

WHO KNOWS?

I had finished my Smith Cage routine and was sitting on the security bar with my face in my towel when I heard the unmistakable sound of Tara's voice.

---"You spend a lot of time hiding in terry-cloth."

---"Not a bad idea," I responded as I lifted my head from the towel.

I had run into Tara by accident, more like a crash-bang, several weeks ago. Both of us were signing in at the counter ruled over by the principle owner, Katie, who seated herself on a fire-engine-red bar stool with a high back. It took a few seconds to realize that we knew each other and another few seconds to decide if we should acknowledge we knew each other.

---"I hope this is temporary," spoke Tara first.

That caught Katie's attention.

---"Afraid not. At least a year. How are you after how long?" I finally got out.

---"Not as long as I had hoped. What happened to the beard and the pony-tail? You look older," and with that she walked away.

---"You will need protection, that I can see," said Katie sympathetically.

---"Woe is me! You can guess what might have laid the groundwork for this conversation. I knew she lived in the city, but I never thought I'd meet her in the gym. Her attitude toward workouts in our previous lives was 'only on the eighth day of the week, thank you'. It won't hurt her from what I can see."

---"She joined a month before you arrived. Should we believe in fate?"

---"I live with the fear of colliding universes and out-of-control fates. Sorry you had to put up with a couple of feuding ex-lovers."

Before the reunion at the desk we had not seen each other or spoken in a decade. After I discovered her art on-line, we had exchanged a few emails and I had bought one of her paintings. In those emails she was courteous but not forthcoming, and then when I asked by email if I could attend her latest opening, she read me a new riot act. That was the last contact until the gods, who so often fuck up my life, decreed the desk meeting.

Looking at her now after so many years, she was rounder and plumper and certainly meaner. Always small in stature she never looked overweight. Now she did. Regardless that round face centered by deep blue eyes still drew me in. And that was happening as she stood in front of me.

---"How'd the show go?" I threw out without knowing what to expect.

---"You have a knack for raising the wrong subject. That's why you were told not to attend."

---“I followed your orders. I did look at the new paintings on-line. I liked what I saw, but that’s about as close as I’ll ever get since the gallery owner won’t ever let me through the door by your instructions.”

---“You pissed me off.”

---“There was a time when I didn’t. I like to remember those days.”

---“I have no idea what you’re remembering,” she said glaring at me.

---“Didn’t mean to cross the line,” I said in what I hoped would be taken as genuine penance.

How this woman combined cool and savage in one body I’ll never figure out. When we first met, it was only the cool I saw. I was warned by friends who introduced us that she had her moods. But since we’ve parted ways, it has been savage I’ve known. Why was I was trying to have a conversation with someone who did not like me and had disowned our past?

---“So the critics didn’t like it,” I continued gently even though I knew what the few critics who saw the show had said.

Being a glutton for her punishment I was willing to endure another verbal blast to find out what she thought. Since I’d discovered her paintings on-line a couple years ago, I’ve taken an interest in her career. I told her in one email, to which there was no response, I found her canvases so sensuous as to be soothing and so unpredictable as to be menacing. Critics had not been positive. Cute, superficial and unmemorable were words that often showed up in their columns. I’d even seen juvenile and confused. But they missed the essence as far as I was concerned. The personality of the artist and the essence of the painting may be one and the same. Images of everyday things painted in soft, alluring colors will divert your eyes from more ominous things and colors. A vortex, unobserved, will suck you in. Cajoling and bewitching at the same time. Her canvases had a way of turning on the viewer as if to say “Gotcha ya”, maybe even “You asked for it”.

Wasn’t that how she got me into her vortex that I was still swirling around in and trying to escape from? Maybe I was reading into her canvases how I felt about our troubled past rather than what she intended. Our stories about that past were very much at odds and would remain so since there was little likelihood we could ever sit down with wine and sort out the differences. We’d now spoken several times since our re-acquaintance, no more than five or ten minutes each time. Why she talked to me at all was incomprehensible, except to remind me how much she despised me. Was this some form of punishment for past sins for which I was largely responsible? I was no closer to figuring her out now than I was a decade ago when she told my friends she wanted to go out with me. We did, and here we are years later snarling at each other in a gym removed from where it all started. What I did know regrettably was that despite it all I liked her then and I like her now. I shouldn’t. I should walk away from her and her paintings. I won’t. I know better, but I don’t. These gym encounters have only reaffirmed what she made clear a year ago. “You have no place and have never had any place in my world.” She believed I had no part, but why have I kept remembering the part I had? Who was lying on top of me on my apartment balcony? Have I told it to myself so often that I’ve totally rewritten it? Even now I can’t take my eyes off her snarling lips that always turn up to the right. What would surprise a person just meeting her for the first time is how swiftly that sneer can become a smile, the dark

can become light, the vitriol can become high-spiritedness, only then to revert to what they were once your guard is down. Thank god she's married. Otherwise I'd be a candidate for falling at her knees only to be kicked where it hurts.

---“What didn't the critics like about your paintings?” I asked, not giving voice to my other thought, besides you.

---“My style is “lite” like beer, too bubbly, all foam, no depth, no body,” she replied as if well-rehearsed.

Not true, I thought. Besides I knew her body firsthand.

---“Why do you think they miss what you see and some of the rest of us see?”

---“They haven't slept with me?” she shot back, demanding a reply.

---“Well, there is the question of professionalism. Shouldn't they be able to see merit without knowing the body?” I hoped this would be an acceptable response.

---“My father has even joined the chorus of doubters. At my latest exhibit, which I ordered you to stay away from, he said my big canvases don't work. The parts don't add up to a whole. You own a part – why I let you have it I don't understand....”

---“You didn't let me have it, I bought it. I like it, and I'm not complaining, but for the sake of the record....”

---“Fuck the record. I should take it back, but you'd fight me all the way to the hell. You're as bull-headed as I am. Nice on the surface, unlike me, but underneath we're the same – you push, I push back, you, then me...it's endless.”

She was right, even in our best times we sparred. Perhaps we knew each other better than either wanted to confess to. The most revealing thing about this conversation, which I shouldn't be having with her, was its confessional nature. Notwithstanding what she said in our last email exchange – I don't want to be friends, I barely knew you years ago – she did have memories.

She turned and walked away. I re-entered the Smith Cage and did another set of squats. I was vain about keeping my butt, not letting it turn into a backside slide that so many aging men were plagued with. Of course I wasn't sure they ever felt plagued. After finishing the routine I resumed my place on the safety bar. Looking across the room I could see Tara on the StairMaster, a machine I had assiduously avoided and would for a new but obvious reason continue to do so.

As I turned the corner to my place I was asking myself: back in Tara's whirlpool by accident or design? I'm not at all religious, don't even care to answer the question, is there or is there not a god, and yet I think about fate or the forces and energies that make fate all the time. Her I was in the same city and in the same gym with Tara, a woman by any rational analysis should never have entered my life.

I landed in her backyard because a long-time friend had asked me to take over his graduate seminar for the Fall Semester at the university where he had taught for some years and where as

graduate dean his deanly duties had left little time to teach. I was able to extend the stay to a full year because my university owed me a semester off. My temporary salary was big and the workload was small – that’s what deans can do. And after the Fall Semester my home-university salary would kick in. The dean’s secretary, whose family was in the real estate business, found me a loft to lease for the year. Money was not an issue. I was going to use the year to finish several manuscripts and think about when and if I should take retirement.

Even though I knew this was Tar’s backyard I had said to myself I was not dumb enough to try a third go-around with her. The gods were having a good laugh over that personal resolution. Tara was back even if under the restricted conditions of gym face-offs. I never expected this and hadn’t yet come to terms with it. I couldn’t get my body out from under hers. I climbed the stairs to my living quarters, I hadn’t engineered this reunion, but neither had I done what I could do to escape from her presence. Of course, I was finding out that the truth I didn’t want was the truth.

The loft, which I had dubbed The Space, was a deal-closer, as the dean knew it would be. I had renovated largely with my own hands several different properties, but I had never lived in a space as open as this. I disliked interior walls and small windows. There was little to dislike about The Space. The loft was also furnished with more furniture of modern or contemporary styles than I owned at home. I decided to have some pieces from my own art collection shipped to the loft, including Tara’s piece which I had dubbed “Caveat Emptor”. Now the artist and her canvas were closer than I was prepared for.

As I spiffed up The Space, I wondered what Tara’s reaction would have been to a nickname – Hooch – a handle she never knew me by because I had more or less abandoned it in my mature years. But a few colleagues in the city knew me as Hooch, and thanks to the dean all the seminar students knew. He spent 10 minutes discussing my nickname to the amusement of the assembled group. At the end of the introduction he warned students that they should not be misled by such an unscholarly appellation, for like those “hooch” runners in the Southern Appalachians during the prohibition years I would require them to navigate the most treacherous paths in order to deliver the goods, what he hoped would be legal goods. It was a bravado performance, which was why he was a dean, and why I was still Hooch.

With a fake feather duster in hand I found myself standing again in front of her painting. It brought me pleasure, even though I also taunted by it. Right now it was the artist rather than the art that preoccupied me. I had no doubt that the artist would bury me alive if she could and then dig me up to bury me again. I decided in the interest of universal peace I was either going to change gyms or change times. Yes, that was what I had to do. I walked to the kitchen to finish the preparations for the food court to accompany tonight’s seminar. If I had to be slapped around by Tara, this was the best day for it. The seminar was the high point of my week, and I had no doubt that while she had been front and center for the last couple hours she’d soon fade to wherever she lived most of the time. I often wondered if she lived in and ruled over another brain in my head.

I had asked the dean why me? I was seldom on anyone’s list to be a visiting professor. I was not active in professional circles. I did not serve on panels, or attend conferences, or deliver papers, or sit on boards. Nor did I seek visiting professorships. Right here in the city there were probably as many as a half-dozen scholars who could have filled the bill. The dean’s response was that it was about time I had some much-deserved exposure. He knew me as a maverick, and more to the

point, he knew I'd come to cherish the role, even nourish it. He was the opposite, more active as a professional than as a scholar. His earlier research was innovative and sound, but he'd given up scholarship for administration. He had continued to teach and accept graduate students, some of whom were among the brightest young scholars, but he had reached point where something had to give. I assumed he was destined for a university presidency, and the abandonment of his last teaching assignment was in preparation for his next move.

I also knew that, as dean (with the support of the president, who was a former classmate and a close friend), he had rankled his own department because he was trying to revamp graduate programs including theirs. In the modern era where information was quickly and easily accessible and undergraduates entering graduate schools were far better prepared than ever, departments should, he had said to me, get rid of the hoop-jumping mentality. I basically agreed with him. A few times over coffee or wine, when the dean and I were physically in the same place, we talked about these issues because in my early career I had served time as an academic administrator. Although we were not intimate friends – I knew little about his personal life nor he knew little about mine – we could on a scholar's level converse with ease and pleasure. We disagreed about how to interpret datasets and trends, but these differences never became a barrier between us. The dean had more or less ceded the disputed historical turf to me because I was still digging away and he wasn't.

He had often urged me to spread my wings and to join him and others. And I just as often refused. The sky was full of honkers and crows. I had no interest in flying with them.

The truth was that I always felt more comfortable as the outsider. I had never relished the role of the insider. Unattached rather than attached. Unfortunately that attitude spilled over into my personal life with messy results. I tended to make decisions professionally and personally that reinforced my hermetic side rather than my gregarious side. I couldn't explain this to myself let alone others. It wasn't that I couldn't connect with people. I could, but when I did connect at some point I had the urge to slide back into the comfort of the hermit.

As a child, I remember I wanted to be included, but I always stayed on the edge of the circle so I could escape if necessary. As an adult more often than not I lost the need for inclusiveness and pretty much stayed outside the circle.

When the dean's invitation arrived, I had to ask myself if he had an undeclared grand design in mind. After making further queries by phone and email I couldn't detect any such design. It appeared he had decided (since his budget was paying the salary) to hire me because I would bring a different and perhaps fresh perspective to the program. This was most evident in the fact that description of the seminar was rewritten for this one occasion to emphasize the relevance and applicability of number-crunching to historical analysis and to invite graduate students from outside our area. I could handle areas outside my own because I had in the last decade branched out myself. As I assessed where I was in my own life, I decided I had almost nothing to lose. I had several manuscripts close to completion and assumed I would finish them during this year in the city, and even though I had sworn off dating a couple of years ago, I was ready to indulge my pleasure in visiting galleries and museums, attending concerts and recitals and discovering new eateries. For several years relationship messiness had been held at bay except for Tara's blast at my attempt to rekindle a friendship. After receiving the dean's invitation and thinking about it I

felt ready for a modest reengagement with human kind to the extent that would occur with this new teaching gig in a totally new setting.

As has happened from time to time in my life, I was ready to change course. Home was comfortable and predictable but a bit long in the tooth. The city seemed like the right move before I fly away into retirement. As a temp, I could hang out around the edge, being attached when that felt right but not being pulled into the center, which almost never felt right.

Tara was not drawn into any part of the picture of life in the city as it was evolving in my mind. That she became a part of the picture could not be avoided. Maybe the gods were not being so cruel and vindictive. Perhaps seeing her in person and listening to her invectives face-to-face I could finally come to terms with her and us. I would see the light, so to speak, that she was not the person I wanted her to be.

The dean made it clear while I was a member of the department I was ultimately responsible to his office. He had been granted funds to bring in outsiders who might stir things up a bit. He was not looking for revolutionaries. Rather he was looking for people with solid scholarly credentials and with a willingness to engage students on a different level from the normal seminar approach. He was not asking outsiders to become his agents for change in departments. In fact he went to some lengths to insulate the outside appointees from departmental politics. Whatever “shaking up” might come from these appointments would be indirect. He knew my approach was unorthodox but certainly not revolutionary. I generally did not assign reading lists, bibliographic essays, literature reviews. I asked students to attack the numbers in the very first class, even though some of them had never seen a dataset before. After the dean’s unexpected introduction, I handed the students a dataset I had created specifically for that first class, and we went to work, in this case with the dean present, an uncharacteristically quiet presence. My technique was to ask a series of questions that would allow even students with the least background in numeric analysis to be engaged. After an hour we took a break. The dean departed with the comment “just about what I expected,” and flashed a big smile. I was not sure how to read that comment, but for better or worse this venture was launched. But I had nothing to lose whether I won his approval or the department’s disapproval. I was on academic terrain I could handle.

The seminar met in The Space because there was no reason not to. In this wireless world – this university was ahead of most in this regard - I didn’t need an office, although I had a small space, or a classroom. All the students had their own laptops, and I could send files to them and receive files from them. Since I created and managed two web sites where scores of datasets and other related materials were stored and to which new datasets were being added, the students had direct access to everything they needed. During the seminar itself we’d all pull up datasets or tables or charts, relevant to the discussion, on our laptops. In all the years I’d been teaching about crunching numbers and actually crunching the numbers the capacity now to do it as a group made the experience so much richer. All that time I used to spend preparing on paper what I wanted the student to study could now be devoted to analysis – at least that’s what I told myself. No denying it was different from the days of mimeograph and ditto machines!

While I favor a free-wheeling discussion, I left as little as possible to chance. The previous summer I had prepared all the data and ancillary files that the student would need. I anticipated few weekly preparations because so much of the work was already done. What I did not anticipate was that several outsiders, not students but professors, had asked if they could attend,

and even though the seminar was limited to 10, I said yes. These were scholars who had experience in contemporary data analysis, like trends in government figures, but who were moving back into time and studying historical datasets. That required some skills in how to assemble data from sources that were suspect and incomplete. While they knew far more than I did about the various analytical tools that were more applicable to modern data collections, they wanted to know about how to judge datasets within their historical context. That brought an additional dimension to what we could do in the seminar. They were more than willing to offer some tutorials in addition to what I was doing, so once the seminar was underway I was making some alterations to the schedule so I could call upon their expertise. We were six weeks into the semester, and for some reason, controlled by a different set of gods, I'm sure, this seminar was working better than I had hoped. It helped that the students were bright and the other attendees were into it as if they were students again.

I gave letter grades because I had to. Most if not all would receive the highest grade. For my part I regarded the extensive evaluations that I compiled on a continuing basis week-by-week of each student's progress as more important than the letter grade. There was little that they would all receive the highest grades. I would share these evaluations with the students, and at the end of the seminar I would give each student a small packet of my materials concerning their accomplishments as well as their weaknesses. It would be their choice if I should deposit the evaluations in their student files. Following each evening seminar because I was such a night owl I usually spent a couple of hours updating their evaluations based on their performance that evening. With my laptop on throughout the session it was easy enough for me to insert brief comments on a student's performance, and later I would expand the comments into a more formal critique. I had developed this style of teaching and evaluating at my home university.

Except for the Tara problem there was no observable downside to this venture that a year ago was not even under consideration. But I had consciously or unconsciously always organized my life around downside rather than upside. Although the physical universe had found a way to neutralize anti-matter, I was sure that a substantial volume of it had been dumped into my own little personal universe. My life compared to many others was not a very convincing demonstration of my theory, but from inside my own universe the blow-ups were many and nasty. I'd come to prefer to live with the prospect of more downside than upside because that might inspire more upside. It must be genetic. My mother used to think the same way but without all the molecules and atoms. How else can I account for it?

My unexpected gym encounter had thrown me slightly off schedule. Tonight was a deviation from the usual: a guest performer, one of three I'd arranged for. As I finished the preparations for the evening my cell went off. I checked the number on the screen. I recognized the caller was that performer.

---"Hello Richard."

---"You can't be in the middle of something or you couldn't have answered the phone so smartly."

---"Your uncanniness continues to dazzle me. How are you?"

---“Asking myself why I accepted this invitation. I’m not sure I’m equipped to deal with so many brainiacs in a large open space. I prefer dummies in a small, closed space.”

---“Make sure you pin on your tail before you leave home, Eyeore. It will improve the symmetry.”

---“No way. Without my tail I can plead incompleteness. It’s my constitutional right.”

---“Have it your way, as you will and always have. Just be here tail-attached by 6. I will serve your favorite pasta dish, and I’m about to open an expensive Chianti. You should feel right at home. And need I remind you these are smart kids. So you have about two hours to pump up your fret level. And don’t forget your laptop. We live in the real time here, not in some Princeton 60’s bubble you’ve crawled into”

---“How we’ve remained friends I do not know. If you hadn’t upset the applecart with all your regressions that meant scuttling decades-worth of received wisdom on colonial economic growth, we’d all be ensconced in our tenured worlds with obsequious students and comfortable hierarchies. You’ve screwed it all up. When are you upstarts going to learn to conform instead of confront.”

---“Well said, as usual, without any regard for the truth. I can see that this will be a rollicking session. Your mood is perfect. And to think you’re working your way into a lather without much encouragement from me. The students will love you. By the way, no reciprocating. House rules.”

---“Always the devil in disguise. Have the students figured that out yet? I don’t have time for an answer. I need a nap to calm down.”

And he hung up. So typical of Richard. He could do this seminar in his sleep, but he’ll act as if he’s giving his first college lecture, and worse it’s all my fault. His public persona was well-known across the professional world that we both belonged to. Once I gave a paper he had written to be delivered at a professional meeting, which at the last minute he could not attend. The room was filled with colleagues of ours plus many newcomers who were misinformed that fireworks would ensue because of the membership of the panel. These panels tend to be weighed down in unctuous sincerity. I was not originally part of the panel, but because I lived nearby I was filling for Richard. I knew the panel members, and I knew the fireworks would be muted. We disagreed more over how to use of the data, rather technical differences, than how to interpret the period under consideration. After the first two papers the newcomers had grown restless because the conditions needed for fireworks did not appear to be in place.

When I rose to read Richard’s paper, the third and last one, I decided on the spur of the moment to try to read it as Richard would. I had some stage experience in high school and college, but I didn’t know if I could pull it off. I had to present that hang-dog demeanor that he was known for, and I also tried to drape myself over the lecture as he did to underscore further a scholar’s fretting. For the first few minutes through the first two pages the room came alive, with more laughter than I’d ever heard at any similar panel. I knew the contents of the paper well, so once I had the attention of the audience I began to summarize the essential points and then on my own made an effort to contrast Richard’s finding with those of the other panel members. The latter provoked a series of questions that allowed my panel colleagues to toot their own horns and for me to expand the Richard persona. It turned out better than I thought it might, and later at the

inevitable evening cocktail party I was toasted as the Richard clone. No objections from me because I'd long thought Richard was the best economic historian in our field.

At 6 Richard showed up and handed me a piece of fabric shaped like a tail. Then he abruptly turned, bent over to highlight his ass and pointed with his finger to a spot where I was supposed to attach the tail. I refused to accommodate him, pleading bad eyes, and we both had a good laugh as we walked with arms around each other's shoulder into The Space. He had been here for drinks several times since I arrived so he was familiar with the loft. The table was set and we sat immediately since we had only an hour before the students arrived.

---"So HUUUGH, what's up. You know giving up Hooch is a mistake."

---"Takes less time to write, and it's not been retired," I shot back.

---"HUUUGH is totally devoid in color or texture, you know. What won you fame and fortune was not your rather one-dimensional research but your nickname – a Hooch could only be a once-in-a-life-time academic superstar."

---"The students know the nickname, thanks to you-know-whom, but they still call me Dr whatever."

---"By the way, to bring you up-to-date on professional gossip, which you never have any to share because you never talk to anyone, guess whose name is changing again? A hint, you used to screw her...."

---"You're kidding!"

---"Not only not kidding but her new husband is your old nemesis. How screwed up will she be now?"

---"Is she going to live in England?"

---"Well, he's not going to live here, and from the West Coast to the Isles is a hell of a commute every other weekend."

---"I hadn't thought about her in a while. How many years ago? We hooked up after our respective divorces. Fucking every night. She insisted on a 10 PM bedtime with an hour for fucking. I was exhausted after two weeks."

---"At least you got two weeks under your belt – I'd be done in two days."

---"Not if you pinned your tail back on. By the way she remarried her first husband after me and then divorced him for a second time. I couldn't use the word "fuck", but I could do it however I wished. Oddest romance of my life."

---"You were more of a Hooch than a HUUUGH in those days. I'm enormously jealous of your many conquests against my meager record. Unlike you, though, so constantly on the prowl with all the disappointments that such brings, I've lived in virtual tranquility."

---"You're damn lucky she stayed with you and your perpetual grayness."

---“Don’t I know that, thank you. Let’s talk about tonight...,” and so we did. Richard would put on a premier performance I knew, but he required some pampering. He was trying hard to rely more on the laptop than pieces of paper, but he did bring a few graphs and charts with him. A security blanket, perhaps.

Another strong reason for doing this temp gig was the fact that Richard and his wife had moved back to the city where they had grown up two years ago after a long stint in a no-name southern university. Richard and I and sometimes Lynn, who was much busier than Richard because of her administrative duties, tried to get together for coffee at least once a week, and several times since my arrival last summer we’ve met at restaurants of their choosing for an evening of good food, wine and conversation. Being natives of the city they knew where to find small, often family-owned eateries that featured limited menus, fresh ingredients and simple dishes. I loved these treks down narrow streets, each with its own rhythm and voice, a mixture of shops and residences, a part of and yet apart from the big city. Being back in the city had boosted their spirits. In the last few years both had lost their elderly parents, and, for Richard the death of his father had been almost traumatic. On the other end, as should happen, their two kids left home, graduated from college and took off to grad school about 3,000 miles away. The hole in their lives was amply filled with their new city life.

Richard was the second of the guest appearances I had arranged with the help of the dean. The first was by a noted economic anthropologist from another university in the city. I knew her work but had never met her. Her special interest was how indigenous populations adapted to new economic regimens as a result of conquest from the outside. What most impressed the students was how economic data could be assembled from sources that were not heavily numeric. Her patience and skill in explaining how economic anthropologists worked with their sources had provoked a lively discussion. The dean had assured me she had ample experience in explaining economic anthropology to those outside the field. He was right, again.

Richard’s approach would be different. Since the students were by now pretty familiar with standard historical datasets, he would walk them through the datasets that had a much lower reliability score. His reputation was based on his skill not only to assemble useful datasets out of bits and pieces of data but also to incorporate them into more reliable datasets so as to enrich the analytical framework. For the century in which he worked he could ask different questions that elicited different answers about economic trends. This was especially relevant because the analysis he offered upended the dean’s paradigm that had dominated for more than a decades. The other relevant fact was that my research on the previous century had served as a foundation for Richard’s work on the next century. It’s worth noting that we all remained friends, on speaking terms, despite the upheaval our research had caused.

The first half of Richard’s presentation would have the feel of a lecture, but the second half would be more free-wheeling with Richard trying to engage each student for a few minutes and also trying not to lock up his computer, still a nemesis in his life.

The third presentation was three weeks hence, and tonight I was to meet Deidre, who had called to ask if she could attend. She was a visiting professor/researcher at one of the university’s institutes, and from Richard I had learned that she had also become a candidate for a chaired professorship in Economics here. Her specialty was international currency markets, but recently she had pushed her focus back into the early modern period, especially the links between Europe

and China. Several years ago I had posted an essay that challenged earlier estimates of silver bullion exports from the New World to the Far East, corrected errors in several widely-used datasets and offered new estimates based on reworking the printed datasets. She had apparently read what I had posted and thought my estimates were reasonable, based on what she had learned about currency transactions. I was looking forward to meeting her, and I alerted Richard to her appearance tonight. He was pleased. I never saw Richard show any reluctance to engage as many as possible in his quest.

Because Richard had just published another “big” book on post-colonial trade, I’d spent about 30 minutes last week highlighting its major themes and suggesting how to approach the datasets that he had posted on my web site and would walk the students through tonight. Despite his fretting, he was always well-organized and prepared. This was the last session before the Fall-Term recess, and I’d also announced last week there would be no specific assignments over the recess, but once back they could a heavier-than-usual workload and perhaps a somewhat faster pace in order to complete the assigned topics. Finally I warned them that Deidre’s presentation would require some familiarity with several arcane economic theories, and for those who lacked the background, they should consult the links to tutorials that I had listed on the web site.

As Richard cleared the few dishes, I made sure the buffet was ready.

---“Not a bad pasta dish. Your creation?” asked Richard with a smile.

He knew full well the answer. I was not crazy about pasta and never fixed pasta dishes in my kitchen.

---“Well, thank you,” I replied. “One of my favorite Marcella Hazan recipes. I only fix it for my best buddies. It barely takes any time at all.”

---“That’s because you bought at the Italian deli down the street. I doubt if Hazan would approve, but I do, and that’s what count,” he said with brio.

With The Space now ready we poured some wine and waited for the arrival of the class. At close to seven the bell sounded and I zinged the door downstairs. More than half the class showed up in the first group, and minutes later other groups arrived. The attendees spread themselves around the wingback where Richard was seated. Some seated themselves in chairs or on the sofa, but some preferred to lounge in large pillows on the wooden floor. As usual the group included the regular outsiders and several outsiders who come to hear Richard. Also two or three spouses, partners or lovers of the enrolled students had joined us. It was a full house. As yet Deidre had not yet made her appearance. I decided we should start, at least we should introduce ourselves since about a half-dozen were first-timers. As the introductions were ending the bell rang one more time. Before I could comment, Richard asked impishly,

---“Ah, Professor Chilton, is this bad timing on our part?”

---“Most definitely it is,” I replied as I buzzed in who I assumed it was Deidre. There was no Intercom, but a peep-hole provided a wide view of the landing outside the heavy metal door. When I looked I saw not one but two people, a female who must be Deidre and of all people the dean, or at least that’s who appeared to be on the landing. Once I opened the door, there was no mistaking who it was. At 6’4”, slightly bent, losing hair and showing a pouch, he was still a

commanding presence. We shook hands, and he introduced Deidre to me. I ushered them into the room and presented them to the assembled, I couldn't help but observe the mixture of facial expressions. Everyone knew who the dean was but not all had met him. Richard may have been the only one in the room who knew both the dean and Deidre. That they arrived together was curious to me if no one else because it did not appear that they had accidentally met outside at the corner of the building.

I asked the dean to make the rounds while I opened some more wine. This was the dean at his best. He not only introduced Deidre but he also spoke to each member of the audience. He had a surprisingly amount of information about each student. As I was preparing the wine, I was trying to eavesdrop on these brief one-on-one conversations. I poured wine for him and Deidre and for other who were ready. While still standing I commenced my introduction of Richard. I then turned to the dean and asked if he had done the assigned reading for the seminar. Hardly necessary, he said, since he laid the groundwork for Richard's stellar contributions to the field. True to an extent, but actually more stretch than truth. His scholarly work had ended 20 years ago, and until he entered administration he had been coasting on those early accomplishments. Richard had galloped right by him and had left him, so to speak, sitting in the dust. Much of the dean's writing since had been in the form of bibliographic essays at which he was a whiz. Richard now owned the field in which they had earlier competed for recognition, competed I say because they had come to almost diametrically-opposed conclusions. To no surprise Richard had the weight of evidence on his side.

For 45 minutes Richard held the class in awe. The fact that he reacquired his city's accent helped. He knew the topic so well that there was not a wasted word or phrase. Several times he asked the attendees to look at the tables and graphs on their computers and on the sheets that he had provided and to pay close attention to certain irregularities that must be accounted for before patterns and trends could be described. He also cautioned them not to read too much into the statistical results because crunching historical numeric series often missed the softness or the incompleteness of the data themselves.

A few years ago he had been critical of some of my research on the grounds that I had used regression where I shouldn't have. He was a stickler for following certain rules, most of which were based on common sense. Did it look right? Did it fit with what we know from other sources? Did it come off as cute and clever rather than persuasive? We had conducted a friendly argument about my regressions in print, but even though I stood by them, I always kept his comments in the back of my mind. He knew what he was doing and saying. A European economic historian, whom we both knew and liked, had applied stepped regression methodology that changed the parameters with each run so that he ended up with dozens of coefficients that he then used to test certain trends. The results did not square with what some of the rest of us had found so that the journal that decided to publish his findings did so with commentary from other scholars. Among the commentators Richard took the least admiring stance. Regressions beget regressions beget regressions with results that beget nonsense. That more or less summed up his views. Beware of numbers from calculations for the sake of calculations. He was proven right as more discreet analyses were undertaken in the wake of the publication.

As a member of the editorial board he had recommended against publication. But the editor of the journal was dazzled by the numbers that he did not understand. There was no escaping Richard's influence in shaping the research in the general field that we both worked in and the

dean had once worked in. Richard and I had drawn a line in our continuing conversations. The fact was that I knew the data better in my period than he did and similarly he knew the data better than I did in his period. We had divided up the research globe in a sense. We had friendly discussions and disagreements about interpretations, but we seldom contested over the datasets. In Richard's eyes, of course, both the dean and I had gone apostate because we were now pursuing new interests far outside the area that had united us as colleagues and friends. I doubted that Richard would ever grow tired of what he had been doing so well for a long time. I had no interest in doing what the dean was doing – have done that in my youth – but I wanted to try my hand at some new things.

At the end of his formal presentation we took a break and gathered around the buffet. Twenty minutes later we began the discussion. I was pleased that the students were the first to ask questions. As usual they were prepared. Six weeks ago they could not have even framed the questions. They had come a good distance. After the students had exhausted their bag of questions, Deidre raised some technical issues. To what extent had Richard relied on estimates in order to enrich the dataset and what standards had he used in making the estimates? As always Richard was straight about how he had built the databank and how another method of estimating might have altered the results slightly. The fact was Richard was so meticulous that he had tried as many different methods for estimating the lacunae in the dataset as he could. And he welcomed another approach that he had not tried. He was always on solid technical grounds but always looking to make it more solid. I did not permit intellectual brawls, and there was no sign, even as the dean posed some questions, that a brawl was about to break out. At 9:30 I adjourned the discussion, and the seminar morphed into a social event.

With dessert served and drinks in hand the crowd broke into small knots of conversation, and I made certain I circulated through them all.

---“Many thanks for letting us attend tonight, Dr Chilton, or may I use Hooch. Is that truly a nickname you go by? Amazing for an academic,” I was asked as I joined one knot made up several I had just met for the first time.

---“Hooch it is, and it's up for sale,” I replied.

---“The most amazing thing about the dynamics of this seminar,” he continued, “is that the students in the face of so many high-powered academics seldom seem intimidated or inhibited.”

---“I don't have a ready explanation. I had a similar experience a decade ago when I was invited to teach a year-long seminar abroad. I think it may help to be temporary. I'm not a part of the local scene, and except for Richard and the dean and one or two others – Tara flashed through my mind – I'm unknown in this city. That gives me a certain amount of freedom that permanent appointments may not have. For me and the students it's pretty much a clean slate. In an odd way because we are new to each other the students and I can share an unencumbered enthusiasm for the subject. To hell with the politics, if you know what I mean.”

---“I share that view,” said Sasha, one of the enrolled students who had just joined the group. “I'm new to the program, and I'm not familiar with the rules of engagement yet. I barely know the professors or the students or whatever the parties may be warring over at the moment. That will end as I become more connected to the program, but right now I'm rather enjoying the

outsider-observer role. It's scary at times but not the first time I've found myself in such a situation. I'll miss the clean-slate phase."

---"I'm not scheduled to teach this class again here, but if I were, I suspect I would feel more constrained than I do now," I offered in response to Sasha's comment. "The more you exist within the system the more you have to respond to what the system expects. That's not always bad, but now I'm enjoying that unfettered feeling. If things work well, as I think happened tonight, I'm pleased. If they don't, I try to make some course corrections – excuse the pun – but I seldom agonize about the failures.

---"Failure is not a word that Hooch understands," came the voice of the one and only dean in the room followed by laughter. He joined our group.

---"Failure is what makes the world go round and why we need hooch," I shot back and then raised my glass.

---"Have you ever met another Hooch?" asked someone in the group.

---"I have met a couple, and recently in one of those odd Google moments I ran into a cat named Hooch, whose death was being memorialized on-line. Lo and behold, the article included the name of the woman who taught me to ski years ago. I had lost track of her. She has long had an interest in abandoned or abused animals. She had rescued the cat and found him a new home. Actually she had named the cat Mooch but the new owners changed it to Hooch. Unfortunately the cat only lived another year or two. The coincidence of a cat renamed Hooch and a rescuer who I knew a decade ago left the impression I shouldn't be so dismissive of the nickname I've been trying to shake for most of my life. I think friends still insist on using it because they're amused in a way I'm not any longer."

---"Did you get in touch with her?" asked someone.

---"No, not yet at least. Sometimes it's best to leave old friendships buried," I said as I thought again about Tara. I didn't want to think about the cat rescuer.

---"So is Hooch a family nickname or something acquired later?" asked Sasha.

---"Family. They had nicknames for everyone. My father called his first cousin Daniel Dieter even though his name was Paul. My aunt called her husband Timothy, not Tim, even though his own name George was not much different from Timothy in terms of popularity. A double curiosity with my younger brother who got tagged Larry Wayne – a name with no connection whatsoever to any living or past family member. When my mother was asked she simply replied that she liked the sound of it. But, then, my father could not avoid a nickname, Larry was and is still known as Butch. In my case I think Hooch came from the sound of combining Hugh Owen Chilton, but I'm not sure how."

---"I can tell you how good a sport he is about this handle," interjected the dean. By then Richard, who was one of the co-conspirators in the story the dean was about to tell, had joined the group. "We arranged a panel discussion to celebrate his *magnus opus*, which Richard called the best of a generation, and while more of his colleagues may have known him as Hugh than

Hooch, he was introduced as Dr. Hugh ‘Hooch’ Chilton after which there was a resounding chorus of ‘Hooch, Hooch, is good for what ails you!’ And we lifted our glasses after the chorus.”

As that knot disbanded, I moved on. The crowd began thinning fast. Some with family obligations left shortly after the seminar had ended, and as the hour approached 11 only a handful remained- Richard, the dean, Deidre and two students. The dean was in an expansive mood, and, as his closest friends knew, he could be expansive even when he should have been withdrawn.

We were all standing by the big window that offered a view of the neighborhood. The conversation had turned to the view and the weather, and within minutes the group had gathered up coats and briefcases and headed for the door. We all tramped downstairs to the street

On the way to the street the dean turned to me and asked if I was free for lunch tomorrow? I said I was.

---“I’ll meet you at Sheila’s at noon or 1 PM.”

---“I’ll choose 1 PM. It matches up with my sleeping habits better.” I said, afraid to ask why this unexpected invitation on such short notice.

---“Good work tonight,” he said with a tap on the shoulder as he and Deidre entered their cab.

In the meantime Richard had hailed his own cab, which a student was going to share with him. I asked Sasha where she lived, and she told me she lived in the neighborhood and would walk, and I insisted because of the hour without any resistance from her I would escort her home. Although a cool, autumn evening, the sweater I had donned earlier was all I needed.

The near-midnight walk through the neighborhood was pleasant and with no apparent risk. Sasha and I talked about living the city and being lured by its many temptations.

I asked her about Kendall, a long-time friend and colleague, who, I knew, had been Sasha’s undergraduate teacher, and I was surprised when she said she had not seen him for several years but last winter when she was completing her applications they talked by phone and exchanged emails.

It was obvious that several years had intervened between graduation and now, I asked what had transpired during the time. Had I spent more time with the students’ dossiers, which the department had made available to me, I would have known about the hiatus from her academic studies.

---“My undergraduate major was history plus work in econ and math, both of which come easily for me but either of which I’m much interested in. My father is trained in business economics and has worked for West Coast investment houses and banks. I have more interest in history – I need to proclaim that loud and clear now, don’t I? – largely because of Kendall,” she said almost sarcastically. “He’s a demanding but compassionate teacher, and I found the way he approached history challenging. In his senior seminar we read your work as well as Richard’s and the dean’s. Your approach is different – the questions you ask are harder to answer, if you don’t mind my saying – but my coursework with Kendall is now serving me well. I have a sense at times that

I'm further ahead in my understanding of what you're trying to do than the other students. Richard's presentation was fairly easy for me to follow because Kendall had Richard's permission to assign an earlier draft of what was published as his book...."

---"I'm not surprised to hear this about Kendall," I broke in as we reached her building. "I have no doubt your grounding is solid. Why then the hiatus and what, I suspect, is some uncertainty about continuing in the history program? I think I should be more in tune with the students' dossiers than I am. I tend to procrastinate about things like that, sometimes never getting anything done. I knew you were Kendall's student, and I should have asked earlier."

---"What you don't know and what is barely mentioned in my dossier is that I have another career. I've been designing jewelry and peddling my creations since my mid-teens. I took no classes in design at the university so this side of my life doesn't show up on the official transcript. I'd got my training by attending various summer institutes and working with master West Coast jewelers. No artists in my immediate family, but strong support from my parents to explore as much as possible. It turns out my paternal great-grandmother was an amateur painter. Some of her paintings were in the attic of my aunt's house. She was quite good for having no training whatsoever. Her paintings have been rescued from the attic, reframed and hung on walls of homes of family members. I've been influenced by what I see in her paintings. She loved to experiment with pastels in unexpected juxtapositions, but for me what was more important was the power that derived from the simplicity and the leanness of the design. That has carried over into how I design my jewelry. After graduation I had to make a choice, more schooling, find a job or do art. I chose the last. The summer before I graduated I worked with a sculptor, my first experience in that medium. I decided to pursue sculpting rather than jewelry, although I continued to design and sell jewelry. I apprenticed myself to Nevada sculptor. Last spring after being accepted here an exhibit of my sculptures at a small Bay gallery sold out. I had second thoughts about grad school, but I stuck with my decision. The dean had written me a personal note, although I had not met him until tonight. He also told me you would be teaching in the fall term so he could devote the time to some important administrative matters. Kendall, who knew about my artsy background, encouraged me to give grad school a try. I was caught in that legendary battle between the right side of the brain and the left side."

---"I agree it's worth a shot, but you won't get the party-line from me. Getting an advanced degree can be a pain in the ass. It appears that you have talent to do history, but ultimately you have to decide whether your heart is in it. I'm sure learning how to sculpt can be a slog, but it's a different kind of slog from learning how to be a historian. I must confess that in my mature years I want to work the right side more than the left side. I just haven't figured out how yet. I have no artistic talent at all, at least none that I'm aware of, but one avenue by which I can exercise the right side is to write, not history, which I've done over and over and over for a third of my life, but stories. For the most part I've been writing them in my head, but since I came to the city I'm turning them into actual words on a screen. It's a different, even odd, experience. Instead of trying to create a narrative based on documents or datasets in front of me, I'm trying to create one based on what's floating around in my head. Sometimes I feel as if I have more than one brain, and ideas or experiences keep jumping back and forth among the various brains, imaginary as they may be. The brain that governs my day is the one I'm most familiar with, but the other or others can intrude and do with regularity. Especially when I'm writing stories unlike history I

almost feel as if I'm working out of another brain. I find myself talking to the characters who momentarily exist in the space where I'm working. Do you ever talk to your creations?"

---"Maybe so. I talk to myself while I'm creating, but I never thought of this as talking to the creations. Do the characters ever talk back?" she asked with a laugh.

---"Only in my head I'm afraid. I'd really freak out if they actually had voices and moved their limbs and made physical contact."

---"You're right, though, about the process. Studying reports or tables and then trying to write about them is different from studying a piece of metal and then trying to subject the metal to a design floating around in your head. It obviously helps to make a sketch first, but even then it's almost as if the metal dictates how to proceed. I've done both for some years, although after my hiatus from history I'm a bit out of practice. It's been challenging the last couple months to raise the concrete world of studying those documents and datasets to prominence over the imaginary world of shaping and manipulating a piece of metal. One thing I know already is it's hard for me not to be using the right side of my brain as much as I have in the past. As an undergraduate I did my class-work and still spent 20 hours a week in a studio. That's not possible now. Even if I had a studio, it wouldn't be. If I continue with grad school, I can't imagine that I won't spend summers in a studio. I realize that is a heretical position. I should be spending those summers doing history. I sketch a little every day, and, if past experience is any guide, I'll begin to turn these sketches into full-blown designs that I eventually will want to make. I really don't know if one can be a practicing historian and sculptor at the same time. It's hard to imagine doing history as a hobby. In my case it's also hard to imagine doing sculpting as a hobby."

---"Will you return next summer to Nevada to work with your teacher or in your studio at home?" I asked what seemed to be natural questions.

---"No," came a firm answer. "We're a neurotic group. I used to work such long hours at home I drove my parents batty. And my teacher, if I were to return, would drive me batty. My teacher and I become lovers. We ended up arguing a lot in the studio as well as in the bedroom, so the time had come to move on. Besides he had a long-time partner, another artist, who would swoop in from wherever she lived and painted, and I'd be hidden away. It was funnier than the comics. No, I'll rent a studio somewhere away from my parents and my ex.

---"But your ex must be excited about how well you've done unless..." I ventured.

---"You're right to add unless...my rise has coincided with his eclipse. I'm afraid he had one idea, and it's run its course. I learned very little design from him, but I learned how to use the tools and materials. Unlike my jewelry, which is small and exquisite – it speaks in a soft voice – my sculptures are large and soaring – in contrast a loud voice. He taught me how to execute on the large-scale, but he never taught himself how to reinvent the large-scale."

---"Any chance I could ever see some example of your creations?" I queried.

---"I'm not surprised you asked. I couldn't help but notice the art on the walls. Yours or the owner's?"

---“It’s all mine. The walls were bare when I looked at The Space so I had my own art packed and shipped. I can’t live without art on the walls, although I’ve had a tough time living with some of the artists.”

---“I told you, we’re a neurotic group. As opened-minded as my parents are they could never figure out what was happening between me and the sculptor. All my boy friends in high school and college fit a set of molds that fell within their experiences. The sculptor didn’t. Even I had to ask myself why. I wondered if artists have trouble stopping the creative process. Loving this guy who was older but not wiser was a creative venture in itself. Anyway, I’m glad to be beyond his reach. Three artists brawling in a small space would be disastrous. It’s been a whirlwind for the past decade, not what I expected when I began my teen years.”

---“What a story! It’s late, and I should get back, but perhaps we could pick up from here over a glass of wine and even dinner. You could bring along some photographs of your work, if you have any”

---“Yes to both questions. As you must know, every artist carries a large portfolio around just in case someone asks. My roommate hasn’t quite got use to my roomful of photos, sketches, videos, etc. If wine and dinner are appropriate – I’m not familiar with the local rules since artists have none – I’m game.”

---“We’ll establish our own rules. I’m perfectly comfortable with it if you are. If you’re in the city for the recess send you an email as to a time. My calendar is pretty open,” I replied.

She said she had decided to stay to get ready for the final rush, but a little socializing would be welcome.

We parted, and I thought on the walk back what a gem. So talented, and yet so low key. Her written work – what I had seen thus far – had a flow not unlike her conversational language. At times it was a little too sparse. Usually with students I was pleading for fewer words, but with Sasha I was asking for more words. No doubt in my mind she could do either history or art, and no doubt either which would probably win out. I should ask the dean tomorrow about her admission? He may end up volunteering the information since he must have known she would be enrolled in my seminar. In her mid- or late 20’s with notable accomplishments already. How many of her peers could boast similar achievements? How different from my generation, at least the slice of my generation that I knew. Athletics more important than academics; music, art, literature of little consequence. I stumbled around with piano, clarinet and violin lessons without any progress whatsoever. In high school never asked to write a serious essay or encouraged to let loose my imagination. Not true of everyone or every high school in my generation but certainly true of my classmates. For me personally, as I thought back over my teen years, I was driven less by the need to accomplish and more by the need to escape the world I was living in. I was not abused nor neglected. My childhood was not traumatic. I just wanted something different. Did I think if I changed my surroundings I would then realize my goals, except I don’t remember I had any goals. Change for change’s sake? I had little to show for it until later in life, and even now the list of accomplishments was modest. I’d thought about the differences between my generation and the generations of students I’d, and my conclusion, hardly profound or unique, was for whatever reason or by whatever pressure, successive generations were more accomplished.

As I climbed the stairs, I recalled how Sasha in conversation at least was noticeably relaxed and unpressured. Despite her accomplishments she seemed bent on further explorations. I don't think she was afraid of the changes these explorations might bring. Reading too much into this brief conversation, I was sure, I further speculated that she may welcome the prospect of change. To spend a year in grad school away from what she obviously was good at and could make a living from didn't seem to weigh that heavily. If grad school didn't work out she'd move to the next phase.

I understood. If I couldn't keep moving, I was done. Relationships, friendships, even a marriage had failed on the rocks of longing. Moorings scare me. At my age I should be seeking moorings, and yet I kept seeking the opposite. In a strange way we were both here in this setting having arrived from different experiences to figure out what we wanted to do. For me, after the dean's invitation arrived, I took no more than a day or two to decide that I'd have a better shot at figuring out how much longer before that fateful step called retiring could be taken. I realized I'd been living in a kind of mental and physical stasis. I had unknowingly moored myself to routine. The dean's invitation was a way out at no great cost. I called the dean back in 48 hours later and without ever seeing the contract took the plunge. This could not exactly describe Sasha's journey to the university and the city, although we shared in common a need to get out and get on, no matter the risk.

As I turned the corner to my place a corollary thought on escapism smacked me in the face. Be careful what you long for. I ended up not just in proximity to Tara's world but in her world. Dumb and smart at the same time? I had never erased Tara but I had buried her. Now she was standing directly at eye level with her head cocked, her lip curled, her hands on her hips, and saying I dare you.... As late as it was I was ready for a drink. I also had work ahead of me.

The cell was blinking when I woke about my usual time mid-morning. I dialed up voice message. It was the dean's secretary's sweet voice. The dean, she said would meet me at 1 PM at Sheila's Café about 15 minutes from my door. I was supposed to call back if inconvenient. It wasn't inconvenient, but I called back anyway. I loved talking to the dean's secretary with an accent from one of the city's neighborhoods where she was raised and where she raised her own kids. She knew how to organize the dean's day as she had pretty much organized the days of her kids, her husband and her aging parents.

---"Dr Chilton, how are you," she asked in utter sincerity, so typical of her. "I hope I didn't wake you."

---"And if I told you that you did, you'd say it's about time I should be getting up, no?"

---"Would I ever venture to tell the faculty what to do?" she said without missing a beat.

---"It's a good thing you do venture once in a while, and tell the dean, one o'clock is fine. By the way what am I to expect," a question I knew she would finesse.

---"You haven't been fired. Don't make yourself so scarce around here. We've not had any of your wonderful chocolates for a while."

---"Only looking out for your health, but your point is well taken. I will make amends soon. Keeping the staff happy is essential if anything is to get done around here."

We disconnected and I set about brewing my Peet's and squeezing some oranges for juice. The thought of cereal made me gag so I grabbed a yogurt, which came close to making me gag as well. Jacques Pépin once said on TV he only drank coffee for breakfast. That would work for me as well, although I would add willingly orange juice and a piece of chocolate cake. But because the doctors kept reminding that I needed roughage to stay healthy, I played along as if cereal, yogurt and the like were central to my life. Now, eggs and bacon, or sausage or ham, that was a breakfast.

I switched on the TV to the business channel so I could learn to endure further disappointment with the performance of the market. I maintained my own portfolio of investments, and under the current DC crowd whose mantra was everyone be damned I was losing more money than I had in 30 years. This was why people died with their boots on. The powers-to-be made sure that we wouldn't be allowed to slip off our footwear and lounge pleasantly in our favorite Lazy-Boy for a few years.

As I walked to Sheila's, I couldn't help but speculate why this luncheon was even taking place, especially after the dean showed up last night for the seminar. I assumed I was going to learn something but what I hadn't a clue. When I reached the Café, I was surprised to find the dean already seated at a table outside. The fall weather had not yet driven us inside. After a handshake I sat across from the dean.

---"I have chosen the wine, if you don't mind. Actually Sheila chose the wine. To a very successful session last night. It only confirmed that I made the right choice," intoned the dean as we raised our glasses.

---"Thank you, but you make it sound as if the power of appointing is more valued than the appointee."

---"As usual, you're on the mark. It's the appointing that makes the appointee. Straight out of Admin 101."

---"You're more expansive than usual. I'm grateful for the brilliance of the appointer, believe me. But I've also known you too long not to ask, what's up?"

---"Your tenure as an administrator left you more cynical than most. After we order, I'll tell you what's up "

We both knew that Sheila's luncheon special was what we would order, especially since we could both observe she was headed to our table.

---"We have a limit on the number of troublemakers allowed in the Café at one time. You've exceeded the limit," she said without fear or apology. I had been coming to Sheila's since I arrive last summer, but the dean had been steady customer for several years and had introduced me to Sheila last spring when I flew in to discuss the offer. Unlike so many American cafés Sheila's had a limited menu that changed daily. Bistro food, I once told her, only to learn she had trained in France, had been married to and divorced from a French entrepreneur and had returned to the city where she had grown up to open a café to rave reviews.

---“We’re having lunch so I can defang this troublemaker,” shot back the dean. “I’m hoping that your *cassoulet* with this hearty Bordeaux will do the trick.”

---“He’s not about to be defanged anymore than you are. But the *cassoulet* will divert your attention to what’s pleasurable in life. *Bon appétit*,” and she left.

As the dean sipped his Bordeaux. I could see he was in a pensive and serious mood. I took some pleasure in drinking Bordeaux with him because I had introduced him to Bordeaux while he was teaching at Chicago where at the time Napa reigned dominant. He sat back as the waiter located plates in front of us and the steaming *cassoulet* in the middle. He asked if he could spoon, and we both answered in the affirmative. That would be the last we would see of him until dessert and coffee unless we had request or complaint. Sheila trained her staff not to be inquiring about the food. Let the clientele eat. If they were unsatisfied, they speak out, especially in this city, and if they were satisfied, they’d be back.

---“Now that we know both the Bordeaux and the *cassoulet* are more than we had expected, let’s turn to your expectations, let’s call it your future.”

---“I’m please to learn on this beautiful fall day at a wonderful café that serves a 3-star *cassoulet* I have a future. You know, unlike Richard who gropes his way into despair, I expect to be swallowed up in one big gulp – that will be it. No future.”

---“Well, for the future you have at the moment - is that a *non sequitur* – here’s my question: can I lure you to remain at the university as a temporary-permanent faculty. After that performance last night, even if it were a one-shot event, I have no doubt that you merit appointment – not because it’s me appointing but because it’s you delivering.”

I did not respond immediately as I finished the last of the *cassoulet* on my plate. I had yet to look at the dean after his last comments. He was smart enough to allow me time. In the meantime the waiter arrived with the dessert sheet - three items, all of which I could have ordered at once. I chose one and answered yes to the espresso question, and the dean, who never ventured near a gym or a machine declined dessert but ordered an espresso.

---“At the moment I’m committed to the prior arrangement. One-semester temporary appointment, a semester off in the city and a return to my home university. My thinking hasn’t changed,” I said finally and with a degree of finality.

Before I could say more, he advised me that the department chair would be calling me soon to discuss the same topic. He thought that discussion might go better if I had some warning. This conversation had to be confidential.

---“It would be disingenuous for me not to say I’m honored. I truly am. Thus far this had been a better ride than I’d prepared myself for. I can’t imagine it won’t hit some bumps but, even so it may remain a better ride than I could find anywhere else. In an odd way its temporariness may account for its good feeling. It’s not that the thought of something permanent hadn’t crossed my mind; it has. But the fact is I feel freer because there is no commitment beyond the agreed-upon end at which point I’ll bow out. My home university remains a commitment but less and less so with time. Eventually I’ll flee that. If I accepted an appointment here the whole cycle of being

committed starts all over again. Not that I couldn't flee at some future time, but that's the problem, some future time."

---"As if I hadn't thought about these possibilities," broke in the dean. "I knew from the outset that unlike 99% of our profession the prospect of a permanent appointment at a prestigious university would hardly be a lure for you."

---"Likewise, I assumed you had taken that into account, so there must be more," smiling as I spoke.

---"There is, but only after a liquor. I'm heading home after this," and with that he motioned the waiter and then ordered the best Armagnac that was hidden away in Sheila's private cabinet.

---"The best may not work its magic," I warned with obvious pleasure.

---"Your department chair wouldn't understand this conversation. He has been driven all his life to move up, and when he encounters someone who has the qualifications to do precisely that and who shuns it, he concludes the person's not worth the effort."

---"Bingo, the reason we have so many dysfunctional departments," I threw in with knowing results, the dean's famous chuckle.

---"I've talked to the Provost and the President about you, but more about how your appointment would represent an important shift in how some departments with big graduate programs need to adjust. Both officials in public and private have warned department that demographic and technological shifts will bring to bear some new pressures on business as usual. This university is pretty adept at embracing change, but at each turn the academic culture which you and I both know so well begins to resist. We get thousands of applications from well-qualified persons for admission to the undergraduate and graduate programs, and more often than not when the acceptances are tallied we end up with a student profile like last year's, like last decade's, probably like last century's. It can't continue that way simply because the ground is changing under us as we speak. Even if we alter admissions standards to admit a few outliers, we can't keep them because they end up with faculty who demand almost total allegiance to some old cultural model."

---"Like Sasha, for example, good in history with some math background, and what I learned last night an accomplished designer with her own line of jewelry and a growing interest in sculpting. To organize a program that allows her to pursue her multiple interests, which seem totally unrelated, is outside any program. She needs a studio as well as seminar."

---"How interesting. I read her dossier but what you just said did not come through that clearly," said the dean. He was lost in his own thought for a moment before resuming. "I often think about myself – strong academic record, competent in several languages, varsity athlete, a junior year abroad – a winning profile when I was admitted to Harvard even though I lacked the pedigree, and now there are thousands with the same profile, perhaps hundreds of thousands, and individually or collectively they allow a university like this to revel in its solid traditions for excellence and service. We're very careful to let only what we want to sweep through our hallowed halls. Public universities are much more vulnerable and therefore more chaotic, at least for the moment, than we are. The worse of it, Hooch, we really don't know how to accommodate

this fast-paced world that may ultimately blow up the planet. I think we need someone like you not because you have the answers – don't be offended – but because you know you don't have the answers. With you and the students it's more of a process. How do we get from here to there and what have we learned along the way and how will this help us move ahead. I witnessed that the first night, and with Richard last night the students showed how well they're managing the process. Now do you want to hear the outline of the proposal the chair will offer you?"

As he finished his thought I was recalling my conversation with myself last night. He was a generation behind me, and his youthful accomplishments compared to mine were utterly stellar. Then I also recalled the dean had just asked me a question.

---"Sorry I was thinking how different your youth was from mine and how different Sasha's is from either of ours. To your question, am I supposed to act surprised if and when I talk to the chair?"

---"Overwhelmed! That sort of 'what me?' is it possible? Impersonation, which we all know you can do, Richard."

---"I'd forgotten. You were in the back of the room, weren't you?"

---"In stitches, by the way." The dean in stitches was hard for me to imagine. "Here's the deal. My future is uncertain. There is not much support within the department for me to return. I'm not afraid to take them on, but I'm not sure it's worth it. I think I'm destined to spend the rest of my life in administration. I like it. As you know, having spent a few years doing it, it's an unpredictable game. We both were ready to move beyond the research we've been arguing about for years. You chose to tack into new waters, and I chose to jump ship. You have managed the new waters well, but I may have to jump again. I've only been in this job a couple years. In terms of my career I should stay with it a few more years. That's my plan. You know the President and I were suite-mates at Harvard, and we've remained close ever since. I talk to him on the q-t a couple times a month. I along with two others put forward his name five years ago during the last presidential search. His star has risen nationally since his appointment, and, as odd as it sounds for the person you've known for 20 or 25 years, I've more or less hitched my wagon to his star. I'll leave it at that. As far as the department knows or cares, I'm destined to be the dean for the immediate future. That where you come in."

He sipped some liquor before continuing. I was attentive because I didn't want to miss anything. I fixed my gaze on his face. I wanted to watch his expressions as well as listen to his words.

---"The department has been told no chance to fill my slot with a big name until next year at the earliest and perhaps not even then. The department like all in Arts and Sciences has to submit a plan for the next decade. You've had enough administrative experience to know what this entails, but here it is more general and philosophical. Out of The Plan will come short-range goals to be worked toward. On the other hand, the department has been granted permission to hire a new junior member in our field to handle essentially undergrad classes. So where does this leave you? I have money for what is called facetiously 'super faculty' – appointments for specified period to serve in a senior capacity and to develop experimental courses at the grad level. It's fairly free-wheeling but must follow certain criteria established by a committee in consultation with me. It is hoped that ideas for such appointments and courses will develop from

within the departments, but it is understood that they may originate in my office. Your presence has become, unbeknownst to you, a bit of a test of the idea. I know you well enough to assume that won't bother you. We weren't being dishonest. This program has been evolving since before you were hired. I knew your approach would be different, and I wanted to use it as a template."

The dean took another sip, and I had a moment to speculate on what was coming next. I thought I knew.

---"Back to the proposal. It's pretty simple actually. Do this one more year with some additional responsibilities that we can negotiate. The graduate school has some university-wide plans for next year and these plans might dovetail well with some of your pre-retirement goals. We can talk about these later. You may keep The Space and you will receive a salary increase. Next year we'll get together to discuss what the future might entail. It's one year at a time. I'm assuming you can arrange a second year's leave from your home university. If not, we can develop a backup plan. You don't have to decide for a while. But you need to know it's under discussion. Your seminar next semester, if you choose to stay, will be a repeat of this semester's. For the following year you are free to develop courses that fall within the general guidelines I just laid out but also fall within your own special interests. We are not asking you to reinvent yourself unless you want to. The department will proceed with a junior appointment – you may be asked to chair the committee - and if there's no senior person on board after next year, so be it. I've tried to keep this whole matter in as relaxed a mode as I can. I do not want to drive you to a premature decision. But let me be clear the university and that includes the department would be thrilled to have you here for another year."

It had been delivered in a manner that the dean was known for both as a scholar and administrator. He liked to think in terms of ideas and plans unfolding. This was vintage unfolding.

---"Well, it deserves consideration. What more can I say right now. You know me well enough that I will not drag out a decision. On matters like this I don't dilly-dally. Of course since I'm familiar with protocol in these matters, I will remain mute until I've had my conversation with the chair."

---"Agreed. No rush. We have time to alter our plans if you should opt out."

---"One question, though. What happens if you're not here? This seems to be mainly your plan and your money, and without "your" it all falls into the circular file. At some point your cryptic remarks of a few minutes ago will have to give way to something more definite. I'm assuming at some point I can have a more definite pinpointing of your future whereabouts."

The dean took much longer than I had expected to respond. I was not surprised because I saw in his expression something that made me ask the question.

---"I promise you that my whereabouts will be more precisely pinpointed. I sincerely doubt if I were in your shoes I would even come to the table if I couldn't talk to the chef."

He paused again. Obviously troubled and therefore uncharacteristically unsure how to proceed he was going to choose his words carefully. I remained quiet. The clatter of dishes, dozens of table conversations and early afternoon street traffic briefly assumed center stage.

---“There is some gossip making the rounds that concerns me and Deidre, whom you met last night. You may be privy to it.”

---“I am not,” I answered honestly. “I had a brief conversation with Deidre last night about getting together before her presentation in a couple of weeks. When you arrived last night together, I assumed you were friends and colleagues.” I did not say that I was suspicious, as is my nature about boy-girl friendships.

---“You never cared much for gossip. The few times you deigned to attend a conference and to join a circle of colleagues in beer and gossip you sat in silence. I could never be sure you were even listening.”

---“I was so far removed from the professional world you were talking about I had trouble following the conversation. To be perfectly honest most of what I heard when I was making an effort to listen I simply did not believe. Faculty fantasies. There was a time in my younger days when I was more interested in gossip. After while it felt like an empty ritual. I once read that gossip was viewed by some anthropologists and sociologists as a vehicle for social cohesion – it made people feel they belonged to a network and more importantly they could contribute to the dynamics of the network. Gossip and religion operate in the same universe as far as I was concerned. It’s make-believe. I won’t get into the potential benefits of the social-bonding thing, which I’ve failed at most of my life. Right now gossip or not I’m all ears.”

---“I can always count on you to build a context for whatever the discussion is.”

We both smiled, not a frequent expression thus far in this conversation, before the dean continued.

---“Deidre and I have been friends for a long time, and earlier we were intimate friends. We both married others but remained in touch. Why we did not marry is hard to explain. I did not initiate the plan that eventually brought her to the university. The institute where she now has an appointment is funded in part by my office but is an independent, interdisciplinary entity that includes the area of mathematical topology across various fields. Deidre is a whiz in using mathematical models in dealing with contemporary economic questions, even though lately, as you are well aware, she’s developed a deeper interest in analyzing historical datasets. The director of the institute drew up a proposal to appoint her as a visiting scholar with money from my office. The proposal ended up on my desk, and I obviously faced a dilemma. The director did not know about our longstanding friendship, and I’m not sure anyone else here did. I knew, though, if she were appointed, it would not take long for our friendship to become part of the conversation. I signed on to the extent that I approved the funding but played no role in the negotiations. I left it up to the director. Of course after an offer was made, Deidre called me. We were both concerned about what might become public, if she accepted. I informed the president who understood the risks but who would not interfere. She accepted, has been on campus since last July, and she has made a big impression both at the institute and in the Department of Economics where she is currently teaching an advanced seminar. In fact she is under consideration for a chaired professorship in Econ. Then last week our friendship became public information, and you can guess how quickly the rumor mills sprung into action. It may have no fallout for her because she had given no signal she would accept a permanent appointment or leave Toronto where she lives with her husband and children. The fallout for me may be worse.

We'll see. During her time we have been friends and colleagues and nothing more. That may not be enough. I would simply ask your patience on the question of my future. You probably don't have as much information as you need to make a decision, but you don't have to make a decision yet."

I had no intention of pushing for more information. I actually knew enough. I also knew the lunch was over. He had delivered his message, and just as I was not going to push for more neither was he.

We both simultaneously got up from the table, he had the check, and we headed for the cashier. Sheila was at the desk, and she obviously could not resist:

---"That long lunch could only mean a plot is being hatched. I look forward to the repercussions."

---"Plotting is what academics are about, and your patio and your menu may inspire some of the best plotting anywhere in the city," retorted the dean.

I nodded in approval. At the curb as the dean waved down a cab. He had a major fund-raising dinner to attend at the President's residence tonight. He asked if I had any plans. I said, yes, to unwind with a bottle of champagne. And with a tap on my shoulder he was gone.

Walking home I kept asking myself what was the conversation I just had? An offer I could not accept, and a past romance, not mine for once, with present and future repercussions. I didn't have to know any more to figure out it was heading for messiness. The dean had to think that I would at the very least be skeptical about signing on. For once I was outside the eye of his storm. I had no desire to add another storm to my own collection. I chuckled to myself as I wondered if the dean's story as told to me today was the same story I might hear from Deidre or someone else.

I was home only long enough to change for my workout. Although I'd told myself after yesterday's encounter, I was going to change my time or my gym, I was going to end up at the same gym about the same time as usual. When I walked in, Katie was in her chair at the desk.

---"How'd you swing the late Friday afternoon gig? Owners should be sipping Margaritas across the street."

---"Can't afford to with members like you. You're here every day, taking up space, using electricity, wearing out equipment for a nominal monthly fee," she said as she handed me the pen to sign in with.

---"You don't want me to be a slouch like half the membership, do you?"

---"Yes, by all means, yes. I make money off them, not you. Besides you don't need my trainers and you won't do aerobics."

---"Aerobics was the invention of a dimwitted person. I would increase liability insurance in case you are flooded with lawsuits from people who gained nothing or lost everything by jumping up and down on boxes."

---“You wouldn’t like a job as a trainer, would you? It would cost me less to pay you than to let you in the gym for two hours every day. By the way Tara’s here,” as she broke into a big smile.

---“You don’t miss a thing, do you? I could use someone like you in my life. Are you free?”

I knew she wasn’t, and, as if to confirm that, her muscle-bulging and supremely handsome boyfriend came out of the office and shook my hand.

---“After the day I’ve had with him,” she said, as she threw her arms around his waist, “I may give you a call. But in addition to using more than you’ve paid for, please don’t stir up the ladies anymore than you have thus far.”

---“Greg, will you call her off, please? All I want is that corner over there with some dumbbells.”

---“If I could create a bubble for you I would, but someone has got her eye on you already,” said Katie.

I refused to look, gave both the high sign and headed off to the dumbbell corner.

A heavy lifter was working in the same corner, and he nodded as I put my towel down and then said,

---“Hi, I’m Scott.”

---“Hi, Scott, I’m known as Hooch, but I also go by Hugh.”

---“Great handle, Hooch. I’ve always wanted a nickname like that.”

---“It’s yours without charge. And I’ll trade you Hugh for Scott.”

I thought to myself, I remember a Hugh Scott, 30 years ago.

---“Let’s shake on that,” as he threw out his hand. “It’s all yours, I’m done. We’ll talk some other time.”

I wished he had stayed a while as a buffer. I was working on arms today, and I would have to move back and forth between here and the pull-down machines, which were much too close to her.

I finished a set of tri routines when I sensed a presence, and when I looked in the mirror I observed what the presence was. It wasn’t the archangel; it was Tara. I chose to remain seated but I turned to my right just as she said,

---“You should have a spotter. You’re too old to work without a spotter.”

---“Would that be your role?”

---“You know what would have happened if I spotted for you. I wouldn’t hesitate.”

Just what I needed after a rather grueling luncheon. I looked at her from top to bottom and reaffirmed she was overweight. Always stocky but with delicious curves in the past. Now just stocky, and stockier than I remembered from a decade ago. Perhaps if I focused on the physical I

could drive this woman out of my mind once and for all. The devil on my shoulder would have no part of it. He made me remember the nights we lay together in a playful mood. Nothing playful now.

---“Have you thought about taking up some weight-lifting to compliment your Nautilus-aerobic routine?” I said as I tried to change the conversation.

---“What I least like about you is you’re genuinely nice. I insult you, embarrass you, dismiss you, and what I get is an invitation to lift weights.”

---“A genetic defect. I would, to use your adverb, genuinely like to be friends, but in the most blistering email I’ve ever received you made it clear we’d never been friends and could never be friends. So, what am I to do?”

---“Be an asshole like the rest of us. It will be good for what ails you.” With that she turned and walked away. I recalled another gym encounter when S-A ended our friendship by ordering me never to speak to her again because I had said hello. My gym batting average – zeros, maybe negative zeros.

As I continued my workout, I thought she might have a point. But as hard as I tried to be an asshole, I knew from experience I’d end up worse off than ever. It would be easier to switch gyms – not likely – or switch times.

---“You have a way with woman,” intoned Katie as I approached the desk on my exit.

---“Thanks, Katie. This little sideshow is one of the benefits of my rather costly membership to you.”

---“More than a sideshow. I could feel the static over here. Funny thing, she comes to you, you never go to her. What does that mean? She’s after something. You haven’t a clue, I suspect? But, of course, being a male, you won’t until it’s too late. Since she’s not a weekend rat, you get a break for a couple of days even though you’re gonna cost me.”

---“Are you free for dinner tonight? I need further counseling, and you won’t have to buy groceries.”

---“Don’t ask too many times. You may be surprised,” as she waved her arm toward the door and picked up her singing cell.

And I left. I stopped for some small dishes because I wasn’t going to cook tonight. I wish I were through thinking for the day. The “brut” in the fridge will take the edge off.

After a flute of champagne and a light supper not of my creation I could see through The Grand Window that a beautiful evening was descending on the neighborhood and I decided on an evening stroll. I had no particular route in mind except I would probably end up in the park about five blocks south. Donning a sweater and a scarf – October days had been warm but its evenings always turned cool - I exited the building and became a part of the street crowd. The crowd included people of all ages plus assorted animals, well, assorted dogs. I remembered being so struck years ago when I read Jane Jacobs and her diagnosis of the cities’ failures – empty streets. Cities needed people out and about to be vibrant. A Europe-centric view to be sure. Whether or

not she had the right diagnosis about the plight of the post-World-War-II American city, cities seemed healthier when streets were filled with walkers and their pets, venders, cyclists and perhaps even a few panhandlers instead of just inanimate vehicles. I often made this walk, and almost never met anyone I knew. Even so I ended up greeting scores of people and from time to time having brief conversations. The walk seemed to stand in contrast to the last 24 hours. Walking with the crowd without knowing anything about the crowd versus luncheons, workouts and conversations that revealed far too much. Despite Katie's accurate assessment of male intuition, I was getting that feeling that I was in for some relationship messiness that I had managed to avoid for a while. That had not been factored into the decision to move.

I can choose from several different routes to reach the park. Tonight I chose to stay on the most crowded. I realized long again that I was often better at working through things in anonymous crowds than in heart-to-heart talks with friends and colleagues. After my own marriage failed I signed on with several therapist to try to figure out what was next. The one I ended up with – a minister who seemed most unministerial to me - helped to open up some new avenues for accommodating stress and disappointment. Most importantly he did not take offense when I argued with him. We came to know each other pretty well, and after a few months I had a pretty good idea where I was heading. Typical of me I was more interested in where I was going than where I'd been. I believed somehow that I could deal with the past if I was negotiating with the future. Even Doug, the therapist, acknowledged that I was pretty good at muscling my way through the worst. I once told him that despite my muscling ability I lived with the fear that I really had never experienced how bad the worse could be. As a result I felt untested, and I was always leery of what events might signal. I think he came up with the phrase anonymity of the future and asked if that might characterize my feelings. Not a bad way to put it, I said. Perhaps the future was more comforting because whenever I tried to make sense of past behavior I remained puzzled. Even after I had arrived at a line of thinking that might lead to an explanation I became aware of all sorts of qualifications and inconsistencies and other possibilities. I thought about Tara again as I moved along with the crowd. I could easily and quickly arrive at a plan of action to exclude her but as soon as I did I was challenging my own plan. I never sensed that Doug was trying to discourage me from latching onto the future, although I suspected that he would have preferred that I do more about cleaning up, therapeutically speaking, my past than I was willing to do. To this day I believe, as I came to realize then, that cleaning up the past is relative. No single past. Many pasts, which are not easy to make sense of no matter how hard you may try. Not a good thing for a historian to preach, for if a person's past is jumbled, think what that means for the collective past. What I did with Doug was clean up a little here and little there until I felt I could step into the future. For better or for worse that's what happened.

Back to the moment, as I made my way to the park, I welcomed the anonymous crowd. I just didn't feel "lonely" in the crowd. How I related to the crowd vis-à-vis David Riesman I had never figured out, although I had used the book in class many times. I was pretty sure the "otherness" category didn't fit. It hardly mattered. This was a momentary repose from that proverbial storm that was be brewing somewhere off the horizon but close enough to be felt. Maybe the strategy in these walks was to let my thoughts, worries, fears mingle with everybody else's so all the personal preoccupations we shared seemed less unmanageable. Of course the laws of physics dictated otherwise. Energies on the loose could be dangerous. Anyway that's how it felt as I reached the park.

The evening light had given way to night, and to my surprise because I hadn't paid attention a full moon was ascending. Most of the park benches were occupied. I slowed my pace as I searched for a seat. I could walk to the other end and stand at the rail that bounded the park before the terrain fell off toward the harbor. As I approached the rail, I could see that it was popular tonight. I found a space, and since the rail was high, I leaned on my elbows and dropped my chin into my cupped hands. I never tired of the view of where the city and the water met. I also observed that the moon's tenure was limited. Dark clouds pointed to a natural storm abrewing.

Darkness in its many shades and forms was not a foe. I had never experienced deep, emotional darkness so I was able to find pleasure in both the dark and the light. For as long as I could remember to lie awake in the middle of the night in a totally dark room except for the light that came through the window could be therapeutic and was not threatening. I often tried to navigate my body through the darkness. I once made the mistake of telling my doctor that I liked to live in the dark, only turning on the lights on when I had to. With his arched eyebrows, his long index finger pointed straight at me and his stern MD voice, he said... turn the lights on...you're too old to prance around in the dark...if you fall...I got the message but I hadn't changed.

It was in the dark more than in the light that I could pull into high relief the "I" of Jorge Borges's "Borges and I." I read this Parable when I was a young adult. It made little sense then. I had trouble with dichotomies. I had reread the Parable a few months back for no particular reason, and I realized that what had mystified me earlier was less mysterious now. "I" had created Borges, but Borges had evolved in a way that "I" hardly recognized nor entirely approved of. Two entities in the same body seemed to be having a bit of a tussle. The "Parable" was clear on the ultimate outcome – "I" would die but Borges would survive – Borges was the published writer and thinker after-all – even as "I" come awfully close to disowning his creation. From my last reading I remember the words "I shall remain in Borges, not in myself (if it is true I am someone) but I recognize myself less...." The possibility that the Borges, which the public thought they knew, was not the Borges that the "I" was. In another Parable Borges asked God to let him be who he was supposed to be, and God answered more or less...no can do because like you I am many and no one simultaneously. And in another Borges wrote "no man knows who he is". The long and the short was who the hell are we? More to the point under these conditions Know thyself seems absurdly impossible. If Borges had talked to God, did he buy into the notion of many and no one simultaneously? I'd never talked to God and had no intention of starting now, but I liked the notion. It summed up how I felt most of the time. Many I's, many me's, many Chiltons but not a clue who I was or would be at any given moment. It was something more profound than Borges versus "I". In the Parable each seemed to have a definite existence. Was the basic human quest to assure ourselves of that we existed in some form because the thought of being many and no one simultaneously was too unbearable? I looked across the harbor at the gathering dark clouds and decided or Chilton looked and decided or somehow the time had come to get my ass home.

Once back in The Space, I filled another flute, settled into the lounge and turned on both the cell and the computer, each of which lit up and rang aloud. Reality had surely returned. OK, I had to choose, and I chose to look at voicemail first since there was only one caller. It was Richard with a reminder that I was joining them and some friends for dinner tomorrow night. I hadn't forgotten and I erased the message. I put down the cell and turned my attention to the emails.

The students and I conferred a lot by email, and most of the messages were from students and could be answered later. The email from Sasha required an answer. She suggested some times, and I responded with a time that would work for me and presumably would work for her.

After cleaning up the few dishes and turning on the quietest dishwasher that I had ever been around, it was earlier than usual for me to retire, but I felt ready for some sleep. I gathered up Russo and headed to the bedroom tucked away in the corner at the end of a long, sleek interior wall about half the height of the brick wall that separated my side of the building from the other side. This wall extended from the end of the kitchen to the far exterior wall. In between the end of the kitchen and the bedroom were bath storage and laundry facilities. I never heard a sound from the other side of the brick wall, although I was told that young couples with children lived upstairs. Downstairs below both residences were retail stores that I had yet to visit because they traded in clothing, jewelry, and bric-brac, things I seldom if ever had need for. The interior wall, was constructed from panels of glass-like sheets, and seemed more like a work of art than a barrier or separator. The kitchen end of the wall was anchored to a large pantry that extended 10 or 12 feet from the brick wall and on the bedroom end to the aforementioned exterior wall. The interior wall reflected light but was opaque to the light behind it. It was about 10 feet high at which point it turned into a slanted glass ceiling that was attached to the interior brick wall. Unlike the vertical wall the ceiling reflected the light from the area that it covered. Each time I walked along this wall the choreography of the light changed. As I entered the bedroom I took one last glance at the changing sky. I knew I would awaken to rain and to a new and sometimes during storms a threatening choreography on the ceiling.

And rain plus thunder was what I awoke to. It was almost torrential. I had promised Richard and Lynn I'd bring the wine for what they told me would be, not to my surprise, Italian fare, veal and pasta. Two Italian dishes in one week could make me querulous, but unlikely since Lynn's pasta dishes had a light touch, always to my liking. I had the feeling that Richard and Lynn had decided on a campaign to root out my disaffection for Italian cuisine. Richard's favorite phrases to describe my professional and personal idiosyncrasies was, if nothing else, succinct – "you're nuts." That applied to my choice of cuisines as well as lovers. When it came to cuisine Lynn was more embracing. I have no idea what she thought about my lovers. Her cuisine strategy was that enough time at their table would educate my palette and bring me into the fold. I was willing to spend as much time at their table as they could endure. I doubted I would ever enter the fold, but I was willing to hang around on another edge indefinitely. I was willing to endure further verbal spankings from Richard simply because an evening at their table came close to the ideal I had concocted in my head about what constituted a perfect social event.

Whenever I think about Italian cooking, I almost automatically recall my days with Alicia. We were friends, although I wished we were lovers. The ideal love, I had convinced myself, simply because it could never be tested. Alicia prepared wonderful Italian dishes for casual dinners that she made for roommates and friends and often included me. My memory, rightly or wrongly, was that her dishes were basically Italian in the manner in which they were cooked, but because she was a serious vegetarian, close to being a vegan, they were as much about the other ingredients as the pastas and sauces. Sadly Alicia had disappeared from my life even though in my head I was still raving about her cooking and her quirky personality as if she were sitting across the table. What I kept in my head all these years was what I could never say at her table nor could I say to anyone – it remained the preserve of my "I" – how deeply I loved her. Never

meant to be romantic or physical love. Something beyond Platonic as well. Not like my feelings for Tara or others I could recall. A feeling that would never be surrendered. That was how I preferred to leave it.

No more time to sort out my past. The rain had not yet let up enough so I could walk the two blocks to my favorite wine shop where I could let Tish and Serge choose the wine for me. I hadn't a clue. I had to be ready to leave when the clouds parted. I was out of bed and as I walked to the kitchen and heard a distance roll of thunder I thought about a dream I just had. Only a vague recollection. But enough to recall I was in a large space with no wall, a roof but no walls, which allowed the outside and inside to intersect. I once read the outside could be interpreted as dream disorder and the inside was dream order. I have no idea how valid this was among dream interpreters. The room was filled with faces, not bodies with faces, just faces. I was standing above and on the side where I could survey the faces, some of which I recognized. Then I stepped into the mass of faces on what became a walk among them. I nodded to those I recognized but with no response to my nod. And the dream ended as I walked. Now fully awake I could not recall the details of the faces, not even the ones I thought I recognized, or how far I had walked, whether I stayed inside or ventured outside. Somehow a sea of faces made sense but I could not make sense why. Before storing it away with many other dreams marked by an indelible question mark I lingered for a few moments on the insoluble: whatever the dream the details – faces and actions like walking - could be understood even though the meaning was lost; in life we also identify the details and actions but barely glimpse the meaning even though we think we understand.

A drink of Peet's Sumatra snapped me back into whatever reality I was supposed to be occupying. I had drunk Peet's for 30 years or more. I'd tried every Signature blend since my first cup at the Berkeley café. House Blend and Top Blend were my old stand-bys, but now that Top Blend was gone, much to my dismay, the stand-by was now in the singular. For most of my adult life I'd avoided the egg and meat breakfast, although that was my father's standard breakfast and he lived forever. Nor had I succumbed to the bagel breakfast. And of course I've been dismissed as a crank and a nut because I regard that lump of dough called a bagel uneatable. So here I sit quite happily just drinking Peet's after a shot of fresh orange juice. In a few minutes I'll add something, perhaps some raspberries and cream plus a cookie, preferably an Oreo.

Bang, Bang, Bang! The thunder resounded across The Space. In the old days, when a thunderstorm arrived we ran around an unplugged computer for fear that a surge in the electrical line would fry the equipment. Now, with these long-life laptops we can unplug and kept working, at least we think the risk is small.

I have a memory of a surge with a different consequence. When I was a kid, about 10 or 11, I had a severe of ear infection, one of many in my childhood. My recollection is that this bout began during a trip to see the Cleveland Indians, my AL team. The days of Lou Boudreau, Joe Gordon, Bobby Feller, etc., and my ears hurt so badly we had to leave the game early. Upon returning home I was dispatched to the Ear, Nose & Throat Specialist, who scared the bejesus out of me. Gruff barely captured his manner, at least in my memory. It was late evening, and he decided after examining me that lancing the eardrum was the only remedy. I think he "froze" my eardrums and then zip, zip. I don't remember if the lancing hurt, but I do remember how the loss of the pressure against the eardrums and drainage felt. We returned home at the beginning of a thunderstorm. After my parents retired, I lay awake in my small room across the hall from theirs.

My pillow was covered with a towel to soak up the goop oozing out of my ears. All at once the outside and the inside lit up by a bolt of lightning that launched an intense crack of thunder that reverberated across my room. As scary as that was, the follow-up was incredulous: light bulbs began to pop and the lamp hanging on the wall next to my bed was knocked from its nail. My parents, out of bed and on the move, checked on me first and then quickly determined that the house was not on fire either inside or out and the damage was confined to popped light bulbs and the loss of electric power. Outside they and aroused neighbors discovered that the lightning had struck a pole with a transformer across the street from the house. As they explained it to me later after the power company had replaced the transformer and restored electricity, the energy from the bolt of lightning had traveled from the poles across the lines that connected to the houses and more or less exited through the popped light bulbs. At least that is how I recall the explanation that had survived all these years as the memory of a 10-year-old. Some years ago, while my parents were still alive I asked if this recollection, which still lingered in my memory bank, was accurate only to discover that their memories were more dubious than mine. I will never know how much of these memories I've made up over time as I've recalled a series of events that had a basic truth.

I had a message from Sasha. She said Monday would work for her. I replied that I'd make reservations for Monday at 7 PM at Le Petit Place on Willis. Since I had to walk in her direction to reach Willis I said I would meet her at her apartment. She could expect me about 6:45. Within minutes I had reply. I was booked.

The rain seemed to be letting up, so I decided to run a few errands. After cleaning up the dishes, showering and shaving and spiffing up the bedroom I took off with my trusty Bodum red sac. As I entered the wine shop, I heard

---"Dr Chilton, how are you?" hidden from view somewhere in the shop. Serge emerged from behind a rack.

---"I'm fine. Serge, but I'll have to warn you again that as a Doctor I may prescribe some medicine that will make you forget the 'Dr' salutation."

---"How about my Dear Chilton Sir instead?" he said with a puckish grin from ear to ear.

---"You're hopeless, Serge, except in matters of oenology, and that's why I'm here."

---"Oenologist at your service!" accompanied by the click of his heels. Just then his wife emerged from the office.

---"Hooch, how are you?" she asked in a voice as quiet and silky as Serge's was loud and brassy.

---"Hello, Tish, I'm fine. You're looking well," I replied.

---"I'm fine also except reigning in this showman consumes all my energy," she said as he planted a kiss on Serge's right cheek.

---"And, if I weren't such a showman, she'd be planting that kiss on some other cheek," he proclaimed, a comment that provoked a smack on his backside.

---“Before this shop goes up in flames from fires of passion, let me place an order. Another Italian meal with my dear friends across town. A delicate pasta with veal I’ve been informed. Within seconds Tish retrieved three bottles of a label that was totally foreign to me.

---“On the mark,” shouted out Serge, who had not made a move toward any of the shelves with scores of Italian wines.

Neither Serge nor Tish was more than 5 feet 6 inches, and neither carried any extra weight. Dressed in casual off-the-rank designer attire, they both looked the part of bantering shopkeepers. They were indeed a handsome couple. I also bought a Bordeaux for Sunday’s fare, although I hadn’t yet been to the local market to choose a main course. I’d become one of their steady customers, and after I made my purchases, if the shop wasn’t busy we’d chat about this and that. Both had degrees from good universities with majors in the sciences, but instead of pursuing medicine, which both sets of parents, who lived in the neighborhood, had expected if not almost commanded, they decided to indulge their love for food and wine. The food part was in the future, but the wine part had proven highly successful in a city full of wine shops. I’d assumed, even though I had no special economic insights as to why they had done so well so fast, that they knew the subject better than the competition and perhaps more importantly they knew how to articulate what they knew. Of course, it didn’t hurt that they located in a neighborhood that knew them well and they also knew well. I prepared to leave with the usual admonition to report how good an accompaniment the wine was when, to my surprise, they extended me an invitation for next weekend to a wine-tasting at their apartment with their parents and friends. No thought necessary. I answered in the affirmative enthusiastically and left.

I was slowly becoming acquainted with the butcher and the owner of The Berries, my local grocery store. The owner discovered one day that we both wore clogs, his being white and mine dirty brown with holes where the big toes live – impossible said the shoe clerk, when I showed up to buy the pair I now own in an older pair with matching holes, even though I explained I had toenails made of steel – and since then butcher had been more outgoing, often asking if I’d like to try this or that. Today his recommendation was beefs filets, and, as he was becoming aware, I was a sucker for filets. I picked up some produce and head home in what was looking like more menacing rain. At that very juncture I thought this life cannot not last, but I was milking now it for all its worth.

It was well past noon when I opened the door to The Space. I remembered the opera broadcast started early today – Wagner’s Meistersinger at 1 instead of 1:30. That should put me in the right mood for the dinner party tonight. Like Walther, I’d break all the rules and render a song with such expression and beauty no one would notice I couldn’t sing. Fame, love and glory would follow in that order.

After fixing a small plate of basically what others treat as hors d’oeuvres, I switched on both the radio and the computer and settled back for an afternoon of pure pleasure. The first sign that the pureness of the pleasure might be unattainable came with a larger than usual list of emails. Actually it was the names of the senders that caused me slight discomfort. I thought, hmm, did I need to open these today. I decided they could wait until later. Besides Walther was singing his audition to join the Meistersingers, alas, as beautiful as it was, he was a singing maverick. I loved mavericks. Walther should give them the finger, but that would end the opera much too

soon for Wagner. I pushed away the computer because right now the opera was more interesting than the digital world.

Because Saturday afternoon was opera time and had been for years I'll forego the gym. It was the one day I purposely took off from working out. I occasionally missed other days because of meetings or appointments, but I seldom worked out on Saturdays. I pulled the computer back and found the libretto for opera. It took a few minutes to locate the place in the libretto with my very rusty German I learned years ago in college, and once there I knew I was set for the afternoon.

During the first intermission I poured myself a glass of wine and checked the Weather Channel. More storms coming so I decided I'll take a cab across town tonight instead of walking to the appropriate cross-town subway. I returned to my chair with my glass of wine as the Second Act began. As five o'clock rolled around, Walther was singing the beautiful *Prize Song* after which he scorned the gold chain, a sign of his admittance to the guild. Sachs implored Walther to put aside his bitterness and accept his nomination. Walther relented, and the final chorus that could lift you out of your chair was dedicated to the beloved cobbler, Sachs. I once read, was Wagner addressing a very human condition – no gods or mythical figures to contend with – just humans trying with a good deal of comedy and farce to navigate the shoals when authority and expression came into conflict. Of course everyone was rooting for Walther, and yet the authority of the guild will prevail through necessary accommodation. I'd always had trouble with the accommodation part, although with age I'd become more malleable.

By seven o'clock I was in a cab heading across town. I will be a few minutes late, but I'm told that was being stylish in the city. I arrived at the brownstone, and after ringing the bell I was greeted by Lynn.

---“Hooch, come in, your timing is impeccable!”

We embraced and then I handed her the wine. Lynn was not only a smart cook but she knew labels as well.

---“Perfect,” she said. “I'll bet you didn't know these labels, but your *cavistes* did. Right?”

---“You've got it, and my only role is to suggest you uncork them now.”

---“ Richard! Call the Rabbit into action,” and she handed the bottles to her husband who appeared at her side but first shook my hand and pat my shoulder.

---“Welcome, my friend, and thank you for the wine,” as he turned and walked toward the buffet.

I could see another couple, whom I did not know, and an unaccompanied lady whom I did not know either, standing by the gas-fed fireplace. Lynn took my arm and led me to the fireplace where she did the introductions in her own inimitable style.

I always had trouble remembering names, and Lynn knew that, so she repeated them several times with intervening and endearing comments. This time she will say,

---“He can remember the output of silver in 1701 Potosí, but he can't remember to whom he has just been introduced. So let me repeat, Ellen and Paul and Cindy. Keep repeating the names while I check on the stove.”

Just then Richard showed up with a martini, for which he was famous, not only because he bought the best gin but also because he imported magic ice. He then repeated everyone's name slowly for my benefit and offered a toast of hope for my memory. The evening was off to a good start. I knew everyone's name.

At the table I was seated next to Cindy, an Associate Dean or Director at Richard's university. Actually she knew Lynn before she knew Richard. After straightening me out, she asked how I liked my new assignment. I said I was quite content. I enjoyed living in the city, seeing Richard and Lynn after many years of only talking by phone and having exceptionally able students.

---"Is this a one-year appointment?" she asked.

---"Aah, only one semester," I responded without hesitation.

---"I wouldn't be surprised if you end up staying longer than year," chimed in Richard.

---"There's an incentive to return home so I can take early retirement," I replied hoping this will put an end of a discussion about the future. I had made up my mind after the dean's conversation, but until I heard out the chair I couldn't say anything definitely.

---"You've been retiring ever since I first met you, Hooch, and it ain't any closer now than it was then. You've got nothing else to do. You're now close to being a total recluse. If you retire, it will mean full-time reclusensss. This job is your salvation, so hang on," he decried to the bemusement of the others, all of whom were listening.

---"Richard," said Lynn sternly, "don't be projecting yourself onto Hooch's plans. You've been retiring since our undergraduate days!" to laughter around the table.

---"I've learned what I know about reclusiveness from Richard," I interjected, "so I am as fully prepared as I'll ever need to be. Thank you, my good friend," and I lifted a glass.

---"You'll be back in the thick of it before the first year ends," retorted Richard. "It's criminal for the best and brightest to retire early."

---"And that's why I can do it. The best-and-the-brightest club will remain intact."

---"If and when you do retire," asked Paul, "where will you go?"

---"A big city somewhere. I have a half-dozen places in mind, but haven't decided yet. I quit driving years ago so small towns and rural areas are out of the question. Besides anything too remote would drive me back to work in 6 months. Any suggestions?"

---"Probably nothing you haven't considered. I'd certainly feel most comfortable in the Northeast and I'd probably just stay where I am."

---"This city is a good choice, but I'm leaning toward a totally different part of the country or maybe even the globe. Lots of things have to fall into place before I can actually take off, notwithstanding what Richard has proclaimed."

In meantime Lynn arrived with a big platter, which she set in front of Richard, who was momentarily bewildered because he had no plates or utensils. Ellen then put the plates and

utensils in front of him, and he felt confident enough to begin his assigned task. I asked if I can pour the wine, and Lynn gave the thumbs-up. Five minutes later everyone was raving about Lynn culinary accomplishments, something we'd all raved about for years.

---"You know, Lynn, if I can live in your basement and have dibs on the leftover I might just become a convert to the Italian style," I said, knowing I could expect a retort from my host. It came immediately.

---"I don't think so. We have strict rules about who can stay over. Besides I couldn't hold my seminars here with you prowling around and engaging the young women in your banal banter. On the other hand we could use some help with the cleaning. By the way, to your credit, damn it, the wine is perfect."

---"Thank Serge and Tish. Am I permitted to report your endorsement or do I have to sign a waiver?"

And so it went for the remainder of our time at the table, as we ate and drank and tried not to let the conversation ever become too weighty. After a light dessert, we took our demitasses to the living room. I found myself sitting next to Ellen. She was not an academic but a Wall Street trader. Her shop where she was managing partner dealt mainly in derivatives and for almost an hour we talked.

---"Do you own any derivatives?" she asked. "You seem to know something about them."

---"No, I don't, although I own a few funds in which derivatives are components. They take too much time. I don't want to sit glued to my TV or computer screen to make sure something untoward isn't happening. I know I can set limits and all that, but I have to pay more attention than I want. I get market reports every day, but I trade only when I'm ready to change the portfolio. Most stock or bonds I've owned for a year or more. I see this as supplemental to my forthcoming pension. It's a defined-benefits plan so I'll get a set sum until I die, and a few years after retirement I'll be able to enhance it with Social Security also until I die. I don't like thinking about the dying part, but I'm glad my death rather than my mistake will end the payouts. And I'll carry my medical, a big plus. I have no debt and so when the day arrives I think I'll be OK."

---"I think so. I'm envious. This is the third shop I've worked for and while we can earn huge bonuses my actual retirement accounts are still too small. In the end with Paul's pension we'll be fine."

---"I think the major pitfall is when people retire with too much debt. Without debt I can't imagine that I will ever need as much money to maintain a good lifestyle as I do now. I suppose it depends on what one wants to do after retirement."

---"You're right of course. Since I have no other skills to fall back on, I expect to travel a lot. Frankly to take up time. And that costs money. I'll stick with my job as long as I can, and I'll hope I can put away enough money to see the world afterward."

---"Despite Richard fulminations academics have an advantage. I can keep doing what I've been doing for 40 years. I have worked most of those years by myself, usually at home in my study,

and that won't change. I've taught so many students and classes I won't miss either. I'll also do some skiing and maybe take up residence in Paris for a few months."

---"Richard says you have many hobbies – other interests perhaps I should say."

---"Besides skiing, star-gazing with actual telescopes and not with psychedelics, managing two web sites, cooking, attending opera – I could go on but I won't. Yes lots of hobbies and interests. I bore easily."

---"And no mate or partner?"

---"Been there, done that. I've been divorced a long time, and while I have had some relationships since, mine tend to be messy. So I've pretty much decided for the sake of sanity I'll plod along by myself. That's not for everyone, but it's OK for me."

---"I understand. This is my third marriage. I married too young, and then I didn't wait long enough in between. I struggled over this one. I was 40, had a career and couldn't remember that I was unbearably miserable living alone, although in my business it's hardly a problem to find a guy to date or move in with."

---"Has this one worked out better?"

---"We'll save that for another conversation. Testy at time, to be sure. What is it about male academics? I live in a world of ruthless egomaniacs, but academics are whiny egomaniacs."

I had to laugh, and Ellen took note.

---"I'd never thought of that comparison. Frankly I find many Wall Streeters pretty whiny but usually because they can't be as greedy as they want to be. But that's not what you're talking about, is it?"

---"No. Whining is universal and probably not the distinguishing trait. The difference – am I revealing too much? – is that one takes the risk in the bedroom and leaves it at that – often just leaves - and the other takes the risk and then wants to analyze it. You can guess who's who."

---"I can. Dare I ask, do you have a preference?"

---"I'm not sure we're supposed to be having this conversation," she responded with a big smile. "In fact I think someone else was supposed to entertain you this evening."

---"I'm quite content with the entertainment at hand. This is not the first time I've failed their match-making class. They're good-hearted, and I'm not."

---"To answer your question, though, I can't say I do. I'm not sure I should. Easy enough to create the stereotypes but that's all they are. Like whining, we make up categories just because we have to. Isn't making love always and thankfully a risk? Would you really want to make love if you knew ahead of time what to expect? To answer my own question, that's what happens to marriages, isn't it?"

---"So why stayed married?"

---“It’s a convenience. I live a fairly hectic day, and it’s a relief to come home to an established mode: the drink is ready, eventually the dinner appears and bedtime is seldom violated. The marriage had worked; a year from now, who knows. And sometimes the unexpected happens, and it momentarily seems worth it. I suppose ‘good marriages’ have an ample supply of the unexpected.”

---“I wonder?” I asked. “My parents were married more than 60 years, and I think their marriage was grounded in the expected, not the unexpected. They had little tolerance for deviations from the norm. Unlike my parents, whether by accident or choice, probably choice, I seemingly find no comfort in the norm. I’ve continually stepped over lines; sometimes, when they recognized what I was doing, causing my parents grief. I still have trouble with lines.”

---“I suspect my husband would like to redraw the lines. He was fascinated by my life as a trader. It was both arcane and lucrative. And I suppose as I insinuated earlier I was looking for the opposite of the arcane and lucrative because that’s what I dealt with day in and day out. He’s no dummy, of course. Well-respected in his field of social and political theory but in his mid-life that may not be as satisfying as it was earlier, certainly when he was married to woman with lower expectations and ambitions. He was attracted to me because of what I did as much as who I was. I’ve often wondered if he shouldn’t have stayed with her. He was ready to cross some lines that he may now wish he hadn’t. One can look back, but can never predict. The uneasiness in our marriage right now is more pronounced than I would prefer.”

This conversation between two people who had just met on the other side of the room from the others could not have ever been anticipated by either of us. I didn’t want it to end. One of those conversations in which the flow of questions was endless, no struggle, no pauses, totally relaxed, pure pleasure, even though the topic may not be pleasant.

---“Are female traders different from their male peers? What drives them in the office or in the bedroom?” I asked.

---“Competitive, compulsive, cranky and carefree,” came her response without losing a beat.

---“You’ve obviously been asked that before. Carefree, not an adjective I would have expected.”

---“Not only asked before but thought about, talked about, repeatedly. Will it surprise you if I tell that bonding among women traders occurs more readily than between men and women or among men. Male traders are always looking over their collective shoulders, pointing their fingers, slapping their foreheads, stomping around in their bubbles. Not so true of the older traders who took reward-risk seriously; more the case with my peers. Few women traders among the elders, but a huge increase in the generations behind the elders. When I’m having a drink I like to enjoy the drink, and when I’m having sex I like to enjoy the sex. Women traders, well, this woman trader knows how to be carefree.

---“Good point to shift gears. Are you a city kid?”

She chuckled before answering.

---“Not at all. Daughter of a couple of hippies. They actually stayed together until my dad suffered a heart attack and died. My mom died a few years later. They were both in their

seventies. They had few possessions, but they were terrific parents. No drugs whatsoever, but they loved the patch of land they owned in northern California. I was an only child but never felt lonely. My parents were always taking in others who were in the middle of this crisis or that. It wasn't exactly a collective but it had that feel. Music was a big constant. Strings mainly...guitars, banjos, lutes. I can still make a tune on a guitar. We raised a lot of our own food, and the kitchen was the biggest room in the house that my father was always adding to. I know I'm making it sound idyllic even though there were times when it was utterly precarious. I was not schooled at home because my parents believed in public education, and I was certainly encouraged to do well but also to explore even if I messed up. I'm not a baby-boomer who resents having had hippy parents. They were both talented in many ways, and they used their talents to keep the crazy enterprise that they had created in motion. I suspect that the risk-taking that I grew up with was what propelled me into the career I'm in. And I suspect that the anti-acquisitive side of my upbringing – we made do – is now coming to the fore. I don't see myself trading forever on the scale I'm now doing. I have few material needs. My parents spent their lives acquiring what they needed and not much more, and yet that patch of land saved them. When they had to leave, hard as it was, they sold it for a sum that gave them more material comfort than they'd ever known before. I can't say they were happy in their new urban surroundings, but they were smart enough to figure out that they had made the right choice. They lived quietly and comfortably for nearly a decade. The downside for me was how do I put together a life that is an extension of what I had known as a kid and is a departure because I wanted to be different. I'm afraid I haven't done either very well, at least not on the personal level. But that's my story. Is it worth a memoir?" she asked with a laugh.

---"It sure is, and I'd love to be the publisher. Publisher or not the rest of the story will have to wait. Looks as if the evening is done. Too bad. Look me up on the web and drop me a line. I'd loved to know more."

---"You're right. Adieus are in order. I will look you up. You also have a story, which I didn't hear much of because somehow you managed to come up with the questions that kept my story going and hid yours."

---"I'll have to make up one to come close to yours. Mine is neither comedy nor tragedy, more like Looney Tunes. I was about to say keep trading, but maybe I need something more original, which I can't come up with."

We shook hands, and then we joined the others at the door. It took another 10 minutes to exit, and another 10 minutes to find a cab. I was home by midnight. I thought...an evening worth recording so I opened my journal and wrote for the next 30 minutes. It was after 1 AM before I crawled into bed.

The Sunday NYT was waiting for me at the doorstep when I awoke. Shortly thereafter my Peet's was ready, preceded by a shot of OJ. I never thought I'd become disenchanted with the NYT, but I had to admit it was much less interesting than it used to be. And the puzzles were boring. But I still subscribed to it and read it in its entirety. For daily news I now read the Wash Post on-line. The best news came from Stewart and Colbert. No lack of information anymore. Whatever I want to know I can Google. I do that more than I had ever anticipated.

Halfway through the first section a local story caught my eye. A local condo developer was suing a former tenant for failure to fulfill a contract. The details about the suit were scant, but names of owners of the property were Howard and Ellen Suskin. The article noted that they had bought the condo for several million and then shortly thereafter their marriage dissolved. The husband remained in the condo but his wife moved out. Several years later for no known reason the husband abandoned the condo, which had been unoccupied since. The developer was trying to enforce a provision that stipulated that condos could not be unoccupied for more than 12 months. The article indicated that a sum of money had exchanged hands as a part of the settlement, and while the wife's name remained on the original contract, there was also a codicil that absolved her. Was that Ellen's last name, I asked myself. I was not sure her last name was ever used. By noon I had read as much as I wanted and put down the paper.

I turned on the computer. For a Sunday morning I was surprised how long the email list had grown. About half the emails could be answered in a few sentences. Even an email from the chair of the department could be taken care of quickly. I knew what it was about, and so it was. He said he would be calling me early next week if I was staying in the city during the recess. I replied that I was and would await his call. Maybe he'll forget, I mused. But the email from the chair at my home university would take longer. He was beginning to draw up class schedules for the next academic year, and he was checking on my plans. He also said that two senior members had unexpectedly announced their retirement and searches for their replacements would be put off for a year. He was eager to discuss these searches when I had time to call. I liked the new head – young, bright and eager – and while I had agreed to help him out on several matters I really didn't want to become too involved. The old-guard was still there, although less numerous because of more retirements than had been expected, and I was still on less than amicable terms with most of those remaining. I replied that my plans about returning at the end of the year hadn't changed, and I would be happy to call him in a week or so. Maybe he'll forget too.

I was especially interested in the note from Deidre's. After watching Richard's performance she had come up with several possible approaches. She was definitely onboard. She thought a meeting between us would be helpful since she was just beginning to deal with historians and may need some coaching. She was on her way to Toronto for the week, but after her return perhaps we could find a time. My note was brief. Pleased to have her response and almost anytime after her return would work for me. I was done and shut down the computer. A workout was called for. I had a quick snack, dressed for the gym and took off.

Paulette was at the desk.

---“Hi,” she said, handing me the pen. “You have the gym pretty much to yourself. Everyone must be off looking at the leaves or what's left of them.”

---“Thanks,” I said as I took the pen. “I'm glad to have the gym to myself. I see you're catching up on your fiction. She's a fine writer.”

---“Believe it or not, it's not for a class. It's for pleasure, and pure pleasure it is.”

---“She written two other novels that I can also recommend. Finish the one you're reading and then decide. She's a wonderful story-teller. The flow is almost flawless.”

---“Actually I’m a lit major with an interest in writing, but while reading fiction like this I have to wonder if I have the talent.”

---“Are you taking writing courses?”

---“I am, and I am doing OK, but still....”

---“It’s scary. Just keep at it. I’m off to the far corner,” and I departed.

I spent an hour plus without any interruptions. A good workout by any measure. I headed for the exit, bid Paulette adieu and squinted as I hit the sunlight. No Tara, and I thought about the benefits if this arrangement became permanent.

I decided to eat at Sheila’s. Another fine fall evening to sit outside and to watch the street traffic. By 6:15 I was seated at the café and had a glass of wine in front of me. Sheila seldom worked on Sundays. Tonight it was not yet busy so the staff was in relaxed mode. I ordered soup and a shrimp-scallop casserole. After such a good workout I decided that a dessert was in order. Fresh apple crisp with a scoop of vanilla ice cream was my choice and an espresso. By 8 o’clock I felt satisfied and fortified enough to head home.

When I woke the next morning, I decided to do some work at the university library. With students on recess it would be quieter than usual. Despite accessibility to information through the Web libraries seemed busier than ever. In part, I suppose, because libraries were responsible for Web accessibility. Computers everywhere, links to hundreds of electronic databases, utilities I’ve never heard of or tried to use...I remember finding my mentor in grad school sitting at the card catalogue, rifling through the 3 x 5 entries and telling me how much he liked the card-catalogue system...whatever would he think now...sitting for hours in a library and never touching a card or a book...he wouldn’t even have to bother to come to the library building. I was always impatient with card-catalogue systems and tried all sorts of shortcuts. The electronic card-catalogue was made for me, although I found library search utilities still archaic. With my library tasks behind me, I arrived at the gym even earlier than I’d planned.

---“Ah ha,” was how Katie greeted me. “A new strategy.”

---“I can’t slip anything by you, can I?”

---“I told you, this saga has not run its course yet. Trust me.”

---“I hardly have any choice, do I? By the way how was your weekend?”

---“Relaxing. I cooked, sat on the deck, and became reacquainted with my domestic side. And you?”

---“Quite manageable and generally pleasant. A surprisingly lovely Saturday evening – dinner and conversation, with friends. And yesterday’s workout, which cost you so dearly, in near solitude, was a morale booster.”

---“As long as your morale is getting boosted, I’ll survive financially,” she said as she handed the pen to others who had just arrived to sign in.

Mid-afternoon may be ideal for workouts. Physical wear and tear but no emotional hammering. I was on my way home by 3:30. After a shower I sent Sasha a text message to confirm 6:45, and within minutes I had a reply in the affirmative. I spent the next hour cleaning up emails and reviewing my portfolio. Nothing about the market was very encouraging. Time to consider more short-term trades, not what I like because I'd have to spend more time paying attention, not one of my strong traits.

I showed up on time at Sasha's doorstep where she was waiting.

---"I decided to wait for you here because my roommate is entertaining some friends. We'll get to the restaurant and the food faster, no?"

---"You're right. Let's go."

We walked leisurely along the streets, which were filling up with strollers and others hurrying home to lovers or enemies. Our table was ready and we were seated along the windows that faced the street. I had eaten here several times but did not know the staff well, although our waitress recognized me. Le Petit Place was not exactly a café or bistro. More like a full-scale restaurant with a limited menu that changed daily and also featured a *prix fixe* and an excellent wine list. Tonight the *prix fixe* was *paella valenciana*, and we both agreed that was all we needed to know. The response of the waitress certainly broke any ice if there was any ice to begin with. She had spent all afternoon committing today's menu to memory and by ordering the *prix fixe* we were going to deny her a chance to show off? We promised to eaves-drop on any nearby table if she got a chance to do her thing. Wine was an easy choice. They had several labels of recently discovered Rioja vineyards, and I chose a label that I had seen on display at Tish and Serge's. Then on the spur of the moment I decided to begin with a champagne, a decision to which Sasha gave an actual thumbs-up. And after the barman poured our champagne at the table the conversation began in earnest. In fact there was nothing earnest about talking to Sasha. Ease of conversation seemed to be another one of her talents.

---"I'm assuming it's rather silly to ask how's the week going on Monday of the week?" I threw out just for fun.

---"Actually I was bored today. Is that a sign of what's to come? Should I report it's been a boring week?"

---"If you do, I'll have to order another bottle of champagne just to stem the boredom."

---"That would probably not only make the rest of the week uninteresting but also unproductive. I'm pretty well organized so I don't have a lot to catch up on. Of course, I may wish I had this week back in a month or so. I must say confidentially I expected more work. Either the work is not anymore demanding than I think or I'm badly out of touch with what's expected. Your observation the first session about reading lists and literature reviews was certainly prescient. I do a lot of that in other courses. What did you call it?"

---"The Yale Syndrome. Many of my colleagues at my university are Yale PhDs, and when they conduct doctoral exams they're obsessed with lists and reviews. These exams cause my mind to wonder. My mentor was a Yale man, and I think the bibliography I presented to him before my orals consisted of 150 items, most of which I had read. I don't recall that the list of readings for

him or any other member of my committee was ever mentioned during the orals. There were a few details I couldn't remember – I think I was being fact-checked – but by and large I was spared bibliography test. I almost flunked the written part, however, because I didn't cite enough from the bibliography I had prepared. The reader, who was not on the oral committee, said she couldn't be sure I had read the items I had listed. When I think about that blow to my ego, I remember she disappeared into the woodwork never to be heard from again.”

---“I have a pretty good memory for lists so I might survive a bibliographic review even though it doesn't sound very interesting,” inserted Sasha.

---“Part of my problem. I don't remember titles or authors, and too often I'm afraid I don't remember what ideas I should associate with the forgotten titles and authors. Even Richard in reviewing my 'big book' remarked that the bibliography, which was about a dozen pages, was not as comprehensive as it should be. In a sense he was correct. I had ignored some standards and I had not scoured the field for the latest publications no matter how obscure. Had I been more bibliographic driven, would I have written a different book, offered a different perspective, arrived at a different interpretation? Hardly. The book was data-driven, and I was pretty much on my own in any event. More to the point, I didn't much care. It was unlikely that I had stolen ideas or misrepresented facts unknowingly because I hadn't read as widely as I should. I can think of projects that would require you to read everything that had ever been published but such was not my project. Besides, as you have no doubt observed, I've chosen to operate on my own even though, when I began my career, I anticipated more participation in a community of scholars.”

---“Kendall used to speak endearingly of his mentor and his fellow-students as if they were just such a community.”

---“Indeed, as he should. He belonged to a circle of young scholars with similar research interests, all of whom had a link to Kendall's mentor. They have kept the circle alive through their published research and edited collections. When I was a grad student, I was an outlier because I was the only one working with big datasets. My fellow-students and I had little in common and seldom talked. I fretted about this for some years because my ideal was not being realized, then I said 'what the hell'. I became a lone wolf, comfortably so, I must confess. A couple times like now I've been in situations for a few months, not much longer, where I abandoned the lone-wolf role. Richard, the dean and I have known each other a long time, and while Richard and I have a personal connection – we like putting up with each other – the dean and I do not. And this is a group of students for whom I'm developing deep affection. But it will come to an end, as it must. The ironic thing is that I'm in this situation with notable scholars and noteworthy students at a time when I'm actually working on subjects and in areas that have nothing to do with why I'm here. I'm turning confessional, but I'm probably done doing what you know me for. And what I'm working on now, I may never become known for. With your split loyalties you may understand more than most how one's world can get so bifurcated, or in my case scattered.”

The wine arrived with bread and other goodies. A timely and welcome pause in the conversation. I have to reign myself in on the subject at hand. I can sound pedantic and silly. I asked her if the wine was suitable or would she prefer another label or something else? She said she knew very little about wine, but she liked this Rioja. We both agreed the bread was excellent.

---“Bifurcated is certainly how I feel. To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure I’m emotionally prepared to jump through the hoops I see looming on the horizon. Let me brown-nose for a minute.”

I laughed because I hadn’t heard that term in years. And she smiled, as if I should be offended.

---“Your approach is different. I suspect at the end of the course if I’ve only read five books instead of 50 books, but I can present a reasonable interpretation based on a careful analysis of the appropriate dataset, you’ll be satisfied. When said this way, it doesn’t sound very challenging. But when said in terms of what we confront with the datasets, it can be very challenging. All of us are becoming aware of that. We talk about it among ourselves all the time. The other thing that’s happening – you probably know this - is that we are also checking out the secondary works based upon what we need to know.”

---“Bingo! That’s what I hope for. At times it may be an untidy process because you may dilly-dally around with the data for days or weeks before you find the key. That’s the way it is in the real world. Hit and miss, success and failure, living on the edge, well, to the extent that historians can live with an edge.”

I poured both of us more wine.

---“I’m still much in the dark about faculty expectations. Based on conversations with my advisor, whom I’m not crazy about, I doubt if I’m going to meet their expectations even if I knew exactly what they were. I’m having an easier time with your seminar than my other classes, not because it’s easier – it isn’t – but it makes sense. The work is designed to reach a goal not to be the goal. As an artist I have goals in mind, not cast in concrete, but clear enough that my time is not just spent working but working toward something. Sometimes the goals prove to be unattainable, but that’s part of the risk. Working toward a goal that can’t be attained is frustrating but not unsatisfying. Working to be working is worthless. I may be overstating because I feel more at home with the material in your seminar than I do with the material in my other classes. On the other hand, since I have to choose several other fields in which I have little or no current competence, I may be looking for a reason to get out. Something inside wherever that may be may have decided it ain’t worth it. Excuse the near perfect English,” I could see a big smile as she dropped her head.

As a moment I said with as much convictions I could muster,

---“You’re excused.

The paella arrived, and without further comment about work, school or life we dug in, and because it was so good we just kept digging.

After a few minute she picked up the thread of the conversation.

---“It won’t surprise to hear me say I’m doing history externally but art internally. I’ve given up trying to corral the art. Doing art is not a perfect world. Not only did I learn to sculpt from my ex but I learned how to shout, stomp, scream and many other gauche gestures and expressions. Never much enjoyed it partly because I had no prior exposure to it. My parents and our household emphasize calm instead of outburst. My parents were not artists, and they never found

it necessary or useful to exist in a constant state of outburst. Even my dad is known among his business associate as a calm and steady hand. I had to learn to be explosive when my ex was in a huff in the studio or in the bedroom. The odd thing is that the better I got at fighting back and the angrier my ex got, the more self-assured I became and the more creative I felt. I had to wonder when I escaped The Compound – my name for his property – if the absence of this thin-skinned, marginally-talented shouter would affect my own output. It hasn't yet. But I also understood the need for tension to agitate the creative impulses. Not his brand of tension, though. He hated criticism of his own work, so much so that whatever good might have come from the criticism was lost. He lived where he did to avoid being around people who were going to tear his work apart or perform better than him. The town was small, he was the only sculptor and the community adored him. They assumed that all the people in their buses arrived as pilgrims to see the great master when in fact all these trips were arranged by his agent and the pilgrims were simply in search of an interesting bus ride. It took me a while to figure all this out. But after two years in which I learned the basics I was ready to leave.”

She paused and then she continued:

---“Put a bunch of aspiring artists in the same studio, and you have the potential for another world war. In college studio critiques were far harsher than anything I’ve experienced here. But when you’re creating and working alone, it can be so fulfilling. From what you’ve said, you’ve more or less operated outside the circle. Artists can do that as well. At some point on our own can we learn what is good and valuable and more importantly once there how little the critics matter. Am I just dreaming?”

---“You are dreaming, but it’s absolutely the right dream. I suppose it’s more accurate to say I’ve listened to my colleagues and critics when I thought I should. I listen to Richard, for example, but less so to the dean. But it’s my choice. I don’t mind a vigorous debate, but I have no interest in a brawl. I don’t believe that my work is so original or profound to be worth a brawl. Besides I’ve never been in a fist-fight my whole life, not even as a kid. Not about to start now for real or vicariously.”

---“It’s something the students talk about. I think some of my classmates wish you were harsher because they afraid they won’t learn the skills.”

---“Believe me, I’ve heard before from students and colleagues I’m being soft. I’m not really being soft, as you can observe from the comments I’ve written on your papers. But you have to take the comments to heart. We can argue about them, but I’m more interested in having you try on your own to incorporate these comments into your thinking about how to approach a topic. If you need someone to put you through the paces, then I’m not the ideal teacher. By the way the “you” should be read as students, not you personally. I don’t think most humans need much training in how to be brutal. I do think we can all learn how to be smart. I’m not yet convinced that brutal leads to smart.”

---“The ‘you’ is and was understood. There is a parallel in the arts. Often times the criticism is directed in such a way as to imply, if you had done it the way I said you should have, then....Of course, I didn’t do it that way because I’m not you, I’m me – we like to lord over others if we can. That was the tactic of my ex. Funny how creative people want clones.”

---“Speaking of doing art, may I have a peek inside the folder you’ve brought? But first let’s order desert or espresso or liquor, whatever would keep the conversation going.”

---“Liquors are pretty alien to me, but a dessert and an espresso sound about right. Fortunately weigh-gain is not a problem I have yet.”

We ordered the dessert recommended by the waitress after we allowed her ample time to describe full list. It was clear this woman had memorized nothing. She simply knew, probably from time in the kitchen with the chef, of what she spoke. Her presentation was funny and simultaneously informative.

After the waitress left, Sasha handed me a folder with photos of her art. The photos themselves were spectacular, the placement, the lighting, the angle, all presented the jewelry with perfection. And the jewelry was beautiful, truly beautiful. The rings were the most intriguing, a band with clusters of small beads, piled on top of each other in various arrangements, and with single beads free-floating. Nothing was highly polished, but everything was exquisitely finished. The pendants and earrings were of various designs – round, oblong, arced – some with beads and some void of any ornamentation except for the elegance of the surface. I wore no jewelry, not even a watch, but if I did I would prefer the mixture of whimsy and exquisiteness I saw in these photos.

As I turned to the last pages, I came face-to-face with her sculptures. Different in design but a similar aesthetic. Long narrow rectangles shadowed by angled pieces that were deceptively simple in appearance but complex in design. Curving metal seemed to be a constant in her compositions. Again like the jewelry the surfaces did not glisten in the light, but they still dazzled the eye. There was no way one would ever tire of looking at her creations. I put down the folder and noticed that her look was as intent as I had ever seen it.

---“Brilliant,” I said, “utterly brilliant.” You’re in your 20’s, and you’ve found that constant that some artists search a lifetime for. The history world’s loss will be the art world’s gain.” I closed the folder, and as I did she smiled.

---“I’m not sure it would have mattered if your reaction had been negative because I’m for the time being pretty much excited about what I’m doing. They’re my creations, and I’m not about to give up on them yet. But honestly I wanted your approval because when I look at the art on your wall – and I’ve done that while I should have been concentrating on history – I knew you had a well-trained eye. The painting, which I think you call Caveat Emptor – I’m only guessing – is a painting that can suck you in until you walk through the odd-shaped archway. That’s the power of good art.”

---“You have the right one, and the story behind is more frightening than the walk-through. Next time, I’ll fill you in. The artist resides in this city, and much to my chagrin and joy belongs to the same gym as I do. Our relationship is more brutal than your studio critics. I had thought about introducing you to her because she might help you find a studio to work in during your free time, but, Sasha, I have misgivings. I haven’t decided one way or another.”

I stopped for moment, dropped my head and tried to think of what I should say.

---“Out of your control, spiraling toward not disaster so much as crappiness. I know the feeling,” she offered sympathetically.

---“That’s the proper diagnosis,” I said as I lifted a smiling face. “Relationship messiness. My life has been steeped in it. Maybe I’m the only one who can’t step around the mess. I know I’m adept at stepping in and looking for more.”

She laughed, not at me but with me, I realized.

After paying the check, we headed in the direction of her apartment when I suggested a longer route in order to enjoy another pleasant fall evening. She agreed.

---“Is it for certain you’ll not be teaching after this semester? I’m not the only one who’s interested, by the way.”

---“No plans to teach, and quite frankly not much interest. I want to write, go to museums and galleries, try new restaurants and slide slowly into poverty. But I appreciate the good words.”

---“I can’t blame you as much as some of us would like to have you around. I can hardly criticize since my own future is under review. This conversation had crystallized some things for me. I’m not sure I want to leave the city, but when you’re an artist in a city where there is so much to grab onto – my sketch pad is filled with ideas – the art assumes pre-eminence. Is that demeaning of the power and glory of history?”

---“Yes, and for that I’ll have to give you a black star!” I said as we reached her door.

---“Thank you for breaking the rules and for the evening. I’d invite you up to see more etchings” – we both laughed – “but I suspect the relationship messiness that I left up there several hours ago is still a work in progress.”

---“We can only break so many rules in one night. But I will be in touch. If not about history, about whether it’s safe to introduce you to the creator of Caveat Emptor. The irony of any introduction would be, afterwards, I would be totally excluded.”

---“That won’t happen,” said Sasha as she patted me on the shoulder and disappeared through the door.

The next morning when I awoke my cell was jumping all over the bedside table.

From the message screen I could see a call from the dean – I intuitively know what that was about – a call from the chair – I could guess what that was about – and Richard – I had no idea. I decided with that array of personalities I needed my Peet’s before dialing anyone. Then I dialed Richard, the mystery call.

Richard answered immediately with

---“I hope I woke up. Such an iniquitous life-style for a Calvinist.”

---“You’re jealous because I have a strategy without penance and confessions, thanks to the Geneva JC, to achieve a blissful life. Sin all you want because you don’t know where you’ll end up despite all the gobbly-gook you’ve been told.”

---“I gave up bliss when I turned 18 – now let’s see, you’re 58 and in bliss? Seriously, Ellen from Saturday called me for your cell number. She said she had gone to your pornographic web site but found no phone number. She wrote an email last night but had no answer as of this morning. I gave it to her only because I plan to keep you mired in trouble. Did I do wrong? My priest is all-powerful if I did.”

I could not help but laugh.

---“You’re sharper in the morning than at night. Remind me to talk to you only after 6 PM. Of course, your priest is powerless in my world, but let him try. I will expect a call from her. By the way are she and her former in some sort of legal skirmish?”

---“You take time to read the Times? Yes, it’s nasty, more for him than her because she’s legally outside the reach of the developer. Sounds juicy, though. Her current marriage ain’t no bed of roses. Lynn and I both wonder how we’re going to continue to navigate their marital shoals. That messiness syndrome of yours, however you phrase it, is engulfing us right now. Well not us, but those around us.”

---“It’s not your relationship messiness, it’s everyone else’s.”

---“I’ll be drown in messiness. Never mind. I have some figures I want your academic opinion of. My café this time. I have a fucking faculty meeting in the afternoon. I’m using you as a bromide before a long floor fight. I’ll call you on Monday if I’m alive.”

---“Just hold onto your tail. Now I have the dean and the chair to talk to....”

---“And will you be joining us next year...?”

---“Shit, news travels extra fast when people live on top of each other.”

---“To put your conniving mind at ease, you have been under consideration and discussion for months. I advised them against a permanent appointment. You’d go crazy. See ya next week.”

Always my favorite friendly adversary.

The chair was next. He too answered immediately.

---“Thanks for calling back. Are you free for lunch tomorrow, Wednesday?”

---“I am.”

---“Good. Let’s meet at the office and then we’ll walk to the Faculty Club. Would that be satisfactory?”

---“It would be. Just have your secretary call mid-morning to be sure I’m up, you know.”

---“Will do. See you tomorrow.”

I thought to myself, that man is on his way to a long administrative career, as long as he can keep it under control. I knew that because he’s totally humorless.

I called the dean and his secretary answered.

---“Dr. Chilton, how are you?”

---“I’m fine for 11 AM, and how are you?”

---“Up to my you-know-what with work. The dean wants to talk to you as soon as possible, but he’s in a meeting right now. Will you be near your cell for a while? No early naps I hope,” she asked chuckling.

---“If I have 10 minutes I may sneak one in. May I ask you a question?”

---“You may. Anything to keep you awake for a while longer.”

---“I’ll have to blame my sleep-deprived state on you. No, does your family have any spaces to rent that could be used for studios or are already equipped as studios? Not for me but I’m inquiring on behalf of a student whose avocation is jewelry and sculpting. She’s new to the city and doesn’t have any contacts yet.”

---“Indeed they do, and several of them are in your neighborhood. Let me double-check with Will, and I’ll get back to you. Now don’t lie down,” and she hung up.

I was cleaning up the few dishes when the cell went off. I could see it was the dean.

---“I’m not lying down or asleep, per instructions from your secretary,” I spoke into the phone.

---“I could use some sleep,” confessed the dean, who seldom confessed to anything. “I’m actually leaving town tonight for a week. I find myself in a bit of a pickle. A candidate for one of the visiting researcher slots will be on campus next week. I’m putting together a panel to conduct a ‘conversation’, if you know what I mean, with him late Monday afternoon at a place to be determined. He and I share some common ground, and you may know his name – Dwight Cleland.”

---“I do know the name and in fact I met him several years ago. I’ll be glad to help you out as long as I’m not crossing any forbidden lines, not that I haven’t in the past.”

---“No forbidden lines, if what you mean, as I’m sure you do, departmental lines. Strictly an interdisciplinary matter. Do you have any opinion of him?”

---“First-rate mind, but a bit too weasily on his speciality – how exporting democracy works. That is much debated, and he’s quite smart in such a debate. He and I had fun for a few minutes disagreeing.”

---“That’s why when I mentioned that you were here for a semester in a similar program he said he like to talk to you. OK, my secretary will call you with the details. I’ll be in touch upon my return.” And he hung up.

A good time to work out, I thought. It was. Within two hours I was home again. After a shower and a nap I was ready to turn on my computer for the first time in almost a day and try to do some writing. As soon as the screen appeared, Google informed me I had emails. Nothing

requiring immediate attention except for an email from Ellen. She wrote to say she'd call very soon but for the rest of the day she was tied up. Probably tomorrow.

The following morning after a reminder from the chair's secretary I caught the subway uptown to the university. I arrived a few minutes early so I could check my snail mail and chat briefly with the office staff. The chair was as prompt a person as I had ever known – did his meetings never exceed the limits he had set? Was that a sign that really not much of importance occupied his time or demanded his attention? – but before I could think about answers he opened his door and invited me in.

We were not alone. Two senior members, whose names I could not recall, were standing when I entered the room. We exchanged greetings as well as names, after which the chair apologized for not informing me that others would be joining us. That had only been decided earlier in the morning. I was beginning to think this is a very collegial department to be deciding things on such short notice. Having more people around made my task easier. I'd much rather be dealing with several, none of whom knew me well, and with quickie decisions that probably had never been thought through. I not only appeared relaxed but was. I would simply let them talk. With three wanting to assure me of their sincerity and importance I would hardly have to say anything for a while. I could have written the script for what was coming with respect to me without knowing any further details.

Reports back from the students as well as visiting faculty were highly favorable, so I was occupying for this semester would not be filled for another year, a senior appointment would be made but in addition a junior tenure-track position to follow the senior appointment had been tentatively authorized, the president, provost and dean's council had urged the department to revise and expand the program because of student demand, changes and appointments would be phased in over three years, and to the crux of the matter would I accept a temporary appointment through the Spring Term and finally would I consider an extension of the appointment through the next academic year to help guide the department toward its desired goals. This took almost a half hour since there were actually three versions that I had to listen to. More importantly it was different from the dean's version.

Then the chair suggested we adjourn for lunch where I could ask questions. Questions over the usual faculty-club fare of mud-thick asparagus soup and over-cooked chicken something-or-other were much easier to deal with than within the confines of the office where the combatants directly faced each other. After placing our order – mine was a non-descript salad – the senior of the seniors asked me the wrong question: what were my professional plans for the near term? I had no intention of telling him about my plans except to say I plan to retire, and that was the truth. I could see from their expressions they had no clue. Now we were on my side of the field. My first question was whether the extension of my appointment was in accord with the wishes of the members of the department, and my second question was whether it can be assumed that the previous occupant – everyone knew the dean was a personal friend – had no intention of resuming his teaching duties or returning full-time to the department or reclaiming his much-deserved scholarly mantle, and my third question was whether I am to assume, as caretaker, I would not be a candidate for the senior position? I knew my part was finished. These answers would take us through dessert or coffee, and I was sure that the chair had scheduled no more than an hour for this luncheon.

I barely listened to the answers for they made no difference. I had made up my mind. I knew what the plan was – to use me, a friend of the dean, as a wedge. With me in a concocted position of determining the future the dean was less likely to interfere. I had no idea what the chair and his allies wanted to do with the field that the dean had elevated to prominence, but I was not about to sign up to any potential internecine warfare.

I was vaguely attentive as they talked, sometimes all three at once. One of the senior members, who informed me that he was chair of the department's executive committee, assured me that protocol was being followed, and I interrupted that to mean that the department had not been consulted because the chair in consultation with the executive committee had the authority to make temporary appointments and then to decide what the duties of the temporary appointee should be. "Trouble right here in River City" I sang to myself quietly. The answers to questions two and three were qualified: the dean, i. e. my friend, had not objected to the plan and had indicated for the time being he intended to continue in his current appointment. Facilitator rather than caretaker would best describe my role, but once the profile for a senior appointment was written, I could decide if I qualified as a candidate. In short, being light-years ahead of my inquisitors, I had no trouble laying out the basics in my mind: I would lead the battle for change that would surely include purging the department of the dean's longstanding influence and then I would be thanked and dismissed.

Lunch was over because the chair was antsy, and I said I would deliver a response within a few days. This was not well received because they expected me to say several weeks, ample time to reflect and to have further consultations. There would be no further consultations.

I had decided before leaving home to stop at the gym on my return. I brought along a small bag with what I needed, and after subway trip I showed up at Katie's desk.

---"How are you, my dear? Are we on for a date tonight?" I asked.

---"Aren't we chirper? You're also in luck. She's not here because you're early."

---"Ah, well-laid plans. So are we on for tonight?"

---"Bad, bad, bad. Did you eat lunch or drink lunch?"

---"A little of both. I just finished a luncheon meeting about my future. The plans laid out struck me as worthy of several glasses of inferior wine. Actually the wine was more interesting than the plans. Since you won't answer my question, I'll leave you to contemplate how a marginal wine can be elevated to such heights."

I was gone before she could rap my knuckles.

I changed, picked a spot in a room that was filling fast and went to work on shoulders and upper arms. An hour latter I was done, and as I approached the desk I heard

---"By the way, what time tonight?"

---"Too tired and too old to answer. In our next life..."

As I reached the door I heard

---“Our next life may be ascending...”

If there was more, I didn't want to hear it. Katie was just too appealing to be further disappointed.

I was too revved up for a nap so after a shower I sat down to do some work. I opened some wine and ate chaucerie and fruit from the fridge. It was a much colder fall evening than the previous week, and I was not tempted to venture out. I worked through the evening. When I quit, I had finished preparations for several weeks. I had several files to send the students but decided to wait until they returned next week. My cell lit up but with a less familiar ring. It was a text message from Ellen. She wanted to call around noon tomorrow if convenient. I responded in the affirmative and assured her I'd be up by then.

I had an hour before Stewart and Colbert and I devoured a couple chapters of Russo. Somehow he made their lives hang together even though they should collapse. Is that the ultimate fate? Just sort of hanging in there? No multiple universes, just the same one in which we muck around until our final exit. I didn't quite know how to fit the last few days into that scheme. Stewart and Colbert removed any need to answer my own question. Not only fake news, but fake therapy.

---“I waited as long as I could,” spoke Ellen into her cell the next morning. “Do you know how much of life you miss by sleeping through it?”

---“And how much shit did I miss,” an answer that surprised me in my quasi-somnolent state.

---“May I join you, then?”

---“You'll need permission,” I responded quickly.

---“Unlikely, but I have a less controversial invitation. Some background first. I not only trade securities, but I also am part-owner of some businesses, including a gallery. It's called Newcomers and the name explains its purpose. We are rich people with an interest in helping not-yet-established, young or old, artists to be shown. We keep no one on the roster for more than two years – that can mean from three to four shows – and more importantly commissions cover costs of the gallery including searches for new prospects, and the investors receive no dividends, bonuses or any other write-offs. We can count it as a charitable deduction in accord with existing tax laws. In short it's not a money-maker or a tax-haven. This may surprise you, but I found your web site, and you own a print by one of our current roster members....”

---“Oh my god,” I heard myself shout.

---“You seem less than thrilled. Am I correct? It is a stunning print.”

I had posted several prints, but I knew instantly which one she was referring to.

---“It is stunning, and I'm a fan, but it came with some unexpected baggage.”

---“Tara no doubt. She has a bit of a reputation.”

---“How many degrees of separation are we operating in?” I asked.

---“You tell me. I know both first-hand.”

---“Not now, Ellen, although it would probably be easier to tell you the story than anyone I know. What’s the angle?”

---No angle. An invitation and an opening. Next Friday night, not this Friday, at 7 PM. I’ll send you the address. It’s not far. I’m serving cocktails at my place at 5 PM, and you’re invited. No artists, probably no other academics, just rich people and you. I think you’ll do fine. I suspect you know more than they do about art, based upon your web commentary. I was impressed. How about it?”

---“I’d love it, being surrounded by rich people. How do you get anyone to a 5-PM, Friday-afternoon cocktail party?”

---“Because they don’t work, or like me they can be done by early afternoon. Who needs another million after 5 PM?”

---“A world I have a lot to learn about.”

---“Will you be bringing a companion either to the cocktail hour or to the gallery?” she asked unexpectedly.

---“No one I can think of except a student of mine, also an artist, wonderful jewelry and abstract sculptures, to the opening. I think she’d enjoy it. She hasn’t had time yet to make any local artistic connections. I’d thought about introducing her to Tara, then I backed off. Besides you may be interested.”

---“Given your track record, I may be. Mark it down. Check the gallery web site for details. I’ll be out of town from tomorrow until Monday. But I have access to emails, etc. I look forward to seeing you.”

---“Likewise and thanks. Be safe.” We hung up.

My social life was in full bloom after years of living in a desert like a hermit. I now had to fill in my cell scheduler with various alerts. I hadn’t used a scheduler in decades. I couldn’t say I was displeased despite years of pooh-poohing such a social life. Was the city leading me down a path that would dump me somewhere in the bay? I’d never learned how to swim.

Not much happened between Ellen’s call and the wine tasting I was getting ready for Saturday night. The Dean’s secretary had called with information about studios and details of Monday’s conversation. I had a number to call to reach Will, but I’d put it off until next week. I was looking forward to the wine-tasting, although I could not imagine I would know anyone besides the owners. And when I arrived that was immediately true.

Tish gave me a warm hug and Serge announced Dr. Chilton is here in his usual loud store voice. Tish introduced me to a group of about 10 people of various ages and attires. During the evening another half-dozen arrived. I wasn’t very good at wine-talk – all those fruity smells and smoky tastes eluded me. But I knew when I was drinking good wine, and it had a lot to do with simple taste. The palate told me all I needed to know. The table was full of bottles with labels and from regions I knew nothing about. Tonight I’d taste and listen. I was not the only academic. But most of the guests were non-academics. We drank an expensive Chateauneuf du Pape, which I knew

quite well; we were served a moderately-priced Rioja I did not know but would remember because Rioja was becoming my fallback when I wasn't buying French. Two Tuscany wines were so-so, and Tish teased me about my anti-Italian bias. The rest were from the US including one from Virginia, which I thought was undrinkable, and one from Australia. Serge made it clear that they had chosen a range of reds – they were all red – and they personally did not endorse all of them. Serge was filled with facts and figures about the number of wine-producing regions, new labels that were growing by leaps and bounds and prices that would continue to be impossible to predict. I was glad I didn't have to remember all this. I was willing to let Tish and Serge do that. Reading wine reviews was about as interesting as cleaning house.

This was a savvy crowd, not just about wine but a range of topics. A neurologist who was studying brain cell activity at the most basic level and confessed the findings did not fit the models and models that might explain the findings seemed out of wack with current knowledge. A female weight-lifter from another neighborhood gym with a nationally-syndicated comic strip that was taking off. A dot-com entrepreneur who was working on a social-networking site for oldsters like me who didn't listen to the latest I-Tune downloads. People were genuinely interested in what I did, especially my WWW life. Since it was a wine-tasting event, every conversation was bound to be interrupted with the announcement of a new pouring and would turn back to the reason for the gathering. Talking about our lives and ourselves never got very far under the circumstances. That was fine by me. I'd had enough of that during the past week. I left in a buoyant mood, due in part, I suppose, to the consumption of more wine than usual. The walk home was hardly pleasant – a cold foul wind – but medicinal in a way.

Over the weekend I sent an email to Sasha. I had a contact – not the one I had mentioned – about studio space, and I expected to talk to him this coming week. If it sounded promising, I'd put her in touch with him. Further I explained that she was invited to a gallery opening for aspiring artists and I would explain the details later. I had a few other emails to answer and some work to do on my web sites, but all in all it was a quiet weekend.

On Monday, the first day back for the students, I emailed the information about the files they should download for the next several weeks. Sasha left me an email in which she responded with an affirmative about the gallery opening and a few details about the studio she would be interested in but could not commit herself to right now. I called Will, whose sister had, as I knew she would, properly laid the groundwork, and I came away from the conversation with a lot of information about studio rates and locations. I gave him Sasha's name and said she would be in touch.

I showed up at the gym earlier than usual with a comment from Katie that this was getting to be a habit and probably a good one, and after the gym I stopped by the wine shop. I thanked Tish and Serge for a fine evening, and they said I had passed the blackball test with flying colors, a mixture of metaphors that amused us all. Now, as I walked home with a couple of bottles of the Riojas we had tasted, I had to begin to prepare for the forthcoming "conversation", at a building, not far, that served as the university's convention center. I had little information although the dean's secretary assured me I had all I needed.

I decided to take a chance on the worsening weather, donned my raincoat and grabbed my umbrella and left the loft for what would be about a 20 minute walk. Once I'd arrived, I was shown to a small room, properly furnished in leather and with booze, where a professor from

geography, the chair of the meeting, introduced herself and then introduced me to the others standing in the center of the room. A white-coated waiter appeared at my side to take my order. I thought, the dean knows how to plan even the smallest event. I decided I needed a straight bourbon, which turned out to be not superior but better than average. Within minutes Dwight and his handlers arrived. Dwight and I shook hands and laughed as we both commented how unlikely it was that our next meeting should be here under these circumstances. The chair announced the “conversation” was to begin. Except for an economist and Dwight I had never met until now the other half-dozen I’d be conversing with. As curious as I was about the group, my mind began to wander. Then I heard my name and refocused on the chair’s commentary, not sure what I had missed. I heard the term post-colonial, and it began to dawn on me what this group was about. While still being a scholar/teacher the dean had developed an interest in post-colonial theory. Post-colonialism also involved a refined version of world-systems theory of a quarter a century ago. As I refocused, I realized that the chair was referring to my seminar – I hadn’t a clue how she knew anything about it – in which I was helping to ground students, interested in post-colonial strategies, by careful and systematic analysis of late colonial economies. Well, there was nothing wrong with that assessment except the seminar had nothing to do with post-colonialism or world-systems or as far as I knew with students who were planning to pursue such strategies. I was trying to recall – had I ever uttered the word post-colonial – I’d certainly never uttered the utterly mystifying term world-systems. What had I missed? I was not as attentive as I should be to university affairs, either here or at home, but this caught me completely off-guard. I decided I couldn’t fake it. When the chair finished her remarks, she turned to me as if I should have a response. I was honest. Unaware though I was of the group’s special interest in post-colonialism, I could heartily endorse the chair’s remarks of the value being well-grounded in colonial studies in order to gain insights about developments in the post-colonial period. Then I turned to Dwight and said I thought he would find students and faculty members prepared and eager to take up the issues that interested him. That was all I had to say, and I had to hope that was all I would be asked to say. I was trying to adapt to a situation that I had not anticipated.

The chair thanked me for my comments and apologized that I was not more fully informed. Before she could fully inform me others joined in the “conversation” and for the next hour I sat and listened, most of the time at least. My assumption was correct. This was a hand-picked group of like-minded academics to initiate a major interdisciplinary program across many departments under the guidance of the dean and the provost and most importantly with a few star appointments not to the departments but to the program. It was truly ambitious and risky, not the first such attempt in the annals of re-engineering the academic world, but unlike many beached whales from past storms this one had money and plenty of it. In fact the money had been raised before the program was officially launched. I had to hand it to the dean – always a big thinker and always a risk-taker.

At the end of the “conversation” I shook hands, wished Dwight the best and exited as quickly as I could. Avoiding any further inquiries was my goal. Even a fairly heavy rain did not deter me. I was headed for the shelter of The Space, as contradictory as that sounded.

The next day I met Richard as planned at one of his favorite restaurants. Being the hypochondriac he was, he was dressed as if Arctic weather had descended upon us. After we ordered, the conversation turned to some data he’d been working with. What did I think, he asked, as he handed me several tables and graphs. He was trying to link several different

datasets, several of which were mine, over a span of two centuries, colonial and post-colonial. As we chatted, I thought that once again Richard is staking out new territory and the result will be unsettling for some scholars. I offered some suggestions and also said I had some other datasets, compiled by several young scholars but not yet published that I'd send him to look at. Then we put away the charts and ordered espressos.

As we drank our espressos, he became more relaxed. He knew most of the important gossip about our academic circle, and that was what was on his mind. He always managed to find a way to remind me I was still regarded as a pain in the ass by most because I contributed so little to the rumor mill.

Then uncharacteristically he asked,

---“Have you been in touch with Ellen?”

I described the call and the gallery invitation.

---“And do you have an interest in her?” one of those zingers Richard was known for.

I laughed before replying. Richard was not laughing. His moral-cop demeanor was absolutely in view.

---“Hardly. She's a personality to reckon with. She also married, and I'm not about to entangle myself in that knot of relationship messiness.”

---“Actually, it's not you I worry about, it's her. The marriage is in trouble, and if it falls, Lynn and I will be faced once again with choosing sides. I've known Paul for some years – a good scholar and teacher with a messy personal life along with a youth spent on the city streets that in some odd way continues to fuck up his life. Lynn has known Ellen since we moved here through yoga or some such meditative experience I'll never understand. We like both, but in the last few months their marriage had been devolving, if you know what I mean.”

---“I don't think she's after me. Obviously I don't know Paul at all. Ellen and I have some common interests, but the bedroom is not on the list.”

---“I must confess that I have observed a different you in the city. Is it the city or is it you?”

---“Well, my dear friend, you always had an unrealistic view of what I was doing in my off-hours. I've been divorced more than a decade, and I've had some relationships, not all of which I'd describe as A-Quality. I've been in some bedrooms I should have avoided. And I was shut out of some bedrooms that still haunt me. In the end, I suppose I've changed only because unlike you I have failed through most of my life to moor myself. Perhaps in these looming god-awful golden years I've seen the need to swim around more cautiously. If I'm moored more so than in the past I'm moored inside a world that is pretty self-contained and self-directed. A world that would make you uncomfortable because I've chosen to be moored even though I don't know if I want to be. A convenience. Anything more permanent would drive me in the opposite direction. That's the one thing I've come to terms with. Since I can remember, lashing myself to a way of life, for the lack of a better term, was the first step toward rebelling against that life. Right now I seem less rambunctious, even to myself, but I have no idea where I'm headed. Perhaps I'm just

sitting dead in the water – is there a nautical term? – rather than being moored. A long answer but not complete. I’ve had plenty of time the last year, especially here, to wallow around in ‘where to now.’”

---“In spite what you say you were married for a fairly long time, by today’s standards, so weren’t you moored, so to speak?”

---“I was. At times satisfactorily so. But the rope was often taut and from time to time broken. Certainly from her behavior she was not happily moored, and that had an effect on me. During my marriage I kept thinking it’s working and I’ll stick with it until the end, but now when I conjure up those words from whatever memory bank they occupy I’m not sure whether I can believe what I thought I believed. As you well know length of time in a marriage means nothing. For a while during the divorce I fought being unmoored, but then I welcomed it. And my life since then, if I could measure it as you and I are wont to do with so much else that we spend our time with, if I could would I find it more unmoored because that’s what I prefer, but not always in wild, uncontrollable seas. Or, as a neuroscientist told me at a wine-tasting last week, when memory is activated so many parts of the brain light up, some parts expected but other parts not, that the brain seems to function on several levels irrespective of what our science tells us to anticipate. He left me with a question...is the brain capable of playing tricks on us even though it’s our brain? This all started with Ellen because your brain observed something may be developing between us, and my brain reacted with a common retort...she’s married, relationship messiness, etc...and yet...you know where I’m going with this. My brain’s reaction is perfectly rational and in the eyes of some moral. But is it to be trusted? I can say that if she is becoming unmoored, although personally I can’t point to anything specific, it’s more than her marriage. Of course this could be more trickery, something I’ve made up just in case. I’ve grown used to these gymnastics – would you like a list of names that helped to make me an Olympian – or should we just pay the bill....”

---“You can leave me dangling like this...man, I have a faculty meeting to get ready for.”

---“Dangling is an operative word in the world I’m describing. Not surprised you don’t like it. No reason you should be dangling. Not everyone’s cup of tea. So what should I say to ‘disengage’ you? Am I on the prowl now, no. And without further adieu you are my guest today because you have unknowingly made me talk about some things I’ve been trying to push into the dumpster of my brain with no success. Sometimes clarity arrives in curious guises. Clarity fades fast but I always enjoy its brief appearance.”

I paid the bill and left a tip, and we headed into the street, sunny but cold.

---“You once asked after looking at my new web page who was crazier, Psycho Kitty, who designed it, or me? Even though she has the preferred name, I’m crazier. Like you, and despite the nickname of her own creation, she’s happier being moored.”

---“I’m exhausted. You’ve done it again, I have no energy left to listen to faculty spouting shit this afternoon.”

---“Unlikely, Eyeore, you’re Mr Atlas. Will it help if you adopt my mantra - it’s all trickery.”

We embraced and parted. The gym was my next stop. If Tara were in attendance, I'd amble over and ask her if she wanted to fuck, to finish what we had started years ago. I quickly concluded that being an asshole would make the situation worse and me worse off. Her dream world portrayed on canvas can be observed but never explained. Dreaming is what we do night after night, often more than one dream per night, and then we try to remember and explain and tell stories about our dreams, and in the end it's what we see on Tara's canvases – images, colors, flatness, eeriness and above all trickery. To her credit she made it a part of her aesthetic, and that mediation between dream and real made her paintings worth looking at.

When I awoke on Wednesday I decided it was time. I logged onto the Net, entered the chair's email address, and in three sentences I thanked him and the department for the opportunity to teach such a fine group of graduate students, I had considered the department's offer and I must decline. I also sent a copy to the traveling dean with the comment, "Sorry. Saying no is what I'm most comfortable with. Thanks."

I read for the rest of the morning and then headed to the gym. No Katie, no Tara, not many rats to contend with it. Before heading for the gym I had put some champagne on ice, not because I had anything to celebrate but just because.

About 7 pm with a glass of champagne in my hand the door bell rang. My god, I thought they've come to haul me away. I rang the person in, and when I checked the peephole I saw Sasha. I quickly opened the door.

---"Sasha," I said far too excitedly, "is anything wrong? Come in."

She was all smiles so I knew my question must have struck her as absurd.

---"Thanks," she said a little sheepishly. "No, don't be alarmed. No crises. Just some news that I want you to be among the first to hear, that's all."

She chose the sofa – in class she preferred the floor pillows – and I chose the wingback.

---"I made a decision over the weekend," she started, and after a brief pause, she continued, "I'm withdrawing at the end of the semester, but I'm staying in the city, at least for a while. I've decided I really want to do art. I have enough money, mainly my own, to live on for several years if I'm careful. I told my parents over the weekend. I don't have to ask their permission any more. But they are dear to me and deserve to know. As I expected, they said they would not interfere and would be available to help out if necessary. They're predictable in a way that their daughter isn't. I feel somewhat exploitative because I know if they had to help it would be a modest financial burden for them. I don't plan to ask for help, but I can do this because I know they can help out. I intend to complete my class-work just in case, and besides if you haven't figured it out yet, I'm fairly competitive about such things. That's my story and the reason I'm here. I hope I haven't interrupted anything."

I got up and walked to the kitchen as I said

---"This calls for a celebration. I have my champagne, you need yours," and I poured her a glass.

---“And now I have some news for you. I will be in city next semester, but I have told the university I will not accept the temporary-permanent, permanent-temporary appointment they offered me last week. Let’s drink to our liberty,” and we both laughed.

---“And what led you to turn down p-t, t-p appointment? You’ve talked about retirement but not about a longer gig here. Did I miss something?”

I described the various conversations and meetings surrounding the offer, and then said,

---“I asked myself or that part of my brain that keeps talking to me, why would I accept? No reasonable affirmative answer. There are a few details I’m leaving out now, but I can fill you in later after the dust has settled, if there is any dust to settle. The offer was less about bringing me into the department and more about keeping someone out.”

Sasha smiled, and I knew she was satisfied. It was not hard to add two and two.

---“Someday you’ll clue me on all these brains at work. More interesting than who’s getting hired or fired.”

---“My current fad. I can’t forget something that was said to me at a wine-tasting last week – maybe that explains it – too much wine – but it was from a brain expert who said watch out for the brain’s trickery. Because it’s becoming a preoccupation it needs to be put to rest for a while.” I retrieved the bottle and split the remainder between us.

---“Anything thing I can do to assist the transition back to artist?” I asked.

---“Indeed a studio is must. Should I call this Will person?”

---“Yes, you should. You may have to use my name or my name and his sister’s name to remind him why you’re calling, but once you get his attention you’ll find he’s very helpful and unthreatening. Or I can lead the way.”

---“I’ll call in the morning. I should be going because I know you’re busy with tomorrow’s seminar and all.”

---“Please stay, finish your champagne, I’m fully ready for tomorrow, maybe we can walk across the street for an espresso?”

And that we did. I asked her how she had reached her decision to switch and stay, and she knew exactly how to answer. The right side was more interesting than the left. That was good enough for me. It was also good for a laugh since brain talk was on vacation. I then filled her in with more details about Friday’s Gallery Soirée.

---“You’ll recall I said I knew an artist who might be able to help you find a studio, and then I decided against involving her. Well, you’re probably going to meet her at the Gallery. Her husband has a print in the exhibit.”

---“And you own a copy, right?”

---“I do, You saw it on my web site, no doubt. How did you connect the two or did I do it for you?”

---“Intuition, I guess. I studied both of them for a few minutes, and while there’s no stylistic connection, the print was below the painting, that painting over there, and neither had a title or name but each had a Latin phrase that caught the mood of each work. I assumed some sort of connection. It’s pretty much a dead giveaway with the Latin and all. And when you just said what you did, it all clicked.”

---“Could I buy some of that intuition? I own none whatsoever.”

---“I don’t recommend it. At times it screws up everything.”

---“Here’s the rest of the story, which you may have figured out.”

I told her about our brief time together a decade ago, her repeated dumping of me, how I acquired the painting and the print and the gym business. I added as many details as I thought necessary but left out others.

---“Do you still pine for her?” Sasha asked pointedly.

---“Yes and no. She’s lost her looks. That’s why the gym time. I’ve grown tired of the deceit but not tired enough to erase her. If she had offered amourness instead of meanness I hate to think where I’d be. I don’t get it, and I’ve quit trying to explain why I don’t get it. I can live with it. I didn’t expect to see her in a gallery setting, but once that’s over I may never see her again. That’s how I deal with things I can’t seem to control. For most of the last decade I had no contact and only occasional reminiscences. That will probably become standard operating procedure once again. That we met by accident may indicate more of a future than I’m expecting – not very good at intuition, as I said – but who knows. Let me warn you. Her tongue is part acid. You can cancel if you wish.”

---“Not on your life. Sorry. Besides you need some support.”

---“You may have noticed from time to time,” she continued, “I’m looking at her painting. I like to think that I can both listen to one reality and observe another. Had it ever occurred to you that in the painting she’s giving the finger?”

I wanted to hit my forehead with my palm, the way a former colleague did to express his astonishment and the way we did to mock his bewildering astonishment, but I resisted. I was utterly dumbfounded and speechless, and from the grin on her face she knew the impact of that remark. I put up my right fist with the middle finger extended as if the painting, which I had committed to memory, were in front of us. Shit, it fits exactly!

By now we were both laughing.

---“How did you come to that metaphoric insight? Will I see it less vividly in the future, but at this moment sitting here across the room from the painting I see it far too vividly. It’s not beyond her. Not a painting directed at me personally – that seems too far-fetched – but a painting destined for my walls – that too seems far-fetched. I looked at a score of her small paintings, and I chose that one. If it is the finger, it’s even more brilliant a triumph than I first thought.” I fell silent.

---“I agree,” Sasha’s words breaking the silence. “What little you’ve told me, I have no trouble accepting the possibility that she’s saying ‘fuck you’, not you specifically, although who knows, but ‘fuck you’ the collective you, amid utterly delicious images.”

---“How strange you should choose delicious. I once saw her sitting in the café we both frequented – this was after the affair that wasn’t had run its course – and I walked up to her and said something like how delicious and she glared, got up and left. You’re right, though, the images are delicious and also devious. Make the fist with the middle finger raised and you have the dark hole under the middle finger that you see in the painting. Is that where we all end up after being told ‘fuck you?’”

---“Let me add one more comment, based on the fact that she and I are both artists. Even though the images have a certain randomness on a very flat surface, there is nothing random about the design. It is in fact tighter and more controlled than you might first observe. I’ve not met her and if I do I’m not sure I will like her, but it’s a brilliant painting.

After a few minutes of silence we both realized there was nothing more to be said. We put on our coats, and I walked her back to her apartment. When I got home I watched Stewart and Colbert and was asleep shortly after midnight after taking one last look at Fuck You.

When I turned on the electronics the next morning there were the expected messages. With my Peet’s in hand I started through them. The chair’s email. Reconsider was the operative term with another proposed meeting to answer questions and iron out details. I thanked him but said my decision was final. The dean’s note more surprising. He asked me to reconsider, suggested some bargaining with the chair that might make it more attractive to me and then added I may have made the right decision, but he felt an obligation to the university to plead the case for my staying. He would be back in the office in a few days.

My reply was equally brief. His last sentence said it all and deepest affections, which I meant.

Since there was an email from Deidre, I was curious what it contained. Most of it had to do with her thoughts about the seminar we were leading. Clearly she was making serious preparations. She could not attend tonight but would call me tomorrow. At the end she wrote she was sorry I would not be on-board after the end of the term but assumed I was remaining in the city for a while long. My reply was thanks, call me tomorrow and yes, for a while. I was surprised that she knew but thought I knew how.

The other emails went quickly. I then turned to the messages on my cell. The emails had taken care of some of the cell messages. I switched on the message from Ellen, who called to remind me of the affair tomorrow night and to ask that Sasha, whom she called my friend instead of my student, bring some photos of her work. I sent her a one-line text message of thanks. By noon I was shopping for what I would need for the seminar tonight. Serge and Tish recommended one of the Riojas we had tasted, and I bought several bottles. At the deli I picked out several hors d’oeuvres and desserts. After lunch I decided to do my work-out, and I was in and out of the gym in less than an hour. By 6 o’clock everything was ready. I checked my emails to discover one from the dean of the college, asking me to meet her tomorrow, if possible, at 11 AM. I quickly wrote a reply that I would be at her office at the appointed time. About 7 the door bell rang, and thus began the arrival of the students.

Everyone was in attendance. No outsiders this week. Just as well. I explained what was ahead and warned the students that the files they would soon receive for the session with Deidre might be a bit challenging. Then I launched into what was a mini-lecture about price history, a lecture I had given many times before about a subject that was more or less the cornerstone of my professional reputation. We took a break and I ordered everyone to the buffet. After the seminar resumed I made a few more comments and then opened it up to questions. By 9:30 we had finished. I spoke briefly to Sasha who quietly reported that her advisor was not happy with her decision. Nor was the chair happy with mine, I responded. And we both smiled. Since another student had asked to talk briefly after class, I could not walk Sasha home. She reassured me she was safe, it was too early for the crazies to out. We agreed to meet at the Gallery at 7 PM, and I sat down to talk with student who remained.

The next morning I showed up as promised at the dean's office. I was ushered in almost immediately. She was a large woman who could bench press far more than I could, of that I was sure. We chatted briefly about some recent university events before turning to the topic at hand. She succinctly reviewed the main points of the chair's offer and asked if there was anything that she could change that would allow me to reconsider. I said probably not. I told her straightforwardly that I was uncomfortable occupying a position that a colleague and friend for nearly three decades had vacated and was entitled to return to. Besides I was seriously weighing early retirement, and I had absolutely no desire to start a new cycle of teaching and administrating that this job would entail. I appreciated the university's vote of confidence, but my decision, I said, was irreversible. I could see she was not about to press the issue any further. We both understood each other even though we didn't talk about some of the things that we understood. She stood, as did I, and we shook hands. She said she was glad we had this opportunity to hear my side, and she appreciated my directness.

I decided to eat lunch at a nearby restaurant that the students had recommended. At the table by myself I thought that another phase of my life was winding down, much to my surprise. To have ended my career at this university would have been a feather in the proverbial cap, but no thanks. I had pretty much left my field of study, and this was more or less the last hurrah. During the next six months I would finish my current projects that had nothing to do with numbers and only marginally with economics, and after that somewhere, I was not sure where, I would start something different. I was not done, although I felt at times I was closer than I wanted to be. What I wanted to do was to put to paper some of the scores of stories swirling about in my head, stories based on my life, and stories shaped by my imagination. I knew at some point I had to give vent to these. They were showing up in my dreams and even in my conversations. I was getting ready to play make-believe. How odd, I thought, then how real. The moorings or the lack thereof seemed less crucial than normal. On one level I was moored, but on another I was floating, not being swept, out to sea. I paid my bill and with my small bag took off to the gym. On the way I checked my cell. For the first time in days the screen was clear.

As I approached the desk Katie uttered,

--- "All clear. Your luck's holding."

---"Except for tonight. She'll probably be at a Gallery reception I'm attending since her husband's print is a part of the showing. Maybe I can hide behind a giant sculpture."

---“That your problem. You keep hiding. Stand out front and be an asshole,” shot back Katie, followed by “Excuse the language.”

---“Funny, last week someone we both know gave me the same advice. I’m beginning to think it’s a gender-based strategy.”

---“A favorite term for how we act and wish men would act.”

---“Under advisement, my dear, But why do I have so much trouble being an ass-hole at least under the terms laid out by you and you-know-whom?”

---“My guess is you think of it in the context of colleagues and associates but never friends and lovers. I have no doubt you can be an ass-hole with your dean, but your lover, especially when you’re in love?”

---“Man, this should be an interesting work-out thanks to my therapist.”

---“I thought about therapy, my mom is a prominent psychiatrist, believe it or not, but bodies seemed easier to manage than heads.”

---“You must have tons of stories from the dinner table.”

---“Didn’t have much of a dinner table, but stories, yes. We’ll have a drink with my stories some night. Now begone.”

Astonishment as I moved toward the Smith Cage.

I could feel a spirit in my step as I arrived at the door of Ellen’s apartment. I wondered if Paul was home and who would answer the door. A man who was not Paul answered. He was, I speculated, the equivalent of a butler, whatever they’re called today. Ellen crossed the room, full of people, to embrace and greet me.

---“You’re looking quite muscular. Did you work out as usual today?”

---“I did and thanks – muscular is not a term I hear often enough.”

---“Rich people like muscle – join me, I’ll introduce you.”

For the next five minutes, even as others arrived and were ignored by Ellen, another prerogative of rich people, I met a dozen people, whose names were more fleeting than any good ideas I’d ever had. I ended up in a knot of people, casually dressed and markedly younger, who seemed to know who I was before I was introduced. Of course, it was Ellen’s doing. The conversation was mainly about me, as if I needed that, and not about them, as if they were immune from such mundane boosting. Paul was nowhere in sight, and yet none of the males appeared to be serving as a substitute. The interior was filled with art and the view was another form of art. The affair was catered, and the champagne was not the *blancs de blanc* from the Loire that I often drank at home. Fifteen minutes before the Gallery opened Ellen showed up at my side with my coat and took me out the door with two or three others. Once in a lifetime. Whatever glass ceiling had been over my head had been shattered. I thought to myself. And when reality returned, the pieces will have to be picked up.

The Gallery was ablaze in light and already filled. The Director greeted Ellen and the others, presumably owners. I was introduced, and Laurent – that was his name – said we’ve been expecting you. More expectations than I had ever known. Ellen said I should find Sasha – her name she remembered – and I should beware of Tara. Also you will find her husband a decent chap. And she was gone.

I spotted Sasha and joined her. She had a small frame and was dressed in a way that accented her best features. She was not lacking in best features. For the first time I could see how attractive she was. Maybe it was the Gallery lighting.

---“Hi! Did you survive?” she asked empathetically.

---“It was incredible, and I almost never describe social occasions that way. Ellen is a phenomenal host. Does that come from being rich?”

---“It comes from some wealth. I know a little about rich people, not like the wealth in this room, and my parents are rich enough that I can unfortunately fit right in. I prefer to keep my distance. Besides, the host has a thing for you, if I may be so bold. Blame it on the champagne, which is out of this world.”

---“A thing? Quick where’s the champagne?” just as the gentleman with the tray was at my side.

---“Let’s walk,” I said to Sasha, “but what thing and how do you know about it?”

---“I met Ellen and the director briefly here this afternoon after a near-disastrous encounter – not planned - with my advisor. A day of contrasts, great for art, a bit wearying for artists. I think they’re interested in my stuff, but I know she’s interested in you, big time.

---“How come I’m the last to know?” not entirely an honest question, although I was truly surprised that Ellen revealed enough that Sasha could pick it up.

---“Because you’re oblivious?” she said with a laugh.

We were standing in front of a painting, heavy oils and very large, that defied description.

---“What do you think?” I asked out of curiosity as to how quickly she could react to a piece of art she had just seen. Actually it wasn’t her first viewing. She had seen it when she walked in, but I was still interested her reaction.

---“Too much paint, although he’s skilled with the brush. It’s abstract but not mysterious. The heavy brush strokes have driven the mystery out.”

I was impressed. I saw immediately what she was saying.

We worked our way through the room, agreeing and disagreeing, until we reached the print.

---“You’re famous and richer than you were – perhaps by a few dollars,” she added with a wicked smile

Then came that voice accompanied by the usual invective.

---“And why are you here? Every time I turn around....”

---“It’s my assigned role. Tara meet Sasha.”

They shook hands, and the expressions on their faces could not have been more different. Scowling Tara and beaming Sasha. What was I to do next?

Sasha took care of it. She explained she was a graduate student and also an artist. I was her teacher, and we also shared an interest in art. She admired Tara’s painting and she had seen her husband’s print on my web site.

---“If we could take them back, we would,” snapped Tara.

---“We?” I said softly.

---“You heard me – we!”

---“I really doubt if you could afford them so they’re stuck on my walls despite your chagrin,” I said sternly, remembering the ass-hole advice of the past few days and just as Ellen showed up.

---“Come with me for a moment, Sasha. Oh, hello Tara. I was just talking to your husband. He’s in a buoyant mood. Entertain Hooch, or do you know him as Hugh?”

What a performance, I thought. Sasha was all smiles as they left.

---“Hooch?”

---“You dumped me before I could tell you. And you haven’t been much interested in listening to me since.”

---“And how do you know The Lady?”

---“The Lady? You mean Ellen?” and she nodded in the affirmative. I explained how Ellen and I had met and that she had invited me to the opening because of a brief discussion we had about art collecting.

---“Shit,” was what I heard.

---“I will stay out of your way and your life, Tara. But the painting and the print are mine. They will be on my walls and on my web site if and when you want to look.”

---“You’re unhinged....”

---“No more than you, Tara. I liked you a decade ago, and part of me still likes you. I have no idea what demons you’re fighting, but at least I acknowledge my feelings toward you even though you have rewritten history. That’s OK. It’s done all the time. This conversation is over. There are interesting people I want to meet. You’re not among them.” I walked away somewhat amazed at myself. Katie might be proud. Suddenly I heard a door go shut in my head. Am I hallucinating, I wondered.

---“So did you tell her off?” asked Sasha, the next voice I heard.

---“I guess I did, mildly so probably. How did you know?”

---“It’s not worth talking about. We’ve got a few more things to look at and then I’m buying you a drink.”

Ellen suggested the bar, two or three doors away from the Gallery. With a peck on my cheek and an embrace for Sasha she shooed us out the door. The décor in the bar, more upscale than any bar I’d ever been in, was cool and inviting. Also quiet enough to talk. We took a bistro-type table at the back end and order drinks – martinis for both.

---“A week unlike any I’ve ever known,” I said without thinking.

---“I was thinking this was your ordinary week,” replied Sasha. “So, you and Tara hit it off?”

---“Knocked the cover off the ball. May have been the final encounter. I told her she wasn’t worth talking to and walked away. As close to being an asshole as I can get when they’re not colleagues and deans. I heard a door slam shut in my head.”

---“Is that martini too strong? A door? Your head? If it works, who cares that you’re hearing doors shut. I don’t think it’s over on her part. Your acquaintanceship with Ellen is all in your favor in that regard. She’s a power in the art community in which Tara and her husband seek membership. In fact she’s the go-to person.”

---“And you and Ellen? Do you have a new power sponsor?”

---“Sharp woman. I like her. I will work up a portfolio and have some things sent after the first of the year. I told her about my conversation with Will, and, guess what, she asked for his number so she could call. The Gallery has a policy of helping new artists find appropriate quarters. At times I think I’m in a dream, but I’m OK with that right now. Oh, yes, dream-talk is off limits, isn’t it? You have your hands full with Tara and Ellen. If I were a fly on the wall....”

---“You keep saying that. One of the first two rules about relationship messiness – no married women.”

---“Not a bad rule. What’s the other one?”

---“You can probably guess.”

---“Yes, I can, no students.”

---“Well, you’re close, no enrolled students. It should probably extend and generally has been extended to all students,” I said with her eyes planted squarely on me. “Do you think it’s a bad rule?”

---“No, it has to be the rule. I’m glad it is your rule. And I’ll add a corollary, no student should sleep with a professor who’s teaching his or her class.”

---“Were you ever propositioned as an undergraduate?”

---“Yes,” she said after a pause, “more than once.”

---“Did you succumb?”

---“I did...”

---“With guy who became your mentor and partner?” I throw out.

---“Yes, he had a temporary appointment. It was hell, but it happened.”

---“On one level it was OK because you ended up with him for a couple years. But even so it surely can be hell.”

---“I thought about that at the time – expedient and convenient – but it’s a bad policy. I prefer your approach. Didn’t you told me Tara was not a student of yours? Am I wrong?”

---“No, you’re right. She was not, but she was an undergraduate. That’s what worried me. My ambivalence did not sit well. Also I was dating another woman – the cocaine lady – who showed up every couple of weeks. She saw us together more than once. I wasn’t trying to hide anything, but in fact for different reasons both women kept disappearing. After both romances blew up, I had to ask myself a simple question...what the hell was I doing?”

---“Cocaine lady? Do I need to know more?”

---“No. Another story for another time. To put your mind at ease, no drugs in my life, not even experimentally.”

---“What I had assumed. Temptations everywhere in my youth, but never enough to pull me in. I tried a little marijuana in high school, but I hated smoke. Also seemed silly. That was it for me.”

---“I don’t know if Tara used drugs. Some of the café workers whom I knew before I knew Tara did use drugs and Tara soon joined their circle. I had no firsthand knowledge. One thing about Tara was she wasn’t prone to reveal. It’s hard for lovers not to be a little intimate, but she knew more about me than I knew about her. One thing I experienced first-hand were huge mood swings, and at times I got whacked by the pendulum. But, as you know, a part of me will always remember and wish – what is the line from Camelot...”

---“‘Don’t let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief shining moment...’ or would you prefer the earlier ‘a fleeting wisp of glory’?” she actually sang.

---“Wow, that’s impressive!”

---“My parents had an old LP, which I listened to until I’d memorized the lyrics. I only sang in my room by myself. Forget you heard me.”

---“I will at your request. Now that I’ve heard the words again I’m thinking it was not Camelot except to the degree I have romanticized it in my mind.”

---“We’re both out of work, so to speak. I got a verbal spanking from my advisor. Wasting spaces and all that.”

---“Ignore it. Party line. They do keep lists of replacements. You cost them next to nothing. Rather it’s ‘How could you give up this wonderful opportunity’ etc. You may get a negative note in your file, but I’ll do what I can to counteract it.”

---“Thanks. I suspect my exit is not as messy as yours. At least it will cause fewer waves.”

---“Mine may be messy for the parties involved rather than me.”

---“Was it hard to turn down such a prestigious offer? I think every young, aspiring scholar would regard you as....”

---“Unhinged,” laughing as I said it. “Tara used that word to describe me tonight. I couldn’t resist.”

---“Who exactly is unhinged?”

---“I had the same thought. No, it was easy. I can say more about it now that the College dean and I had our *tete-à-tete* this morning. I didn’t know the offer was coming in the form that it arrived, but I had more than an inkling that something was afoot. I learned the first round of details from the dean two weeks ago over lunch. He not only paid for the lunch, but he would have paid my salary. On the way home without knowing the second round of details I heard from the chair last week, but from all the details I knew it was a no-starter. I would like to have helped the dean because there’s trouble brewing, but I’m not interested in recycling myself through the academic life that I’m quite ready to quit. Unlike so many colleagues, including Richard and the dean, I have new things to do or at least to try in the next phase.”

---“I assume the dean is disappointed, but how about Richard?” she ventured.

---“I’m not sure Richard knows yet. I haven’t brought it up. I will eventually. The dean feigned disappointment but concluded his email with...you’re probably making the right decision. I found that odd but in a way reassuring. My instincts about these situations, unlike my personal life, are pretty much on the mark. Behind all these conversations and messages there is something I don’t know, and even if I knew my mind is made up. I don’t have to know everything. I plan to finish the seminar and then turn my attention to six months of being tempted by the lures of the city. By the way, Damn good martini. Thanks Sasha and thanks to Ellen. Let me escort you home.”

---“Agreed. You’ve had something to do with some big changes in my life, and I’m grateful. Like you I have new things to do in the next phase,” and she squeezed my hand.

We took the same cab, and I said I’d walk from her apartment. I was ready for bed almost as soon as I crossed the threshold.

The final four weeks shot by. The blockbuster was that the Friday after the Gallery show the dean announced his resignation from the deanship and his return to his department as a full-time faculty member. Not a word to any of his friends, not even Richard who was closer than rest of us, before or after the announcement. He seemed to have dropped out of sight. I talked to Richard Monday night, and we agreed to stay in touch even though we had to cancel our Tuesday luncheon because of the press of work, mainly his. Wednesday I met Deidre. We had

already met for lunch the week before and this was for coffee to make sure we were in synch. I was impressed with how much work she had put into this, and I told her so. Her response was she liked the attitude of these kids, and she thought she could get an interesting discussion going – and the fact was that Thursday night she did. The discussion went well past 9:30 to almost 10 PM. At our pre-seminar meeting I asked her about the dean, and she said she knew not much more than we did. She had not talked to him, and I did not ask her again.

I took a few minutes after Deidre's presentation to wind up. This was the last seminar, although I made plans to meet each student to discuss papers, performance, grades, etc. I thanked them for making this seminar memorable, for welcoming outside speakers and for drinking a lot of wine I was getting ready to throw out. That was it. After the seminar ended, Sasha asked me if I wasn't impressed with my intuition given the unfolding of events. Once in a lifetime I said.

I walked Deidre to the curb where she got a cab immediately. I thanked her again for a terrific performance, we embraced and she was gone. As I walked upstairs I felt sadness that the experiment, which I had originally viewed as iffy, had somehow worked. I felt for once I had made the right decision, actually a series of right decisions. I poured some Armagnac and sat in the unlit room except for flickering of light on walls and panels from outside.

Thanksgiving was upon us. I had no plans for the day itself. Turkey dinners I can do without. Not a fan. The city was full of Thanksgiving-Day deals at attractive prices, but I had decided to cook in, having the day before visited the wine shop and the grocery store. Richard and Lynn had inquired about my plans, and I assured them I was in good hands, my own. They were with family outside the city. Much to my surprise Ellen called early in the week to invite me to join them on the weekend in the Hamptons where they owned a home. Never been there, I said, but had to do it before I died. She said she'd send instructions for transport and death by email. Some seminar-related work remained. I had talked to all the students about their papers through the chat link that the university encouraged faculty to use and had met with several of them, but I didn't expect any papers or files until the week after Thanksgiving. I was so near done I could actually work on other things. I had talked to the retirement counselor at my home university, and he had emailed the options for early retirement, which may occur sooner than I had anticipated. I also spent several hours writing down some ideas for what might be a fictionalized memoir. Why not? Absolutely nothing to lose.

No life was ever trouble-free for long, even when one tried to keep it that way, I said to myself as I stared out the window of the passenger car heading back to the city. I had spent yesterday and part of today with Paul, Ellen and their friends, and last night I also fucked Ellen. Certainly worth writing about. Full of surprises. She had a lot going for her: a beautiful face, gorgeous eyes, attractive body, eye-catching attire and deeply-engaging personality. A whirl-wind except in the bedroom it turns out. I remembered the conversation we had about lovers, and while I think her categorization of her male partners – I wondered how many – was accurate enough as far as it went, she had left out one important component...herself. When she arrived in my bed ready to fuck I expected it to be different because I really liked her and even though it was against Rule Number One I was ready for action. The thought crossed my mind that this was a woman I could see myself being moored to. Something quite different happened. At the end I knew we'd never be lovers; I hoped we could remain friends.

The simple fact was she fell apart in the bedroom. She ended up sobbing on my shoulder as she lay next to me. I tried to calm her in the few minutes we had because the arrangement was anything but ideal. Without knowing what lay ahead for me and us I had excused myself earlier in the evening. Because of numerous rail delays that consumed more than half the day I was honestly tired. Everyone seemed to understand why, after too many cocktails and a superbly catered dinner I was departing about 8:30 for my quarters, a guesthouse on the edge of the property. Quite honestly I was beat. After I left, apparently Paul and his friends who were actually neighbors with properties of their own in this neighborhood of very expensive homes went off to a local watering hole. Ellen told me it couldn't have been planned any better if she's been in charge. Pure luck, I told her, and then with the endless clickity-clack of the rails I had to wonder if her luck ended there. After the other guests had left Ellen arrived at the door. I was not yet asleep, and I was totally surprised when I opened the door to her and her dog, Bonnie, a very large shepherd that I had not seen in her city house. As I shut the door with my eye on the dog she threw her arms around me and we moved toward the bed while embracing and kissing. Once undressed and ensconced with me lying on top – at her direction - I pulled my face away and said “welcome”. In minutes I was hard, and yet as she guided my cock onto her cunt, she could not make it enter. She became more and more agitated until I whispered slow down, give yourself time to be aroused, it will happen...but it didn't happen according to her schedule. I knew instantly what the problem was and I gently rolled her over and with her on top I entered without any difficulty. I kissed her breasts, which were large but flat, spread out across her chest. They were not breast that could be cupped in my hand. Ah, I thought in recollection, B had the loveliest breasts I had ever known – exactly right. Tara...large and malleable...she liked to bury my face in them and later my cock. But Ellen's were almost without shape. When I kissed her nipple, she began to vibrate and even shriek, almost as if the orgasm came from her breasts and not from her cunt. I had learned long ago that hands made a difference. Ellen had no idea what to do with her hands. She came to orgasm or what appeared to be orgasm far more quickly than I had expected. She pounded hard against my pelvic area in a way that made my penis feel like a tool. Was she making love or executing a trade? I knew it would soon be over, and then we'd have some talking to do. It was over when she said she was out of practice. And then the sobbing began. I moved my hands slowly and lightly across her body, which was vibrating from tears rather than sex. We talked for a while, but she was already into the next phase of the evening. She showered and dressed and asked if I wanted to join them at the local pub, and I begged off. She took my face in hands in what may have been the romantic moment of the evening and said,

---“I want to try again. I like you, but at the same time I'm afraid of you.”

I asked her why as I caressed her small ass and she continued to hold my face in her hands.

---“I'm not sure I know why. I hate being unsure. Are you taking me some place I've never been? I really don't know.”

I certainly didn't know either. She let go of my face and turned toward the door with the “I'll see you for breakfast.”

Actually I saw her before breakfast, in my bed again, with her dogs standing guard at the door. It was less sex, and more embrace and caress and confession. How she had managed to escape her husband and the staff of the house was beyond my comprehension. Maybe they knew and didn't care, I had considered at the time.

For a half hour she talked and I listened. She had not yet gathered up the pieces from the night before. What I learned was that love-making was something she desperately wanted and needed but had seldom known. Men who had pursued her were often disappointed. I had not pursued her, and she had to wonder why. So she pursued me in hopes she would find what was missing. She discovered, she said with more heartfelt honesty than I expected, that she was not in my league. I asked her what league that was. Her answer...a league that required her to be a different woman. Or, I asked, perhaps I should be a different man? No, she said, and she kissed me with more passion than I remember from last night. It was a kiss I'd never forget. It pointed to what we both wanted but could not have, at least not now. Under these conditions time had a way of dictating love-making. Ours had come to an end with that kiss. Then she left.

The weather turned foul, but all of us still spent time outside, walking along the beach. I felt safer outside by myself, and Ellen seemed to understand. We walked together, with her arm nestled in mine, for a while and talked about my plans for the next six months unencumbered in the city until we reached the house when she turned to me with a face that still glowed, even though the disappointments in the bedroom couldn't be hidden, and asked for patience. What she most wanted right now was to disappear. I was lost for an answer. I had endured more disappearances that I cared to remember. I said something like trust your instincts. I took leave in the middle of the afternoon, and after a short delay the train arrived in the city early evening. Once home I poured a bigger Armagnac than usual. Should I worry about Ellen? I couldn't decide. I momentarily felt the presence of the woman I expected. Lips firm as if extending an invitation, and hands, for the first time, that made my skin pulsate. I wasn't sure she wanted to release that other woman.

After an absence of several days I showed up at the gym with my checkbook.

Observing the checkbook Katie opened my file on the computer.

---"Let's see, now, I'll have to charge you double for the next period because (1) you spend too much time in the gym and (2) you caused me to lose a client," she said without taking her eyes over the screen.

---"I'll pay. What's the total?" I said looking straight at her face now turned toward me.

---"The crazy thing is," she said in her relaxed mode, "you would write me a check for whatever I said, wouldn't you? As foolish as you sound, you're not."

---"There's a limit, my dear, and there may also be some perks you aren't aware of."

She laughed and pulled a sheet from the printer for me to sign.

---"How many months, my love?"

---"Probably six unless I decide to stay permanently. Would permanent make you happy? That's down the road. I'm sorry about the lost business. I'll try to find a replacement. I can't say, though, I regret she's gone."

Shortly after the Gallery gala Tara failed to renew her membership and hadn't been seen since.

---“Me neither, quite honestly. She was not a pleasant person. Something destabilizing in her life – a word my mom often used. All it took, though, was for you to tell her to get lost.”

---“Unrequited love, as the poets tells repeatedly, never vanishes. In Tara’s case it’s stuffed away again wherever things like that get stuffed,” I said as I finished writing the check and handed it to Katie.

---“I have a few of those unrequited-love things stuffed as well. Sign here,” she said, pointing to that ubiquitous bottom line. “Does this release me from the perks?”

---“I suppose, although the fantasy of what might have been remains.”

Mussing up my hair, as she had done before, she said,

---“Be bald and fat, and your fantasy world will shrink.”

As I folded my copy of the agreement and stuck it in the small bag I carried, I surveyed her beautiful physique and replied,

---“Or do what I can to make it come true. Be careful what you wish for.”

We were both laughing as I headed to the interior of the gym.

The students’ files began to show up in my inbox. I went to work on them as they arrived. Between grading and working out the week after Thanksgiving was full.

By the end of the week the student had their grades and evaluations. I was pleased, very pleased, with their work. Because of my several conversations with Sasha I was most worried about her. She performed well. Light on analysis – true of several others – but well organized and well written. The ease with which she spoke she also wrote. I could write a strong letter for her file in case she wanted to reconsider. I doubted that she ever would.

Richard called to remind me about the informal beer hall dinner Saturday night, an invitation extended earlier in the week, and did I know that Ellen had quit the city?

---“No, I didn’t know.”

---“Be at our house at 6. It’s a short walk. Do I have to pick you up? Or can you find your way?”

---“I’ll find my way. I may arrive early just so you don’t freak out if I’m not there promptly at 6.

---“Good idea. I can’t afford to freak out with 50 papers to read.”

---“Com’on now. You have a grader. All you do is sign the grade card, and I suspect you’ve found a way around that.”

---“But the TA’s can’t worry the way I do on behalf of the students. Now what about Ellen? What do you know?”

I’d had a few minutes to think, and certain things not for Richard to know fell into place.

---“Nothing concrete. What do you know?”

---“Not more than what she sent Lynn by email. She’s on the West Coast....”

---“And she bought a piece of land....”

---“How did you know?”

---“At your house she told me about her parents and a piece of land they owned and where she grew up not quite like a hippy but in a hippish fashion. Did she buy the land?”

---“She didn’t say.”

---“Don’t be surprised if she did. This decampment may be permanent.”

---“How do you know so much if you don’t know anything?”

---“I listen, and then I have fun making up what I don’t know. Would you like to hear about yourself?”

---“I’ve already heard enough. Saturday. Dress casually and don’t be late!”

Another disappearance, I thought. I was such an ace at launching them. As I turned this over in my mind, I was making a bet with myself that I wouldn’t hear, at least not for many months. I doubted that she’d quit her job because she could do that from anywhere. I’ll bet she’s quit her marriage and her circle. And the gallery? In trouble, I concluded. I would have to relay the news to Sasha in time. I hadn’t moved since I’d turned off the cell. I wasn’t immobile, just musing.

What does one wear to a beer hall, I wished I could ask someone. The opera broadcast was coming to an end, and that gave me ample time to reach Richard’s before 6. I decided on jeans and clogs, which was all I owned in those categories of attire, and a turtleneck with a sweater. Lynn and Richard were ready when I arrived. Lynn took my arm, and we started the short walk of a block or two to Beer, Beer, Beer. It was indeed a beer hall, and I was surprised that the owner knew Richard and Lynn. Old high school friend, who, when I asked, had more money than brains, according to Richard. He escorted us to a backroom, and when he opened the door Lynn made sure I entered first to the applause of a room full of my students. I stood dumbfounded and speechless. Not only the students but their spouses or companions and even a few kids, who were as baffled as I looked. This was a student-organized farewell, I would learn later. They were genuinely appreciative, and I was genuinely moved. I made an effort to speak to every student, to meet spouses and companions and kids. The one thing I heard from more than one was how grateful they were that I dealt with each student individually and openly. I knew their work, their strengths and weaknesses and their potential better than almost any professor they had ever had. I liked that. The goals were met. I had a few minutes with Sasha and asked about her plans and was there anything I could do. She said she was leaving next Friday after the last day and hadn’t had time to think that far ahead but would get in touch before she left. I also had a few minutes with Lynn who unexpectedly said she was still shocked over Ellen’s departure. I agreed. This was not a conversation I wanted to have. Fortunately we were interrupted. Richard was ready to leave, and so they did. I ended up sharing a cab with Sasha.

---“You look a little down or maybe overworked,” I said attentively.

Her answer was a kiss, a passionate kiss, and with arms around my neck she said,

---“I can do this, I’m no longer your student, I want to be your lover. What do you say?”

---“First I need to cut through all the stars in my field of perception to make it’s who I think it is. Sasha?”

Her answer was an even longer kiss. Such sweet lips and hands that knew what to do even in the back of a taxi. I whispered,

---“Shouldn’t we change the drop-off or is this to be confined only to the back of a cab?”

---“I need to pick up some things. To walk into a beer hall with a suitcase was a bit too much.”

---“So how much of this was your engineering?”

---“A lot, especially the cab ride. My backup plan – just to show up at your doorstep. By the way I plan to stay a few days even if I must oust Ellen or Tara or anyone else. I can feel that will be OK by you,” as she moved her hand across my crotch.

---“The nest is currently singular and can easily become plural. Much to tell you about the names you named.”

Ten minutes later with a hard-on that I hoped was not too obvious – actually I didn’t care – I was riding the elevator for the first time to Sasha’s apartment, and when I entered her bedroom I was unprepared, even though she had warned me, for what I saw. I was spellbound for the second time this evening – wall-to-wall, wall-to-floor, in drawings, paintings and a couple wall sculptures. All those adjectives – lean, exquisite, original, entriguing. Sasha seemed as oblivious as I was captivated.

---“Hop to it, my dear,” she said and then with a wave of her arm she added, “You can stare to your heart’s content next week when we take these down so I can stash them in the loft.”

Walking with two shoulder bags, which she had pretty much packed earlier, and with her free arm hooked onto mine, we were silent.

---“You know,” she finally said, “You had nothing to do with this caper. Always the perfect gentleman.”

---“A genetic defect,” I replied.

---“I came close to dumping the whole plan. I wasn’t sure I could ever get you interested. You were always interested in what I did but not a pass or a passing word.”

---“Believe me, I plan to do penance tonight. But honestly I never thought I was the object of your affections. You did a pretty good job yourself hiding your interest. Should I have known? I’m sure I missed something, I always do. But I’ve been thrown overboard so many times because I let my heart lead the way that for the last couple years I been practicing a form of asceticism in an opaque bubble. The city has found a way to puncture the bubble. So why didn’t you abandon?”

---“Being with you at the Gallery, watching you outside of your preferred environments of thinking, eating, conversing and yes drinking, talking about the art and above all meeting Tara

and Ellen, I decided to take a chance. I wanted to fuck you that very night, but I knew you wouldn't even though you were vulnerable after dueling with Tara and Ellen.

---“It's a good thing you didn't test me – I would have failed, at least in terms of sticking to the code.”

---“I lay awake that night for a long time. I was so pumped up sexually and emotionally you can guess what happened. I tried to talk myself out of this only to end up talking myself back in. I finally fell asleep. When I awoke, I knew I was going to do this because you were fun to be with and I wanted to be with you. Tara and Ellen no longer concerned me as much as my own drive to try to win you. Nor did the future concern me. There's a curious kind of conjuncture because of our ages: I'm too young still to get too agitated about where I'll be a decade from now, and you're too old – can you accept that? – to get too agitated either. I decided it was a good time to try to hook up.”

---“I'm hooked and we're home,” as I unlocked the street door.

Once inside she romped up the stairs, dropped her bag and turned with her hands outstretched and cupped, and I flipped the keys which she caught. By the time I got to the landing, the door was open and she was standing in the doorway.

---“Welcome to our abode,” she said and then with eyes, more sparkling and inviting than I had ever noticed before, fixed on me she gently pulled my face to hers for a kiss made for falling in love. I closed the door behind me, we undressed in the middle of The Space and we made love for hours. I could not now help but know how perfectly proportioned her body was for her small frame. It was also deceptive. She was appropriately endowed. The love-making alternated between explosive and languid. She relished deep, and I relished her relish. And then we would lie face-to-face, talk about what we were feeling, not why, and caress each other's body. Sculptors and, yes, painters, I mused, had hands that knew how to be sensual. We discovered that the blue of our eyes was similar but the geometry was slightly different. She marveled at how much hair I still had, almost a full head, and I learned that she was a natural blonde with a few highlights. When I kissed her breasts, she ever so gently caressed my penis. Our sex ran the gamut until we were truly spent.

---“Bad news,” she said, “It was better than when I was lying in my own bed with an imaginary you on top so I'm staying, and there's a bottle of champagne in my bag, room-temperature by now.”

---“Further bad news,” I said. “You are sexy besides being smart and sassy, and there's a bottle of celebratory champagne in the fridge. Shall we make it an all-nighter?”

She started to laugh, as we walked arm-in-arm to the kitchen.

---“I love the shall. The seminar agreed you were the only person we knew who distinguished between shall and will repeatedly and consistently. We shall, but only after I shall kiss you,” and we did, and then we opened the most expensive champagne I then owned. The best time to uncork it, a bit too cold, but it actually warmed up between our preoccupations with each other.

---“So, did you sleep with Ellen?” she asked out of the blue during one of those preoccupations, “and I love the bubbly.”

---“I did, how did you know and why haven’t you yanked my balls off? Maybe it’s the bubbly.”

---“I like your balls where they are,” as she moved her hand to where they actually were. “Everyone but you knew where she had aimed her arrow. If we hadn’t had a drink together, she would have had a drink and a fuck with you. So the story, please.”

Leaning against the counter and her leaning against me I told her the story with more details than I would ever have considered proper or wise.

---“Not your love-making style, that’s for sure. I know first-hand. Tonight was your style. It is even better now that I know about Ellen. My guess is that she wanted you but was terrified of failure. And that’s how it worked out. I suspect you’re right, she’ll find some contentment and relief in that piece of land. Sad in a way. I liked her, as you did. A powerhouse on one track, and a dud on another. Still no word?”

---“None that I know about. I’ve wondered what it will mean for the Gallery? And I keep thinking I played it badly. The morning after the night was what she needed, although I’m not the best candidate for unraveling these emotional knots. Still I’m feeling some guilt over the fallout.”

---“You’ll work through the guilt thing. I was sure I had screwed up the sculptor’s life beyond repair, and maybe I contributed but in the end he was mainly responsible. Ellen was not stupid. She more than anyone could figure out the risk. On the other hand once she arrived in your bed you wanted to fuck her. I’ll bet you thought it would turn out differently from how it did. By morning you knew it wouldn’t.”

---“Right, right and right – does that cover all your points? No way could I screw her in the morning, no way. I still admire her and like her, although given my track record with disappearances I doubt if I’ll ever hear from her again. Certainly not in the near term. Even a changed Ellen would hold no bedroom appeal for me. Our sexual episode can be put to rest.”

---“Unlike Tara?”

---“Tara will always be lurking around as she has for the past decade. I confess again that I was smitten. SmITTENness doesn’t ever get totally erased. It does get stashed away. At the Gallery I stashed it away. You have to trust me, not easy because there are several others stashed away, but what I’ve learned tonight for sure is you provide the reason not to unstash them.”

---“I want to hear about the other stashees, but not now. We’ve all stashed. You’ve lived longer – sorry! – and for better or worse you’ve got some powerful stashees to deal with. I can live with it. That’s part of what I love about you. You’re alive, sometimes in dangerous waters, but I’m drawn to dangerous waters.”

---“So, speaking of dangerous water, if the Gallery closes or changes policies...,” before I could finish she had a response.

---“Not a concern. I haven’t told you. We’ve been preoccupied with less mundane things, thank god. I have a lease for a studio in the neighborhood – I don’t know exactly where - from Will signed by the Gallery. I’ve not read the fine print yet, but it’s for six months with an option for another six months. That’s works for now. Even if the Gallery goes kaput, I can afford the lease.”

---“Another rich woman with whom I may actually have a future,” I chuckled.

---“A rich woman – there’s some truth in that – who knows how to love you.” She pulled me back to the bedroom with no resistance whatsoever from me, although I gathered up the bubbly just in case. She slid under me as I slid into her. No reluctance, no resistance. I could have slid my whole body inside her. Someday I would try to attach the adjectives to how I felt inside her, but for now I let myself go until the explosions came almost simultaneously. What I felt, not how I felt, enveloped me. At some point reality returned. I heard her say so softly,

--- “My dear, I’m going to let myself fall in love with you, that feels good, and if your cock tells me anything, you’re going to let yourself fall in love with me, that feels better.” She rolled me over, and six hours later still in each other’s arms we awoke.

Over Peet’s – she said she was ready to convert from whatever coffee she bought on sale – I saw in the morning light a woman I’d never expected I’d be falling in love with. Can one night of incredulous love-making turn into deeper loving and fucking? Before last night I thought I knew the answer, at least in 99.99 percent of the cases. Had I found that fraction of a percent? There was no way I could come up with a reason powerful or scary enough to make me stop. She planned this and pulled it off. If I’d planned it, I’d be pulling myself out of a hole. I had a lot to learn about her, and I had no idea how dangerous these waters would become, but this woman was too beautiful and cool and irresistible to let go of. I knew I wouldn’t, and somehow as her eyes caught mine I felt she wouldn’t either.

---“It’s time for the day-dreaming to stop,” she said as she squeezed my hand and then turned on her cell, which she’d left on the table alongside of mine. On that we agreed, no cells during love-making. I could see her expression grow heavy and then came the outburst.

---“Shit, shit, shit! Guess who?” She clearly had a temper. “He pops back in when I least want him around. Sorry. This has nothing to do with you.”

She got up and walked to The Grand Window while listening to the message on her cell. When she returned to her chair she had calmed down.

---“This is my stashee problem you need to know about. First of all it enrages me – a side you’ve not seen – but rage is almost always temporary. Second I don’t like to dwell on or whine about past shit that can’t be erased or rescued. You understand that, although I can put it in harsher terms if you prefer. I suspect you’re capable of nastiness, I know I am. I’m going into the bedroom and deal with this, and then I’ll put my arms around you and summarize in a sentence or two.”

Fifteen minutes later she emerged from the bedroom, still swearing and now crying. I was at the sink, and she put her arms around me.

---“Summary: first sentence - she broke up with him, he wants me back, he can't sell anything because I'm not there, he will commit suicide; second sentence - he's coming to the city to take me back.”

---“And my role?”

---“Make love. I love fucking when I'm angry. I must have learned that from him. Did I say that? Then we'll relax. He terrorizes because he has nothing else. I'm going to call his buddy to find out the truth, and then you will please make love to me again and again!”

She left, I finished the dishes and the champagne. I hear her voice in modulated tones and I entered the bedroom when all was quiet. No more tears but a body that beckoned, and we made love.

---“He's probably faking it, although there a small probability - to use your language - he's not. No doubt he's reached bottom, where he's been headed for years. Relationship messiness - to use another one of your phrases - I do listen - never ends either for the loves you won't erase nor the ones you can't erase. They're out there, and we have to deal with them.” She pulled me in tight. Neither of us wanted to let go, but then my cell went off. She smiled, bounded out bed and before that final fourth ring the cell was clicked on and thrust into my hand. I looked at her body - how could I have missed it for so many weeks - and said hello.

---“Dr Chilton,” came the dean's secretary's voice. “I'm sorry to call on the weekend. Are you free for a few minutes?”

---“Completely at your disposal,” I said, fully aware of my nakedness and shrinking erection, as was Sasha who left the room with her hand over her mouth to muffle her laugh.

For the next quarter hour we talked. The call was to bring me up to date on the status of the dean. While away during the recess he suffered severe chest pains, admitted himself to a clinic and was then transferred to a university hospital with what was diagnosed as pre-cardiac condition, was recovering only to suffer a deep depression, probably because of the medicine, was placed under intensive care for a week and finally was on the road to recovery. He's now resting at home. I should call him at his cell number, He would like talk to me. As announced earlier, he will not return to the deanship. After hearing all this I felt numb. Pre-cardiac conditions can occur to many of our generation, that was bad enough, but incapacitating the dean, a man who lived with no known limits, was utterly scary. Sasha walked in during this, and I mouthed New York Times and pointed to the door.

After I had all I needed to know, I said I'd stop by this week, and that was the end of the conversation. By then Sasha was sitting at my side with a section of the Times.

---“More bad news? You know, rain and all that,” as she caressed my back.

I was glad I had someone to talk to. I hadn't admitted that in a long time.

I gave her a summary. It took longer than two sentences.

---“Almost as if you were prescient,” she said as she draped her arms over my shoulders.

---“Almost. I turned down the offer for reasons of my own, however. I can’t imagine this is over for the dean. Remind me later to call Richard.”

Sasha’s cell went off and as she dashed to the kitchen counter I followed.

---“Hi Mom,” I heard her say and then she pointed to the bedroom.

The bedroom was busier than it had been for the last three months. I picked up the Book Review of the Times and found the lead piece was a scathing review by a populous Montanan of a book on writing by a pompous Englishman. Right on, I said out loud without remembering that there were two of us. The Brits kept trying to tell the colonials how to write, interpret history and hate religion. Thirty minutes later, having finished the BR, I found Sasha at my side. A littler glum, I thought, but managing. I put my arms around her and she began her recap.

---“My shithead ex had called my parents and scared them silly. Can you believe that? They’re OK now, and after that, not sure how they would react, I told them where I was and who I was with, and my Dad said, tell me he isn’t as crazy as the sculptor. I told him you were crazier,” saying this as she cocked her head toward me. “It worked as comic relief.”

---“Crazier to be sure but also safer,” was my reply.

---“They’re OK with this, although I left out some crucial details.”

---“Like age,” I interjected.

---“Like age and the size of your cock and the length of your erections,” she said without pause.

---“And what do I get to tell my parents when they call in from above?”

---“Madly in love with someone who’s mad.” And we kissed so gently and softly – modulating the tempo was something we seemed to be naturals at.

We decided to do lunch at Sheila’s. It was busy – Sunday always was, but several tables had just opened up. Sheila was at the desk, unusual for her to pull weekend duty. I introduced Sasha with the comment that she may become another regular. Ignoring all the hustle and bustle around her she came out from behind the desk and embraced Sasha and said,

---“We love this guy, and we don’t share,” and led us to a table. She seated Sasha and then me, whispering “I approve.”

---“You’ve been duly welcomed,” I said, trying to defuse Sasha’s expression, more leering than endearing. After Sheila left I explained and she smiled. I thought to myself this relationship will endure some testing. I’m game.

We shared a bistro-version Wellington for two and joked about how complicated it had become in fewer than twenty-four hours. What could we expect in the future? We forewent dessert but each had an espresso. I decided to ask her if she had any interest in joining the gym? Indeed, a must was her response. She had been a gym rat in college, but not since. The sculptor had an aversion to formal exercise.

As we left the café, I suggested a walk in her new neighborhood unless it was too cold. There was no objection as she pulled down her cap and pulled up her scarf. The street noise was minimal, and we walked along in silence for a short distance.

---“You know, last night was special, and I speak for you and me. I could tell, and I want more special nights even though relationships have a way of tamping down the special. It’s the creative impulse in me. We have our lives to live and our duties to perform, but I know how creative you can be in other ways. I want some of that, and I promise you some of mine. You’re finding out I can be bitchy. I also promise to do something about that,” as she squeezed my arm.

---“Don’t. The quickest way to doom this relationship is to start making rules about how we’re going to change. Remember, I grew up in the sixties when communal types sat around and made rule after rule about how members ought to get with it and they fucked up the whole enterprise. Creative we can be, directed behavior modification sucks.”

---“And that I intend to pursue again, you beautiful man!”

I called Richard after a nap when we both were too tired to fuck but not to entangle ourselves. I fell asleep loving her body and these new moorings that also seemed to have a long enough line to wild waters.

---“Look, Richard, I’m worried too but others are in charge. Whether or not you should call him let me ask him. I’ll call him tomorrow. OK? Do the dishes or something to drop the pressure. Later,” and I hung up.

---“Are dishes your answer to everything nerve-wracking?”

---“Yes, better than breaking them, the therapy practiced by my best man. His kitchen cabinets were filled with dishes because he often hurled them against the wall for no apparent reason, at least no reason he’d share. Later committed for a short stay.”

---“You’re right, washing is better.”

During the rest of the evening we read the Times and talked about things that caught our attention. She was far more politically attuned than I was. I had some catching up to do. Bedtime was uncharacteristically early for me, and, as it turned out, for her, another night owl.

Our love-making was languid and exclusionary. We explored our bodies, we talked about our feelings, we made sketches on each other’s face or chest or thigh with our fingers. We laughed a lot, and we fell asleep without orgasms.

The next morning Sasha was up and drinking from a press full of Peet’s before me. She poured me a cup and sat on my lap as she handed me the cup. I noticed she had been sketching, and I asked her what she had in mind.

---“You,” she said, “I’m going to do a sketch of you and I may later stick your face on a ring or sculpt your whole naked body with a huge penis.”

---“And you don’t need me to sit naked for hours with a hard-on?”

---“Indeed, that’s part of the plan,” as she took hold of my penis while I tried to juggle my Peet’s.

---“I had an email from a guy I’ve been seeing about tomorrow night. Am I busy?”

---“Did you screw him?”

---“Turn about’s fair play, I did but not on the first date. Does that count for anything?”

---“You’re busy, but invite him to tea.”

She squeezed my cock and jumped off.

---“I’ve already taken care of him, nicely. I need a shower, and I notice you have those huge, fluffy Turkish towels. That alone is enough to screw your penis permanently into my cunt. Think about that. By the way you’re getting a new handle. Haven’t decided yet. I have trouble with all your names.” The next thing I heard was the shower, for the first time without me in it. I was liking this. I remember after my first date with the cocaine lady – such a sweetheart except most of the time for the obvious reason – I remember she said “I think I’m going to like you”. Was that some form of the progressive I didn’t know about. On the next date she literally ripped my denim shirt off, buttons flying every which way, as she pushed me into her bedroom with more flowers on the wallpaper and more pillows on the bed than I’d ever seen. What did those symbolize, I asked myself as she shouldered me onto the bed. All downhill from there. Then she disappeared. At least I had learned a new and useful grammatical case.

I surveyed her refreshed body as she stood in front of me with the towel – the very large towel – not draped around her body but wrapped around her long hair and hanging over her shoulder. There was something different about looking at a body with which you’ve had so much good sex. It stood out in a way it hadn’t before. Every curve, every muscle, every angle meant something. She knew I was looking, and she just stood there in utter silence, expressionless like a cat whose next move might not be what you expected. Finally I broke the silence, as she knew I would,

---“A goddess in my living room. Showers are transforming.”

---“Don’t forget that image. My ultimate ambition is to be a goddess. I love the power.” And she threw her arms around me. “What are our plans, besides the obvious.”

---“You have to learn that I’m terrible at planning because I never feel compelled to do any. I just wake up in the morning and things happen. Plan my day for me.”

---“You’re not forcing me into another dependency-relationship – get my water, make my bed, do my laundry, get out, don’t leave – have you ever gone through that? I can’t believe I did for as long as I did. Rest assured, I’m delivering a different person for you to love.”

---“I dated briefly a woman, not my age but closer than most, who told me about a relationship that she could not escape even though it had turned abusive. Her elderly mother had to drive hundreds of miles to extract her literally from an apartment and a relationship she couldn’t leave on her own. She was 35. I never quite assimilated that, partly because when I knew her she was a strong-willed professional. Maybe being strong-willed can work in the opposite direction in the bedroom. It was one of the messiest stories I’d ever heard.”

---“Did that end it?”

---“More or less. I’d also discovered she communicated with her deceased father every evening in an established ritual, and I’m not very ritualistic. On our last date, maybe the third or fourth one, I learned while sitting at a bar – and that’s another story – after a concert that she enjoyed my company but I did not qualify. I asked innocently what she meant. Important to know, when I dated her, she was in her early 40’s. I didn’t qualify because she was still planning to do it all – kids, family, house in the burbs, what most of us do when we’re a bit younger – and at my age I could hardly be the father and husband she needed. Well, she was right on the father thing, too old to learn, I never called after that.”

Sasha was hanging on and laughing uproariously.

---“I’m sorry, you have more stories than a library, and they’re so eerie they belong on the Fantasy Shelf. Is all of this for the sake of the story?” she asked as she pulled away and gave me that you’re-in-my-crosshairs look I’d first seen at Sheila’s. “Am I a fool to ask about the story within the story? And I have my knee cocked.”

I looked at her knee, and it was cocked.

---That’s how it happened. I couldn’t make up a stranger story. We were gym buddies but never became lovers because, apparently, I didn’t qualify. She had told me about losing her fiancé – her college love was killed in a traffic accident – and while she said she had moved on, I wasn’t sure she had. I wasn’t about to judge. She’s had a tougher life than I’d had. In any event we were probably as incompatible as two people could be, even though we had fun lifting together.”

---“At loose ends can be awful. It causes you to latch onto things that will probably only make matters worse. But some people spend their lives in that mode. With the sculptor I began to come up with all sorts of strategies to avoid what had to be done. Not my mode now. My Mom, a successful woman by every measure, has a minor dependency thing concerning my Dad, who has a heart of gold and the patience of Job. But her childhood was much scarier than his or mine. I’m not sure she has ever comes to terms with that or ever will. She lives with contentment about her life but with a dark side that is still out of bounds. I’ve not helped because of the sculptor, and I get pissed, as you saw yesterday, when he starts playing around in a way that will unsettle my Mom. As I said, I haven’t helped, but I still react protectively.”

She wrapped the towel around her body and led me to the sofa. No problem for her to curl up her legs under her butt and no chance for me...ever. I extended my legs across the coffee table. With her arm around my shoulder I heard,

---“No necking until I hear the rest of the story so I can decide how much of a liar or philanderer you are.”

---“Not sure it’s all that interesting – I may have to lie a little just to keep you interested.” I felt a fist on my thigh not far from....”

---“Fair warning....”

---“When she was dissecting my lack of a future at the bar, I saw a familiar face heading toward us from the other side of the bar. He threw his arm around me as if we were long-time buddies – we weren’t. He sat next to her and immediately steered the conversation to him and then to her. I thought to myself, this is going to be fun. He had a reputation as a lady’s man, a reputation mainly burnished by his own retelling of his many conquests. I had no doubt that as troubled as she was, he was no match for her. Being courted for nefarious deeds was a no-no. I had no doubt he was also operating on the premise that this divorced academic joke – me - was no match for him. He too was an economist, although he kept writing the same stuff over and over again to be published in popular magazines or delivered at world conferences. No one could figure out why he ever got hired to head a rather well-known department.”

I paused and turned only to discover Sasha more attentive than I had expected.

---“So was there a wife to go with the string of women?”

---“There was, but she was not in the picture when I knew him.”

---“He prowled and ended up on a stool next to your date?”

---“Right.”

---“And his charm - I use the term loosely...?”

---“I don’t know for sure. But I had heard justification for his behavior more than once - the Holocaust.”

---“The real Holocaust?”

---“My reaction exactly the first time I heard it. His parents were survivors, and even though he was born and raised here he shared their trauma....”

---“And his amorous pursuits were needed to liberate himself from his trauma by way of their trauma...oh my god, I’ve heard versions, not Holocaust-related but trauma-related. Before I discovered sanity, I used to fight with my ex over the other woman, and the answer I got was they were working through traumas from childhood, or adulthood or Sunday School or permanent constipation. I’ve lost track of all the traumas.”

---“Times in my life I could have used a good trauma story, but I don’t lie well.”

---“So how did this bar encounter actually end?”

---“Like so much else in life, it just ended. I never saw him again, and I only saw her at the gym.”

---“Speaking of ‘ending’ when I realized I had feelings I wanted it to fail because I was afraid of the future if it succeeded. Now I want it to succeed, and yet I’m afraid it won’t. And then there are the specifics of Tara and Ellen and as I’m learning drip by drip a whole pantheon of goddesses. Do I need to go on?”

---“There is always another place, another time...ouch!”

---“Another place, another time can be next week...wise up!”

---Message recorded. All I mean is the past exists only because it is now the past. And the future will certainly conjure up other times and other places. I have no idea how to prevent that. I suggest we stick as close to the present as we can.”

Before I knew it she was on my lap with my head between her hands and our lips pressed tight, my mouth opened as did hers, her tongue worked my mouth like her hands worked my body. And then her thighs began to move up and down slowly, and I lay my head back on the sofa and let the rhythm take over. She lifted her head as mine remained between her hands and said slowly with her eyes rigidly fixed on mine,

---“Before we fuck, I want to tell you I’m glad I attacked you in the back of the cab. Who knows where it will end up, I intend to stay jealous. This is happiness I’ve not ever known, and I’m holding to it in any and every way I can. And, Pip, your new name, I’m having fun, and if I’m having fun I can be more creative than ever. Not a word from you, let’s fuck.” And we did for the rest of the morning, ignoring the cells, which we had forgotten to click off.

---“Am I permitted a word?”

---“It had better be what I want to hear.”

---“You’re the only goddess left in the Pantheon.”

Our tongues became intertwined again.

Remembering I was vulnerable because I was on the bottom, I took a chance with

---“Do we have any plans today...oooooh...I’m onboard....” as she pressed her pelvis ever so tightly against mine. After few minutes, she raised her head,

---“I like your hands too, I swear they’ve touched every exterior love cell I own....Yes, we’re going to the gym after I do some packing. My roommate’s man, a real creep, wants the room as early as possible so he can set up his Internet whatever he does. I think he’s a professional hacker. So I can pack everything today and we can figure out how to move it all tomorrow. I can lure him into hauling the stuff over here in his car. He told me one night he wanted to fuck or if possible to fuck both of us in the same bed. After I threw up, I reminded him I was an evangelical Christian. I once had a friend whose favorite expression was I’d rather suck a dirty sock than make love to him. Well, that sums it up.”

---“Gee, I’ve had a great time with some evangelicals...oh no, a knee from out of nowhere.”

We kissed, and then I gently lifted her face and

---“This is the best, you’re more than I could ever have dreamed possible, I’m in love with you whatever the risk, be jealous if you must, but better yet be more of who you are – I’m in love with that person.”

For the first time we rubbed noses – is that a ritual I don't know about - and her face was alive, sparkling eyes and joyous smile, not a word, just her face and mine inches apart. All either of us had to know was registered therein.

We agree to meet at the gym, which she assured me she could find – when was I going to learn how resourceful this woman was – and as I arrived at the door she was coming down the street. I walked toward her. We were both bundled up against the hard wind.

---“How'd it go?”

---“Done. Everything's ready for tomorrow's transfers, and weirdo will drive his potential *ménage à trios* wherever she wants to go. Ugh!”

---“Here we go,” as I opened the door. Katie was at the desk, all eyes, her mouth nearly agape in either horror or amazement

---“Hi, Katie, Meet Sasha. I promised you a replacement, she is it. Does it meet with your approval?”

---“Katie jumped off her stool, came around to the front of the desk – first time ever I'd seen her in front of the desk – a gorgeous woman to be sure – and gave Sasha a hug.

---“I have no idea what's happened since I last saw him, this one who's intent on putting me out of business, but I'm not asking any questions. Welcome Sasha.”

---Hi,” said Sasha in the voice I remember the first time I met her – engaging but modulated. “I've been anxious to see the gym that so dominates his life and conversation. I wasn't sure it was real or another one of his stories.”

---“So you've hear the stories too. They're endless, aren't they, and suspect, don't you think?” replied Katie. I was now leaning against the counter in anticipation that this would have to run its course.

---“You look as if you're not adverse to working out,” remarked Katie, as she surveyed Sasha who like me had removed her winter gear.

---“Any ideas what you want to do?”

---“I'd like to do more weight-lifting. Never done much. The machines tend to bore me. Besides I need to stay close to him,” as she nodded in my direction, “because old guys tend to forget where they've stashed their latest...”

Followed by a roar of laughter including Greg who had now joined the group. I was too befuddled by the wit of this woman to make a proper introduction. Sasha reached her hand across the counter and did it herself.

Katie returned to her accustomed place and dug out the paperwork.

“We can close the deal after your workout. Six months like his to start?”

We nodded yes in unison.

---“Look, Greg is free right now, he’s the best, why not start with him today, and after that we can set you up with a couple more training sessions.”

Sasha explained she would be gone for ten days, but she’d like to get started. She had the rest of this week. I had no part in this conversation, nor, as it turned out, in providing the financing even though I held my checkbook in my hand. This was a sure sign of financial independence would rule this romance. I had always said after my divorce, to the amusement of my gym-rat friend, when asked the inevitable question about remarriage, “only if she brings her own checkbook”. Now it had happened. And so a new part of our venture began. As I watched her and Greg, I could see how strong and flexible she was. I had felt that in bed, but I wasn’t sure. At the end of the workout we headed to the desk where Sasha signed the forms and much to my surprise Katie reached across and gave me kiss on the cheek. Greg and Sasha arranged their future appointments for the remainder of the week and after her return. The first time in my gym career I’d ever had a mate to work out with. I was sure I was going to like her.

---“So now I have to worry about Katie in addition to the others. What a beauty. She needs to be in a drawing.”

---“Not with me, I assume,” as I felt her squeeze the hell out of my arm, through her glove and my coat. “What the hell did Greg do for you today?”

---“Greg is cool, and I like Katie, and I want you to be on-guard because she likes you a lot.”

---“I’ll call you on this...not enough to sleep with me. I know Katie well even after just a few months. Her mom is a prominent, practicing, teaching psychiatrist, and Katie’s about as well grounded as anyone I’ve met. She and Greg belong together, although every guy in the gym wishes it weren’t true. You surely felt an inner strength just in the short time you talked to her.”

---“You’re right. Your intuitive powers are actually pretty impressive. More importantly you’re the first guy to have gym time with. I like that.”

---“Likewise for me, especially the ‘I like that’.”

She bounded up the stairs as usual, but now she had her own set of keys and she was waiting for me in the doorway. We hugged and kissed, hung our coats and scarves and walked arm-in-arm to the bedroom.

She began to root around in her bag and then handed me a package of condoms.

---“That serious, eh. Thanks, but they’re not needed. Curl up here with me. We can listen to wind and...”

---“You have another story, no?”

---“Yes, the gift of condoms makes it necessary. Now’s as good a time as any.

---I need something to drink. What can I bring you? I’m choosing juice for now.”

---“I need something stronger, maybe some bourbon on ice. I can...”

---“No, you cannot. Curl up, I have a feeling this ain’t gonna be easy,” and after a quick kiss she went off to the kitchen.

No, it ain’t gonna be easy, but it used to be much harder.

Both of us still in gym attire, we were ensconced amongst all the pillows, probably eight or nine.

---“I’m not sure what’s ahead, but today’s been a good day, Pipperoo, a variation of your new name.”

---“A good day, and nothing catastrophic yet on the horizon. I don’t need condoms because I have no poppers in my semen.”

---“A vasectomy? But you have no kids, right? Aren’t they reluctant to zap people who haven’t had kids yet?”

---“You have an uncanny familiarity with medical literature.”

---Not so uncanny. Guess who tried to get a vas and was denied. He could not ever get the condom on before he died on the spot. It was so un-fuckin funny. He would go berserk, and I’d have to finish the job myself. I don’t like that unfinished feeling. Thank god you finish it with a flourish, my love.” She kissed me and we had trouble letting go.

---“OK. Time out. We may never get this done before you leave. The obvious question is the one you asked. I have no children of my own. My ex had three, if you can believe that.” From her look she could not.

---“She was married at 18 to a scion...is that the right word...a rich guy with a trust fund. Actually they both had money, but he had a lot more. Private schools, summer camps, European stays, horses, houses, but no parents, just nannies. They met their freshman year at Hampshire College, the first step in their rebellion against parental planning, compared upbringings and ran off and got married. She also got pregnant, and then pregnant again a year later, and finally a third time but several years later. Three kids by the time she was 22. They could afford help and were able to graduate almost on time. She wanted a career despite her wealth, and he didn’t want one because of his. His trust fund must have been huge, but I don’t know that. Despite her rebellious nature and rather premature behavior, she wanted to be an editor at a recognized publisher. She did this on her own with no help from him and their families. And she was good at it. She was smart, well-read and could write a decent sentence. But over time she couldn’t deal with him. Not abusive, just lazy and spoiled. So in her mid 20’s she walked out with the kids. Obviously one of those separations where money was not an issue. No fighting over property. The lawyers took care of that. I met her through a friend several years later. I’d been through a few unsavory romances that I haven’t told you about. Can we do that later? No one around here knows anything about my marriage or premarriage. Not even Richard except that there was a divorce.”

---“You know, this hookup will last forever because you have so many stories to tell. I can’t possibly leave until I hear them all.”

---“If stories will keep you down on the ranch I’ll make up as many as we need. Back to the story. After a couple of years we married. She seemed stable and ready, and I had no trouble cutting the cake. What to do with the kids was a problem and continued to be a problem, and even though they’re adults now they remain a problem. Too much like their father.”

I took a drink, and Sasha ran her hands back and forth across my cheeks. She knew the hard part was coming.

---“I’ll spare you many details. The kids were in and out of this school and that school, all private of course, they would arrive at our more modest quarters – 5 bedrooms and 4,000 square feet – only then to return to the estate of their father and his family. I tried, even she said that unequivocally at the divorce hearing, and she added I tried harder than she did. We all carry a cross – that’s mine. It became unbearable. She started disappearing and then reappearing, sometimes leaving me to juggle unpredictable schedules. I’m resourceful, more so than most, but I was getting pissed and after while I called it quits. I moved out. I had never signed guardianship papers so I had no legal responsibility. The sad fact was that the kids and I could get along and could from time to time live normal lives. Their father never could, and their mother was increasingly absent. I’m still in touch with them and talk to them several times a year. Also before I came here I made an effort to spend a day with each of them and their partners. Two of them, incidentally, are gay and in all three cases the partners – no marriages – have helped to give ballast to their lives. I like their partners and that’s another reason to stay in touch. I may see the youngest here after Xmas, although it’s still up in the air. That’s why I haven’t said anything. The divorce took forever because she and her family kept trying to buy me back into the marriage. Finally they realized the game was up and we signed the papers. I walked out with my personal things, the art I’d bought and the books I’d collected and my retirement and portfolio intact. I refused everything else. We’d been separated for several years before the divorce, and in that time I dated several women including Tara. But the trauma of separation had come and gone by the time I knew her. I’d already been through therapy. I also took a leave to teach abroad. What shook me up was the sense of failure I felt. I worried about her but I worried more about the kids. Their welfare made me stay in longer than I should have, and then when it collapsed anyway, I had all those feelings you read about – betrayal, anger, failure, etc. I was at loose ends, and I knew I needed help. I fell off the cliff I’d been so gingerly stepping along for years. Sorry to lay all this on you so soon. You’re becoming a part of my crazy past. But it gets crazier, as you warned your dad. Are you up for this?”

There was silence. She had not taken her eyes off my face and now tears began to form in those beautiful blue wells. She kissed me ever so gently and softly as if to say you’re safe with me.

---“God damn, I know what you’re telling is the truth but I’m having trouble absorbing it all right now. I need to know.”

---“Take your time. In those years after my separation and divorce one of the people I dated and slept with was my cousin. She was at the end of her fourth or fifth divorce, and we found a lot of comfort in each other’s company. It became complicated, especially with her kids who did not approve, and we ended it. She has remarried. We remain close but our days as lovers are behind us. You may meet her someday.”

I could see she needed time. I stopped, and then I wiped a tear away from her eye. She wasn't angry, just trying to absorb.

---“Back to what started this conversation. The vas procedure was agreed to by our physician – a family friend of course – her family not mine - because we did not want any children of our own. The kid business was tough enough without more. Her ex actually fathered three more. God knows what their lives are like. You know what the other option was but she decided against it. In fact she remarried and had another kid who is about 10 now. That's how I got chosen in my early 30's. I didn't give it much thought because my hands were full with the comings and goings of her tribe. That's my condom story. I prefer it without condoms. Our rewards, perhaps.”

---“Agreed,” as she ran her hand across my cheeks. “And everyone, myself included, thought of you as a carefree divorcee. I guess we never considered what kind of marriage you had because you seemed so unconnected to it.”

---“Except for my occasional visits with her kids, I'm no longer connected. Doug, the therapist, kept saying unlatch, unlatch, unlatch, and ultimately it worked.”

---“Am I supposed to ask about your cousin?”

---“An interlude. If it bothers you, I'm not surprised. It bothered a lot of people. She's a sweetheart, and in some strange way we helped each other through some tough times. I think we both would have made it without the bedroom, but no apologies. We had some good times. We knew what we were doing and why we were doing it. After-all I'm not the only person to share a bed with a cousin?”

---“Not at all, Mr Poe. Let's take a shower together so I can soap you up in all that warm water. Have you ever fucked in the shower?”

---“I have.”

---“I might have known. I haven't. So teach me.”

---“I'll make love to you but I won't teach you. Not that you're unteachable. You just know. Let's go.”

An hour later wrapped in our towels we lay on the bed.

---“I don't want to leave, but I don't know how to get out of it. The water beating down on me while you were beating inside of me was utterly delicious and divine.”

---“I love shower fucking, and you knew instinctively every move to make. It's part of the creative we both want.”

We decided to cook in. Actually we decided I should cook in. Sasha had no interest. We opened a good wine and I whipped up a vichyssoise, made a plate of cold-cuts and cheeses, cut some bread, and within 45 minutes we were dining.

---“Will it bother you if I never learn to cook? I can do the dishes, although they cause violent mood swings.”

---“Let’s hire someone. I wouldn’t mind being the *sous-chef* and the diner and if permitted the lover. You could just be waited on.”

---“I’ve had a lot of trouble wrapping my arms around domestic things unless I’m sketching them. I’ve never actually created anything very domestic and probably won’t. But I took a course on Still Life in college and what fascinated me most was the use of space. In some strange way I can’t explain that course after thousands of slides caused me to rethink how I looked at space or at the use of space. It made me realized there were limits to what I could do with jewelry. I thought seriously about taking up the brush and the canvas. I’d been drawing since I was a kid, but going from drawings to paintings is harder than it might appear. At some point, maybe because I was sleeping with a very smart biochemist who could draw on paper from memory hundreds of molecules – those things that look like tinker toys - I got more interested in his renderings of molecules than his other offerings. I liked the way those shapes interacted with the space. I started thinking about not painting but about sculpting.”

---“So what happened to the biochemist?”

---“He was a difficult fuck if you know what I mean, except my parents loved him. That probably doomed us. They can’t love you.”

---“Unlikely. I promise not to render any molecules. But the Still Life genre always intrigued me. I don’t own any. I almost bought one by an Iowa City painter a year ago. So real I thought I should crawl inside the frame. That was reality, not where I was standing. When I began to take an interest in painting I thought, so what is so fascinating about someone’s kitchen table? Our dining room table always had a bowl of wax and then plastic fruit. The cut-glass bowl itself was surely worth more than the wax or plastic reproductions. Nowadays because fruit moves around the world with such ease many have real fruit in highly decorative bowls probably bought at summer arts fairs. But does anyone throw a recently-shot pheasant on the table to accompany the fruit? One of the first art prints I bought in my 20’s when I had no money and knew next to nothing about art was a Braque Still Life. I hadn’t a clue except I liked the arrangement of the geometrics. And here I am, decades later, the owner of quasi-geometric “fuck you” art. By the way, as I look at Tara on yonder wall, it has a Still-Life quality to it – ribbons and dishes surrounding what may be a candelabra in utterly enticing hues, ah, that menacing hole in the middle remains.”

Sasha turned and looked for a few minutes.

---“Her brilliance is that she paints the mystery, the insolvable in her life. I can honestly understand how you’re drawn in – just be careful how far you go along that path, Pipparoo,” in her warning voice as she turned back.

---“If jealousy makes you creative, let’s drink to jealousy.”

She got up and came around the table and put her arms around me from behind and whispered,

---“I worry, but I’m not worried. Does that make any sense? Dangerous, I know, but that’s the way it may be for a while. Who knows where we’re going. For three months I watched and listened and I knew I was falling in love. With a style, a sense of humor, a specter, I didn’t know exactly what, but I knew the feeling. Was it a bundle of neurons playing tricks, to use your

analogy? My outlet was sketching. You didn't look very closely – well, I didn't give you much time to look very closely – but you show up in those sketches in various guises and distortions. Sorry about the distortions. I never knew if I would get to this point. And now that I'm here, the process begins all over, what is the next point, the next cycle, the next....”

---“Bundle of neurons playing mischief. Fine by me. I could play mischief with you every minute for the rest of my life.”

---“Pip, be good! You can't be naughtier than I am.”

---“I wouldn't try,” I said as I felt her let go. I got up and faced her, and I knew the danger of throwing my arms around her again. I had no idea who was running this old body anymore. Someday I must read up on libidos. Can libidos drive people crazy? Not fighting the tape in the stock market was something I understood and had made money not doing. Not fighting off the libido – I was totally in the dark except it ran counter to the mantra I had adopted somewhere in my past – moderation. There was nothing moderate about having this loveable woman in my life.

---“OK, your thoughts, you're off somewhere?” she said as we sat on the sofa and she pulled my head around to square up with hers. “I haven't gotten used to this wandering mind yet. You're probing something right now, aren't you?”

---“I suppose I am. Not a sign of disconnection. Just the opposite. Intensely connected and trying to find a context.”

---“Me too, for what it's worth.”

---“Sitting on your legs again. I know I've found the fountain of youth when I can do that. In the meantime even though I no more clairvoyant than you about the future I think about it. I prefer to live in the present, the past is too messy with some memorable moments, though, and I can't figure out the future. Perhaps I'm cutting too fine a line between present and future. Right now in the present it's working between us.”

She nodded and squeezed my shoulder and lay her head on my shoulder.

---“And furthermore I'll tell you why it's working – at the risk on conjuring up a curse – because our own egos, perhaps more precisely our own libidos, tell us it's working. I'm a product of a Sunday School upbringing...I hope you brought your Bible...and any thought that sex could have a positive outcome except for procreation was the work of the devil. Well, my love, the devil has done his or her work and we like what he or she's done and we both think we have a future. If all that takes new bundles of neurons, pushes aside the status quo, breaks old moorings, stretches new ones, agitates the waters around us, so be it. We're both cognitive as well as emotional animals, and at both levels the messages contain the same – it will unfold because we want it to. That's it. You and I can think of a thousand questions and doubts that must be dealt with along the way, but on a level that my Sunday School teacher would not approve of we have melded. How many do you know or have known would still be fighting with their zippers or condoms at this stage or would have already drawn their knives?”

---“I’m in; even if I tried I couldn’t get out,” she said as she lifted her head and then shifted herself onto my lap. With her lips no more than inches “You’re also in and can’t get out. I can feel it. That’s what matters.” And we kissed.

After a few minutes, she jumped up and commanded,

---“Sit, I’m pouring you some wine, cleaning up the dishes and cussing you for making me feel good. And then I’m getting out my sketch pad, and I’m taking you into the world I dream about.

---“Do I have your permission to call the dean? I’d promised I would.”

---“Absolutely,” and in the midst of the clatter of dishes I dialed the dean’s number. I was surprised when he answered. He was eager to talk, and we did for a half-hour. In the meanwhile Sasha had poured the wine, finished the dishes and sitting next to me had started sketching. The dean and I covered the waterfront. We finished, and I closed the phone.

---“So I doubt if it’s totally good news, but how bad is it?” asked Sasha.

---“I don’t know. That’s the honest answer. I couldn’t tell what was real and what was made up. He said he’d been far sicker than he ever thought possible, but also his recovery was faster than...do I need to finish that sentence. What was hardest to grab onto was his excitement about returning to full-time teaching. I don’t believe it. I can’t imagine the classroom will satisfy whatever drives him unless the heart attacked sucked out his ambition. Incidentally it was a full-blown heart attack. He’s got stuff inside him now. I don’t know, Sasha, I’m not optimistic. I don’t know firsthand what cardiac patients go through in a recovery. Maybe he needs to be forward-looking. There was something in the voice that raised red flags.”

---“I didn’t know him well, and I agree I can’t see him being happily confined to the classroom. And remember you need to call Richard.”

---“Tomorrow. Better to give the news in the daylight than before bedtime. The dean said that Richard should call as soon as possible.”

---“It’s odd to me that you’re calling him but he’s not calling you.”

---“Not out of character for the dean. He’s used to being approached. It must be no different in illness or health. Richard can sort all this out tomorrow.”

Sasha had her sketch pad on her lap and a pile of pencil on the table.

---“May I watch?” I asked.

---“Only if you hand the right pencil to me when I need it,” she replied without averting her eyes from the pad.

I picked up the pencils in my right hand and arranged them so that all the points were facing up. She smiled as she watched me do this out of the corner of her eye. I hadn’t a clue, of course, which was the right pencil. It didn’t matter. When ready to change pencils, she simply reached over and took the one she needed and left the one she discarded. She seemed to know intimately the fineness of each pencil. I had the feeling that she could also pick out those nuances that made

relationships work or not work. For maybe five minutes neither of us spoke as the figure on the sheet began to take form. Then I realized it was Katie, that beautiful body that she admired earlier in the day. Somehow she sensed that revelation I had was reason to break the silence.

---“So what do you think? Remember it’s early stage.”

---“I’m amazed. How did you gather in all those details in such short order?”

---“Some of the drawing is strictly generic, but the features that make it Katie and not just any other beautiful woman caught my eye as soon as we met. I was rolling those over in my head wherever that happens, and I kept her in sight while I was working out with Greg, another beautiful body. I can still do several things at once.” A sly glance in my direction followed.

---“Thanks. Would you ever sculpt Katie?”

---“Probably not. I’ve tried such sculpting on a small scale, but it’s not my thing. I’m much more comfortable with forms and objects. Drawing figures, however, keeps me in touch with my aesthetic sense. Drawing remains basic to almost everything we do as artists, at least I think so.”

---“How hard was it when you were also doing history?”

She closed the pad and laid it on the table with the pencils taken from my hand.

---“Some days it was hard. I almost had to lock up my pad and pencils in the next apartment or spend the day in the library. I always allowed myself time on the weekend to draw. I usually had a date on the weekend not because I was especially thrilled with the guys but because I liked a break from the intensity of the work. I also think a little sex is positive even when your partner has little future. I only had sex a couple of times with one guy. Knowing that, will it be easier for you to accept my promiscuousness?” she asked, her mischievous eyes aimed in my direction.

---“I’m not sure how to react until I consult Ms Post. I of course was celibant.”

---“And Ellen was a mirage?”

---“That was therapy.”

---“For her or you?”

---“I wish I knew, I wish I knew.” Her lips against mine made any further comment unnecessary.

This was the first night we sleep more than we fucked. I awoke first and gently caressed her arm draped over my chest until she opened her eyes and then slide on top. We had already established some rules and routines. No anal sex ever. She preferred the bottom for intercourse and the top for snuggling. Perfect, I thought. We spent a lot of time caressing, sometimes talking, sometimes cooing. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d cooed. This morning she wanted to snuggle. She had something on her mind, something had to be talked about.

---“I hope I didn’t wake you – well, not really,” she whispered in my ear “I could not resist pulling my leg over yours and laying my head on your chest, which, my dear Pip, is remarkably muscular and cushy at the same time. I tried to reconstruct the dream I just had. All I could come up with was I was standing in front of a sculpture or a person who looked like a sculpture. It was

certainly immobile and not inviting. I was scared. When I woke up, I thought the body next to me was the body from my dream. I wanted you, but I wanted to push you away. I needed you, and then I realized I had you. I plan to hold on for a while.”

---“Perhaps it was about the unknown. I am an expert, of course, on the basis of several dream therapy sessions with Doug, my therapist. He was into dream therapy. He asked me to keep a record of my dreams, and I still do. Lots of days with no record because I can’t always recall enough of a dream to write something down. In some dream therapy outside and inside can be interpreted in term of disorder and order. Outside is open and unprotected, inside is the opposite. Oddity for me because I prefer interiors with few of the things – walls, doorways, hallways – that can help impose order. I have lots of dream situated outside more than inside irrespective what’s going on in my real world. If that means I prefer disorder to order, I’m not surprised. But frankly I’m not sure what all this means. I remember a dream with verdant, rolling farmland. When I told Doug about the dream, he asked if I could remember the context of the dream. I said I thought I was traveling to D C, something I did to get away from the shit of my divorce, and this was a view from the road I was driving along. And then he asked how the trip went, and I replied that it didn’t do much to raise my spirits. That was when he told that the farmland in the post-journey dream was deceptive. I thought I was escaping but I was actually just piling on more shit, not finding order, as the landscape seemed to suggest, but courting disorder. So dreams come in many guises, I learned. Your dreams seems to me fairly straight-forward. New circumstances that are scary. Even though you and I can verbally or physically reassure each other, your dream world’s not sure yet. Are you feeling at loose ends?”

I could feel that she had been listening intently, and when I finished she tightened her hold on my torso. I began to caress the back of her neck. Finally she said,

---“When I began setting my trap for you – and I admit I was doing that – I could never figure out what I’d do if I lassoed you. Well, I lassoed you and then I crawled inside the lasso, and now I’m wondering where next. We’re both in this up to our you-know-what, I want that and I want more of that, but I haven’t come to terms with what it all means. Not something I’ve ever worried about in the past. My longest relationship was with the sculptor, and yet I always seemed to feel or know it had a limited future. He cared little about what I needed, and eventually I came to feel the same way about him. Why did I sleep with him, why did I stay with him, why, why, why? This feels different, and now I’m scared? Unsure? Unprepared?”

I could both feel and hear the sobs.

--- “I’m feeling a little disordered and disorderly, to use your words.”

Best to let her have a cry but held her tight. We lay that way for a while.

---I hear a cell,” she said as she lifted her head, her eyes so moist they glistened.

---“I’m sorry I didn’t hear it. Do you want me to check it?”

---“Maybe you’d better,” and she rolled off.

---“It may be your roommate. I’m just guessing because I don’t recognize the number.”

---“You’re right,” as she looked at the screen. “I need to call her with a time. What do you think about 1 PM?” as she patted the bed next to her and I lay down again.

---“That’s good, let’s do it then.” She rolled back on top of me.

They talked for a few minutes and settled on 12:30.

---“I’ll feel better when the move is finished. That closes another window. Even though I know I have to leave Friday, I want to stay. I have things to tell you, to ask you, to share and to discard. I don’t want to wait two weeks to start. I’m mean and selfish that way, but that’s the way I am.”

---“It doesn’t fit my definition of mean and selfish. I want you to stay, but I also want you to do what you have to do to launch our life here. Also your parents may need some reassurance.”

---“I’ve thought of all those things, but they don’t change how I really feel. You’re right, though, I have to do what I have to do – you and I are both well practiced at that – but I’m feeling pissed about it. Sorry. I’m not sure I can fuck, but kiss me and may it never end.”

We kissed and caressed but we didn’t fuck. After a few minutes she propped her head up on her arms resting on my chest and said,

---“I like to fuck, and sometimes I worry that my libido is out of control. I meet guys who are complete turn-offs, but then again I’ve met a few who have the opposite effect. I wanted to find out how it felt, if they could make something happen, what hidden drives they had or could unleash in me...generally I’ve been disappointed, but not so disappointed I want to stop trying. Any explanations, Doctor?”

---“None. You’ve pretty well summed it up for me too. Right now in this bed with you my libido is living the life it seeks to live. I’m glad you took the risk. I was probably incapable of acting first. Like you, I’m in more deeply than I could ever have imagined.”

---“Agreed. It’s different thus far. Not the usual messiness – your term again...I’ve become your language clone – and yet too early to predict. I should be more on guard than I am, but even in those serious moments, the drip, drip, drip of our past, it feels so cool – that’s the word, my word this time - this is so cool, I love it and I love you, and yet I find myself thinking or feeling we may be headed for the same shit we’ve both had enough of. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

My head was locked in her hands as she brushed my eyes with her thumbs. I could have lain there forever, leaving her question hanging. Then I heard,

---“Nothing gets resolved quickly. Let’s leave it at that. Up, buddy, it will take more this this morning to shovel out all the shit.”

It was mid-morning when we dressed. I took my bag to do some shopping, and she headed for her soon-to-be-vacated apartment.

The *ménage à trois* was just finishing when I returned, earlier than I expected. I fixed lunch for me and Sasha, who was busily organizing her corner on the opposite side from the kitchen, just under Tara’s painting. The juxtaposition caused me to pause. Finally I said it was ready whenever she was, and without a word she headed toward the table.

---“The longer I’m in this space the more I love it she said as she draped her arms around my neck from behind. She moved her pelvis tight against mine. It was possible lunch would have to be postponed indefinitely. We came to our senses and ate lunch and talked about the move. She was clearly happy to be out – having met the perpetrator of the *ménage* I could understand why – we both agreed that her roommate was not loony at all and should not be hooked up with this guy. Of course we all had loony tunes in our lives. I cleaned up the kitchen so she could get back to her corner, and then I called Richard to fill him in. He was more upset than the last time we talked, and I encouraged him to call the dean because he may come away with a different and more positive impression. He said he would. He said Lynn wanted to talk to me, and when she came on the line – they still had a land-line – she said Richard would fill her in. She asked about my vacation plans, and I accepted her invitation for Xmas dinner with them and their kids who’d be home for the week, and then she asked if I had heard from Ellen and I said I hadn’t. She said she was worried, and my response without giving anything away was that a move back to California might be just what she needed at this point in her life. I hadn’t convinced Lynn of anything, but she appreciated the sentiment, and we hung up. I wish I could have said more. Lynn was one of those dear people we meet far too infrequently in life. It bothered me I was not being more forthcoming. Eventually I could tell her without revealing too much that Ellen had to shift gears. That patch of land, if in fact she had bought it, would help her become grounded again. I honestly felt Ellen would work things out. It has been a long time since I’d had anyone to talk to about such things. I ambled over the Sasha’s corner and sat on the floor next to her.

I summarized, and I asked for her opinion. She thought for a minute, and while she agreed that Ellen would find her way, she was less optimistic about whether the land would make a difference.

---“Perhaps a first step. She may never actually connect after the life she’s lived. A respite at best. And you need to keep all that business about you and Ellen from both Richard and Lynn, unless Ellen tells them first. If you tell them, they’ll conclude you seduced her. Technically you did, and they’d be right. But it was unintended. Not that you would resist - and you didn’t – but she, like me, paved the way. You had seduced her without trying to be the seducer. If they hear it from her, they’re less likely to blame you. Now, do I have to worry about you over Xmas? You’re properly bounded and leashed?” she asked with her hand on my knee not far from....

---“Did I seduce you with some sort of magic I’m unaware of?” and I got exactly what I expected but in the gut rather than in.... “By the way, I expect you to worry incessantly about me and my libido as I will worry about you and yours,” I added.

---“Your gut is so hard I should shoot for a more vulnerable spot. One of these days your smart mouth will be sewn shut to universal applause,” she said firmly as she nestled her head into my shoulder.

---“You had three month to figure out what you were in for. It’s not my fault, you blew it,” comments that provoked a new, surprisingly hard blow to the gut that unlike the first had an impact. The strength in her arms surprised me.

---“It will take a while, but I will eventually whip you into shape,” she said as she wrapped her arms around my chest. I gave in. No good reason not to.

But, for the first time since I'd been pulled into her world in the backseat of a cab, I could see that Sasha truly felt some foreboding. She was edgier and less buoyant. She was taking stock as perhaps I should also. Not my strength in any romance I could remember. Fall, fall, fall until you shatter against the concrete, and then pick up the pieces if you can. I don't recommend it. No turning back. I love this woman top to bottom, inside out, but falling in love, as I well know, is laden with risk. No bookie would make favorable odds on this one. Was Sasha deciding the odds were unfavorable?

In my most rationale moment, I couldn't blame her. As much as I liked to ignore my age, as much as I liked to congratulate myself on bench pressing my weight and more, as much as I liked to rewrite my life, I knew I was going for broke in a situation like this. I could dismiss the age thing because it didn't seem to matter from my vantage point. But how about Sasha? How could she dismiss it? Accommodate it, maybe, but never dismiss it.

The scary thing for me was the ease of it all. The tension level had risen slightly but it was nowhere near the pleasure level, which rested somewhere near the sky. It was the ease in fucking, in talking, in being silent, like now...five days together no discord, although perhaps some doubts.

---"This is so fuck'in easy and so fuck'in hard," whispered Sasha as if she was inside my head. "I'd convinced myself that even if I won over your affections we could just glide along because somehow we were both smart enough to figure out how to do that. When you first slid inside me, Piperoo, it was so easy, so cool, so big, so lovable, I never wanted it to end. Lately I've wanted most of them to end almost immediately. Masturbating – the guy trick – was preferable. Not this time. Funny, the gods make sure that even the best of times will get messy. Now I'm trying to explain all this to myself. Why? I have nothing to worry about and yet I'm doing just that. Am I still caught inside the sculptor's web? Or is this something quite natural, and what two people who love each other have to deal with? This is not my first relationship, and it's certainly not yours, and yet it seems that way. Am I screwed up because it actually worked out as I had planned it and dreamt it? I can't answer these questions, I can't even figure out where they came from, but I can fuck. Let's go. I've never felt that way about any man I've slept with. And I'm going to enjoy it for as long as I can."

---"For some strange reason I feel better. The questions and the doubts have receded," said Sasha, now lying on top. "Maybe I just had to ask the questions, not answer them."

We decided it was gym time, although Sasha didn't have an appointment this afternoon. We worked out together, and it was fun.

---"I keep expecting someone to amble over here with today's dose of vitriol," said Sasha as we sat on a bench with our towels wrapped around our necks.

---"She's apparently gone for good. The gods of Olympus are sometimes wise and good."

---"And how will they smile on us, buddy-boy, or will it be something worse? How silly. You have me thinking they are real gods out there on that peak."

---"Of course there are. Isn't that where you descended from when you landed in the back seat?"

---“I have no problem with that since you seem to acknowledge implicitly where the power lies,” with that angled look again.

---“I acknowledge. Take me home on your golden wings.”

---“Love birds in the gym – a good thing,” said Katie as we left.

The evening was quiet. We showered, separately, ate in, drank in, talked and joked, were spared any calls or emails, watched the fake news that mattered with more howls than usual and retired. Enfolded in each other’s arms we kissed and literally said good night to each other and fell asleep. I must have been as tired as she was because the next thing I remember was her hands moving ever so lightly across my back. When I opened my eyes, I knew it was morning – the dawn light was dancing across the glass ceiling – enough light I could see her eyes fixed on mine.

---“Never had an alarm clock like this,” I said with some trepidation because I did not know what her morning mood would be.

---“I’m going to make this work, even if you resist, I’m going to make it work. I’m jealous of all your women, and as silly as it sounds I’m arm-wrestling all them out of existence. When I woke this morning, I knew I was in love with you, but at the same time I knew I loved being in this relationship, which by any reasonable definition is craziness – that’s worse than messiness. I know more about you than you know about me. You have more to learn, and I’ve decided you’re going to get told as they say up in the high Sierras.”

---“Do they also say giddy-up?”

---“Quiet! I like you ‘old’. You can do with ‘old’ what few can do with ‘young’. Don’t ask me to explain that nonsense, but that’s how I feel. You present yourself with such an even-keel demeanor. At first I thought it was a pose. It’s not, is it? You’ve learned how to accommodate and resolve without losing a passion for things. I’ve watched you for three months, and I’ve loved you for five days, and even though I’ve had doubts the last day or two – yes, doubts, my dear, real doubts – and I’ve got my arms around you and I’m not letting go. One more thing before your ego explodes, I bring something to this relationship that’s novel. Unlike your past lovers, I’m telling you I intend to make you my lover and my companion. It scares me, but it also drives me. That’s what a good night’s sleep can do for you,” as she slid under me.

I shaved while she readied the coffee. Looking in the mirror, I wasn’t sure who was staring back at me. Was the image in the mirror fucking Sasha or was that image reprimanding me for fucking Sasha? There was no doubt I was going to keep fucking Sasha. She was right, we were in this because we wanted to be. Vulcan’s forge had made a set of bracelets and we both heard and felt the snap. Sex with her this morning was different, almost rollicking, as if she had cut a tether. And when it happened it happened at the same time for both of us.

I heard a cell, then I heard “Fuck!” I knew there was a bump in the road. There was nothing beguiling about her voice. Just the opposite. She was reading the riot act, and it was not pretty. I slowly stepped into The Space, and to my surprise she motioned me to her side. Her free arm was now draped over my shoulder.

---“This is the final word. I will not cancel the deal, and I will not renegotiate the deal, and I will not forget the deal. The next conversation will be with my lawyer. Write that down and good-bye.” And she shut her cell.

---“Sit down. We need to talk. I’ll get the Peet’s. Can you think and talk without breakfast? Of course you can, what am I thinking.”

I sat as instructed. I’d never been instructed in this manner, but I seemed to know what to do.

---“OK. A good night’s sleep not only made me more in love than yesterday but feistier as well. I’m not as calm as you and never will be. I’m sure for most of the last three months you may have thought that quiet and calm described who I was. Actually you seem to be adapting pretty well to the other side of my personality. I will probably never figure out how you can have so much passion between the covers and remain so calm while people like me are blowing up around you. And don’t use family or genetic defect. You’ve used that line already. I don’t really want to change that. That’s why I want you here beside me as I talk through this.”

I was befuddled to say the least. I’d decided she hadn’t just talked to her ex but whoever it was it was about her ex.

---“When I was about 12, my father took ill. It was serious, very serious. In the midst of all this he decided that he had to do more than he had done to assure that Mom and I would be taken care of. While listening to doctors’ diagnoses that at times were absolutely devastating, he managed to talk to his lawyer about our financial security. He got well, thank goodness, but the financial changes were executed anyway. I have my Dad’s head for numbers. My Mom is not out to lunch on financial matters, but she has trouble with the big picture of markets and investments.”

She sipped her Peet’s.

---“Goddamn, I love this coffee! Let me drop to the ‘bottom line’ as it were, I’m worth a few hundred thousand bucks. Of course you may not think so, and before you answer remember where my hand is,” she said playfully but with her hand positioned where it could do damage.

---“But even people, as you well know, who are smart about money can be dumb about the people they let into their vaults. I let fuckhead in by buying half the property with the studio and the house. He needed money and I was able to get a sweetheart – excuse the pun – deal. Someday I’ll let you look at the papers, but now all you need to know is he’s defaulted on his mortgage and under the arrangement if he defaults the property must be sold. I’m ready to cash out because I’ll make money even in this market. There’s been a buyer out there for more than a year waiting patiently and sometimes not so patiently for my ex to screw-up enough that he has to sell. For the record I often stayed with him when Tootsie came for one of her stays. And, yes, I slept with him. He has money and not much else. Can you live with that?”

---“Are you waiting for answer or will I be held accountable at the end of the conversation,” I said slyly. “I know there is more to come.”

I felt that well-positioned hand as a smile broke out across her face.

---“I want a career and want to make a living from that, but the fact is in my late twenties I’m pretty well off. The person on the phone was his agent who for reasons that I can’t fathom is trying to resurrect my ex’s career. He wants me to back off. I won’t. I had an email from my ex once-in-a-while moneybags-bedmate and my future transactioneer reassuring me he was committed to the purchase.

---“No hard feelings on his part?”

---“None. I was an interlude between marriage four and five. With rich people it has to do with making money, not love. You never figured that out with Ellen, did you?”

---“In fact I did indirectly, although I’m not sure I understood it. It was, as I said, like closing a deal. No time to really make love.”

---“Touché. You did. Anyway those are the basics. The trust fund is now under my control, and a friend of my father manages it. I’m careful about expenses, but once the sale is completed I can be less careful. By the way I operate independently of my father, although I talk to him from time to time about what’s in the portfolio. My father didn’t want me to invest in the crazy’s property, but the advisor thought it had potential. Neither knew I was sleeping with the guy who’s going to save me. Oh, by the way, utter silence about my sleep-over with moneybags. If it became public, his life would become more complicated than it is already. I’m not sure anyone else knows except you, and you know nothing. Promise me.”

I made the appropriate sign with my finger on my lips.

As was becoming a wonderful custom with her, she swung over on to my lap.

---“Tell me this is not going to change anything.”

---“How do you want me to tell you?” and I rolled her on her back. After a long passionate kiss, she said,

---“As angry as I was on the phone – a mood you’re learning to live with, I hope – I’m actually happy to have some reserves. I thought about this as I cooled down. I’m not going to tell you what to do about your retirement, but I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t rooting for as early a retirement as possible. I can do that because I know we’ll have the resources to settle where we want. Of the few people I’ve known in your position, thinking about retirement, you seem to me best prepared.”

---“I have no fears, and now the context is far different from what it’s been. I too have several hundred thousand dollars stashed away plus my pension and then Social Security down the road. I’m OK, and apparently you’re OK too. Look, back to the bottom line, we’ll manage probably better than most financially.”

If I had more to say, I wasn’t going to be allowed to deliver it. It never got delivered. It was noon before we were decided to start our day.

We showed up at the gym at the appointed time for Sasha’s next training session. Katie looked at both us and said,

---“So that’s how you look when you’re in love? We’ve forgotten, right Greg? Are you sure you have enough energy and strength to work-out without endangering yourselves?”

Actually I had more of both than usual. On the way home we stopped at the wine shop. I introduced Sasha to Tish and Serge. And before I could gauge their reaction, Tish had Sasha in her arm and they walked across the store to the other side.

---“Don’t worry,” said a reassuring Serge. “You need some champagne, and I’ve got something that’s just right.”

---“So what did Tish have to say, or should I mind my own business,” I asked as we headed to the butcher shop.

Sasha laughed.

---“The women in your life, not the romantic ones, have only your best interests at heart. And the romantics ones have the opposite. And in some strange, bizarre way, they’ve decided without knowing me I line up with those best interests. Do I? Not a position I’m used to being in.”

---“I’ve had enough questions for today, but don’t try to get away.” And we entered the butcher shop.

It was nearly 6 PM by the time we got home. I started cooking – chicken breast baked in a cream sauce with risotto (from the box), bread, cheese – but first I opened the champagne recommended by Serge. And it was better than I expected for a California label. I poured the champagne and took a glass to her. She was getting ready to put the small sculpture pieces I had seen in her bedroom on the far wall in the panel next to “Fuck You”. They were matching pieces but the finish of the metal and the angle of the long rectangles were slightly different, a difference that became perceptible only after looking for a few minutes. The subtlety was intriguing and also playful and whimsical. Since her arrival, she had worn little of her jewelry, but she almost always had her rings on several fingers. They were more delicate than her sculptures but equally luring. As she stepped back from the wall I handed her her champagne. She took the glass and never took her eye off the wall. She leaned up against me without a word. I love these moments of silence when the space around us almost vibrated with creative energy.

---“Later,” she said, “I’m not sure it’s the right space.” She looked around at the other walls, and then her eyes stopped at Tara’s painting. “I’ll leave it for now. The way in which the light strikes the metal is important. Com’on, I’m going to help you cook by watching.”

She lifted herself up on the end of the counter, and I began to prepare the sauce. We talked and laughed about little things that happened during the day. After I stuck the dish in the oven, I walked over to where she sat. I filled our glasses, and she spread her legs so that I could lean against the counter in front of her. She was more mellow or maybe more introspective than usual. The tension from this morning seemed to have dissipated, but she was also looking wary. I wondered if she had more to say.

She set down her glass and put her arms around my neck.

---“You know more about me and my life than any other human. It’s easier for you to talk about your past than it is for me. One realization for me was that there’s something eerily similar about our romantic ventures. I’ve never figured out my passion for making love and having sex. The guys I’ve slept with are guys I could fall in love with. They’re smart, physically attractive and desirable at least on that elemental level. Even the sculptor. He was the oldest male before you, sweetheart, I’d ever fucked. Physically and creatively he was in decline, but it took a while for me to see that. And he was attractive to other women as you are. He loved to parade around the bars we occasionally visited. The town, I told you, loved him. From the pictures I’ve seen his Tootsie is a woman that even an old cynic like you would find attractive. She could have had another man, and apparently made that choice after I left him. I have no idea how I was seen by her. She had to know there was another woman. Maybe it didn’t matter because she had her other man. Her time with the sculptor was an interlude. We’ve all had interludes, haven’t we?”

She arched her eyebrows as she spoke that. I thought it best to keep my mouth shut.

---“Listening to your stories and making love in your bed have made me understand more than ever I love the thrill that comes from two bodies letting go. I guess what I’m leading up to is you seem to be driven by the thrill as well. At least that’s what I feel, not only when we fuck but when I hang my arms around your neck as I’m doing right now. But, my man, it also feels different. Maybe that’s why I’m finding it a little scary. I tell you that I love you and you tell me that you love me, and I believe myself and I believe you, but saying it and then feeling it the way I do is new to me. I don’t expect it to be so unique for you. There’s your ex, there’s Tara, one or two others – a list I say I shouldn’t be jealous of but I am – a list that exists and will continue to. I have a list of past relationships, but I’m discovering lists and memories about them can be different.”

She tightened her embrace and looked at me with utmost seriousness,

---“I may feel scared and I have no more idea than you what’s coming, but I told you this morning I’m in and I’m going to do all I can to keep you in. It’s cool, and I love it and I love you.”

Her kiss was so warm and so perfectly placed against my lips. Yes, I’d been in love, but this woman was a force I’d never known. Her sitting and me standing but bent over, we held that position for a few minutes, intense but quietly so, no rambunctiousness, all the feelings we had could be expressed in the meeting of our lips.

The bell went ding, and we both pulled away with laughter, and before I could turn away she said

---“That kiss may have sealed our fate....”

The rest of the evening we chatted, listened to music, made plans – yes, our fate for however long any fate can last seemed to be sealed.

The next morning – her last full days before she left – we ticked off the things that had to be done and agreed to meet at the gym about 3 PM. She had an appointment at the gallery, but even if the gallery had to back out she wasn’t concerned. She had talked to Will and was certain she could pay for a studio for the next six months without any help from the gallery. My chores

involved a trip to the department to sign papers, turn in keys and say good-bye. I also planned to stop at the dean's office to see his secretary. We agreed we could stay in touch because of all the electronics.

My errands were uneventful. I stayed the longest at the dean's office. I brought a box of Belgian chocolates. I thanked the dean's secretary for all she's done, especially relating to Sasha. I said that Sasha fully intended to sign a lease. She'd know more after today. We chatted on about this and that, but surprisingly not a word about the dean. I wondered if he had ever really worked here.

We both showed up at 3. Katie was busy with someone but Greg was waiting. After the workouts Katie made it clear that she expected to see Sasha back at the gym in a couple weeks, no ifs, ands or buts. Otherwise, how could she put up with this guy, pointing at me.

On the way home we joked about the risk of disobeying Katie. We had decided to cook-in again, and during one of my errands I had picked up one of Sasha's favorite – mussels. I chose a cold pasta dish made at the deli since I don't do pasta. I was going to boil the mussels in water and wine and top with a butter sauce. Fresh baguette, some cheese and two luscious cupcakes. Before cooking I popped some champagne left over from yesterday.

---“Champagne again! I've had more champagne in five days than the rest of my life....”

---“I'm sorry you've been deprived...in this one area only....” I managed to move out of the way of her fist.

We sat on the sofa, and through The Grand Window we could watch the light snow dance through the city lights.

---“Maybe I'll be snowed in...no flights to anywhere...so much snow we'd be moored in here for days...could you stand me for days without Katie, Tish and Sheila?” she asked with her cocked head and arched eyebrows.

---“I refuse to answer on the grounds that I will suffer....I don't like suffering.”

---“Do you think you can get away with that answer? Simple yes or no to the question.”

The right answer was kissing her, and I did.

While she checked her emails, I fixed the meal. When I said “almost ready” she fixed places for us on the coffee table. I poured some Bordeaux, and dinner was served. She noted that the snow had stopped, but the question still needed to be answered. Tenacious hardly described her mind. I was a puppy dog compared to her.

After dinner and a cleaned-up kitchen, she cuddled up against me on the sofa. I had an Armagnac but she begged off.

---“You haven't checked your emails all day? Aren't you interested in what might be there?” she asked.

---“The most important thing is right here; the rest can wait until tomorrow.”

---“And will you be that nonchalant while I’m gone?” as she burrowed her head into my shoulder. “Yes or no, no bullshit.”

---“No. no, no!” I said as I caressed her thighs.

---“I have a feeling that you’re being moored more than you like or want or are used to. Actually I’m surprised that I’m even saying that.”

---“I need to be reminded. I’ve spent a lot of time being unmoored, and because of that I may have a predilection toward that state. I want to be moored as I think you want to be. Aren’t we both similar in that we resist too taut a line? I love you in all your moods, at least what I’ve seen thus far. You may surprise me as I may surprise you. I’m learning and relearning some things being two people instead of one. I have no regrets about that, but I’m not always very adept at it. I want this and not something else. I’m going to pine for your return, and if you don’t I’m coming after you.”

---“I like that answer. I’m a bit shaken up by how this has evolved. More so than you are. I suppose that bothers me even though it shouldn’t. I’m in so much deeper now than I’ve ever been. Sometimes I’m surprised at the silly thoughts I have. I’m developing that multi-brain complex of yours. My head gets into arguments. Some inches below my brain is my heart, and it’s not in any kind of internal war.”

---“In my case my head is actually quiet. No arguments. My heart is always a puzzle to me, but if it’s responsible for my feeling good about this, great. Let that grow and grow and grow. Perhaps all this business about being moored or unmoored, various brains and universes and relationship messiness has to be rethought. I’m all for that. I’m bored with all that old stuff.”

---“Take me to bed. I’ll finish packing in the morning. What time does the limo pick me up?”

---“Not until 11 Am. I shall take you to bed.”

We made love, slept and made love again.

Awake in the early hours, Sasha said,

---“I want you to think about where we might settle when you retire. I plan to think about it, and I think it will be fun to talk about. Let’s agree anything and anything is on the table. We may have our preferences and our dislikes but right now think about every possibility. After last night I can’t even entertain of how this relationship can ever be unwound.”

We talked about this and that for another hour and then we swing into action. The snow had stopped so there was no chance her flight would be cancelled. By 11 we were ready. With the back door of the limo open we kissed and said in unison “I love you”. And within moments she was gone. I knew I could expect a call from the airport, and she knew I’d call tonight. As I watched the cab turn right and pass out of sight I thought of lines from a poem recently read, something like, ‘I didn’t build my brain, but I’m helping to finish it.’ My feeling was that the brain *du jour* had a ways to go before being finished. No one knew, of course.