his peers. He had often thought he might have been more comfortable as a professor like his buddy, Regg.

---“OK, is there a next step?”

---“You might try some journal-writing. Not every day, not long entries, just some jottings about where you’re tramping around at the moment. The journal is an outlet, nothing more. It’s a conversation with yourself. You’re not Samuel Pepys. You’re Joel with a pool ideas, disappointments, frustrations and dreams rattling around in your head. See what happens to them when you turn them into words.”

---“A journal? My buddy, Regg, he has kept journals for years. They occupy a whole shelf in his library.”

---“Another lost soul?”

---“Maybe. Should I talk to him about this?”

---“Of course. Another way of putting into words that rattle in your head.”

A journal, thought Joel, as he left the office. Why didn't I think of that? A former lit major at Harvard couldn't figure that out. Probably the first thing I should jot down, as he turned the corner and pulled open the door to the gym.

He loved this place. Regg had introduced him to it. Regg was in his mid-sixties and has been lifting for a long time. His friends Dee and Nick owned the gym. They had a small clientele. Most of the members were trained by one of the owners. Regg was an exception along with a half-dozen other lifters who were long-time gym rats.

The gym was busy. Regg was at the squat rack with Nick, who was scheduled to train Joel in 10 minutes. He walked over the rack to watch Regg do a routine they called up and down the ladder. He started with two 25-pound plates, did five squats with Nick as his spotter, added two more 25-pound plates, five more squats, until he reached 250 pounds, the top of his ladder. Down the ladder was the reverse, starting at 250 and removing weights until he reached 50 pounds. When he got to the rack Regg was at 150 and heading down. Regg tried to do each routine as fast as possible but then allowed himself 15 second in between as he and Nick changed the weights. Regg nodded at Joel as he squatted. Nick said,

---“I'll be with you in a few minutes. I've got something new in store for you today.”

---“Get ready mentally when Nick has something new.” said Regg as he and Nick removed two plates.

He slid under the bar, lifted himself up, with Nick hand against his back, and started to squat. The burn in his thighs was almost unbearable, but he had felt it before and he knew he'd make to the end. Almost effortlessly he racked the bar, removed a plate as Nick did on the other side, said to Joel

---“My will is in the top drawer of the desk,” and slide back under the bar for his last set of squats. And then it was over. He racked the bar, removed the left plate as Nick removed the right plate, got thumbs up from boss who had taught him this routine and sat down on the left security bar on the side of the cage with a towel over his head. The next thing he heard was the voice of Mel:

---“I don't know, Nick, why you stop him at 250. Let him go all the way wherever that is.”

There was laughter, and as Regg lifted the towel, he looked squarely at Mel, who was almost as strong as Nick, a strong-man competitor and feared by almost everyone in the gym because of his temper. But the old guy was not afraid of him, and Mel so respected him that he once said aloud the next time I get married Regg will be my best man.

---“Mel, there's nothing in my will for you so don't be pushing the envelope. Besides I want to be around for that next marriage.”

Nick put his hand on Regg's shoulder and said,

---“Gotta run, good job – Joel, get dressed! – Mel, you've been living in the trees too long.”

Joel and Nick moved away, and Mel sat down on the other security bar.

---“How’s the tree business? Must be fuckin cold up there right now.”

---“Yeah, but I need the dough. I’m trying to save to fly across country to see my boy.”

---“How’s he doing,” asked Regg, who was one of the few people who could have a normal conversation with Mel.

Mel was a bright, personable guy in spite of all his gruff. Regg had attended a couple of the strong-man competitions to watch Mel. He had met his parents and had observed that Mel was a curious combination of the two, the sentimentality of his mother and the gruffness of his father. He wasn’t sure if the end result was manageable. Mel was trained as an architect from a good school but found life in an office surrounded by colleagues and calendars unbearable. Regg understood that. In his academic life he had managed to alienate almost every colleague, chairperson and dean he ever worked for. So Mel took to swinging around in trees, and he courted danger in every tree on every day because his methods were designed with that in mind. And Regg had embraced a quasi-exile from his department and the goof-balls he found him surrounded by.

---“He’s OK I think. My ex won’t let me talk to him very long and doesn’t want me visiting. But I have the right to do so, and besides I wish he were around.”

---“Well, think about how you can convince her that you’ve changed. Your business is steady, you have set a little money aside and you’ve quit whoring around since Winslow threw you off his property.”

---“The bastard. A camera in his bedroom.”

---“Mel, I told you before, you shouldn’t have been fuckin that woman in Winnie’s bedroom while you were supposed to be looking after his property. It makes a great story but not a great life experience. You got caught, and I believe your thick noggin learned a lesson. Right?”

---“He’s still a bastard.”

---“I agree, and you’re less of a bastard.”

Both laughed at this.

---“We’ve rested long enough, man, but think about how you can present the new you. Your kid’s worth it, your Mom will faint with joy and your Dad, I don’t know what he’d do.”

Mel smiled, put his arm around Regg, and said,

---“Don’t forget the next wedding.”

---“Is this woman going to live in the treetops or in your junk of a truck with you? You’ve got a few other fundamentals to work on.”

They parted with the usual lifter’s high-five. Regg never had any doubt that Mel would be at his side if he ever needed him. In fact, one day when a couple young wiseacres, who had just joined,

asked Mel, who's the old fart on the only leg press, Mel pushed both of them against the wall and said loud enough for Nick in the office to hear.

---"One more word about the old fart on the leg press, and you'll be doing all his chores!" Nick separated them and told the two they could have their money back if they left promptly. They did. Regg heard the commotion and then learned the full story.

---"Thanks, you guys, now I need a body-guard."

From that moment Regg had no doubts about Mel's loyalty. He headed for the light dumbbells.

Just then Dee walked. A big hug, and he could feel his juices flowing. A beautiful woman. He had not meant to fall in love with her because she was married and much beyond his league. For her 40<sup>th</sup> he had written her a love poem. The only thing she ever said and the only time she ever said it was I love you. But the days of romancing her were long past, and they were now just friends.

---"How goes it, my fair lady?" asked Regg.

---"Oh, my sister is driving me crazy!" replied Dee.

Regg knew the sister, another beautiful woman, in the middle of a divorce from her wealthy husband who was Regg's age.

---"And this time?"

---"She forgot to pay her bills or open her mail. The power company turned off the meter, and she went ballistic. I had to drive down yesterday and clean up the mess."

Dee was good at cleaning up messes, and in fact Regg had told her once that too many people depended on her to do just that. He often thought about Gerry Mulligan's *Unfinished Woman* when he was in the company of Dee.

---"So is the fridge running again?"

---"Yeah. How goes it with you? It's time for us to have coffee and catch up."

---"Good idea. Next week maybe?"

Another hug, more flowing juices and off to their respective assignments.

---"I don't know how you do it. Your 15 years younger than I am, and you hardly broke a sweat in the gym, and I'm utterly demolished," said Joel as they left the gym.

---"Time. If you stick it out, and most people don't, you'll find the rhythm. And how do your pecs feel after something new with Nick? A little scorched?" Regg asked with a smile.

The coffee shop was about three blocks from the gym. Almost everything they needed with in this part of the city where they both had condos. They had met at this coffee shop. Regg had been a steady customer since it opened because the owners had been undergraduates in his classes when he was teaching at the university. Joel had stumbled in, almost literally, as he had

tripped on the door seal. He was not in good shape that day. He had just moved into the neighborhood after surrendering his uptown, upscale brownstone to his ex. He needed an arm around his shoulder. The kids – well the kids in their 30s – were so good at welcoming people. They inquired if he was OK after the near fall at the door, and they directed him to the table where Regg was sitting.

---“This is the best person in the world to salve your pain, He actually owns the world’s pain factory,” said Alyse as she mussed up Regg’s hair.

---“Hi, I’m Regg, the pain doc. Are you alright?”

---“I’m OK. I’m Joel.”

---“We’re Alyse and Bernie, the owners. Please don’t sue. The first coffee is always on us. And watch out for his snake oils.” said Alyse.

---“Well, thanks, is he really a viper? I’ll take a single espresso, please,” responded Joel.

---“An espresso man, that’s an encouraging sign, and I gave up viping years ago. Alyse loves the past,” said Regg and he shook Joel hand. Alyse did not miss the allusion.

Joel had found a new home, and Regg a new friend.

The usual table that they sat at was full. The shop was very busy, not unusual for that time of the day, especially with finals looming. Alyse waved, but Bernie was nowhere in sight. Regg and Joel took a small table in the back corner. Joel found that reassuring since he wanted to talk about his recent session.

Two espressos were delivered by Alyse without any order or exchange of money. Regg had an account that he paid every month, and then if he was in mood would collect what his friends owed him. Alyse mussed his hair, and then went

---“Ugh! All those sweat beads.” Joel noticed she kissed him anyway.

She gave Joel a pat on the shoulder without knowing how sore even a pat was.

---“So how many squats today?” she asked as she knew Regg’s routine inside out. She knew Regg well and he her. When he met her he was already a skier, and on the spur of the moment she decided to teach him to snowboard at fifty-something. He had also slept with her before she and Bernie decided to quit fooling around with life and get serious about settling down. He doubted that either could settle down permanently, but he was a booster.

---“Nothing out of the ordinary. Nick sends his best. He may be by later,” answered Regg.

---“Great, all I need today is Nick to shout at me about getting my ass to the gym,” Alyse responded as she turned and headed back to the bar.

---“What a woman,” said Joel with some jealousy since he knew how close Regg and Alyse were.

---“No one else like her,” said Regg. He meant it. He could not imagine what his life would be like without Alyse, even if she no longer came to his bed.

---“Are you in the mood to be serious,” asked Joel.

---“I can be after a sip.” As he lifted his cup.

---“I had a session today. She said I was lost, nothing new in that, but then she said and that is what you prefer. I was all ears. What the hell did that mean? She said that I preferred to wander rather than to travel a track. At the time she was talking about this I thought I understood but now I’m not sure I do. Don’t we all have a track, need a track, prefer a track?”

---“Wow, she deserved her hundreds today. I’ve never thought I could stay on a track, but I never connected that with a preference for staying off the track. Somehow it makes sense even if it doesn’t.”

---“She also said I should keep a journal, like you, a journal of jottings rather than long, well-constructed musings. What do you think?”

---“Have you bought your journal yet?”

---“Not yet.”

---“Let’s go. Stabler’s down the street has a great selection.”

Regg was already standing. They took their cups to the discard counter, bid adieu to Alyse and left.

Joel chose a green leather journal, far more expensive than Regg has ever paid. That’s OK, thought Regg, because money’s not important under the circumstances. Comfort is the crucial point. Joel was comfortable with a \$100 book of stitched-together empty pages in glossy leather.

Both had Friday night obligations. Joel was meeting his parents uptown at a fancy restaurant to bring them up-to-date on what had become a contentious property settlement. Regg had gone through the same thing even though the property involved a few tens of thousands rather than Joel’s millions. A curious but useful twist in the state law that allows a divorce to be finished before a settlement is agreed upon. The problem was that if the proceedings were acrimonious, as Regg’s were, the post-divorce phase could be a real pain. And Joel’s had become a pain. Regg was glad he was as far away from those days as he was. Tonight he was going to listen to the jazz of Marian McPartland and Bill Charlap. A big event.

As he walked home, he thought once again how lucky he was to live where he did. He didn’t own a car, he used public transport and he could walk to all the outlets he needed to make his day. When he was married, he lived in the suburbs and commuted to the university on the days he came in to teach and meet students. He seldom interacted with his colleagues. He was a fish in the wrong pond. Post-divorce he and his ex disposed of the house, and he moved into one of the city’s neighborhoods. It had been rejuvenating.

As he opened the door his cell rang. He looked at the screen, and it was Kathy, probably the female he’s been the closest to for more than a decade and yet had never slept with her.

---“Hey Ms K, what’s up,” he spoke into the phone as he dropped his bag.

---“Tonight? Are you ready yet?” asked K in her no-nonsense voice.

---“What do you think?”

---“I think you’d better get ready.”

---“At the risk of...”

---“At the risk of being hogtied and dragged...”

Only K, with degrees from Barnard and Columbia, a well-established painter and commentator on things artsy and never to be found near a farm or pig sty, could get away with hog-tied.

---“That’s scary enough for me,” Regg said.

---“Good, now, the beverage bar opens at 7:15.”

---“How much time do I have?”

---“About an hour unless you have pets or kids, which you don’t.”

He headed for the bathroom, showered and shaved and dressed in his trade-mark unkempt casual. He was thinking about tracklessness, and he quickly concluded that most everyone he knew in his small world were track-bound people. One or two exceptions. Alyse wasn’t, and Joel is a question mark. K on the other hand chose the track because she had to, but her art, big lightly-brushed, solidly-dynamic, erotically-entangled abstract canvases suggested something different. But she was disciplined on the canvas as she was in life. He had once compared her to the West Coast abstractionists, and with the wave of a hand and a dozen well-chosen words she had compared him to an ass. Like Joel, she came from money and status, but Cap, her husband of too many years and a dolt, didn’t. But he had made money, tons of it, selling entertainment service to big businesses. Interesting thought, was she riding his track or her own or was she trackless?

He put up with Cap because he loved K, a good-looking 55-year-old with a mind and a talent that was as expansive as the universe. She had always been solely a friend (they had met at the university years ago) and would remain solely a friend. He had spent more time alone with her than any other woman the last 20 years and never once did they even muse about crossing the line.

After drinks they took their seats in the center of the auditorium. First half was Charlap and his trio. He does Hoagy Carmichael better than any current performers. True to the score but inventive and original. “The Nearest of You” brought tears to the edge of Regg’s eyes. In the Second half Marian appeared on stage. That economy of style fit her even better in her mid-eighties. She never played too many notes. When Charlap returned, they dazzled the audience with their good-natured dueling. He looked at K who was engrossed. Cap was barely awake. Improvisation must be music’s most direct form of tracklessness. Regg learned to love improvisation when he was in college and went to as many Brubeck and Desmond concerts as he could find. Improvise and learn to love it.

Drinks afterwards at a small café near the theater. Cap was in rare form, full of himself, that is. Regg had learned to answer his incessant questioning with one sentence because after that Cap took over regardless. As Cap babbled on, he watched K, and he realized for the first time she had tuned him out. If he were to stop and ask her a question, she might be stumped (although that seldom happened to her). But that would never happen because Cap was never known to stop until he had to use the john or pay the bill.

The next morning while Regg was reading his way through last week's NYT toward the puzzle, which he had come to hate under the new puzzle-master, his cell went off.

---“Hey Joel, what's up?”

---“The journal now has something more than blank pages.”

---“So how do you feel?”

---“Not much different, and I found myself trying to compose.”

---“Par for the course,” said Regg, “:and are you afraid to write about how you feel or have felt?”

---“The answer briefly is yes,” said Joel slowly, “as if someone is reading over my shoulder.”

---“You know, Joel, you're the only reading it and that may remain the state. You would also be surprised what's in my journals, probably not what you expect of me, because I spend a lot of time in tears, believe it or not. So many tears some of the pages soaked through. I can't say I'm proud of my lachrymose side, but on the other hand tears mean something. When I reread those tearful entries I'm bewildered because I don't remember the time or event I'm reading about was so bad as to push me down. You've met some of the women who've driven me to tears. And yet now I can't ever imagine tearing up. So maybe the journals did their thing.”

---“Interesting for a guy who regularly ascend and descend the squat ladder.”

---“That's funny,” said Regg, thinking that's one of the reasons I like Joel.

---“I didn't feel tearful, I just felt bewildered. I don't know if I can't write because I'm trying to figure the track thing or I just can't write.”

---“At this early stage probably hard to figure it out. Do you think it has anything to do with your parents, etc.?”

---“It's always a pain with elderly parents who've been married for 60 years and claim of course despite shitty moments never thought about divorce. I thought last night during this endless conversation that I've reached the limit with them and with my ex. You know I have more money than I'll need, and I'll keep making money, so why not get all this business settled no matter the cost. That might drive my parents crazy, but assure my sanity.”

---“A problem I never had. A lowly-paid professor who had pissed off everyone at the university ended up not being so badly off. I suspect a highly-paid hedger will do fine. It may be worth trying to write about what you just said to me. You sound ready to tackle it.”

---“I've never told you my respect for you arises out the mundaneness of your daily life,”

---“Did I miss the complement in that statement?” chuckled Regg.

---“Probably not. You don’t miss much. The things that bug other people, ironed clothes, manicured nails, foodie fads, circles of friends, bouquets of wines, gossip, etc., are non-existent in your world. It’s as if you have found a different cloud layer.

---“Improvisation mixed with cynicism. We may serve as each other alter egos and therefore distort how we should see things. I’m not above thinking that with some of your discipline before you discovered you were trackless I might have done more. Some of the things people like about me cause me more unrest than you may realize. How about dinner tonight at Le Joul? I’ll call for reservations.

---“Good idea. By the way you’ll love the puzzle this week.” said Joel.

---“I know you’re grinning from ear to ear, and no I won’t. Later.”

Le Joul was always busy on Sunday night. Lots of neighborhood folks eating out. Regg knew most of the people by name, and Joel, a more recent arrival, was very much liked by the neighborhood. It helps to be tall, rich and handsome and becoming more muscular. Marci, the young dancer struggling to hold it together, came over to their table. They both stood – why was not clear – shook her hand and reseated themselves. Joel had queried Regg the last time if he should ask her out. Regg’s answer was how many such disasters do you want to hear about? Regg could see that Joel was still thinking about it.

---“I assume you guys are coming to my performance Thursday?” asked Marci.

---“I have my ticket already, center about half way back,” answered Regg. He was in fact a season ticket holder.

With some chagrin Joel had to say,

---“I’m going to Europe the week. Sorry.”

---“Take me along,” she said almost touchingly, then she added “oh well, next time.”

---“You’ve noticed, I’m sure, in addition to being a renowned European connoisseur, he’s also working on his pecs,” Regg inserted.

---“He looks bedraggled to me,” and added “let’s get some food in him. The tarragon chicken is out of this world, and how about some champagne to celebrate.”

---“Celebrate,” said Joel looking puzzled.

---“Nothing special, just the night,” said Marci, and we did.

---“Should I feel smitten,” he asked Regg.

---“Write about it later after the champagne has settled in,” responded Regg.

---“What’s the youngest you ever dated?” came a question out of the blue.

But Regg had been asked it before and almost always condemned as soon as he replied

---“20.”

---“And does a 20-year-old call you an old fox, an insufferable leech or a pitiful cripple?”

--“All three and that would equal – a man without friends, lovers or prospects.”

The champagne arrived, much to Regg’s joy and Joel’s disappointment because it was delivered by M. Joul himself. Salutations were exchanged, M. Joul said they would like the chicken and they said you know why we keep coming back. M. Joul returned to the kitchen. Then came the food, and the conversation grew laconic. The chicken on a bed of vegetables was indeed superb. The dessert was the chef’s creamy cheesecake with a hint of lime, unlike the usual big-city dense, rubbery, tasteless stuff. They paid their bill, “bon soired” everyone and Regg put his arm around Marci and asked

---“Are you going to make it, pay your bills and all that?”

---“I’m working on it, but thanks.”

---“Give me a call if you run into any trouble, and Joel and I will play the role we are totally unaccustomed to – Good Samaritan. Seriously, if we can help we will, he from Europe and me from good old wherever we live.”

She gave them both a hug, and they departed into a cool, breezy night.

---“Maybe when I get back, I’ll take the plunge,” said Joel.

This struck Regg as odd because the last thing he expected from a guy so accomplished and poised was hesitation. He knew without saying anything that Marci would go out with him. Let him work it out, though. Divorces have a way of unnerving even the most confident, and Joel’s divorce is fairly recent. He remembered another friend’s divorce. He saw his wife riding away on the back of a motorcycle with a guy he did recognize driving it. The next phone call – self-explanatory. His friend beat his head against the wall for weeks. Joel’s ex also rode off only to reappear with lawyer in tow and a long list of demands. Regg knew about disappearances. At last count two dozen with most never making getting back.

They parted at the corner and agreed to keep in touch with all the electronics they owned. Regg took a longer way home. He liked to walk by himself. When he goes to Paris, two-hour daily walks not unusual. He was thinking one of the things that he had finally learned – perhaps why there were fewer tears – no matter how hard he tried to analyze a situation, he often failed to anticipate how it would turn out. That’s not to say that things always turn out for the best under these conditions, for surely they don’t, but rather let it happen.

The next week was moderately busy. Joel wrote that he was in Paris and soon to leave for Berlin. Regg worked on a manuscript he had been sent to try to solve a dispute between two referees and worked on his quasi-memoir. The dance recital was splendid. It was company repertoire in order to give the young dancers experience and confidence. It was surprisingly fresh and spirited. Chalk it up to the director who had joined this company after tiring of the endless fund-raising in LA. This company was small and well-financed in a city where every damn parent had a child in

dance. At the reception he met up with Marci, who was tired but thrilled with the performance. After an embrace and words of praise for her role as principal, Marci planted a kiss on his lips. She knew as did many people at the reception that Regg was not faking it about dance. He knew what he was talking about.

---“Do you want to send Joel a note?” he asked and handed her the phone.

Startled, she finally said “why not.”

He typed in the number and she the message.

---“Hit the send button,” he told her, and it was gone.

---“Let’s get some champagne and mingle” said Regg. This was a crowd Regg liked. Before they could lift their glasses, he could feel his phone vibrate. He handed it to Marci.

---“My god, he was a wake,” she said minutes later, “and he asked me out.”

---“So?”

---“Please tell me this wasn’t planned?”

---“Not at all. But my suspicion was his phone was on – it’s five o’clock there – in hopes of a call.”

---“Wow, I’m a bit unsettled. I said I’d go out with him.”

---“Take it in stride, my dear, and you can talk honestly with Joel. He’s in a business full of deception, but he’s a straight shooter.”

---“He is unattached, isn’t he?”

---“Very much so.”

The company director came by, gave Marci and Regg a big hug, said he was thrilled with performance and Regg patted him on the shoulder and said each performance makes it easier for their funds committee to do their job.

Reg turned down another glass of champagne and headed home. As he was pulling back the covers on his well-made bed – an utter and perhaps sole essential in his life – his cell rang. He thought it would be Joel but to his surprise it was K

---“I’m coming to sleep with you,” she blurted out.

---“Where the hell are you?”

---“Was driving around in the Beamer until I was sure you were home.”

---“I’ll meet you on the street.”

---“Don’t bother getting dressed, I’m already inside and waiting for the elevator.”

And in three minutes she was at his door. They fell into an embrace, not something they had done very often.

---“Hold me really tight,” she said.

He did and after a few minutes they separated and sat on the sofa. He detected no tears but lots of energy and emotion.

---“I can’t listen anymore to Henry Higgins, a really dysfunctional Henry Higgins. I’ve tried everything. Walking out of the room, tuning him out, turning up the volume on whatever was playing and shouting shut up. I want silence, a sound-proof room, at the very least a modulated conversation. You’ve asked about the kids and their distance from their parents, and now you can guess. I need some decades of my own. Years ago I insisted on separate bedrooms simply to escape. He talked while having an orgasm if he was lucky enough to last more than 30 seconds. I think his penis acted as fast as possible to hide away.” She paused.

---“We have never talked about him very much, but you must have known how I felt.”

---“Oh, yes, one sentence replies, very smart, except you only gave him more airtime.”

---“Hadn’t thought about it that way. Would you like a drink?”

---“I brought champagne, it’s a celebration, at least tonight. Down the road I’m sure it will be hell.”

---“How long have you planned this?”

---“Weeks. I knew you had a recital. I know your habits well enough to figure out you’d be home about 11:30 unless of course a co-ed came into your scope. I thought that was unlikely.”

---“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

---“Anyway, here’s the champagne and I know where the flutes are. Open!”

And pop goes the weasel thought Regg. He knew they would fuck, and they did. He could tell she was struggling at first, given those 30-second orgasm, but she soon fell into a rhythm that last for more than an hour. The old line, biking and fucking. They slept until 10 AM. She kissed him and caressed Jackson, as she had named his appendage. She turned on her phone, and it went crazy with sounds.

---“Oh shit, a grand symphony before coffee,” she said.

---“Guess who?” she sneered and then hit the delete button. “I called my lawyer last night and told him to handle it. Thank god I have my own money.”

His cell rang.

---“Joel!”

---“I’m on my way home early with a journal full of words and tears.”

---“Hold on, man. A journal is not a cure-all,” he said while K caressed his thighs.

---“They’re all muscle,” she whispered in his other ear, “nothing but muscle.”

---“Clear your calendar for Saturday afternoon after the opera since I know nothing can intercede between one and five,” said Joel.

---“It may be six, it’s Wagner, but for you and for me I’ll clear the calendar.”

---“For you?”

---“It’s too much to lay on one cell-phone conversation. Until Saturday.”

---“So what’s churning his butter?”

---“You’re full of farm analogies. A dancer. I can’t blame him. She’s a doll. But his disciplined life is under attack on various fronts. We can talk about it over breakfast. We both need some Peet’s, the only reason you showed up here instead of with the guy down the street.”

K stayed with Regg one more night. He discovered how well she had planned. She had leased a condo, had already furnished it and with Regg in tow unlocked the door Saturday morning, a day after the movers had finished. They had a quiet lunch so Regg could get home for Wagner, which K cared little for. Besides K needed time to take care of more than Regg was capable of dealing with today.

Joel showed up at 5 PM just as Siegfried, with a sword in his back, stumbled away to sing a poignant farewell to Brünnhilda.

---“I think this calls for a martini instead of champagne,” said Regg.

---“Martini is exactly right. Martinis signify change”

---“I wasn’t aware of that,” replied Regg, a long-time martini man.

---“Just made it up. Here’s what I have to tell you before my date with Marci tonight. I can’t move too fast because I have much of other people’s money at stake, but I’ve already begun to scale back in hopes of a complete exit in a year or so. That was a decision independent of Marci on one level but completely related to her on another. I don’t know what’s going to happen tonight. I’m far more out of practice than either of you. But I know I can’t try to live in her world and stay with my world. I don’t need money, but I do need to find the time to reorient myself. I know how to make money and now I want to try to find out how to do some things I’ve never tried before.”

---“Wow, I applaud. Just don’t try to conquer Everest tonight. Forget about the money, and let your good sense be your guide. Believe me, this woman knows how to be interesting and engaging. You’ll do OK if you let yourself breathe.”

There was a pause as Joel sipped his martini.

---“I’m in the enviable position of being on the ground floor with two rich people who want to shuck one world for another.”

---“I beg your pardon,” said Joel.

---“You and K.”

---“K?”

---“K walked out on Cap, spent two nights here and moved to her condo that she had arranged to lease weeks ago. If there was a punishment for premeditated divorce, she’d be put a way for a long time.”

---“So while I’m in Europe, writing my heart out, sleeping one or two hours a night, fretting beyond description, you’re receiving the entreaties of one of the most attractive women in the city?”

---“Life is unfair.”

For the next two hours until Joel had to pick up Marci, they talked about life the way good friends do. As they parted Joel turned to Regg and said,

---“Do you remember what Mel said at the gym; well, I’m also putting in a reservation for your services. Christ, I would never have even thought that a week ago.”

---“Listen, lots of rain and snow will fall, lots of words and tears will cover your pages, lots of wandering around will fill your day before you need a best man. But tonight just have fun.”

Joel put a hand on his Regg’s shoulder, smiled and said,

---“Thanks, and you too, you old fox, former leech and all-around screwed-up male idol.” And he left.

Regg needed some time but the cell ring.

---“Hey, are you OK?” he asked.

---“I am. How’s Joel?”

---“Madly in love before his first date. He’ll get through the night and probably the rest of his life.”

---“My kids are in town, at the request of their father – I think he sent a limousine with a CD that contained all the details and more. I said I would talk to them tonight. They’re on their way over. Can you deal with that?”

---“You bet. Why don’t you call me when it’s calmed down. I’m staying home.”

---“Thanks, and I love you.”

Before he could respond he heard the click.

He poured himself a Maker’s Mark – bourbon for this occasion – and turned on Audra McDonald’s “Build a Bridge.” He picked up his journal and pen,

“I usually start each entry with a recap of my dreams from the previous night. Many of those entries are just ? because I can’t remember. I could start this entry with a ? because I don’t know. Actually not entirely true. Some things I can figure out----

With K my past works against me. She knows it better than anyone. I must confess, though, I learned some things about her in the last 48 hrs. I didn’t know, could never have guessed. Our history is too long for us not to remain friends; it’s also probably too long for us to remain lovers, as much as I may wish for that----

This divorce will be every bit as hard to finish as Joel’s. Divorces suck up energy even as they sometimes energize. K wants out & she’ll get out. Messy, messy, messy.

K shot into my life in a way I was unprepared for. Am I ever prepared? Hardly. Never am. She knows how foolish I’ve been, and I know how few times she’s shown such foolishness. I’ve got thousands of journal pages to prove it. She’s never mentioned keeping a journal.

Joel, on the other hand, will learn some things tonight that will slow him down. What Joel doesn’t know is how well I know Marci & her ex. Already 1 marriage, 1 divorce and not yet 30. I know her story and her ex’s story. I know where her ex is & why. Joel will learn all this. It will test his trader’s mettle. I’ve not told Joel this. How far should a friend go in such matters? I don’t know, I truly don’t know. What I fess up to will depend on what she says----

I hope they connect. Joel needs someone like Marci now. She’s smart, experienced. Joel has trader’s toughness, Marci, personal. Their backgrounds are diametrically opposed, but I have reached the point in my thinking where I’m not sure that matters. Look how unopposed Joel’s and his ex’ backgrounds were.

Use that \$100 journal, Joel, it may serve you well----

No way to sort out whether people are on or off the tracks, want on or off the tracks. Like other analogies it can help to focus the conversation. It did for Joel. Never crossed K’s mind. Can’t speak for Marci. Cap keeps trying to build his own spur. It’s a device----“

He put his pen down. He looked at the art hanging on his wall. He loved his collection, but he had ignored it today. Each piece with its own story. For part of his life he cared little about his own stories, only the stories written by others. For this part, his stories are front and center. Doug, who talked him through his own divorce, kept reminding him to unlock, focus on yourself, what’s your story. It worked except he never found the balance between the two sets of stories. He has told his own stories so many times he’s not sure what the original was. His eyes fell on The Gala. He loved that painting as he had once loved the painter. It’s a story he can’t forget and may never tell except to himself. The one story that he keeps retelling to himself and can’t quit retelling. Sometimes he wishes he could. Life is just messy, tracks or no tracks.

He emptied his glass. He picked up his pen again. “I Think It’s Going to Rain Today” sang Audra. The music stopped. He put the pen down and closed the journal. Enough. You learn that after a while in the journal business.