

Fabulous at Fifty
a novel by
Rafael Yglesias



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For Ann,

with every ounce of love I have in me. And then some.

Stage One

1.1

Hugh Reynolds was a happily married man, which is to say that shortly after concluding he and his wife were hopelessly mismatched, fated to disappoint each other daily, he realized he was content. Hugh arrived at this startling epiphany on his tenth wedding anniversary. He was thirty-one. Over the next fifteen years he discovered more than contentment in his marriage; he unearthed gladness at growing old with Amy, a profound and abiding pleasure in knowing that she was the last woman he would love, really the only woman he would ever love, since he had met Amy when he was nineteen. Naturally, along the way there were hiccups in his conviction that his wife was the great love of his life—a day here or a week there when he suspected a platonic crush, if allowed to become physical, would ignite into a grand passion. Fortunately, such visions quickly vanished, mirages in the desert of contentment in which he burned.

Then Amy died. It took five years to lose her. The attenuated ebbing and departure of a woman whose sensibility had been grafted onto his consciousness was sad and terrifying in countless ways—none of which concern this story. The commonplace terror being singled out here is that no matter how long Hugh mourned—and he expected to mourn for the rest of his life—someday in the incomprehensible future without Amy he would have to go on a date.

“It's been thirty years since my last date and that turned out to be a disaster,” he said, confessing his dread to Leslie, his wife's closest friend. Over those same thirty years she had also become precious to Hugh. During Amy's illness he had relied on her more than anyone.

“How can you say that?” Leslie objected. “Your last date was fabulous: you met Amy.”

“Exactly,” Hugh said. “Then she died.”

Leslie mourned Amy solemnly but was witty enough to concede, “I see your point.”

Hugh couldn't elude dating by proposing to Leslie. She was married. There were, in fact, several charming women Hugh would have wed without the preliminary bother of dating if it weren't for the inconvenience that they were married. True, many complained so bitterly about their husbands that they appeared to be available for a second marriage. But Amy's death had clarified Hugh's view of wife-stealing: he now understood why not coveting another's spouse was a moral imperative worth carving on a tablet and possessed a keen awareness of what a rotten thing it was to steal a wife from any man—even an asshole, which curiously seemed to be just the type intelligent women selected for matrimony.

Luckily for Hugh, in the aftermath of his wife's death he was too miserable to date. And too busy. Besides catching up at the office on what had been neglected during the last stages of Amy's illness, his days were crammed with gloomy tasks, such as mailing official copies of her death certificate to Chase, Verizon, and American Express to convince them to stop billing for services that even their omnipresent companies could no longer provide her. Daily encounters with the bureaucracy of death left him with little energy for his evenings; he attempted nothing more strenuous than dinner with friends. These were consoling, but loving company did not obscure the painful sight of the empty chair beside his. Nothing left him

feeling more bereft than dinner for three and a solitary walk home to a silent, dark apartment. Soon Hugh decided that he preferred to stay in, askew on the couch where he had spent so many contented hours with Amy, staring at the 55-inch flat-screen TV he had bought a week after her funeral—a giant television plopped into their once tasteful living room being the only improvement he believed he could obtain from losing his wife.

“She must be turning over in her grave,” said his mother-in-law, Ruth, when she learned of his high-definition purchase, no doubt wondering what other horrors her son-in-law might bring into her grandchildren’s lives now that her daughter wasn’t there to restrain him.

Ruth was concerned about his life, too. She was especially worried about his being alone on Yom Kippur. She called the week before that solemn occasion in October of 2005 to invite him to join her and Amy’s father at their temple. Hugh Barton Reynolds was not Jewish, unsurprisingly, and so Amy had given him a lifetime pass on going to services with her—until her illness. He had accompanied her for the past five years and he thought Ruth might have a point. If he didn’t go to temple would he feel too bereft? Most of his friends were Jewish enough to repent, so they wouldn’t be available for company. Nor would his children. Amy had raised them to be High Holiday observant, but they didn’t want him to assume her role as spiritual nag and synagogue companion: daughter Ginnie lived in DC, where she would attend services with Amy’s brother, his wife, and their two little boys; and son Raymond had preemptively announced he wasn’t coming into town for the Day of Atonement—not a surprise since he had informed Hugh that if he believed in God he would turn his back on Him for killing his mother. Ray was spending the weekend in Providence with Mai, his African American girlfriend.

“Celebrating Kwanzaa?” Ruth asked.

“That’s in December,” Hugh said.

She laughed; first time he’d heard her laugh in a year. “I know! I was making a joke. So why not join us at temple for Erev?” she continued in her drained and often cracked or hoarse post-funeral voice. “You know, evening services? The night it begins? Or if you want to come on the day, you could stay for just a little while, not the whole megillah. And don’t worry. You don’t have to fast. After all, you’re not Jewish.”

“*Zol Got mir helfen*,” Hugh said.

“May God help us all. I promise I’m not trying to convert you. I just want you to know you’re welcome.”

“Thank you, dear. I’ll be fine on my own. And don’t forget, in a week I’m taking you out for your anniversary.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ruth said. “We’re paying.”

Hugh had volunteered to have dinner with Ruth and Bernie on their fifty-ninth wedding anniversary because Amy’s brother couldn’t get away due to work obligations and Hugh couldn’t bear the thought of his in-laws—late in-laws? what was the proper term for a dead wife’s relatives?—celebrating alone so soon after burying their daughter. That was one reason why he declined Ruth’s invitation to temple; seeing her twice in two weeks was too often. Not that he disliked Ruth. He had grown quite fond of his mother-in-law over the years. It wasn’t her fault she bore a close enough resemblance to Amy to trigger pangs of loss. Also, she had a habit of calling him “Hughie” in exactly the same tone as Amy at her most affectionate. But even if echoes and resemblance had been a comfort, he wouldn’t have been tempted to attend services. Hugh, like his son Ray, wasn’t in a mood to atone for his

sins to God. This year he thought he was owed an apology.

Ruth worried Hugh was going to be lonely, but of course she didn't suggest he go on a date. So far no one Hugh knew had suggested this, which made sense: nearly every one of his acquaintance was also a good friend of his late wife. The only one who raised the prospect of his dating did so to inform him that when she saw another woman on his arm she would have a stroke. As for the two men who were exclusively his friends, Peter and Kyle, they knew he was sleeping less than four hours a night and sometimes sobbed while watching reruns of *Seinfeld*. For one hundred and twenty days after Amy's plain pine coffin was lowered into an anonymous landscape in New Jersey, no one bothered him about "moving on." Four months, however, proved to be the limit for the world to ignore his attractive condition of being a man without a wife. On Yom Kippur, it became apparent that his tribe was recalling, or more likely Googling, the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*—"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife"—in order to adapt it to his gloomier but perhaps even more attractive circumstance as a widower. A drumbeat had begun, a call to reintroduce Hugh to the comforts of a romantic relationship.

His happily married friend Peter was the first to make noise. They had gone to college together, if you could call four years of smoking dope, reading Beckett and writing bad poetry "higher learning." Like Hugh, WASPy Peter had married a Jewish girl but hadn't converted. He rescued Hugh from atonement. While Debby fasted, Peter came down from "the boring Upper West Side" to Hugh's "hip Village digs" to take him out for a sacrilegious steak. He stopped by the apartment first, to smoke a joint on Hugh's grimy, bare terrace before they walked to the Knickerbocker Bar & Grill. After their martinis and steaks arrived,

Peter leaned forward and announced, “It’s time you starting thinking about dating. I’m sure you don’t feel ready, but you never will. You’re a hot commodity, Hugh. A real catch. Know what Debby said about you?” Peter liked to quote his wife, which he did for a variety of purposes: to submit evidence that she wasn’t kind enough to him; to repeat one of her cutting remarks about a man Peter envied; or to cite her as the ultimate expert on everything. “Debby said, ‘Hugh stuck around for the cancer.’”

Hugh recoiled, less at the subject of dating being broached than at the idea that Amy’s illness could be reduced to a question on a matrimonial quiz. And anyway, what sort of recommendation was that? “Stuck around for cancer?” he said. “Makes me sound ghoulish.”

“Don’t start with the self-deprecating crap, okay?” Peter’s eyes filled. “What you guys went through . . .” He suppressed his rising tears—before the Daughters of the American Revolution could arrive to clap him in irons, Hugh figured. “‘Hugh stuck around for the cancer,’” Peter repeated, in love with the phrase. “Debby says for women that’s the cherry on top of the perfect sundae of your CV.”

“My CV?”

Peter became bellicose, accusing Hugh of his advantages: “You’re fifty years old, you’re in great physical shape, you were happily married for twenty-nine years, you’ve raised two brilliant children, one at Yale, the other at Brown, and you have a real job. Fuck, a job that’s actually interesting.”

“Ginnie graduated. She’s in DC.”

“I know Ginnie graduated!” Disgusted, Peter leaned back, beer belly ballooning his polo shirt. In truth, his stomach was inflated more by *frites* than lager; the formerly chiseled bones of Peter’s college countenance were sinking into a pillow of middle-aged calories.

Having dispatched his own *frites*, he was steadily consuming Hugh's. "The point is: you're a catch, the Great White Whale every woman wants to harpoon," said Peter, never a man especially gifted at metaphor.

"I don't want to marry Ahab," Hugh objected. "Or Ishmael."

"Everybody's talking about it. No one's saying it to your face but everybody's got at least two prospects they're hot to fix you up with. Last night, knowing I was going to see you, it was all Debby could talk about. 'Hugh's ideal,' she kept saying." Peter stuffed four frites into his mouth, washed them down with the remains of his martini, and signaled for another, all while his famished bloodshot eyes focused on Hugh, waiting. For what? A request to be fixed up? Amy's clothes were hanging beside Hugh's in the closet. A conflation of Chanel and her essence lingered on his pillow.

"I'm bald," Hugh finally pointed out.

"That's ideal. No woman wants George Clooney for a husband. They want a guy, as Debby said, who will stick around for the cancer."

"Well, they'd be making a mistake," Hugh said and added, before he changed the subject for good, "Next woman gets cancer, I'm outta there."

1.2

Peter's pitch was offensive, but his timing was congruent with the world's impatience. The morning after their steak dinner, Hugh's email was pinged by Cathy Moriarty, a friend of a friend of Amy's from when their children were little, the very first email he had ever received from her. It took him a few minutes to remember who she was. They had met perhaps five times, in large groups back in middle-school days, when Ray and her daughter were classmates. Maybe they had had a conversation or two between grabs at passing plates of bland cheese and unsalted crackers, while clutching partially collapsed plastic cups of a piquant white wine with undertones of diesel fuel. Cathy wrote to say how sorry she was about Amy's passing, how she had always admired her unfailing good cheer as a mother—a mischaracterization of Amy's bunk-counselor efficiency with her kids—and how painful it must be for Hugh to have lost her only weeks before sending his youngest off to college. "Talk about empty nest," she wrote. "I was feeling sorry for myself after my divorce and my little girl abandoning me for Wesleyan but you poor guy."

There Cathy revealed a good grasp of what had caused him particular anguish. Dropping off his baby boy at college, Hugh felt as if they had abandoned each other to lives of desperate loneliness. But what was his alternative? Keep his eighteen-year-old son home to languish in front of the 55-inch TV watching the Giants lose?

Cathy went on to write that if he wanted to go for a walk or to come over for a home-cooked meal just to talk, she was more than happy to lend a "sympathetic shoulder."

Is it only her shoulder I'd want to borrow? Hugh wondered. He longed to touch and

be touched—understandably, since one of the truths universally acknowledged is that a side effect of grief is lust, sex serving as an excellent fuck-you to death. He suspected Cathy had designed the invitation to circumvent the awkwardness of being the first to ask a widower on a date, and although he was tempted by her shoulder and everything attached to it, he was bothered by the possibility that she might have calculated he would take advantage of her offer of sympathy to gratify his baser appetites. He believed no man required a woman's help in appealing to his worst instincts—that was what male friends were for.

The result of his conflicted feelings was that he dithered violently. Hugh's libido wrote back instantly that a home-cooked meal would be great. But when Cathy replied with an invitation for that very night, his conscience took over, and he immediately executed a U-turn in a second email, declining dinner, offering no alternative date.

Five minutes later his landline rang, Cathy's name glowing on its Caller ID. With a feeling of doom he picked up.

"Hello, Hugh? It's Cathy. Cathy Moriarty."

"Sure, Cathy. I recognize your voice." It was tuneful. "You got my second email? I just sent it. You should have it by now."

"Oh . . ." She paused. "No . . . I . . . didn't," she said haltingly. Not because she was confused, Hugh decided; he suspected she'd recognized an opportunity he had stupidly created. "I'm not at my computer so I didn't see a second one. I was calling to find out if steak was okay for dinner? I couldn't remember if you were a carnivore," she finished brightly.

Hugh didn't mind her harmless, friendly fib about seeing his second email. All's fair. He was simply too sad to play. "Cathy, I changed my mind about dinner. Sorry. That's what

my second email was about. I'm very sorry to be confusing. Just feeling too tired."

"Well, how about tomorrow night? Are you free?" she asked, obliging him to disappoint bluntly. Disappointing a woman had always been painful for Hugh. He had never been able to during the wink when he was single—if living in your parents' house or a dorm qualified as being a bachelor. Before his epiphany about the contentment of his marriage, Hugh had been nagged by a suspicion that he had proposed to Amy to avoid letting her down.

"Cathy," he began, then choked up. She meant well and it pained him to bruise her feelings. He cleared his throat. "You're very kind to offer to be a sympathetic shoulder, but I've got no shortage of sympathy. Everyone is being very attentive."

"Oh that's wonderful!" Cathy exclaimed. "I'm not surprised. So many people love you. How about I give you steak and no sympathy?"

She was funny. That was good. And she was bold. That too was good. Hugh liked strong, assertive women, which created a paradox: although he resented that they moved him so easily across the chessboard, he enjoyed the sensation of their confident fingers looping around his will.

Hugh took the risk of full disclosure: "Here's the real reason, Cathy. I know you're being kind, and that's all you mean to be, but for me, going to your apartment for dinner feels—and I know you don't mean it this way—but it feels like a date. And I'm not ready for that. Sorry."

"Oh my God! You thought I was . . . so close to . . . I would never . . . Amy was . . . even I'm still not over . . ." Cathy was so appalled she had been rendered incapable of finishing a sentence.

Hugh hurried to reassure her. "Of course you didn't mean that. That's exactly why I

put it all on me. It just feels weird to me, even though I know it's the furthest thing from your mind. I apologize."

"I understand . . . now that you explain . . . of course it feels strange to have dinner at a single woman's apartment. I understand."

"Thank you." Hugh congratulated himself for his bravery in being straightforward. See? It wasn't painful at all.

"I have an idea," Cathy continued with renewed energy. "Tomorrow's supposed to be lovely. Picture perfect weather. I'm going to enjoy the new West Side esplanade, walk it from Twelfth Street down to Battery Park City. Why don't you join me? Get you out of the house. We'll stay away from talking about how sad it is to lose people we love. We'll stick to talking about the disastrous Iraq war. I still can't believe George Bush was reelected! Was Kerry so boring everyone was willing to destroy the country just to be entertained by that idiot?"

There was nothing for it. To put Cathy off for good Hugh had to prevaricate. He thought of himself as a skillful liar but he began to doubt his ability after the dismal performance that followed. He told Cathy he couldn't walk this weekend because he would be in DC visiting his daughter. Naturally enough, she proposed a stroll when he got back. He explained he was stuck at the office late these days. "I'll email when I have a free weekend," he promised, the opposite of his intention, and ended the call with that hoariest of pretenses, claiming someone was on the other line. By then, his rejection clear, her tone had chilled.

Disgusted with himself, he tossed the cordless phone onto his home office desk and slid to the scarred oak floor, where he curled into a fetal position, exhausted and defeated by

his first encounter as a single man with a woman. He realized with deepening dismay that twenty-nine years of marriage hadn't improved his ability to fend off female desires. He feared what he had learned from his relationship with Amy was that he should always give in. That had kept his marriage humming but obviously left him hopelessly out of tune for dating.

He picked himself up, shook his head until his cheeks wobbled, then made a thunderous noise by stamping his feet and releasing a growl that expanded into a great roar. This jungle display heartened him, urged him to be stronger than the inept man in the awkward conversation with Cathy Moriarty. Ginnie and Ray needed him to avoid behaving like a middle-aged child, to prove he was independent and able to console himself, that losing their mother wasn't something they needed to worry would unman their father—although clearly it had.

He returned to his desk chair and pondered how to prevent a repetition of such clumsiness. There followed a half hour of forehead rubbing, staring at his iBook's beach screen-saver, and making a cup of tea and scalding his tongue, before a solution, albeit temporary, occurred to him. He remembered what Kyle, his frequently single friend, following a diagnosis of fatty liver disease, had told him was one of the rules of Alcoholics Anonymous. When you first quit drinking you were to avoid making big changes for a year, including starting a new relationship, to give yourself a chance to know your new sober self. Kyle had found it extremely difficult to stick to that injunction, as hard as not drinking, but thought it had been crucial to his temperance. Hugh decided he would institute a one-year moratorium on dating in order to first "date" this Hugh Reynolds, a grown man without Amy, a man he hardly knew. Now when the subject of "moving on" came up all he had to do was announce that he had decided he wouldn't be ready to have a relationship for a year, and then

everyone would leave him blissfully and morbidly alone. In the meantime he'd have twelve months to learn how to say no to a woman.

1.3

“You really did *everything* your wife wanted?” asked Roberto Salazar, Hugh’s grief counselor. “I *think* I do everything my wife wants. But she doesn’t agree.”

Salazar was a cheerfully lapsed Catholic priest with a degree in psychology whom Hugh had found on his employee medical plan. He was listed as a bereavement therapist. At their first meeting Hugh had wondered aloud, “Do we have that many deaths?” “9/11,” Salazar explained. Hugh was abashed. He directed the film program of the Hamilton Foundation for the Arts, whose administrative offices had been in Tower Two; while only one of its employees had perished in the terrorist attack, that loss had shivered the entire staff.

“Amy wouldn’t have agreed that I did everything she asked either,” Hugh conceded now. “But that’s because she was kind and didn’t want to seem to be emasculating me. When I refused to do something Amy wanted, she would pretend to give in, but really it was just a postponement. A year or two later, or as many as ten years later—she was a very patient woman—she tried again, knowing I would eventually cave. So I started giving in right away to avoid the Chinese water torture, the slow drip of her wants.”

Salazar said nothing for a while. Hugh feared it was an appalled silence. “It’s good,” Salazar finally said, “that you’re not idealizing your marriage. Lots of the widows and widowers I see grieve for their spouses by making them into paragons. And then they get stuck. Can’t move on.”

Hugh supplied the obvious: “No one else measures up.”

“Exactly.”

Measuring up to Amy: what would that entail? She had thick auburn hair, warm brown eyes, and a pleasant arrangement of features in a friendly rounded face that Hugh was always relieved to come home to; but she wasn't a dazzling beauty. Her personality was elusive. She could languish in a dream-like state of contemplation, lazy and disorganized for stretches that she redeemed every few months with sustained bursts of energy, able to meet impossible deadlines at work while managing her children and her husband down to the smallest detail. She was very loving without being cloying. She teased without being mean. She was whip-smart, much smarter than Hugh, and he wasn't dumb. So there were some qualities of Amy's he didn't expect could be topped, but in other areas he could imagine improvement. Amy didn't care for symphonies, would tolerate only the decorous calm of chamber quartets, was bored by jazz, and her taste in popular music dead-ended at the Supremes. She couldn't digest any spicy cuisine, a shameful waste of New York City's international buffet. She didn't like any movie over two hours long. She couldn't bear violent or horrific Asian movies, not even Kurosawa, or vaguely sad French films—that is, all French films. She liked to go out for events yet couldn't bear cocktail parties, which made a lot of the social side of Hugh's work lonely. And although Amy enjoyed sex, after twenty years of marriage she seemed to want even more preliminary romancing, for making love to be preceded by an anniversary, a birthday, an afternoon at the Met, dinner at Le Bernardin, or at least pizza at John's—something in their anchovies? Yes, he could improve on Amy in some areas.

At this blasphemous thought Hugh waited for lightning to strike him dead. Once God appeared to be indifferent, he asked Salazar, "So I should bad-mouth Amy as much as possible?"

“I didn’t mean that,” Salazar snapped. “I meant some people are shocked if a grieving spouse doesn’t turn their lost loved one into a paragon of all virtues. You should praise Amy to those people—her parents, her brother, her close friends. But it’ll be better for you, and especially good for your children, if you don’t do that all the time.”

“Really? Especially for my children?” This was interesting.

Salazar nodded sagely. “My experience is that what the children of dead parents miss are the years they would have had with that parent. Your daughter and son are relatively grown, right? Ginnie is out of college?”

“Ginnie’s twenty-three. Ray’s eighteen.”

“So they experienced their mother as teenagers. As adults they’ll never get to know her. We see our parents differently as we get older, see their flaws more clearly, for better or for worse. If you talk about Amy realistically that would be helpful to them. Give them what they missed.”

Hugh was relieved. “So I don’t have to be a hypocrite with them.”

“A hypocrite?” Salazar frowned. “I wasn’t suggesting you be a hypocrite with anyone.”

“Of course not.”

“Did you feel emasculated by her?” Salazar said, changing the subject with the pouncing air of Sherlock Holmes pursuing a revealing clue.

“No!”

“You said she didn’t want to show off that she was emasculating you.”

“I was kidding. Exaggerating. Amy wasn’t a bitch or controlling. It’s a flaw of my character. I can’t say no to women.” Out of tune he sang a gender change in the song’s lyric:

“I’m just a guy who can’t say no.”

Salazar looked puzzled. Apparently he hadn’t left the Roman Catholic Church in order to free up his evenings for musical theater. “So what you got out of your ambivalence about accepting this woman’s invitation to her house for dinner is that in general, not just in this situation as a grieving widower, in general you have trouble saying no to women?”

“Yes.” Hadn’t he already said that? Not for the first time Salazar seemed a little slow.

“But if your problem is that you can’t say no to a woman, why do you think telling people you don’t want to go out on a date for a year will help?”

“I think the year will help, not my saying it. I have a friend in AA and he told me that one of their rules for staying sober is to avoid getting into a relationship for the first year of sobriety. It seems to me I’m in the same position as someone who’s been drinking his entire adult life. I met Amy when I was nineteen. I’ve never been an adult male without her. I should find out who this grown up Hugh is before I try to form a new relationship—especially since at my age I’ll be dating very grown-up women.”

“*Very* grown-up?” Salazar asked sharply.

“Well . . . at least within five years of my age.”

Salazar cocked his head in surprise. He had olive skin, still darkened in the first week of October by fearless days under the ozone-thin sun. “You’re not going to date younger women?”

“Not younger than forty,” Hugh said, conceding another five years. This didn’t dispel Salazar’s raised, skeptical eyebrows. Worse, Salazar pressed his lips tight as if struggling not to burst out laughing. Hugh protested: “I don’t want to have more children. If I start dating

young women, a woman in her thirties for example, and things go well, she's going to want to have kids and then someone's heart is going to get broken." He had scared off Salazar's smirk. "Probably mine," he added.

Salazar was quiet for a while, considering. "I think that's very smart," he concluded.

"Not dating younger women? Or not dating for a year?"

"I don't know about not dating. What I think makes sense is to avoid getting into a relationship right away. But let me ask you this, something I'm really curious about: why are you so determined to go through this alone?"

"Alone?" Hugh was startled by Salazar's notion of solitude. "I have Ginnie and Ray, Leslie, and my buddies, Peter and Kyle. And Karen!" he added hastily, as if worried his list wasn't long enough. "My boss Karen Watanabe. She and her wife Didi are also great friends."

Salazar nodded impatiently. "Yes. But I mean: why are you so determined to go through this without the companionship of a woman?"

"A romantic companionship?" Hugh was irritated. Hadn't Salazar been listening? "I love Amy, I was happy with her, but I never had a chance, 'cause we met so young, to be independent, to be a man on my own. Shouldn't I at least use this tragedy to grow, to be a better man?"

Salazar nodded vigorously. "That's a great approach. I agree. To give yourself a year of independence." He was thoughtful and silent for a long moment. Then he smiled slyly. "But do you really want to wait that long for . . ." He lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

"Sex?"

Salazar nodded.

“I wasn’t promising to be celibate,” Hugh informed him.

“That’s what I told the Pope,” Salazar said with a grin. It vanished suddenly, replaced by an ominous frowning of brow as he cautioned Hugh: “But you know, it’s very, very hard to keep sex from becoming a relationship.”

“I think I can separate the two.”

This didn’t erase Salazar’s frown. “Have you ever separated the two?”

“Sure,” Hugh lied.

“And what about her?”

“Her?”

“The woman you’re going to have sex with. What if she doesn’t separate the two?”

Hugh nodded. “I see what you mean.” He took a deep breath and announced, “Okay. You win. I won’t have sex.”

1.4

At the Hamilton Foundation for the Arts there were women of all ages, races, and temperaments. They had always been friendly and respectful to Hugh, but once they observed how he cared for Amy during her illness he was raised onto an altar of pity and admiration that granted him powers equivalent to those of the only nation on earth with a nuclear arsenal. His slightest whisper was obeyed without question, his desires were preemptively satisfied, and his flaws were transformed into markers of his exceptional character.

Hugh chose not to abuse his gloomy advantage—for the most part. Although he had vowed years ago he would never demean employees by requiring them to fetch snacks or dry cleaning, he didn't stop his twenty-seven-year-old assistant Melissa, an anxious, freckle-faced redhead, from routinely buying him a skim latte and cranberry scone for a midmorning pick-me-up. So Hugh enjoyed his special status a little, but he assumed that after a season of grief passed, his female co-workers' fierce hugs and brimming eyes, gazing at him as if he were the best and saddest thing they had ever looked on, would diminish and eventually cease altogether. But nearly five months after he had buried Amy there was no sign that the women at work were removing the pedestal beneath Hugh the Saint.

That was one reason he preferred getting to the office before his co-workers, easy to do since he was unable to sleep past five in the morning. He'd arrive at six-thirty, relishing his privacy until Melissa came in around nine, depending on the vagaries of riding the G and L subway lines from Greenpoint. "You come from Greenpoint, go back to Greenpoint,"

Hugh silently quoted to himself from *On The Waterfront* each time his assistant complained about having no hot water and plenty of mice. After delivering his latte and scone, she would rat on his sleeplessness to his boss.

“Melissa says you had another bad night,” Karen said one morning in early November, poking her head in as she invariably did upon arriving at work from her loft two blocks away. Today she changed the routine by entering and sitting. This was ominous; Karen had no spare time for idle chit-chat. She and Didi were raising two children, each the result of Karen’s eggs artificially inseminated with sperm supplied by Didi’s gay brother. So she was forever rushing between fundraising, administering the Hamilton Foundation, attending parent events at the children’s elementary school, and reassuring stay-at-home Didi that she wasn’t the lesbian equivalent of a taken-for-granted wife. “You need drugs,” Karen informed Hugh. “Ambien, melatonin at least. You—need—to—sleep.” Her squared-off body, round face, and dark eyes that always seemed narrowed in irritation, transformed her in Hugh’s imagination—latently racist from repeated viewings of *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*—into a fearsome interrogator.

“I’m getting enough sleep,” he lied.

Without looking at him, Karen pressed something on her Blackberry, permanently glued to the palm of her right hand. She raised it to her ear while telling Hugh: “You’re going to my doctor. Only take ten minutes. He knows all about the new sleep drugs. He’ll find you one that won’t give you a hangover.” She informed someone who she was and that she wanted Dr. Greenstein to see a friend today, then insisted, “Yes, you have to squeeze him in.” A moment later, she hung up and announced he had an appointment for two-fifteen.

“I’m screening the Wallinski film at two,” Hugh objected.

“You’re moving the screening to tomorrow and seeing Dr. Greenstein,” Karen told him. “And if I have to stop by your apartment after I go to tonight’s nightmare dinner party at FF’s to force feed you a sleeping pill, I will.” She stood up, hands and Blackberry on her hips, managing at five-foot-two to glare down at him.

Here we go, Hugh decided. He took a deep breath: “No,” he said.

“What?” Karen snapped, as if she had misheard.

Hugh swallowed and said: “I don’t want to see your doctor.”

Shortly after four in the afternoon, having filled the prescription Dr. Greenstein had handed him, Hugh returned to the office a defeated man. Melissa pointed to Watanabe’s door as soon as he stepped off the elevator. He walked into Karen’s paperwork jungle waving a pill bottle of surrender.

“What did he give you?” Karen demanded.

“Ambien.”

“Just Ambien? Why did it take so long?” Karen was bent over a towering stack of folders rising from the carpet. Hugh knew from prior bitching they were the annual staff evaluation reports she was required to complete before Thanksgiving. She groaned and picked up the top one. “You’ve been gone forever.”

“Greenstein found out I hadn’t had a check up in a while so he gave me the Full Monty.”

“A while?” Karen was appalled. “When the hell was your last check up?”

“Six years ago. Amy and I were in too many doctor’s offices for me to volunteer for more. Anyway, I’m fine,” he added in response to her disapproving frown.

“Excuse me,” Melissa said, as she appeared in the doorway, in an energetic and

anxious rush as always when on the subject of Hugh's schedule. "Hugh, if you want they'll run the Wallinski at five. It runs two-ten. Should I grab you a snack? There's a new sushi place round the corner. Could get you a tuna and California roll. Miso soup would be nice too, right? Chilly today."

"He can't see the Wallinski at five," Karen told her, then turned back to Hugh: "I need you to be my date at FF's tonight. Didi has another of her migraines. FF insisted I bring you so she's not stuck with an empty chair."

Hugh wondered whether, if he took an Ambien immediately, he could sleep through the rest of his day. He said, "I really should see the Wallinski today if we're serious about opening the festival with it."

"We're not," Karen said. "We need to premiere a big studio movie, an Oscar contender. The board is on my back about our 'relevance.' That we've got to compete with Tribeca and the New York Film Festival."

Melissa stepped into Karen's office, joining the conversation: "Should we be allowing money to influence our artistic choices?"

Karen narrowed her eyes at Melissa, taking aim. Hugh stepped between them. Melissa was five years older than Ginnie, yet Hugh felt she was young enough to require protection. "Do I need suit and tie for Francine's dinner?" he asked Karen.

She leaned around him and said to Melissa: "You can go. And from now on knock before you enter my office."

Hugh didn't have to look at Melissa to know her reaction; her stubborn response was sufficient: "So Hugh—do *you* want me to cancel the Wallinski?" He nodded without turning. He feared that if he saw the hurt and fury on her freckled face he might have an

uncontrollable impulse to buy her the latest American Girl doll. “Should I close the door?”

Melissa asked, voice receding.

“Yes, please,” Karen hissed. Once it clicked shut, she said, “You should fire her.”

Hugh wanted to say no. He settled for “Why?”

Karen made a face as if this was infuriatingly obvious: “She’s your assistant and she walks all over you.” She waited for a response, then shrugged and waved the subject away.

“Go home and take a nap. We’re due at seven but FF never serves before eight-thirty. We’ll be lucky to get out of there by midnight.”

He left immediately, relieved she wasn’t going to press him to fire Melissa, who, he had to admit, did tend to share her many opinions inappropriately. Hugh also admitted to himself, and not for the first time, that while in theory he was the only nation in his office with a nuclear arsenal, in practice he was a pitiful helpless giant.

1.5

“I’m living my mother’s dream,” Karen said as Francine Bishop led the two of them into her mansion on 81st Street off Fifth Avenue. “Hugh is the man Mom wanted me to marry: a tennis playing WASP who’d turn her Kyoto cousins green with envy.” She squeezed his arm and winked at him flirtatiously. Hugh had accompanied Karen to cocktail parties, openings, after-screening dinners, but they had gone together as a professional duo with different contingents to talk to—she wealthy donors, he grungy filmmakers. Tonight, thanks to his widower status, his sole function was to be her escort. It occurred to Hugh that this new role didn’t bode well for his social life; and the coquettish look, given her sexual preference for women, was simply weird.

“You play tennis?” Francine asked. “I’m obsessed with tennis.” Although in her mid-seventies she looked fit and toned in her clingy, black silk dress, and her skin gleamed like a baby’s. It was as wrinkle-free, too—hence Karen’s cruel nickname of FF, short for Facelift Francy.

“So is Hugh,” Karen said. “He plays every chance he gets. Maybe you guys should partner up.”

While a solemn young man silently took their coats, Francine asked Hugh where he played. He answered, “Your home is amazing,” overwhelmed that they had stepped into another time, and into astonishing wealth: a five-story city mansion, double the width of a typical townhouse, the interior meticulously preserved, or more likely carefully restored to its turn-of-the-century appointments. “This is fantastic, exquisite,” he gushed, eyes roaming

over elaborate moldings, marble fireplace, and a sweeping semi-circular staircase with an ebony bannister. It looked like the set for Scorsese's disappointing *Age of Innocence*.

Francine detailed her home's provenance while leading them up to the second floor. Built by a railroad tycoon in 1894, the ten-thousand-square-foot mansion had been inherited by a dissipated son who had to surrender it following the '29 crash, after which it passed through four international financiers, briefly served as a discreet sanatorium for the very wealthy and mildly insane, and was bought by Francine and her late husband in 1979.

Ushering them into the main parlor, she explained that four years earlier she had redone the house down to its bones. Hugh spied a Tiffany chandelier, its glass glowing from the reflection of a roaring fire. The air was redolent of pine and birch, comforting on the raw November night. He decided the look was older than he'd first thought. This was mid-nineteenth-century: Olivia de Havilland's drawing room in *The Heiress*.

As it turned out Francine's decorator was there. Brian Mahoney appreciated Hugh's movie references. "A film-set look is what I was going for," he said snaring one of the mini crab cakes that were being offered on silver trays by the same solemn young man and a smiling young woman, both in black slacks and white shirts. "I wanted to satisfy Francine's vision of restoring the house to an original look while adding enough self-consciousness to make it sing. So I pretended I was being asked to design a period film, a stage for the incredible Francine." He blew a kiss to their hostess across the room.

She was standing near the crackling fireplace, talking with a dour elderly couple whose soft-spoken paleness reminded Hugh of his paternal grandparents, while by the floor-to-ceiling windows, Karen monopolized a voluptuous young woman who looked as if she had been poured into her shimmering blue dress. Hugh was glad they were across the room.

Even at that remove, his eyes were magnetized by Blue Dress's cleavage.

The safety of his somewhat male conversation with Brian was undone by Karen's leading the young woman over. En route Karen made no effort to avoid staring at the creamy display beside her, a leering surveillance that she could indulge more discreetly than if Hugh had attempted it because her eyes were level with the young woman's scoop neckline whereas heels had raised Blue Dress, naturally tall anyway, to his height. Karen introduced her to Hugh as Hilda Stapleton. Karen immediately explained that Hilda had returned to graduate school to study film at NYU after working for fifteen years in investment banking.

"Hugh teaches a course at Tisch every semester." Karen lifted her pencil thin eyebrows suggestively and added, "Maybe he can give you an A or two."

Luckily Hilda ignored this inappropriate remark. She earnestly asked Hugh, without any preamble, what he thought of the Dogme 95 Movement, referring to the Danish filmmakers who insisted on strict here-and-now realism, no special lighting, no filtered lens, no soundtrack, no music cues, no genre stories, no period pieces, nothing artificial. She explained she had just seen *Open Hearts* and *The Celebration* and thought them "devastating, revolutionary."

Hugh gave his usual politic answer—"I like most of the Dogme films, but not all of their dogma"—while keeping his eyes focused on her forehead.

Meanwhile three other guests arrived. Hugh was introduced to a young couple, whose robust blondness balanced the pale elderly duo already present, and to a seventyish man named Gus, who broke the dress code in a black cashmere sweater and ironed jeans. He appeared to be cast in the role of Francine's date—or at least a special friend.

So long as Hilda remained in Hugh's field of vision everyone else faded into the

emerald-green wallpaper. He couldn't stop himself from looking at her, or think about anything other than what it would be like to kiss a woman almost his height. The prospect was so exciting he glanced around guiltily to see whether his wife had noticed his lust. Then he remembered that Amy was dead. This sort of eerie sensation, that Amy was about to walk in, or an impulse to rush home to tell her about a hilarious or horrifying event that had just occurred, ended each time with a fresh stab of loss. This new twist, Amy as jealous wife, wasn't an improvement. After Hugh remembered that Amy wasn't there to scold him, he continued to wish she was present to be irritated or, more likely, inspired to wry sarcasm by his wandering eye.

Worse than Hugh's mental confusion was that, after gazing at Hilda's wide-set light-blue eyes, straight white-blonde hair, mountainous bosom, and—when she turned to go into dinner—her rounded ass, firm thighs and well-defined calves, he misjudged distances like a pubescent boy after a growth spurt. Failing to clear a one-inch-high doorsill in the central hall, he stumbled into the dining room and upended a silk fire screen.

“And Karen told me you're a sure-footed athlete,” Francine teased as she took his elbow, directing him to sit on her right. He was flattered to be granted this place of honor yet disappointed to discover it put him far from Hilda. Gus and his gloomy face got a seat next to the view. Like Karen, Gus openly admired the fjord formed by Hilda's breasts. He was so impressed that he interrupted Francine raving about the Met's current Van Gogh exhibit to inform the group that Hilda looked like “the spitting image of Marilyn Monroe.”

“Don't be an ass,” Francine murmured, wasting no energy on her insult. “You're embarrassing Hildy. And she looks so lovely tonight. Not cheesecake at all.”

“I didn't say a goddamn thing about cheesecake,” Gus growled.

“Gussie is right, darling,” Brian exclaimed. “I never thought of it before. Hildy does look like Marilyn! What do you say, Hugh? You’re the film expert.”

Other than her figure, she did not resemble Monroe. She was nearer to Monica Vitti in Antonioni’s *L’Eclisse*. To Hugh’s taste Vitti was a more refined and beautiful woman; her hooded blue eyes were disillusioned rather than Marilyn-desperate, her pouty lips sly not wanton, witty not forlorn. Was Hilda’s resemblance to the exquisite Vitti the explanation for his befuddlement? Actually, her generous figure wasn’t his type; Hugh had never been attracted to large breasted women, or tall woman, or women of many curves. Amy had been five-five, nearly flat chested and small boned. Her abundant auburn hair was the biggest thing about her, and she didn’t blow it out, often suppressing it altogether in a ponytail. But why be ashamed that he was turned on by Hilda’s robustness? When he was thirteen he had enjoyed *Playboy* centerfolds. As an adult he sometimes managed to tolerate otherwise dull museum exhibitions by lingering at a Rubens.

“Well, Hugh, I think you’ve studied Hilda long enough to form an opinion,” Francine said dryly. “What’s your verdict?”

“She’s beautiful, of course,” Hugh mumbled. “But Marilyn had a very different shape to her face . . .” His throat closed, his cheeks warmed. He remembered this childish reaction when he was thirteen—stammering to a teasing friend that he wasn’t impressed by a girl’s beauty while it rendered him speechless.

“You cruel, cruel man,” Brian said. “Well my dear, I think you’re much more beautiful than Marilyn.”

“Oh she is! You are,” Hugh cried out, mortified, his right hand reaching across the table as if to retrieve his insult. He knocked over his crystal water glass, which landed

unbroken but with a heavy thud. Someone gasped, and Hugh stood, hurrying to right it. Too late. The contents were already soaking into the tablecloth.

“It’s only water.” Francine was impatient. “Sit, Hugh. Leave it. It’s nothing.”

“I was going to say you look like Monica Vitti,” Hugh pleaded to Hilda.

She stared uncomprehendingly, but Brian whistled. “Monica Vitti! Much classier. I like it.”

After that Hugh kept his head down for the remainder of the meal. When he raised his eyes it was to fasten them on his handsome hostess, ignoring the young woman on his right, who was attractive in the refined small-boned tradition of Grace Kelly, an equally unsettling vista. He preferred to stay out of trouble by limiting himself to admiring Francine Bishop’s high regal brow, pale blue eyes, aquiline nose, jutting jaw, and wrinkle-free skin.

He managed to evade Francine’s sympathetic questions about Amy’s passing, turning the conversation to her love of tennis until Karen barged in with an encomium of how well he had cared for Amy during her illness. Hugh tried to interrupt, attempting to launch two new topics, but twice was leashed back to questions about his goodness from Francine and the Grace Kelly look-a-like, and finally by Hilda, who abandoned talking with Gus to join the Caregiver Hugh Fan Club and elicited even more details from Karen.

During this crucible of praise he restlessly sipped from his wine glass, steadily refilled by the wait-staff pair until he heard his tongue slipping on the few words he managed to get out. He shifted to Evian, downing five glasses. Well before his decaf espresso was served, he had to excuse himself to urinate.

“Let me show you the way,” Francine said, “and I’ll check on what they’ve done with my mint tea.” She guided him to another masterpiece of a nineteenth-century room, this one

draped and upholstered in burgundy fabrics.

She paused before an unusually tall church door. “Here’s the loo,” she said, then added, “I’m so sorry, Hugh, so terribly sorry for your loss.” She squeezed his forearm and added softly, “You’re a good man,” before leaving him alone to relieve himself.

“They love me because of you, Amy,” Hugh slurred to his penis during a very long emptying of his bladder in the dark wood bathroom. Peter’s miserable phrase came back to him, “Hugh stuck around for the cancer,” and he caught himself wondering (what a horny cad he was turning out to be) whether Hilda-with-the-Blue-Dress-On was duly impressed.

1.6

At 10:40 Karen Watanabe's Blackberry buzzed and she became the first to announce that she had to leave Francine's nineteenth century. "Just got a text from Didi that our legally unrecognized marriage is over unless I'm home in fifteen" was her exit line.

"And it's a half-hour cab ride," Hugh said, getting a bigger laugh from the group than he had expected. He, Hilda, and the dour older couple joined Karen in departing. On the street, the couple delivered a real-estate surprise by announcing they lived in Tribeca, and who else was going downtown?

"I'm all the way west," Karen said. "Better get my own cab. But you're going my way—right, Hilda?"

Hilda considered Karen's invitation. She was a solemn woman—early- to mid-thirties, Hugh guessed—movements languorous, wistful look in her eye, regretful cast to her lips. Amy had been a physically perky girl, even on chemo: quick to smile, always on the balls of her feet, eager to get to her next activity although it might be nothing more strenuous than taking a nap. Hugh again had the odd sensation of disloyalty to Amy for his fascination with so different a woman. Hilda finally answered Karen: "I'm on Fifth and Twentieth. Not west."

Karen had flagged a cab. She got in, leaving the door agape. "I can drop you," she insisted.

"*We* can drop you," said the husband. He glanced at his better half, adding argumentatively, "It's a straight shot for us."

“Not really,” his wife mumbled.

“Which way are you heading?” Hilda asked Hugh. He didn’t answer immediately, preoccupied by noticing that Karen was so eager to drop Hilda at Fifth and 20th that she had neglected to offer Hugh a ride down to 12th off Fifth, equally on her way.

“Hugh’s practically your neighbor!” Karen said. “Both of you get in,” she ordered as she slid to the far end and patted the middle seat for Hilda.

Thus Hugh, to his nervous excitement, was squeezed flush against Hilda’s left flank, although he didn’t feel anything more thrilling than pressure from her camel hair greatcoat. Karen babbled all the way downtown. When they passed the Flatiron building she fired a random question across Hilda’s lap at Hugh: “Francine is such an elegant and handsome woman—right, Hugh? And she looks so young.”

“With a scalpel’s help,” Hilda said.

“But you can’t tell it’s surgery,” Karen said disingenuously. “I was serious about you playing tennis with Francy, Hugh. She’s terrific. Right, Hilda?”

“After they got married, she used to beat my dad regularly. Drove him crazy.”

“Your dad?” Hugh was surprised. “She was married to your dad?”

“Yeah, she’s my stepmother. She kept her maiden name. Francine was an early feminist. When I was eight she told me never give up mine.”

“She’s awesome,” Karen said, then leaned forward to instruct the driver to stop at 20th. “Okay if you guys get out here? Great to finally meet you,” she said, twisting to face Hilda and kissing her full on the mouth, lingering. Hilda had to jerk her head back to end it. “Mmm,” Karen said, then ordered Hugh: “Don’t you dare come in before noon. And take your Ambien.”

On the sidewalk, silenced by the vacuum left by Karen's departure, they watched her taxi drive off. They stood side by side until it turned a corner and disappeared.

"You can't sleep?" Hilda asked finally.

"I sleep fine."

"Are you tired now?" She spoke so earnestly Hugh perceived no motive but concern.

"No. Not tired." In fact, he was a little woozy on his feet. Since Amy's diagnosis five years ago he'd been diligent about stopping at one glass of red wine—until tonight. The years off seemed to have cost him his birthright capacity: Grandpa Reynolds had downed nearly a fifth of bourbon every day of his ninety-two years with no sign of inebriation other than a loud exhale and the murmured phrase "It's a bad world."

Hilda nodded at the double-height windows of her building. The spanking new lobby glistened with white marble and polished gold fixtures. Whenever Hugh had passed by during the previous year's gut renovation he had wondered who could afford the posted prices for its new condos. "Want to come up for a night cap? Or tea? I have brownies." She began a smile but it expired before being fully born. "I love brownies," she said glumly. "Better than Ambien."

It might not seem surprising that an attractive young woman, recently enrolled in film school, would invite up to her apartment an eligible man responsible for programming a prestigious film festival as well as chairing a scholarship committee responsible for doling out grants to independent moviemakers—yet Hugh hadn't seen it coming. Not because he was naïve about the fuzzy border between romance and opportunism or uninformed as to the attractions of what his friend Peter had called his CV. It was that this muscle—is she interested?—had atrophied decades ago. In addition, he'd been precluded from anticipating

such a turn of events by being the father of a daughter. Hilda didn't seem much older than Hugh's baby girl.

At last he understood his evening-long compulsively averting eyes: it wasn't a widower's guilt but the reflex of being a daddy. Once Amy had whispered to him about the early maturing effects of antibiotic-laden chickens on their confused eleven-year-old daughter, Hugh had made sure to look away from young female flesh. That was required often because Ginnie tended to forget that her door, if not locked, gaped open; and there was her habit of commuting to and from a shared-with-her-brother hallway bathroom in a robe not tightly tied. He had never felt self-conscious hugging Ginnie, or when she snuggled with him while watching TV, or when she took his arm and leaned against him while they walked Manhattan streets, but when she dressed up to impress a young man he made certain that his eyes didn't ski down her scoop neckline. And once his apartment became a gathering place for her friends he committed an entire generation to a no-leering zone.

"I guess not," Hilda said in reaction to his flummoxed silence.

"Yes, I would!" he said. "Not a brownie. I'm stuffed. But tea. I'd love a cup of tea."

And thus Hugh, who had vowed not to go on a date for a year after his wife's death, not even five months post-funeral found himself after midnight in a buxom young woman's apartment.

1.7

Hugh pretended to admire Hilda's condo, although he was shocked by how tiny it was. A complete tour consisted of standing in the center of her combined living and dining area and looking in one direction through an open doorway into a bedroom hardly larger than its queen-size mattress and in the other at a closet-sized galley kitchen. He was flabbergasted that this nine-hundred-square-foot box was what eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars bought in the once-despised Flatiron neighborhood. With whose money had Hilda purchased this rip-off? Perhaps the apartment represented her farewell bonus when she quit investment banking for film school. Of course her deceased father must have left her something and her stepmother had plenty of money. Then why this lower floor one-bedroom? Why not the three-bedroom penthouse?

Hugh settled on a white leather loveseat with a cup of mint tea while Hilda delivered a fifteen-minute monologue about her change of direction from investment banking to film school. Hugh's anxieties about the forever-escalating prices of Manhattan real estate—he feared that the rent on his soon to be de-stabilized apartment would rise to unaffordable heights and force him to move to Kansas, or at least Brooklyn—distracted him, but he was able to keep track of Hilda's story anyway because she had a habit of repeating key phrases. "Everyone bitches about the long hours in IB, the crushing paperwork, but I liked the twenty-four-seven of it." Pause. "I loved the twenty-four-seven. I wanted to hide by working my ass off." Full stop. "Wanted to avoid everything in life except work. The work didn't get to me. What bothered me was the only reason we were all working night and day was to make

money.” A long, thoughtful beat. “To make as much money as possible. That’s it.” She sipped from a glass of white wine she had poured for herself. “That’s all they live for. More. Make more money.” She shook her head in disgust.

Hugh gently objected, “When you went into investment banking, didn’t you expect it would be about making money?”

“No!”

“But it’s banking. Other than money what could it be about?”

“Help start businesses! Facilitating innovation!” Hilda seemed astonished he didn’t know about this beneficent aspect of high finance. “Investment banking is the life’s blood of capitalism. Poison it and the body dies, that’s what Jerrold used to say, and I guess I wanted to believe what my father taught me.” Pause. Stare into middle-distance. “I needed to believe what my father had taught me.”

“Jerrold was your father?” Hugh asked.

A half-hearted smile appeared and immediately expired. “You don’t know who my father was? Really? You don’t know about my father?”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s wonderful.” She looked grim. She took a long sip of her wine, lifting her chin, exposing a long smooth neck. She was too young, too tempting. After he finished his mint tea, what the hell was he intending to do with this fatherless child?

“Jerrold Stapleton founded Stapleton, Tyler, Arthur and Rausch,” Hilda explained. “STAR Bank?” she prompted. “You’ve heard of STAR, right? The leading investment bank in the world? It’s number one.”

“Sure, of course,” Hugh said to confirm that he didn’t reside in a cave. “But I’ve only

heard the acronym. I guess it never occurred to me that actual living people had founded it. In fact, isn't STAR one of the Hamilton Foundation's largest patrons?"

"No, STAR isn't a patron," Hilda said gently. Another attempt at a smile withered before it could blossom. "But it manages the Foundation's endowment. And my stepmother is one of your biggest donors. Francine is a BIG donor. That's why you were at dinner tonight. I mean, that's why Karen was invited. Francine loves her. Really loves her . . . Not that way!" she added abruptly. "Did you see how she tongue-kissed me in the cab!"

"She . . . she did?"

"She stuck her tongue all the way into my mouth! Yuck. I mean, Jesus, if a guy I just met did that I'd bite it off. Right off. I'm sorry. She's your friend. But I got my fill of groping lesbians at Wesleyan. Then I got my fill of groping men at M&G."

Reeling from the detail about Karen—he liked Didi a lot and immediately worried about the future of their coupledness—Hugh mumbled, "M&G?" to change the subject.

"Sorry. Keep forgetting you're not a fundraiser like Karen. You don't keep score about who has money in this town. McClaine and Greenstein. Boutique investment bank. Boutique but big enough."

"You worked there? Not at STAR?"

"At STAR? No way. Nothing I accomplished at my father's firm would be taken seriously. What I didn't know was that I couldn't escape Dad anywhere in IB. His ghost is everywhere. They're obsessed with him. It's weird. They're supposed to be numbers guys, cold bastards, but they worship my dad's legend like he's King Arthur or something. More like Batman. I don't know." She paused to think that claim through, then: "A superhero. Definitely. Superman of finance. I couldn't get credit for anything."

“So you felt hopelessly overshadowed by your father’s reputation in investment banking,” Hugh said, repeating back what he thought was the gist of her speech.

“No!” she protested, cheeks flushing pink, a pretty sight. “I didn’t give a shit about my father’s reputation. Everybody else did. Not me. I wasn’t competitive with my father.”

Hugh didn’t believe her. He thought the reverse must be true and also thought no less of her. Why shouldn’t she want to best Jerrold? Why shouldn’t daughters, like sons, wish to surpass their fathers? Ginnie loved Hugh but was delighted whenever she could correct what she dubbed his “literalness” in deciphering Herzog or appreciating Tarantino.

“I didn’t mean you were competitive with him,” Hugh fibbed. “I meant they couldn’t see you, the real you. That’s very frustrating. My daughter enrolled in a film course her senior year, was doing great, thoroughly enjoying the class, and then one of the kids mentioned my job to the professor, and he began bugging Ginnie about it, always assuming her insights had come from me, or that she had seen everything when she was a kid thanks to me, not out of her own curiosity and initiative. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ginnie’s way smarter than me about movies, has seen all sorts of things on her own . . .” He noticed Hilda staring at him open-mouthed. Had he offended her by seeming to compare her great father’s fame to his little job? On reflection it was absurd that he had. He tried to make amends: “No comparison, of course. But it spoiled the course for her.”

“What does Ginnie do?” Hilda leaned forward, her scoop neckline billowing. Hugh saw more than ever of her black bra and its creamy filling.

He looked away. “She’s, uh . . .” His cheeks warmed. He was shamed out of what he was going to say by his awareness that he was speaking about his daughter while picturing kissing Hilda. He shouldn’t be talking about Ginnie in this circumstance. In fact, it wasn’t

proper for him to be in this setting at all. “She blogs about DC, restaurants, new galleries, happenings in the reviving inner city. Sort of like a critic but also a kind of living guide book really . . .” He checked his watch. “Oh my God. It’s almost one.” He stood up.

“You’re going?” Hilda stood as well, blocking his exit. She exaggerated a pout of disappointment.

“I really should be in bed,” Hugh blurted. On the phrase *in bed* he met Hilda’s big pale-blue eyes. He blinked, then stared.

“We should both be in bed,” Hilda said, and for the first time that evening she succeeded in completing a smile.

The Kiss

Hugh kissed her.

He had not kissed a woman other than Amy, excluding hello and goodbye pecks, since he was nineteen years old. He utterly believed this accounting of monogamous smooching to be gospel, although one drunken night at the Sundance Film Festival seventeen years ago he had experienced an unfulfilling nine minutes and twelve seconds of sexual intercourse with a film critic from an LA giveaway newspaper. Long ago, self-disgusted and guilty, Hugh had scratched out this adulterous mark from his morality ledger with such violence that he no longer remembered the original blot. The nearly ten-minute fumbling on a lumpy Hilton mattress was as thoroughly repressed as if he were a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. And there was a rough similarity between combat and Hugh's encounter at the Sundance Film Festival. Some men of his generation had fought in the tragic mistake of Vietnam; he had watched three independent black-and-white films on 16-millimeter in a row, followed by two martinis. Shit happens.

So this kissing of Hilda, what he thought of as his first contact with strange flesh in over thirty years, was a bold adventure, a trespass that had an overpowering effect. The slight parting of her moist lips, a taste of wine and something fresher and younger than himself, shut out sight and hearing as their mouths met, opened, sealed, widening with each additional contact, until he was falling into her taste and texture. He felt on the verge of losing time and place forever when a rebuke interrupted: *You are kissing a woman who is not Amy*. He jerked away.

“What?” Hilda asked. Her eyes were glazed.

“I never kissed a woman before,” he said in perfect seriousness. Amy wasn’t a woman he had kissed, she was his other self, as easy as drawing a breath.

Hilda blinked, stared; then a doubtful smile appeared. “Never?”

“I never kissed anyone but Amy,” he said, which was wildly inaccurate and exactly true.

The effect of this chaste testimony on Hilda was stunning. It overwhelmed the need for further action on Hugh’s part. To prevent becoming entwined with her in her bed he would have had to push her away, re-button his shirt, slap hands off his belt. Besides, Hugh did not want to be separated from her ocean-kissed mouth. She tasted like the Hawaiian surf, tipsy Hugh believed, although he had never been near Oahu’s waters. He was grateful to be submerged in the warm embracing sea.

He remembered this thrill from years ago with Amy, intense excitement as the border between foreign bodies is breached, a reckless yearning to be united with the other. Once they were in bed he was surprised and delighted by the many novelties. He was harder than he had been in a long time. Hilda’s skin was smooth and firm in ways no one past forty could expect to be, and there were intimate discoveries when he roved below: absence of hair, a heady perfume, a sweet and pungent taste. When their bodies united—her long, soft flesh arching against him—their choreography had an utterly different rhythm that somehow felt familiar. Everything about their lovemaking was a pleasure, but that initial kiss above all—her different height, her lip’s fullness, sipping her essence—was deeply gratifying. To his astonishment he preferred the kiss’s subtler and lingering pleasures to the sneezing violence of orgasm. Most striking of all, while they kissed he had a thrilling and shameful

feeling he had not known in those deathless days of youth: his gratification was thoroughly selfish. Hugh enjoyed an undiluted satisfaction out of being alive that he felt he didn't deserve.

Later, while walking home alone, enjoying a loose-limbed stroll through the city's bright, deserted three-in-the-morning streets, he wondered at the paradox: how could it be that his profound enjoyment was not diminished by the accompanying sadness he felt at knowing that to kiss and to be kissed, and all other earthly delights, had been taken away forever from the woman he loved?

1.8

Francine Bishop was next to seduce Hugh. She accomplished this platonically with two hours of free indoor tennis. As soon as he arrived at the office on the morning after bedding Hilda—at 11:00, unconscionably late—Karen popped her head in. “Told you Ambien would do the trick,” she chortled. “Drugs. I love ’em. And look at you. You’re so relaxed, the most rested I’ve seen you since . . .” She waved away the dark past. “So do it every night. Promise?”

“I promise I’ll do what I did last night every chance I get,” Hugh said.

“Now that you’re here, you have to go. Get your tennis gear and your butt over to the Midtown Courts. That’s where you usually play, right? So does FF! She just called, desperate for your number because her doubles partner woke up with a 102 fever. I accepted for you because I need you to say yes. I figured you’d say yes anyway because it’s her treat, court’s already paid for.” Karen clapped. “So hustle up. You’re on from noon to two.”

Hugh murmured he shouldn’t play hooky given that he’d come in late, but his demurrals were profoundly insincere. He couldn’t afford to turn down two free hours of tennis, a pastime he loved above all others. He needed to be careful about money, especially now, after Amy’s death. His salary covered to the chin his cheap, soon-to-expire twenty-four-hundred a month rent and Brown’s gouge of tuition; Amy’s free-lance editing used to pay the rest: groceries, clothing, vacations, medical deductibles. He was spending down his thirty-eight thousand dollars of savings at a rate that would drain it in two years. His hope was that when Ray’s college days were over he’d get back to black. Until then, two free hours of

tennis, albeit mixed doubles and in a group probably below his level, was Christmas come early. And there was the bonus of his boss giving him permission to skip the dreary Wednesday meeting, which invariably consisted of Karen scolding, staff whining and Hugh ameliorating.

He hurried out and didn't come up short from his delight until he entered the Midtown Tennis Club, where the ramifications of partnering with the stepmother of a woman he had made love to last night struck him. (And what were the ramifications of last night? When he got around to calling Hilda he wasn't sure how to manage his contradictory message: he wanted to thank her for the profound pleasure he had obtained from her company and somehow let her know that it would never happen again.) While Hugh shed corduroy trousers and blue work shirt, exchanging them for frayed white shorts and yellowed white tee, it struck him that Francine might have an angry reaction if she learned that he had been a guest in her stepdaughter's bed, which would then have unpleasant consequences for Karen vis-à-vis the Foundation's funding, and of course for Hugh.

As he double-tied his New Balance laces, what had so far been a morning of pleasurable flashbacks to last night with Hilda turned to dread. How could he have put at risk not merely his job, programming of the film festival and helping young movie-makers with grants, but the Foundation's funding in general? Other than his children—and the film program was his child too—his work, work he cherished, was all he had left. If it suffered because of his sexual indiscretion he could never forgive himself.

Ready to leave the gender safety of the men's locker room he remembered what Leslie, in one of their tearful post-funeral dinners, had told him about her last conversation with Amy. "I'm not worried about Ginnie or Ray," Amy had said. "They have Hugh to

mother-hen them. But Hughie—who'll watch over him?" Amy's best friend and her bereaved husband had agreed how sweet and loving it was of Amy as she was losing her life to worry about rather than resent Hugh's surviving her. "I told her I'd keep an eye on you," Leslie said with a wink, and he nodded, both of them sure that he would eventually overcome his grief and move on. Now Hugh knew that Amy had been right in a way he hadn't understood. She wasn't thinking of his despair at losing her, she was worried about her boy being off the leash, running wild in traffic, and she was so right. His very first kiss without her had been an unmitigated catastrophe.

"There he is!" Francine announced as he emerged, befuddled and tongue-tied. He couldn't blurt out, *I slept with your stepdaughter but don't take away our funding!* Yet he was anxious to say something, at least hint at what had occurred, convinced it would go worse for him if Francine learned of it first from Hilda. Unfortunately he wasn't alone with her. She said, "You're a dear to play with us hackers," and immediately turned to introduce a stocky woman, dressed, as was Francine, in designer tennis togs emblazoned with Nike swooshes. Beside them, in pristine Roger Federer signature navy blue, was a man with a flowing mane of straw-colored hair who looked, at most, twenty years old. "This is my dear friend Sara Bingham and her nephew Toby."

Hugh, for the most part, was a contented, even-tempered man. He didn't possess the murderous ambition typical of New Yorkers, didn't mind that he made less money than everyone he knew, didn't resent that he had no luxury car, no house in the Hamptons, no swollen IRA, or that he didn't possess that male Manhattan must—the latest electronic gadget. Outside of purchasing his high-definition television, he was indifferent to 2005 tech: iPods, Blackberries, and the latest rage, WiFi laptops. Hugh did watch the Giants every

Sunday, the Mets, some playoff basketball, but not with the argumentative, histrionic ferocity of his male friends, crushed if their heroes lost, obnoxious in victory. There was one location, however, where Hugh's calm self turned testosterone homicidal: on the tennis court. He needed to beat whomever he opposed. And he utterly loathed losing. So when Francine announced he was "stuck with her," the two of them playing against stocky Sara and lithe Toby, all considerations vanished other than the provocation of playing against a twenty-year-old male.

The mixed pairs faced off by gender to warm up. Toby's strokes surprised Hugh. Young men usually swung as hard as they could, ignoring how many balls flew out of court. Not Toby. He had gentle strokes, his fleet feet helping him to return everything. He patiently waited for an aggressive opponent's error, or the opportunity to hit a strategic lob, a drop shot, something off-speed to frustrate a hard-hitting foe. In other words he played like a crafty old man, the way Hugh was supposed to.

At first this incensed Hugh, sure that Toby was condescending to him. To bestir the young man to hit the ball normally Hugh swung even harder and finally came to net as part of their warm up rally, deliberately slamming the ball right at the young man. But Toby wasn't patronizing Hugh. His game was as cautiously defensive as Hugh's was fiercely aggressive. This discovery didn't calm Hugh. The possibility of losing to a prematurely aged boy inflamed him into an anxious rage.

Sara twirled her racquet and Francine correctly guessed—Up. She said, "You serve first for our team, Hugh. With my shoulder I'll be lucky to get one in."

Hugh's serve was his pride and joy, his weapon, his touchtone. His best were too hard for most hackers to return. Even his gentler, more reliable offerings, when properly

placed, often didn't come back. "First ball in," Hugh called to Sara and Toby, not wanting to show off his stuff by practicing and thus give them a chance to gauge and prepare for his power. Tennis Hugh was ruthless.

"That's too good," was Sara's reaction as he cleanly aced her down the middle to begin the match.

As Francine crossed to take her net position for his next serve she looked back to flash Hugh a gleeful grin of appreciation.

Hugh didn't aim for the lines against the young lion. He smashed the ball at his body. Rather than attempt a swing Toby had to awkwardly use his racquet as a shield to protect his privates. Although Hugh's back soon tightened, his legs got rubbery, and he had to ease up on his serves, he didn't soften his hard ground strokes or penetrating volleys. He and Francine won the first set six games to one. As they shook hands before marching to the net to thank the losers, Francine said in a low voice full of breathless ardor, "From now on you're my partner forever and ever."

1.9

“You whipped them!” Karen said when Hugh arrived back at the office. “You kicked their ass! FF wants you to play every week.” She bounced up and down. For a stout girl she was surprisingly nimble in her glee, finishing with a 360-degree twirl. “Our funding . . .” Her right arm shot up to the ceiling to indicate where Hugh’s hard serve would send it.

He kept quiet while Karen explained that she knew about his triumph because Francine had called to apologize for skipping out without thanking him properly and gone on to promise she would call back to make sure he was available next week. “I told her you could have every Wednesday staff meeting off, so don’t you dare tell her you can’t play!”

Begging that he had work to catch up on, he shoed his boss out, shut his door and fretted. After they won the second set, Hugh had rushed through his shower to catch Francine in order to confess privately about Hilda, but she was already gone. Now what should he do? Maybe call Hilda? He suspected she wouldn’t mind that he didn’t feel right about seeing her again, had probably already filed it away as a one-night stand. If so, telling Francine might become moot. Yes, he would call Hilda first, on his cell from the street, out of range of the nosy ears of the office.

He was halfway to the door when he realized he didn’t have her number. He had been too happy in her arms to ask for other ways to be in touch.

He tried information but she wasn’t listed. Googling her yielded no phone number. He remained stymied until Melissa popped in, red curls bobbing as she paced back and forth in front of his desk, apparently troubled by something.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I’m going to lunch,” she said, stopping in her tracks and looking at him as if she needed permission. “You must be starving. Bring you back some sushi?”

“I’m meeting a friend for lunch,” he said, deciding on the spot that he needed the advice of an expert, namely Kyle, the most experienced man he knew when it came to single life and women.

Melissa followed him into the elevator, resuming her complaints about Karen overruling the new Wallinski for the festival premiere, presumably what had been on her mind. When they reached the sidewalk, she snagged his arm and tugged him close, whispering, “I think what Karen’s doing to you is weird, you know? I mean, like, really kind of inappropriate.”

Hugh freed his arm. “What’s she doing to me?”

“Using your situation to keep her rich ladies happy.”

“Melissa.” Hugh adopted the stern yet calm tone that could bring Ginnie to heel without provoking tears. “You’re the best number two I’ve ever had. You have a bright future, but what’s inappropriate is you making assumptions about my social life. And what’s even more inappropriate is for you to make assumptions about how Karen Watanabe, who is the best I’ve ever seen at fundraising, handles donors.”

Melissa was more sensitive than Ginnie: tears sprouted instantly. “Oh God,” she gasped. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Hugh. I’m so, so sorry. Please don’t be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry with you,” Hugh lied. Melissa’s mortification was inappropriate too. What was wrong with her? But he had neither the time nor inclination to buck her up.

“Look, I’m late. We’ll talk about this later.” He moved rapidly east, waiting until he was a safe distance away to open his flip phone and speed dial Kyle’s landline.

“Hugh?” Kyle sounded surprised. They never spoke on the phone except in emergencies. An aspect of Kyle’s private, secretive nature was that he preferred to communicate by email, and in pre-tech days hardly at all. “You’re not cancelling our tennis tomorrow?”

“No, no. I’m about ten minutes away, haven’t had lunch. Can I bring a box of sushi, veggie burger?” Since giving up booze because of his fatty liver Kyle had also dropped red meat, dairy, and processed sugar and taken up long distance running. He was as lean as a greyhound. “I need to talk.”

“What’s wrong? Are you ill? I don’t want to wait ten minutes to hear you’re dying.”

“Not dying. I need . . .” Hugh sighed. “I need dating advice.”

Kyle, who almost never laughed, laughed loud and long.

“Are you through?”

“Oh Lord, it was great to laugh like that. My knees actually stopped hurting. Okay, come on over. But if we’re talking poontang, fetch us a pizza and some brewskies.”

Hugh stopped short on the sidewalk, appalled. “Brewskies? I’m not soliciting your advice if it means you’re falling off the wagon.”

“The brewskies are for you, moron.”

“I don’t like beer. Remember, you self-centered prick? And pizza? Aren’t you vegan?”

“Get cheeseless then! Sweet Jesus you’re worse than Nurse Ratched.”

Hugh brought a marinara and mushroom pizza and four Diet Cokes over to his buddy's Greene Street loft. Kyle ate four slices, listening without comment to Hugh's at first stammering, then fluidly honest account of last night's lovemaking and today's homicidal tennis. Kyle sat on a massive plaster and wood sculpture of his own making, one of a series he had begun a year ago. He had soaked large uncut tree trunks in salt water and stabbed them into hunks of plaster that he had painted or dyed into a rusty grimy gray, creating what looked like enormous pieces of apocalyptic driftwood, as if Manhattan had been blown up and these petrified remains had washed up in SoHo. Hugh very much liked one that suggested a gargoyle fused with a park bench. The other two, including the one Kyle was using as a picnic table, didn't speak to him.

"You don't need dating advice. You need career counseling. Sweet Jesus. Watanabe expects you to be a tennis walker for a rich donor? That's fucked up."

"That doesn't bother me. What do I do about Hilda?"

"Should bother you. It's fucking inappropriate. It's like she's pimping you out."

"Stick to my question: how do I handle the situation with Hilda?"

"First you need to get her phone number. Then, next time you're horny you text her for a booty call. You've got an eighteen-year-old son. Don't you know how the kids do it these days? Friends with benefits. Hookup culture. Long as you use a condom, anything goes." Kyle drained the Diet Coke, crushed the can, and released an attenuated belch of pizza fumes. "Am I living up to your vulgar expectations?"

"No, you're not. I want you to tell me how to manage this so that for once in my life, being involved with women doesn't somehow cause me to abjectly surrender my will. I've

got two difficult conversations ahead of me. I have to handle Hilda so she doesn't get pissed and tell her stepmother what a cad I am."

"Because supposedly that's going to cost the Foundation its funding?" Kyle asked with pointed sarcasm. Hugh nodded. Kyle tossed the flattened can at him. It clattered as it came to rest amidst the mess of the loft's work area. In New York City's bankrupt 1970s Kyle had bought an abandoned five-thousand-square-foot commercial space for eighty-thousand dollars; it was now worth millions but with its narrow unvarnished oak boards spattered with paint and covered by a layer of scattered wood chips and plaster dust, the ruined soda can fit right in. "Where is all this bullshit guilt coming from? Did Amy get a deathbed promise out of you that you weren't going to get laid?" Kyle, who seemed to be warming up for a long rant, abruptly cut himself off, wincing at what he saw on Hugh's face. "Sorry. That was an exceptionally dumb ass thing to say. You were genuinely happy with Amy. Even I know that. What I'm trying to say is that we both know you don't have my appetites or my contempt for feminism, but this . . . what's her name?"

"Hilda."

"Hilda's a big girl and so is the rich old lady. They're not in middle school. Neither are you."

"I almost am, Kyle. I haven't dated since high school. So please, give me the benefit of your greater experience. What do I do?"

"If you want to have another roll in the hay with Brunhilda, don't worry about it. You didn't steal anything from her. I know it seems highly unlikely, or at least a failure of aesthetics on their part, but nowadays women admit they like having sex with men. I don't mean to be disrespectful of what you're going through, but frankly a guy in your situation

can get away with murder. Me? Twice divorced, three babies with three different women, going to AA twice a week, Hilda'd expect a heartfelt conversation about where *this* is going. You? You can fuck everything in sight for at least a year and they'll all just want to mother you." Kyle made a rude noise and added with startling bluntness, a new characteristic since his sobriety: "I never envied you, Hugh. Even when I blew up my marriages, shat all over my career, I was still glad I wasn't pussy-whipped like you, but now, sweet Jesus, you've got the leather in your hand. Enjoy it. Lord knows you've earned it."

So Hugh's male buddies could provide no emotional solace: Peter had thought he would be glad to learn he was in demand, and now Kyle saw Hugh's tragedy as an opportunity to misbehave. Walking back to the office, Hugh understood how they could miss the hole in his doughnut: no one they loved had died.

And Kyle had relaxed him, at least about his urge to tell Francine. On reflection, his impulse to confess struck him as absurd, as if he had committed a burglary: "Thank you for dinner and by the way I stole your candlesticks . . ." As for Hilda, for all he knew she would never dream of telling her stepmother.

But calling Hilda and making sure she wasn't expecting more, that seemed essential, more than ever. As it turned out, he didn't have to unearth her telephone number. When he got back to work, Melissa said with a scowl, "A Hilda called. She refused to leave a last name or say what it was about but wants you to call her right away." She handed him a note with a 917 number and seemed to wait for an explanation.

He didn't provide one. He entered his office and called from his late '90s Nokia, still adequate, he believed, and not worth trashing in favor of an expensive upgrade. He stood

beside the windows, the farthest spot from his shut door. Melissa's cubicle was just behind it, close enough to worry him.

"Hello?" Hilda answered doubtfully.

"Hi, Hilda, it's Hugh." He kept his voice to a murmur anyway in case Melissa had developed Supergirl's hearing. "I'm glad you called. I stupidly forgot to get your number. This number is my cell. That's always the best way to reach me." He sounded like a doomed, paranoid character in a thriller, fated to fall dying into the hero's arms mumbling an incomplete solution to the mystery. He brightened, raising the volume: "How are you?"

"Uh . . . I'm good. Listen. This is awkward, but could we meet for coffee or something? For fifteen minutes? I won't keep you much longer? I think we have to talk?"

Have to talk? She thinks we have to talk?

"Uh, whenever's good for you?" Hilda continued. "I'm busy tonight at around seven? But anytime before?"

She was making everything sound like a question, a tentativeness that grated on Hugh. He had no time to see her this afternoon or evening. He should stay in the office late to make up for oversleeping and tennis hooky. "Um . . . tomorrow might be better."

"I can't tomorrow? And I may go away for the weekend?"

"Five. I can meet you at five," he said, the suspense unbearable.

But when he tried to sneak out at 4:30, Watanabe complained. "Hey! You're going? What did you put in today? Two hours?"

"I won for Francine, remember?"

"That's right!" Karen clapped her hands together rapidly. "I love you, Hugh! You're my champion!" Melissa, behind Karen's back, made a face.

Well, at least someone loves me, he consoled himself, bitter that the first woman he had trusted with his affection since losing the love of his life had decided, after one sip, to dump him as if he were spoiled milk.

1.10

Hilda had asked Hugh to meet her at the least romantic spot in their neighborhood, the Union Square Starbucks. Long and narrow, windows covered with a film of soot and further darkened by scaffolding, this iteration of the chain featured permanent rings on counters and tables, and baristas who took forever, often pausing in mid-brew to gossip with each other. Yet this slow, dismal establishment was wildly popular with a motley crew: NYU students, tourists fighting jet lag, bloggers mooching WiFi, strangers exchanging cash for Percocet, the homeless flush with donations, real estate brokers checking emails or speaking on their cell phones. Hugh couldn't conceive of a less private place to be told someone wasn't interested in him.

On arrival he had to credit Hilda with proving him wrong. She had commandeered the most secluded table, in a corner against a wall and a window facing the Square. They were protected from eavesdroppers on three sides. A trio of students at the sole adjoining table had their ears stuffed with headphones, eyes mesmerized by the campfire glow of their laptops. Hugh felt reassured no one but he would hear her rejection.

After checking that Hilda was content with her half-drunk green tea, Hugh got in line for a skim latte. As he waited for his dose of caffeine, a vivid memory from Sloan Kettering's cafeteria returned to him—not a recollection of medical drama, a hopeful afternoon—and his anxiety about what Hilda was going to say burned off like a morning fog.

At that time, Amy had almost fully recovered from a raging infection, and had just been told she would be released the next day and could resume chemo in a week. She had

not yet been declared terminal. Her room was crowded with optimistic friends, smiling children, the laughter of reprieve. Hugh was free to take a break from his bedside vigil, snare a coffee, stroll outside and breathe air without a trace of ammonia. Ahead and behind him, as always at Sloan, were the anxious, exhausted faces of people in his position. That day he felt sorry for them, believed they didn't have his emotional resources. They couldn't conceal loss and terror beneath the polite mask Hugh had fashioned in childhood to shield himself from the soured sarcasms of his mother and the low marks his father gave him in everything he attempted—except his tennis serve. That day in the dreary cafeteria he had been suffused with gratitude that Amy would come home, available to Ginnie, Ray, and himself for conversation and snuggling; that he could resume playing tennis with Kyle; that he could watch the new Haneke film in the screening room, not squeezed on his laptop. Those simple pleasures were gifts of incomparable value and he remembered vividly that he had promised: *I'll never complain again*. To have Amy well and at ease, surrounded by people who loved her, the children they had made together chuckling at her jokes—what more was there to want?

When Hugh finally sat down, latte in hand, he was grateful Hilda was going to relieve him of the sordidness of dating and restore him to the dignity of a chaste grief.

“Thanks for seeing me,” Hilda began. “I kind of freaked when I called Francine to thank her for last night and she told me you had played tennis together. I didn't know you saw her regularly. So the thing is, I want to ask you a favor. Please don't tell her about . . .” She nodded toward the outside as if that's where their lovemaking had been located.

Hugh chuckled. “I'll be glad not to tell her. And by the way, I had no idea I was going to be playing tennis with your stepmother when I woke this morning. Came out of the

blue. I never played with her before. She called Karen, who volunteered me, so I had to say yes to your mother's—I mean to playing in your stepmother's game."

"Yeah, she said you'd never played together before." Now Hilda chuckled. "She LOVED playing with you. It was hilarious. She kept chortling about winning. Never realized she was so competitive."

"Ridiculous, isn't it, to be competitive about mixed doubles," declared Hugh, a perfect hypocrite. "Anyway, no worries about me telling her. Or anyone. I'm happy to forget last night."

Hilda winced. "You're happy to forget it?"

"No, no. Not happy to forget. It was great." His cheeks warmed. *Tell her the truth!* he told himself. If she wasn't going to say they shouldn't see each other again, he'd have to. "Last night was a gift. I'll never forget it."

Hilda grinned into her green tea.

"But . . . uh . . . of course, you know, my age and circumstance, and everything else, your stepmom, the whole situation, it's insanely fraught, for both of us evidently, so that's all I meant. Better to keep it as a fond memory."

Hilda squinted at him. "I don't know what you're talking about." She looked out at the Square and told its bare trees: "I don't know what you're trying to say."

Ginnie's eyes also fled from his whenever he was compelled to disappoint her, a pained diffidence that never failed to cleave his heart. "Well, I . . ." His voice warbled, and he cleared his throat. "I mean I'm still in mourning, and anyway you're young enough to be my daughter."

"That's ridiculous. I'm thirty-nine. Were you married at eleven?"

“You’re . . . thirty-nine?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“Thirty. Tops.”

“I’ll be forty in a month!”

“Huh.”

Hilda’s full lips formed a confident smile, their sexiest formation yet. There was a tingling and a stabbing rise in his corduroys, a lightning fast reaction that hadn’t occurred in decades, obliterating all civilized considerations.

“I’m fine with whatever you want this to be,” she said. “But I didn’t mean we should stop getting to know each other better. I just don’t want my stepmother to know. Frankly, I don’t want her to know anything about my real life.”

“Huh,” Hugh said again. Nothing else was in his head but last night’s kiss, vividly replaying.

“Are you busy?” she asked. “I have a class at seven, but I’m free until then.”

“I am free,” Hugh said in a robot’s monotone.

Hilda grinned. “My place?”

He buttoned his overcoat before he dared to stand up.

Once outside he took her arm as they turned toward Fifth Avenue. She moved into his chest and he found himself, there on the streets of New York, absorbed in kissing a woman who still seemed younger than he had ever been. This time no dark memories interfered with his enjoyment.

That is, until they released. When he opened his eyes to the world again he saw something that chilled him from head to toe. Stopped at the corner by a red light, weighed

down by two bulky shopping bags from Paragon Sporting Goods, was Cathy Moriarty, the woman who a few weeks ago had offered him a sympathetic shoulder and been told he was too grief-stricken even to share a meal with a single woman. She stared at him with a look of outrage befitting a betrayed spouse. And certainly Hugh skulked off with Hilda as if he were guilty of a mortal sin.

1.11

As Peter had warned, Hugh's male acquaintances began clamoring to fix him up with women they believed to be perfect for him. At least once a week, one or another called or took him to lunch and said, "I totally understand you need time but I want you to know that when you're ready there's . . ." and offered a woman who turned out to be a younger and slightly prettier version of the man's wife. Oddly, the men were immediately contradicted by the wives themselves, who dismissed their doppelgängers as wrong for Hugh, and recommended friends whom he suspected, and in a few cases knew, they pitied for being single. But no matter the motive or source, the available women sounded extraordinary.

There was a violinist who had been with the New Haven Symphony for ten years before shifting to teaching at the Yale School of Music once she became a mother. She had a twelve-year-old son destined to be the next Yo-Yo Ma.

There was the television critic for *Manhattan Magazine*, whom Hugh had always admired for being witty about shows she didn't like without also being mean to their creators.

And there were three actresses: a former Second Stage comedienne who had been a regular on *Saturday Night Live* and the lead in a hit sitcom, and who these days did small parts in big movies; a Broadway star with a soaring, almost operatic voice, who seemed to be in a hit musical every year; and, most tempting of all, a brilliant character actress whose tormented roles in Scorsese and Coppola movies and dozens of other indie films Hugh deeply admired.

Tempting though they were, Hugh continued to use his widower-not-ready card. “I’m not dating,” he told his friends, hoping that would be the end of it.

But the subject came up with Karen, too. At the Hamilton Film Festival’s opening night party, she downed three flutes of champagne and said: “Once you start seeing someone, *don’t*—do not—start playing tennis with your new honey and drop out of FF’s game. Yesterday she pledged us an extra half a mil. It’s your serve that got us the raise.”

“I’m not dating,” he promised her.

The one person Hugh expected to leave him alone about all of this was Amy’s mother, but that only held true until Ruth called to insist Hugh bring Ray and Ginnie out to New Jersey just a few weeks after Thanksgiving for what she dubbed a Chanukah dinner, a brand-new family holiday gathering that Hugh presumed was an invention of grief. After explaining she didn’t want to make another big meal so soon, that she wanted them to come to her and Bernie’s new golf club, she said: “So I have to reserve a table. Is there anyone else you want to bring?”

“Anyone else?” Hugh asked, puzzled and unsuspecting.

“Someone you’re seeing? You know, you can tell me if you’re seeing someone. I hope you are! We don’t want you to be lonely.”

“It’s . . . it’s too soon,” Hugh stammered.

“It’s too soon *now*. I know that. But when you’re ready there’s a lovely woman, the daughter of my friend Denise—you remember Denise Roth from our old club? They switched too and by coincidence they’ll be there. They love going. Denise hates to cook. Do you remember their daughter Sue?” As was often the case, once Ruth had built up a head of steam she didn’t pause for him to reply; the answer was “not really”; he recalled only a

blur of attractive and not-attractive members of a large family. “Well, Sue’s very bright, very successful. And lovely looking. She works at New York Presbyterian in development. She’s very bright. I said that already, right? And she has a great figure. Runs marathons, or something like that. Sue never married. Couldn’t have children, which was the problem, I think. What am I saying? I don’t know! She’s about your age. She just moved into the city.” Ruth paused, then added, “And she loves movies!” as if that were an astonishing coincidence. “When you’re ready let me know, Hughie,” she concluded, perfectly reproducing her daughter’s affectionate intonation.

“I’m not dating,” he said yet again, as blandly as he could, but he was appalled, offended that his mother-in-law of all people could imagine he’d ever want to be with a woman other than her daughter—forgetting for the moment that four nights a week he was in Hilda’s bed. He’d bring over one of his Criterion Collection DVDs and introduce her to the genius of Bresson before she reintroduced him to the genius of the blowjob. Often, with a shameful cringe, he worried their relationship consisted of little more than a barter of his knowledge of film for hers of sexual gratification—preferable to an adjunct’s salary at NYU but less respectable.

Unlike everyone else, Hilda seemed content to leave the subject of dating unexplored, until one evening when they were talking with lovely openness and calm after sex. She asked whether he had gone out with anyone since Amy’s death and he told her about his one-year moratorium, that he wasn’t ready for more than their—what did the kids call them?—hookups.

“We’re just hanging out,” she said, but her voice rose, as it often did, as if for a question.

“Are you asking me?” Hugh was prepared to explain that if she wanted more he’d have to beg off.

“No, no,” she said, resting her head on his chest. “This is all I can handle right now.” She had had a bad breakup recently, she explained, and still felt too raw. “I’m happy,” she added and reached below to see if the old guy could manage a double-header.

The only people in Hugh’s orbit who never in any context, no matter how hypothetical, brought up the subject of Hugh falling in love again were Ginnie and Ray. Ray stuck to politics and sports, often ranting with alarming intensity about the Iraq War or the Giant’s porous secondary; otherwise he avoided all emotional subjects, including his mother’s death. The sole romance Ginnie mentioned was her own. In 2003, after graduating Yale, she had followed her college boyfriend to DC because he had landed a promising job working in the Senate Majority Leader’s office, and she wasn’t sure what career she wanted to pursue. Amy was too ill to be open with Ginnie about her disapproval of this move and Hugh too preoccupied. They both nodded glumly when she rationalized it by saying after a year waiting tables and writing a blog about her daily doings, she might want to apply to law school, and so the city she selected didn’t matter. Two years later, her boyfriend gave up on Capitol Hill and had just started law school at the University of Virginia while Ginnie had become self-supporting as a free-lance Internet writer. Her work and love lives were stable—or so Hugh thought.

He was walking up Fifth to Hilda’s carrying a DVD, a screener of *The Scion*, a Hamilton grantee’s entry to the Sundance Film Festival, when Ginnie’s name glowed on his vibrating cell. Thrilled as always by a call from either of his children (even if the thrill was

also a heart-pounding terror until he established whether they were in trouble) he flipped open his Nokia and sang, “Ginnie! Hi!”

“Hey,” she responded dully. She paused as if he had placed the call and ought to explain why.

He prodded, “What’s up?”

She sighed and announced in deep gloom: “The *Post* wants to hire me.”

“*Wants* to hire you?”

“Yeah.”

“And this is bad?”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said. “It’s making me very, very anxious.”

Hugh stopped walking. He was a block from Hilda’s and didn’t want to continue the conversation there. “What’s the job offer?”

“Blogging. You know, they call it an on-line column, but really it’s blogging. That’s good, you know, that’s the good part. But they also want me to write articles for the Sunday magazine and do reporting for the paper. You know, the actual newspaper. I really don’t want to do that.”

“You don’t want to write articles for the *Washington Post*,” Hugh said in as neutral a voice as he could manage.

“No.” She sighed. “Joe is furious at me. He thinks I’m crazy to turn it down.”

“You turned it down!”

“No, no, Daddy, I didn’t do that,” she said, her voice small and pitched high, a five-year-old again. “You know, I just told them I don’t really want to write for the paper. I mean, maybe I will sometimes, but I don’t want to do it if that’s a requirement for them.”

“Uh huh,” Hugh said. *She’s out of her mind. What’s making her so crazy?* “How are you, pumpkin? What’s going on otherwise?”

Silence. Then a sigh. “Where are you?”

“On the street.”

“Where?”

“Outside our building,” he lied. “I was going to the supermarket. Do I have to be in a secure location to hear what’s going on with you?”

At his sarcasm she surprised him by laughing gaily, a merry echo of her carefree girlhood. The happy sound reminded him of Ginnie gleeful on the beach during their annual two weeks on Block Island in August: chasing after her energetic mother, coaxed by Amy to ride the chilly waves, discovering a tiny, perfect crab in the sand, spotting the north star’s early appearance at sunset—away, always away from unhappiness. “No . . .” Her giggles trailed off. “Joey is . . .” Tears abruptly warbled her voice. “I think he wants to break up with me, Dad. And he’s a coward about it. He’s doing it really stupidly, really being a klutz about it. I’m losing him, Daddy.”

Hugh was devastated. Not about her losing Joe, who was the kind of humorless, ambitious young man he had always avoided and didn’t really understand, the sort who wanted to win at everything, often did, and was never made happy by his victories. Good riddance. But not at this price; not if it meant listening to his daughter’s vibrant voice crack with heartbreak. She had endured her mother’s illness and death; Hugh wanted sadness confined to her rearview mirror. Eager to provide relief, he asked for details: “Why do you say that, pumpkin? What did he say, actually say, to you?”

“He keeps saying that I’m not committed to my career, that we’re very different about how we see our futures, that maybe we’re incompatible, you know, all that crap, as if anyone wants to spend their whole life with someone exactly like them. Anyway, that’s not the real issue. The real issue is he says he thinks he needs to really focus on nailing law school, that he’s got to make law review to land the clerkships he wants, so he needs to live on campus full time, not see me every weekend. I don’t know why he says it like that, you know, because he has to be on campus some weekends as an RA. So he has to, even if he doesn’t want to, it’s not really ’cause we’re incompatible.”

“Right. He has to spend weekends there because he’s an RA. And he has to be an RA so he doesn’t drown in loans.” Hugh lathered up the balm of denial: “He’s not breaking up with you, honey. He’s just going to law school.”

Silence. She knew he was desperate to saying anything that might make her feel better and probably saw through his reassurances. Fuck. Why not tell her what he really thought? Joe was the kind of selfish asshole who never admitted he was selfish; his self-interest was always transformed into a higher calling.

“Yeah,” Ginnie finally said. “I guess you’re right. I’m overreacting. After all, he hasn’t moved most of his stuff out of our place. As long as I have his complete collection of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* DVDs we’re still living together.”

“Right.” Hugh was disgusted with himself for enabling Joe’s manipulations but let it go. “So, tell me about this job offer again. Can’t you negotiate with the *Post* about how many articles you have to write? Maybe they’ll be satisfied with one or two a year?”

“Huh,” Ginnie said. “I didn’t think of that. That’s smart. You’re a smart cookie, Daddy. You mean I could, like, define how many pieces I write for the paper?”

“Right. Set a limit.”

“Right, right. Oh, that’s great. Like, get it down to a low number and maybe taper off the second year and eventually they’d let it go . . .” Ginnie’s typical sprightly energy was restored, a sweet legacy of her mother’s optimistic nature. “Yeah, that’s what I’ll ask when I call them. Great, Dad, thanks. Listen, I’m here. I have to go.”

“Where’s here?”

“Sorry, new fusion Mexican on 14th I want to blog about if it’s good. Meeting Joe and the Gang of Five so we can order everything on the menu. Call you tomorrow! Love you! Bye!” She again sounded as pleased with life as if she were racing beside her mom on Block Island to catch more summer fun.

Hugh didn’t enter Hilda’s building right away. On the sidewalk, he ruminated bitterly about Joe tormenting his daughter with criticisms of her character while scheming to make the relationship as convenient as possible for himself. No doubt he planned to fuck adoring coeds on the side while keeping Ginnie available for holidays. Hugh looked down at the movie he was bringing as an offering to the object of his secret romance. *Romance? Since when?* He had been telling himself they were hooking up, and she’d said they were just hanging out, but if he was honest with himself their four-nights-a-week get-togethers would soon amount to more. A stirring began as he flashed on Hilda’s warm breasts filling his hands, her lips opening to his, and he wondered, not for the first time, whether having a penis and being good were incompatible. Before heading into Hilda’s lobby, he vowed, once again, to do the right thing and break up with her.

1.12

Hilda opened the door to Hugh with a delighted expression, but after she saw his face, hers fell. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? I call bullshit on that.” She posed as for a playground challenge: hands on hips, chin thrust forward. “Can’t be nothing.”

“Just something—not a big deal—with Ginnie.” He brushed past her and sagged on the white leather couch without removing his overcoat.

She sat in an armless chair opposite, hands demurely in her lap. She said sweetly: “Please tell me about it.”

So instead of broaching the subject of the non-future of their non-relationship, Hugh confessed his worry that he had botched advising Ginnie about her selfish boyfriend. This broke precedent. Until now he had promised himself never to disturb the tropical-island peace of their hideaway assignments with storms of grief or family life. Previously he could deflect Hilda’s curiosity about his children’s love lives by merely stating the facts that Ginnie had a live-in boyfriend and Ray a girl at college to whom he seemed attached at the hip. Now she required details. Filling her in took a while; she handled listening to Ginnie’s romantic history as if it were a bank audit, requiring disclosure of all facts dating back to the first transaction. So he opened the books of Ginnie’s college relationship with Joe, its violent, sobbing break up and matter-of-fact reconciliation a week later, that drama cruelly coincident with the news of Amy’s diagnosis. Then he gave an accounting of Ginnie following Joe to

DC in the immediate aftermath of learning that her mother's treatments had failed. Reliving these crises, Hugh was reminded that at each turn he had wanted to tell Ginnie to be less committed to Joe, and each time had held his tongue, constrained to be tender because of her mother's illness. The prior missed opportunities exacerbated his worry that on this occasion he had egregiously goofed, that now, during the relative calm of grieving for her mother, he ought to have encouraged Ginnie to seize this law-school pause as a chance to be independent of Joe. "This guy is just gonna keep her on a string until he's a lawyer pulling down big bucks and if, at the end of it, he's bored with her, he'll let her sink to the bottom," Hugh concluded bitterly.

"Wow," Hilda said. "You really don't like him. And you're right. He sounds like my ex-boyfriend. I wasted ten years waiting for him to commit." She shook her head. "Ten years wasted. Waiting for him to grow the fuck up." She brightened, smiling at Hugh. "I'd love to meet Ginnie and Ray. They sound great."

Hugh was alarmed. If she had passively waited ten years for her ex-boyfriend to declare himself, she might be on the brink of repeating the pattern with him. His suspicion was heightened when she hurried to add, "You know, when it's appropriate. When you're comfortable. Speaking of comfortable, why don't you take off your coat?"

"I don't think I should stay," he blurted. He looked down at his winter-white hands. The veins bulged like rivers on a topographic map. An age blemish below his index finger had turned darker and bigger. And was that . . . yes, a new spot on his left hand. He was old, pale, bald, well past the expiration date for romance. Soon he would look like his father did in his last years: a mottled gray driftwood of a man, askew on cracked bones, bleaching in the sun.

Hugh raised his eyes to Hilda, determined to tell her that their secret liaisons must end. His heart almost stopped at what he saw. Her face had the about-to-wail shock of an infant who has fallen. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm in a terrible mood. Not fit for company."

Relieved, she hustled over, kissed his cheek and whispered, "I want to be here for you," with a touching earnestness. It was utterly clear now. How could he have failed to perceive her real feelings? *Because it was convenient for me. Men. We're monsters.* "Let's watch young Cartwright's offering to Sundance," he said. "It will calm me down." Actually, he hoped it would allow him the chance to think about how he could minimize Hilda's distress when he summoned the courage to tell her they needed to stop whatever it was they had told themselves they were doing. He put the DVD into her player, turned off the lights, and settled on the couch, distant enough from Hilda to discourage snuggling.

While Hugh liked nothing better than to share a superior film with another, he also treasured having no distraction from losing himself in the filmmaker's work. He especially longed for a splendid isolation this evening, a respite from fretting over Ginnie's and Hilda's vulnerable hearts. This was one of the gifts of watching a serious work of art: by society's conventions, he was permitted, even admired for ignoring the living, breathing human beside him.

And no question they were watching a great film, Lincoln Cartwright's ambitious first full-length feature, *The Scion*. Hugh's enthusiasm for it spanned years. Development of the script had been fully funded by a Hamilton Foundation grant he'd awarded and its production partially by another. It told the story of three generations of a Durham, North Carolina, African-American family, charting their rise out of slavery during Reconstruction, continuing through their greatest prosperity at the turn of the century, and climaxing with their eventual

decline by the early twentieth century with the full-blown return of the KKK and the enactment of Jim Crow laws, winked at by Woodrow Wilson's federal racist policies. This made the movie sound like an earnest social-realist melodrama but it was decidedly not that in Cartwright's telling. Cartwright was an imaginative and bold twenty-six-year-old filmmaker who had loosely based his script on anecdotes from his own family. He dramatized their history impressionistically through the anguished, self-hating memories of a half-black half-white scion, the grandson of a man born into slavery who died a prosperous dry goods owner. During the desperate days of the Great Depression the scion passes as white, eventually winning election to Congress on a platform of "keeping America safe for the Master Race." By using the traitor-to-his-race grandson as narrator, Cartwright had freed himself from the pedantry of sociology and oversimplification. His unreliable and evolving main character was at times oppressed, at times heroic, finally villainous, and always tragic. Cartwright's stream of consciousness filmmaking, a weave of memory and feeling, showed off his extravagant gift for designing images in elegant tableaux that evoked place, people, feeling, and idea.

Hugh and Hilda were watching the final cut prior to *The Scion's* premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. It was the best of the seven versions Hugh had seen. The film, always very good even when rough and too long, seemed now to Hugh to be a masterpiece on the order of *Citizen Kane*.

While the credits rolled Hilda didn't move or speak. Hugh stood up, turned on a lamp, shut off her TV. "Wow," she said at last, blinking at the harsh light. "Wow."

"You should really see it on the big screen," he said. He was feeling abandoned, an emptiness in his gut that always followed an absorbing film, dismay at being returned to the

prison of his skin, confined to the trivialities of his consciousness. For two hours and fifteen minutes he had forgotten tennis elbow, sore back, the frightful image of himself as a teetering version of his father, the hollowing absence of Amy, the moral bankruptcy of his relationship with Hilda, and the dread that his children were permanently dented by sadness. Also that he was hungry.

“I’ll get to see it on the big screen at the festival next fall, right?”

Another by-the-by assumption of their future together as a couple and somehow he was shocked again: how had he stumbled into exactly what he wanted to avoid? Meanwhile Hilda was waiting for an answer.

“Way before then. A year from now everyone will have seen it. In a month it’ll be the talk of Sundance. Probably won’t be a bidding war, it’s not commercial enough, but Miramax’ll pick it up for peanuts, premiere it at the New York Film Festival next year, get half-a-dozen nominations and make a killing.”

“But if Harvey Weinstein buys it wouldn’t he want to premiere it at your festival?”

“Harvey wouldn’t let us have it unless I can convince Karen to open with it.”

Thinking about the tawdry maneuverings for prime slots in the festival didn’t cheer him up.

Tell her, he thought.

“It’s so amazing! Why wouldn’t Karen let you open the festival with it?”

“She might.” *Tell her now*. “Depends on what else is hot at the time.”

“But it’s yours. You gave him a grant. There’d be no film without you and the Foundation.”

“Thanks. That’s not really true, but thanks for the thought.” Hugh tried to smile. He needed a drink. “You want a glass of wine?” he asked while heading into her kitchen. There was usually a bottle of white wine in the fridge.

“Why isn’t it really true?” She followed him into the tiny galley, and he felt and was cornered.

He waved a Chardonnay at her. “Okay if I open?”

“You go ahead. I want a Glenfiddich. It’s the holiday season.”

“The holiday season.”

“That reminds me. I wanted to talk to you about Christmas. Are you staying in town?”

“Not going anywhere.”

“Did you used to go somewhere?” She opened a cabinet and removed a tumbler from a set of heavy crystal inherited from her mother’s mother. She poured out a generous portion of thirty-year-old single malt.

“Not since my mother passed. We used to go to her house in Massachusetts. Anyway, Ray’ll be home, so yeah, I’ll be in town.”

“You guys didn’t used to go somewhere warm?” She sipped from her dazzling glass, refracting the kitchen’s halogen, bejeweling the dark brown scotch. She reminded him of his Great Aunt Helen, who was not as tall but had Hilda’s regal posture and voluptuous figure. Great Aunt Helen had managed to be at once large and vulnerable, shifting abruptly from scolding her relatives to fits of self-recrimination and tears, all the while never letting go of her bourbon-and-soda.

“Dad used to take us to Barbados for Christmas,” Hilda continued. “I loved it there. So warm.” She sipped again, eyes on the prism of single malt as she ventured, “Maybe we should go to Barbados in January. You know, right after the New Year. To get warm. A friend from boarding school has a house there. She’s offered to let me use it. She can’t go. She said I could bring anyone. How about that for a deal? A week in the Caribbean for the price of an airline ticket?”

He could plead Sundance was coming up. He could point out Ray wouldn’t be returning to Brown until the fifteenth. Those were accurate outs. He said nothing.

“You’re too busy, right? Karen won’t give you the time off. You’re too busy.”

“It’s not just that,” he said, putting a toe into honesty’s cold waters, ready to tell her he couldn’t, he shouldn’t see her anymore. His heart thumped. His throat closed. Of all the no’s one could say to a woman this was the nuclear *No*.

“We’ll keep it secret. Just tell your family you’re going somewhere. I could tell Francine I was skiing. You could say . . . I don’t know what you’d tell your kids, but we’ll think of something.”

Another available easy out, the surrender of *Yes*. Agree, have a glorious week with the ease of being with someone who knew only him, not his losses, had no memory of Amy and his youth, who knew only the battered Hugh that had washed up on the shore. No. It was time to end this painful misunderstanding.

Before he could, Hilda asked, “Why did you say that it isn’t really true you made *The Scion* possible?”

“What?” he said, confused by the change of subject.

“I said you funded it, you helped Cartwright develop the script, and you gave him his first tranche of the money he needed for production, but you said it’s not really true. But you did do those things, didn’t you?”

“Someone else would have given him the dough; that’s all I meant. It was a brilliant idea and his short was brilliant. If we hadn’t given him the money to develop his script—and hey, it wasn’t a lot, just twenty grand—some other group would’ve. And once he’d written that stunning script he didn’t have any trouble raising money for the shoot.”

“Wow.” Hilda drained her glass and immediately moved to refill it. “You really have self-esteem issues.” She turned to him with glass extended, toasting him. “Give yourself credit. That movie is great and if it weren’t for you it wouldn’t exist! You are brilliant at what you do. And what you do is really, really important.”

Hugh decided not to continue insisting that he had been in no way essential to the making of Cartwright’s film. Amy knew—Amy had known, had known—that he didn’t need to exaggerate his contribution to feel good about his work, that he despised the acquisitive self-delusion of his colleagues when they called other people’s creations “our script,” “my festival,” “my movie.” Amy had known that he was satisfied simply to be proximate to the art he loved. But why be surly about Hilda’s flattery? Her kindness didn’t deserve that. Besides, it was pleasant to listen to. So he resolved to stop hectoring her about his unimportance. And also not to break up with her—tonight.

1.13

“Hugh, my dear,” Leslie said, laying her hand over his, pinning it with firm affection. “I’m sorry to ask you, but I have to get to the bottom of this. Someone—I don’t even really understand how this horrible person knows anything about you—has been saying terrible things about you and it’s reached my ears . . .” Leslie chuckled as she tried to complete the old-fashioned phrase: “And they are burning. Or on fire. Or something.” She patted his hand, a soft gavel calling him to order. “I have to know why this strange woman is saying shit about you.”

“What are you talking about?” Hugh slipped his hand free, intensely agitated that anyone was speaking ill of him. He was no saint but he did fancy himself to be a decent man, and certainly not a villain. He couldn’t imagine who would be critical of his character now that his father and fourth grade teacher were dead—at least he assumed Mrs. Freed had passed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to ambush you like that,” Leslie said, recapturing his hand with maternal love: the help of last resort, what dying soldiers yearned for as they bled out. “We ran into the Freedmans, Linda and Ben, remember them? Their daughter went to P.S. 41 for a while with Ray? Then they moved to Jersey. Amy was pretty friendly with Linda?” Hugh was shaking his head; he didn’t remember. “Anyway, doesn’t matter. From back in the day they knew someone named Cathy Moriarty, whom they bumped into recently and somehow your name came up and this Cathy Moriarty person said you were only pretending to be grief-stricken, that you’re dating women young enough to be your daughter.”

Hugh blushed violently, and Leslie glanced at her husband, Guillermo. Hugh didn't expect support from that quarter: he suspected Guillermo wasn't thrilled by the intimacy that had developed between him and Leslie during Amy's illness, a closeness that was persisting unabated after her death. Not that he believed the hip and handsome Guillermo could ever be made nervous by his bald, tweedy self. Gui's good looks were notorious in their set, Latin lover central casting: tall, lean, olive-skinned, smoldering black eyes and a full head of salt and pepper hair. The physical was enhanced by the romance of his profession, a jazz pianist of world-wide cult fame.

But Guillermo surprised by nodding approvingly, as if he understood everything and there was nothing for Hugh to be ashamed of.

Comforting as his blessing was, Hugh felt it was tainted. Guillermo was often on the road, especially in Latin America, or playing until the wee hours in the disappearing jazz venues of Manhattan and Brooklyn, living a pirate's life compared to the pale workaday men Leslie's friends had married. He was devoted to his children and loving to Leslie, yet most of their friends assumed that in a sophisticated Latin way—Guillermo's family had fled Castro's Cuba when he was five—he had succumbed to the temptation that most women found his irresistible good looks to be, in fact, irresistible. His readiness to assume the worst about Hugh and treat him as a comrade confirmed that view of him. He took hold of Hugh's shoulder with his powerful fingers and squeezed; other than the day of Amy's funeral, Hugh couldn't remember him being so affectionate. "You deserve what comfort you find, my friend," he said.

"Oh . . . oh, of course," Leslie stammered, grabbing her Perfect Manhattan. She took a long gulp as if it were the antidote to poison. "It's none of my business," she said before

she'd finished swallowing, and she dribbled a line of brown liquid onto the white tablecloth. She dabbed at her lips, crying out, "Oh my God, what a klutz!" Eyes averted from the still blushing Hugh, she mumbled, "How do you know this person? *Do* you know this person?"

"Yes, I know Cathy vaguely," Hugh said. "From years ago when Ray was in middle school."

"Do you know her today? Do you have any idea why she's saying shit about you?"

"What exactly did she say?" Hugh's guilt had molted into anger. How dare she turn a paper cut to her vanity into cause for slandering him!

"She said . . ." Leslie turned to Guillermo. "I can't say it."

Guillermo again laid a hand on Hugh's shoulder and kneaded, his piano-strong fingers producing more pain than massage. "You really want to hear what this bitch had to say?"

"Gui!" Leslie said.

"Talking this way about our friend? She's a bitch. Be glad I'm not saying she's a cunt. Which she is."

"You're terrible," Leslie said with a grin.

"You really want to hear it, Hugh?" Gui said.

Hugh nodded while he tried to figure out how to explain Hilda. What would Leslie think of him? On the surface she displayed no distress at his dating, but underneath, he suspected, out of love for her dead friend, she wished he would remain chaste.

Guillermo sighed. "This woman said, or rather Linda quoted her as saying: 'Hugh's a lying sack of shit about being too grief-stricken to date. He's fucking girls young enough to be his daughter.'" Guillermo looked off, toward the Knickerbocker's piano, shut up on a Tuesday night, and smiled to himself.

“A lying sack of shit?”

Guillermo murmured, “I’d never heard that insult before. Lying sack of shit. Has a kind of melody.”

“Cathy Moriarty called me out of the blue! I could barely remember who she was.” Hugh heard his voice squeaking like a guilty boy’s. “She offered her shoulder for me to cry on.”

“What?!” Leslie exclaimed. “You were crying to her?”

“No, I wasn’t crying. I just answered the phone. She used the expression ‘a shoulder to cry on.’ She offered to cook me dinner. I said that was nice, but it felt like a date and I’m not dating. She made a friendly offer to go on walks and so on, but I said no. I didn’t mean to be rude but I guess it really pissed her off.”

“I told you,” Guillermo said. “A woman scorned . . .”

“Wait, wait.” Hugh raised a hand. “She’s not making everything up. I *am* seeing a woman.”

“Oh,” Leslie said and then nothing more. She gawked at him.

“Not seriously. And she’s younger than me, yes, but she’s not Ginnie’s age. She’s forty,” he said, absurdly padding her age by a year. “I guess Cathy Moriarty needs new glasses.”

“Good for you, my friend,” Guillermo declared. “You’re a man and that’s how a man consoles himself.” Hugh couldn’t help but feel a zing of pleasure at this macho approval.

“I have no idea what the hell that means.” Leslie finished her Perfect Manhattan with a big gulp. “So when do I get to meet her?”

“Meet her?” Hugh stammered.

“Yes. When do I meet her?”

“Never.”

“I don’t get to meet a woman you’re dating?” Leslie laid a hand across her bosom and pouted.

“I mean,” Hugh said, “I hope you meet her as a human being, but not as my date. We’re not dating.”

Guillermo twisted away to summon a waiter. “Of course you’re not dating,” he said, and just as Hugh was about to thank him for understanding, he turned back and added, “You’re just fucking her brains out.”

1.14

Chanukah dinner with Amy's parents in New Jersey promised to be a gloomy celebration. Hugh borrowed Leslie and Guillermo's 1996 Volvo to drive himself and his children to Ruth and Bernie's country club. "Does Grandma," asked Ginnie, riding shotgun, "plan on adding Chanukah to her annual holiday calendar?"

"It's already happened," Ray said from the backseat. "Grandma's a ruthless imperialist of family celebration."

"Oh God," Ginnie said. "She's grabbed new territory and will never give it back."

"No, no," Hugh said. "I agreed to it this year because it's the first holiday season since your mother's death. If I had said no they wouldn't get to see you guys until Passover, and this year that's just too hard on them."

"They just saw us for Thanksgiving," Ray said, objecting in his most lawyer-like tone.

"That was with the whole extended family," Hugh said. "Tonight's just us."

"But why do we have to schlep to New Jersey?" Ginnie said.

"Yeah, Mom used to invite them over for dinner," Ray said. "We'd have traditional Jewish holiday food: takeout Chinese."

"Exactly!" Ginnie said. "They'd give us checks and those fake gold chocolate coins."

"Chinese and chocolate," Ray said. "Good times."

"Why didn't we do that this year?"

"Because," Ray answered, "Mom could fight Grandma to a draw, waging guerrilla war against her stormtroopers of guilt. But Dad is..."

“Vichy France!” brother and sister finished together and laughed uproariously.

“In a year,” Ray said when they settled down, “Grandma will add Sukkot to Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to Chanukah and we’ll be practically living in the hell of New Jersey for four straight months.”

“God, you’re right.” Ginnie said. “This is a total disaster.”

Not for the first time, Hugh felt guilty that he and Amy, by their poor example, had made their children callous to the unconditional love their maternal grandparents lavished on them. Every year of their young lives they had heard their parents bitch and moan about the Jersey drive; Ruth’s tasteless food, occasionally avoided, but only in favor of the country club’s bland fare; Ruth and Bernie’s word-for-word retellings of family anecdotes and political observations; and their predictable reactions to the most popular Broadway shows, Hollywood movies and bestselling middlebrow novels. He listened to his thoughtless resentment played back through his children and winced at the clang and whine of its ungrateful melody as they continued through the Holland Tunnel and the gaseous landscape of the Jersey Turnpike. As they meandered on the bucolic two-lane roads of horse country near the club, Ginnie and Ray shifted to grumpy and presumptuous observations about a new development of eight-thousand-square-foot homes they passed, saying it was “people like this” who had voted in George Bush for a second term. They fell into a gloomy silence once Hugh drove through the gates into the vast expanse of the coiffed golf course.

“They don’t have a special Chanukah dinner,” Ruth greeted her grandchildren. “First of all because tonight’s Friday and it starts on Sunday—which anyway this year is also Christmas—and second because there’s no such thing as a traditional Chanukah dinner. I hope you’re not disappointed. Chanukah’s not really a holiday we celebrate, you know,” she

informed Hugh, forgetting, as she always did, that as an outsider he had made certain to know more about Judaism than she. “Hello, dear,” Ruth said, approaching Ginnie first and offering the outside of her right cheek to be kissed while she bussed air. Hugh had long felt that Ruth behaved more like his chilly Scottish mother than a stereotypical Mrs. Portnoy. “I would have given you brisket and noodle pudding,” she told Ray as she offered a cheek to him, sounding grandmother-like until she added, “but I didn’t feel like cooking.”

“Do they have their pigs in blankets tonight?” Ray asked his grandfather. Bernie moved into his grandson’s arms, hugged him hard and planted a kiss on his cheek. That lived up to Hugh’s notion of a Jewish family’s warmth, a marital bonus he treasured. At his own mother’s funeral, Hugh’s grieving father had greeted him with a firm handshake.

“I would have resigned if they didn’t,” Bernie said. “I told them my grandson was coming and they dare not disappoint him.”

“Good work, Pop-Pop,” Ray answered in the gentle voice he used with his grandfather, an arm cradling the old man’s bowed back. In his late eighties Bernie had become unsteady on his pins. He often fell, usually escaping with no worse than scrapes, but last year in his own driveway he’d broken his wrist. Since then, Hugh had noticed that when his son and Bernie walked or stood together, Ray kept an arm around his grandfather, or at the very least a steadying hand on his elbow. After Amy’s diagnosis and especially after her death, Ray had developed a reputation for ferocity in conversation. His once merely opinionated and contentious manner regarding politics gave way to rants and spread to innocuous subjects, and he badgered anyone who disagreed with him into submission. In moments like this one, though, Hugh could see that the sweet boy underneath was still in residence.

Bernie kissed Ray's cheek a second time for good measure, then opened his arms to his granddaughter. "Come here, beautiful." Ginnie hugged him hard and long. She liked to hug. As did Ray. As had Amy. There were no handshakes at her funeral.

They followed Ruth's vigorous stride into the cocktail lounge, where Ray came to a standstill at a buffet of his favorites: pigs in blankets, cocktail shrimp, and fried dumplings. "Don't fill up on that junk," Ruth ordered him.

"Good luck implementing that policy," said Ray the political science major. He filled a plate to overflowing, six of each vice, and defiantly ate them in front of his grandmother, hardly pausing to chew while she daintily nibbled on a rounded slice of carrot. Eighty-year-old Ruth was lean and erect and apparently tireless. If she had aches and pains she never mentioned them.

"Why are you being so mean to Grandma?" Ginnie admonished Ray.

"I'm not being mean to Grandma," Ray said. "I'm being kind to myself."

"You won't have any room for dinner," Ruth said.

"Oh I'll have room," Ray assured her. He popped a fried dumpling into his mouth.

"Use a fork," she said.

"This is how Asians eat dumplings."

"No they don't! They use chopsticks!" Ruth said triumphantly.

"That's false," Ray said. "Chopsticks, as you call them, are used by authentic Asians to funnel rice like this." He pantomimed a shoveling motion into his mouth.

"I'm sick of all those faux Asians using chopsticks incorrectly," Ginnie mumbled.

“Only Westerners use chopsticks to pick up food,” Ray said. “In most of the world what’s considered unpardonably rude is eating with your left hand. You eat exclusively with your right because it’s the left hand you wipe your ass with.”

“Ray!” Ruth cried out. “That’s disgusting.”

“Most of the world *is* disgusting, I agree.” Ray’s plate, heaping moments ago, was clean; he stood resting it on the cantilever of his stomach. This caused Hugh to notice his once lean boy had grown a beer belly, a stunning revelation. Ray had been home for Thanksgiving. How had Hugh been blind to this? And now Ray was turning toward the buffet for reinforcements.

Ruth leapt to her feet, blocking his route. “You’re coming with me to say hello to the Roths. You too, Ginnie and Hugh. I promised my friend Denise I’d bring you all over to say hello.”

“What?” Ray said to his father.

Ginnie mumbled, “Don’t make a fuss.”

“We’re going to say hello to the Roths,” Hugh said.

“Why?”

“They’re lonely?” Hugh suggested. Ray’s belly no longer looked as prominent. Maybe he was sucking it in. Maybe Hugh had imagined it.

Ruth grabbed Ray by the wrist, towing him while calling back to Hugh and Ginnie, “Let’s go!” She aimed for a large group settled in wing chairs around a coffee table covered with drinks and appetizers.

The Roths looked vaguely familiar to Hugh from the many meals he’d been served at the club before Amy’s diagnosis. After that she had refused to celebrate at a golf club. “One

good thing about cancer,” she had explained to Leslie, “I get to decide the venue of my mother’s events.”

Hugh definitely recognized the short, big-bosomed woman who rose to meet them. She sported a tower of teased hair, dyed the color of blood, sickly against her extremely pale, unnaturally smooth skin.

“Denise, these are my grandchildren, Ray and Ginnie. And you remember Hugh, of course.”

Hugh felt the eyes of the Roths on him as he greeted their matriarch. He had a blurred impression of three generations, from ten to eighty. He couldn’t turn their way because Denise, after kissing him briefly and firmly on the lips, grabbed each of his hands and squeezed while saying, “I’m so, so sorry about Amy. She was such a good person! Always remembered to ask after my poor mother, even when she was just a little girl. She would inquire after my mother and also Sam’s mother. Everyone in my family. So considerate!”

Amy was kind-hearted and polite enough, but this meticulous standard of courtesy didn’t sound like her.

“And so musical! So talented. Piano, right?”

“You’re talking about my niece,” Ruth corrected her. “She’s the pianist. Amy couldn’t play a thing. None of us can. We don’t have an ear for music in our family!” she announced as if it were a point of pride.

“Your niece is in your family,” argumentative Ray pointed out.

Ruth had no interest in that debate. “Sue!” she called, singling out a woman from the tribe of Roths. “Sue! Hi. These are my grandchildren, Ginnie and Ray.”

Meanwhile Denise took firm hold of Hugh's wrist, as if he were a reluctant teenage boy, and towed him toward Sue, who looked to be about his age. "Hugh," Denise said, "you remember my daughter, Suzie."

He nodded as if he did, though he didn't. Sue didn't resemble her fireplug mother. She had a slight, elegant figure, porcelain not freckled skin, hair black not scarlet, sharply defined features dominated by large, solemn gray eyes. Sue was strikingly beautiful but what was truly arresting was the sly expression she directed at Hugh, seeming to imply they were sharing an inside joke. "Hi, Hugh." She greeted him in a familiar tone, as if they saw each other everyday, and started to rise.

"Don't get up," Hugh said.

She did, on high heels that brought her to his chin. Hugh knew her elegant black shoes were fashionable, but Amy wasn't there to identify them as Jimmy Choo's. "How are you managing, Hugh?" she continued in a familiar tone, a buddy checking in. She wore a perfume he liked that reminded him of Amy.

He had trouble answering. Something about her confident, intimate tone, the relaxed amusement in her manner entranced him. He managed a grunt. His eyes scampered away so he might collect himself. He caught Ginnie and Ray staring at him. Ginnie was frowning so hard her eyebrows had met in the middle. Ray was displaying the dispassion of a research scientist checking on his lab rat. Hugh returned to focusing on the lovely Sue. He cleared his throat but could think of nothing to say.

"I was very sorry to hear about Amy," Sue offered, wonderfully at ease with a topic others found awkward. "I met her about ten years ago. She was so funny, really hilarious,

about picking up your now very grown up children from camp. I remember she talked about wanting to burn their clothes.”

“Suzie lives in Manhattan,” Denise broke in. “Not far from you, Hugh. You’re in the Village, right? Sue just bought a place in SoHo. And she loves movies.”

Ah, that was what Sue was implying with her tone, the joke they were both in on. She knew Denise and Ruth wanted them to meet. It came as something of a shock to Hugh that Ruth’s taste was so good. He noticed she was keeping an eye on them while announcing, more than introducing, Ray and Ginnie to the other Roths.

Denise didn’t bother to disguise that she was intent on monitoring her matchmaking. She hovered beside them, watching with an open-mouthed, wide-eyed expression of intense expectation, as if waiting for Hugh to propose.

“I’m so unusual. Right, Hugh?” Sue winked. “Who likes movies?”

She’s funny. That’s good, Hugh thought, excited. A different voice interrupted: *Wait. I’m taken.* A third Hugh chimed in: *By whom? You’re not dating Hilda.* The cacophony threw him off the track of the conversation. He gawked at Sue’s sly expression.

“What do you do, Hugh,” Ruth said, “when you have to see all those movies? You don’t go alone, do you?”

Ginnie took his arm and pulled him protectively close. He followed Sue’s eyes to his daughter, who now directed her unibrow frown at Sue.

“Don’t tell me you watch them all by yourself,” Ruth pressed.

“I’m sure Hugh’s screening card is full,” Sue said.

“We have to go,” Ginnie announced. “Grandpa *is* sitting there all by himself. He looks so sad.” She twisted away, taking Hugh’s arm with her. Hugh was forced to turn or do himself injury.

“Nice to see you again, Hugh,” Sue said as he staggered two steps away but then stood his ground, stalling his daughter’s progress. She called, “And you too, Ginnie. Haven’t seen you since you were a little girl. You’ve grown into a beautiful young woman. Happy holidays.”

“Happy holidays,” Ginnie answered to the ceiling. “Come on, Daddy,” she insisted. When he didn’t immediately obey, she yanked hard—one more instance, in a lifetime’s worth, of being towed by a woman to a port of her choosing.

1.15

“What the hell was Grandma talking about to that woman? Asking if you go alone to movies?” Ginnie had been stewing since meeting Sue Roth. This was what bubbled up after fifteen minutes of silence in the passenger seat. Ray was sprawled across most of the back seat, deafened by his iPod earphones, staring at the Jersey landscape of malls and the occasional correctional facility. Hugh had also been pensive. He and Ginnie had the same woman on their minds.

“I don’t think Ruth really understands that I screen movies at work most days. Or that I get DVD screeners to take home. She doesn’t really know how I do my work in general,” he said diplomatically.

“For a second it almost seemed like she was trying to fix you up with that woman.” A heavy silence followed until Ginnie exclaimed: “Don’t tell me that’s what Grandma was doing!”

Hugh had never developed a taste for secrecy, especially with his children. He practiced it when necessary or merciful but otherwise did his best to be straightforward, another of the many ways he tried to differ from the example of his father. “I think it was more coming from her friend Denise. And I think ‘fix up’ is overstating it . . .”

“How would you state it? That’s exactly what it was!” Ginnie was more or less shouting. “OH MY GOD, Grandma was matchmaking!” Now she was shouting.

Ray pulled out his ear buds, leaking rap lyrics and an insistent beat. “What?” he asked.

“Aren’t you just . . . APPALLED?”

“Are you talking to me?” Ray said.

“Nobody’s talking to you, Ray.” This was as unpleasant as Ginnie had ever been.

“That’s sad,” Ray commented mildly. “Are you yelling at Pop?” He leaned forward, head thrust between father and daughter.

“Dad,” Ginnie prompted.

Hugh considered what he could say.

“Dad,” Ginnie repeated.

“What are you badgering Pop about?” Ray asked.

“Did you know about this scheme of Grandma’s, Dad?”

“Ah!” Ray leaned back, searching for his earbuds. “The fix up.”

“See?” Ginnie said. “It was obvious to everyone. So don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m not pretending anything,” Hugh complained, stung. “Couple weeks ago Ruth mentioned that her friend—”

“Couple weeks ago!” Ginnie exclaimed. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“Why should he tell you?” Ray asked.

Hugh pressed on, “Her friend had a daughter who was, you know, a good person...”

“A good person.” Ray chuckled from the backseat. He had the buds poised to be reinserted as soon as this conversation became tiresome. “Is goodness what you want in a date?”

Hugh talked over him: “. . . who had lost her husband . . . ”

“Lost her husband. Where?” Ginnie said. “At the mall?”

“What?” Hugh said.

“Bad joke, sorry.”

“To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune,” Ray said, quoting Oscar Wilde.

“To lose both looks like carelessness.”

Ginnie twisted about and snarled, “Oh shut up! Sarcasm doesn’t always have to be your default.”

Ray often seemed enraged during routine conversations. Faced with Ginnie’s out-of-proportion anger he reacted gently. “I wasn’t being sarcastic and I’m sorry I offended you. But I think you should bear in mind that Dad has to live his life and I’m sure Grandma would like to have a hand in that.”

“What does that mean, ‘Dad has to live his life’? Of course he has to live his life.”

“His life will include dating.”

“Dad isn’t dating!” Ginnie lunged toward the backseat as if only the safety belt could prevent her from assaulting her brother. “He isn’t dating for a year! He told us. Remember? At Thanksgiving? He told us his therapist said he shouldn’t date for a year. Jesus, don’t you listen to anybody?”

“No, I only listen to my girlfriend. With her there’s an incentive. But you’re the one who doesn’t listen to what people say. Dad told us he decided not to date for a year and asked for his therapist’s approval. Not the other way around. This is Dad’s impossible-to-pull-off idea and maybe he came up with it *because* he was worried you’d freak out if he started dating.”

Ginnie turned toward Hugh. She might have startled him into a crash, but as a precaution he had already slowed to well under fifty and shifted into the right lane, a snail's pace for the Turnpike.

"*You* decided not to date for a year?" Ginnie said. "Your decision, not your shrink's?"

"Just a second. I'm looking for a rest stop. Are we near the Walt Whitman?"

"You mean the Grover Cleveland," Ray corrected. "That's the last rest stop before the Holland."

He didn't see a sign for the Grover Cleveland or any other rest stop. He exited anyway to gas up Leslie and Guillermo's car as a thank you, and to avoid killing what was left of his nuclear family. While he turned onto a service road Ginnie again thrust her face across the bucket seat divide. "So not to date for a year was *your* decision, not your shrink's?"

"He's not really a shrink. He's a grief counselor."

"Not a shrink, a grief counselor." Ray chuckled. "Poor Pops," he added.

Hugh spied a Mobil Station and slowed to enter. "And yes it was my idea, not his."

"Remember now, sis?" Ray said. "We were on the way home from Thanksgiving at Grandma's, on this same bucolic turnpike, and you were fishing to find out if he was dating by asking if he was too lonely without Mom . . ."

"I was not fishing! Jesus, you're a dick."

"That's true." Ray inserted his ear buds, and collapsed back, re-sprawling himself across the seat.

Hugh arrived at the less-explosive haven of a gas tank. He hopped out to fill the Volvo, but was immediately reminded of New Jersey's bizarre state law that barred self-

service by an alarmed attendant jogging his way and waving him off. Hugh stayed out, preferring to chat with a stranger about the Giants while the car was fed than brave more of his children's conversation. He saw Ginnie talking, presumably to Ray, although Ray's ears were stuffed with music. Meanwhile, he realized he had made a mistake, an odd one. Sue Roth wasn't a widow. Ruth had told him she'd never married. Why had he put her in his category? In any case he decided against correcting the record with his children.

Once the Volvo was satisfied and the attendant paid he remounted. Before turning the key he raised his right hand, the ancient sign from his children's toddler days that he was about to make a speech. Ginnie folded her hands in her lap. Ray sat up, earbuds still in. "Can you hear me, Ray?"

Ray smiled and nodded.

"Let me just set a few facts straight. All Grandma said was that she knew I wasn't ready to start seeing people, but when I was ready there was this woman—whom I'm assuming was the woman we met tonight—and she lived in Manhattan and was nice. That's all."

"And she likes movies," Ginnie said, voice dripping with contempt.

"And she likes movies," Hugh admitted. "But I'm not ready to start dating so none of it should bother either of you." Hugh turned to Ginnie. "We okay?"

"What do you mean?" she snapped. "I've always been okay with your dating. You were the one who came up with this cockamamie one-year rule. I don't want you to be alone. I just want you to be happy." She folded her arms across her chest, looking as unhappy as she had all evening.

Hugh called back to Ray, "We okay?"

“What?” Ray removed his earphones. “Did you say something to me?”

“Jesus,” Ginnie said.

“I’m still not dating for a year, okay?”

“You’re asking for my approval?”

“No.”

“Good. Because it’s none of my business.” Ray grinned at his sister and re-stuffed his ears. Hugh rejoined the flow of traffic and they rode the rest of the way home deaf and dumb.

1.16

Hugh had promised Hilda that by Christmas he would give her an answer as to whether he could sneak away to her friend's house in Barbados in January. But having celebrated Chanukah by denying to his children that he was dating, he wondered all over again if he should continue to see Hilda at all. Going on a trip, no matter what they told themselves, would mean they were a couple of some sort, closer to being married than to dating. And if he said no to an ideal winter vacation wasn't that a passive preliminary to breaking up?

Better to be honest with her and his children by ending it. He had made no promises. If he stopped seeing her, no matter how hurt she might feel, she couldn't claim he had misrepresented the limited nature of their relationship.

Still, he wished with all his heart he could avoid telling her in person. He was cowardly enough to contemplate a hand-written letter or a phone call so he wouldn't have to witness her immediate, unguarded reaction. He wished he could ask Roberto Salazar's opinion, but their grief counseling sessions were on Christmas hiatus until January 3rd.

He had just about convinced himself a phone call would be merciful to Hilda, not to mention himself, when Ginnie, three days before returning to DC to celebrate New Year's with Joe and friends, entered the living room in tears.

"The fucker did it by email," she announced, clutching her Blackberry in both hands as if it were a tiny bible. Her round face, the shape of Amy's, was relaxed, but tears were steadily refilling her light-blue eyes and skimming down her fair and, like Hugh's, easily

reddened cheeks. One tear in particular lingered on her chin. She bowed her head and read Joe's email aloud as the tear fell on her screen: "'You know I care about you and I'll always have feelings for you but I'm too busy at school to maintain a relationship and, to be completely open and honest, I know that eventually I'll want to be free to see other people while we're living so far apart.' Far apart!" Ginnie interjected. "It's a hundred miles!" She returned to reading: "'Sorry to break up long distance but moving my stuff out while you're away will be less painful for both of us.'" She shoved her Blackberry into her jeans. "He's too busy to have a relationship but not too busy to fuck co-eds. What an asshole. What a cowardly asshole." So far anger had effortlessly powered her speech. Cursing him released a sob.

Hugh hugged her, and she laid her head on his chest. He stroked the tight dirty-blonde curls. They were an amalgam of his straight yellow hair and Amy's auburn waves. Caressing her like this brought back carrying her in a Snugli. She had been a fussy baby, happiest when held. Her head was trembling. No more noise, though. He swayed from side to side, the old technique of soothing her. After half a minute she calmed, as she had more than two decades ago. Hugh could see Amy—not corporeally, but he could feel her at the fringe of this embrace. She was mute, yet he heard clearly what she was saying: "Stop fucking around. Take care of our babies."

Ray appeared, earphones in, not seeing them, too intent on his goal, the kitchen. When he reappeared with a box of Stoned Wheat Thins, a knife, and a jar of Skippy, he noticed them. He was in boxers and a white T-shirt, the newly grown tummy clearly outlined. He must have put on twenty-five, maybe thirty pounds. Even for the first semester

of freshman year that was too much. Ginnie was clinging to a toxic love, Ray to saturated fat.

Ray removed his earphones. With the knife he gestured a question mark at Ginnie that she couldn't see. Her back was to him, and anyway she had buried her face in Daddy.

Hugh mouthed: Joe broke up with her.

Ray frowned. He blared in his public address voice: "Just now?"

Ginnie startled in Hugh's arms. She peeked out at her brother, then shivered and hugged Daddy tighter.

Ray put Wheat Thins, Skippy, and knife down on a side table and came over. He rested a hand on his sister's back and rubbed in a comforting circle. "He's a dick."

She nodded.

"He's always been a dick," Ray said. "He didn't just become one today. He was made in standard dick mold. He's still only a first-year law student, but he was born a soulless corporate lawyer."

Ginnie chuckled reluctantly, gratefully.

"This is a good thing for you," Ray said. He kissed the back of her head, then retreated to collect his foodstuffs.

Ginnie watched him. "I love you, Ray," she called.

"Love you, sis."

"Don't get fat."

Ray cocked his head and carefully thought through this change of subject. "I still love you," he decided and took the food into his bedroom.

Ginnie peered up at Hugh, eyes swollen, red. "Dad, I'm sorry."

“Nothing to be sorry about.”

“I mean about being silly about Grandma and that woman. I was a pill. I’m sorry. You don’t have to wait a year to date. I’m okay.” She hugged him again. “I’m okay with it.”

In thirty minutes Ginnie’s two closest friends arrived. With the determined hustle and bustle of paramedics they carried her away to be resuscitated. Shortly after, Ray’s girlfriend Mai appeared from some family obligation of hers. They barricaded themselves in his room. Based on past experience, other than brief sightings when they foraged for food, they would not be seen for at least eighteen hours.

His evening suddenly free—he always held himself in reserve in case his children should be available last minute—Hugh called Hilda’s cell. They had not spoken for three days, the longest silence since they met.

“Sweetums!” she answered. “Glad you called. I didn’t want to bug you while you were with your kids. How was Chanukah?”

“We survived. Barely. Are you home for a little while? Can I stop by?”

“You betcha. You can stop by for as long as you like. Longer,” she giggled, sounding two drinks into merriment. “Are you hungry? I just came from Francine’s Christmas Eve clusterfuck. I ate instead of relating to anyone but I’ll meet you somewhere discreet if you’re starving. Or we could order in, like always.”

Even inexperienced Hugh knew that breaking up in a public place to forestall a scene was chicken shit. He said he just wanted to come over for a little while. He marched to her apartment without rehearsing a speech or imagining her reaction to the miserable act he was about to commit, both likely to detour him. He fancied his robotic state of mind must be what executioners affect before they dispassionately end a life.

Hilda didn't derive a hint from his grim appearance or manner. Nor his no-lingering peck on the lips, his squirming out of her arms, his shedding of goose down coat on a chair instead of hanging it in the front closet, and not even by the tell of all tells—his declining a glass of wine and saying, “We have to talk.”

“Sure,” she said brightly, standing at the entrance to her tiny kitchen. “What about?”

“You should sit,” Hugh said. Still no alarm on her face. He settled on an armless chair and gestured for her to sit on the couch. At last some inkling appeared to set in as she obeyed, hands in lap, waiting for him solemnly and curiously. He sighed, couldn't hold her eyes, his drifting to the floor. “You know I've had a great time getting to know you and being with you but you remember what I said at the beginning and it's true, I'm not really available, I'm still . . .” He cleared his throat rather than say ‘in mourning.’ He was surprised to hear himself making Amy the cause. That was a lie. Ending things with Hilda had nothing to do with grief. For one thing, his vow was still in effect, to be independent for at least a year, to learn who the hell this Hugh was. And for another, although Hilda was beautiful, sweet-natured, and great in bed, she could never be his wife, companion to his final days, the last face he would see before journey's end. When the time came to marry again, to bring someone into his children's lives, he didn't feel the childless and still somewhat immature Hilda was appropriate. Amy, the memory of his marriage, the loss of her, that wasn't the obstacle. And yet what a handy excuse! Much less hurtful than a rejection. “So while I'm going through this mourning process it just feels wrong to me for us to continue seeing each other this way. It's not fair to you and really it's not good for me. You should be dating guys who are available and I should be dealing with my grief.” Calmed by hearing the compassion, the reasonableness, the kindness of his speech, he dared to look at her.

Hugh thought he had seen the full range of expressions Hilda could produce. She had wept on two occasions, once speaking of her mother's death and—to Hugh's astonishment—once after a series of rapid orgasms. He had also seen her look angry with him after he casually called investment banking legalized fraud, her mouth, nose, and brow collapsing into a face-wide frown. Now she showed him utter shock, profound surprise. She had had no clue.

"I don't understand, I don't understand," she stammered. "What did I do? Why are you dumping me? What's happened?"

"Hilda, I'm not dumping you. I have the greatest respect for you . . ."

"THEN WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?" She clutched her stomach as if he'd stabbed her.

"Honey." He crossed to the couch, straightening her into his arms. "I'm not dumping you. There's nothing wrong with you. You're fantastic. Smart. Beautiful. Great to be with."

"Then why?" she groaned. "Why are you throwing me away?" Pooling tears were all he could see of her eyes, narrowed and wincing.

"I'm just not ready," he pleaded. "Amy died six months ago."

"Great," she mumbled.

"Great?"

"Eight," she enunciated. "She died eight months ago."

Confused, Hugh counted. "May," he said then stopped himself. "Well, she died May 29th so really May doesn't count. June, July, August, September, October, November, December. So it's seven months, really."

“Okay, seven! Thirty days! I was off by thirty days. So were you.”

“You’re right, the exact amount doesn’t matter. I was with her for thirty years.

Compared to that six months, eight months, a year, is a very short time. It’s just too early for me. I’m sorry.” Hugh paused. “This is my fault. I should never have started seeing you, even secretly. It was unfair to put you in this position.”

“What’s the difference?” She pushed out of his arms. “It’s bullshit. Just bullshit saying this was different than us falling in love, regular dating, all that. This is the way real relationships start: intense talks, hot sex, lots of time alone together.” Hilda crossed her arms, eyes narrowed and glaring. “You’re dumping me. You took what you wanted and now you’re throwing me away.” Her voice had cleared of pain. It rang like a brass bell: “I’m going to tell Francine.”

“What?”

“She should know the kind of user you are.” Hilda stood. “Go.” A wince cracked her stern demeanor. Her lips trembled. “Just go,” she mumbled. She turned away and waited for him to obey.

He took a final, appreciative look at her strong calves, shapely buttocks, the length and strength of her back, her cascade of blonde hair. She was proud and direct, different from the other women he knew well, and it struck him how few he had known as intimately. He was grateful she had shared so much of herself. He wanted to apologize again. He wanted to excuse himself again, to reassure her about her future happiness, and most of all to part without ugliness. Instead he made sure to say “Goodbye, Hilly,” because he had learned that unlike his finer feelings, goodbyes could last forever.

1.17

Descriptions of the Christmas and New Year holidays for the Reynolds household are best skipped, so heavy were their days and nights as a motherless family. The exception was an encounter Hugh had on December 31st at ten-thirty in the morning. He was fetching a third cup of coffee from the Melitta drip in his galley kitchen when a six-foot African American woman blocked his exit. He gasped at her silent, sudden appearance. He was only momentarily startled: it was Mai. He was used to Ray's girlfriend being almost his height, but a new hairdo, a woven tower of gold, red and black dreadlocks, had added six inches. The last time he saw her, two days before, she'd had braided cornrows flush to her scalp.

"Wow," he said, stepping back to get a wider angle. "Your hair looks great."

"You're so nice about that," she said. "You brought up Ray to be polite that way too. He always notices when I change something and compliments it." She slowly maneuvered her long neck, a thin column for the grandeur of her head, ninety degrees to the right, then pivoted one hundred eighty to the left, seemingly testing whether the bouquet of threaded hair was properly balanced. "I'm still not sure about the dreads."

A spice—tamarind? something Indian—wafted from her. Hugh worried it was racist of him to notice she smelled of anything, especially food seasoning. He concentrated on seeing her as a human being but got stuck on body parts. First, her bone-thin arms, bare in one of Ray's pre-washed Gap tees. Second, the sharp points of her shoulders under the fabric, as if she had neglected to remove a hanger. And last the hollows above and below her collarbone. He wondered if her ancestry was Sudanese. He hoped she wasn't anorexic, his

speculation crossing the Atlantic to middle-class America. Mai was decidedly middle-class, her mother an OB/GYN, her father an insurance executive who had died of cancer, roughly four years ago, Hugh believed. That was how she and Ray had met, in a Brown support group for students whose parents had died. She had been raised in Hartford, Connecticut, and hoped to be a public-interest lawyer.

I'm racist to think of her as exotic, Hugh decided, sinking deeper into the mud of self-disgust he had been mired in since his cruel treatment of Hilda, a guilt worsened by her not having acted on the threat of telling Francine—at least so far.

“I’m probably standing strong precisely because my mother hates my hair like this,” Mai went on to explain. “She says I’m being self-consciously ‘African,’” she added, forming air quotes with her astonishingly long fingers, which looked equal to Hugh’s. It occurred to him with a thrill that if six-foot-two Ray married her, his grandchildren would be able to palm a basketball.

“Aren’t dreadlocks Jamaican?” Hugh ventured.

“Exactly!” Mai said, approvingly pointing her elegant index finger at him. She sighed. “Either way, my mother’s point is ‘You from Connecticut, girl,’ as she chose to put it. Whenever Mother wants to sound hip she ends up imitating Oprah.”

“Sounds more like Dr. Phil than Oprah,” Hugh said, encouraged by his previous success.

He was granted another finger point. “Right!” She focused her enormous amber eyes on him; they were exquisite, shimmering jewels. That his son was enjoying the affections of this exceptional young woman was comforting, especially given that when it came to his children’s futures Hugh’s heart was fretting for two. He wondered what Amy would have

said about her, or rather about Ray's devotion to her, that Ray seemed more interested in her than in his studies.

"Mr. Reynolds, I wanted to discuss something with you," Mai said.

Hugh didn't answer, preoccupied by a conversation with Amy he would never have.

"Mr. Reynolds?"

"Hugh," he said, not for the first time. "Please call me Hugh."

"My mother wouldn't approve of that," she said, also not for the first time. "I may be having relations with your son"—Mai smiled slyly, mostly to herself—"although she's in denial about that, but even so she wouldn't believe that was cause for me to be informal with an adult."

"Your mother and mine would have gotten along," Hugh said.

"That so?" Mai asked innocently and with a note of profound skepticism.

"Well, at least about manners they would have been in agreement. But please tell me anything that's on your mind," Hugh said. He was keen to learn what he could from her. Ray used to confide his every hope and hurt to his father, but since the day Amy was declared terminal he had sealed shut. Hugh feared beneath Ray's argumentative rants something urgently needed to be discovered and healed. This remarkable young woman had the keys to his son's secret heart. Maybe she would open it for him.

"I wanted to ask you, Mr. Reynolds, and I only dare to ask because Ray says it's okay for me to ask. Actually he said 'It's appropriate,' which sounded strange, as if Ray were a television shrink, which he most certainly is not. Anyway, what I wanted to ask you, sorry I'm very slow to get to it, another trait of mine that makes my mother even more impatient than she usually is . . ." Out of breath, she inhaled deeply before continuing. "My point is

that I took his word as permission to ask whether you would be willing to entertain an introduction to my old voice teacher, Mrs. Fletcher.” Mai, for the first time in their acquaintance, looked flustered. She lowered her gleaming eyes to the floor and shook her head. “Former, I meant to say former. Louisa Fletcher is not old. She’s about your age, which is certainly not old.” Mai interwove her fingers prayerfully at the waist of her black jeans. They were probably the smallest adult size manufactured and yet they looked loose on her. “She’s a widower, recently lost her husband, just last year. Like you, she isn’t interested in dating or anything remotely of that sort. Like you, she had a very happy marriage. She’s a very intelligent and cultured person, as you are, and is fantastic to go to concerts with. She was kind enough to take me to the opera several times since her husband passed and it’s an education—a fun education, I mean. I remember your saying that one of the things you missed was giving up your Carnegie Hall subscription. Mrs. Fletcher has one to the Met, of course, but she also loves jazz.”

Ray appeared from the gloom of the hallway behind her. “And?” he prompted.

Mai glanced at him. “And?”

“You didn’t tell my pop the best part.”

Mai returned her attention to Hugh and smiled broadly. “And she loves movies!”

Mischievous Ray grinned at his father. The laughter this pulled from Hugh surprised him as much as it did Mai. Hearing Ray’s chuckles she wheeled on him, demanding to know what prank he had played. Ginnie appeared fresh from the shower in bathrobe and towel head to find out what the fuss was about. Hugh explained, Ginnie giggled, and Mai attacked Ray, who fell to the floor laughing helplessly while she pounded his chest, saying, “How dare

you punk me, mister!” and for the only time that holiday season there was laughter throughout the Reynolds home.

Stage Two

2.1

As the first anniversary of Amy's death neared, Hugh decided to honor Jewish tradition by unveiling her headstone. Ruth told him she and Bernie preferred not to use a rabbi for this ceremony, limiting it to the Kaddish prayer and whatever her loved ones wanted to say. To prepare his remarks, he went deep into the master bedroom's walk-in closet to explore the box of childhood keepsakes that years ago Ruth had packed up for Amy to have.

He carried it into their bedroom and found the sealing tape already cut. Amy must have neglected to reseal it after she inspected what Ruth had chosen to send. Inside he found photos, two sets in small albums and the others loose, a chronology of Amy growing up: as cherubic baby; as impish girl dressed like a cowboy, complete with toy gun and holster, boots and spurs; as cheerful chubby camp counselor-in-training; and last as a solemn, slightly worried high school senior, a little too skinny, her auburn hair so ungoverned it almost covered her face. Beneath the pictures he spied a packet of letters in her rounded, neat handwriting from camp and college and read a few. They had a touch of formality, the frustrated writer struggling to find a voice that was at once casual and fulsome. Beneath the packet, tucked away at the very bottom—he almost didn't reach for it—was a notebook.

Its padded cover had a floral design. The pages were light green and faintly lined, the edges becoming brittle with age. The opening sentence was “I just finished moving into my freshman dorm.”

Seeing each entry had been dated, Hugh’s heart began to beat fast. He flipped to the end and confirmed that this notebook covered all of her college days, which meant he would find accounts of when they first met, his courtship, and their decision to marry in senior year.

There were several tearful pleasures he discovered in these entries, including the surprise that right away Amy had thought him “very cute, in a preppy way, especially his chiseled chin and the dimple that appears in his left cheek when he smiles . . .” She loved his “passion for movies, which makes him talk like a professor . . .” He also discovered a jealousy he didn’t know he should have had, of a would-be poet and classics major, Bill Zwick, whom he remembered vaguely always smoking Gauloises and tossing off his shoulder a mass of straight black hair that fell halfway down his back. She gushed about Z’s lanky frame, moody eyes, and, most shocking of all: “Z is so good with his long fingers my bones feel like they’re melting. He’s a very experienced lover . . .” Hugh wasn’t surprised, but it was painful, that once Zwick without explanation disappeared from the diary, and lucky Hugh became the only man in its pages, he found no mention of lovemaking other than the fact of it.

He forgave her, or rather the past, for that slight and continued on to find the entry reacting to his marriage proposal in senior year.

*It’s so fucking crazy to marry this young when all my friends
are vowing never to get married. It’s not only a stupid, stupid
bourgeois convention, I think marriage stopped my mom from*

staying a teacher and that's made her a little crazy. But I don't have to give up my writing. Anyway, that's not what I'm really worried about. I'm worried about taking Hughie on full time. He's so sweet, but he's sweet like a child and when I met his parents I found out why. His mother is an ice cube tray. She treats him like a stray puppy she's longing to give to the ASPCA. She even corrects the way he eats. You can practically see the newspaper in her hand hitting him on his snout. And his father acts like an older brother to H., like he's someone he wants to beat up. He bragged to me that Hugh still couldn't beat him at tennis! Anyway it solves the mystery of why Hughie never seems to know what he's feeling. His parents obviously didn't want him, don't like being parents, so they don't want him to feel anything cause it's so goddamn inconvenient. He's like a character out of Franny and Zooey. That's why I always have to explain to him why he gets sad and feels like crying for what he thinks is no reason, when it seems so obvious, or why he can't be alone for too long, or why he keeps doing what his friends want even if it bores him, and it's so fucking clear now. His parents aren't parents. He's a child. Can I marry a child? Should I?

That brought him to the bottom of the page. He felt his jaw ache, sore these days from what his dentist claimed was night-grinding, and throbbing now with anger at Amy.

This was an old quarrel, what he thought of as her Jewish view of his parents, a tribal misunderstanding. Of course his parents loved him in their critical, WASPy way. They hadn't had any other children; naturally he bore the brunt of all their criticism. Amy had a brother for her parents to snipe at. Amy even complained that Ruth was never satisfied with her homemaking or mothering of Ginnie and Ray. Long ago Hugh and she had agreed to disagree about his parents. Right: long ago. He was merely reading her first impression.

He flipped the page. "But," she wrote, "but but but I love his tenderness, his need, and I don't mind, I really don't mind having to tell him what's in his heart. He won't need much mothering. In my arms, he'll grow up fast."

He covered his face trying to stop them, those same tears Amy claimed would come upon him without his understanding. Only now he did understand. She was right. She had been the mother he never had, the love that, rather than shame and thwart him, had made him a man. She had been his family.

Two weeks after the unveiling, twelve months after Amy's death, Hugh decided his year of avoiding dating was over. Since Hilda he had remained chaste in his grief and it was time for both sorrow and horniness to be relieved. And he certainly wasn't going to repeat the mistake he had made, and regretted, with Hilda: hurting a woman by keeping his heart shuttered while she opened hers.

That night Hugh told Leslie, "I'm ready to start dating."

"Great news," she said, bluffing excitement; her hollow intonation suggested worry. "Who?" she asked and immediately corrected herself: "I have names for you. People have been submitting prospects to me for months." She penitently bowed her helmet of straight brown hair, lately dyed with a reddish tint, bringing its color nearer to her lost friend's shade.

“People have been submitting names to you?”

Leslie turned to look him full in the face. They had met post-work for dinner, a regular occurrence since Amy’s death, sitting side by side in a booth at the Knickerbocker. Guillermo was touring in Italy and France. Leslie’s big brown puppy dog eyes, the one arresting feature in an otherwise pleasant face, held his much longer than usual; they had a tendency to dart away bashfully when confronted. Now they stayed and looked forlorn, as if she were saying goodbye forever. “You are a hot ticket, my friend. I’ll go through the list. You have to choose. I can’t pick someone for you, that’s for sure.” She returned her attention to her plate. “I’m going to miss you when these ladies take you away.”

I’m in love with her, Hugh thought. It was a shocking truth that had never made its presence felt before, at least not consciously; a painful discovery because it included the inescapable fact that he could never have her.

“Okay,” she said to the last of her second Perfect Manhattan. “Boy, am I drunk. If you ask me Margery Collins would be first on my list. You know who I’m talking about, right?”

“Sure, the writer? She’s famous.”

“She’s brilliant and not at all full of herself. We were both at Hunter, although I didn’t know her well until after we graduated. She used to work at *Time* magazine but left to write a book. And did. She’s published three. All pretty successful, especially her bio of Alice Roosevelt that was made into . . . what was the movie called?”

“*The Princess of DC*,” Hugh said. “Wasn’t that the book’s title?”

“I think she just called it *Alice Roosevelt*. Don’t remember. I’m going senile. You’ve heard me talk about Margs a lot, right? She’s one of the people in that regular lunch I have

with women who were in my class at Hunter. Since the school had no spirit we started meeting once a month a million years ago . . .” Leslie was addressing her drink, her plate, the Hirschfield drawings on the Knickbocker’s dark walls, anything but him.

He was glad her big brown eyes were avoiding his. Otherwise he might kiss her and hang on for dear life. He moved to neutral ground. “Sure, you’ve talked about those lunches a lot. Wasn’t the whole group at your fiftieth birthday?”

“Yeah, exactly, they were all there. Remember Margery? Very slim and pretty, has beautiful skin, no lines, and looks twenty years younger than she is, only when she was in her late twenties she let her hair go gray. It’s pure white, very straight, very striking against her black eyebrows, dramatic, really lovely. I was furious at her twenty years ago. Now I think, what a lot of time I waste on my hair. And for what? I’m an old lady. Margs’ natural gray hair looks great. Of course she doesn’t have my wrinkles.” Leslie put a hand on her throat and pulled her skin tight. “Time to have this done.”

“You’re beautiful. Don’t be silly. You look twenty years younger than you are. At least!” he added hastily in case that wasn’t a sufficiently flattering age regression.

“Margery’s really lovely, very, very smart, wonderful mother, one of my favorite people who I don’t get to see enough of. Did you read her book?”

“You know illiterate me. Just saw the movie.”

“Her husband, you know the famous Jim Wilson, was much older, almost thirty years older than she, a world-beater but still, much older. Was her boss at *Time* briefly before he got some chair at Columbia. It was one of those young woman-older man crushes that I think maybe she was too proud to admit later was a mistake. They have a sweet son—just graduating college—I shouldn’t say that,” Leslie added, interrupting herself.

“The son is a secret? Or his graduation from college?”

“You’re funny. Have I ever told you you’re funny? No, I mean I shouldn’t have made it sound like she didn’t love Jim. She never said anything like that to me. Quite the opposite. To everybody’s amazement she talked about him as if he were the most devastatingly handsome and charming man, which, to be honest . . .” Leslie made a face. “Nice looking guy before decrepitude set in, but devastating? Also, smart, sure, and successful, but charming? Terminally smug and sort of grumpy, I always thought. Anyway, Margs always talked and acted as if he were the cat’s meow.”

Hugh was losing interest. He doubted he could measure up to either charm or smugness. The search for love suddenly seemed exhausting, especially now that he knew he was sitting beside the woman he wanted. “When did he die?” he asked.

“Who?” At last Leslie looked at him. The puppy dog eyes were no longer sad, merely curious. Perhaps he had only imagined she felt possessive.

“Margery’s husband. Jim, you said? When did—”

She laughed, a lovely relaxed sound from a gal who usually seemed worried and harried. “Jim’s not dead! He left her for a thirty-year-old graduate student. Can you believe it? He’s in his eighties! I guess Jim’s expiration date on us ladies is fifty. ‘Time for a new squeeze.’” She sat up abruptly. “Oh! I forgot. I have a favor to ask you. Our cleaning lady is leaving us. Can you believe it? Her daughter is moving somewhere way the hell out in New Jersey and she’s moving in to help with the grandkids. Does Olga have any free days? I’d love two but I’ll take one, beggars can’t be choosers. The boys are just a disaster no matter how many times I yell at them to pick up towels, underpants, video game controllers.”

“Okay, but . . .” Hugh hesitated to agree. Olga’s incompetence had been a running joke in his household. Ray was amused by her consistently putting his clothes in his sister’s drawers and vice versa, commenting that she obviously wanted them to be cross-dressers. Ginnie was amazed that no matter how many Post-Its she stuck on her papers and books warning Olga not to, Olga went ahead and moved everything while dusting. Amy often wistfully said, “Poor Olga’s a dolt. If we fire her she’ll starve.” And Hugh remembered Ray commenting, “If everyone who’s a dolt was fired half the country would be unemployed.” Olga was a legacy of his life with Amy, especially the years of her illness. She had seemed as heartbroken as anyone during Amy’s struggle and decline. She did her job ineptly but with discretion, helping with emergency cleanups others might have balked at. Since Ray’s departure for Brown, and especially because he was staying with Mai in Providence for the summer while she worked as an intern for a Legal Aid lawyer, Hugh no longer needed her twice a week but hadn’t had the heart to reduce her days. It astonished him that with only him messing up a small corner of the apartment, it seemed dustier and more disorganized than ever, and Olga, perhaps out of grief, seemed to make more mistakes.

“But what? Don’t tell me you don’t want to share?” Leslie struck a pose of matronly hurt—hand on bosom, dignified pout.

“Leslie, you’re welcome to Olga but you remember Amy used to complain that Olga just moved the dust around, and Ray and Ginnie always thought she was a joke, putting the wrong clothes in their closets when it should be obvious who is the six-foot-two boy and who the petite girl.”

“I’m not as fussy as Amy.” Leslie’s familiar, soothing hand stroked his forearm; it was such a pleasure to be touched with easy familiar affection. “And Margery Collins?”

Should I give you her email or phone number or . . .” She hesitated and asked gently, “Maybe she’s not intriguing? Just because *I* would date Margs in a flash doesn’t mean you’d like to. Should I go to number two on my list?”

“You have them ranked?”

“Sort of. A top five anyway. After that I don’t really know them, just names people toss at me when they hear I know of an available man who isn’t psychotic.” She shook her head. “I gotta say, for gals our age it sounds pretty scary out there. So you have your pick. Should I go deeper into the list?”

It was amazing to Hugh that should he reject this accomplished woman without having met her, for his hubris he would be rewarded with more names. He stared off considering her details. A gray-haired woman dumped by her doddering husband seemed safe. On the other hand it would be devastating to be judged less exciting than an octogenarian. But what choice did he have? Leslie was beyond his reach. Hugh sighed, sounding and feeling doomed. “When you get home shoot me her email address.”

2.2

Corresponding with Margery Collins, Hugh immediately felt incompetent. Her response to his introductory email seemed as elegant as haiku.

Dear Hugh: Thanks for your charming note and the wise caution of your invitation. Leslie raves about you and she is never wrong. Would be pleased to have coffee (or something stronger) next Tuesday at venue of your choosing, anytime after four. — Margs

He discovered she was a lively and skilled writer after buying a paperback of her Alice Roosevelt biography. He also learned it had been nominated for a National Book Award and short-listed for the Pulitzer. James Robert Wilson, her unfaithful husband, was even more intimidating. He was a jack of all trades and a master too: champion squash player at Yale, top news editor at *Time* through the seventies and eighties, two-time crew member in the America's Cup, host of an award-winning PBS documentary series on neuroscience, longtime occupant of the Allingworth Chair at Columbia as a Distinguished Professor of Foreign Policy, author of the bestselling World War II spy trilogy *Golden Acorns*, and a world-class Scrabble player. According to his amazingly long Wikipedia entry he was fluent in Russian, German, French, and, presumably, English.

The couple's pedigrees threatened to render Hugh speechless for the hour he set aside to meet Margery. From her email's aside about something stronger he assumed she preferred

not to meet in a Village café. Despite his intention to write a brief and pithy reply, he composed a long-winded, dithering email suggesting they meet at five-thirty for a drink at the Gotham, unless she preferred somewhere else or a different hour, except for lunch and not later than . . .

Margery's entire response: "H - Brilliant! - M."

His shaky self-confidence collapsed when he didn't recognize Margery from her author photo. The slim, blue-eyed woman in a sleeveless gray silk dress who approached the two stools he had commandeered at the quiet end of the bar and asked, tentatively, "Hugh?" didn't have a single strand of gray hair. She had flowing, blown-out sandy locks.

He stammered hello while trying to extricate himself from the Gotham's stool and offer a hand, managing to accomplish neither satisfactorily.

Slapping down a glittering black purse on the bar as if placing a bet, inserting a black high heel shoe into the neighboring stool's first rung, and boosting herself up gracefully beside him, Margery didn't notice Hugh's hand. "I abandoned my honest white head," she explained without being asked. "Haven't confessed to Leslie that I finally gave in to middle-aged vanity. Pure stubbornness. My hair went gray at twenty-five, I decided not to dye it, that became my trademark, as it were—I'm hardly a can of Coke—and then I was too proud to admit there's a difference between premature gray and mature gray." She exhaled. "Hello. Nice to meet you finally. You are Leslie's favorite human being, outside of Guillermo and her boys, of course. I'm quite jealous. Leslie is the kindest, most thoughtful person I've ever heard of, not to say met. My ambition was to be her favorite person and you've beat me out."

As he had feared Hugh was made mute by her power of speech. He did perceive she was very nervous and trying to impress him but that didn't change the fact that he wasn't nimble enough for her wit. He felt as if he had been given a "fun" opportunity to rally with Serena Williams and he was responding by standing still.

"Leslie feels sorry for me," Hugh said. While contemplating how sad he felt that his feelings for Leslie were hopeless, he had also wondered why she was so affectionate to him, more affectionate than if he were merely a friend. Taking into account her tall, dark, handsome husband, he had decided pity was the likely explanation.

A hovering bartender asked Margery, "May I get you something?"

"Vodka martini?" she wondered.

"We have them," the bartender said. He was returning Serena's backhand better than Hugh. "Belvedere? Gray Goose? Ketel One?"

"I don't know. I never have cocktails, only white wine," she said, adding, "I swear!" as if the bartender had disputed this. "Whatever you recommend," she told him and then asked Hugh, "Do you have a signature drink? My son, who knows these things, tells me I should."

"You mean like shaken, not stirred?"

"Precisely."

"I don't mean it to be a signature but I always have"—Hugh turned to the bartender—"Chivas, rocks, a splash of tap water."

"That's a drink worthy of Sean Connery," Margery said. She was a pretty version of a male Kennedy: widow's peak, wide brow, almost predatory nose. Despite Leslie's claims about her beautiful skin, he'd expected at least a few freckles and the crinkles of their age

group, but if she had them she'd hidden them with enough cover up to rival Broadway. The overall effect, dressed up and ready to party, was the opposite of her unadorned book jacket photo. In that portrait there wasn't a touch of sexy glamour: hair white, no makeup, regretful smile, bulky wool sweater. "Of course Leslie is heartbroken about losing Amy, and is sad for you and your children, but she had a high opinion of you long before all that. I was very sorry when I heard about Amy. She edited a novel by a dear friend of mine, Laura Solomon, who just loved her, raved about her notes. And I remember Amy from talking with her at Leslie's fortieth and fiftieth milestones. She was lovely, smart, kind, and very funny about working in publishing. Had the knack for being truthful about its irritations without a trace of bitterness."

Ambushed by this accurate description of Amy from someone who didn't know her well, Hugh looked away and coughed into his hand, until the burning in his eyes cooled and his throat cleared. "She was . . . her authors loved her," he managed to say.

"Sorry. I should stay off that topic. Always been my downfall. Jim says I'm like a kid who can't stop pulling at scabs, except the scabs are on other people!" She groaned. "I should stay off the topic of Jim, too. And this will help," she said about the arrival of her martini.

Hugh lifted his scotch. "Cheers."

"Absolutely." They clinked glasses.

The brief silence allowed Hugh to say what he had prepared: "I read *Alice Roosevelt* in two sittings this weekend. It's a fascinating book. You're a wonderful writer." That was a good thing to tell her, Hugh knew; it also represented his true opinion.

Margery cocked her head and smiled, relishing the compliment. “That’s very sweet of you. To take the trouble to look at my book before you meet me, exactly the kind of thoughtful gesture Leslie warned me—I mean, raved to me about you. Usually people make do with a non-specific ‘I admire your work.’”

“I wasn’t being thoughtful . . . I really, really enjoyed it. I’m terrible about reading. With all the movies I see I kid myself I’m cultured. For example, of course I saw the movie they made of your book and I was deluding myself that—”

“I loved the movie! Don’t say anything bad about it or I’ll cry,” she said, looking very merry.

“Oh, I liked the movie,” Hugh fibbed. There were things about it he’d liked, but there were moments in almost every movie he had ever seen that he liked. The filmmakers had aimed dead center at the middlebrow tastes of the Oscar voters: a script jammed with good-hearted politics, its characters learning important lessons; almost every scene designed to show off a hammy give-me-an-award-please performance by Mary Winston; the cinematographer and director approaching their jobs as if Cinemascope and Technicolor had just been invented. Montage too. The filmmakers’ strategy was a partial success. They did receive dutiful Oscar nominations for the big reputations—Mary Winston, the director, the writer, and the cinematographer—but the picture lost in all categories to up-and-coming talent whose performances, direction, writing, and photography were bolder and more original. The box office gross was disappointing, the reviews polite. Hugh was surprised Margery was so happy about it. The movie had nothing of the sensibility of her book’s tart narrative, had replaced her subtle and complicated depiction of the frustrations of female ambition and sexuality in that repressed society with a timid and superficial feminism.

Seeing the movie you might have assumed the book was as bland as a Landmark history.

“I’m glad to hear you were happy with it. Authors often—”

“I loved it!” Margery repeated emphatically. “Mary was just amazing. I still can’t believe she didn’t get the Oscar, that they gave it to that year’s pretty young thing.”

“You mean Hilary Swank?” Hugh wondered aloud at hearing her gritty performance in *Million Dollar Baby* described as pretty.

“New kid on the block syndrome. Mary has her Oscar and she’s getting close to forty so they’re ready to ignore her until she’s an eminence. But this was one of her best. Mary was stunning as Alice, a complete transformation; I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. And I was thrilled by the experience of being on set. Bob pretended he needed me around to consult for authenticity—insisted I stay for the whole shoot! Ended my marriage, but that’s a blessing in disguise. You’re probably terribly bored with the magic of movie-making but for me it was like running away and joining the circus. I had this marvelous, talented family, all of them working like crazy to make my book into a great film.”

Hollywood, Hugh could hear Ethel Merman sing, *where you’re terrific when you’re merely good*. He nodded, submerged into a long sip of his Chivas, and surfaced to ask, “Are you working on a new book?”

“You know I was kidding,” she said, laying a hand, nails dark red, on his forearm. “You can tell me if you didn’t care for the movie. In fact, since you’re an expert, unlike hearing what most people thought of *Princess*, your frank opinion interests me enormously. Open fire.” She left her hand there and gazed into his eyes. Her look and touch were intimate and unsettling.

He averted his gaze to the mirror behind the bar. Better to observe her reaction once removed. “The movie was good, very effective at what it wanted to achieve,” Hugh lied to their reflections. “But after reading your book I feel they aimed low. Your Alice is a complicated woman, fighting the time she’s living in and also longing for its approval. There’s her conflict with the world’s sexism in your biography, and there’s also the conflict within herself for her father’s respect. The movie doesn’t convey how those two interact and complicate her feelings. Doesn’t do justice to the psychological insights of your book.”

“What a relief.” She patted his hand, bringing his eyes back to her. Her touch and penetrating stare weren’t sexual, rather relentlessly intrusive, as if she were boring into his consciousness to take up permanent residence. She fascinated him and he wanted her to back off. “To talk with someone who really knows movie-making and can understand what I’m about to say in context. I was overwhelmed by the excitement, the . . . you know, summer camp, high school intimacy, and hierarchies of the set. And, of course, I was star-struck. Mary is charming, smart—not as smart as she thinks she is, but bright and, of course, insanely charismatic. She could be anything she wants, even President, maybe especially President. I said to her she should consider becoming the Democratic Reagan. Revive true liberalism in the U.S. And Bob Tillinger, my director . . .” Margs released Hugh’s arm at last and brought her hand to her throat. “I fell in love. Not with Bob the man, but the thrill of having a collaborator, because by then he had barred Gail Redmond, the screenwriter, from the set and was relying on me for the many, many dialogue fixes. I begged Bob to let me also fix Gail’s dreadful oversimplifications of Alice’s character but he just wanted me to make their speech authentic, was scared, terrified really, to trust that the audience would . . .”

Other than pausing to acknowledge Hugh's occasional *yeses*, *of courses*, and *I sees*, Margery talked until their drinks were emptied and seconds were ordered and half-emptied. The gist was that she was responsible for everything good in *The Princess of DC* and everyone else was responsible for what Hugh had correctly identified as weak. She was on the editing phase of the movie when she glanced at her watch in mid-sentence and exclaimed, "Oh my God, I have to run, I'm meeting an old friend to see the new Martin McDonagh play. I hate his work but I can't tell my friends or they'll write me off as hopelessly middlebrow." She opened her purse.

"I've got this," Hugh assured her.

"This is so embarrassing. I talked about nothing but myself." Margery stood and offered an ingratiating smile and glistening eyes. "You have to let me take you to dinner and I promise I'll shut up and hear all about what you're up to. Promise you won't hold my egomaniacal fit against me and we'll do this again? Please, Hugh?"

He wanted to say, "You're too much for me, too smart, too big a personality, too interested in success, too alive." He said, "Sure."

"Thank you!" She kissed him on the cheek briskly, angled to move off, but paused to say: "I'm so, so sorry I monopolized, but it's really your fault. Once you got me on the subject, I couldn't help it. What can I say?" She grinned. "I love making movies!"

2.3

“Hugh, you poor baby, she’s impossible. I had no idea how bad.” Leslie was breathless. She had called Hugh during her half hour on the elliptical before a salad at her home-office desk and a rush back to her law firm to vet contracts for the plentiful deals booming in New York real estate. He assumed she wanted a report on his drink with Margery, but before he made the mistake of answering that Margery did seem self-absorbed, luckily Leslie made it clear whom she was complaining about. “Olga must be one of the thickest women I’ve ever met. I don’t know how she made the mistake of putting king-size sheets on Rafa’s bed in the first place—it’s a full after all, not even a queen—but she did it again! And, please tell, how does she mistake a twelve-year-old boy’s T-shirts for a fifty-year-old man’s? I love you, Hugh, and thanks”—he heard a gasp as the whirring noise in the background slowed and stopped—“for loaning her but I have to find someone else or Rafa said he’s going to run away from home.” Another gasping inhale. “She put a rubber band around his Magic: The Gathering cards and stowed them in a drawer under a pile of graphic novels!”

“I’m sorry,” Hugh said. “I tried to warn you. Don’t you remember how Amy quipped that although Olga’s heart is always full, she’s got an empty brain—”

“Okay, that’s my question. You know Amy was my dearest friend and we both loved her, but what the hell was she thinking keeping Olga?”

“Amy would say, ‘Olga needs this job.’ She just couldn’t bear to fire her.”

“Amy couldn’t bear to fire her? Amy was a rock, always there when you needed her, but she wasn’t soft-hearted. She was tougher on me than any of my other friends, and she was not soft when it came to you either, and you’re a model husband. And boy did she crack the whip with Ginnie and Ray—”

“She wasn’t tough with strangers. And certainly not someone she was employing,” Hugh corrected Leslie. “She told me that if we didn’t give Olga work she would starve to death.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that about my Aim. That’s so interesting.”

“And then Olga was very, very kind and sweet once Amy got ill, very thoughtful about us changing her hours and the extra work, never complaining—”

“OF COURSE,” Leslie shouted over him and agonized, “I’m horrible, horrible. Olga is very sweet. She means well, but . . . Jesus! I didn’t get a wink of sleep and my desk looks like a hurricane hit it. The Gordon brothers are going to have a shit fit if I don’t— Oh! They’re buying that commercial building next to yours. It’s their third deal contiguously on the block and they’re talking about tearing them all down and putting up a condo. Make your place much more valuable.”

“But I don’t own,” Hugh reminded her. “I’m a lowly renter.”

“I know! And when your rent hits the twenty-five-hundred a month threshold in two years you won’t be rent-stabilized anymore.”

“Don’t remind me!” Hugh was in deep denial about this coming economic catastrophe. He would have to move.

“After that, they can raise you to market rate. Hugh, honey, that’s probably gonna be seven, eight, maybe nine thousand a month.”

“Jesus,” he mumbled. “Really?”

“Really. That’s why I begged you guys to buy into my building when prices were cheap.”

“We didn’t have the money to buy. We didn’t when things were cheap, we didn’t when things were reasonable, and we—that is, I—definitely don’t now that things are insane.” He cut himself off. “What can I say? Your friend is poor.”

“You’re the richest man I know,” Leslie said. “Everyone loves you, and your children are fantastic. And the Gordon project will class up your whole block.”

“And that will help me how? I’ll have to pay more for milk at D’Agostino’s.”

“I guess it doesn’t. I don’t know what I’m saying. I’m going to lose all my clients if I don’t get some sleep and clear my desk. I’ve got to hang up—but wait, wait! How did it go with Margery? Full disclosure: I know it went great for her. She wrote to thank me, said you were utterly charming. You read her book! What a good boy. She was very impressed. A true gentleman, that’s you.” At last Leslie came to a full, panting stop. And waited for an answer.

What to say? He longed to ask her how she could have described Margery as a woman who wasn’t full of herself. “Well, of course she was brilliant, fascinating. And lovely. By the way, she’s dyed her hair—”

“I know! She confessed. I’m so relieved she’s joined the hopeless fight against aging. She always made me feel trivial and superficial, which is exactly what— Oh! Rafa’s texting me. Gotta go. I’ll call on my way home for a full report. Bye.”

When Hugh got home from work he showed off his new real estate savvy to Joe the doorman, announcing that the building next door was being bought by the Gordons.

But no one could get the drop on Joe. “Yep. Heard,” he said, nodding sagely, leaning on the awning’s brass pole. Joe was a hundred pounds overweight; he took every opportunity to prop himself up. “And we’re next. Jesus, I’ll lose this job. I mean, I’ll get work, another building, and maybe after they build the new place they’ll have me back here, but you know, this is my family. I’ve watched everyone’s kids grow up, yours, the Rothmans’, Baums’, Rachlins’.” He shook his head, jowls trembling. Were those tears forming?

“How do you know we’re next?” Hugh said, irritated Joe was so eager to spread calamitous news.

“Hang on. I just remembered. I got something for you. Hand delivered.” Joe pushed off the pole and waddled into the building, where he retrieved a manila envelope. In the upper left hand corner Hugh saw the sender’s name written in a flourishing hand: Margery Collins.

“Yeah, they’re warehousing,” Joe said. “That can mean only one thing.”

“What?”

“Stein is getting ready to sell. 12G, Penthouse A, 4B, all empty. He isn’t showing ’em. Not listing ’em. In fact, he hasn’t rented a place in four months now. He’s warehousing so he can sell the building.”

“Are you sure? I heard he was planning to renovate Penthouse A.”

“Renovate for rental? You paint a rental. Sand the floors. Put in a cheap new stove. Renovate!” Joe waved a pudgy hand. “That’s a cover story. He’s seeing how fast he can warehouse enough apartments to catch himself a buyer. Probably the Gordons. Then they’ll

tear down the whole block and build some goddamn monstrosity. Good for you, though. You'll make some change out of it." Joe winked. "Insider price and you flip, right?"

Hugh staggered upstairs. Could this be true? He was going to be forced out of his home in a matter of months, not even squeak out another two years? He opened the envelope absent-mindedly and was confused when a smaller linen envelope slid out, addressed to Margery Collins. A yellow sticky was attached with a note in her confident, legible hand:

Must attend for me.

Any interest in accompanying?

Should be mildly amusing. – M

It took him several seconds to figure out she had enclosed an invitation addressed to her that she meant for him to open to decide if he would be her plus one. The stiff embossed card inside the linen envelope asked for her attendance at a fundraiser for the New York Historical Society, celebrating the publication of Cyrus Milhouse's *Central Park*, a history of the Manhattan landmark from its design to the present day. He saw a blur of famous names on the invitation committee, checked for Karen, Francine, or Hilda, felt relief they weren't there, then despair that he could think of no good reason to say no. As a first real date it seemed uncomfortably public. He wanted to get to know Margery in a relaxed setting. He had reconciled Leslie's saying "She's not at all full of herself" with his impression that she was utterly self-involved by deciding that she was suffering from temporary narcissism brought on by her husband dumping her. If that guess was correct then going to an event mobbed with people who knew her as Mrs. James Robert Wilson would only make matters worse. He certainly did not fancy the role of her I'm-okay date.

Luckily, he had a session with Roberto Salazar scheduled at five-thirty. Freshly showered and his thoughts neatly dressed, he recounted every detail of the drinks date and the Historical Society invite and concluded by asking the grief counselor whether it wouldn't be better for all concerned if he politely declined, offering instead to take her to a quiet dinner?

"If you want to give her a second chance," Salazar said, "suggesting dinner as an alternative is certainly a polite way of saying no to her invite. And saying no to women who are not Amy is your objective, right?"

"What?" There was something nasty in how Salazar put it. Reminded Hugh of his mother's way of sniping at his decisions. "I never said that."

Salazar opened his hands and said gently, "You told me you never said no to Amy and now you want to learn how to say no to any new woman who comes into your life."

"Yes, but no. You've put it in a funny way."

"Fair enough." Salazar leaned forward, as if getting down to it. "Let's forget Margery for a moment. I'm wondering why you want to learn how to say no to new women when you were happy saying yes to Amy?"

"I don't!" Hugh protested. "I want to say yes to seeing Margery again, I just don't want to go to this shindig. That's why I want to know if you think it's a good idea to ask her to a quiet dinner instead?"

Salazar shook his head and leaned back, as if he were giving up on some goal. Then he shrugged, made a rueful face and mumbled, "Sounds okay to me." He appeared preoccupied. Doubtful? No. He was censoring himself.

"Come on, spit it out," Hugh said. "What do you think?"

“I think talking about dating decisions with me has nothing to do with grief-counseling.”

“Oh.” Hugh considered this. “You’re wrong.”

“How so?”

“Because in this situation, when I’m deeply unsure of what to do, the person I want to ask for advice is Amy.”

“Yes, well, you’re right, you can’t ask your wife who to date.” He looked at Hugh as if that had some deeper meaning.

“Okay.” Hugh decided this was Salazar’s point. “You think I have to make up my own mind.”

“No, you can ask friends for advice. Pick one.”

“Leslie. But I can’t ask Leslie.”

Salazar made a face. “Because you have a crush on her? Or because she has a crush on you?”

“What? That? I wasn’t serious. No, it’s because she picked Margery for me. She’s biased.”

“What about Peter?”

“I love Peter but he doesn’t know what he thinks about anything until he asks Debby.”

“What about Debby then?”

“I don’t really know her.”

“And the sculptor? I can’t remember his—”

“Kyle. He thinks I should fuck everything in sight.”

Salazar grunted a laugh. “He has a point. You’re taking every step of this too seriously, overthinking everything. This is just one evening. Sounds like it’s an interesting event. You’re probably interested in the history of Central Park. At least you won’t be home alone sobbing at *Seinfeld*.”

Salazar was right. Hugh was making himself into a nervous wreck about every gesture, every word. And why not ask Leslie? They were just friends, the best of friends. On the street he opened his Nokia and hit speed dial for her cell.

“I can’t talk! Still at the office,” she answered. “Are you okay?”

This was a busy woman, a high-powered lawyer, mother of two, wife of a cult jazz pianist. He shouldn’t be bothering her about his high school dating anxieties.

“Hughie? Are you there? You okay?”

“What is warehousing apartments?”

“What? Warehousing apartments is when you let leases expire and don’t rent until you have enough empty units to convert a building to go condo, or to sell it unencumbered by leases to a buyer, so the buyer is free to do what he likes. Why? Who’s warehousing apartments?”

“Joe the doorman says Mr. Stein is warehousing apartments in my building so he can sell to your buddies, the Gordons.”

“He hasn’t approached the Gordons. So far as I know, I should add. How many apartments are sitting empty?”

“Just three.”

“For how long?”

“Joe says the first was four months ago.”

“Oh, dear. Forgoing four months of rent. So he’s serious. But only three apartments so far? Okay, you’ve got time. Plenty of time. This is not gonna happen overnight.”

“What’s not gonna happen?”

“Stein selling the building. Or converting.”

“So that wouldn’t be good for me? Joe seemed to think I could get an insider price and make some money.”

“Joe is a doorman, not a real estate lawyer. If Stein succeeds in converting to a condo he can just kick you out.”

“What if he sells the building?”

“Same thing. Anyone who buys would be buying to convert.”

“So I’m fucked?”

“You’re not safe.”

“But it’s my home,” Hugh pleaded. “My whole life is in that apartment.”

“I know, sweetie. But”—Leslie delivered this truth as gently as she could—“when it comes to your life, even more than the rest of us mortals, you’re just renting.”

2.4

He went to the Historical Society fête. As he had feared, Margery seemed to want to display him, not be with him. He was carted from introduction to introduction. When she announced his name to each celebrity of her world she beamed at him, tugging him close as if he were her favorite stuffed animal.

The worst instance of her making him feel he was competing with her ex came after they were seated at table two, immediately below the podium where Cyrus Milhouse was introduced by the Parks Commissioner, read from his book, and answered adoring questions—one from Charlie Rose, for God’s sake. Between speakers, Margery told a bigwig from *The New York Times* that Hugh ran the Hamilton Film Festival. Hugh commented, “More like chase after it.” She kissed him on the lips—briefly, but for the first time—and called to everyone, “Hugh’s so modest!” adding pointedly, “Isn’t that refreshing? The truth is, he does a brilliant job with the city’s best film program.”

Brilliant, he feared, was what she needed him to be. And he wasn’t. More to the point, he didn’t want to be.

There had been an early telling and unsettling moment, when he picked her up in the lobby of the elegant Beresford—which was not a rental, he noted with his newly embittered consciousness of such differences. She appeared in a slinky red dress he later heard her say was a Valentino, that showed off her fit, lovely shape. Before he could say wow, she did the same and gestured appreciatively at his gray Armani. It was his one expensive suit, reserved for the festival opening night and the Foundation’s annual fundraising gala. “You clean up

nice,” she said. In the moment, he was flattered. Later he realized it implied that the outfit he had chosen for their initial drinks—black linen pants and a thin beige Italian cashmere sweater, both among the priciest garments in his closet—were, as Ruth might say, chopped liver.

It was after midnight when they finally left the event. Being on stage had exhausted him, so he agreed immediately when Margery said, in her brisk, in-charge style, “Hugh, you’ve been a real sport. Just put me in a cab and get yourself home to a well-earned night’s sleep.” She kissed him a second time, also on the lips, but faster, a passing breeze.

His mind and body were profoundly tired until he got into bed and shut his eyes. Memories lit up a slideshow: Amy laughing with him; Amy irritated at him; Amy riding her bike intently on Block Island; Amy on the tennis court, sweat glistening at the edges of her thick auburn hair; Amy carrying baby Ginnie on her hip like a gun, Amy gathering tall Ray into her shrinking body. The past was interpolated with the evening’s residue: feeling his cheeks stretch as he shook famous hands, walking arm in arm with a strange woman, standing in the Beresford waiting like an anxious sophomore on a prom date. As the gray-black at the edge of the city sky brightened, the worst memories of Amy’s illness overwhelmed the happy past, settling at last on his final view of his beloved: motionless, medical equipment disconnected, eyes vacant, mouth agape, and forever still.

He had resisted temptation for two weeks but now he wanted company, so he broke a promise he had made to Roberto Salazar that he wouldn’t bring Amy to bed with him. He tossed comforter and sheet aside and staggered to his home desk across the room. He opened the bottom filing cabinet drawer where Olga never bothered to dust, and took from the backmost file—behind the detritus of insurance, income taxes, Amy’s employment

information, a file of death certificates, condolence letters, and the deed to her grave—a four-by-six-inch dark brown folding leather frame that opened to display a triptych of photographs. The frame was meant to house family portraits, to be kept open on a desk, a piano, a credenza. He had bought it to preserve a trio of pictures of Amy.

The first was from their first year, first trip together after graduating college, a cross-country drive in his coughing VW bug. They had splurged, deciding to skip yet another night of back-aching non-rest in their sleeping bags, instead renting a room in what he kept calling the Bates Motel just outside the entrance to Canyonlands. They had enjoyed a long day of hiking, fallen deeply asleep at seven, and woken at dawn to make love, the eerie orange landscape aglow behind the thin curtain of their tiny room's lone window. Afterward he fetched a pair of Styrofoam cups of weak complimentary coffee from the office and brought them back. He gulped his and dug out his camera while she, uncovered, leisurely sipped hers in the creaky bed, wrinkled sheets and scratchy blanket having slipped to the wood floor. She gazed contentedly as the sunlight spread across her fair, girlish skin. He pointed his Kodak, wanting to document in a permanent image the beautiful young woman he had won. He waited for her permission. Her sly smile, amused and naughty, silently agreed to the nude portrait.

The second photograph was taken ten years later, their first trip alone after the birth of Ginnie. While their four-year-old girl was fussed over by her doting grandparents in New Jersey, Hugh and Amy went to the Cannes Film Festival for a long weekend partially paid for by Hugh's then job, unhappily writing second-string film reviews for *Newsweek*. The movies were disappointing and Hugh felt lost and disgusted by the hucksterism, but Amy got a bang out of meeting Liam Neeson and Sigourney Weaver, and they had a great seafood meal

dockside, got very drunk on two bottles of white wine, and woke at dawn miraculously free of hangovers to once again make love in the orange light of a new day's sun, this one breaking over a still Mediterranean sea. This time he brought back a better dose of caffeine, in wide, handleless mugs. Once again sheets had been kicked off the bed during their lovemaking, and while Amy sipped her *café au lait* slowly, studying the jammed harbor, Hugh fished out his point-and-shoot Olympus. There had been very slight changes in this young mother's body, a line in her wide brow, a crinkling at the eyes, breasts succumbing gracefully to gravity, stomach softer, hips more generous. These markers of time's usage made her more gorgeous, grown into confident womanhood. He waited for permission to immortalize this self-assured incarnation of his wife. She smiled, recognizing what Hugh already had, that it was an anniversary photo, then rested the bowl of coffee on her belly and nodded. Her sly look pierced the lens and could still shock Hugh with its intimacy, a gaze that made it clear this was no youthful lark, rather a display meant solely for his eyes—an image fashioned just for him.

The third photograph had been taken after almost another ten years, on another trip, this time celebrating her birthday in Paris. Amy wasn't thrilled about turning forty. She had been passed over for a promotion at Madison Square Books that she felt she had been promised; the children, now a teen and a tweener, were no longer only adorable; and she seemed a little tired of Hugh, complaining with fresh annoyance about traits he had displayed for two decades. One of these was that he never planned a trip unconnected to a film event, so he made certain nothing was scheduled during their week in Paris but leisurely walks through the Musée d'Orsay, an afternoon at Versailles, and meals at legendary restaurants such as Le Grand Vefour and Taillevent. On the afternoon of her birthday, he snuck back to a

shop on Avenue Montaigne and bought her an eight-hundred-dollar dress she had admired. At first she threatened to return it, but after a sensational late-night snack of foie gras and champagne, and another dawn of lovemaking, this one lit by a shimmering red light spreading over their expensive hotel room's view of the Seine, she agreed to keep his present. He ordered a pot of press café, hot milk, and a basket of croissants. He waited until she was on her second cup to bring out his Nikon. She smiled wanly and nodded for him to proceed. For room service she had drawn the sheets and blanket up to her chin, and he waited, staring at the covers. She shook her head. "I could let you take a picture of me naked," she said, "but then I'd have to kill you."

"You're beautiful," he promised her.

For a moment he expected her to refuse. If she did, he would quietly accept her no. The trip had cheered her up; he didn't want to spoil that. After a grim stare at the Seine she kicked off the bedspread and sheets—angrily, he feared. But once she was uncovered her face relaxed, and the slyest of all the sly nude smiles appeared. This picture was his favorite of the three. It was almost obscene now to look at her just out of her teenage years, and heartbreaking to encounter the optimistic young mother who had been robbed of seeing the full fruition of her labors. This womanly body, stressed but not exhausted, not seducing or wanting seduction, this mature woman who had in the truest sense given Hugh his life, was the sexiest Amy of all.

So Hugh broke his promise to the grief counselor. He brought these three lovely ladies back into the bed where they belonged and after a long unsatisfying night out with the beautiful people of New York at last found pleasure.

2.5

His second night out with Margery was the quiet dinner he had wanted as their first. She met him at his deliberately downscale choice of comfort pizza at John's in jeans and a men's polo shirt, showing wrinkles and freckles, the fast-talking brittle wit on hold. She apologized right away "for dragging you to that New York cluster fuck. I just couldn't face going alone and I had to. Thank you for keeping me company. You were a real sport."

"Oh, it was fascinating," Hugh lied.

Margery seemed relaxed but he felt anxious. For a while they focused on their menus, eventually deciding to get one large pie with everything but onions.

"It must have been hard," she said after they ordered, "really hard on you during Amy's long fight against cancer. I've heard what a great caretaker you were for her and your kids. Must have been so painful, so draining. And exhausting?"

"Yes, it was exhausting," he said, "but mostly sad. And divorce, that's also sad and very stressful. How is your son handling it?"

Margery paused, seeming to consider objecting to the change of subject before answering, "He's a wreck. In a rage. Unable to cry unless he's yelling." She smiled wanly and shrugged, then tried a subject change of her own. "I know Karen Watanabe a little. We were at a Women's Conference on the Arts thing in some godforsaken resort in Arizona for a weekend and hung out. Saved each other from death by PowerPoint. She's a dynamo. I liked her but it was just a weekend. How is she to work with?"

“Oh, she’s great. We’re good friends.” Hugh was about to add he was worried that Karen seemed to be exclusively focused on fundraising these days, disengaged from what she was raising money for, but thought better of being that frank with someone who seemed to know everyone. “So what’s your next book about? If you don’t mind saying. I know writers don’t really like to talk about their works in progress.”

“I do! As you know all too well I love talking about myself. But first, I insist you tell me about your work. How do you go about choosing which films you put on at the festival? Which I love, by the way. I haven’t gone every year, but when I have, I’ve loved what you picked.”

“I watch the submissions with Melissa, who works with me. We just pick what we like. And you? How do you pick your subject?”

Margery began to explain how she had come to want to do her next book, a biography of Mary Lincoln. She was fascinating about her meticulous research so far, curious, full of wonder and enthusiasm. *Here* was Leslie’s warm, modest, brilliant friend.

Unfortunately, Hugh wasn’t able to relax. He continued to behave as if he were interviewing her at a Foundation event. “Your passion,” he said, “for inhabiting the lives of others feels like the same impulse that drives movie-makers. I never realized before how much being a biographer is the same task as an actor creating a character. In your hands it becomes an art form.”

That was his fourth flattering comment during her explanation. She had smiled tolerantly through the first three. At this one she grimaced. “You’re being sweet, Hugh, but you saw what happened the last time you over-praised me. I made a fool of myself about *Princess of DC*. I talked as if I’d made the movie all by my lonesome. I was mortified when

I got home and played myself back. Truth is, they were all just being nice, keeping me involved. I had nothing to do with what made it so good. And you know, of course, why I exaggerated my contribution.”

She waited, presumably for him to say why. He had no idea other than his general impression that she was insecure because she had been dumped, needed to puff herself up. “Well, getting a divorce must be very hard on the ego,” he said.

“Oh! That’s what you thought? No, no. It wasn’t about Jimmy. I was trying to impress you, the cinéaste.” She shrugged and added, “Well, I guess you’re right, maybe I was so anxious about you because Jimmy knocked me for a loop.”

“Dating is hard.”

She laughed. “Oh my God, it’s awful, isn’t it? This is only my second try. Does it get easier? Or is it just easy for you? You’re so comfortable in your own skin.”

Wow, how had she gotten that wrong impression? At the moment he was trying to figure out what to do with his hands. Prop his chin on one? Fold them in his lap? His back ached from trying to sit up straight.

“Whoops,” Margery chuckled. “Your expression tells me I got that wrong. Like Jimmy always says: ‘Margs is a biographer, so she’s great at knowing what dead people feel.’ With the obvious implication of what I’m not great at knowing.”

She wanted to talk about her ex-husband; Hugh didn’t. Nevertheless, he said, “You call him Jimmy?”

“I know. Perfect reveal of his adolescent character. An eighty-year-old man who calls himself Jimmy.”

“I saw a recent photo of him,” Hugh admitted, but he didn’t confess that he had been continuing to research Margery and her husband in the office that afternoon instead of reading submissions for the grant program. James Robert Wilson had a shiny bald scalp and his neck was wizened. Otherwise the wiry, fit, ruddy-cheeked man with a high forehead, refined nose and long jaw looked to be in his sixties: older than Hugh but not a generation’s worth. He was a handsome man in a way Hugh had never been. “He didn’t look eighty,” Hugh said.

“I know.” Margery leaned forward. “Let’s not talk about him. I’m with you and very glad to be only with you tonight.” Her left hand turned up: not reaching for him, but the gesture was a request. He laid his palm on hers and her fingers closed around his wrist. “It’s a lovely spring night. Your praise of the West Side esplanade made me long for a post-prandial.”

They held hands while ambling beside the restless Hudson. She was silent, happily pensive, gazing at the river. It was a relief not returning her serve. He realized how much of what he enjoyed with Amy was mutual silence, a communion with their surroundings. The body beside his—shoulder brushing against his shoulder, fingers loosely threading his fingers—had relaxed from its alert, rigid posture and no longer felt like a stranger’s; and he had stopped monitoring his arms, legs, face. Still, he didn’t feel at ease. Sex was looming, or at least a real kiss. This was their third meeting and the one thing that seemed clear about modern dating: everyone was in a hurry. Or maybe that was just New York.

When they reached the esplanade a breeze, fishy and brisk, came off the river. She shivered. He put his arm around her and they moved easily together. Before meeting her this evening he had thought it likely this would be their last date, they were too different. Now

fitting together nicely in their strides, he was excited that her personality contrasted so sharply with Amy's. Margs was full of smart talk, ambitious, passionate about her work. Amy had a razor sharp intellect, graduated Phi Beta, could do the *Times* Saturday crossword puzzle in pen in less than twenty minutes and the Sunday before Hugh's bagel was toasted, but she mostly kept her clever thoughts to herself. She underused that extraordinary brain, in Hugh's view, working in the shadow of the legendary head of Madison Square Books, Carl Shoenfeld. In college she had enthusiastically written short stories, and after graduation she attended a summer writing workshop, placed a story in a literary quarterly, got into MacDowell, considering applying for an MFA. But during the first year they lived together, while she supported herself freelance copyediting, she was unable to finish a novel to her satisfaction. Hugh had thought her draft beautifully written: thin on plot, yes, but a fully realized, sad, sweet story. She, on the other hand, thought it "second-rate and banal." She took a job at Madison Square as an assistant editor, within a year and a half was promoted to editor for her ability to repair manuscripts that were mostly a mess, and was eventually plucked by Carl to do his editing since he was too busy acquiring bestselling writers and the memoirs of ex-Presidents. Everyone in publishing knew she was the editor behind the legend, but no outsider did. That didn't bother Hugh; he believed in being a good number two, that they were crucial to every successful organization. What did trouble him was her failure to go back to her own writing. From time to time when the kids were still little he tried to encourage her to resume, and each time she frowned until finally one day she snapped, "Give me a break. I can't even think straight, much less write." He gave up for a while after that, but when Ginnie and Ray both went off to summer camp he suggested she take advantage of the childless eight weeks to join a workshop, start another novel, a story.

This time she said, “I prefer to read mediocrity than create my own,” adding a chilling look that reminded him of his mother, amazing because they in no way resembled each other.

“You’re not mediocre,” he protested. And she closed the subject in an icy tone worthy of any thin-skinned WASP: “I’m satisfied by my career. Sorry you’re not.” He never brought it up again.

Margery, in contrast to Amy, had persisted through setbacks: an unpublished novel, many rejected short stories, and the disappointment of her first published book, a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt that, she had written in her website bio: “was deadly dull and only sold copies to my parents and most loyal friends.” Ambitious and insecure, eager to please and willing to argue—all traits opposite to Amy. Amy wasn’t ruffled by other people’s opinions of her, uninterested in engaging in debate. She didn’t suffer fools, gladly or otherwise. She ignored them. Margery, Hugh guessed from her book, wanted to educate every idiot who walked the earth.

The river wind became chilling, the warm June day regressing to a March night. She shivered again. “Head back?” Hugh asked and was surprised to hear himself add, “My place?”

She leaned on his shoulder, nodding shyly. Once among West Village townhouses they were protected from the Hudson’s winds. Crossing a street, she moved out from his shelter and they went back to holding hands, swinging gently over the pavement, until a stalled couple with a stroller forced them apart on Sixth Avenue.

“It’s children, isn’t it?” she said. “That’s what really changes a marriage—makes a marriage, I mean. When I married Jimmy, because of his age, because he already had practically grown children, and because I didn’t, I was sure I didn’t want children . . .” She

paused. “And then I got pregnant—had stopped worrying about it, I guess, I still don’t know how it happened, though I know Jimmy never believed me . . .” She halted, looked at Hugh, and with her voice full of wonder said, “Then, big surprise: I loved being a mother! I thought it would ruin my life, I’m so ambitious, I hadn’t written the books I wanted to, but no, no, no. When I could steal only a few hours for myself I was more concentrated. I worked faster, harder, so I could get back to that fascinating little creature, growing, changing every minute. Being a mother focused me, made me bolder. It was the best thing in my life, the most rewarding, and I almost didn’t do it—it’s scary, spooky to think of, that I almost let the best thing in my life slip away, never happen.” Her eyes sparkled, freckled forehead wrinkling with surprise. He loved the way her mind worked, and had grown to enjoy that she blurted her deepest feelings. It was thrilling. Hugh leaned in, pausing as he neared her lips. She didn’t balk, so he kissed her.

The Kiss II

The instant their mouths touched, Margery's jaw opened cavernously, Hugh's lips were suctioned inside, and her encompassing teeth raked his skin. Her canines seemed to lengthen and sharpen into saber tooth tiger's. Instinctively he pulled away.

"Mmm," she murmured, eyes shut, lips waiting for more. He studied what he could see of her teeth. They looked normal. He decided he had hallucinated and leaned in for another kiss.

This time he was sucked in deeper, her mouth closing tighter around his lips and her incisors tugging so hard he felt sure she was drawing blood. He wondered if this was a style of kissing that he was ignorant of. He forced himself to stay, thinking perhaps he would learn to enjoy it. But lingering didn't teach him to like her razor-ringed vacuum of a kiss.

She ended it this time. Leaning against his cheek, she whispered, "Let's go to your place."

They were a block away. Resigned, Hugh marched toward the point of no return. He longed to put her in a cab but felt it would be profoundly rude to reject a woman who wanted to have sex with him. Also unprecedented. Perhaps male movie stars, pro athletes and rock 'n' rollers were practiced at saying no to sex. Not Hugh. Since he had stopped seeing Hilda, the physical aloneness of grief, the longing to be held, to forget death in the heat of life, had returned redoubled. Still, he didn't want to be eaten alive. Better get out while he could still say no.

“This is what you claim you want,” Salazar irritatingly pointed out almost every time Hugh saw him. “To say no to women.” Until this trying kiss, Hugh judged he had been doing well. He had said a cruel no to Hilda about a relationship he judged inappropriate; he had said a firm no to his mother-in-law’s latest request that he add Father’s Day to the already established family gatherings of Rosh Hashanah, Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Passover, and Mother’s Day; and he had marshalled a mutinous no to Karen Watanabe when she tried to bully him into asking Francine to add a grant specifically for the film festival to her already generous annual donation.

But there was no *no* forthcoming as Hugh and Margery passed Joe the Doorman, who looked discreetly away while he absorbed the shock of seeing the widower bring a woman upstairs; and no *no* while he put his key in the lock and swung open the door for her to enter his apartment—only to find himself ignoring the *no* of a photo of Amy and baby photos of Ginnie and Ray. Long ago Amy had put the pictures of their children on a side table next to the front door, a location for tickets, letters to mail, keys, any item one needed before leaving home. The day after burying her Hugh added one of Amy. She was seven months pregnant with Ray in the photo, her rounded face swollen to a full moon. It was a snapshot she disliked, but he cherished the merriment brimming in her eyes. She had been unsure of motherhood while carrying Ginnie; with Ray she knew she was going to enjoy his innocent greed.

“Your place is lovely!” Margery elbowed past him into the living room. She merely glanced at the couch and wing chair, sagging and strained from the bounces and spills of two growing children, and at the expanse of floorboards scarred by their play. Instead she made a thorough survey of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that ran the length of one wall, mostly a

legacy of Amy's love of fiction. At the far end was a section that consisted of film books and quarterlies. "Oh my. Look at this. It's a treasure trove!" She pulled out *Painting with Light*. "None of these are on Kindle."

"Or ever will be. They're too obscure."

"That's what makes collections like this so precious," she mused. "What's this?" She reached for Hugh's book, published twenty-two years ago: *Caligari to Psycho: The Evolution of Noir*. "You wrote this." Margery settled on the gray corduroy couch with the book and said, "Tell me about it. When did you write it?"

He explained that with Amy's encouragement he had expanded his senior thesis into a book that he had been paid a pittance to write, that had taken him too long to finish, that had never earned the small annuity they had fantasized it might, and that years later embarrassed him when Aaron Lefkowitz wrote his masterful survey of American noir, *Unhappy Endings*. Lefkowitz devoted an entire chapter wittily debunking Hugh's faulty correlation of German Expressionism and American Noir, and along the way corrected two outright blunders Hugh had asserted about Expressionism's influence on Hitchcock. Aaron, a gentle man whom Hugh had met several times at festivals, had stated his objections gently, but Hugh felt that tenderness only made them more damning.

He confessed all this to Margery and volunteered other anecdotes of his incompetence as a writer of grants, program notes, and lectures, responding at length to her follow-up questions, although he could hear her inquiries were migrating from polite to cursory to impatient. While doing his best to cool her ardor, he remained as far away from her as possible, perched on a spare chair against the back wall. She reclined on his couch, an arm stretched out as if to suggest there was plenty of room available for him to join her. But he

held his position. He had never felt more reluctant to kiss a woman in his life. Was it possible to fuck without kissing?

Eventually she seemed to understand he was stalling and stopped prompting him with questions. She looked long and hard into his eyes, lips forming something that might be a teasing smile, might be a disgusted frown. “So,” she said at last, “it’s late. I should be getting to bed,” but she didn’t make a move.

Hugh leapt to his feet. “I’ll go down and help you find a cab.”

She squinted for a long second, disgust clarifying on her lips, then twisting into a grimace. “Right-o,” she said in a hitherto unused English accent. She stood up, arms folded, staring down at the floor.

Embarrassed that he had brought her up to his apartment only to boot her out, he marched at her. When he broke the invisible barrier of appropriate distance, her angular face came up, startled. He dive-bombed at her downturned mouth. Margery’s arms opened, body melting into the kiss. Unfortunately her mouth was as stainless-steel devouring as before. To escape, Hugh took the risk of seeming to go too fast, disengaging, sliding down to her neck. At her murmur of pleasure when he nibbled there he felt enormous relief. He didn’t have to kiss her lips again tonight. They fell onto the couch, petting each other through denim like teenagers. Primarily to steer clear of her face, Hugh kissed lower, to her slight cleavage, fumbling with the small slippery buttons of her blouse until she whispered at his bowed head, “We’re too grownup for this. Let’s go to bed.”

He took her hand and trotted her to the bedroom as if they were late for a plane. He recalled fondly what this had been like with Hilda as he unbuckled his belt, stepped out of his pants, glad this wasn’t going to be his first experience of lovemaking after losing Amy, and it

was only as he continued to strip naked in the dark, furtively glancing at Margery's silhouette as she stepped out of her panties, that it occurred to him he was setting a momentous precedent. He was taking a woman into Amy's bed. And this realization, once in place, spelled catastrophe.

2.6

“Hughie,” Leslie said breathlessly into her cell phone. From the blare and scream of sirens he guessed she was en route to her office. “How the hell are you?”

That she was calling at the early hour of eight-ten, that she had added “hell” to her usual inquiry as to his current state of being, told him she knew something about last night’s fiasco. How humiliating. “I’m good, and you?” he dodged. “Did you have to go to court over that development in Bayside?”

“What? Oh no, thank God. They backed down. And . . . Oh, wait! I have news for you. I violated a handful of legal ethics getting it so don’t tell on me. I found out your landlord has approached the Gordons about selling your building. They passed. That’s the good news.”

“And the bad?”

“The Gordons passed ’cause it’s too small a deal for them. Only thirty units if you gut the building and combine the twos and ones into threes, which is the hot size in our nabe. Stein is definitely warehousing to sell to a developer and someone will definitely go for it, the market is so hot. Especially downtown.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, it’s shitty, it really sucks, but you were gonna get priced out sooner or later. At least with Stein wanting to sell I can get you some money out of it. You’re sitting in a three-bedroom next to a studio. Stein can combine and have a four-bedroom condo to sell, a real rarity in the Village, worth fifty percent more than a three. I’ll call Stein and start

negotiating. You have no insider rights and your lease is up in two years but I'll let slip that I'm a close friend so he'll know it's costing you nothing to create all kinds of irritating delays. I could easily stretch out an eviction into three, five, maybe seven years. That's a lot of lost income to Stein. Just to get rid of the nuisance he'll offer you relocation dough."

"You mean, he'll pay me to move?"

"It's really worth it to him to get you out of there as soon as possible. To gut it, he needs the building empty. You won't be the only one he'll pay. I'll just make sure he pays you more than anybody else."

"But where am I gonna move? Unless he offers me fifty thousand I won't be able to rent a studio in Manhattan."

"Fifty thousand! I can do better than that. Bet I can get you a quarter of a mil. You can use that as a down payment on a nice two-bedroom condo in Brooklyn. No more renting, Hugh. What am I saying? Brooklyn! Shit, then I'll never see you. This is a terrible plan. If we find you someplace great in Brooklyn, do you promise you won't neglect your old Manhattan friend?"

She wanted him close by, which on this embarrassed morning reinforced his belief that she was the woman for him. "Of course I'll see you but this is terrible news. I'm losing my home. We moved here when Ginnie was four. Ray's never had any other home."

"I know, sweetie, I know. I'm sorry. I'll get you enough money so you can make a lovely new home, okay?"

"What if he calls our bluff? You said I have no rights."

"But you have me representing you! That's better than having rights." As if awed by Leslie's statement, the hubbub around her was muzzled, replaced by echoing, soft chimes. In

this new quiet her voice blared: “We’ll figure it out. Listen, I’m in the lobby and I’ll lose you in the elevator so let me get to why I called. Margery is sure to check in today and I wanted to know what I’m allowed to say. Not that I *have* to say anything, but she’s going to know I’ve spoken to you. I mean you don’t have to tell me a thing.” She stopped abruptly and waited.

Hugh felt certain she was fibbing. How could she be sure Margery wasn’t still in his bed unless she knew she had fled it last night?

“Hugh, are you there?” she demanded into his silence. “Did I lose you?”

“I’m here.” The ghost of his father draped him in Yankee reserve. He shivered at its chilling touch and said, “A gentleman never tells.”

“And you are a perfect gentleman,” Leslie agreed. “That’s what I love about you. One of the many things I love about you. But . . . you do like her? I mean, you know, not necessarily romantically, but you share my high opinion of Margery? I just think she’s terrific.”

Why was Leslie worried about his opinion of Margery rather than vice versa? Maybe she really did know nothing. Had he lost his grip entirely, spinning into paranoia? “She’s a caring, energetic, and fascinating woman,” Hugh said, describing not Margery but Leslie.

“Wow, that’s great. What an endorsement!”

Hugh hurried to add, “Don’t tell her I said so.”

Leslie laughed. “Playing hard to get, eh? That’s my boy. Good move. Okay, gotta go. Call you later, sweetie.”

While shaving he decided this was the proper attitude to strike: all praise of Margery, no mention of his failure. The truly pressing issue going forward was what to do about his

haunted bed. How to get a new one? Furniture purchases had been Amy's domain. More likely he was lazy about them. 1-800-MATTRES popped into his head from commercial breaks on *Seinfeld*. He located his cell, charging on the kitchen counter, and flipped it open to place an order, but it occurred to him that phoning for a bed was the kind of thing a recent college graduate furnishing a first apartment would do, not a fifty-one-year-old widower. Was 1-800-MATTRES (*Leave off the last 'S' for savings!*) really the right choice to cart away the matrimonial bed, where he and Amy had slept and loved and said their last goodbye? And if not 1-800-MATTRES, who was fit to be trusted with those cherished and sad memories? Bed, Bath & Beyond?

Leslie was the natural person to advise him. He debated whether to text her. He had decided no, that it was ridiculous to be in such a rush to get a new bed, when the phone beeped. Startled, he nearly dropped it, juggling it twice from hand to hand before making a clean catch. He nearly dropped it a second time, shocked to discover a text from Margery, then doubly shocked by its content:

Last night magical. Want a home
cooked meal tonight?

Hugh stared at the backlit letters, unable to fathom her enthusiasm for more of him until he noticed the time above the message, 8:45 AM. He'd better get to the office.

Walking briskly west toward the subway, he decided he had no choice but to seek advice from a source he had sworn to avoid after the pizza powwow seven months ago.

"Are you injured?" Kyle grumbled on his landline in a baritone of gravel and sleep.

"No."

"Goodnight."

“Wait. This is urgent. Goodnight? It’s almost nine!”

Kyle groaned. “I got to bed three hours ago.”

“What were you doing all night?”

“Working. Some of us actually work.”

“I work.”

“You watch movies. That’s not work.”

“You sculpt. Or glue stuff together. How is that work?”

“Okay. We’re both frauds. What’s the problem now? Karen pimping you out to male donors?”

“That’s not funny. In fact, it’s offensive.”

“To who? Rich fags or you? Not the Jap. She is a pimp.”

“Jesus, you’re racist. Cut it out.”

“You’re such a PC schoolmarm. Tell me your problem or let me sleep.”

“I went to bed with someone I shouldn’t have.”

“Unless she has AIDS and you had unprotected sex, that’s impossible.”

“I didn’t want to go to bed with her, but I did, so it was a disaster.”

“That’s your emergency? For Chrissakes don’t worry about your dick not working. Happens to everybody sometimes—”

“I wasn’t . . .” Hugh interrupted, but Kyle was giving no ground.

“—just means you didn’t really want to stick it in.”

“I didn’t . . .” Hugh tried again.

Kyle was enjoying himself too much to listen. “Was she ugly? What’s ugly to you, anyway? I hope you’re not a skinny freak. Chubby is good. Cushion for the pushin’.”

“I WASN’T IMPOTENT,” Hugh shouted. “I CAME IN FIVE SECONDS!”

Three passersby stopped in their tracks to study him. One looked up from the dog she was walking, another from the cab he was trying to hail, and the last from the child she was shepherding to nursery school. Mortified, Hugh veered sharply downtown, thinking he’d catch the subway at its next stop.

“P.E. eh? Why so scared of her pussy? Vagina dentata? Who is this terrifying bitch?”

“I wasn’t scared. It’s just that I didn’t like . . .” He sighed. Now that it came right down to it he didn’t want to supply details, the haunted bed or the painful kiss.

“Didn’t like what?” Kyle snapped, impatient.

“She does this odd thing with her mouth.”

“What? Drool?”

“The way she does it,” he stammered, “was a little dentata.”

Kyle growled. “Holy Shit. She bit you?”

“No, no, but she . . . raked me.”

“The bitch bit your cock? Fuck. Now I’m awake.” Kyle’s hoarse voice faded to a whisper. “I need an espresso. Call you back in five.”

To be available Hugh would have to walk to work. He had reached Hudson Street when Kyle’s follow-up call buzzed in his pocket. “Is your dick okay? Maybe you’d better see an MD.”

Hugh explained the much simpler facts, that he didn’t like her kiss and that when they stripped and got into Amy’s bed, he was overwhelmed with embarrassment and a kind of dread, so he entered her without any preliminary and ejaculated almost immediately. He tried

to make up for his selfish behavior by kissing down her chest but when he reached her belly Margery pulled him up from descending farther. Instead she positioned his right thigh against her sex and rubbed and pushed, while he did his best to flex his quadriceps powerfully, until she shuddered and released a single moan. He suspected she was faking. She snuggled in the crook of his arm. Before he could apologize and explain about the matrimonial bed, she resumed talking about his collection of film books as if there had been no interruption. She concluded a long monologue about the value of true film criticism as opposed to reviewing by declaring it was time for him to write another book, perhaps about the ins and outs of film programming. He said, "I'm not a writer," and she said, "Nonsense," then glanced at her watch and said, "Oh, I have to go. I have"—she laughed—"a power breakfast at the Regency at 7:30, can you believe it?" He didn't protest. He assumed she was making a polite excuse for her escape and that he would never hear from her again.

"Why?" Kyle said. "You think she went to bed with a fifty-year-old widower expecting you to last two hours?"

"How about five minutes? I lasted five seconds."

"What are you, twelve? First times don't count. Even teenagers know the virgin fuck always sucks. What happened with Brunhilda? Was that magic the first time?"

"Yes."

Silence. Then: "Really? Great sex right away?"

"Yep."

"Why the hell did you dump her?"

Hugh ignored that. "So you're saying Margery still wants to date?"

“No, she’s making you dinner to dump you. Of course she still wants to date.

Women never know when to give up. Fuck. You woke me up for this drivel. You’ve got to get a grip on yourself, man. It was a bad one-night stand. Standard shit. You’re gonna have plenty of ’em. Text her you’re busy and go back to fucking thirty-year-olds.”

“Hilda was forty.”

“Whatever. Goodnight. And fuck you.”

It took Hugh a moment to realize Kyle had hung up. He had just flipped the Nokia shut when it trembled and beeped. Margery again:

Horrified I invited you to dinner by
text. Can I call you to do it
properly?

Abreast of a crowded bus stop, Hugh stopped walking so he could concentrate on pressing the correct tiny buttons on his phone. His children were used to his ludicrous typos and even odder Nokia auto-corrections but writer Margery might judge him more harshly.

No, he typed and paused to think of what he could plausibly claim to be doing that a phone call was out of the question but a text was not. Heading into a staff meeting? Late for work? He was wondering if those were convincing reasons when it occurred to him that he was in fact late for work and due at a staff meeting. A bus zoomed across his vision, belching to a stop. The crowd beside him surged forward. Someone’s computer bag whacked the back of his right elbow, and the Nokia flew out of his hands, end over end, a tiny black bird that disappeared underneath the bus’s gigantic wheels.

“Oh, dear,” said a little old woman on the queue. She was wearing a midnight blue dress with a lace collar, and her head was covered by a black shawl, her hands and forearms

by evening gloves. Hugh couldn't decide if she was dressed for grief or a gala. She glanced up at him, her face a mask of Kabuki white makeup, mouth a garish red. "You're screwed," she said and nudged him out of her way.

2.7

Ray was delighted and brimming with pleasant sarcasm. “About time, Dad. That flip phone was reactionary tech. The candy-ass nineties. This is the kickass millennium. Budget surpluses are for sissies. Iraq isn’t Vietnam. Men carry desks in the palms of their hands. You’re an important dude. You need a Blackberry. Writing emails on the fly. Or at least *in* the bus, instead of under it.”

Hugh took Ray’s advice, and after wading through Verizon’s contractual choices and obtaining a sensuously curved device with a muscular miniature keyboard; and after feeling invaded and helpless while Melissa plugged his new phone into his work computer, forcing them to swap data in a way that seemed sexually perverse if not outright rape; and finally after retrieving the new and now information-loaded cell phone, Hugh called Margery and in response to her wary hello told her breathlessly that collision with a bus had pressed the send button prematurely, causing his rude one-word response to her dinner invitation.

That night they laughed about it in her marital bed, where Hugh felt more at ease, or lasted longer anyway, especially since he didn’t linger on kissing her. He had fun telling her about the phone fiasco because Margery, as Leslie had predicted, was witty, charming, and caring. “That’s what you get for even typing no to me,” she said, unaware of how close her joke came to the truth of Hugh’s fears. “Next time, a cruise missile will silence your Blackberry if you dare turn me down for dinner.”

Then their exchanges became intimate and comforting. He confessed about being spooked by his bed. Tears welled in her eyes. She hugged him tight. He said he would get a

new mattress and she whispered, “Take your time. Whatever makes sense for you. Don’t do anything you’re not sure of.” Her helpfulness had no bounds. She was not only sensitive to his grief, she provided tips on how to take advantage of his new smartphone’s capabilities. He opened up about his job: what movies they were angling to get an early peek at for the festival, his disgust at Karen’s insistent pressure that he compete with the New York Film Festival for big studio movies and even more at her irritating demands that he bring in actors to interview about their films, rather than, as she put it, “those grungy, mumbling indie directors.”

“You’re right,” Margery reassured. “Directors are who we should hear from, who can provide revelations. You have to stick with them, you’re right, but I know what Karen means. Indie directors all look like what you’re afraid your brilliant teenage son will become if you don’t push him to get better grades. Maybe you can compromise? Have a couple actors with directors?”

“Put an actor and a director on a stage and the director just grins and nods,” Hugh answered, and Margery laughed with delight.

In turn she confided how difficult it was to negotiate a separation agreement, that she was having a hard time putting aside her rage at her eighty-year-old Peter Pan husband and focusing on what was best for their boy Sean. She worried Sean would eventually choose to blame her for the divorce rather than his adulterous father because that was easier: she was around all the time, a handy, non-retaliating target, whereas his aging narcissistic father turned to ice if criticized. And besides, soon Jimmy would probably disappear permanently from heart failure at fucking way above, as she put it, “his cock-grade.” Hugh could listen to

her talk all night. Her restless mind, a little frightening when it focused on him, was endlessly entertaining as she toured him through her smart world.

Hours after purchasing his Blackberry Hugh couldn't imagine life without it and suspected that someday he might feel just as passionate about Margery. It was odd to reflect on this past year, a landscape filled with new women and old friends he was coming to know in a different way. Leslie was caring for him with the attention and detail she used to reserve for her sons and husband. Karen worried about his sleep, Melissa protected his turf at work. He would treasure forever the memories of Hilda's energy and grace when they made love. Even his once-a-week free tennis with Francine was a gift of bereavement. He was grateful and guilty at having the attention and affection of these brilliant, competent, nurturing women. It was a betrayal of Amy's memory—perhaps on some moral plane equivalent to cheating on a living wife—but in the dark, in his new bed courtesy of same-day delivery from Bloomingdale's, comforted by the warmth of Margery curled against him, he had to admit that exploring this new land of women, although it came at an unacceptable price, was an adventure he was glad not to have missed.

Three weeks later Hugh reported his progress to Roberto Salazar at the monthly check-up they had settled on as a compromise when Hugh, feeling that everything had been discussed at least five times and chafing at the co-pay, began agitating for an end date to his grief-counseling. Salazar ignored Hugh's delight as a Blackberry owner, instead reacting to his transformation into Margery's boyfriend with an irritating observation: "You finally succeeded in saying or rather texting no to a woman and you immediately took it back."

"It was an accident. I didn't really say no."

Salazar grinned. "Freud said there are no accidents."

“Freud has been discredited.”

“Who isn’t discredited? Hugh, I’m serious, I really do want to understand how all these changes happened. Why did you take back the honesty of your text? Why go to her apartment when you didn’t want to? Why are you having sex with a woman whose kiss you can’t stand and who makes you feel like a failure?”

“She doesn’t make me feel like a failure!” Hugh was pissed. He had trusted Salazar with his deepest feelings, something he wasn’t eager to do with any other man or most women, and now Salazar was using them against him. “And the sex is fine.”

“Fine? That’s enthusiastic. Is her kiss getting better?”

Hugh changed the subject. “Look, all that’s out of date. We’ve seen each other every other night this month, four nights in a row this week. I have a much better understanding of the pressure she was under from her ex to be an achiever. And from her mother. Really it started with her mother. Both made her feel she had to impress them with achievements, a bird dog fetching their kill is the way she puts it. Anyway, the point is: she doesn’t make me feel like a failure.”

Salazar ticked off his indictment with his fingers: “She keeps poking you about writing another book of film criticism. She keeps demanding you get Karen to put you on the Foundation’s board. She wants you to apply for a teaching job at Columbia. And lastly, there’s this bizarre insistence that you fire your cleaning woman.”

“That’s not Margery. It’s Leslie who wants me to fire Olga. Mostly because she fired her. Or stopped using her as a temporary. Leslie never really hired her.”

“Leslie. Right. The woman you *really* love,” Salazar said. “You’re pursuing a woman you don’t love because you can’t have the woman you do love. Is that what you’re saying no to—love?”

Hugh crossed his arms and stared at Salazar’s faded Shiraz rug. He decided this would be his last grief-counseling session. He could easily say no to Salazar.

The therapist followed up in a gentle voice. “I honestly believe you should explore why you’re seeing a woman you don’t really like and who is so critical of you.”

“I like her a lot. She’s vivacious, she’s accomplished, she has a brilliant mind. So the sex is . . . mundane. So what?”

“Isn’t sex pretty important in a romantic relationship?”

Hugh studied a pair of yellow-and-black-striped tigers leaping at each other against a deep red background. There was little detail to their faces, no expression. He tried to make his own face as impassive.

“I think so,” Roberto said. “But maybe you feel differently. Maybe it wasn’t that important in your marriage. Maybe you don’t want to have a better sexual relationship than you did with Amy.”

Hugh uncrossed his arms. Cleared his throat. “You’re being sarcastic.”

“I’m not. I see several couples who really don’t feel it’s important in their marriages, especially after the first few years. Companionship, shared values and interests, raising children—much more important to them.”

“She doesn’t belittle me,” Hugh said.

“I’m quoting you, Hugh. And not from last month. From today. You started this session saying things were going well with Margery”—he raised a finger for emphasis—

“*even though* she keeps talking about you doing more, that she makes you feel you’re not accomplished enough for her.”

“She’s a very ambitious woman. That’s all. She assumes I am too and she’s trying to be encouraging. She’s not belittling me. On the contrary, she’s encouraging me to be more.”

“Do you want to be more? You seem to me very satisfied by your work. As you should be. You enjoy what you do and you have a very important, prestigious job.”

“It’s not important, it’s not prestigious.” Hugh was embarrassed he had given Salazar this impression. Had he been bragging? He loathed braggarts.

“To most people your job is a great job. Even if they don’t love movies. And in general to be paid to do something you love to do is out of most people’s reach. From your description Margery isn’t anywhere near as satisfied and happy in her work as you are. She seems always to want to be more famous, richer, sell more books, write movies, television shows, she seems to want to dominate every field she encounters. She’s never content with herself and her work. From that point of view, which I admit is my point of view, you’re more successful than she is.”

Hugh blamed Salazar for what happened at dinner with Margery that night. Things really had been settling into a good pattern. Just the two of them after their separate trying days, sharing dinners and feelings, exchanging advice about their work, enjoying efficient lovemaking and comfy snuggling. He hadn’t protested when Leslie, calling with more dismaying intelligence about the rapid progress of Stein’s attempt to sell the building to a developer, referred to Margery as “your girlfriend.” The trouble came when they tried to be a public couple.

They went to the ballet at Lincoln Center as guests of Bud and Joanne Cousins, whom Margery had described as “my oldest and dearest friends who are dying to meet you.” *Sleeping Beauty* was lovely to look at, although long and sometimes repetitious, which Hugh accepted as a convention of the form. Afterward they walked to Gabriel’s, an elegant restaurant whose prices made Hugh nervous, especially after Bud ordered a bottle of Barolo that Hugh noticed cost a hundred and seventy-five bucks. Since they had been treated to first-ring tickets Hugh felt he ought to offer to pay the whole bill until Bud casually agreed with the constantly-refilling-their-glasses waiter that they needed a second bottle. Hugh decided manners be damned, half the tab was all he could afford.

Then things went south. Bud said in a friendly way, “You know what you’re perfect for, Hugh. You should run the Lincoln Center film program. The New York Film Festival has become predictable, the theater needs an update, in fact the whole program needs new blood and new money.”

“You’re right,” Margery said, squeezing Hugh’s knee with excitement. “They desperately need a new head. Who do we know, Bud? How do we get this done?”

Maybe it was because he was fretting about being seen as a cheapskate, or maybe it was all the booze (he’d downed a cocktail and more than his share of two bottles of wine); certainly he was tired, full, and tipsy. Whatever the reason, he said, “Head of the Lincoln Center Film Society? Oh my God. Save me. I couldn’t handle that collection of star-fuckers.”

Bud retracted his chin as if avoiding a punch. “Sorry.”

His wife frowned. “Star-fuckers?”

Recovering from his surprise, Bud said dryly, "I would think you'd be used to handling stars anyway."

"Of course you can handle it, Hugh," Margery persisted. "They'd be thrilled to have you. Everyone knows the Hamilton festival is the great event in New York."

"Great?!" Hugh sputtered. "The New York Film Festival is as great an event as they come. That's exactly what's wrong with it. There's a thousand times more pressure on them than on little us. NYFF is a jungle of cut-throat politics. Last thing it's about is appreciating film. And that's what I care about. Not slobbering over movie stars."

Bud raised a hand for the check. "Sorry I brought it up. Sore subject, I guess."

Hugh's cheeks warmed. He didn't look, but he assumed Margery was wincing, hurt by his abusive tone, humiliated in front of her friends. "I can't handle that kind of job, that's all I mean to say," he said, hoping self-deprecation would dilute his anger. "We're just movie nerds. They're the cool kids. I really can't handle them," he insisted, glancing at Margery and seeing not the hurt he had imagined but a frown. Was she perplexed? Irritated? One of the worst things about dating was that he couldn't read a new woman's expression anywhere near as well as he used to obtain clues from Amy's wry smile or narrowing of eye. "As I'm proving right now," he said, grinning sheepishly at Joanne, who, for whatever reason, smiled as if she understood and didn't mind his outburst. "I can't even handle a couple glasses of wine without becoming belligerent. Sorry." He exhaled heavily, like Grandpa when loaded, and by God if he didn't hear himself say, "It's a bad world," just like the old man.

Once they were in a cab heading downtown it was clear that Margery was furious. Her frown remained fixed, her down-turned mouth sealed until they were below 23rd Street. She mumbled into the well of the car, "You know Bud is on the board of Lincoln Center."

Hugh croaked, “No.” Cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t.”

“You didn’t Google him? Or Joanne?”

Hugh shook his head. “You said they were old friends who loved the ballet, that’s all I knew about them.” He wanted to add “I was having dinner, not networking,” but thought better of it.

“You didn’t wonder how they had those seats? First ring, center?”

“I assumed they were rich.”

“Rich is an understatement. She’s a Brandt.”

He wanted to say, “Who gives a fuck?” Instead: “What’s a Brandt?”

“Oh come on!” she shouted, exasperation unleashed. “Don’t be ridiculous. You know the Brandts. The fabulously wealthy mining family? Of course you know who they are. Her brother Fred is a major donor to the Hamilton Foundation, for God’s sakes. You know him, right?”

“Right, of course.” He did know Joanne’s brother. Sort of. Hugh paid little attention to the stream of faces at gala events. They reminded him of his boring cousins at Great Aunt Helen’s massive Christmases. Blazers and pressed trousers talking golf, bond portfolios, college bowl games. Hugh was a voluntary exile, slinking off with sweater-vest-and-wide-wale-corduroy-wearing cousin Henry to watch *It’s A Wonderful Life* on the small black-and-white TV in the children’s room. Years later, hearing the news that Henry was dying of AIDS in San Francisco, Hugh’s mother asked, “He didn’t ever . . . bother you, did he?” In fact Henry was the only member of the family who never bothered Hugh.

Still he felt properly scolded and said no more. Neither did Margery until they were in Hugh’s apartment, his place having become their usual venue post-date. Her co-op was

being shown by brokers, often first thing in the morning, and anyway Hugh wasn't eager to be surrounded by her husband's photos of himself with the last eight Presidents of the United States. The one of JFK and the young Jimmy rigging a sail off Cape Cod was profoundly intimidating.

Hugh made a beeline for the fridge to pour a glass of seltzer. He was parched and he wanted to mitigate what was sure to be a hangover. He asked if she wanted some. She shook her head no. Then she broke her silence: "Should I go home?"

He gulped half the glass, suppressed a belch. "Whatever you want. I'm okay either way."

"That sounds like you want me to go."

"You're angry at me."

"You sound angry at me right now. At Gabriel's you sounded angry at everyone."

"I wasn't angry. Just . . ." He sighed. His breath reeked of Barolo. He took another gulp. His share of the check had been a day's salary.

"You were rude to Bud. Very rude. He wanted to help you. He's in a position to help you."

"I don't need help!"

"You're going to need a raise if you have to move and buy a new place."

He nearly said, "That's none of your fucking business." He struggled for calmer words. "Sorry. Look, I'm tired and drunk. Let's get some sleep. We'll talk about it in the morning. I'll apologize to Bud tomorrow, okay?" he added and immediately wanted to kick himself for it. He finished his glass and poured another. "I'm dehydrated."

"Seltzer'll just make that worse," Margery said. "The carbonation. Drink tap water."

The liter bottle was made of soft plastic and almost empty. He considered throwing it at her. “Good idea.” He did not want to fight about anything. The last argument he had had with a woman was five years ago, a year into Amy’s treatment when she was blaming a nurse for delays beyond anyone’s control. “I’m on chemo, God damn it,” Amy had shouted at him when he objected. “I get to be a bitch.” He had sworn off bickering after that and hadn’t missed it.

Margery left the kitchen. He finished the seltzer, then filled a glass with tap water. “Wimp,” he whispered. He searched for Margery. The lights were on in his bedroom, and the bathroom door was shut. He heard the bathtub filling. She had never taken a bath at his place, although she had commented several times that they calmed her down after a stressful day. Amy had relished her baths too, especially once ill. Hugh never took them. In fact, no one had taken a bath in there since . . .

“Oh my God!” Margery shouted in a voice filled with horror. He heard something bang. He ran to the door. It was locked.

“Ugh,” Margery groaned.

Had she fallen, hit her head? “Margery!” He banged the door. Turned his shoulder, ready to knock it down.

It opened. Margery, in panties but no bra, mouth distorted by disgust, pointed at the tub.

Hugh had to move past her to get a view. Shit-brown water, lighter in color with each gush, was sputtering unevenly from the faucet. The tub had filled with a few inches of rusty water and the dry sides were spattered with dozens of drops of something gray. He sat on the edge, released the drain so it would empty, turned the hot and cold faucets on full. The water

was already nearly clear. “It’s okay. They shut the water off each season when they flush the system and it hasn’t been run since . . .” He didn’t finish.

Margery appeared next to him, clutching a towel, an accusing finger aimed at the tub’s sides. “It’s filthy. She never cleaned it! There’s grime everywhere.”

“Of course she used to clean it!” he snapped, his patience exhausted. “She’s dead.”

“What?” Margery slapped his shoulder lightly, as if to wake him up. “I’m talking about Olga,” she said, making an effort to speak softly but sounding like a scold anyway. “Doesn’t she ever clean it?”

Hugh realized the gray dots, dripping now into muddy smears, were the result of a uniform film of dust getting wet from the faucet’s splashes. He sloshed clear water all around to wash the sides.

“Didn’t you notice the dust?” Margery backed away, gesturing at the tub area. “It’s like Miss Haversham’s. Leslie said she was incompetent, but this”—Margery dropped the towel and reached for her bra—“this is worse. Gross negligence. You have to fire her.” She put on her blouse. “I’m going home. Sorry. This totally freaked me out. I didn’t know what was coming out of that faucet for a second. I’m going. I have to be in my own bed tonight to get any sleep. Sorry.” She turned to go but stopped to add, “Seriously, Hugh, there’s something wrong with you if you don’t fire that woman. Seriously wrong.”

Hugh thoroughly washed down the walls of the tub until all the soot was gone. He heard Margery putting on her shoes in the bedroom, walking down the hall. Running water prevented him from being sure she had left the apartment until he went to the front door and verified her coat and purse had been taken. He double-locked it, as always. Then he did something he had never done before. He picked up the dangling chain lock and slotted it

onto the door, so if someone pried open the bottom and top deadbolts, they would still be stopped. There hadn't been a burglary in the building during the twenty years Hugh had lived there. Not a mugging, not a single intruder, and yet Hugh longed for another bolt, a thicker door, perhaps a moat stocked with piranhas, whatever it took to guarantee he would be securely alone.

2.8

On waking, Hugh found an email from Margery on his Blackberry:

Sorry I rushed out. Need to have Sunday Mom
dinner with Sean tonight, but let's talk this
afternoon.

He responded with the briefest email he had yet composed to her:

Sure. Just watching a Mets doubleheader. Call
anytime.

His phone thrashed on the coffee table at 4:37. He didn't answer. He decided to email her later, while she was busy with her boy, that he had fallen asleep. Almost true. He had hardly slept all night and he kept dozing off through seven hours of swings and misses.

There were no messages from her when he woke up on Monday. He was grateful. He didn't hear from her all that day or evening. That was a relief too. By Tuesday morning, however, when there was still no word, he became anxious, wondering when she would make contact.

Lunchtime was the answer. He was walking on the esplanade under a clear blue sky, enjoying a warm gentle July breeze, a perfect summer day that would have cheered Amy, even during the worst of her chemo treatments, into girlish excitement as she tugged Hugh off the couch to walk over to the Hudson and watch the sun set before they dined al fresco. He was remembering her glee when Margery rumbled his pocket. Leaning against the rail, his back to New Jersey, studying the ever-expanding West Side's condo skyline, he dug out his Blackberry.

“Hi,” she said, her tone brisk, wary. “Guess we both needed a couple days off.”

“Yes,” Hugh said.

“In fact, Hugh, I think we’re both under a lot of strain, all these big transitions for both of us. Not to compare what you’re going through with what I’m going through . . . ”

“Divorce, moving,” Hugh said. “Those are very big deals.”

“Yes, they are.” Margery’s voice relaxed. “Thank you. Anyway, I think maybe we were moving too quickly. At least I . . . ”

“Yes,” Hugh interrupted.

“Ah.” She paused in surprise. “So you agree. Maybe we should take a break?”

“Yes,” Hugh said.

At his next grief-counseling session, he filled Salazar in: that was the last communication he’d had with Margery and the last he expected to have. “So,” Salazar said, “you managed to have an entire relationship with a woman, including breaking up with her, always saying yes to whatever she proposed.”

Hugh waited until his anger subsided before he commented genially, “I didn’t fire Olga.”

“Uh huh. But Olga is a part of your previous life. Didn’t Amy hire her?”

“I said no to Leslie and to Margery about firing Olga.”

Salazar looked confused. He opened his mouth to object but before he could, Hugh changed the subject. He told Salazar that he was no longer really in mourning and wanted to end therapy.

Salazar questioned that with irritating calmness. “You’re no longer in mourning?”

“Deep mourning,” Hugh said, and then he politely fired his grief counselor.

It took another month for him to fire Olga. Leslie and Margery had opened his eyes to his house cleaner's poor job performance, and yet his first impulse was still to overlook her faults. After all, he had lived this way for almost seventeen years, fifteen while Amy lived and more than another as a widower. For a while he forced himself to avert his newly sharp eyes from congealed circles of dishwashing liquid and other unidentifiable cleaning agents in the cabinet under the sink, and from film and grime in the bathroom tiles, and bathtub rings, and layers of soot atop every doorframe, picture frame, book, anything Olga presumably regarded as being out of sight or daily use.

That self-imposed blindness became impossible to sustain when he went to fetch the broom to sweep up pieces of a glass he had broken and discovered the floor of the utility/linen closet was covered in a layer of speckled crystals of Ajax. They had spilled from a box Olga had opened from the bottom instead of the easily re-sealable top. The broom he sought was resting on top of this mess. He decided to sweep up the corrosive cleaning agent—the wood floor had already developed several white blotches—rather than scold her, hoping his example would inspire her. To clear the floor he lifted the laundry basket Olga used to carry clothes to the machines in the basement and found a bag of socks in a Duane Reade bag.

At first he was baffled by their location. Then he discovered they were all singletons, their mates lost. He had wondered from time to time why his drawer of socks seemed to diminish at a steady pace; while Amy was alive he assumed she was tossing them, since she often complained his socks had holes well before he noticed them. But after her death, when it continued, instead of asking Olga about the missing socks, he had bought more without keeping track of the rate of replacement. Evidently Olga had been losing socks at a rapid

rate. And she had kept—hidden?—the unmatched singletons, which he thought bizarre. Why? Did she hope to find their mates someday? There were forty-one solo socks in the bag. Forty-one! Thinking back he realized he had been buying a few pairs every month for years. Had there been hundreds? There must have been. At what point did she give up and throw away the widower sock? And how in God's name was she losing them? The building had only six machines in the laundry room, and it was never that busy. To lose one every few months, stuck inside the dryer or falling to the floor while en route, seemed reasonable. But forty-one!

It was so appalling he confessed his disgust to Leslie. She laughed, covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I know you're fond of her." She added in a mumble, as if Hugh couldn't hear, although of course he could: "Which is nuts." Then she said in her sweetest, most forgiving voice, but nevertheless each word spoken firmly: "If you don't mind that your house is filthy, okay. But what bothers me is she's cheating you. You're paying her for what? Eight hours? She can't be cleaning for more than two. At most."

And that was why he decided he had to let her go. Although Amy had forgiven Olga for incompetence, she would not have forgiven her for taking advantage of a widower, which must have been what was happening. Olga couldn't have been this careless and sloppy while Amy was alive. Obviously she thought Hugh was too blind or too weak to protest. Even if he wasn't offended, what else could he do but replace her? Otherwise he'd have to hire another cleaning woman to straighten up after her. He couldn't afford to waste money, especially with his building up for sale, and if he ended up moving he'd have to fire her anyway. He certainly wasn't going to let her spoil a brand new apartment.

The night before he planned to confront her he didn't sleep a wink. First thing that

morning he had withdrawn what he paid her each month—six hundred and forty dollars—to give her. At lunch he went back to the bank and took out a second month's worth. Twelve hundred and eighty dollars! That had to be enough until she found another job.

Then he considered the likelihood of her keeping another job once her new employers discovered they had to buy socks every week.

He went back to the bank intending to take out a third month. But when he saw his balance he realized it wouldn't leave him enough to pay his Amex bill, due that week, and his next pay check wouldn't appear until the end of the month. He did have enough to give her another two hundred and twenty. That brought her severance to a round number of fifteen hundred dollars. That was far too much and yet he felt it wasn't enough.

He intended to deliver the bad news right after she arrived, since he usually left for work soon after. She came in and plopped her Coach bag—a hand-me-down from Amy that she'd carefully preserved, more carefully than anything in Amy's apartment—on the kitchen counter, sipping what she had left of a takeout iced coffee. Hugh, awkward as a sixth grader asking a girl for a dance, mumbled he had something serious to discuss with her. She furrowed her brow and looked sad, probably because every serious talk they had had was about Amy's illness. Olga nodded without a reaction to Hugh's at first stumbling, then stammered, and finally hurried speech as he presented Leslie's ongoing negotiations as having been completed, then built that into a complicated lie in which he would be moving out soon, subletting the studio apartment of a friend who was working out of town while he looked for a place to buy in Brooklyn or maybe Harlem. All that, he said, could take a year, so Olga should look for a new job.

Olga finished her iced coffee with a loud slurp, looked serious for a moment, and then

seemed to cheer up. She said with a smile that she could help him pack up here and clean at his friend's apartment while he stayed there and then clean his new apartment after he moved in. Hugh shook his head, said his friend had a cleaning woman and that it could be as much as two years before Hugh had a new place of his own for Olga to clean. That was when Hugh saw the reality of her situation come into her eyes, that he wasn't going to be talked out of this, that she was really going to lose her job. And that was when he noticed the smell.

He recognized this stink, the pungent odor of onion fear, the flop sweat of dread, but for a moment he couldn't believe it was being generated by a placid five-foot-two woman who usually smelled of ammonia and gardenias. She was reacting as if what he was doing was a mortal threat. Her body had become still, eerily motionless, eyes fixed on him, a chameleon trying to blend into the surroundings, hiding from a killer.

She is utterly terrified by what I'm doing to her, he realized with horror. To be merciful he quickly ended his painful speech about how much he valued her and would miss her. He explained he was giving her fifteen hundred dollars, offering the thick envelope of cash. He told her she could go, didn't need to clean one last time.

She snatched the money as if he might try to take it back, reached into her purse, and came out with the key to his apartment. She held it up to his face as if it were a cross and he were Dracula. "I hope you are happy with the new girl," she said, fear wafting away from her as if she were baking a pie made of terror.

"What new girl?" Hugh asked, baffled. Did she mean his invention of a friend's cleaning woman at the imaginary studio subplot? Or had she seen through his stammered lies?

She cocked her head, mouth twisting bitterly, eyes disgusted and furious, a look that clearly signified: Who are you kidding? "Goodbye, Mr. Reynolds," she said, using his last

name for the first time in a decade. She picked up the Coach bag and left as fast as she could.

He opened a window to clear the apartment of the stench of her pain, then called Melissa to say he would be coming in late.

“Are you okay?” Melissa asked. “You sound terrible.”

“I broke a crown. Have to see my dentist.” A plausible lie: she knew he had been grinding his teeth at night, and anyway his jaw was aching.

He took two Tylenol immediately and another two six hours later at the office, but his head ached all day. To Leslie’s question about how the firing had gone he said accurately, “It was one of the worst experiences of my life.”

The next morning his painful jaw woke him before dawn. He took two more Tylenol. Looking at himself in the mirror, he realized that if Amy had been in his position she would never have fired Olga, even if she had had to scold and fuss until Olga swept up and scrubbed properly. Amy would never have fired the woman who had seen their children through puberty and the worst of adolescence, who had seen Amy through chemo and her death at home. In his spot Amy would have done her best to keep Olga. Life was too short to care how many matched socks you owned.

In the weeks that followed, Hugh often thought of Olga’s fate, always with a stab of self-recrimination at what he had done to her. He could not forgive himself. Nearly a year had passed since he had begun his project, and he hadn’t learned to say no to a woman. He had simply learned to be cruel.

Stage Three

3.1

Over the next year a newly resolved Hugh, although determined to keep himself aloof from female invasions of his decision-making, became a dating machine.

First he went through the list offered a year before by friends. Almost all the women were still available. Rachel Abramson, the violinist and music teacher, met him for coffee while in town from New Haven, escorting her prodigy son to a rehearsal at Lincoln Center for some sort of young person's showcase that she mentioned by initials as if it were as well known as the Super Bowl. She was small and pretty, her features delicate, her voice soft and mellifluous, but the content of her speech was obsessive and grim. She couldn't get off the subject of her son's talent and prospects, not even to talk about her daughter beyond commenting, "She's very bright in her academics but not a musician," in a tone of deep and permanent disapproval. She sent Hugh an email ten minutes after they parted saying she would be back in town for the actual performance and staying for the weekend with family if he was free. He wrote back that unfortunately he would be in DC visiting his daughter. He thought that a pointed reply.

Katherine Tolson, the TV critic, was big boned and voluptuous, her face perfectly round, her smile a friendly dawning, and she was funny about being someone who "sits all day and watches soaps."

“Soaps?” Hugh asked. “But this is the new Golden Age of TV, right?”

“It’s great, just great,” she admitted. “Although it was better when everyone looked down on TV. Nobody used to pay any attention to my reviews. Now, no matter what, half my readers hate me and think I’ve committed a crime against culture. But it’s thrilling to have all this terrific work to see. I’m sorry about what’s happening in your world,” she added and looked at him with genuine pity.

He asked what she meant.

“Well, movies are a dying form, right?” she said in the same cheerful, friendly tone as she plunged a dagger in his heart. “They used to be at the center of the cultural conversation,” she said, still beaming at him as if she were delivering good tidings. “And now only teenagers are excited about them and that’s because they’ll soon be video games.”

She looked surprised when Hugh declined to walk back to her place and watch her screener of the pilot of a new show called *Friday Night Lights*.

Of the actresses, two were no longer available, but Patricia Murphy, the one Hugh admired for her many roles in indie films and Scorsese pictures as tormented, self-destructive, tough, and fearless working-class women, was glad to meet late one afternoon at the West Bank Café, across the street from Playwright’s Horizons, where she was in rehearsal, playing the lead as an alcoholic mother in a new comedy by Jonathan Reynolds. “I’m going to have to eat now,” she apologized, “because we just did a tech and we’re doing our first preview tonight.” She ordered a kale salad, explaining she was vegan. “Like everybody these days. I’m a cliché, a cliché, a cliché, a cliché,” she said, each one in a lower and lower register, a remarkable feat of vocal control. He was startled by her speech in

general. She had no trace of the flawless New Jersey, New York, or Philly accents of her movie roles, instead had the notes of a patrician New Englander.

She had all sorts of “neurotic tics,” as she put it. Fear of flying, fear of elevators, fear, she said laughing, “of loud toilets.” You know, the New York tenement Niagara Falls flush?” She apologized for having no makeup on. In fact, she was gorgeous. Her face sculpted, her deep-blue eyes full of feeling, her thick brunette hair framing her face perfectly. She was intelligent and high-strung, not a tough Mafia girlfriend. “Men are always disappointed,” she said with disarming charm, “when they discover I’m not the woman they see on screen.” “They’re crazy,” Hugh said, but he didn’t follow up. Without the Jersey accent he just wasn’t turned on. He was a man after all.

That being the case, more and more names and email addresses were fed into his dating data bank by friends, or friends of friends. Hugh soon learned not to assume that the accompanying details describing the woman were accurate or in accord with his taste. The Internet often proved the given facts to be less intriguing than others that had gone unmentioned, and no woman presented the same face to him that she showed to her friends. Nor did he rule that face in or out based on the images available online: sheepish, name-tagged grins at reunions and work-related conferences, the whimsy or glamour of a Facebook self-portrait. It wasn’t only that he learned he couldn’t judge a book by its cover. He also discovered that what Nature had given women outwardly—a noble forehead, worried eyes, a cheerful mouth, a weak chin—was often transformed by the animating spirit within to the opposite effect. A generous mouth turned down in persistent resentment, hard features softened with kindness, intelligent brow trivialized by tedious conversation, dull eyes glowing with sympathy.

Meredith Wilkinson was an example of a misleading package and resume. Tall and angular, with short severe silver hair, imposing high forehead, long nose, solemn mouth; a full professor of microbiology at Columbia, one of the fifty most important woman scientists in the U.S., according to *Discover* magazine: all of this pointed to a formal, intellectually cool personality. But her soul was mischievous; her conversation consisted largely of gossip about the sexual misdeeds of her colleagues. Their drinks date, arranged by Peter's wife, Debby, extended into a meal at the bar, then a brisk winter walk that turned into an ironic snowball skirmish in Riverside Park after Hugh commented that he would kill himself if he saw one more romantic comedy in which the couple made snow angels. After she nailed him with an ice ball that sent a chilling river down his neck, she invited him up to her nearby apartment for hot chocolate. Instead of offering a warming beverage, immediately on stepping into her foyer and giggling all the way she pushed him into her bedroom and at the mattress until he was prone. She stripped in front of a sweeping view of the Hudson, pausing as she shed each item to exclaim, "I'm getting naked!" until sweater, jeans, bra, and panties were gone and she announced: "I'm naked!" She jumped him while he was untangling from a shirt. She pecked his belly playfully, then rose suddenly to bury her face in his neck. She nipped him and he yelped, briefly wondering what it was about him that made women want to bite? He forgot that inquiry when she lay across his lap and said, "I'm a bad, bad girl," and wiggled her buttocks invitingly.

At first Hugh stared, understanding and yet not.

She wiggled again. "Spank your bad girl, please!"

Hugh applied his hand once, a pat, more reassurance than punishment.

"Harder!" she barked.

Hugh had never spanked anyone, in earnest or as theater. He whacked her with a quarter of his strength. She squeaked and shuddered as if he had struck hard. That led to some confusion as to what was and was not pleasurable. She showed off a scientist's dispassion then, sitting up to explain earnestly that she was "wired to enjoy impact play. You should spank me hard, and pinch my nipples"; and she illustrated by taking hold of each one between thumb and index finger and squeezing until they almost disappeared. He winced at the sight. She grinned and reassured, "If you do it too hard my safe word is 'Pineapple.' That means you should stop. But you're so gentle I'll bet you I never use it." She promptly resumed her position across his lap, adult voice escalating to a girl's squeak: "I'm sorry I interrupted you, sir!"

Hugh didn't enjoy administering the spanking. He couldn't imagine how a hand striking flesh could be pleasurable for the striker. But that wasn't the attraction, he realized after her pale skin turned pink and he found himself flipping her over to share his astonishingly vigorous reaction to the sight.

After they both climaxed, and blushing himself, he had to nod yes when she said, "See? It's fun, right?" She was fun. And educational. When he asked about her work and he confessed he had no basic knowledge of the immune system, to his delight she mapped on his belly the lymphatic network and the crucial interaction between antigens and antibodies. For ten stunning minutes he understood this marvel of the human body. Unfortunately the following day he couldn't remember anything of her explanation. He liked everything about her and, puzzlingly, once she was out of sight didn't miss her. It was obvious she also didn't miss him as she flew off every other week to conferences, or was bunkered in her lab, or caring for her two teenage children, whose custody she shared with her ex. They tried a few

naughty emails and calls, but those were pale compared to their robust in-the-flesh meetings, and soon all contact, except body to body, ceased. They “hooked up,” as Ray would have put it, once every few weeks for a friendly evening of bowling and spanking or ice skating and spanking, until spring blossoms changed their once a month meet-ups to roller-blading and spanking or Mets games and spanking.

During one of those intervals Hugh had a non-dating evening out with another woman who surprised him with the private side of her personality. One day at tennis Francine said a friend had punked out at the last minute on going with her to the *Grey Gardens* musical that night. She didn’t want the ticket to be wasted, wondered if Hugh had been a fan of the original documentary and might be interested? After the show he accepted her invitation to join her at Esca, although he was worried about what in the world they would talk about during a one-on-one dinner. But it was easy. Francine was delightfully lively, and about a subject no one else was, the death of a spouse.

“I’m sure you miss Amy terribly but I don’t miss sharing my bed when it comes to getting a good night’s sleep. I had no idea how sleep-deprived I was. I was able to stop taking three medications after Jerrold passed: Ambien, which I took every night after he’d wake me with his three a.m. trip to the loo; Wellbutrin, when it turned out my depression was just lack of REM; and Tagamet, of all things. Did you know not sleeping gives you heartburn? But best of all, absolutely the best thing: if I want to go without makeup all weekend at the beach house, I do. He’s not there, looking at me as if he’s contemplating how much a divorce will cost him.”

Then she pivoted to him, asking what it was like to be single at his age. “My God, they must be crawling all over you. I’m a feminist but honestly my gender just loves making

themselves miserable by entangling themselves in relationships. Even the lesbians drive each other crazy.”

Encouraged by her openness, and reassured that Hilda had never carried out her threat, Hugh told her frankly of his other encounters, going so far as to say, “Really, honestly, Francine, I’m beginning to think I don’t have another love in me, certainly not a satisfying love like I had with Amy. I mean, one a lifetime, that’s plenty. Why be greedy?”

She was touched and sympathetic but also laughed off his romantic despair in a way that helped him feel it could easily pass. “That’s exactly why I’m thrilled to be single,” she said. “Can’t stomach the thought of having to take care of—no offense—another fully grown baby boy. And I’ve certainly had my fill of making an idiot of myself over men. If you keep dating, forgive them, Hugh, they know not what they do.”

The whole night out was so diverting, so blissfully free of dating’s anxieties and self-consciousness, that he agreed a month later to be a last minute replacement again, this time to the pre-opening party of the Neo Rauch exhibit at the Met. He found the paintings to be, well, very German, and afterwards they went to dinner with ancient friends of hers who had both worked in finance. That turned out to be the stiff, humorless evening he had feared the first would be.

Undaunted, at least once a week Hugh accepted other recommendations from friends. By the end of the summer of 2007, Leslie had moved down her list to Judy Kaplan, whom she claimed was a spiritual cousin of Amy’s. “They both love to read. Judy’s a writer too and like Amy, Judy doesn’t try to publish. I wish she would. I really, really like her poems. Also like Amy, she’s got great legs. I’d kill for her skinny thighs. She’s also a no-nonsense

mom like Amy, not a pushover like me. You'll see. You'll feel like you've known her all your life."

He did feel immediately at home with Judy and she did have shapely legs, but during their three lively dates of non-stop conversation Hugh decided she was a spiritual cousin of Leslie's, not Amy's. Like Leslie, she supervised her three children's movements—son already at college, fraternal twin daughters in their junior year of high school—as if they were constantly at risk of attack from Al Qaeda. Like Leslie, she was moved by the plight of anyone in need and urgently wished to help. Like Leslie, she touched Hugh on the arm with maternal sympathy every time the subject of Amy came up. And like Leslie, she was as absorbed by his real-estate crisis as if she were a co-signatory on the lease. Leslie had been fitfully negotiating with his landlord for months. Recently, the back and forth had heated up as Stein got close to having enough vacant apartments to allow him to convert the building from a rental to a condo and cash out. Hugh's could put him over the top, and Leslie's latest proposal was that Stein offer Hugh a quarter of a million to move within ninety days, thereby vacating the remainder of his lease and forfeiting his technical right to renew it. Threatening that otherwise Hugh would renew was a bluff, since a new lease could go up to a market rate he wouldn't be able to afford. Leslie had other bluffs up her sleeve, like filing an injunction with the city claiming tenant protections for Hugh, the logic of which he didn't really follow; but he understood these moves would spell trouble for Stein, whose plan to make a killing would be stalled for years.

"So this morning Leslie told me the latest," Judy said while spreading a blanket over grass planted on the landscaped pier off the Esplanade. "If Stein pays you to move you'll buy a place?" This was their fourth date, their first since her son had moved back uptown to

Columbia to start his sophomore year. Her daughters were at their father's house in Woodstock, she'd mentioned, which led Hugh to assume she had arranged this brunch as foreplay. They had yet to have sex, or kiss beyond hello and goodbye. He felt sure their lovemaking would be decisive for both of them. Short of introducing their children to each other, no other pothole loomed. They agreed about politics, all cultural events they had attended, spicy food, and had discovered they shared an addiction to watching the sun set over the Hudson.

"I don't know if I can buy anywhere I'd want to live in New York. I can't afford this view, that's for sure." Hugh gestured at the restless river and New Jersey's unevenly developed shore beyond.

"How about in a hip and cool gentrifying neighborhood? With Stein's cash and a mortgage? Leslie says your credit is good."

"Well," Hugh said as he helped unpack the food, "I can't afford even a gentrifying 'hood in Manhattan. We're talking—shudder—Brooklyn."

"What about the upper Upper West Side? Anyway, Brooklyn's where it's at now. And in Brooklyn maybe you can get a townhouse."

"Maybe in Greenpoint. I definitely can't afford to stay in Manhattan. I need at least two bedrooms. Ray's got another year of college after this one, and even when he leaves I want him and Ginnie to visit. As it is, with two bedrooms I'm going to have to sleep on the couch when they're both home for the holidays."

"Make Ray sleep on the couch," Judy said.

"You're a sexist."

"Okay, make Ginnie sleep on the couch. But not you. You'll throw your back out."

“Is Leslie telling you all my secrets? How did you know my back kills me when I sleep on the couch?”

“Leslie didn’t say a word. At our age who doesn’t have a bad back?” She grinned. She had warm brown eyes, like Leslie, and Leslie’s comforting cheerful manner. “And knees that creak! We’ll be lucky if we can get up from this blanket.” She laughed coquettishly, selling decrepitude as a come-on. She was sexy in her nurturing way. Again, like Leslie. He had had this perverse thought before and had it again now, that making love to Judy would be a nearly perfect stand-in for making love to Leslie—which made it all the more puzzling that he had come to brunch without enthusiasm, dutiful about its purpose. But now, as the moment of truth drew near, he was eager to get to her apartment.

While they munched bagels, ignored salad, and relished rugelach and coffee, Judy audited his finances and disagreed with his assessment of his prospects for buying a place. Leslie had not informed her about his back but evidently she had disclosed his salary; that didn’t bother him, although he thought it ought to. Judy insisted, as had Leslie, that the smart play was to hock everything and break his IRA to buy an apartment. Maybe they were right, that with Stein’s exit money he could afford someplace decent in Brooklyn or the very Upper West Side. But he felt only heartbreak at the prospect of moving out of his home with Amy and terror at going deeper into debt to live someplace strange. He fell silent and clenched his jaw. That sent shooting pains up to his right ear, then down his neck, somehow managing to lodge finally in his shoulder. His nocturnal teeth-grinding had worsened. The guard his dentist had given him was visually disgusting and unusable if he wanted to sleep. He had been warned, after shattering a two thousand dollar crown, that many more expensive dental procedures loomed if he didn’t stop grinding while he slept, so catching himself doing it

during the day was disheartening. He turned away from Judy and dug a finger into his rigid, sore jaw hinge. Loosening it unlocked an overwhelming urge to sob, the prospect of abruptly falling into a depthless sadness that he had hoped was over for him and anyway seemed foolish when provoked by real estate instead of the death of a loved one. He focused on neatening up, putting bagels and accouterments away. He felt Judy's eyes on him during this struggle for calm and cleanliness.

"Maybe it'll be good for you," she said. Feeling under control, he paused to look at her. She smiled encouragingly, urging a shy child to meet his new classmates. "A new chapter."

But a new chapter had already been written, a whole new book. Why the fuck should there be another new anything? He finished packing up their picnic. As he turned to her he raised a bright smile, which made his cheeks ache and shooting pains radiate from his right jaw. She took his hand and patted it consolingly. Enraged, he wanted to yank it free. *How dare she!* he thought. And then, *How dare she what?* His anger vanished as quickly as it had arrived. Without it he felt false, unthinkingly progressing to a lovemaking about which he was so unenthusiastic he had to pretend it would be approximate to sleeping with Leslie, who persisted in seeming to be the only living woman he loved, no matter how many times he pushed that daydream out of his mind. She kept popping back in as the ideal choice, though he wasn't sure he wanted to bed her, given it would require at least the death of her husband and perhaps something more impossible, Hugh growing hair like Guillermo's or a more decisive personality.

In the elevator of her building Judy fished out her keys. Once in the hallway she walked ahead to her door. Following behind, he felt like a dutiful sexless husband, carrying

the red plastic picnic case, back aching from sitting on the grass, calculating that if they made love right away, even taking into account a sufficiently polite post-coital hug, he might be able to get away with turning on the Mets game to catch the final innings. Of course he was recording it at home so . . .

“Honey!” Judy exclaimed, because her front door, before she could unlock it, had been jerked open from the inside by a tall, skinny, disheveled young man. “Are you okay? What are you doing here?”

“I texted. Didn’t you get it? The Columbia nurse kicked me out of the dorm.” The young man’s hair was matted all along his temples, and he was in a T-shirt and sweat pants. He was deathly pale. “I have mono,” he said, rheumy eyes settling on Hugh. Judy’s son took in the strange older man, the picnic basket, and finally his mother, hair blown out, wearing makeup on a Sunday. “The kissing disease,” he explained.

Judy hugged her boy and glanced back, apology wrinkling her kind face. After a brief introduction, Hugh excused himself and went home, happy to watch the Mets lose.

3.2

A week later Stein countered: he would pay Hugh one hundred and fifty thousand to move within ninety days. Reporting this on the phone, Leslie skipped over inquiring if Hugh was willing to agree to the lower offer, immediately proceeding to: “It’ll take another couple of rounds before I get him up to two-fifty, but this is good news, really good news. He’s agreed in principle, now we’re just haggling. You’re going to make a nice piece of change, enough to put a down payment on a townhouse.”

“Where? On Staten Island?”

Leslie chuckled. “A fixer upper on Prospect Park? It’s beautiful there. Really.” Hugh sighed, and Leslie’s no-nonsense work voice softened to maternal solicitation: “Honey, no matter how you look at it, you can’t stay where you are. At least this way you get some money out of it to help you make a new home. A better home.” She softened more, whispering kindness into criticism: “Let’s face it, your place is a little run down. You haven’t done anything to it since you and Amy moved in. And it’s more than you need. This whole neighborhood’s become impossible. It’s all investment bankers and NYU students. Everyone has too much money and too little body fat.”

“Are *you* going to move?”

“I’m thinking about it. At these prices, it no longer makes sense to stay. For sure we have to consider doing it once the boys finish college. We won’t need the space.”

“Like me,” Hugh said, stating the obvious.

“Like you, honey. I’m sorry. I know how hard all this is.”

He said nothing because he was sure if he attempted to speak his voice would break.

“Oh!” Leslie changed subjects. “Judy told me about Sam showing up with mono. Hilarious. I mean, not hilarious for your date, or poor Sam, although Judy says he seems happy as a clam lying in bed watching TV, being waited on hand and foot.” Leslie chuckled. “And I guess it’s going to delay your”—she hesitated, then finished brightly—“your next date!”

She knows Judy and I haven’t consummated. She’s not only living vicariously through me, she’s enjoying it. Suddenly Leslie’s natural curiosity about his dating life, no matter how well-meaning, offended him. He didn’t want to be her entertainment. And her taking pleasure in his dating life was disloyal to her dead friend. Until now he had appreciated Leslie’s desire that he move on as generous; abruptly, it struck him as callous. The force of this revelation was nauseating. Revulsion for his closest female friend, the most reliable friend of both genders, was so intense he ended the call immediately, blurting out that Ray had just texted him, he needed to reply.

His lie had truth in it. Ray had fired off a message at seven a.m., an unusually early hour for him.

coming home today.

ok take Acela w/yr Amex?

Sure, Hugh typed, agreeing via text to pay for the more expensive train despite his money worries. U ok? he asked, the first time he had imitated his children by abbreviating “you.”

ok u free 4 dinner @6?

Ray's reply was simultaneously reassuring and not. An appointment for a father-son meal? Something was wrong. Something had been wrong with Ray for years. What was no mystery—his mother had died—but how exactly things were continuing to go wrong for him wasn't clear. Except that his grades were headed the wrong way. The once A student was barely passing most of his college courses. At least he was in love, more than ever, practically living with the dignified, kind, and lively Mai, who sometimes seemed to be the only force on earth capable of preventing him from spinning off the globe in a rage at the world's stupidities, especially George Bush's wars. Before returning to Providence in August there had been a mumbled mention, quickly retracted as premature, of renting a place off-campus with Mai in the spring. Maybe that was why he was coming in, to reopen that possibility. Hugh resisted the temptation to text the question of whether Mai was also coming into town. He hoped so. He had grown accustomed to her being in the apartment, was comforted by the company of a near daughter-in-law. Or maybe while Ray came to New York Mai was going from Providence to Connecticut to inform her mother. Mai's father had passed away when she was fifteen, a point of emotional convergence for the young couple, Hugh assumed. From what he knew, Mai's widowed mother was a church-goer and might object to their living together while they finished college.

As had Leslie. "Aren't they too young?" she had said last week when Hugh mentioned the prospect. "It's like a junior marriage." Another strike against her: she was always fretting, always saw the downside.

Wait. Was that true? Hugh caught himself from spiraling deeper into utter disgust with his friend. Leslie was an encouraging person, he had to admit. *Falsely* encouraging . . .

“Hugh!” Francine snapped. He turned around and woke to where he was: playing doubles. Since hanging up on Leslie he had been wandering through his day like a ghost, preoccupied by dread that his son was in desperate trouble. “I’m serving to the Ad court,” Francine said, which meant he was standing on the wrong side. They were playing against Francine’s decorator, Brian, and his long time live-in boyfriend. With these two men, matches were usually close and Hugh and Francine usually won. Today they were getting blown out, and Hugh was the culprit. Continuing the day’s overanxious, distracted play, he proceeded to hit a volley into the net, losing set number two.

“What’s wrong, Hugh?” Francine whispered with genuine concern as they walked off the court. Solicitude about tennis from Francine was unexpected. The other thankfully few times they had lost, she had been cross, with him and herself.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said breathlessly. “My mind’s elsewhere.”

“I have to go to a board meeting at the Foundation. I’ll give you a lift,” she said and turned away to congratulate their opponents, not giving Hugh a chance to decline. He didn’t enjoy the prospect of being scolded at greater length, and the subway would be much quicker than her limousine, but after their showers he let her shepherd him into the BMW sedan. As soon as her driver nudged away from the curb and into halting traffic, she demanded, “What’s worrying you so today?”

Not wanting to mention his newfound discomfort with Leslie, or his anxiety about Ray, he told her about the situation with his apartment and the offer Leslie had organized.

“But this is good news!” she said. “You told me a year ago you were going to be in trouble when your lease was up. This way you’ll have some money to find a new place.”

“But I have to move.”

She turned her regal profile to study him face to face. She surveyed him thoughtfully for a long, uncomfortable moment. At last she nodded with understanding. “Your home,” she said.

He nodded. She asked no more questions, offered no encouragement, proffered no advice. Sometimes it was good to be with his tribe.

They traveled forty minutes—covering only fifteen blocks—before she spoke again: “Hugh, please don’t feel you have to answer right away—or ever—but there’s something I want you to consider. That is . . .” Francine uncharacteristically looked flustered, uncertain how to continue. “This has crossed my mind before, several times in fact,” she said and paused to clear her throat with a demure cough. “It would make a lot of sense in my life, and would be a pleasure, at least for me, if you and I married.” She added with a wry smile: “Of course I mean solely for companionship.” She peered out the Beemer’s tinted window and confessed: “I’m tired of traveling alone. Figuring out which gay man will humor me by accompanying me to events. Besides, they’re not readily available these days. They all have husbands now,” she said lightly. Her tone quickly darkened again: “I’ve tried to get used to going alone but really that’s no fun.” She paused for a reaction from Hugh. He was astonished, speechless, but his shock did not discourage her. “I can easily manage providing you with a no-interest loan to buy a new home for yourself and your children,” she continued. “You can sleep there if you like. When I’m hosting late or for whatever reason, I will fix up a room for you at my place. Decorate it anyway you like. I wouldn’t mind at all if you stayed with me all the time, as a matter of fact. Either way, you’d be able to have a home of your own to give to your children someday.”

Hugh's face must have retained its look of astonishment because Francine, when she looked at him directly, blanched and added: "You understand I don't mean anything romantic."

"Of course not!" Hugh blurted out.

"You don't have to be so vehement," she teased.

"I wasn't!"

"Of course I know you would still be . . . active. You're a young, vigorous man. You'd be completely free to satisfy those needs with anyone you like. At your place," she added. "Anyway, you don't have to answer now. Or ever." She looked out the BMW's tinted window, giving him the back of her head. "They used to call it a marriage of convenience when a wealthy widow married a younger gay man. Of course you're not gay and there's no longer any social requirement for a woman in my position to have a husband." She turned back, her chin up, and looked down the length of her aquiline nose, her usual command restored. "But the more I think about it, considering that I enjoy your companionship and that's all I want out of a relationship, and considering how comfortable I can make things for you, this really would, in the best sense, be a marriage of convenience for both of us."

3.3

Hugh noticed immediately on his son's arrival that Ray's eyes were thoroughly bloodshot but dismissed any suspicion of hangover. The puffiness of Ray's lids indicated not hedonism but sorrow.

Hugh waited to ask, instead opening his arms. Ray settled into the embrace, resting his head on his father's shoulder. His belly was full of college flab but his arms retained the steel of high school wrestling. "What's wrong?" Hugh whispered.

"Mai dumped me." Ray's chest heaved and he swallowed a sob. Hugh put a hand on the back of his son's springy mass of hair, as dense as his mother's, but thicker, curlier. That was too much comforting for Ray's comfort. He extricated himself, turning away and walking to the kitchen. Hugh couldn't see if tears were falling.

"Dumped you?" Hugh said. Mai had seemed crazy about Ray: her exquisite amber eyes followed him wherever he went, and she laughed with delight at his witticisms and listened reverently when he railed against American imperialism.

Ray opened the refrigerator violently enough for bottles and cans to rattle. "You want a beer?" he called out, then said in disgust: "There is no beer."

"You know I don't like beer."

"I do!" Ray cried out piteously.

"Sorry," Hugh said and he was. "We'll go to the Knickerbocker." He thought: *Ray's belly doesn't need meat and beer. But he doesn't need being dumped either.* What other

comforts could Hugh offer? He had an impossible, childish wish that Amy would appear and take over. Wasn't healing heartbreak a mother's job?

"When?" Ray asked. He didn't come out of the kitchen. Was he weeping in there?

"It's five-forty-five," Hugh said. "A little early for dinner."

"I'm hungry." Ray appeared with his right hand buried in a box of Stoned Wheat Thins.

"Let's go now then," Hugh said before Ray could stuff his face with crackers.

Walking to the restaurant, as if there were a male ordinance against emotional conversation on a public sidewalk, they discussed the haplessness of the Mets. Once inside, a beer foaming in front of Ray, a Chivas gleaming at Hugh, father said to son, "I'm really surprised Mai broke up with you."

"Me too," Ray said and drained a third of his draft in one swallow. "I said we should get married."

Hugh was confused. "She broke up with you and you proposed?"

Ray shook his head. "Other way around. But I didn't propose. I said we should get married and have children and she broke up with me."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either," Ray said. "I mean, I do. She wants to finish college, get a law degree, all that, okay. But then why not say 'No, it's too soon'?"

Hugh waited for more. Ray took another long pull. He suppressed a belch, sighed, and fell into a deep silence. "So," Hugh said, "you talked about getting married in general, Mai said she didn't want to until she was done with her education and then she broke up with you?"

“Yep.” Ray raised the menu, obscuring his face.

Hugh tapped the menu. “I don’t understand.”

“Look, Dad, I don’t want to talk about it. She broke up with me. Whatever bullshit people say, when they break up with you it means they don’t want to be with you anymore. So fuck her.” The angry words brought up tears, and Ray ducked for cover behind his menu again.

After ordering, Hugh restored their conversation to the male comfort of baseball complaints. Once dinner was cleared and dessert arrived, he watched Ray consume a slice of cheesecake that would likely add another inner tube to his stomach and only then attempted an oblique return to the subject of the breakup by asking, “You here until Sunday?”

“I’m going back Tuesday.”

Hugh waited for more. “Tuesday?”

“Yeah, I have stuff to do Monday.”

“Stuff to do in the city?”

“Yeah.” Cheesecake gone, Ray scraped the plate with his fork, then sucked the tines.

“What stuff?”

Ray sighed, looked down, then met his father’s eyes to deliver this bombshell: “I want to transfer to NYU in the spring if it’s not too late, or next fall if it is.”

“NYU?” Hugh repeated, stunned. “Because you broke up with Mai?”

“And other things.”

“What other things?” Hugh sounded irritated and angry to himself. He sounded . . . like his own mother.

“I hate Brown. I hate living in Providence. I want to be in New York. My friends are here. You’re here.” Ray lowered his eyes to his empty plate and kept them focused there.

Hugh’s chest constricted, his eyes burned. He would love Ray to be closer to home, but Amy—not a mute ghost this time but a public address broadcast loud in his head—asked a question he immediately relayed to her baby: “Is NYU really the right school for you?”

“No,” Ray said in a tone of disgust.

Hugh was baffled. “Then why—”

“Because *no* college is right for me.”

“That’s horseshit!” Hugh snapped, his father’s favorite reply of contempt. Ray blanched. “Sorry,” Hugh said. “But how can you know that all colleges are wrong for you?”

“Because I don’t like college,” Ray said. “It’s a waste of money.”

“Well, it’s my money.”

“You’re not a rich man,” Ray said. “And I don’t want to go into debt for a worthless degree.”

“What? Why are you talking about anyone going into debt?”

“I’m not letting you pay for any more of my going to college. It’s a terrible waste and anyway I’m getting nothing out of it.”

“Slow down. First of all, don’t worry about the money, the money is not an issue.”

“It *is* an issue. A month ago you told us Stein may be selling the building and you might have to move. Not until your lease runs out, but still, that’s what? Less than two years?”

“I can afford a new rental and your tuition,” Hugh said, deciding this wasn’t the moment to inform him—and Ginnie later tonight, since information like this had to be

delivered as simultaneously as possible—that moving out might happen a lot sooner. Or that after moving, Hugh planned to buy a place and would be saddled with a mortgage.

“You’re going to pay market rate in Manhattan? You’ll be broke.”

“I have savings. In fact, I’ll have enough to pay off your BA and a graduate degree loan.” That was an exaggeration—and a rash one. The understanding with Ginnie and Ray was that they would pay for graduate school. Ginnie hadn’t gone and it wouldn’t be fair to her if he paid for Ray’s. Fair? he argued with himself. Ginnie didn’t want to go. Anyway Ray would eventually get a job and pay off his own loan for graduate school. Francine’s startling and bizarre proposal came back into his mind, as it had every half-hour since she made it, but now, for the first time, as the perfect salve for his failings as a solo parent: he and his motherless children would be set for life. Then he was beset again by his main worry, that he was guilty of having encouraged her proposal by twice agreeing to be her escort. Considering his bad behavior with Hilda, he could seem quite the conniver. But really he had accepted Francine’s invitations innocently . . .

“I’m sorry,” he said to Ray. “I was distracted. What did you say?”

“I’m not going to graduate school, Dad. For Chrissakes I can’t stand the crap now. Not gonna volunteer for years of more bullshit. All of this is a waste of time.”

Hugh reverted to snapping. “How do you know that?” Ray looked startled and hurt, but Hugh couldn’t stop the flow of now Amy-like irritation: “You don’t know what you’ll want to be in five years. A doctor, a lawyer—you’d make a great historian, or a political science professor—for that you need graduate degrees.”

Ray’s brows, at rest quizzical like his mother’s, met in a line of shock: “Historian?!”

Poli sci professor? I'd rather blow my brains out than be an academic. And I have no interest in being a doctor. Not after seeing what Mom went through."

Hugh was taken aback. Did Ray feel his mom hadn't gotten the best treatment? Hugh knew any probing there would find the entrance sealed.

Meanwhile Ray added to his rant: "But the one thing I'm not doing is going to graduate school to become a scumbag."

"Scumbag?" Hugh stammered. "Who comes out of graduate school a scumbag?"

"Law school graduates."

"Ah."

Ray stood up. "You paid, right?"

"All lawyers aren't scumbags," Hugh protested.

"They are if they're any good at it," Ray said. "Come on. Let's go home."

Exiting the restaurant Hugh put a soothing arm around his son. Ray accepted walking like that, as if he were ten and still used to snuggling in public with his father. During the stroll back to their building they were quiet, allowing Hugh to analyze his son's vehemence about graduate school and arrive at a deduction he was eager to verify.

Unlocking the front door, Hugh asked: "Mai wants to become a lawyer, right?"

Ray brushed past him, in a hurry to get to his room. "Exactly," he said and he shut the door behind him.

3.4

A few weeks later New York had a spell of Indian summer. Though it was October, Hugh took off his blue blazer for the walk south to Kyle's, happy to be going to a cocktail/new works viewing party at his good friend's loft and even happier not to be going on yet another date, especially with someone new. Repeating the story of his life, listening to them repeat theirs with a similarly weary tone, probing for hints as to possible future discordances, navigating the first kiss and all the firsts of a stranger becoming an intimate: all of this had been scary at first, then intriguing, better than watching TV, more suspenseful than the last innings of the seventh game of the World Series, or even—sacrilege!—the best of Hitchcock. But in recent months, the last six fix-ups, fun or no, had become repetitive and predictable in their general outline.

As he contemplated the looming fall and winter, a disappointing but mostly comforting suspicion had taken residence in Hugh's head, that there wasn't a special someone out there who could ignite the kindling of dating into the fire of love. What he had confided to Francine the previous spring seemed truer than ever: he no longer felt capable of headlong passion. Or perhaps romantic yearnings had been an illusion of youth, mistaking desire for need. Recently he had come to what he fancied was a mature conclusion: that for all the differences between one woman and another there was an underlying sameness to their effect on him, and to his effect on them. Women, whether they were enthusiastic about him or not, admired his devotion to Amy. He, whether he found them dull or thrilling, admired their earnest desire to enjoy and improve life for themselves and everyone they cared about.

Of course, he knew there were evil women, from books and rumor anyway. He knew there were selfish women. But he hadn't dated an evil or selfish woman and wondered if those were traits that revealed themselves only when a woman was in a relationship. He also knew there were unkind, critical and unloving women—his mother, for example—but they seemed to have gone missing from the world after Amy's death, as if once the word went out that Hugh was alone the entire gender had been infused with sympathy and forbearance.

But admiration was not excitement. He felt the lack of it on both sides. Maybe the reason for the cautiousness of middle-aged daters was their long histories. Hugh and the women he met had already loved and lost, been besotted and disappointed by their children, their friends and careers, disillusioned by political causes and the private lives of their heroes—how could the charm of any date promise a future without heartbreak?

For nearly five weeks he had managed to avoid even considering a future relationship. He had said nothing to Francine about her odd proposal, taking advantage of her not giving him a time limit or raising the subject again. And after he had several times excused himself from another date with the pleasant but uninspiring Judy, she had become busy: tending to her elderly mother, a crisis at her job, a reunion for something—he hadn't kept close track, hoping, as seemed to be coming true, that a lack of contact would become permanent.

So he felt safe and content to be alone when he spotted Sue Roth walking toward him on West Broadway. He had been preoccupied by that New York City fetish, real estate, as he crossed into SoHo from his soon-to-be-lost home in the Village, wondering how the hell Kyle could afford to live in his thousands of golden square feet. Although they were old and close friends he had never had the nerve to ask Kyle whether, as envious mutual acquaintances grumbled, it was a richly endowed trust fund that allowed him to be a rigorously pure artist

who made sculptures too large and too unpleasant to be bought by anyone except the occasional hedge fund manager desperate to acquire hipness.

These ruminations were chased away by the sight of Sue, which triggered a zing of excitement from the base of his spine to the top of his skull, along the way miraculously clearing his sinuses. She wasn't looking his way; she was surveying gallery windows or restaurant customers seated at sidewalk tables. Should he stop in his tracks and force her to say hello? Or nod and smile in passing, plan to be in touch later? Getting to know her well was suddenly an urgent desire, although he hadn't thought about her once in the nearly two years that had passed since his mother-in-law's attempted fix-up at the country club.

He didn't have long to be anxious. Soon she was within ten feet. He noted her hair was longer and severely straight compared to his memory of a shorter cut arranged in gentle curls, waves on an otherwise tranquil bay. The hairdo emphasized the elegant lines of her brow and delicate features. Her intelligent, amused gray eyes, as they passed over him with no sign of recognition, were just as he remembered them. That a glimpse of him didn't provoke instant recognition sent a new shudder of excitement and worry through his system. *Why am I so excited to see her?* he wondered as the fluttering persisted.

He hadn't forgotten that only seconds ago he had felt ready to give up, if not on relationships then on having another love in his life like he'd had with Amy. Yet as he got closer to Sue, elegant in a black-and-white striped dress that hugged her slim figure, he was in a dither about how to say hello, especially in a way that would seem casual but guarantee she noticed. He'd have to do something to attract her attention, since she was still looking beyond him as they were about to pass . . .

Sue's eyes lit on him, this time flickering with recognition.

“Hi!” Hugh called—or, he feared, desperately shouted—and stopped walking.

“Well, hello, Hugh!” Sue stopped and leaned in to kiss his cheek, right hand resting on his forearm for balance, rising slightly on the balls of her feet with the grace of a ballet dancer. All done quickly, yet without anxious haste. As she withdrew, she added, “I’m so glad I ran into you,” with enough conviction that he half-expected she had a favor to ask.

“Me too, me too,” he stuttered with excitement. His mind raced, wondering how to make sure this wouldn’t be their last meeting in human history. Kyle’s private viewing would be a small group, no more than two dozen friends and acquaintances whose enthusiasm was supposed to encourage a handful of prospective buyers, but especially two gallery owners he hoped would take him on. There would be wine and finger food. Old friends, such as Hugh, were expected to linger afterward and order food to be delivered, or go out for a proper meal, but Kyle of all people would understand if he skipped out early in pursuit of a woman. Asking Sue if she was free for dinner suddenly seemed right, though at the same instant it occurred to him how odd it might appear for him to invite her to dinner on the spot after he had ignored her existence for two years, and how much odder if he followed up with the fact that first he had to go to a cocktail party. Should he ask her to join him at Kyle’s?

“So, how have you been?” she said. “Actually, I know from my mother you’re doing very well. Your in-laws just adore you. And I hear how sweet you are to them, calling once a week, seeing them regularly, not just on holidays. My mother thinks you’re the perfect man.” Sue’s lips fought to suppress her amusement at this notion.

“Because I’m kind to in-laws?”

“Exactly. I didn’t know that was my mother’s standard but I guess it makes sense.”

She paused before adding, “For her.” She smiled that sly smile of hers, aloof yet welcoming, which he remembered vividly from their first meeting. She paused for him to say something; when he didn’t, she said, “Well, I’ll let you—”

“Are you free for dinner?” he blurted.

She blanched. “Tonight?”

“I’m going to a friend’s loft now to see his latest work, he’s a sculptor. You know: cocktails, a few people he’s hoping will buy, and supportive friends who are too poor to, like me. Should last an hour or an hour and a half and then I’m free for dinner. I could meet you somewhere or you could come to Kyle’s—”

“I have dinner plans tonight,” she said. “I’m on my way there now. Rain check?”

Her sly smile reappeared, and he perceived a trace of triumph. *She’s flattered I’m interested*, he thought and felt a measure of triumph himself.

“Great,” he said, taking out his Blackberry and asking, “Your number?”

“Send me an email,” she said. “It’s sueroth1, all small letters, at AOL dot com. I’m number one!” she added with a smile. “At least at AOL. Shoot me an email and we’ll have dinner.” She took his wrist with what he noticed were long elegant fingers, like Amy’s and cool like Amy’s. She squeezed and let go. She appeared ready to depart when instead she rested back on her heels, cocked her head and wondered aloud, “Did you say you’re going to an opening? Something about sculpture?”

“Not an opening.” He explained, and she asked him to repeat Kyle’s name.

“Don’t know him,” she said in response.

“Are you a collector?”

“I dated a man . . .” She hesitated. “He bought art,” she added with a trace of what Hugh imagined, or hoped, was contempt. He noted that she’d used the past tense. “I have about half an hour before my dinner date,” she said. “Can I tag along and take a peek at the new work?” She laughed, with surprising gaiety. “Not that I can afford to buy anything or that I have any place to put it.”

The exact reverse of what Hugh had schemed, yet he was thrilled. While they walked the few blocks to Greene Street, she asked how he had met Kyle, and Hugh explained they’d been assigned to be roommates as freshmen at Middlebury. “Otherwise, I’m sure he would never have given a square like me the time of day.” He raved about his old friend’s precocious talent and admitted Kyle was a womanizer when Sue reacted with horror at the news of Kyle’s three marriages. “My God, how exhausting,” she said.

“I love him, he’s a brilliant, hard-working artist, but he’s had a chaotic personal life.”

“A free spirit,” she commented, flashing her wry smile. “That’s what we call the bad boys. And we girls love bad boys, don’t we?”

Hugh didn’t like the sound of that. Maybe she would fall for Kyle before he had a chance to impress her. At Middlebury that had happened plenty of times, Kyle beguiling his friends’ prospects with his curly blond hair, sparkling blue eyes, and radical speechifying. Thirty years had trimmed Kyle’s hair to a Marine-like crew-cut, his baby blues were framed by crinkles, and his talk lay to the right of Bill O’Reilly’s, but the parade of women in and out of his life hadn’t slowed. *Or maybe women just can’t quit us*, Hugh thought, since even bald dull Hugh seemed popular these days and certainly thirty years hadn’t improved his look.

“How come you didn’t tell me you were dating a great beauty?” Kyle asked mischievously when Hugh introduced Sue.

Her clever smile appeared, but then she wounded Hugh: “Because we’re not.”

“That’s a tragedy,” Kyle replied. “At least for my man Hugh. And a blunder on your part. There may be a kinder and gentler man on the planet than Hughie but my guess is he’s been murdered.”

“I only meant we just bumped into each other on the street a few minutes ago,” Sue said, flustered for the first time in Hugh’s brief experience with her. Kyle had succeeded in discombobulating her. “I invited myself along.”

“Good move,” Kyle said. He immediately took Sue by the elbow, turning his back on a big-boned, six-foot woman wearing glasses with thick round black frames who seemed eager for his attention. Hugh soon learned she was one of the gallery owners Kyle wanted to impress. And yet Kyle had abandoned her, leading Sue toward one of his enormous sculptures made of iconic New York City street objects—slats from a park bench, half a fire hydrant, the top of a street lamp all mashed into slabs of concrete, creating the detritus of a well-groomed and bloodless apocalypse.

“I think they evoke climate change more than hydrogen bombs, don’t you?” the gallery owner asked Hugh while they watched Kyle and Sue ambling between the elegant wrecks, farther and farther away from them.

“Maybe it’s gentrification,” Hugh said. “That’s what’s really destroying New York.”

“I disagree,” she said. “New York is finally becoming habitable.”

“Not unless you’re rich.”

“Oh, come off it,” she said, throwing her arm out to dismiss his comment, nearly whacking him with two thick black rectangular plastic bracelets with edges that looked dangerously sharp. “No one in this room is poor.”

Hugh saw Kyle laugh uproariously at something Sue said. His appreciation evidently required a physical follow through: he put an arm around slender Sue, who in heels was almost as tall as he. He pulled her into his burly arms for a squeeze and she smiled with delight. All the way across the crowded and noisy room Hugh could hear his old friend exclaim: “Brilliant! My God, that’s brilliant! You see right through my bullshit.”

Hugh’s cheeks were hot. He was feeling a sudden and absolute conviction that he was in love. Straight through to his core, exactly like the second time he met Amy, waiting with friends to get in to see *Dog Day Afternoon* on a chilly fall Saturday, her round, friendly face framed by brilliant red and yellow Vermont leaves. He had fallen in love on the spot, like being slapped, and just now he had fallen in love on a SoHo street, and he was terribly worried that Sue, allowing herself to remain encircled by Kyle’s bearish arms, was about to become infatuated with his Lothario of a best friend.

“Did you say something?” the gallery owner asked.

“I am,” Hugh said, hoping this confession would explain his humiliated cheeks. “I am poor.”

3.5

Hugh found out his son was actively pursuing the idea of transferring to NYU through the mail. First, an envelope appeared addressed to Ray labeled APPLICATION. Hugh informed Ray of it via email, asking whether he should forward it. He received no immediate reply, raising a hope that his boy's irritating penchant for ignoring paperwork would for once work in Dad's favor. However the next day an NYU envelope addressed to Hugh appeared. It was an application for a loan based on financial need, requiring Hugh to fill out an income and net worth statement. Hugh texted his son to ask what was going on.

Ignore that. It's a mistake.

Hugh was relieved. For five minutes. Then he realized the mistake might refer solely to the application for financial need. Finally he texted Ray:

Have you applied for a
transfer to NYU?

Ray replied:

I told u I was.

Hugh stared at the message, appalled that so momentous a decision had been made without meaningful consultation. Indeed Ray had told him, but Hugh hadn't believed him, had thought the impulse to leave Brown was a spasm of Ray's broken heart. He decided not to call Ray and have it out. Unfortunately, at the same instant he made that vow, his finger pressed the phone icon and he was dialing Ray. His son answered after the fourth ring with the enthusiastic greeting: "Yeah."

“It’s your dad.”

“Yeah.” Ray’s voice had been emptied of all feeling other than hopelessness. “You can throw it out. I’m getting a student loan, that’s what they were supposed to send. I’m coming home this weekend so just leave all my mail in my room.”

“Why are you coming home this weekend?”

“It’s Mike’s birthday,” Ray said, referring to one of his closest high school chums. He added, “I gotta go. Bye,” and the connection cut off before Hugh had a chance to say Ginnie was going to be home this weekend as well, for a mysterious job interview. And she was bringing a new boyfriend, someone named Ethan Harrington, equally mysterious, no detail provided except that he “made documentaries,” which Hugh knew all too well meant that he was broke. Or a trust-fund baby. Or both. In any case, that she was serious about a filmmaker both flattered and made him nervous—for reasons he couldn’t immediately identify and didn’t wish to investigate. Although he suspected he would have to eventually; this young man was a serious development. For the past three months Ginnie’s biweekly calls—chock full of excruciating details about her disappointing dating life, exciting details about the success of her new blog for the *Washington Post*, and exhaustive details about her hunt to replace the apartment she would lose in four months—had waned, then stopped altogether. This past month Hugh had had to place a weekend call and interrogate her as if he were her grandmother. With little success. Other than a half-choked, half-thrilled blurring of “I’m seeing someone I really like,” there had been little discussion of how she felt about Ethan, which meant—Hugh knew from previous experience—that she felt a lot.

Although Hugh doted on his children he wished they hadn’t picked this weekend to descend on him. He had a date with Sue for Friday—beautiful, elegant Sue whose sly mouth

he could vividly imagine kissing—and he had a secret wish, a keen hope, almost entirely hidden from himself, that Friday evening would extend into Saturday and perhaps a Sunday brunch. Not so much *The Lost Weekend* as a *Weekend Found*. He had emailed Sue the morning after Kyle's new works showing, asking if she would like to see the director's cut of *The Scion*, a longer version of what she might have seen in a theater last year, followed by a Q&A with director Lincoln Cartwright, the Q's supplied by Hugh. Hugh calculated this would show himself off to greatest advantage, although he pretended otherwise, adding to his email invitation that he would make up for the dull evening by taking her to a good dinner. Sue accepted with the witty response "OF COURSE I'm interested! One, I never saw it and second, as you may have heard, I'm that rare person who likes movies!" She had remembered his mother-in-law's reason why they should date; Hugh had stuck in her mind these past two years. Another hopeful sign was that when he called Kyle to ask him whether he'd had any luck with the gallery owners, fully expecting him to demand Sue's phone number, his Lothario of a buddy didn't mention Sue at all. He did comment that the tall gallery owner was pursuing him, presumably as an artist, so slighting her, whatever his motive, had been the right career move.

Friday evening Hugh put on his Armani suit. He was glad neither Ginnie nor Ray had arrived early enough to see that he was dressing up, and he hoped to return home too late for them to notice his sartorial splendor.

Sue noticed. As he guided her to two seats reserved for them, she said, "Nice! You're ready for your close-up." She was elegantly dressed, shedding a camel hair coat to reveal a black jacket, a rope of pearls, a pale pink blouse, and a taut gray skirt.

“As are you,” he said and excused himself to briefly introduce the movie. He had made welcoming remarks prior to a screening countless times, and having Sue in the audience didn’t make him nervous. On the contrary, glancing her way he was inspired by the lively interest of her edge-of-the-seat posture and glistening eyes. Her presence encouraged him to call *The Scion* “a landmark achievement in American filmmaking,” praise he had wholeheartedly believed before the release of the movie but lately doubted, unwillingly influenced by the mixed notices it had received. Gazing at Sue’s trusting eyes renewed his original enthusiasm. Reviewers had been critical, he decided as he settled next to her, because the movie didn’t end with sentimental optimism, no feeling of triumph over racism, instead insisting that the wounds of slavery still bled.

“I’m excited,” Sue whispered as the lights went down.

So was he to be beside her. But while the movie played he was reminded of showing the early cut to Hilda shortly before he broke up with her. That memory troubled him. He hoped she had found someone, she had so sweet and generous a heart. He had no discreet way of finding out: at tennis Francine never mentioned Hilda, and presumably her proposal to Hugh meant she’d never been told about the relationship. Hugh had come to feel he’d mistreated Hilda. Certainly he’d been careless of their passion. Sitting next to Sue, which had him as excited and jumpy as a teenager in love, he wondered whether he had made a mistake in assuming the pleasure of his time with Hilda had been merely a byproduct of its clandestine circumstance. After nearly two years of wandering in a passionless desert, he was chastened to realize that opportunities for genuine connection were few and far between, that being in love wasn’t simply a matter of will.

During the first hour, as the movie's imagery progressed from the lush colors of plantation life to the jazzy, washed out, nearly black and white of Baltimore's ghetto, his anxiety about possibly blowing it with Sue made it impossible to sit still. Toward the end he excused himself to go to the bathroom, but really it was to be free of her alluring and familiar scent—he couldn't place from where—and to stop himself from looking at her profile instead of the screen. She had caught him at it once. She misunderstood, thank God, and whispered, "Everything okay?" He had an urge to blurt out "You're beautiful," which was something he felt in general rather than could see in the darkness.

He watched the last ten minutes standing in the back beside the director, chilled once again by the film's shattering scene of the "passing" narrator initiated into the Ku Klux Klan, the final indelible image of his eyes shutting as a white hood, like a hangman's blinder, was lowered over his numbed and yet still agonized face. Lincoln Cartwright had arrived shortly before the last sequence began, accompanied by a very skinny blond who looked like a model. He had warned Hugh about his late arrival, that he didn't feel up to watching "the damn thing again," as if the movie were a rebuke, not his masterpiece.

Of course he had moved on, as all artists do, was absorbed with editing *The New People*, a studio-financed, \$250-million so-called tent-pole, a sci-fi saga about a teenage girl kidnapped by a barren alien race to help them breed. The story sounded absurd to Hugh—especially when he learned the detail that the aliens were reptiles—but the buzz was good, so Hugh utterly believed the introduction he made to deafening applause: "Please welcome one of the premier filmmakers of the world, Lincoln Cartwright."

He glanced out at Sue while Josh strode up to join him in the chairs placed on the stage. Checking on the object of his infatuation chilled his heart: she looked skeptical. In

fact, she frowned. What had happened? She hadn't liked the movie? Okay, the story was sad and yes, some scenes bordered on melodramatic, but not to have any admiration for this ambitious, often magnificent work on race, the central dilemma of American life? Could he be in love with a woman—hell, could he date a woman—with taste that shallow?

Maybe it was her sour expression but he did a poor job with the interview, listless on his own part and sometimes defensive on Lincoln's. He was relieved to open up the floor to questions, especially because the audience gushed at Lincoln. But the writer-director claimed to be disappointed by *The Scion*. "All I see are its flaws, its compromises."

"Compromises?" Hugh challenged instead of interpreting Josh's self-criticism as modesty, as he realized later he should have done. "I think it's remarkably uncompromising. What compromises did you make?" he asked, a second mistake because Josh then wallowed in complaints about studio interference. But the audience evidently wasn't convinced by the auteur's low assessment of his own achievement. After Hugh said in conclusion, "Well, my guess is that everyone here disagrees—we are not disappointed by your great film," they stood and clapped long and enthusiastically—all except for Sue. Instead, she turned her back to gather her coat. Hers was a shapely backside, but at that moment Hugh didn't appreciate it.

3.6

He told himself not to ask what she thought of *The Scion*. He told himself not to while walking to the Red Hen, while being seated at a quiet table by the plate glass window, while ordering a martini for himself (he wanted to be drunk, or at least reckless for the rest of this date), while she ordered a glass of Cabernet, and while listening to the waiter's melodramatic presentation of tonight's specials. During each conversational pause Hugh implored himself: *Don't ask her*.

Alone with the menus, Sue gave hers a glance, put it aside, and said, "Aren't you going to ask me what I thought of the movie?"

"You didn't like it," Hugh said. "What are you having?" He meant to be pleasant by changing the subject but immediately realized he sounded dismissive.

"How do you know I didn't like it?"

"We film curators know these things." Where was this insufferable tone of superiority coming from? Superciliousness was a typical flaw of his kind; usually he was careful to remove every trace of it.

"Curator? That's what you are? Not a film critic?" Sue's teasing smile appeared. This mannerism of hers, a look of suppressed laughter, had become irritating, no longer a turn on. What the hell was so amusing about calling himself a curator?

"Well I guess I'm a film programmer and a grant-giver. But part of my mission"—holy shit, did he just claim to have a mission?—"is to organize events and program films around a theme or a . . ." He stopped abruptly. Sue was nodding encouragingly. Her lips—

she had painted them a nearly purple red, a brilliant contrast against her porcelain skin—parted slightly as if preparing to drink him in. “What did you think of the movie?” he said.

Sue frowned. “What? Oh. You switched subjects. Well, I did admire it. It’s very well done.”

“That doesn’t sound like you enjoyed it.”

“Well, I know men don’t like if women volunteer criticism . . .” She shook off that thought. “You’re not that kind of man. You want to hear my frank opinion, right?”

“Right.”

“I thought it was too long and too preachy.”

“Preachy?” Hugh couldn’t keep shock out of his tone.

“No?” she asked with gentle curiosity, apparently open to hearing that she was wrong. She was utterly self-possessed, he noticed for the one-hundredth time, very different from most people, especially New Yorkers, who even when insisting on their point of view had a nervous energy that belied a lack of confidence. Most people Hugh knew, himself included, wanted to impress and persuade. Sue, like another woman he had loved, seemed to have a rare and true self-belief. Like Amy, Sue was able to not share his love for a work of art but feel the disagreement said nothing about her feelings for him, that other people’s opinions were incidental to the substance of their character. In short, she was the opposite of a critic.

“I guess,” Hugh said slowly, reluctant to argue now that he felt Sue was a superior person, that it was small-minded of him to contradict her, “I believe the one thing *The Scion* is not, is preachy.”

Sue nodded, interested by this. “Hmm,” she said. “Well, I don’t know, it just seemed to me the movie’s about the fact that racism and the legacy of slavery are terrible. You know,

it's like a lot of Holocaust movies. You're supposed to feel awful about it, and of course I do. Genocide, slavery, racism are evil, but if I'm being told what is good and what is evil, aren't I being preached to?"

"I think it's about a lot more than just that racism is bad," Hugh said and went on to explain he thought *The Scion* detailed how racism is inevitably internalized by its victims, which makes racists feel justified and so contributes to more racism, a vicious cycle. By the time he was done two things had occurred. Their drinks were nearly gone and the waiter had reappeared to get their order.

"I'd like the salmon, with the sauce on the side," Sue said. "And to start, the mixed salad without the buttermilk dressing, just oil and vinegar on the side."

"Of course," the waiter said. "We have a balsamic vinaigrette that's superb—"

"I'm the only human on the face of the earth who doesn't like balsamic vinaigrette," Sue interrupted. "Just oil and red wine vinegar on the side will be lovely. Thanks." After the waiter took Hugh's order, she said, "Sorry to be fussy about food. We women are all controlling when it comes to food."

"Well, the society we men created has left you little choice but to be neurotic about it."

"And all these years I've been blaming my mother." She winked. "Anyway, I'm sure you're right that *The Scion* isn't preachy but I guess all political movies feel preachy to me. Maybe it's because they're predictable. Is it news that slavery and racism are evil? Or, in Holocaust movies, that the Nazis were monsters? If I agree with a political movie's point then I'm bored, and if I don't I'm irritated, so it takes me out of the story and the characters. And it's really characters that I love. That's why all these cartoonish action movies bore me

too. I'm not even especially interested in visuals. For me, *All About Eve* trumps *Days of Heaven* any day."

"*All About Eve*," Hugh repeated, startled she had inadvertently chosen as her example a favorite of Amy's. He guessed she'd prepared this speech because of his work, knowing that a casual remark about her taste in movies wouldn't wash. That was charming but he couldn't agree less with her assessment of what made a film great. "I love *All About Eve* too," he said. "But it doesn't make use of the particular strength of movies and so it's kind of an outlier to me. Really a filmed play. Which is fine but not true filmmaking."

"Right, but I don't care about what's true filmmaking. *All About Eve* is the kind of movie I really enjoy. I can understand in my head that I'm wrong, but that doesn't change how I feel while I'm watching. And I've learned—to my sorrow—that it's not good for me to lie about my feelings." Her chin trembled, and she took a sip of Cabernet, appearing to wait for her interior distress to resolve while she carefully replaced her glass and leaned back.

He guessed that the sadness she referred to was recent. Under normal circumstances he would have assumed her speech was a test of his willingness to accept that she would have her own opinions, including on the subject of his expertise, and he might have gone on to reflect that their dispute was like a clichéd meet-cute scene in a romantic comedy, hostility at the start implying underlying passion. Instead, these thoughts were preempted by a vivid recollection from thirty-three years before. It was his third date with Amy, a Middlebury film club night. They had seen *All About Eve*, the first time for both. After, over greasy pizza and caustic Chianti, Amy told him it was the best movie she had ever seen. He berated her because . . . *it wasn't true filmmaking*. Almost word for word the same conversation. And

what had his eventual bride-to-be and love of his life replied? “I don’t give a shit if, by academic criteria, it’s true filmmaking, I still liked it better than any other movie I ever saw.”

“You’re right,” Hugh said to his current companion, not shaking off the memory of pony-tailed, makeup-free Amy in a cardinal-red sweatshirt instead placing that image side by side with Sue—hair blown-out, perfect makeup, elegantly dressed—fascinated that they were twins in taste and reasoning. “Only a fool would argue with what someone truly and deeply enjoys.”

Sue’s trembling chin and apprehensive eyes quieted. She smiled to herself and said, “Thank you.” Had some man bullied her about her taste? Was her self-possession a victim’s mask?

“But enough about the movie,” Hugh said. “Let’s talk about me. What did you think of my interview? I ask because I wasn’t happy with it. I was flatfooted. Really didn’t get at what I wanted to. So . . . any notes, any pointers?”

“The interview was interesting,” Sue said. “I liked him. He seemed level-headed about his movie.”

“Yeah, he was fine. It was me. I was kind of . . . boring, wasn’t I?”

Sue made a funny face. “Are you asking for my professional opinion?” Hugh must have displayed his confusion at this because she added, “You Googled me, right? It’s de rigueur for a first date.”

“Guilty. But what I found was that you worked in development for New York Presbyterian.”

“Used to,” she said. “I’m leaving, or I’ve left really, just cleaning up my desk and handing off to the new hire. But, yes, I worked in their development department.” She

paused for Hugh to acknowledge something he couldn't. "That means fundraising, mostly through events." She laughed into his puzzlement. "You didn't think I was inventing new surgical procedures?"

"No. But fundraising through events . . ." Hugh trailed off as he realized: "Events."

"Right. We have monthly events with big donors where we interview doctors, especially our department heads. And before that I booked guests for the *Bill Braxton Hour*," she added, referring to a late-night talk show on serious topics for PBS. "Anyway, I have a lot of experience preparing the questioner for interviews. What I've learned is that the best way to conduct an interview is to be contradictory. Not argumentative. You can be friendly, but the more an interviewer challenges what his guest is saying the better the result. You were soft-balling Cartwright and, like most people, he's better when someone's throwing at his head. Also, with a black filmmaker, it can look a little condescending to have an older white guy trying so hard to be nice."

The last sentence was the one that hit Hugh on his noggin. He immediately realized she was right. He would have challenged a white filmmaker about why he had turned his back on independent and original filmmaking and agreed to direct a big-budget studio sci-fi popcorn flick. Why was he so disappointed by his own masterpiece? Instead of pretending Lincoln was merely being modest, Hugh should have investigated that disgust.

But he didn't want to confess to Sue that she had hit the nail—and him—on the head. Instead he asked about her use of a pitching metaphor, "Are you a baseball fan?"

"Guilty. I'm in love with Derek Jeter."

Hugh tried to smile. It felt more like a wince, but he convinced himself that he had successfully concealed his utter dismay at learning she was a Yankee fan.

Sue laughed, a genuine laugh, with easy surprise and delight.

“What?”

“You’re a Mets fan.”

“Is that so funny?”

“It’s who you are. When you love something you’re serious about it. I’m a dilettante.

I go where the action is. Or the excitement anyway.”

“Or the wins,” Hugh mumbled.

“Now don’t tell me you’re in love with losing,” Sue said. “Being loyal to a team is sweet. Relishing defeat is neurotic.”

Their starters arrived. Hugh spread his napkin over his lap to catch the blood from the several wounds Sue had inflicted. He peered at the delicious-looking browned gnocchi with mushrooms that had been presented to him and instead finished his martini. He had lost his appetite. He felt a bizarre and silly frustration. He’d felt a flash of gladness about Sue’s fandom—he missed going to games with Ginnie and Ray, who well into their teens were happy to accompany Pop a few times a season—but she loved the team he hated most! Truly, it would be better if she were repulsed by the game.

Hugh decided they were incompatible. Even if he looked past the fact that she didn’t like the movie he was proudest of being associated with, and that she didn’t think much of him as an interviewer, there was her unforgivable contempt for his hapless Mets. The evening ought to be judged a disaster, but most shocking of all was that staring at his full plate, for which he had no appetite, all he could think about was when he might kiss her. That was the bargain he made with himself: he would kiss her and let the kiss decide if despite their being wrong for each other they could be content.

He supposed he would have to attempt it in the cab they would share when they stopped at her place to drop her. A first kiss with the driver looking on? No, better to get out with her, say he would walk home—she had mentioned she lived off Houston Street, which made that plausible—and kiss her on the street. A friendly peck on the cheek and a hug that lingered a moment or two longer than friendliness. He decided against a second martini and forced his knotted stomach to accept a few morsels of food.

He tried other topics and managed to avoid stepping on another land mine. Her account of growing up in New Jersey at last solved the puzzle of why Sue (five-nine, long straight black hair and slim hiped) and her mother (four-eleven and squat, with frizzled orange hair, perhaps once bright red) looked so different. She was adopted. “From an agency that actually guaranteed to give my parents a red-headed Jewish baby, can you believe it? ‘Pitch black!’ Ma used to say about my hair. ‘You’re a gypsy baby. I stole you from gypsies.’”

Hugh, familiar with the abrasions of a sharp-tongued mother, asked, “Did she really think that was a funny thing to say to her adopted daughter?”

Sue nodded. “My mother thinks she’s a great wit.” She smiled to herself, a wry slight upturn of her lips, and that was when Hugh understood the look that had so attracted him. Her slyness wasn’t restraining mockery or signaling private amusement. It was resignation to her fate. Sue added, “Mom has a great heart. Not a mean streak in sight, but she’s horrendously tactless. Took me a decade of therapy to get it: she really doesn’t mean to hurt you when she steps on your toes, she just has poor impulse control. Anything that pops into her head which sounds funny to her, and that’s usually something embarrassing or

politically incorrect, she has to say it. Loudly. Someone must have convinced her that jokes are harmless.”

“Actually they’re deadly,” Hugh said.

“Yep.” Sue cocked her head and looked at him gratefully as she confessed: “Made being a pimply, self-conscious, gawky, introverted teenager a total nightmare.”

He certainly was going to kiss her. They talked about her soon-to-end job and her plans for the future, and they laughed together, hard, at something so minor Hugh couldn’t remember what it was a few minutes later. The belly laugh was a relief, left him with the realization of how clenched his muscles had been all evening. He never did recover his appetite. They both left their entrees half-eaten and passed on dessert. It was late anyway. A three-hour movie, a forty-five-minute Q&A, and a two-hour dinner had pushed them well past midnight.

“This was great. I really had a good time,” Hugh said once he’d paid for the cab and they were standing in front of her building. He meant it with all his heart while also knowing it was a lie, he felt an utter failure as her date.

She said, “Yeah, really fun. Anytime. You know me,” she added, returning to their private joke: “I love movies.”

And without warning Hugh dove at her.

The Kiss: A Leap of Faith

It was a plunge, not slowing down as he approached those full lips in the amber cast of a street lamp. He landed hard on her soft mouth. Maybe it was the impact, he told himself at 1:00 a.m., eating an entire box of Stoned Wheat Thins. Maybe it was that he immediately withdrew, he decided at 1:45 while finishing off a chocolate Flying Saucer, so that the entire kiss consisted of a mash of lips and sudden retreat. Maybe the suddenness was what provoked her mouth to twist into a shocked, appalled expression, he thought at 2:00, her nose scrunching up, her brow contracting, as if, in kissing her, he had instead emitted a smelly fart.

He was still replaying his clumsiness at 2:15, imagining a graceful approach, a soft beginning, parting, then going in again, longer, deeper, a great first kiss of a romantic movie.

He knew how to do it.

He had done it a few times now that he had some experience dating, including with women who had failed to smite his heart. And Sue's lips were perfect for kissing. He would definitely do it right the next time, he vowed while opening the freezer to grab a second Flying Saucer at 2:30.

3.7

Hugh was woken by the laughter of his daughter's lover. A soft laugh. The chuckle of a man who knows he is loved. Hugh heard immediate confirmation in how Ginnie answered: words tripping over each other, eager to share intimacies—the way she talked to her best friend, or how she used to confide in her daddy when she was little. Okay, he was feeling sorry for himself. Ginnie still offered him her ideas and feelings with a glad trust. Or did until a month ago, when she met . . .

Did she tell me his name? Hugh wondered, hearing the strange baritone gently interrupt Ginnie's aria. On cue, Ginnie answered by raising her voice with excitement, loud enough for him to hear, "Oh, Ethan! You're so . . ." then dropping it so he couldn't hear the rest. He glanced at the clock. 8:37. Two hours later than his usual rising. But he hadn't fallen asleep until 4:00, digesting the Flying Saucers. That brought back with a stab the memory of Sue's wince at his kiss. He groaned.

Must have been a loud complaint because Ginnie called out: "Dad? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just getting up," he shouted at his door.

Reluctant to meet Ethan, he stalled by waking up his Blackberry. There were four junk emails and a reminder from Melissa that she had left a packet of DVDs with his doorman, screeners from last minute applicants to the festival. (Of course Joe had handed them to Hugh on his way in. Melissa often sent pointless reminders like this; sometimes she seemed to be inventing reasons to be in touch.) Then commonplace irritations and possible

sons-in-law were driven from his mind, and his heart skipped one whole beat: there was an email from Sue!

Dear Hugh: Thank you for last night and for tolerating Grumpy Me. I thought about THE SCION for an hour before I fell asleep and woke up thinking about it so I must have liked it more than I realized. And sorry I was startled by your kiss. May I have a mulligan? xo Sue

Hugh hated golf. For starters, he was hopeless at the game. And it was all his mother talked about, her one true love. He particularly loathed the coinage of mulligan for do-over; its wink at cheating without penalty symbolized for Hugh the smug incompetence of country club privilege. But he was thrilled by Sue's usage. The promise of a kissing do-over propelled him out of bed to shower, shave, and make for the kitchen table with appropriate enthusiasm to greet this new paragon of Ginnie's.

He wanted to be as welcoming as possible. He did not take lightly that she had brought Ethan home. And it was a good omen that as Hugh approached the kitchen he overheard Ethan's resonant voice deliver an opinion he shared: "*An Inconvenient Truth's* message is really important for the world, but its structure is deeply flawed. It's both a movie by Al Gore and a movie about Al Gore. It needs to be one or the other, take a position."

Hugh quickened his pace to meet this clever young fellow. He entered the kitchen eagerly but froze when he discovered that Ginnie was gazing adoringly at a bald, middle-aged man. Ethan had to be at least forty. Worse, this geezer wasn't dressed his age; he was outfitted like a teen geek attending a computer summer camp: T-shirt, shorts, and black socks with retro Keds sneakers.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Ginnie greeted Hugh. She gestured proudly at the goofy old fart and confirmed the nightmare: “This is Ethan Harrington.”

Ethan rose to shake Hugh’s hand. Yes, he seemed about forty: maybe as young as thirty-five, perhaps as old as forty-five. Either possibility appalled Hugh, dismayed as he was that his baby girl was dating someone in a different decade of life from herself. Dating? Hell, she was in love. He could see as much when she moved her gaze from Ethan to her daddy: her eyes glistened with pride at her romantic victory.

At least Ethan’s eyes, framed by power-nerd thick black frames, lowered with shame—as they should. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Reynolds,” he told the floor. “I’m a fan,” he added with a sigh, as if it were a confession. “Never miss your festival. Best in the country. You don’t always have the so-called hot films, but you always have the most challenging and fun to talk about.” He glanced up at Hugh and smiled shyly, apparently hoping he had pleased.

Hugh was horrified. His daughter was dating her father! Or as close an approximation of her father as possible without the resemblance being disgusting. Ethan not only looked a little like Hugh when Hugh was a young father, he introduced himself the way Hugh usually did, instantly forthcoming with his admiration for the work of others.

Hugh thanked Ethan, who proceeded to prove he wasn’t bullshitting about attending the Foundation’s film festivals, or at least that he had done his homework. He talked in detail about specific films and themes going back four years, remembering selections even Hugh had forgotten. Hugh quickly deflected the praise and asked about Ethan’s work.

“I’m just completing my first full-length doc. Doing the final edit tomorrow so I can submit it to Toronto.”

He was forty and just finishing his first film? “It’s tough raising money these days,” Hugh said. “How long did it take you?”

“Not long. Raised the lion’s share thanks to a rich uncle. A couple college buddies who run a hedge fund supplied the rest.” He grinned, and the effect on Hugh was unpleasant; it looked like the smirk of a man granted a mulligan.

“His short is brilliant,” Ginnie gushed. “*Saying Goodbye?*” she added as if Hugh ought to know it. God, she was smitten. Of all people his daughter knew that thousands of documentaries were submitted to Hugh each year, and he never looked at the shorts because they didn’t fit into any of his programs. “It’s about a twenty-one-year-old weight-lifter, an Olympic bronze medal winner,” Ginnie said, “who very consciously used the Oregon law to end his life—he was terminal—and said goodbye to everyone, had a lovely party in fact, and then did it.”

“It’s a laugh riot,” Ethan said.

“I heard good things,” Hugh lied to be polite. “But I didn’t get a chance to see it.”

“No one saw it,” Ethan said with a sheepish grin.

Hugh began to suspect Ethan was a man who had taken plenty of mulligans. He checked on that deduction: “So is documentary filmmaking a relatively recent interest?”

Ethan nodded. “Yep. Until thirty I couldn’t make up my mind what I wanted to do: Peace Corps, intern for a congressman, law school. Then I gave up being respectable. Dropped out in my second year to try improv comedy. God! Improv. I was stubborn about giving that up. Couldn’t admit to myself I just wasn’t funny.”

“You’re hilarious!” Ginnie declared. She told her father, “You should see his imitation of W. It’s brilliant.”

Ethan nodded patiently at Ginnie's adoration, already accustomed to basking in that sun. "So then I got an MFA in documentary filmmaking at NYU—embarrassing to be a student approaching forty—and finally got serious about my career."

He's serious, Hugh thought sourly, *until he takes another mulligan and moves on to medical school or performance art*. If he had met Ethan in any other context Hugh wouldn't have disapproved of his peripatetic identity, but he hoped someday to be a grandfather and he was old-fashioned enough to want Ginnie to marry someone who wouldn't decide to give up being a dad when that proved tiresome.

Hugh was saved from further discussion of Ethan's career by Ray's appearance. It startled everyone into silence. They collectively stared at Ray as he passed them without a hello, head down, aiming for the refrigerator. He was naked except for plaid boxers, providing a view of chubby breasts, an enormous belly and thick hairy thighs. He took out a Gatorade and proceeded to chug-a-lug it.

More than half of the yellow goop was gone when Ray finally paused and looked their way, as if only now discovering their existence. His eyes were half-closed and winced shut for a long beat before half opening. "Hangover?" his sister called out with a giggle.

Ray peered at Ethan. "Who are you?" he demanded so hoarsely it was more growl than spoken word.

"This is Ethan!" Ginnie said.

Ethan waved limply and said in a whisper, "Hi," as if trying to spare Ray's ears.

"When did you get home?" Ginnie fairly shouted.

While Hugh was binging on Flying Saucers at three in the morning, Ray's door had been shut. He had wrongly assumed his son was already in bed. "The sun was coming up,"

Ray said. "Nice to meet you," he mumbled to Ethan. "I'm going back to sleep," he added and shuffled toward the hall.

"What are you doing home?" Ginnie asked his love handles and broad back.

"I'm transferring to NYU," he mumbled as he continued to shuffle out.

"What!" Ginnie screeched. Ray shook his head at the cacophony, a bull in pain. She followed her brother and continued in a loud volume, "That wasn't a joke?" She turned to Hugh. "He texted me he was transferring but I thought he had to be kidding."

Meanwhile Ray had bent over, hands on knees. Hugh worried he was about to vomit. He rose and went close in a vague desire to help somehow. He noticed his son's back had a large brown mole a few inches below his left shoulder blade. When was Ray's last dermatological appointment? Ray had inherited Hugh's fair skin and needed to be checked once a year. Hugh realized with horror he had forgotten to nag him into an appointment last year. And the year before?

"Ray," Ginnie said. "Why are you transferring to NYU?"

"I don't like Providence. I want the purgatory of home. Goodnight," he said and took a step into the hall before his sister stopped him cold.

"Mom didn't want you to go to NYU!" Ginnie cried out, almost a yelp.

Ray turned to tell Ginnie angrily: "You're wrong. Mom didn't want me to go to Columbia. We didn't talk about NYU." Hugh could see Ray's eyes now. They were out of *The Omen*, the eyes of Satan's son: blood red framing black pupils.

"She didn't want you to go to college in New York City. She wanted you to have the experience of living somewhere else."

"Neither did I," Hugh piped up.

Ginnie and Ray weren't interested in what he had thought. Ethan, however, nodded politely and inquired: "Same reason?"

Ray growled: "I've had the incredibly fucking broadening experience of life in Providence during winter so now I want to come home."

"Come home? Here?"

"Yeah. I like my room, the room I grew up in, the room I've lived in since I was born."

"You're going to live here with Dad?"

Ray shouted back: "I'm not gonna live in a tiny dorm three blocks from a three-bedroom apartment I grew up in!"

"You can't," Hugh said, raising his voice too. "You can't live here with me."

"What!" Ray took a step at his father, eyes bloody, his belly thrust forward like a battering ram.

"Good for you, Dad," Ginnie said. "Don't let him."

"What do you mean?" Ray demanded.

"You can't go home again," Ethan mumbled to no one.

Hugh took a moment to glare at the intruder before he turned to his children and made the announcement. He had hoped for a calmer time but Ray had forced his hand. "I'm probably going to have to move."

"What!" Ginnie shrieked.

"Not this year," Ray corrected him. "Our lease isn't up until next year."

"No," Hugh said. "By spring at the latest. I haven't had a chance to tell you but since Stein is selling the building I'm going to be moving out sooner."

“What? Why?” Ginnie said. “Who is he selling it to?”

“Selling or developing it into a condo, it’s unclear, but anyway I’m—or Leslie, actually—has been negotiating for me to get some dough if I leave early. If Stein offers enough I’ll move as early as this winter.”

“This winter!” Ginnie exclaimed. “What do you mean it isn’t clear whether Stein is selling or developing it? And anyway, why do you have to give up your lease?”

“You know,” Ethan said, “tenants have rights beyond just their lease.”

Ray waved a hand and groaned, turning away. “I’m going to sleep.” This time he disappeared into the hall without a protest from his sister.

“Tenants have rights beyond just their lease,” Ethan repeated. “Do you know a good real estate lawyer?”

“Shut up,” Hugh said. “This is none of your business.”

“Dad!” Ginnie shouted. He waited for her to continue objecting: to his moving out, to his rudeness with her new love. Instead she shouted “Dad!” again, her features scrunched up in the way that always preceded tears. Before they could arrive she covered her face and ran from the room. Ethan followed in a hurry.

Hugh sat alone in one of the cane chairs Amy had bought for their kitchen table. The seat was sagging, had needed repair for at least a year. He sat still, contemplating the wreckage of his family. He felt himself estranged from the worn chair, the gouged oak floors, the scuffed white walls. He could no longer reside in his past and he couldn’t bear to contemplate the future. For several eternal seconds he stared into the abyss and then he thought: *How long before it doesn’t look desperate to ask Sue for a second date?*

3.8

He was reading over a reply to Sue's mulligan email that he had composed and not yet sent when Leslie called and poured gasoline on his real estate fire. She said things were so frantic in her office yesterday she hadn't had a calm half-hour to tell him that Stein had come up to two hundred thousand and made it clear that was his final offer, good until the end of the month. She recommended Hugh say yes: it was close enough to their goal of two-fifty, and she knew for a fact that Stein had three other tenants willing to vacate their leases for less and didn't need Hugh to proceed; if Hugh stuck it out for the nineteen months remaining on his lease he would get nothing.

Hugh was silent. Two hundred thousand was three times more than he had ever saved outside of his IRA, but when all was said and done it didn't sound like that much. Not for a lifetime of work, not for giving up his family home and all of its treasured memories.

"Well," Leslie said when he at last confessed to these thoughts, "it's not nothing, which, to be honest, is what you're probably legally entitled to. And if you use the two hundred for a down payment and break your IRA to get a mortgage, you can look for a bachelor pad in a hot neighborhood. Wait until Judy hears about this. I know you guys haven't gotten together in a while, but now she'll definitely want to snag you, preferably before you get too busy with your move." She laughed gaily. "Which, by the way, will be ninety days after you agree to terms."

"Jesus, I just told the kids this might happen but nothing was certain," Hugh said, despair overwhelming him. "And they were devastated. Ginnie in particular. She started in

with all sorts of questions and wild statements, that her new boyfriend was seconding, about tenants' rights. And the only reason I didn't get an earful from Ray was because he's too hungover."

"Tenants' rights? Which ones?"

"I couldn't follow it. They're too smart for me. I'll never explain to their satisfaction why this is the best choice."

"Poor Ginnie. Poor Ray. Poor you. You all have a right to be upset, it's your home."

He wanted to say what Amy would in this situation—Yes, it's our home but we'll make another, or something brave like that—but he felt his voice would break, or worse he'd sob. He was sick of being this shaky, his emotions always surfacing. All he could manage safely was a sigh.

"Listen," Leslie said. "Gui's away until Sunday night and the boys have play dates. I can do a brunch tomorrow at noon. I haven't seen Ginnie in almost a year and I haven't seen Ray since before my summer vacation. Invite me along and we'll explain it together. I can answer any questions they have."

Hugh calculated quickly this was a safe plan: he knew Ginnie was showing off Ethan to friends this afternoon and tonight but not tomorrow. "Oh, God, that would be great. Thank you."

"My pleasure. A sad pleasure, but I'll be so happy to see Ginnie and Ray. Tomorrow, it's a date. By the way, speaking of money, I keep forgetting to ask you. What in God's name did you finally say to Francine about her offer to make you a kept man?"

"Nothing."

“Nothing?! Didn’t she propose weeks ago? Don’t you see her every week at tennis? How can you get away with nothing?”

“We’re WASPs. She said I didn’t have to respond so I haven’t. She knows that means I’m declining but don’t want to rub it in.”

“Wow,” Leslie said. “And what did Karen say when you told her you turned down the Foundation’s biggest donor?”

“Leslie, I’m a goy. I didn’t tell Karen and you can bet Francine didn’t either.”

“Huh. Guess that makes sense. So, what about Judy? She’s back from her travels and the girls are with their father this weekend, so the coast is clear.”

“Well, Judy’s very nice but I don’t think I’m going to pursue her.”

“You’re . . . not?”

“I just don’t feel there’s real chemistry there. You know? She’s smart and kind and lovely but . . .you know.”

“Huh,” Leslie said. There was a silence Hugh didn’t want to fill. After it had gone on for several awkward seconds, she said, “Okay. So when are you going to tell her?”

“Tell her?” Hugh’s turn to be startled. “I mean, we haven’t . . .” He stopped himself before he applied the embarrassing standard that since they hadn’t had sexual intercourse a break-up wasn’t required. He tried a course correction. “Really? I should go out of my way to reject her? If I don’t call, isn’t that clear enough?”

“Oh God,” Leslie moaned. “You men.”

“Okay, I’ll call her if you think—”

“Do what you want,” Leslie snapped. “It’s certainly none of my business. I just think—” She clammed up.

“You just think?”

She sighed, as if reluctant to fault him, although she managed to anyway: “A *mensch* would call. And, WASP or no, you’re a real *mensch*.”

But I’m not a man. I’m a widower. “I’ll call,” he said, a reflex to mollify her. But after a moment’s reflection he decided she had a point. He needed to clean up his act. He wasn’t being clear with any of these women; worse, he wasn’t even thinking through the possible ramifications. He hadn’t given much thought to whether or not he should inform Karen about Francine’s odd marriage proposal, or walker-in-residence offer to be more precise. It might have a consequence. Francine had never brought it up again, as he’d guessed she wouldn’t, but ever since a chilly breeze had whistled through their weekly tennis doubles. After their victories she no longer offered him a ride in her sedan, even when she was heading to the Foundation for the monthly board meeting. The few minutes devoted to conversation on court were no longer about what filmmaker he was interviewing next at his Directors Series screenings, or any other comment directed his way. Instead, she chatted with their opponents about the day’s headlines. And when she departed, instead of her ironing board hug and air kiss, she stood several feet away, nodded curtly, and said, “Good playing as always, Hugh. See you next week,” which he understood to mean he would never again be invited to her mansion for dinner.

So. He was about to lose his home. He had gotten himself into an awkward situation with an important donor without keeping his boss in the loop. His daughter was in love with an old man. His son was on the road to academic ruin. And he had offended Leslie with how he had treated her friend.

He wanted to keep his promise to call Judy, but he couldn't concentrate on how to assuage her and Leslie's about-to-be-broken heart (surely it was somehow shared) until he'd sent his reply to Sue.

He reread the draft of his email:

Dear Sue: I'm relieved you weren't put off by my clumsy kiss. My fault. I was rushing things. How about we go slow? And while we're going slow, are you free tonight? For yet another movie? Nancy Meyers has a new middle-aged romantic comedy out. It's playing every fifteen minutes at Regal Union Square. I'd be drummed out of the cineaste corps if anyone knew I willingly went to see it, but if you'll promise not to rat on me, we can have popcorn and the guilty pleasure of a trashy movie.

Without thinking he typed *Love*, the signoff he used with Ray, Ginnie, and even Leslie.

He quickly changed that to: xoxo Hugh

He stared at the x's and o's, struggled to remember which represented a hug and which a kiss. Either way, they were excessive.

He deleted the two hugs and two kisses, leaving merely: H.

But the H. was too stark.

He deleted it and typed: Affectionately, Hugh.

What was he, her maiden aunt? He deleted *Affectionately* so hard he also erased part of his email. He retyped the missing words and added: xo H.

He stared at his compromise until he concluded this appeared restrained without being stiff.

He hit send.

He waited.

“Dad?” Ginnie, voice wet with anguish, called plaintively from the other side of his bedroom door.

Hugh hurried to open it. As soon as she could slip through Ginnie banged into his arms, face disappearing as he clasped her tight.

She was saying something but their embrace muffled her.

Meanwhile he was talking at her buried hair: “I’m sorry I yelled at Ethan. He’s terrific. I was upset—”

Ginnie’s face—or rather, a squeezed-together mush that desperation had made of it—appeared again. “You can’t. You can’t!” She shook her head, or tried to since he didn’t let go. He didn’t want to, wanted to hold her this tight for as long as she would let him. “You can’t, you can’t do it.”

“I have to. Look, I’m not a real estate lawyer, but Leslie is, a great one, and tomorrow at noon we’re going to have brunch. You and Ethan will come and I’ll make Ray come, and she’ll explain? Okay?”

“If Stein is selling, can’t you buy our apartment? I’ll help pay, I’m making actual money these days, and Ray can get a student loan so you’ll have more money. And what about Grandma and Grandpa? They’ll help you. If mom were alive, they would help for sure, and they love you, I’m sure they’d be happy to help you.”

“They need their money. And you need yours. And Ray’s not paying for his college education. Look, Manhattan’s gone insane. It’s becoming a home only for the very rich. I just don’t have enough to buy or rent anything larger than a studio in the Village.”

Hugh had never thought of himself as an inadequate breadwinner for his children, but this admission felt like a damning judgment of the choices he had made. He had wanted a quiet, satisfying career. Had he been a selfish fool? True, he couldn't have saved Amy's life with any amount of money. But the apartment was different. If he had fulfilled his father's wish, gone into banking or law, he could at least have saved his children's home, preserved their memories of growing up in the hearth of Amy's love.

"This isn't because of Ray, is it? Just tell me this isn't about crazy Ray."

"Ray? You mean to stop him from moving in?"

Ginnie nodded. "I know you can't bear to say no to him."

"I say no to him all the time."

"No, you don't. You don't say no to me, either. You're too nice to us. I'm not complaining. But it isn't good for us. Just tell Ray to stay at Brown."

"I already questioned his decision."

"Daddy!" She actually stamped her foot. "Not question, for God's sakes. Tell him. Order him."

"Order him?"

"You know what? I'll order him." She turned on her heel and walked out.

"Don't!" Hugh called, but she ignored him and turned the hallway corner, heading for her brother's bedroom.

She was right. Not that he never said no to his offspring; that his no's could be safely ignored. Although Amy had never raised her voice to her children she was the one whose disapproval stuck, who could frighten them into obeying merely by looking disappointed.

Hugh thought he ought to pursue Ginnie, stop her from turning this into a sibling rift that would leave them both bereft. But he heard, or thought he did, a ping from his iBook announcing he had a new email. From Sue?

He hoped, he hoped and hurried to his desk.

Yes! An email from sly Sue. A great email. A message that lifted his spirits into exhilaration and excitement.

H: Trashy romantic movie is a great idea for tonight. Tell me which showing and I'll meet you at the Union Square Regal. And slow is good. Slow is great. Also ripping off each other's clothes works too... xo S

3.9

“So did your children end up killing each other?” Sue asked while they were queued up for popcorn. He was delighted she had agreed to share his movie theater poison. Amy had always taken the first handful, leaving the rest to him, but none of the women he had dated since her death were willing to brave even a small fistful of calories. That slim Sue had said “Of course!” when asked if she would share a bucket added to the lengthening list of her virtues.

Hugh told her there had been raised voices but only one angry outburst, from Ray. “You’re not Mom!” he had yelled, followed by the front door banging hard. That had brought Hugh into the hallway to watch Ginnie walk back to her room, passing by with a fierce scowl to hide her grief.

“I get why they’re upset, of course,” Sue said. “But sooner or later, you were going to have to move. Most parents move from where they raised their kids. My parents did.”

“Yeah, but God, I felt useless,” Hugh admitted after they settled into their seats. “A complete failure.”

“You’re a good father.”

“Thank you. But how do you know? Maybe I kept them in a closet and beat them.”

She grinned and said, “Yeah, you’re the abusive father to a T.”

“How do you know I’m not?”

“First, I know from Denise that your in-laws think you’re a great parent. And in-laws have to be the toughest judges. Second, I know from how your children talk to you. They tell you their feelings. Their actual feelings. That means they trust your love.”

For Hugh there was no deeper cut than a woman’s criticism and no comfort warmer than her reassurance. He didn’t say thank you because he feared he would choke up. This was the kind of consolation he missed from Amy. “Well, my daughter thinks I’m a terrible father.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Sue said, then changed the subject. “Were you serious that you would be drummed out of your profession if they knew you were seeing a Nancy Meyers movie? Didn’t they like *Something’s Gotta Give*? I thought it was hilarious. Trashy fun. But fun.”

He explained that his colleagues’ hatred for a Nancy Meyers movie was more than snobbery. It was a symptom of their despair that nowadays studio movies were a relentless stream of commercial banality and repetition: almost without exception sequels about cartoon characters, genre horror or pat romantic comedies. During the 1970s, he explained, his film-loving generation’s formative years, there had been a golden age of studio-financed movies that would now be considered indie films: stories about human beings whose lives weren’t wrapped up into pretty bows.

“Like what?” she asked.

“*Five Easy Pieces, The Conversation, Nashville . . .*”

“*Nashville* I remember,” she interrupted. “The other two I don’t think I saw.”

“I have them on DVD. It would be a pleasure to show them to you.”

She leaned over, rubbing her shoulder against his as if she were a purring cat. The lights were coming down for the start of previews but he could still see her sly, inviting smile. “Are you inviting me up to your place to show me your DVD collection?”

Soon after the movie began Hugh wished they could retire to his couch and watch just about anything else, but Sue didn't seem restless. Besides, Ray and Ginnie were crowding his place with unstable emotion; adding Sue was unlikely to calm them. And he didn't really mind staying until the end. There was always something Hugh could find in a movie to think about with pleasure. He became fascinated at the ways in which the picture was a lifeless construction, even for a rom-com formula. He decided it was because the writer and director had had the ambition to be smarter than the genre without abandoning its conventions altogether. Ironically, that was how the commercially successful made their biggest bombs.

He mused aloud about this to Sue as they left the Regal and she took his arm and leaned on his shoulder, the way Amy used to when it was cold. It wasn't cold. On the contrary, the fall evening had more of a summer night's baked breeze.

“How about we don't eat out, and go to my place?” Sue said. “I can whip up something simple. Omelet with smoked salmon and a salad? I'll open a good white wine. Brunch for dinner. That okay?”

“Great idea,” Hugh said. He knew where this was heading. His only question: would they be tearing off their clothes before she cracked eggs?

That excitement was quelled by Sue's reaction when her doorman came out from behind a black marble podium that her converted loft building had plopped in the center of the black marble lobby, otherwise bare but for two Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chairs. He offered Sue a hand-delivered letter—no postage, no sender's name, only her name in a scrawl

that was twice as large as it needed to be. She stared at the envelope for a long moment without reaching for it while the doorman said in an ominous tone: “He dropped it off a couple hours ago.”

At this information Sue finally accepted the envelope. She shoved it into her purse without looking, crumpling it in the process. For her this was a violent gesture, unlike the usual elegant deliberation of everything else she did.

They rode up to the eighth floor in what Hugh supposed from the large size—it could have accommodated a small car—to have been an industrial elevator when this was a factory building. Sue remained silent and pensive, staring down as if they were strangers.

Her apartment was an efficient one-bedroom. There was a dazzling stainless steel and granite counter kitchen open to the dining and living space, with a small powder room on one side. In the bedroom suite there was an immense bathroom, almost as big as the bedroom, with separate shower and a Jacuzzi tub the size of a kiddie pool.

Sue gave him the tour briskly, walking quickly in and out of the bedroom, so no opportunity for clothes being torn off presented itself. The mood had changed for Hugh as well: Sue had told him she’d paid two million for her loft. He was busy reflecting in despair that he would never be able to afford this comparatively small place, at best three-fifths the size of his.

He also noticed that unlike many of the other womanly domains he had invaded as a middle-aged dater, this one had no mess of children, or any memory of their mess. The immaculate nap of the furniture’s beige fabrics, the clean white walls, the unscarred oak floor spoke of a life free from the affectionate destruction of kids. When she opened the refrigerator to fetch a bottle of California chardonnay and take out a packet of smoked

salmon and a half-dozen eggs, he noticed that everything in her gleaming Sub Zero was meticulously organized: fruit, vegetables, cheeses, cold cuts, all assigned to their own bins. Next to four neatly lined-up low fat yogurts was an open baking soda container. No mess, no waste, no odor.

Hugh wondered if childless Sue could stand sharing a place with his children, who, although presumably grown up, still left towels on the bathroom floor and unwrapped cheese in the fridge.

Sue hurriedly poured him a glass of white almost to the rim. “I need to run to the ladies room before I start our modest dinner,” she said. Then she did something odd: she took her purse with her.

The letter. She wants to read it immediately, in private. So I have a rival. An ex? It better not be a plea for her to take him back.

He guessed from how eager she was to read the letter that her response to a proposed reconciliation with its author would be yes. He took two long gulps of chardonnay, draining half his glass while wandering through her living area. He was struck by its formality. There were coasters for the glass coffee table. And the couch was bravely white—like Hilda’s, another childless woman. He rubbed its pristine surface. Suede? Something soft and stainable. He took another sip of wine, already feeling tipsy on his empty stomach, and found he had developed a hatred for the man who dropped off the letter. And for the prematurely balding young doorman who gave it to her. Guilt by association: the guy could have thrown it in the trash.

He sank onto her couch. How could fate be this cruel? After grieving for a year, and wandering for another in a delightful but confusing garden of women, he had found the

perfect flower and she had already been picked? By a jerk, obviously, if he had dumped this elegant, witty woman. The guy had to be an asshole. And that was bad news: assholes were especially hard to defeat.

After a good fifteen minutes, Sue came out changed in dress and manner. She'd discarded her tailored pants and high heels for blue jeans and a gray zippered cashmere sweatshirt. Her graceful movements were restored, walking as if she were gliding, her posture perfect without being stiff. And her sly smile had returned. All bad signs, Hugh thought. Whatever was in the letter had restored her confidence. Also a discouraging sign was that she had dressed down, cashmere or no, from dating attire ready to be torn off in passion into comfort clothes to cook for a friend.

Indeed, she didn't join him with a glass of wine on the couch. Instead she moved straight to the kitchen, fetching a mixing bowl and frying pan, calling out, "Do you want toast with your omelet and salad? Don't have bagels. I've got whole wheat, if that's okay?"

Hugh couldn't contain his curiosity. He rose with a groan—back sore from serving to Kyle yesterday—and approached the granite counter that visually divided the kitchen and living areas. Being nosy at all was the opposite of his nature and what he did next was worse, outright rudeness. "I hope that letter didn't have bad news," he said, his cheeks flushing, no doubt because he was being something he despised, a phony. She obviously wasn't upset now.

"Letter?" She wasn't an actress. She tried to fake ignorance of what he meant but when their eyes met, she looked away guiltily.

Hugh chided himself to stop this disgraceful interrogation, which he was sure would backfire. But he pressed on: "You seemed upset when your doorman handed you that letter."

“Oh. That letter.” Her pretense of recollection was lame. “That was work stuff.” She cracked an egg and emptied it into the bowl. While she cracked another she added, “You know, H.R. exit papers I have to sign. Roll over my IRA. That junk.”

She didn’t want to tell the truth about the letter. Really bad sign. Hugh grabbed the chardonnay and refilled his glass without asking if she wanted any. Jealousy had made him a barbarian. He watched her make their meal in a gloomy silence she didn’t break.

At the table she asked if Amy had liked to cook? Or did he? Once she established that neither did, she asked if it had been awhile since he had a home-cooked meal. “Not that this is a meal,” she said.

He took his first taste. He said truthfully, “It’s delicious. But I’ve had plenty of home-cooked meals. My friends have the widower over for dinner at least once a week.”

“Don’t call yourself that,” she said with a disapproving frown. “You don’t seem like a widower to me. You’re in the prime of life.”

“You can be a widower at twenty-one.”

“Yes, but you know. It sounds old. You’re not old. You’re a sexy man.”

Hugh chuckled skeptically.

“You are. You’re fit. You’re comfortable in your body. It’s sexy.”

He laughed. He didn’t want to, but he laughed.

“You find being called sexy funny?”

“That’s not why I’m laughing. You’re the sexy one, dear.”

“Don’t call me dear.” Again she frowned with disgust. “Makes me sound like a widow.”

Hugh was confused. Were they flirting? Or squabbling? Or both? Was she bucking him up about his attractiveness because she was about to explain she was taken? Seeking safer ground, he returned to the neutral subject of the movie. “It was terrible,” Sue admitted after Hugh finished picking it apart, “but I love love. So any romantic movie, even a terrible one, keeps my interest.” By then dinner was done and it was nearly eleven—time to rip off clothes or go home.

He rose to clear their plates. She said, “Leave them.” She emptied the bottle of wine into his glass, his fourth. “This’ll have to be your dessert. I don’t have anything sweet. Except for me.” Her sly smile reappeared. “Retire to the couch?” she asked as she took her glass and moved into the living area, picking up a fancy remote control that she pointed at nothing, and yet somehow jazz began to play, softly, from many directions. Hugh scanned her walls and spotted white speakers embedded near the ceiling in all four corners of the room.

“Surround sound?” he asked.

“Something sound.” She unzipped her cashmere sweatshirt, revealing a purple V-neck T-shirt that he immediately looked up from because it revealed too much impressive cleavage to glance at casually. “I hired a man and he installed everything, TV, hooked up my iTunes into my stereo. He fixed up this idiot-proof remote.” She placed the device on the coffee table and relaxed onto the couch, leaning back, one arm stretched out. “Join me,” she said. He couldn’t help but observe from her pose that Sue was well-endowed: buoyantly, perhaps suspiciously so for a fifty-year-old woman.

As Hugh lowered himself beside her he noticed there was no position he could take that wouldn't place them almost in each other's arms. Indeed, once he was seated and turned her way, her face loomed and he went in for a kiss, realizing as he did: *This is my mulligan!*

Once again his lips refused to follow orders. They touched hers fearfully, tentatively. When he tried to compensate, he pressed too hard. He pulled away—she kept her eyes closed, waiting while he took a breath to reset for another kiss—and went in for a mulligan of his mulligan. But nothing improved on the third try. His lips touched hers as if they were scalding hot, withdrawing immediately, briefly touching again, withdrawing again: pecking, not kissing. He stopped. This time she opened her baffled eyes, confusion on her face as well at how uncomfortable it was.

“You kiss so softly,” he said, trying to keep complaint out of his tone.

“That's you,” she said. “You're doing that.”

“Well, I'll cut that out.” He charged ahead and pressed harder. But her mouth didn't seem to welcome him, or fit, or some other problem he couldn't identify. It was maddening. He thought her elegant, beautiful, smart—everything he wanted. He stopped again.

This time she immediately leaned back, turning him gently while she lay all the way down. They ended up lying face up, side by side on her long, soft couch. She rested her head in the crook of his left shoulder and abruptly they were an old married couple, snuggling in bed after sex or before sleeping. Comforting. Not passionate.

“Mmm,” she said. “This is cozy.”

“Yes,” he agreed. But he wasn't comforted.

She murmured, “This is so nice,” thus discouraging Hugh from disturbing her position.

“It is,” Hugh agreed again, although nice was the last word he would use to describe his situation. He was turned on just enough to feel restless while she clearly didn’t want him to move.

“Mmm,” she said and nestled deeper. He could no longer be sure the delicious tingling on his neck was caused only by her breath. Were her soft lips when she whispered also lightly kissing him?

And then she stretched her arm across his chest, fingers hooking onto the far side of his torso. She couldn’t know this was the position that most nights Amy had lain in for five minutes or so before she whispered “Goodnight” and turned away to be fetal for sleeping. Those ten minutes before full sleep hadn’t been a sexy position with Amy, but Sue’s variant stirred him below. He wasn’t sure how obvious his excitement was, but he daren’t sit up and didn’t want to. And he certainly didn’t want to disturb the brilliance of this embrace for another clumsy kiss.

She lowered her head to speak, moving her lips clear of tickling him. Perhaps it was the analysand position that encouraged her to confess: “I lied about the letter.”

Hugh’s heart pounded, no doubt into her ear, since it was placed directly over his heart like a stethoscope. “I figured.”

“Silly of me to be embarrassed. The letter was from my ex-”—she laughed softly—“‘boyfriend’ I guess is the right word, although I’m way too old to have a boyfriend. We never lived together. Half the week . . . more than that, five days a week Mike would stay over at my place. We broke up four months ago, just before I moved. Moving here, all this is supposed to be a new start.” She nestled into his neck. Her message seemed unmistakable: Hugh could be a new start too.

“He wants you back,” Hugh said, heart still thumping. It was embarrassing that he couldn’t hide his yearning.

“That’s not what he claims,” she said. “He wants to quote, talk about what happened, unquote. That we haven’t been clear. He says mature people are clear about breakups. Says we need closure.” She mocked the word by elongating the first syllable and turning the *s* into an aristocratic *z*.

Hugh cleared his throat, thinking that might muffle the sound of his heart. This prompted her to lift from his chest and shift away, so they were lying side by side, hardly touching, not a result he wanted. They truly had become patients on a couch, talking instead of acting on their feelings. “Sounds like an excuse to get you back,” Hugh heard himself say confidently. But that wasn’t what he truly thought; he was probing to find out if she was tempted by the possibility. It was embarrassing that he couldn’t shake his jealousy and fear of this man whom she had already discarded. *Am I insane? Did I expect a woman my age to have no past?*

But is it her past?

“Mike dumped me,” she said to the ceiling. “So I doubt he wants me back.”

“He dumped you?” Hugh’s incredulity was genuine. He straightened, leaned on his elbow, and looked down at her. “You’re kidding.”

Her chin wrinkled ruefully. “He found someone younger.” She rolled her eyes. “Mike said she was ‘more available, more loving,’ but she was also seventeen years younger, so that means perky tits and no wrinkles.”

Hugh glanced down and couldn’t resist: “Yours look plenty perky.”

“Push up bras . . . they’re a miracle.” She grinned with enough pride to suggest she might be their inventor. Then she seemed to hear herself and laughed. “This is a weird conversation.”

“It’s a great conversation.”

They settled into a long silence, gazing into each other’s eyes without charm or restraint, a relaxed and profound exchange. Normally this pose would lead to a kiss but Hugh had developed a phobia that his clumsiness would break the spell. She seemed content to wait as long as he liked. Her gray eyes were a beautiful stormy sea in which he was happy to ride the swells and sudden calms forever. The crow’s feet she had been at pains to eliminate—at this distance makeup couldn’t conceal them—added to their cleverness, her sly wisdom. He felt an impulse that he feared would soon prove overpowering to say “I love you,” which was absurd of course. Mostly to avoid that gaffe he said, “He’s an idiot.”

“Who?” she said, a very good sign that she had forgotten the subject.

“Your boyfriend.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “And thank you for going slow. I’m not on the rebound. Mike and I are done. As far as I’m concerned. But it’s hard, you know. Hard to trust again.”

He nodded. “I know,” he said. But then it occurred to him that he didn’t know. He had trusted Amy and that had been wise, had kept him safe and sound. He knew and shared her feelings still: Amy would be worried about Ginnie and her new “fella” and angry at Ray for throwing away Brown; she would lament at having to move, leaving neighbors and store-keepers she knew, routines that comforted. “I have to get back,” he said, easing up and off the couch. When he glanced at Sue he caught—or wished for—a surprised and disappointed

expression on her face; but the lights were low and he didn't trust his perceptions. "I've got the big brunch explaining to my children why I have to abandon their home," he explained.

"Of course," she said, rising to see him off. She fetched his windbreaker from the closet. "Your cloak, sir?" she said with a mischievous smile, holding it for him. She guided him into his sleeves and when he turned to say goodnight she immediately rose on tiptoe and kissed him on the lips. Lightly and briefly, but her touch left a cool tingling of pleasure all the way home and erased, at least for the remainder of that uneasy night, the memory of all their disappointing kisses.

3.10

Hugh watched Leslie hug his children with equal enthusiasm, squeezing Ginnie and then Ray as tight as she could, swaying a little from side to side. “Oh! It’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed twice. As she pulled away from Ray he saw tears brimming in her eyes. He turned away so his wouldn’t overflow.

As soon as they settled in a booth she interrogated them as ruthlessly as if they were her children. She asked Ginnie and Ethan about how they’d met, smiling and nodding enthusiastically at the details, declaring it to be “so romantic!” On the phone with Hugh yesterday she’d said, “Starting a career at forty! Not ideal marriage material,” but she gave no hint of her qualms. Then she probed Ray’s plan to transfer to NYU, expressing her skepticism through practical questions about losing touch with the friends and professors he had at Brown, remembering he’d enjoyed being on Brown’s debate team and asking whether he could get on to NYU’s squad this late? Ray argued that because his mother’s death almost immediately preceded his going to Brown, a fresh start at a new school was better for him. He became intensely irritated when she pressed her point, suggesting he could treat Brown as a fresh start, but just when he seemed on the verge of biting her head off, she defanged him. “I don’t blame you for wanting to go to college in New York,” she said. “It’s the greatest city on earth.” This gave her an opportunity to pivot to the reason for the brunch. “But you won’t be able to be roommates with your daddy.”

At which point she changed her tone, talking to them as adults, explaining in even greater detail than she'd given Hugh the byzantine laws about renting. Ethan inserted himself into the conversation, citing a friend who had successfully fended off eviction from his late parents' rent-controlled apartment for over a decade, after which the thwarted landlord sold the apartment to his friend for a song. Leslie dismissed Ethan coolly, saying his friend's situation didn't apply to Hugh's, a sharp contrast from the warmth and patience in her voice as she moved on to answer Ray's questions about why tying up Stein in the courts wouldn't succeed in stalling him for much longer than a year.

It took a good hour to wade through the byzantine legalities and logic of her negotiations with Stein. Ginnie was completely silent during all of it—because she was too sad, Hugh assumed. But once the men surrendered, she spoke up with great energy. “Okay, Leslie, I get that Dad has to take Stein's offer, thanks for explaining it so well, I totally understand now, but I still think it's a mistake for Dad to take the money and run. I think we should ask Stein to let the two hundred be a down payment and we'll buy the apartment.”

“Buy?” Leslie asked, confused. “How?”

“I can help pay the mortgage and I asked Grandma and Grandpa this morning—”

“What?” Hugh said. “What are you talking about? You called Ruth and Bernie?” He was astounded she could even conceive of being this high-handed and interfering.

“And they said”—Ginnie charged ahead—“they could give Daddy a no-interest loan of a million dollars, which is our inheritance anyway, and we'll inherit the apartment someday so it's all the same.” She turned to Ray. “Right? You agree, right?”

“That's a great idea, sis,” Ray said. “And you won't even need to pay my tuition, Pops. Right, Leslie? If Dad's got a humongous mortgage then I'd qualify for student aid.”

“I don’t know about that,” Leslie mumbled.

“Out of the question,” Hugh said. His heart was pounding. “Forget it. I’m not borrowing money from your inheritance—”

“Grandpa said it was a great idea!” Ginnie said. “He thinks maybe it’ll be a way of sheltering the gains from taxes, since Manhattan real estate is sure to keep going up and up. He’s going to talk to his accountant tomorrow.”

“Makes so much sense,” Ethan said. “You’re brilliant. Isn’t she brilliant?” he asked Leslie.

“She’s perfect,” Leslie said.

“Grandma said—” Ginnie laughed. “You’ll love this, Daddy. Grandma said they could sleep over in my bedroom when they go to theater in NY. ‘Your father won’t mind,’ she said. ‘We’re very quiet.’”

Leslie laughed. Ray grinned. Ethan opened his arms as if everything was solved.

“Honey!” Hugh slapped the table firmly enough to silence her, wipe away Ray’s smile and cut short Leslie’s chuckles. “I am not borrowing money from anyone other than a bank. Period. And I’m certainly not borrowing from my children’s inheritance.”

Ray lowered his head. Ginnie looked sheepish. But not Leslie. “Well, you’re not really borrowing from their inheritance,” she said, putting a hand on his wrist and patting it. “You’ll be repaying the loan. And since you’re going to leave your estate to Ginnie and Ray, they’ll end up with both their grandparents’ money and the apartment.”

Hugh leaned close and said in a low voice, “You’re not taking their side?”

“Side?” Leslie faced him squarely. “There are no sides, Hughie. This is just about what’s the best move financially. And also emotionally. You don’t want to leave your home, do you?”

“Oh come on, Leslie, there are a million things wrong with this plan. I don’t want to be mixed up in Ruth and Bernie’s savings. Ruth’s so fit, she could live to be a hundred. She may need that money, and anyway what happens if I get—” He hesitated. Sue had reawakened his belief in the possibility that someday he would have a mate. He glanced at the kids, who seemed to be absorbed talking to each other, but he still cut himself off. “You know,” he said, to avoid being more explicit. “And I don’t want Ray paying for his college education. Do you?”

“Of course not! Ray’s not paying for his college with loans. That’s out of the question. But with Stein’s two-hundred K and even a no-interest loan from Ruth and Bernie you can still pay for Ray to finish. And you’re wrong about being tied up with Ruth and Bernie’s finances. It’s a loan. If you start doing better you can refinance with a bank and pay them back. Or sell the apartment. Let’s just think about it, sweetie, okay? As an option.” She raised a hand to his cheek, to sooth the anguish written on his face.

He intercepted her hand and pushed it away. “Honey, there’s nothing for us to think about.”

He heard Ray clear his throat. Loudly.

Ethan, suppressing a smirk, was looking away. Ginnie was staring at her father and Leslie. Ray studied his plate. “Ginnie’s idea should be explored,” Leslie said in a business-like, wrapping-up tone. “You should consult with your accountant. And your friend Peter. He’s an investment guy, isn’t he?”

Hugh stared at his coffee cup.

“I have to go back to Hell,” Ray announced, nudging Ginnie to let him out of the booth. “I mean Providence.”

Hugh stood while Leslie slid out, opening her arms to Ray. He hugged her, saying, “Thanks for explaining the situation and helping out Dad.”

To put some distance between himself and the embarrassing display he had just put on for his children, Hugh walked Ray outside. “You need money for a cab?” he asked, reaching for his wallet.

“I’ll take the subway,” Ray said. They hugged goodbye and he whispered, “You need a wife, Dad.” He pulled away and looked deeply into Hugh’s mortified face. “A real wife.”

3.11

Determined to succeed where he had twice failed, and eager to obliterate the memory of the brunch, Hugh emailed Sue immediately after Ginnie and Ethan left for DC. He wrote that he had a screener of a festival entrant he needed to see that night. *Great*, she replied immediately.

But come to my place. I'll fix us another
easy-to-do dinner.

The screener turned out to be impressive—a relief because the pickings so far had been slim—and Sue served another delicious and rigorously healthy dinner, of salmon and asparagus and salad. She included a few pieces of black bread to satisfy his yearning for carbohydrates. From what Hugh could tell she managed to survive without them, which he thought impossible, though it explained how a fifty-year-old woman could maintain so girlish a figure.

He learned more about how girlish when once again she led him to the couch and lay down immediately, bringing him with her into the same snuggling, non-kissing position as before. This time he wasn't shy about resting a hand on her hip and pulling her flush, which eventually led to resting his palm on the globe of her behind. He could feel how slim and firm she was, in better shape than Amy, indeed than most women on earth.

She's a better version of Amy entered his head, an appalling thought that triggered a paroxysm of shame. He felt punished for it when shortly afterward she launched into a discouraging monologue. "I told you last night I'm not on the rebound but I was thinking

about that and this morning I was talking about you with a friend and I realized, or she helped me realize, in one way that's not true. I have no desire, none, to be with Mike again, but what happened, his betrayal has left me raw. I feel like an open wound. I just don't feel that I can trust any man. Or"—she tightened her grip on his side for emphasis—"I mean that it's too soon."

Hugh realized he had stopped breathing. He inhaled abruptly, gasping.

"You okay?" she asked, lifting her head.

He gently urged her raven head back to its resting place. "We'll go slow," he said.

"As slow as you like."

"I just don't want to mislead you," she whispered into his neck, shivering him. She tightened her embrace and nuzzled, as if she wanted to burrow inside. That reminded him of Amy at her most vulnerable, in the late stages of her illness. And although Sue, like Amy while dying, wanted not passion but comfort and protection, her lips felt deliciously exciting, and her perfume—Chanel, she told him when he asked—was intoxicating. If anyone needed comfort and protection he did, from her ability to reject him.

Thus he tacitly, and perhaps gratefully, agreed to stall the normal progression from getting-acquainted-dating to becoming lovers at a peculiar stage that he couldn't define, even to himself. Certainly he was grateful to Sue for any relief from the rest of his life.

Monday morning at eight a.m. his landline's caller-ID proclaimed that Ruth was calling. He considered letting it go to voicemail, but that would only prolong the agony of discussing Ginnie's indiscretion. To his surprise it was Bernie who greeted him. "Good morning, Hugh, hope I'm not calling too early. We seniors, we're up at dawn. It's practically lunch time for me."

“I’m here too, Hughie,” Ruth said on an extension. “I told Bernie you’re an early bird too.”

“And so is my accountant,” Bernie said. “He just assured me there are many tax advantages to our providing a loan to help you buy your place. We can extend you a million dollar mortgage at the current Prime rate plus one—”

“Excuse me for interrupting you, Bernie,” Hugh said. “But I wouldn’t be able to follow all that, and anyway I’m sure you and your accountant know how it would all work. Here’s the issue for me, Ruth and Bernie. I really appreciate your offer—”

“It’s to our advantage!” Ruth said.

“Let him speak,” Bernie said.

“I just can’t accept, Ruth. No matter how much sense it might make financially, Bernie. Once again, I’m grateful for the offer, I can’t begin to say how touched I am by your generosity—”

“We’re not giving it to you—” Ruth began.

“Stop! Let him finish!”

“I’m not saying a word. Go ahead, Hughie.”

“It’s just not . . .” Hugh paused to absorb a sudden inspiration. So often Ruth had irritated him with her self-consciousness about him not being Jewish, despite Hugh steeping himself in their religion and living for almost all of his adult life in the most Jewish city in the world outside of Israel. At last his separateness to her could work to his advantage. “As a WASP—I know it’s silly, but these family tics they stick with us all our lives—in my family you just don’t borrow or have any monetary dealing with family. It would make me very uncomfortable to be involved, even in an advantageous way for them, with money that

Ray and Ginnie will inherit someday. Anyway, it's all theoretical for now, I don't know how much Stein would want for the place, so let's not worry about it. Okay?"

There was a silence. A long silence.

"Hello?" Hugh said.

"Talk, Bernie," Ruth said. "You wanted me to shut up, so talk."

"Do you have a financial advisor, Hugh?" Bernie asked.

"Yeah, not a formal—my friend Peter, he's an investment guy and he advises me."

"This is all I ask: find out from Stein what he wants for your apartment, and then please have Peter call my accountant and also call me. We'll make a proposal. And if after that you still feel it makes you uncomfortable in any way, of course we won't press you. Can we make that deal, Hugh? Will you promise me?"

"Yes of course," Hugh said, grinding his teeth, feeling two intense emotions he had never experienced together: gratitude and anger.

Leslie called soon after to ask if she should accept Stein's offer, and to find out what was happening with Ginnie's idea. Hugh told her to say yes and that she could mention the new idea to Stein, but when she asked him to a family dinner with her and Gui and their boys, he declined.

He wanted to keep his time free for going slowly with Sue. After all, that didn't mean not seeing each other frequently to watch a movie, on her TV or in a theater, followed by snuggling on her couch after a healthy meal. Over the next week he saw her every night but one, the exception being her office farewell party. Hugh took no offence that she didn't ask him to go.

After a second week of movies, salmon, and hugging, however, he was a little hurt by her reaction when he asked if she wanted to accompany him to a Hamilton Foundation fundraising dinner. She said no rapidly and emphatically, eyes widening with horror.

He didn't ask whether she balked because it sounded boring or because of the symbolism of appearing in public as his date. He didn't ask because he suspected the latter. She was obviously reluctant to have the world know they were dating. She asked him not to mention to Ruth that they were seeing each other. "She'll tell Denise, who'll start planning the wedding," she explained. That seemed a legitimate concern for both of them. And Hugh didn't want to tell his friends either, until he felt secure that their going slow wasn't about to grind to a halt.

The secrecy soon became a strain. To keep his nights free for Sue he had to decline all other social engagements, including two more invitations from Leslie, who told him that Stein was pleased he'd accepted the offer to buy him out of his lease and was intrigued by the possibility of Hugh buying the place, but had to figure out a price and would get back to them. "I haven't seen you in two weeks!" she said before they hung up. "Why are you so busy? Are you seeing someone new?"

No, busy with work, he lied. He also told Meredith Wilkinson work was why he wasn't available for what had become their once-a-month hookups, an uncomplicated pleasure he had been grateful for only weeks ago. And he begged off from a dinner party at Peter and Debby's, and even a Mets game with Kyle, the very first time he had declined a boys' sports night out other than during Amy's illness. After he declined, Kyle made things more awkward by saying, "Damn, I wanted to grill you about that hot gal you brought to my show. Are you seeing her? If not, I'd like her number."

“I’m thinking about seeing her,” Hugh said.

“Well hurry the fuck up and decide, ’cause I want her if you don’t!”

He continued to see Sue at least every other night, riding a roller coaster of confidence and despair about their future, its exaltations and fears bearable except that each trip ended with a gloomy landing: that they weren’t moving forward, that he was the Hilda in this so-called relationship. Hugh felt something had to change. And then it did.

They had watched screeners several nights in a row until an evening when Sue had a prior engagement: a family meeting in New Jersey to discuss her parents’ estate planning. Hugh was looking forward to getting some rest. Most nights, after snuggling with her until past midnight, and going home to bed alone, he had trouble falling asleep; and his night grinding had been waking him up early with a jaw that felt as if it had endured ten rounds with Muhammad Ali. He was feeling almost grateful not to be seeing her as he got into bed at ten-thirty—when she texted.

Nightcap? 20 minutes?

My place. Lots to tell
you. Miss you.

Within seconds he was wide awake. Five minutes later he was dressed and on his way. A summons at ten-thirty, not for a movie or a meal?

Most mornings following the frustrating nights on Sue’s couch, Hugh had consoled himself with the thought that it was as if he and Sue had skipped over the first twenty-five years of marriage and were now in a deep friendship: physically comforting, even intimate, but dormant sexually. That consoling label was belied by Hugh’s intense desire for her. The more he gazed at her clever gray eyes, her pretty mouth, her strong chin, all framed by her

shimmering raven hair, the more vivid an afterimage beckoned when he was away from her. One morning he was woken at dawn by an insistent, almost painful erection, reminiscent of when he was a desperate boy, and he realized he had been dreaming of kissing Sue. Not in the clumsy tentative way that mysteriously continued to overtake him whenever he ventured another attempt; in his dream theirs was a leisurely, elaborate kiss, the kind he had shared with Amy all of their married life.

Now, as he trotted down to SoHo, excited by the crisp November air that had finally broken an Indian summer of lingering humidity, he had to admit these nights of snuggling without intercourse weren't like the familiarity of a long marriage. At some point while they snuggled or kissed awkwardly, his physical yearning for more couldn't be suppressed. Sue had felt him grow hard many times. She hadn't reacted until two nights ago, when she covered the bulge in his jeans with a fan of fingers and made this tantalizing promise: "Your patience will be rewarded."

And here was a late-night summons on a night they weren't scheduled! His time had, so to speak, come.

Sue had left the front door ajar. When he poked his head in, she called out in a tone of merry despair, "I'm already on the couch, doctor!"

"Doctor?" he said, entering and shedding his windbreaker.

She was prone in her cashmere sweater and what she called her comfy jeans, although they were as tight as a second skin. She waved an almost drained glass of red wine above her head. "I need to go back into therapy, that's for sure. Pour yourself a glass and give me a refill."

"Estate planning stressful?"

“They’re screwing me.”

Hugh brought the bottle over while she complained that she was being slighted as the adopted daughter compared to her brother Andrew, the biological son. Hugh sat on the edge of the couch, not wanting to concede another snuggling tableaux. He was glad to meet this Sue, who abandoned her usually temperate language and calm demeanor as she told her story. She began with basic facts as if he were meeting her for the first time, namely that six months after adopting Sue, Denise had gotten pregnant with Andrew, a surprise—Denise called it a miracle—because after six years of failed fertility treatments she had been assured by her doctors that she would never conceive. Sue had always been told—her mother protesting too much, she complained—that they were equally loved, but at the family estate-planning she learned that she would inherit half of her “parents’” liquid assets—she put “parents” in air quotes, an embittered first when referring to them—but nothing of the winter retreat in Boca Raton.

“I mean I don’t give a shit. I don’t want to go to that cultural wasteland, but Andy’s not getting Florida ’cause I don’t want it, and it’s not because he has three kids and they supposedly love, love, love to spend Christmas and spring break down there. Really, this way Andy’s going to end up with all the family mementos, most of which Denise has already shipped down, and she’ll bring the rest when they finally move there full time. So when they die, everything will be there and there’s no provision, Denise hasn’t made any provision for what they’re going to leave to me that’s personal of theirs, not just some fucking stocks that I don’t really need anyway.” She laughed. “Not that I’m so rich I don’t need money. But you know what I mean.”

Everything about this speech was blunt compared to how she usually spoke. There was generally a WASPiness to her self-expression that, combined with an overanalyzed New Yorker's vocabulary, had left Hugh with the impression she didn't trust him with her feelings. Emotional reserve worried him more than whether she trusted him with her body. He was sorry she was suffering, but it was gratifying that she was being so open with him.

Although Denise and Sam had never done anything overt Sue could cite as proof they loved her less than Andrew, she nevertheless felt she was "more of an obligation, you know what I mean? Not that they regret or would ever stop loving me but it's something they agreed to, not a miracle from God. And Andrew *is* more of a miracle than most children. Denise had given up. I've heard her say it a million times, 'I had given up!' And she makes goo-goo eyes at him. Such total love. She never looks at me like that." Sue seemed near tears. Perhaps to stop them she got up, turning her back as she walked away to the open kitchen, asking, "I'm going to open another bottle. You want more? I really need another glass." She had drained the second one in record time.

Her departure prevented Hugh from offering the consolation of his arms, which might have led to using the condom wrinkling in his pocket, but lascivious thoughts were not preoccupying him anymore. He was moved by what she felt, wanted to console her.

He followed her into the kitchen and listened to her confess in the bright pool of a Halogen light. "Sam is closer to Andy," she said while opening and pouring. "I understand that. I mean a father would be to his son even if I were his biological daughter. But if I was Denise's blood, no way she would be closer to Sarah than to me—"

"Sarah is Andy's wife?" Hugh interrupted.

Sue nodded. “Denise calls her every day, sometimes twice a day, and of course Sarah has given her three grandchildren, and maybe it would be different if I had had children, but I really don’t think so. My children still wouldn’t be her blood. Denise is so much closer to Andy than to me, and with every other Jewish mother I know it’s just the opposite. It’s the mother and daughter who are like this.” She put her index and middle finger tight and squeezed them.

Hugh felt sure, although he had no information on this point, that she was wrong, Denise must love her very much. After all, blood or not, Sue had been Denise’s only daughter for fifty years. “Let me ask you something,” he said. “Not to dispute anything you’re saying . . .” He paused because Sue’s eyes were wide with alarm. *Am I making a mistake?* he wondered. *Am I just supposed to listen? Shut up and be sympathetic?* But he was midsentence. “Maybe in her will your mother . . .” He stumbled on his choice of word, since Sue had never called her “Mother,” just “Denise.”

“She *is* my mother.”

“Maybe she’s going to leave personal things to you in her will?”

“She didn’t say anything about that,” Sue snapped back, as if he had been cross-examining her. “We were discussing their estate and she didn’t say anything about that.”

“Maybe they were only talking about monetary things?”

Sue looked at him for a long moment, her expression becoming a thoughtful study, anguish smoothing into a contemplative gaze that eventually seemed to look beyond him. To her past? To her future? To an argument with someone else? “You’re sweet,” she said finally.

Sweeter than Mike? He hoped.

“I’m sorry,” she added, “to ask you over this late and then dump my crabby feelings on you.”

“I’m . . . flattered,” he decided was the right word. “I’m glad you told me.”

Sue nodded. And sighed. “You know being adopted, when I was little, wasn’t an issue for me. Really. I didn’t feel . . . overlooked or . . . But as I get older . . .” She lowered her eyes, shook her head. “I actually got tested. My DNA. Secretly. And I discovered something that shocked me. Really I’m only half Jewish. Only fifty percent of my genes are Eastern European. Half of me is Scots Irish genes.” She met his eyes, her sly smile appearing, now with a mischievous slant. “My nice Jewish mother must have wandered into what Denise would call the ‘wrong neighborhood.’ Probably that’s why she gave me up. Or her parents made her. Pregnant from an Irish boy. What a *shanda*.” She paused. “The agency told Denise she was a teenager. She’d still be pretty young today, maybe not even seventy.”

This discovery of her origin, the story of a woman he felt he loved more than ever, was deeply moving to Hugh. He had to clear his throat to ask, “Have you tried to contact her?”

“I put in a request. The agency relayed it to her. Then it was up to her, and she declined. Or didn’t respond, they didn’t specify. I’m sure Denise thinks I’m fully Jewish. It’s the second thing she tells everyone after saying I’m adopted. She always makes a point of saying the agency guaranteed the baby would be Jewish. She says, ‘So I know my Sue is one of us.’ I don’t think she wanted a half-Jewish baby. I think she would be upset if she knew the truth. Really upset.”

“Are you?” Hugh asked. “Do you care?”

“No. I sort of always suspected I wasn’t a total JAP.” She made a rueful face. “Is that anti-Semitic? That I’m glad I’m not a total JAP?” She dismissed him with a wave.

“How would you know? You’re not Jewish.”

“I may not be Jewish but thanks to my mother I know an anti-Semite when I see one.”

Sue opened her arms and asked, “So what’s the verdict? Am I a self-hating half Jew?”

They had reached a crossroads. It wasn’t Mike, or only Mike, that had her feeling so vulnerable. This resentment and uncertainty about her parentage and her identity: that was the deeper, festering wound. She had shown him where she hurt and, no matter how ironically phrased, had asked him if he had anything to offer that could assuage the pain.

“Well?” she demanded as his silence dragged on. “You can tell me the truth. Am I anti-Semitic?”

“Anti-Semitic or self-hating?”

“Either?” she said meekly. “Both?”

Hugh may not have felt confident about women in general, and certainly not about Sue in particular, but he had been married for almost thirty years, and he was the father of a grown daughter. He felt sure he could supply reassurance to a woman in need. “No,” he said, “you’re not self-hating and you’re certainly not anti-Semitic. You want to know that you belong, exclusively belong, to someone who loves you.” He said these wise, fatherly words in a soothing tone. He fully expected they would move her, perhaps into his arms, but certainly into his heart.

Instead, something quite different happened. Hugh choked up. His eyes welled. In a stab of revelation that cut deep he felt he was the child whose mother had been taken from him, that he was cast out into the world without knowing where or to whom he belonged.

He turned away to hide his upset. Not quickly enough; Sue noticed. And so it was she who took him into her arms; and she who kissed his forehead like an affectionate parent; and he who no longer felt sexy; and he who said he should go home; and he who forgot about the condom in his pocket; and he who, after he reached the sanctuary of his bedroom and fetched the three photos of Amy he treasured, it was he who wished he had belonged utterly and completely to his beloved's tribe, in case that deficit had ever, even fleetingly, caused her to feel less loved.

3.12

A week later, Hugh was in the small screening room wolfing down sushi with Melissa, a feeding pause before they started the next potential festival entry, when an email from Sue appeared that nearly stopped his heart. He had resisted giving into his anxious mid-morning compulsion of emailing her a suggestion about what movie they might see that night, hoping that today she would be the one to propose an evening plan. To be the aggressor was presumably the male's responsibility, so her rarely being the initiator wasn't—he told himself repeatedly—an indication of lesser interest on her part. After the intimacy of her adoption speech, however, he had been disappointed that their evenings had snapped back to their prior shape, and he longed for an encouraging sign.

When he started reading her email he must have been in mid sentence to Melissa and then never finished his thought, because her face loomed and she asked, “Hugh, everything all right? That from Ray? Is he going through with transferring to NYU?”

“Who knows? Still not a peep about that. Just a friend changing plans. Let's start,” he said, but the first fifteen minutes of the movie didn't register on his consciousness because he was utterly preoccupied by Sue's message. She had written to inform him that at the last minute she had decided to go to this weekend's Dream Strategies conference in DC, a yearly gathering focused on non-profit development. She had mentioned this event a few times as a boring chore she wanted to avoid; now she said she'd decided that was immature because the trip could refresh old contacts for her new career as a consultant. She added that she wanted to spend tonight, Thursday, quietly at home, packing, getting to bed early. I should be

back Sunday afternoon. Maybe we'll catch a movie? was the farewell line. Hugh latched onto that as a reassurance he ought not to feel rejected, this wasn't the beginning of being let down. Nevertheless the email not only disappointed him about this weekend, it worried him about their future.

When the screener finished, he declined to watch the next candidate Melissa was ready to cue up because he was unable to think of anything other than the startling fact that he was facing three days and nights in a row without seeing Sue, his first break in a month from their immersive and clandestine relationship.

But a break from what sort of relationship as far as Sue was concerned? Hugh was madly in love with her, that much he admitted to himself. Silently. So silently he had not said it out loud. One reason he was glad he hadn't told his close friends about Sue was that if asked, and they would ask, he would have to say "I love her" and hear the words reverberate back. No longer muted, the implications of his being in love would have to be examined, and he didn't want to do that while Sue remained elusive. He had never expected to fall in love, head-over-heels, full of yearning, as he had decades ago with Amy. He would be thrilled, except for Sue's obvious reluctance to move forward from . . . what?

What would Sue call their relationship if she told anyone about it, which he suspected—no, not suspected, was certain—she hadn't. What would she call snuggling on the couch before she retired to her bed alone? Was he her poodle? He had never heard of grownups having this sort of prolonged tease of a courtship. He felt as if he were a love-struck 1950s schoolboy carrying her books. Was she really aiming to date the Varsity quarterback? Was he like Richard Nixon wooing Pat, driving her to dates with other men? He wanted to talk it all out with Leslie, with Kyle, even (especially?) with Roberto Salazar, if

only he didn't cost so much. But he was afraid of being mocked for what he loved, in the disdainful way his mother had been amused by his obsession with movies ("I always thought you'd outgrow that in college"), by his wearing his hair long ("From the back I keep mistaking you for Aunt Mary"), and most of all by his marrying a Jewish girl.

"Well, at least she won't mind you don't know how to make a decent martini," Mother had said after he had done his best to mix one very dry and chilled near to freezing, the way she liked, before he told her the news of his engagement.

"Why not?" he had said, offering his chin to be struck.

"They don't drink, right? Her people. Just that wine that tastes like grape jelly."

"My God, you're a cliché" was his feeble attempt at punching back.

Mother finished her unsatisfactorily mixed martini before producing an insult that he had never succeeding in erasing from memory: "At least when I leave the room nobody busts out laughing."

Hugh didn't want Leslie, Karen, Peter, Kyle, or anyone he cared for, to snicker about how he was mooning over Sue. No, he dared not ask for advice.

At least he could take advantage of a night alone to go to bed early, once again hoping to catch up on the sleep he had been missing. He was about to turn out the lights at nine-fifteen when Leslie's number appeared on his phone. He considered not answering, since he couldn't talk about what was on his mind, but he wanted the comfort of her voice.

"Where are you?" she said without a hello.

"Home."

"Come over for a drink."

"Why? What's wrong?"

“Come over, okay? One drink. Help you sleep.”

When she opened the door to him, she handed him a glass of Chivas and announced:

“He said no.”

“Who said no?” Hugh had no clue.

“Stein. Actually he said he can’t. He’s selling the building to a developer and they’re going to empty the place, gut it, and reconfigure into humongous floor-throughs, duplexes.”

She led him into her living room, waving a hand to illustrate the grandiosity of the plan.

“Apartments for billionaires and movie stars. The whole megillah will take two years.” She pointed to a legal-sized envelope on her coffee table. “He sent over the paperwork for canceling your lease. I can notarize it and you’ll have a check in a couple days.” She sat down and looked at him with worry and affection. “Only good news is that since it won’t make a difference to his deal, I got him to agree to a much later move-out date. March 1st.”

Hugh took a long sip of Scotch before he opened the fateful envelope. He’d known for months that the end of his apartment was inevitable, but as had been true of waiting for Amy’s death he hadn’t believed it would actually occur. He felt now as he did then: numb and lost.

“I’m sorry,” Leslie said. “At least . . .” She didn’t finish.

After signing Hugh didn’t stay long. Frustrating though the night snuggles with Sue were he wished he were heading toward her apartment instead of his empty one. At least he’d get a full night’s sleep. He was in bed by ten.

But alone in the dark he wasn’t rid of Sue disrupting his sleep. He could feel her nestled against him, the comforting weight of her head on his chest, her fingers hooking his

waist. And although she had never been in his apartment he would have sworn in court that he could smell Sue and her perfume, her sweet and pungent scent.

He shot up in bed. He snatched his Blackberry off the night table and rapidly typed to Leslie:

Amy didn't wear perfume
most of the time, but
when she did is my
memory correct that it
was Chanel? I've thrown
out all her cosmetics
so I can't check.

She answered immediately:

Yes Chanel Number 5!
What made you think of
that? Are you still blue?
We'll find you a nice
new home. I promise.
P.S. You never called
Judy. She's deeply
offended. So am I . . .
a little.
:) xoxo Leslie

Sue and Amy wore the same perfume! Was that why he was in love with Sue? Because smelling her triggered a powerful memory, a Pavlovian reflex? Was the entire month of his infatuation, dreaming of a future crammed with companionship and affection, a case of mistaken identity?

My God, how depressing.

His landline rang. He ignored the first two rings; Ginnie and Ray always rang his cell, as did Leslie, Peter and Kyle. When it rang a third time he glanced at caller ID and saw his mother-in-law's number. Why was Ruth calling so late, at ten-thirty? Did she have a sixth sense of when he had news to tell her?

He decided not to answer, spare himself another emotional conversation. But on the fourth ring it occurred to him she might not be calling about his emergencies. He picked up and asked with no preliminary: "Is everything all right, Ruth?"

"Oh it's you, Hugh," she said as if surprised he had answered his own phone. "I thought you would be out. I hope you weren't asleep? I know it's late for me but not you, right? I didn't wake you? We just got home from dinner at the club with the Roths, and Denise told me you're dating Sue. I just wanted to ask, since Thanksgiving is coming up, and we're going to have it at the club—I told you, didn't I, that this year I don't feel up to cooking? Anyway, since we're all going to be at the club do you think we should get a big table with the Roths so you and Sue can be . . ." She hesitated in what so far had been a headlong speech, careening to this cliff. She paused at the edge, then jumped: ". . . you know, together."

Hugh's mouth opened and stayed open. No words issued forth. The automatic mental process of taking in information, comprehending its implications and then producing an appropriate verbal response was jammed by the impossible fact that Sue had told her mother they were dating. Why would Sue tell Denise when she had specifically asked him not to tell Ruth because Ruth would tell Denise? He feared that confirming it would mean breaking his promise to Sue, even though she was the source.

"Hugh? Hugh? Are you there? Hugh! Did you hang up?"

“I thought she wanted it to be secret,” he blurted.

“Who? Oh, you mean Sue. Right. That’s right. She told Denise you had been keeping it quiet, low key she said, she didn’t say it was a secret.” Ruth laughed and added, “Not a deep and dark secret. She said she wanted to wait a while because she’s still . . .” For the second time Ruth, who rarely hesitated to finish her sentences, trailed off.

“Still?” Hugh said, aware of the worry in his voice.

“She was a little bit on the rebound. But not anymore!” Ruth sang out. “Have you told Ginnie and Ray?” Hugh detected something other than Ruth’s usual efficiency. There was anxiety, which often accompanied her compulsive planning and nosiness. And there was a note—maybe he imagined it, or wanted there to be such a sound from his wife’s mother—of sorrow.

“No! I haven’t told anyone, Ruth.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know whether we’re really dating. I don’t want to expose the kids . . .” He stopped. Expose? As if Sue were radiation?

“You’re not sure about Sue,” Ruth said more than asked.

“Other way around. I don’t think she’s sure about me.”

“But you’re sure about her?”

“Ruth, I feel very strange talking about this with you.”

“Oh Hugh, please don’t feel that way. Bernie and I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy . . .” Her voice broke, or seemed to. She coughed and mumbled, “Excuse me,” then coughed again. “You have to move on, Hugh. You know Amy wanted you to be happy. She told me that. She told me she wanted you to find someone. She told

me that several times.” Ruth’s voice trailed off, as if she were in a 1940s film, about to flash back to a poignant conversation. Most of Hugh’s emotional life was in the past with Amy, and yet he was so much younger than his eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law. What images must come into her head of Amy as a sweet-smelling baby, an energetic girl, a feisty teenager, an Amy bursting with life? How poor Ruth must ache for each one.

He stammered that he needed to discuss Thanksgiving arrangements with Sue. Mostly to get Ruth off the subject he told her the upshot on the apartment. She immediately said they would be willing to help him buy a new place, but he had the presence of mind to reply that help was needed only to keep the old place; he had enough to buy or rent in a less expensive neighborhood. She asked several more questions, where he would look, how big, where would he store the kids’ things if it was only a two bedroom. He told her he had until March to figure it out. As soon as he hung up and had a chance to think through what Sue had done, he was pissed off—the first time he had ever been angry at her.

Why tell her mother, and by extension his late wife’s mother, without alerting him—and, to put it bluntly, before they had fucked? How could she possibly know there was any reason to inflict hope on those kind-hearted old women in New Jersey before so basic a part of being a couple had been at least tried? Maybe they were both too old for sex to be truly the decisive element in a relationship, but surely it mattered somewhat?

He was angry . . . and he was thrilled! *She loves me too!* he thought, and forgot all about perfumes and worries.

He threw off his robe and dressed. The thought of being without him for three days and nights must have felt as forlorn for her as it did for him. Obviously that was why she had told her mother.

He went downstairs into a cool, cloudless night and saw a merry couple leaving a cab two doors down. The young woman laughed at something her fella said and hugged him with delight, kissing and tugging him into her building, his building, their building—a happy couple in the final fadeout of a romantic comedy.

He couldn't wait for his feet to carry him to Sue. He was too tempted by imagining her, weekend bag neatly packed, shedding clothes to get into bed, missing him. Sue, at long last, was ready now. Now, *now*, NOW! Hugh flagged down the young couple's chariot, a real extravagance spending money for a cab on a mere fifteen-block walk, but he didn't want to wait a minute longer than he had to.

As if to bedevil him, the taxi went past her corner and halfway beyond before Hugh could get the driver's attention. He didn't ask for change of a ten, jogged to her lobby door and entered, breathing hard.

The young doorman looked surprised by his appearance. *When will he get used to me?* Hugh wondered. *I've been here almost every night this month.*

"Are you expected?" the doorman asked sternly.

What kind of question was that? "No. You should call. Tell her I'm here." He moved toward the elevator.

"One moment, sir," the officious asshole said. Hugh waited by the elevator while the doorman went through the formality of checking with Sue. "Yes, Miss Roth," he said.

Before Hugh could step into the elevator, the doorman held out the sleek black receiver.

"She wants to speak to you."

Undaunted, Hugh took the receiver and didn't give a damn that the doorman heard him say, "Hi, darling. Did I wake you up? Sorry, but there's something I'd like to discuss before you go away. I just got a call from—"

Sue cut him off, very unlike her. Also unusual, her voice was low, hurried and worried. "Hugh, you did wake me. I took a pill an hour ago and conked out. I'm on the six a.m. Acela. Why don't you call me when you wake up? I'll still be on the train. Okay? Talk to you then." She hung up without a goodbye.

Hugh returned the receiver to the doorman. He couldn't look him in the eye. And didn't want to. He turned his back to hide his face. He could feel his cheeks turning red. Just before the massive glass door shut behind him, he clearly and distinctly heard the young man snicker.

3.13

It was the snicker that stopped him from retreating all the way home. Halfway, he turned back. It had come into his head that the only reason the doorman could have to laugh was that he knew why Sue had refused to see him. *She has a guest. Her ex-boyfriend Mike.*

Hugh argued with that logic while he retraced his steps to her street, telling himself this was paranoid behavior and probably wouldn't work anyway as a successful surveillance, but his body disobeyed his reasoning. When he reached her corner he stood at the bus stop, out of sight of the doorman, pretending to wait for a ride. The night air felt cold but not uncomfortable, at least for the first twenty minutes of his vigil. But even if his suspicion was correct, how would he know Mike hadn't already left? Or if Mike was sleeping over, whether he would linger in her bed until long after Sue departed for DC? Or if she really was going to DC? And what about that? Was Hugh planning to stand at the corner until five-thirty in the morning, letting buses go by, no doubt arousing suspicion that could easily result in a cop car checking him out, all to make sure of her departure? And finally, how could he be certain that if Mike did appear he would recognize him from the one photo he'd seen at Sue's apartment? It was a wide angle of Sue and Mike and another couple posing under the Sphinx. Sue had told him it was several years old, mostly capturing the exotic location, the only big trip Sue said they had taken together. At night and from a distance of half a block, how likely was it that Hugh could discern if the man leaving her building had the same tiny smiling face as the Mike in the shadow of one of the wonders of the world?

I could follow him to where he goes, find out his last name, and then look up if that's his address. Suddenly Hugh was frightened. I'm a stalker. And what does it say about my feelings for Sue that I suspect her of lying to me about where she's spending the weekend?

He saw the bus was coming. Having to give up the pretense he was waiting for it also propelled him to abandon his mad stake-out. He walked home and vowed to himself that when Sue returned, one way or the other he would settle whether they were a couple.

He was unable to shut his eyes until past two. And they snapped open in the pitch dark at five-fifteen, what felt like only a few minutes later. *No*, he told himself. *You're not going to see if she leaves for the train.* Although exhausted, he couldn't fall back to sleep. At six-forty-five he called her cell.

It went straight to voice mail and he didn't leave a message. He showered, shaved, answered Melissa's late-night email about the prospective festival entries they hadn't covered. All that took him to seven-twenty-two.

He called Sue's cell.

Straight to voice mail again. After the beep, he said, "Hi. Guess the reception on the train is poor. Call me when you can. I'm dying to know why you told Denise about us. That was a surprise. Love you," he said without thinking, the standard sign off to Ginnie, Ray, Ruth, even Leslie.

His heart pounded, mortified by his error. Luckily relief was immediately granted. Her voice mail asked if he was satisfied with his message and told him to press 3 if he wanted to rerecord it. He pressed 3 so hard it twice pleaded, "Your message is deleted."

His mulligan was: "Hi, it's Hugh. Call when you can. Very curious about what made you tell Denise about us. Talk soon."

Wow, was that better. He had never loved the anonymity of the technological world more deeply.

He went to the office and tried hard not to check his phone every five minutes. So he checked it every fifteen. Meanwhile, he and Melissa watched movies. They were halfway through the second one when Karen opened the door. She said nothing, staring at them silently with an appalled look, as if she had caught them *in flagrante delicto*.

Melissa paused the small screening room's DVD player. Karen continued to stare.

"What?" Hugh asked.

Karen nodded at Melissa. "Go get yourself coffee." Melissa looked at Hugh. Karen snapped at her, "Go!"

Melissa stood and moved past Karen to the door, then stopped and said, "Hugh, you want a latte?"

"GO!" Karen shouted, and Melissa hustled out.

"What?" Hugh asked.

"You slept with her daughter. Broke her heart. Then she asked you to marry her anyway. And you never gave her an answer? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Francine," Hugh said, more to orient himself than anything else.

"What the fuck were you thinking not telling me? Me! You don't tell me you've pissed off our top donor? Francine gives us two fucking mil a year! And now she says she's quote reevaluating her grant to us unless there are managerial changes in the film programming unquote." Karen sat down heavily. She continued to stare at Hugh with a frown of incomprehension as if she was having trouble recognizing him. "Is it true?"

“What?” He was trying to remember how long ago it had been since Francine’s bizarre proposal. A month? Three? He couldn’t remember. *Maybe I have Alzheimer’s?* He might also be having a heart attack: he could feel his heart pulsing in his throat.

“Did you have an affair with Francine’s daughter?”

“Stepdaughter. Yes. I mean . . . yes. But they don’t get along. Francine wouldn’t care about that.”

“Well she does. She says you’re some kind of . . . I don’t know, user is what she meant.” Karen frowned. “‘Trifle,’ that was the word she used—you ‘trifle with women’s feelings.’ I can’t believe she proposed to you. Unbelievable.” Karen shook her head . . . then suddenly she burst out laughing. “You’re a Casanova! I’m worried and feeling sorry for you, all alone in the world, and you’re beating them off with a stick!”

“Hardly.” Hugh was having trouble speaking, even breathing. Hoping to calm himself, he checked his phone to see if Sue had called back, although he hadn’t heard a peep or felt his pocket rumble.

“Hugh.” Karen leaned forward and resumed her stern look, black eyes boring at him, thin lips disappearing as she scolded: “Marry her. She still wants you. I can tell. It’s an arrangement, just an arrangement. You don’t have to sleep with her.”

“Oh come on, Karen. I’m not going to marry a rich old lady for her money.”

Karen leapt out of her chair and whacked him on top of his head with the open flat of her palm. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“Jesus,” Hugh complained, rolling his chair away. His scalp stung.

“Marry her! Your job will be secure and it’s the best thing for Ginnie and Ray. She’ll probably put them in her will. And you can save every penny you make. You can even go back to fucking her daughter on the side, I bet. I remember her. She was hot.”

“Stepdaughter,” Hugh said and then couldn’t stop himself from saying exactly what he thought: “My God, are you really this amoral?”

“How is this amoral? It’s totally moral. It’s an arrangement. A great arrangement for you.”

“I don’t love Francine!”

Karen laughed, a deep laugh as if he’d made a startlingly good joke. Then she peered at him. When she realized he meant it, her mouth dropped open. “You’re not kidding. You think you have to be in love to get married?”

“Why would I kid about that?”

There was a knock on the door, and Melissa said from the other side, “I have your latte, Hugh.”

“You drink it!” Karen shouted. “Go away and stay away.” She continued to Hugh, loud enough for Melissa to hear, “You actually want to be in love? Mooning over someone the way Melissa moons over you? She can’t even do the simplest task, she’s so sick in love with you.”

“What?” Hugh sat up straight. “What?”

“You heard me. I hope you’re not also fucking her.”

Hugh could have sworn that he heard Melissa groan through the door. He’d been feeling panic and shame; now embarrassment and confusion were added. “What are you talking about?” he whispered. “Melissa doesn’t love me.”

“Well it’s not a healthy love, I grant you.” Karen faced the door and yelled, “Melissa’s got Daddy issues! I wish you would fuck her so she’d get over it and do her job!”

“Karen, stop,” Hugh hissed. “Are you serious? She’s got a crush on me?”

“Crush!”

Hugh put a finger to his lips and begged, “Shhh.”

Karen didn’t turn down her volume a notch. “Not a crush! It’s an obsession. She fusses over you like a Japanese mother!” At last she dropped her voice. “It’s just weird. You really don’t notice? There’s something wrong with you. Are you seeing a shrink? You desperately need to. How can you destroy your career like this? Your career! How about mine? Why the hell didn’t you trust me enough to tell me about the daughter? Step-daughter, whatever. And what in God’s name were you thinking, saying no to Francine’s offer without discussing it with me first? And what the fuck do you mean, ‘I don’t love Francine.’ Who the hell is in love at our age? Are you telling me you’re expecting to fall in love?”

“Yes! I hope to fall in love!” He felt sure his heart was about jump out of his body. He swallowed hard. “It’s certainly a prerequisite for marriage for me.”

Karen sat back in the chair and released a long sigh with such force that from four feet away he smelled stale coffee on her breath. She shut her eyes, breathing in and out deeply, calming herself. When she opened them she seemed normal, thank God. “Hugh, I’m a dyke so you’ll probably write off what I’ve got to say but I’m not blind and deaf: I know hetero relationships aren’t different than ours. If a couple is lucky, they’ll be excited about making love to each other for seven years. After that, everyone’s bored. Even if they keep doing it, once a month, even once a week, it’s just oiling the hinges, changing the filter.

Marriages are about money, children, where you live, who you see, does it help your career? If it lasts, it's a fucking practical arrangement. Francine is perfect for your life. You want romance, Hugh? Have affairs. Francine won't even complain."

"Karen, that's just depressed bullshit," Hugh said, so emphatically Karen was startled. "Sure, it was familiar and comfortable with Amy. And sure, she didn't want to do it more than once a month; and sure, I would long for more, or idly think about what it would be like to have sex with Monica Vitti, but I wanted her every day—almost every day, anyway. I loved her." He said all that in a clear, untroubled voice, amazing himself. Since Amy's illness he had been unable to talk about his feelings for her without his voice cracking and stalling. It was Sue, wasn't it? What he felt for Sue had given him the courage to speak of love.

Karen was unimpressed. Her thin lips twisted in disgust. She shook her head. She stood up and spoke—announced, really, in the brisk tone she used whenever she had made up her mind and for better or for worse was going to act on it: "Hugh, if you don't go to Francine and say you've been thinking it over and you're grateful for her marriage proposal, I don't know if I can protect your job."

"Oh come on! Stop bullying me!" Hugh was furious, close to saying something he would regret. He stayed silent, waiting for the angry words to evaporate.

"I'm not bullying you. I'm trying to help you."

"Help me? How? By telling me you're not going to be my friend unless I marry Francine?"

“I’ll be your friend. You’ll come to dinner every couple weeks. I’ll throw you the best sixtieth birthday party in the history of the world. But, Jesus, I’m not going to lose my job to protect you! If I don’t fire you, Francine’ll get the board to fire me.”

“That’s ridiculous.” His heart was pounding again. What had he done? “I can’t believe she’s that vengeful.”

“How naïve are you? Here’s a news bulletin, Hugh: human beings aren’t rational about rejection. She’s not going to let go of this. This year or next or the next after that, she’ll turn off the green faucet. If you don’t marry Francine I’ve got no choice but to dump you.”

Hugh stared, terrified and speechless.

“And Hugh, without this job you’ll lose your importance in the film world. And let’s face it, with all due respect to Amy and her memory, it’s movies that you can’t live without. They’re the love of your life.” She walked out without another word, the way she did when announcing to all departments a decision that was irrevocable.

It took a moment to get to his feet, but when Hugh finally left the screening room he searched for Melissa, having decided he would make no mention of what she must have overheard, which would allow her the option of pretending she hadn’t. He found her desk abandoned. One of the interns told him she’d said she wasn’t feeling well and gone home.

Hugh had never suspected anything about her feelings for him. He saw himself as Melissa’s mentor, thought of her almost as an adopted daughter. The idea of making love to her was worse than horrifying: it was absurd.

He didn’t finish watching the movie or eat the niçoise salad she had arranged to be delivered. He sat frozen at his desk, keenly aware he urgently needed to address the disaster

he'd made of his life, but unable to do anything useful: unable to do anything but wait for Sue to call.

At last her number flashed on his cell. "Hi, Hugh," she said and rushed past his reply to explain: "Sorry I didn't get your message for some reason while I was on the Acela and I've been signing up, getting into my room, grabbing a chance to go the gym. I have to take a shower and get to the first panel but I wanted to apologize for last night. I wasn't sleeping. Mike showed up unannounced and insisted on seeing me. I had to deal with that. In fact I didn't sleep a wink."

Hugh stopped breathing.

"Hugh?" she asked into his silence. "Are you there?"

"Yes. So you're patching things up." He had meant this to be a question, but it came out as a flat, dispirited statement.

"What? No, no." She laughed gaily at his misunderstanding. "I didn't sleep a wink *after* he left. Because it was upsetting. I had to tell him I've moved on and he got . . . well, pretty angry."

Hugh got a sense of how terrible an illness manic depression must be from the dizzy way his heart zoomed from the basement to the roof. "Oh. Oh. Good. Well, I mean, I'm sorry he got angry but I'm glad, very glad you feel that way."

"Me too," she said brightly. "I was feeling good about us, that's why I blabbed to Denise, and I was going to warn you, but Mike, who I'd also sent an email to that I was seeing someone, showed up and . . . Anyway, that's the past. I told Denise because it's silly not to. We are seeing each other, right?"

"We sure are."

“I should be back early enough on Sunday for us to catch a movie if the Acela doesn’t slow to a crawl. Can we go out for a change? I love your indie screeners but I’d like to see a big-budget movie after a weekend of boring conference symposiums on how to soak rich people.”

Soak rich people. That spurred him. After he agreed to a commercial entertainment on Sunday and let Sue go to her conference, he decided to use the brimming confidence he was feeling to call Francine immediately.

She answered warily. “Hugh? Is this you?”

“Yes, Francine. Do you have any free time this afternoon? I can meet anywhere that’s convenient. I want to clear the air about something.”

“Clear the air,” she repeated as if it were a phrase new to her. Then a long pause. He felt sure she was debating whether to agree to talk at all. “All right. Hang on. Let me check.” She suggested he come by her place at four-thirty. “I have half an hour,” she added in her haughty way, as if he had been given an audience with the queen. So he had a few hours to wait to face the music.

He knew how to use them. The agony of suspense he had suffered while Sue was unreachable had taught him a lesson. Painful or no, better to be clear with people. He looked up Melissa’s home number and the number for Judy’s office and shut his door for privacy.

3.14

Talking to Judy surprised him. Leslie had said she was offended, so he expected chilly formality. Instead, Judy answered brightly and warmly, “Hugh! Long lost Hugh. How are you? Buried by preparations for your festival, I bet.” She had an excuse ready for him. If she was angry at him why make this easy?

“Uh, yeah.” If he grabbed at that explanation he could then resume dating her as if nothing had happened. Was that her fantasy? He would call and she would coax him into resuming? “Things have”—he began to stumble—“been . . . very . . . you know . . .”

“I’ve been swamped too,” she finished for him. “Sorry I haven’t called.”

There it was again, an invitation to pretend he hadn’t dropped her. What the hell was going on? Leslie had made it seem as if it was understood that he wasn’t interested. He pressed on. “I’m sorry I haven’t called too. I should have. I just, you know, you’re terrific, um, but I . . .” He ground to a halt, unable to state the perfectly reasonable but brutal-to-his-ears fact that he wasn’t interested in her romantically.

“You’re not ready,” Judy finished for him in a maddening tone of maternal confidence. “I sensed that. It makes sense. You were married for almost thirty years. Not something you can process in a year or two.”

Irritated, Hugh corrected her: “Going on three.”

“Three,” she said. “Or even five. It takes time. You’ll get there and you’ll be happy. And I’m around whenever you feel like talking, whatever. I understand what you’re going through.”

How the fuck does she understand? She hates her living ex-husband and both her parents are still alive. Other than her Scottish Terrier dying, what does she know of grief?

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ve got to run, more festival stuff.”

“Absolutely, you get to work, Hugh,” she said, “but make sure you take good care of yourself.”

After hanging up he held his Blackberry and stared at it. *She’s just protecting herself,* he reached for as compassion, and that was a good reminder, to be compassionate as he dialed Melissa’s cell.

It rang three times. He was preparing a short message for her voice mail when her live voice came on, speaking fast and full of upset. “Hugh, I can’t. I can’t talk right now. I’m okay, but I’m at my shrink’s and . . . I’ll call you later. That okay?”

“Sure,” he said and she was gone. At her shrink’s? An emergency session? Had to be. She had never excused herself during working hours for therapy. He felt a flash of pity and affection for poor Melissa, combined with anger at Karen for shaming her. He longed to tell Karen off. So Melissa had a kid’s crush on her boss? So what? She had never embarrassed him with it. Was Karen that bitter about her sexless marriage, or about something Hugh couldn’t comprehend? Why did Karen care who had a crush on him? She didn’t want any man.

Was *that* it? My God, did Karen have a crush on Melissa? Her sarcastic disdain might conceal lust.

His anger faded. How sad for Karen. He had felt so happy for her when she found the nerve to tell her mother she was gay and was going to marry Didi, in a sweet, exuberant,

and non-legal ceremony—and yet now she was so miserable she was lusting after unattainable young women twenty-five years her junior?

Presumably everything about Karen's life was happier and more successful than Hugh's. But he didn't envy her. He was in love with Sue and they were a couple. Or soon would be.

What had loomed as the most difficult conversation, explaining himself to Francine, proved to be the easiest. He told her that he hadn't answered her generous offer right away because he was giving it serious thought, and only a few weeks ago had decided to say yes. Then he slid from prevarication into truth, saying the very day he made that decision he had met someone and immediately felt she might be important, and now it was clear to him that he was in love. Francine listened impassively until this confession. She reacted in a way he hadn't expected. Her face softened.

"Oh Hugh," she said tenderly. "I'm so glad."

"Of course I don't know if it's going to work . . ." His voice threatened to break as he remembered the uncertainty he had felt about Sue's feelings only . . . last night? Was it really only last night? He stopped speaking.

Francine put a hand on his forearm briefly, then leaned back. "You don't have to say anymore. I understand. And I'm happy for you."

"I apologize that I've been so . . . all over the place these past two years. I really lost my bearings without Amy. You know, a little bit like a dog off the leash, running in circles. Lost." His voice broke again. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone's feelings." He hoped that would stand in as an apology for "toying" with Hilda.

He didn't raise the question of her support for the Foundation or whether she had implied to Karen he should be let go. If anything a vulgar pitch, linked to their personal conversation, would repel her. Either she forgave him or not for his slight to her. Either she would judge his work on its merits or not. If she were truly rigorous in her thinking she would realize one had little to do with the other.

That night he enjoyed his first deep, restful sleep in a month. Longer than that. He couldn't remember when he had last slept better. And when he finally woke up with a rock-hard erection, after a post-Amy's-illness record sleep of eight-and-a-half hours, he assumed he had been dreaming of Sue. Sunday—tomorrow, only one night away—he would for the first time since Amy make love to a woman he was crazy about. He couldn't admit even to a close friend—not Leslie because it would offend her as a woman, and not Kyle because it would disgust him as a male chauvinist—that for him a banal act of animal pleasure would be a more profound commitment than a wedding ceremony. To hold a woman he loved close—how he had missed that grace! Nothing dismayed him more about dating than how it trivialized making love.

To celebrate his restorative sleep he fixed himself a big unhealthy breakfast of four scrambled eggs and half a package of bacon Ray had left from his last visit. He even buttered his toast, a first since he was put on Lipitor. "I'm livin' large," he said aloud, biting the last piece of bacon in half. He never got to the second half because he heard his front door locks tumble.

By the time he reached the foyer Ray had propped open the front door with a stuffed green duffel and was carrying in two suitcases. In the background, just outside the elevator,

was his desk chair. These must represent almost all of his possessions from Brown other than a mattress and lamp.

“NYU already accepted you?” Hugh asked. “But the term’s not over.”

Ray shook his head and walked back to the chair, rolling it fast toward the front door. Hugh got out of the way as its casters hurtled over the jamb and clattered hard on the floor. Ray kicked the duffel aside, the front door slamming shut behind him. He waited for complete silence to announce: “I dropped out. I’m not going to NYU. I’m not going to any college.”

Afraid of what he might say at this infuriating news, Hugh avoided Ray’s eyes and silently helped carry his suitcases and duffel into his room.

“Don’t worry,” Ray said. “I’m not staying long. Just dumping stuff here before I go on the road.” He hadn’t shaved and he was sweating profusely—unhealthily, Hugh feared—from the effort of carrying all that luggage and his bulbous stomach.

“You’re not going to college?”

“Not now.” Ray stood facing his father, hands on hips, chin forward. A pugilist.

Hugh swallowed his anger. Fear warbled his voice as he asked, “Not ever?”

“Maybe.” Ray abruptly hugged his father, holding Hugh tight against his soaked t-shirt. He didn’t stink; drenched and salty, he smelled as if he’d come out of the ocean. He buried his face on Hugh’s shoulder and rubbed his forehead back and forth, the way he used to on Hugh’s chest when carried in a Snugli.

“What are you going to do?” Hugh asked.

Ray stepped back and announced without a smile or challenge or worry, merely a fact: “I’m going to work for the Obama campaign.”

Of course Hugh knew the young senator from Illinois had announced he was running for President. Just two nights ago he had seen footage of him speaking impressively in Iowa to an excited crowd. Still he asked, “For President?”

“Yeah, he’s only been running for the past year, Dad, for the nomination against Hillary. Remember Steven, the weirdly tall skinny kid I roomed with freshman year? I’m gonna work for his uncle, part of a team doing advance for O’s appearances. They’re actually going to pay me. Just my expenses, but I mean I won’t need any money from you.” He smiled brightly and added, “Although a campaign contribution would be good. Give me fifty bucks and I’ll give you a button.” He turned toward his jammed duffel as if he was going to fetch one.

“But he doesn’t have a chance,” Hugh said, not his true objection.

“Why? Because Hillary’s unstoppable or because he’s black?”

“Both,” Hugh said. But again, this wasn’t the problem.

“Hillary’s a mirage. Her vote on Iraq is going to sink her just like Iraq will sink the Republicans. And for a woman candidate she’s the opposite of what feminists want. Young women won’t vote for her. She didn’t make it on her own, she’s not Nancy Pelosi or Madeline Albright or even a Republican like Olympia Snowe, she’s not like any of the accomplished, experienced women who should be running and who are truly qualified. Hillary’s who she is because of her husband. Even her behavior toward Bill was retro—stand by your man no matter how abusive or demeaning.”

Hugh sighed. Why were the young so unrealistic? “In my generation it just wasn’t that easy for women. Hillary’s very smart. She went to a top law school—”

“That makes it worse! She’s weak. She’s the opposite of a leader. She had the opportunity and the brains. She didn’t have to be the good little wifey. She could have made it on her own.” Ray nodded confidently, obnoxiously, the way he used to after defeating his father in a chess game. “She’s going down, Dad. And Barack is going to make history.”

“Well, even if he does beat Hillary, which I still don’t . . .” Hugh sighed. What in God’s name was the point of arguing about this? “He’ll still lose to Romney or McCain or whoever. A black can’t be elected President. Any white idiot—even a Donald Trump has a better chance.” Why was he still arguing politics? *Tell him he can’t drop out.*

“Maybe,” Ray said, apparently ready for this objection to his calamitous life plan, “maybe America is too racist to elect a person of color no matter what. But presidential elections are four years apart. Millions who couldn’t vote four years ago can vote now. And many millions who couldn’t vote eight years ago can now. My generation, how we think about gays and minorities, is much more progressive than yours. Lots of people say young people and the poor will never vote in big numbers, so maybe we won’t be enough. But if we are, and Obama is elected, we’ve changed something profound for our children.” He tapped his sweaty T. “Our children will grow up knowing that at long last America is what it says it is: a place where anyone can become President.”

Oddly, given how exasperated he felt, Ray’s speech brought tears to Hugh’s eyes. He had to clear his throat before he resumed being the voice of reason. “Finish the year, work for Obama during the summer, and transfer to NYU next fall. Or if Obama gets the nomination take the term off and start in January. Don’t drop out. Don’t fail the term. You’re going to fail, right?”

“Incomplete. Brown’s being good about it. I can go back. I might not drop out for good, Dad. Maybe in a year or two I’ll finish.”

“Ray!” Hugh cried. He looked at his son and felt heartsick that he might lose him too. But he took the leap. He had to learn how to do this. He had to tell hard truths to people he loved, the way Amy used to on his behalf with their children. “You aren’t going to get Mai back by working for Obama.”

Instead of socking Hugh, turning purple, or giving him his back, Ray smiled. A slow smile that became a grin, then a forgiving laugh. “Dad,” he said in a low, gentle tone. “Mai’s joining me during Thanksgiving week and Christmas break and maybe taking off next semester. We’re gonna work together, Dad. Side by side.” He came up to Hugh and did something he hadn’t in years; he kissed his father on the cheek, then whispered, “It’s all gonna be fine.”

3.15

The weekend that had begun as restful and contented became exhausting and worrisome. After he'd seen Ray off at the crack of dawn Sunday morning, Hugh had a long and painful wait for word from Sue. He had to keep his fists clenched to stop himself from emailing or texting. At two, he gave in:

How's it look for a movie
tonight?

An agonizing hour passed before Sue pinged his Blackberry:

Looks good if Amtrak
Gods allow.
Will text u when close.
U up for seeing Elizabeth?

Knowing Amtrak all too well from visiting Ginnie in DC, he didn't feel calmed about whether he would actually see Sue for their fateful act of lovemaking.

When his landline rang he feared the worst, although why the landline should scare him, a number Sue had never called, was mysterious to him. I.D. read **UNKNOWN**, but he answered anyway.

"Hello, is this Mr. Reynolds?" asked a refined woman's voice, with a hint of an FDR lockjaw. She identified herself as Dr. Thompson, Mai's mother, and asked if he was Ray's father.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't tell Mai I phoned you but of course you're free to do what you like about that. I'm calling because I'm very concerned, I'm very, very troubled

about her going off with your son over the holidays. I like Ray, I like him a lot, I have nothing against him—but Mai’s too young to be so deeply involved. For goodness sake, they’re even talking about getting married!” She released a laugh full of despair. “And this talk of taking off next semester. I won’t stand for it. I’m going to put my foot down. And I know it’s none of my business, or maybe it is my business if they’re going to act like they’re married, but I don’t understand how you can permit Ray to drop out of college.”

Hugh was taken aback; he felt assaulted. “As a matter of fact, Dr. Thompson, I told him I think it’s a big mistake.”

“Oh.” Until then she had spoken in a rush, as if Hugh might hang up or interrupt. She paused. “I see.” Another pause. “And what did he say?”

“He said he expected me to think that. He wasn’t impressed. Not impressed at all by my not approving.”

“Aren’t you going to stop him?”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t?” she demanded. “You’re his father.”

Hugh was offended by her presumption but felt obliged to be tolerant. Of course Mai’s mother, a black woman born into Jim Crow America, believed, like the characters in *The Scion*, that getting a college degree and becoming a professional was a life-and-death matter. To keep his tone light he chuckled before indirectly pointing out to her that his method of dealing with his son, as a privileged white father of a privileged white young man, was necessarily different than her handling of Mai: “How, Dr. Thompson? By sitting on him? He’s stronger than I am. By cutting off his money? He’s not taking any money from me.”

“Well, then tell him you won’t tolerate it, that you—”

Hugh was finally exhausted and irritated beyond belief by these women, their staggering entitlement to intrude into the most intimate decisions, their mind-boggling confidence that they knew how everyone should live. Even if her experience granted her an especially passionate conviction, he couldn’t tolerate her rudeness anymore. “He’s lost his mother!” he said, fairly shouting. “What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to take away his father too? How the fuck would that help?”

There was a long silence. Then in a soft, low voice, she said, “I know your wife passed. I’m sorry. Mai lost her father six years ago to pancreatic cancer. That’s how they met, in a support group. Mai’s grandparents have also passed. My brother died in Vietnam. She only has me. And I only have her.” Her voice quavered. Then it strengthened and became very firm. “It will break my heart, but if Mai doesn’t go back to Brown after Christmas I will never speak to her again. And I believe if you love your son you should do the same, never speak to him again. Tell him he is no longer your son. Goodbye, Mr. Reynolds.”

Hugh dropped the phone. He had wanted to see her as a black professional intent on the upward mobility of her race. He was wrong. She was what he could never be for Ray—a mother. Her maternal rage broke him. He doubled over and sobbed. In the first few months after Amy’s death he had often been broken in half by sorrow, but this time it wasn’t for his loss. He wept for Ray and Ginnie, that his children had been deprived of a love so pure it would strangle itself to save the beloved.

The Kiss: A Denouement

Between pitying his motherless children and worrying over the competence of a government-run railroad, he was wrung out by the time Sue's text arrived, confirming that he should meet her at six-forty-five for the seven o'clock showing of *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* at the Union Square multiplex. Her invitation came with only an hour to spare.

He had waited until then to groom himself. He wanted his showering and shaving to be as fresh as possible. He did a thorough job, using his electric trimmer to rid himself of ear and nose hairs, as well as to neaten himself in other, less immediately visible regions. The latter necessity was another change in mating since his college days, the opposite of his youth, when young men grew as much hair as possible in all locations and even the fair sex displayed faint moustaches and hairy pits. Nowadays hairlessness everywhere except on heads was a given. Hugh had become accustomed to women in their fifties being bald between their legs, although he continued to think it an odd, less-sexy appearance, a style only a pedophile could love. Still, their depilation made him feel some reciprocal trimming was called for, although he held his breath while using anything sharp down there.

"Don't cut it off now," he told himself in the shower when he decided to use his razor to clear more of his forest for Sue than he had for any other woman. Yes for Sue, for thrilling Sue, he would risk everything.

He was still tingling below the waist when they met. Hugh could steal only a brief look at her before they entered the cave dark of movie previews, and that glance was in the unflattering fluorescence of the theater lobby. Yet Sue had never looked younger or more

glamorous—although for her she was dressed casually, in a white blouse, skin-tight jeans, and high leather boots. And her enthusiastic greeting was unprecedented, pressing her breasts flush against him and squeezing him for a long embrace, long enough for a few passersby to note it. Previously, no matter how closely she'd snuggled with him on the couch the night before, the next evening's hello was almost at arm's length, a peck on the cheek, no more than one hand touching his arm. Absence, evidently, had made the body fonder.

Hugh had his usual film-lover's musings during the film, but he was impatient for the movie to end. Usually when the lights came up he was mildly disappointed to discover he was still himself and the world was unchanged. Tonight, the sight of Sue's shapely legs moving ahead of him, leading him out into the lights of New York, was thrilling.

Sue didn't suggest they go back to her place for one of her healthy meals. She chose an unusually fattening alternative, pizza at Otto. Watching the beguiling Sue's unusual display of appetite, her full painted lips relishing both the white pizza she ordered as well as a sampling of his blood-red Margarita, Hugh wasn't hungry—for food anyway. For once she ate more than he.

"I pigged out," she said with a grin, splaying two hands over her dainty stomach as if it were enormous and puffing out her cheeks. She saw something on his face that chased away her merriment. "Are you feeling all right?" She sat up with a worried frown. "You hardly ate anything."

"I'm fine. Just not hungry. Let's get the check and go to your place," he added with a meaningful stare.

Her eyes slid away. "Sure," she mumbled nervously.

They rode in grim silence as if en route to a beheading. The usual doorman wasn't on duty, but Hugh felt self-conscious crossing the lobby past the friendly older fellow manning the black marble podium, as if even that stranger could sense tonight was the night when Hugh, in his most primitive self, would find out if he and Sue were meant to enjoy the intimate happiness that every other aspect of their relationship augured.

He had determined not to be passive. When Sue unlocked the door and held it for him, he backed her against it and kissed her, this time pressing her lips firmly, the right way to do it. He shut his eyes and smelled her—Amy's smell, he was reminded anew—and felt himself harden. He was having a good time or was willing himself to, but like the other times he had been passionate with his lips, she averted hers, very slightly, just enough to spoil his enjoyment of the kiss.

"I have to pee," she mumbled out of the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, sorry," he said, stepping out of her way.

She hurried into the guest powder room, not into her bedroom and its master bathroom. Her choice worried him. She certainly wasn't going to emerge from the guest facility in something more comfortable. What Hugh absolutely wanted to avoid was settling on the couch for unsatisfying snuggling.

He did something so unlike himself he wouldn't have been surprised to discover he was dreaming. He walked into her bedroom and sat on her pale pink-and-white quilt. He studied the three-deep frilly embroidered pillows and cylindrical bolsters, the latter reminding him of the concrete security barriers around federal buildings in DC. He calculated that Sue's pillows took up thirty percent of the bed's surface. Where did she put them when she went to sleep? The white leather chaise? The carpeted floor? How long would it take to

remove them to have sex? Wouldn't passion have subsided well before they got between the sheets?

Sitting alone, he felt like a patient in a waiting room. He thought he heard her flush the toilet. He moved to the chaise, which seemed a subtler pose. He had just settled there when he heard a confused Sue call, "Hugh?" The back of her passed the open bedroom door, searching for him in the kitchen.

"In here," he said. He was sitting upright on the chaise, the wrong posture for furniture designed to be used horizontally. As Sue turned toward his voice and approached the doorway, he leaned back to look more casual, hoping that would lend him an air of confidence about invading her bedroom, but he'd forgotten the chaise had no support in that direction. As Sue appeared he began to fall backwards. To stop himself from tumbling head over heels he lay down sideways, resulting in a contortion: torso and head lying on the chaise, legs outstretched, feet still planted on bedroom carpet: like a rag doll broken at the waist.

"You feeling okay?"

He sat back up and patted the chaise for her to sit next to him. Immediately he thought that was a mistake: the damn thing was no better than the couch.

"Not enough room for two," she said. Her sly smile appeared. "You're tired of my couch?" She nodded at the bed. "Wouldn't that be more comfortable?"

He nodded.

She cocked her head. "You think we're ready?"

"We're overdue," Hugh said and his voice, husky and hoarse, sounded it.

Hugh had turned on the ceiling light when he entered, an array of six frosted glass fixtures in the shape of newly blossomed tulips. They cast a soft pink hue but evidently that was still not discreet enough. She turned them off, darkening the room but for a bright slant of light from the open door, transforming her femme boudoir into a film noir set. She moved out of the spotlight at the doorsill to the shadows of her bed. Somewhat violently she tossed two layers of brocaded pillows to the floor and lay on top of her quilt, resting her head on a bolster that she hadn't tossed. She looked at him. Boldly, as best he could tell in the dark. With a hint of challenge?

The pillows that remained worried him. A mountain range of puffy embroidery remained on the side nearest him. Should he clear them? Or go around? Sue rolled onto her back and opened her arms. He climbed over the final obstacles without incident and at last, at long last, they kissed deeply, mouths gaping, Hugh filling her and welcoming her, both exploring without restraint. And yet. And yet there was something that obstructed a unity he had accomplished with every woman he dated to some extent, although admittedly never the complete joining he used to have with his wife. What was missing now? he wondered while continuing to shift and search for that intimacy with Sue. There was no object imposing itself, no orthodontia obstacle, no foul breath. Her tongue and his were normal. Their lips matched as well as any other pairing.

As if she were also disappointed, she moved her mouth away and began to nip at his neck and ear, her hands roving under his sweater, pulling out his shirttails, reaching for and undoing his belt.

He had been right to worry that when their groping reached a fevered pitch there would be an awkward delay between clothed foreplay and nude embrace in bed. Undressing

felt almost clinical and she seemed eager to hurry things along when he took out a condom. She told him not to bother. "I was tested and I assume you're safe?" she said with her sly smile.

Why she had assumed him safe worried Hugh more than that she didn't have an orgasm, although he roved below happily and did his best. She pulled him up after a good stretch of making pleasurable sounds that suggested she was having fun but no more than fun. She guided him in while she whispered, "I never come the first time. You go ahead. Let go," she encouraged as she bucked her hips.

Immediately after, they snuggled for a long time. She gossiped about her former colleagues at the conference, and her future competitors now that she would be a freelance consultant. Their joining had made a difference. She talked in a relaxed and unselfconscious way that was new, making fun of some of them, complaining about slights, and praising two people there she had always liked.

His eyes got heavy. For a moment he drifted into sleep and when he startled, then yawned loud and long, she asked if he wanted to sleep over. He did, but there was something pro forma in her tone, and so he declined, pretending he had to be up early. She seemed a little relieved he was going, so he congratulated himself on getting that right. He wasn't hurt by her willingness to let him go because she kissed and hugged him heartily before she released him. He walked home at a leisurely self-congratulatory pace, a victory parade of one.

Hugh was easy in his limbs and mind, and his thoughts were clear and untroubled. He had a girlfriend, a lover, a woman who beguiled him. He had thoroughly enjoyed becoming acquainted with her body and how she held and touched him. The next time, or the

time after that, she would relax and abandon herself to pleasure with him. And someday—he was sure of this—someday they would kiss and it would feel totally right.

3.16

After a deep, restorative sleep, before going into work later than usual on Monday, Hugh dashed off an email to Sue without his usual dithering over each word.

Wonderful time last night. Thank you. I've got a Pakistani (!) romance screener they say is funny. Let me know if you want me to bring it over. I should be free by 7.

He hesitated, then typed:

Love, Hugh.

Entering the office, he noticed right away Karen's door was open and she was seated, not at her desk but on the couch facing it, so she could easily spot him when he came in. She smiled, got to her feet and held out her arms. She kissed him on both cheeks and said, "My hero." She shut the door to report that Francine had called first thing in the morning. "To apologize to me! Can you believe it? She said she was wrong to be . . . you know, she didn't use this word, but she was trying to say she had been *pissed* at you. She adores you again, said she thought you were doing a brilliant job with the film festival, that it's what she cares about the most . . . actually she said 'dearest to my heart.'"

Hugh sighed with relief and discovered he had been holding his breath. "So everything's fine."

"Everything's great, but please, do me a favor, keep playing tennis and help her beat her friends, okay?" She leaned forward and pointed at him. "And now let's talk about my

feelings, buster. I'm pissed at you. Didi too. We're both pissed at you. We thought you considered us family."

"I do!" Hugh cried out, baffled. What had he done now?

"Oh yeah? So we had that whole conversation on Friday, how come you didn't tell me you're in love? Unless it's a lie. FF says you're in love. That true? Maybe you were bullshitting her?" She squinted so fiercely her eyes completely disappeared. But what she saw in Hugh's expression popped them open. "You ARE in love!" She beamed and her mouth split apart into a kid's grin. "Hughie!" she said, as far as he remembered the first time she had called him by Amy's nickname. "I'm so happy!" She bounced off her couch and stood over him reaching for a hug. He could only rise halfway to standing before she grabbed him and squeezed, and when he tried to straighten out they had to do a little dance not to fall over.

"Who is she?"

Karen wouldn't let him escape from her office until she had completed a half-hour debriefing, so greedy was she for details about Sue. Sweet Sue. He told Karen all the qualities he loved about Sue, and lied with a big nod when Karen asked, "And the sex is great, right?" since there was no point in explaining they'd only done it once and the first time was always mediocre.

In his happiness, he guiltily turned his attention to discovering what was going on with Melissa. She hadn't answered her cell or email all weekend. Today she had called in sick. So far as Hugh was concerned she had been MIA for four days. He tried her cell again. He texted and emailed. No replies. When he asked others if they'd heard from her, they said no and volunteered they were puzzled she wasn't answering what they considered to be

routine questions. By four o'clock Hugh had worked himself into an anxiety with no basis in Melissa's energetic personality, that she might hurt herself.

Then he realized: *Over me?* That was laughable unless Melissa was deeply depressed all the time and would seize anything as an excuse to crater. But Melissa was feisty, not sad.

At four-thirty, Sue finally answered his email:

H -- Don't feel like a movie tonight. But want
to see you. Dinner? Mind going back to Otto?
On the early side? 6:30? -- S

Since he assumed they would go from there to her apartment—although it was odd she had picked Otto, so near him; maybe she wanted to finally see his place?—he headed home at five to freshen up.

He was steps from his building when Melissa appeared. She darted out from the deli across the street, tossing a take-out coffee into a trash can en route, as if she had been on a stakeout. "Hugh! Hugh!" He waited for her to cross, her orange curls bouncing as she hurried between cars that hadn't really stopped. He winced as a cab lurched, braking hard to avoid whacking her.

"Hugh," she gasped, out of breath on arrival. "I have to talk to you. I can't go back to work without talking to you first."

"Come upstairs."

"Sure," she said with her usual cheery energy, and he thought: *What an idiot worrying she might kill herself—over me!*

Grumpy Mr. Stimpson from 10A, having just collected his mail, rode up with them in the elevator, preventing them from talking until Hugh opened his front door and held it for Melissa. He locked it and turned to offer, "Do you want tea or—" but he never finished.

Melissa put her arms around his waist, rose up on tiptoe to make herself level with his lips and kissed him. A firm peck. She leaned back to study him. “The bitch is right. I love you. You’re so smart, Hugh, and so kind! You take care of everyone. Except for you. You don’t take care of you. No one takes care of you and I want to. I want to take care of you.” She moved her mouth onto his, head tilting, settling in for a long visit there.

Although Hugh could immediately tell—to his surprise—that she was a great kisser, he pushed her off. Not that gently.

“Melissa. No.”

Her face collapsed in distress.

“I’m your . . . I’m old enough to be your father.”

She looked outraged. “You’re not my daddy!” She came at him again, this time with abandon, throwing her arms wide.

He put his hands on her shoulder and held her off. “No, no, no,” he said in a panic and added without thinking, “I don’t want you.”

He might as well have stabbed her in the eyes. Her arms came up and shielded them. “I love you, Melissa, but not like that,” he pleaded.

She pushed him aside and moved toward the door—to run out, he hoped. What could he say to console her, considering that he thought her insane? Why in God’s name would she want to waste her life on him?

However Melissa hadn’t given up. When she reached the door, she turned back, her fair skin mottled by high emotion, blue eyes red with grief and wild with fury. “You’re an asshole! ‘I don’t want you!’ You’re an asshole to say that to me!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re throwing away someone who truly loves you! I was willing to give you all my love. You think you can get that anywhere? You don’t know what you’re missing!” She pointed to herself. “I would be great for you!”

“You are great,” Hugh stammered, but by then she had left, slamming the door behind her.

There was something in the silence that followed that felt like a damning judgment, a cell door shutting behind him. Condemned and alone, he wondered about the variety and quantity of female love, affection and help he had tossed out. Hilda’s passion, Karen’s advice, Francine’s proposal and God knows how many other women he had dated who seemed interested but whom he had not pursued. Who the hell did he think he was? In high school and the beginning of college he was invisible to young women—including Amy until he stayed in her vision so obnoxiously she had to notice. Women had been kind enough to him when he was young but hardly as intensely and passionately as they all were nowadays. He understood that this change of attitude was due to a demographic imbalance: women living longer, men his age culled by weirdness and second marriages to younger women. But instead of being grateful for this temporary and unearned attractiveness, he had become a love spendthrift. Melissa was correct to be outraged—how dare he turn down a bright, attractive young woman willing to waste her best years on him?

But he wasn’t being arrogant, he told himself as he hurried through showering before dinner at Otto. He had been waiting, he congratulated himself as he hustled through Greenwich Village’s crowded streets, passing couples walking arm in arm, cosseted against the November cold in their love, waiting for that mysterious quality—Sue’s sly smile—in which he would delight every day and every night for the rest of his life.

Stage Four

4.1

Although he arrived ten minutes early Sue was already there. He declined to check his coat, heading straight for her. He could see right away that she must have had a tough day: eyes puffy, mouth downturned, and staring at a glass of red wine that had only a sip left. When he bent over for a kiss, offering his lips, she pecked and sat back immediately.

He settled in the chair opposite her and asked, “Rough day?”

“Uh . . . Well, yeah. Kind of.” She waved for a waiter. “You want something? I’m getting another. Another glass of Chianti,” she said to the arriving server, and gestured at Hugh to order.

“The same,” Hugh said.

“Do you want a bottle?” the waiter suggested.

“No,” Sue said emphatically. “This is my last glass.”

Once the waiter departed Hugh asked what made her day hard. She started talking about having trouble explaining to her designer how she wanted her website to look, but in mid-paragraph she changed the subject. “And then Denise called interrupting and I was stupid, I took the call and then she . . .” A sigh. “Well, like you said, the two matriarchs want to put both our families together at Thanksgiving at the Club, God help us, and when Denise told me that unless I objected they were going ahead I realized I was drifting into something,

we're drifting into something, that I'm just not ready for." She held his eyes for a moment. This was a different Sue than he had ever seen. Not a trace of her sly smile, not a glint of amusement in her gray eyes. Instead a grim and—was he imagining this?—ashamed face. She cast her eyes down as she confessed: "I can't be your girlfriend. I'm just . . . my head is just not ready for that."

Hugh's head buzzed: a white noise of pain that jammed all thought and feeling. The only other time he had felt so overwhelmed was the day Amy's oncologist told them her cancer had metastasized.

Hugh looked away from Sue's apologetic, doom-saying expression to clear his head. There had to be hope in this situation; no one was dying.

"Sure," he said and forced himself to look at her without wincing himself. "We're going slow. We're just dating. Not merging families. I'll tell Ruth we can't do Thanksgiving together. Don't worry about it." He sighed, relieved to have fought off that dreadful flashback. What was wrong with him? He needed to be less sensitive. Everything was fine. He picked up a menu. "Are we doing pizza again?"

"I'm not hungry." Sue's head was still down. Finally she looked up, sadly and warily. "This just isn't going to work for me. I'm sorry. I'm not ready. I thought I was over Mike, but I'm not. I'm not going back to him, I'll never go back to him, but I can't . . ."

The waiter interrupted, arriving with a glass of Chianti for Hugh and a new one for Sue. She hurried to finish off the sip remaining in her first glass so he could clear it. Hugh noted that nicety with a fresh stab of pain. She looked and sounded full of sorrow while telling Hugh she didn't want him, but she wasn't so upset it trumped her being bothered by

the disorder of two wine glasses at her place setting. Anger surged up from somewhere ancient. It raised a bitter smile to his face.

Sue smiled back for a moment, then saw the spite in his. Hers vanished. She looked scared. “Sorry,” she said. “You’re great,” she added, the same condescending words he had said to Melissa. “I’m just not ready for a real relationship, and that’s what you want.”

“I love you,” he said. Even before her eyes widened with alarm and her mouth twisted in discomfort, he knew this would only make things worse. He was escalating into what she feared. *Be gracious, say it doesn’t matter, change the subject, skip dinner, send her home in a cab, and don’t call for a few days. She’ll come running back.*

“I love you,” he said, repeating the disastrous error and reaching for her hands, which she allowed him to take, which gave him hope. “I won’t hurt you. I’ll take care of you . . .” He stopped talking because he could hear he was repeating exactly Melissa’s doomed plea. And as its recipient, what had he felt? Astonishment and pity. He could see that was Sue’s reaction too: *Why in God’s name does this nice boring man want to throw his life away on me?*

“I don’t want to be taken care of, Hugh,” Sue said, pulling her hands away. She sounded pissed off. “That’s exactly what I don’t want to have happen. I lost myself with Mike. Thinking about what he wanted, what he was feeling all the time . . .”

Hugh wished he could stop himself from arguing. “I’m not talking about you taking care of me. I’ll take care of you.”

“I know. I heard you. I don’t want that either!” That was as close as she had come to raising her voice. She glanced up over his shoulder at someone and looked embarrassed.

It was the waiter, who had come within a few feet, presumably to inquire about their order. He backed away, saying, "I'll give you a few minutes."

Sue continued in a lower voice, returning to her solemn, carefully worded rejection: "I don't want to lose myself either way in a relationship right now. I'm not seeing anyone else. I'm not rejecting you, I'm just not ready to be in a couple. Maybe I will be someday, but maybe not. Maybe I'm meant to be alone."

The buzzing was back, thoughts jammed. There had to be a cure. "This feels like a sexual rejection," he said. He looked right into her eyes because of the surprise he felt at hearing himself voice this thought, to check if she was also astonished by it.

"I know," she agreed instantly, utterly unsurprised. "I'm sorry about that. It isn't. The first time is always clumsy. Eventually that would be fine between us. But the aftermath, you going home, the assumption we were going to see each other tonight, Denise asking about Thanksgiving—all that made me realize I was drifting into a relationship and I don't want . . ." She caught herself. Was she about to add "you"? I don't want *you*?

"I'm just not ready," she said. "Our making love made me realize I don't want to stumble into another serious relationship now. And any relationship with you will be serious. That's just the kind of guy you are." She tried a smile. Not sly or cheerful. A wan smile of regret. "You're a great guy, Hugh, the kind of man who does take care of women, and you deserve to be taken care of too, and maybe I'll be ready for that someday, I want to be ready for that someday, but not now."

The buzzing got too loud to think. He grinned through the noise. "I'll wait," he said into her puzzled look. "I'm a patient man." He raised his menu. "What should we eat?"

He kept his face hidden while she said firmly: "I'm not hungry. If you want something, go ahead. I'll sit with you while you eat but then I've got to go home, get back to work on my website." Out of the corner of his eye he saw her signal for the waiter, who immediately appeared.

"You've decided?" he asked.

"I'm not eating," she told him.

Hugh ordered the quattro formaggi. "Bring two plates," he said.

"I don't need a plate," Sue said.

4.2

Two nights later, while sleeping, Hugh shattered a crown. The report of porcelain cracking, the bitter taste of metal and his aching jaw woke him simultaneously. For a confused, horrified second he thought he had been shot in the mouth.

After fishing out the two halves of the crown and turning on a light, he saw it was past four in the morning. He couldn't go back to sleep and didn't want to, knowing his dentist got in at seven, would answer a call and maybe see him right away.

Dr. Greenberg did pick up, but Hugh had to wait until noon to see him. By then he was exhausted. Prone on the cushioned dental chair, while a wad of pink goo hardened in his mouth, he drifted into a surprisingly deep sleep.

Until his Blackberry pinged. He startled awake, heart racing.

Since the disaster at Otto, each alert from his cell phone jerked his body with hope, and as the hours of Sue's silence accumulated, his expectation that the next vibration must be from her intensified. After all, when he put her in a cab leaving Otto, she said, "Give me some space, a day, to think about what's going on in my head, okay, Hugh?"

Had she said a day? The buzz of pain in his head had gotten so loud he couldn't be sure. A day? Or a day or two? Or maybe she hadn't specified the length of the wait.

He squirmed on Greenberg's leather chair, trying to keep the mold in his mouth undisturbed while he attempted to fish out his Blackberry.

The text disappointed. It was from Ginnie:

Good news! Call me!

This was a first. No news was good news had always been true of his daughter's communications. Her calls and texts were invariably eruptions of anxiety and despair. He had heard less and less from her the happier she became with Ethan. In fact, the only call since their brunch with Leslie had been a glum one she placed after receiving his email explaining that buying the apartment wasn't an option and he would have to move out March 1st. He was glad that she had good news for its own sake and also because it would allow him to easily conceal his despair, under no pressure to be cheerful. She was the last person on earth he wanted to know his heart had been broken by a woman. She would be disgusted. And rightly so. The intensity of his longing for Sue was accompanied by shame that anyone had been allowed in so short a time to be as important to him as Amy. My God, he had known Sue . . . what? Six weeks? He had lived fifty-three years without knowing she existed and yet now he felt he couldn't bear another day without her. How could that be?

Unless he was insane.

Or unless she was the perfect woman for him.

As soon as he left Greenberg's office he took out his cell to call Ginnie, but he saw that somehow his emails hadn't downloaded while he was at the dentist. He ignored an email from Melissa because there was one from Sue, written an hour ago.

H: I feel I was too harsh the other night. I want to be really clear with you. And with myself. It isn't about going slow. I can't "go" at any speed. I want to have you in my life but I'm not in a place where it's good for me to be in a relationship and I feel you won't accept anything less. If you won't, I understand. If you want to discuss, let me know. - S

The dash and initial felt more painful than the humiliating relegation to being a friend. That's how he interpreted "I want to have you in my life." He repeated the ungainly phrase aloud while walking to the subway, rubbing his aching jaw. "I want to have you in my life." As what? A purse? No, she was disguising the cliché in hipper words, a modern version of the often mocked "I want us to be friends." The stingy signoff seemed a cruel desire to deny him any affection. Without it he might feel free to hope, from his knowledge of the clichés of rom-coms, that an offer of friendship as consolation wasn't an end to his chance of becoming her lover. In rom-coms it was precisely this reaction to a good, loving man that was the flaw in the heroine's character: a flaw she would overcome once she learned to accept a good man's love rather than keep falling for bums. Hugh could well be the hero who is rewarded for his willingness to be merely a friend by a final scene in which the heroine realizes she loves him. After all, he was conscious that Sue-the-Rom-Com-movie-lover knew said plotting cliché as well anyone and he was also mindful of Oscar Wilde's observation that life imitates art, not the other way around: Sue loved rom-coms so their logic, no matter how unlikely, would rule in her world. She might well demand that every man who courted her go through the friendship-rejection phase. In that case this was no more than a test of his devotion.

He hoped so because in any reality he did not want to be her friend. Her smell, her voice, her smile, the taste of her skin, even the disappointment of their kisses would make him ache with painful longing if he were in her presence and barred from touch.

When Hugh finished working through this dark and inconclusive reverie he checked Melissa's email to him and cc'd to Karen:

As you are aware, I've taken two personal days

to reflect on my career. I'm grateful for the opportunity of having worked for the Hamilton Foundation but I've come to the conclusion that it's time to move on. This is formal notification of my resignation as Assistant Film Programmer.

This was too depressing to contemplate and anyway he remembered that his daughter had good news. Forty-five minutes had passed since her text. He was appalled he hadn't called her. His obsession with Sue was turning him into a neglectful father. He phoned as soon as he emerged from the subway, three blocks from his office.

"Ethan and I are getting married!" Ginnie squealed by way of answering, as happy as he had ever heard her.

He bent over as if he had been punched. His congratulations were stammered out through the pain. "That . . . is . . . wonderful . . . news." He asked sufficient probing questions about wedding plans—August 4th, nine months off—to satisfy himself that the even greater disaster of Ginnie being pregnant hadn't yet happened. Although how far behind could that be? "What prompted you two to decide to get hitched?" he asked.

"We want to get a place together, a real two bedroom, and Ethan said he was too old to cohabit without getting married. Not so romantic, right? But he's right. He's thirty-eight! And me, too. Twenty-six is too old to be roommates."

"Twenty-six is incredibly young," Hugh said.

"You were already a father at twenty-six!" Ginnie protested, convincing Hugh that a pregnancy couldn't be more than a year or two away. The father of his grandchild would be nearly forty without a reliable means of supporting himself, and Ginnie would be distracting herself from concentrating on her career just as it was taking off. Amy would disapprove.

Severely disapprove. He coughed up more congratulations, said he would find time to come down to DC to take them out to celebrate, and hung up.

He didn't feel up to work, ashamed that he'd either have to pretend to Karen he was still happily in love or confess he'd been dumped. And he felt despair about dealing with Melissa's childish resignation. How could he fault her for feelings he was having himself? He walked slowly, stalling, practically hugging the buildings to shield himself from a whipping wind off the Hudson. The icy air suggested that winter had arrived a bit early, a reminder of Thanksgiving and the fact that he would have to call Ruth, who presumably would have heard from Denise that he and Sue were no longer dating. More embarrassment. Worse, how to explain to his mother-in-law the sudden turnaround? We finally made love and now she doesn't want me?

He walked slower and slower until he stopped a block away from the office, leaning his shoulder against the red brick of a townhouse. He cupped the painful side of his face in one hand to soothe the throbbing in his bruised and wounded jaw. Passersby shot him concerned looks, his distress was so obvious. He dropped his hand, straightened up, and faced the cold wind. *For God's sakes, man, you're a White Anglo Saxon Protestant. Hiding pain is child's play for you.*

Chin up, he walked briskly while thinking heavier and heavier thoughts: Ray, Ginnie, himself—their relationships were disasters, ruining their careers, doomed to break their hearts. Why had Amy's death done this to them? Were they so desperate to replace her love that they'd lost all judgment?

And possessed of this fresh insight, which suggested he should never speak to Sue again, Hugh made up his mind to do the opposite. He would ask her to see him as soon as

possible, pretend being friends was fine with him, and gradually convince her that the clichéd third act of the rom-com should come true, that patient, friendly Hugh was the one and only man for her.

4.3

Energized by his decision, Hugh shut the door to his office, deleted Karen's chortling email about Melissa's resignation (Thank God you're rid of her! A competent assistant will make your life so much easier) and phoned Melissa, prepared to leave a stern message to provoke her into calling him back promptly.

"Hello, Hugh." Melissa answered after the first ring in a smug tone, as if she had been expecting him to plead for her to change her mind.

He didn't beg. "Melissa, the way to get back at Karen and me is not to resign and be out on the street looking. Keep your job, demand a great recommendation letter from me—which I'll happily give you—and start looking to run a film program of your own, which'll pay a lot more dough than we are. One day, after Karen finally fires me, I'll come to you a broken old man begging for a job and you can have the satisfaction of turning me down."

She was silent for a long stretch. He assumed this reflected her surprise at his atypical display of jokey cynicism. But after it went on too long, he worried she had hung up.

"Hello?"

"I just . . . I just can't be in the office knowing that Karen has such contempt for me."

"Karen has contempt for everybody. Including me. She likes me, she even loves me, but scolding me, being condescending about my choices, that's her default. She does it with everyone. Look. You don't have to talk to her. While you're looking for a new job you don't have to have anything to do with her. I'm telling Karen I won't accept your

resignation. You can take the rest of today off but I want you in the office tomorrow. I'll have a letter of recommendation ready for you to send out with your resume. Okay?"

Another beat of silence, then: "I don't have to deal with Karen? How is that possible? She's the boss."

"She's my boss, not yours. I'll handle communicating with her. Take a look at what's going on with BAM's film program? With Brooklyn, they need to expand. I know a couple of people on their board. And meanwhile, why don't you start small, start something on weekends in Greenpoint? I bet within a year you'll have funding. I'll see you at eight-thirty a.m. tomorrow and we'll screen the new Millian film first, then the Borotovsky. Okay? Can I expect you?"

Melissa's voice sounded normal again. Even contrite. "I can come in now and we can see the Millian right away."

"I'm busy this afternoon. First thing tomorrow morning. See you then."

He hung up without a goodbye, the phone equivalent of a dash and an initial. He felt smug, and encouraged in general, that he had changed her mind so completely. Women! Did they ever have a feeling that lasted more than two hours?

He was brought up short by remembering Amy. Her feelings had been durable and true.

He walked out of his office, up to Karen's shut door, knocked and entered before she replied. She looked up from a phone call, startled. She stammered to the receiver, "I'm sorry, hang on for a sec," then covered it. "What's the matter?"

"I'm not accepting Melissa's resignation. I need her. It's none of your business who works for me."

“It’s your funeral,” Karen said, then gestured at her phone. “I’m busy.”

“Me too.” On the way out he shut the door hard, the way Karen did when she was irritated by what she called his “passive-aggressive bullshit.”

We’ll see how she likes my aggressive-aggressive bullshit now, he thought and moved to the next female on the agenda.

He composed an email to Sue without hesitation.

S: Happy to be friends. Would like to clear
the air ASAP. Can you do coffee or dinner
tonight? - H

So there, he thought, *I can dash and initial too.*

But this feeling of triumph crumbled within minutes, when he realized he was once again back to the agony of waiting for Sue to reply.

Wishing to fight off passivity he called Ruth, to face that embarrassing music.

“Oh Hugh, it’s you. Hi.” Ruth paused, waiting for him to speak instead of rattling on right away about various logistical concerns. This confirmed she had heard from Denise about Sue’s change of heart.

“I was calling to answer your question about Thanksgiving,” Hugh said. “We should just keep things as they usually—”

“Yes,” Ruth said, “Denise told me. You know, I think there’s something really wrong with Sue. She’s never married. I had my doubts about fixing you up with her because of that but Denise kept telling me she . . . well, Sue lost a lot of years being involved with a married man in her twenties, and after him she made another bad choice, but I don’t think Denise knows the whole story, and now even she has doubts. Frankly Denise is very upset about

this.” Ruth lowered her voice to a whisper, as if someone might overhear them: “She said to me, ‘If Sue can’t be with a great guy like Hugh, then she’s hopeless.’”

So there it was again, the lovely comfort women, and only women, could provide, a fierce consolation, affection that defends and soothes.

“I love you, Ruth,” Hugh said.

“What?!” she exclaimed, confused by his non-sequitur. Only momentarily. Her efficient voice stumbled as she answered, “I . . . I . . . love you, Hugh.”

He said, “Unfortunately you’re married.”

She was still chuckling as he said goodbye.

4.4

“I’ve made bad choices,” Sue admitted right away, as if she had overheard Ruth’s accusation. She had not agreed to a dinner, rather coffee at Le Pain Quotidien at five, and her manner, like the last time, was solemn and wary. She was dressed for the gym. Her hair wasn’t blown out, she had put on little or no makeup, and she was wearing a thin black down jacket over a gray hoodie, sweatpants, and sneakers, by far the least alluring outfit he had ever seen her wear. Was she sending a message—don’t be attracted to me—or was she letting him know she didn’t have a hot date after this? “That’s what I have to examine,” she said. “I need to be mindful of why I give up so much of myself when I become involved with a man. And I become so wrapped up in pleasing him I don’t notice who he really is. I’ve been hurt, really hurt, each time I make this mistake and I can’t . . . I don’t want to go through that pain again. I’d rather be alone.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, I’d rather be alone.”

“You don’t *really* want to go through life alone.”

“Why not? Once people are past the age of having children, why shouldn’t they maintain their independence? I think it’s something you should examine about yourself.”

She paused and watched his reaction while that sank in.

“I don’t know what you mean exactly.”

“You seem to be in a big hurry to get into another relationship and I wonder if that’s really good for you.”

“I’m not in a hurry,” Hugh said. It was irritating to be criticized for what most people considered a natural and healthy desire.

“Well, you’ve only been alone a short time.”

“I’ve been alone for almost three years,” Hugh said with a laugh, as if that were obviously a long time.

“That’s no time at all for a man who was married for thirty years. It’s a drop in a bucket.”

Again Hugh felt scolded, as if he had failed to properly do his job as a widower. He said nothing.

Sue pressed her case. “You told me that you were learning how to say no to women. Have you?”

“No,” Hugh said and grinned.

Her sly smile appeared, but she immediately suppressed it, as if she were trying hard not to enjoy herself with him. That was simultaneously discouraging and encouraging: there must be some part of her that wanted to be happy with him if she had to fight it. “Well,” she said, resuming her prim, tight-lipped pose, “I know it’s not good for me to jump into another relationship. I need to discover, to explore who I am.”

“Okay. So we’ll be friends,” Hugh said, grinning harder.

Sue cocked her head, one plucked brow—it looked thin and bare in her makeup-less state—rising skeptically. “You’re really okay with that?”

Hugh kept the grin plastered on and nodded vigorously.

“Great,” she said unenthusiastically. She looked down at her lap, seemed to gather herself. When she raised her head, her sly smile had been reincarnated. “So, how’s work?”

He decided to tell her the story of Francine's offer of marriage, which he had never mentioned, as if they truly were good friends who shared every intimacy. Besides, it would reveal just how in demand he was. She didn't react jealously, as he might have hoped, but he succeeded in beguiling her. Her face lit up, relaxing as she laughed at each twist and turn, so much so that Hugh felt bad for Francine, whose pathetic solution to her predicament as a lonely wealthy widow Sue seemed to enjoy with too much malice for Hugh's comfort. Sue leaned forward, soaking up his every word, and at one point squeezed Hugh's forearm, delighted by his rendition of Karen's fury that he'd turned down Francine's marriage proposal. Then he finished with an account of how he had finally come clean with Francine, how he'd explained that he believed in love, had recently felt it again (here he looked down so as not to see her reaction) and so he couldn't accept.

At that, Sue's grin disappeared. "Wait a minute, Hugh. Hold on. Maybe you should say yes."

Hugh blinked, not sure he understood. He checked: "Yes to Francine's marriage proposal?"

Sue nodded vigorously, with a kind of excitement as she said, "You'll be taken care of for life. And you can have your fun on the side." She released his arm and sat back.

"It's too late."

"It's not too late. Just say you've thought about it and realized you were just being silly and romantic. Which you were. Not only will you live like a king, as your wife she'll definitely protect your job. In fact, when Karen moves on, runs the Ford Foundation or something, because that kind of hot shot never stays in a job for long, FF'll make you the head." She smirked. "Even if she isn't giving you head."

Now Hugh had to admit to himself that her demotion of their relationship wasn't a test. Sue was urging him to marry someone else and making jokes about his future sex life, or lack of one. Obviously, he would never escape what one rom-com called the Friend Zone. He wasn't even in Sue's Twilight Zone. The bitterness of this provoked him into a sarcasm he immediately regretted: "Will you be giving me head?"

Sue winced, looked disgusted. "Hugh, I thought I was clear."

"Yeah-you-were-I-was-joking."

"I don't want to be confusing. I need to be clear. With myself and you. If we can't limit our friendship to a friendship then—"

"Yes, yes, we can, we can."

She glanced at her iPhone and blanched at the time, well after six. "I have to go," she said and reached for the check.

"I've got this."

"Thanks." She avoided eye contact while she put on her jacket and dug in her pocket for—another low blow—a Yankee cap, completing her workout look.

"We okay?" Hugh asked plaintively.

Sue pretended surprise. "Of course."

"When will I see you?" he asked and instantly regretted it.

She bent over, kissed him on the cheek, straightened and said, "Maybe we'll go to an afternoon movie this weekend. If I can get this damn website fixed by then. I'll email you Friday." She tapped him on the shoulder and left.

He sulked home, raided the kitchen for a box of Stoned Wheat Thins and a wedge of Jarlsberg cheese, and collapsed on the couch. He turned on yet another in an astonishing

string of inept Knicks games. He ate half the box of crackers and all of the wedge, but what he watched and heard were replays of Sue, the masterful point guard of dating. In meticulous slow motion he went over and over the nuance of each lift and fall of her brow and lips, the implications of when light came into or fled from her gray eyes. He went through all possibilities, no matter how far-fetched as to her true feelings: that she had hoped he would decline to be friends and she'd never have to see him again; that this was a profound test of his devotion and would ultimately be rewarded with love; that her dressed-down appearance proved she was busy concentrating on her new career as a consultant and didn't want to think about men; that she had a date immediately after their coffee—the glance at the time and hurried departure—and had shown up in plain clothes to deceive him; that she wanted him to marry Francine because she was afraid of commitment and could then have a “safe affair” with him; that she wanted him to marry Francine because then he would be truly just a friend; that she really did fear he hadn't allowed himself enough time living alone to trust his love for her was real; that unlike most women, but like most men, she had a fear of commitment and that was why she had never married or even lived with a man. By the time he turned off the Knicks at the start of the fourth quarter, trailing the hated Celtics by twenty-five points, he was convinced all the hypotheticals were equally likely. He concluded, as he opened the bottom drawer of his night table to take out his beloved triptych of Amy, that he had no choice but to prove to Sue that he would endure any wait, any slight, any pain to win her love.

4.5

The Iowa Democratic Presidential Caucuses would be held on January 3rd, 2008, followed quickly by the New Hampshire primary on January 8th. Hugh calculated that would leave Ray with plenty of time to apply for a transfer to NYU to begin in the fall, or maybe even for a summer session. After Barack Obama lost those first tests, and with Mai returning to Brown after the winter break (the latest news on that front) it seemed to Hugh January 9th would present the perfect opportunity for him to put his foot down. Not in the ultimatum style of Mai's mother—although that had worked, if Mai had ever seriously considered taking off a semester—but in the more reasonable style Hugh felt might succeed with a son, pointing out that in going back to school in the summer or fall he would be closer to Mai. Especially after Iowa and New Hampshire clarified that Obama had no real chance. With Dulcinea in Rhode Island, Don Quixote might even be persuaded to return to Brown.

He spoke to Ray on New Year's Day. Ray was manic with excitement, claiming internal polls were showing that Barack was going to, as he said, "hand Hillary her head in Iowa."

"Kind of bloodthirsty," Hugh said.

"They deserve beheading. Her people are terrible, just terrible. They're supposedly the ones with all the political savvy and experience and we're the head-in-the-clouds, disheveled college kids. I don't see it. I really don't. We're running circles around them. Hi, guys! Sorry, Pops, the volunteer van's here. Gotta go motivate my people. Happy New Year!"

Hugh had to admit, he hadn't heard this kind of lightness and joy in Ray since before Amy was diagnosed. And what was the point of being alive if you weren't happy?

Hugh, for the fourth time that morning—it was only eight-thirty—moved to his computer to check if Sue had answered his cordial Happy New Year email. Last he'd heard from her, six days ago, she had written she'd gotten a surprise last minute invite to accompany friends on their private jet to Turks & Caicos and stay at the “fabulous Aman resort.” Perhaps she was still sleeping off champagne or piña coladas, but the long time she took in general to answer his emails drove him crazy. And since Sue had complained his emails were like letters and that's why it took her so long to answer, he had kept his Happy New Year email to four brief sentences:

Hi Sue -- Smart you got away. Freezing here.
Going to Peter and Debby's for a quiet New
Year. Have a happy one! xo Hugh

He had sent that yesterday morning. She'd had twenty-four fucking hours to respond.

He opened Mail. Nothing from Sue. There were Happy New Years from Leslie, Karen, Ruth, Ginnie, Meredith Wilkinson, even one from the tenacious Judy, whom he hadn't heard from since their odd farewell call and who must be up-to-date on his real estate status:

Hope next year is full of the joy you deserve -
maybe in Brooklyn! Affectionately, Judy.

What borough he'd live in seemed to be the question preoccupying most of his friends. Peter wrote, Great to ring in the New Year with you! Let's hope you don't move to Brooklyn! Except for Kyle who, in answer to Hugh wishing him a

healthy and happy new year, had written back simply: *Fuck you too. I just hope I still have my prostate,* a reference to his elevated PSA score.

Hugh didn't want to write back to any of them, or see any of them, or even think about them. All he wanted was to be with Sue, on her couch or in her bed, her head resting lightly on his chest, an arm draped across him. Since the first week of December he hadn't seen or spoken to her, and before that they had had only three get-togethers since their fateful coffee talk. Supposedly she wasn't avoiding him. She had had two business trips for new consulting jobs, to Chicago and DC, then another down to her family in Florida for a Jewish Christmas. These had kept her out of town, unable to enjoy a Sunday afternoon movie.

The frustration of so quickly descending to this occasional and superfluous friendship—he hardly needed company at the movies—was exacerbated by the humiliation of having to talk about it with the two people who knew of her change of heart, Karen and Ruth.

Luckily, they were the only two. Karen had been easy to inform: once he explained what had happened, she said, “Fuck her. Onward and upward,” and never raised the subject again except with the surprise of saying a few days later, “Francine asked me how your romance was going and I told her. I also told her you were too upset to talk about it. I’m relying on her WASPiness to never bring it up to you.” She hadn't. Ruth, however, had been unable to stop herself from raising the subject each time they spoke—which had been all too often during the run up to an excruciating Thanksgiving at the Club. The worst moment of the evening, naturally enough, came when the two families crossed paths entering the dining room. Hugh kissed Sue chastely on the cheek, convinced everyone, even Sue's nephew,

knew he had been rejected. The rest of the evening, although he never relaxed, passed without contact. Perversely, he then felt depressed not to have seen more of her.

As soon as Hugh cleared his inbox of all emails, as if waiting for the stage to be all her own an email from Sue appeared.

H – Turks & Caicos is the perfect cure for winter! My bones are warm at last. Rang in the New Year on the beach, went skinny-dipping at midnight. Hope you had fun at your party. Be back by the weekend. Maybe coffee on Sunday? I'll be in touch. Happy New Year! – S

What party? He hadn't gone to a party. As he'd written her, he had gone to Peter and Debby's, where they had two other aged couples over and talked about cholesterol, varicose veins, plastic surgery, allergy to gluten, frozen shoulders, and swollen prostates, and didn't finish even one bottle of champagne. Was that the fun party she meant? Was she reading his emails or skimming them, the way he glanced at group emails from HR explaining changes in health insurance or OSHA requirements?

Why just coffee? What happened to the movie?

Skinny-dipping?!?

He was assaulted by images of her at midnight with these so-called friends—she wrote “friends” plural, right?—of her slim, soft body slipping into the warm night sea with someone else. Why would she write that? She had to know it was cruel. Had to.

Maybe it was a threesome!

She wanted to drive him away. To run such pictures in his head? Had to be deliberate. It was over: he had to forget her. Onward and upward. He vowed that when she

wrote him at the last minute to meet for coffee, taking for granted he'd be free, he would say he was busy, never write her again and that would be it.

Unless she initiated the next contact without another prod from him.

But if she wrote on Sunday to meet for coffee, didn't that qualify as her initiating it?

Was he making any sense at all?

By Sunday morning, on full alert, checking his Blackberry every two minutes waiting for said email, he still hadn't decided if he would accept.

A lot had happened in the meantime.

On January 1st Barack Obama had been a long-shot candidate at best, widely considered an impossible and foolish choice if Democrats wanted to be sure to oust Republicans from the White House. By Thursday the 3rd he had become the nearly-impossible-to-stop front-runner, easily winning the Iowa Caucuses and polling high in New Hampshire, where he was expected to knock out Hillary by more than ten points. Hugh's plan of how to ease his college-dropout son back on the road to a reasonable life had blown up.

Aggravating his confusion was that everyone who knew Ray (even Ruth!) had become excited he was part of this drama and were exaggerating his role. "I told all my friends," Ruth said with a chuckle during their Saturday phone call, "Ray helping run the campaign in Iowa is what turned it around for Osama."

"Obama," Hugh corrected. "And he wasn't running the campaign. He's a gopher."

"They're paying him!" Ruth exclaimed. "And he's got a title: Advance Coordinator." Some doubt crept in. "Or Advance Scout . . . Anyway, he's got a real job working for the next President of the United States."

Hugh was astonished. “You’re not going to vote for Hillary to be the first woman President?”

“If she’d left Bill and not voted for the Iraq War, I would have more confidence in her, that she’s her own woman and knows what she wants to accomplish. Especially if she had divorced Bill. Anyway, the important thing is that what Ray is doing could lead to something. At least it’ll count for extra credit when he goes back to get his degree in political science. Won’t it?”

Ray had told Hugh, in a triumphant and all too brief call after Obama’s Iowa victory, that he was never “going back to studying all that bullshit in poli sci—they don’t know the first thing about what it’s really like in the trenches.” Hugh was about to depress Ruth with that tidbit when it occurred to him: why am I trying to make his loving Grandma miserable?

Because I’m miserable.

His general unhappiness had increased with confirmation that Stein’s check had cleared and he was set to move out on March 1st. Leslie added to the misery by insisting he get serious about looking for places he could afford.

“Call Bill Hathaway and Joan Glickman,” she told him on the phone late Sunday morning. “Have them show you places on the weekends or after work, so if I can get out of the office I can look too.” Excitement had crept into her tone. All this was basically fun for her, wasn’t it? Women didn’t really mind how messy and painful life became as long as they were allowed to get their hands dirty and cry. “Okay, Hugh? You don’t mind my coming along? Helping you pick a place?”

He was her alternate husband, the nice guy she could push around, instead of her playboy musician Guillermo, too handsome and too frisky to put a leash on. Leslie, once a comfort, a living presence of his happy past, also had been spoiled for him.

“Hugh,” Leslie called into his silence. “Are you okay?”

“Little blue about moving. But I’m fine.”

She told him to make sure he saw apartments north of Central Park.

“Harlem, you mean.”

“Yes, but specifically Central Park North, or Fifth and 108th, 109th, and so on.”

“I’ll be a hundred blocks away from you,” he complained. “And a hundred and twenty blocks from my job.”

“I know, dear, but it’s what? Eight stops on the express? Look, Hugh, you have to move by March first. You don’t want to be putting all your belongings into temporary storage. And speaking of that, what are you going to do with everything? You’re not going to move all of it, right?”

“No,” Hugh said, doom in his voice because he was dreading having to go through thirty years of memorabilia—more like fifty years, given that Ruth had given Amy a lot of souvenirs from her childhood before she was diagnosed. “I’ll have to weed stuff out.”

“Oh, it’s going to be hard on you. So hard. Poor baby. I’ll help. I’ll help sort through everything. We’ll cry!” Tears were already in her tender voice. “We’ll cry but we’ll get it done.”

She was right. That was going to be the low point of moving. As painful as it would be to leave the neighborhood where he had raised a happy family, going through boxes and boxes of memories, of times and love that were lost forever, would be far worse. A new

place, a new neighborhood might even be exciting. Someday. But sorting through his past, throwing out any piece, no matter how worn and useless, admitting that it *was* the past?

Agony.

After the call Hugh turned on his TV, searching for a sporting event to anesthetize his heart and quiet his mind. He couldn't concentrate on anything he found. Instead, something came into his head that had never occurred to him before.

He was willing to die.

He wanted to die.

But for Ray and Ginnie. Except for what that would do to Ray and Ginnie.

What else was there for him to care about? Love was out of reach and soon his home would also be walled off behind the impassable and insurmountable past. With eyes shut there were joys he could still see, but they vanished when he tried to embrace them.

He would have to stay alive and pretend to be cheerful for his children. He had no question about that, no practical thought of self-destruction. But he was also sure that besides his children's happiness there was nothing else to live for. Love had been denied him by Sue. His home had perversely been taken from him by its increase in value. His work still engaged him but the mess he'd made of things with Francine, Karen's bullying reaction, and the awkwardness that would forever persist between him and Melissa had spoiled his job too.

That was when he decided. He would have coffee with Sue if she wrote him.

And he would tell her the truth. A truth she suspected anyway. He was in love with her and if she didn't feel the same way, he couldn't be her friend. Better to brick up what he loved and couldn't have, never to see it again, than to peek longingly through a pinhole.

4.6

Getting the words out was like walking through mud. He had to lift each one from the muck inside him—longing, pain, devotion, humiliation; he couldn't identify all of the disparate feelings—and reveal the mess they had made. On Sunday afternoon, looking at her across a small table at Le Pain Quotidien, tanned and glowing from her vacation in the Caribbean, he knew she was the second love of his life. During the weeks of dating he had told himself again and again it was no more than an infatuation, a crush on someone he hardly knew, but in her presence, about to confess he couldn't just be friends, he knew that was a lie. Just as he had known within a few days that Amy was the one, he knew that about Sue, for all her faults and no matter whether she loved him or not. Had Amy loved him in those first few months? He doubted it. She had grown to love him. And Sue could too.

"I've been thinking . . ." he began and paused, gathering strength to go on, "a lot . . . about our, you know, last big conversation about . . . what we're doing?"

Sue, who had been all smiles and jokes while they ordered lattes, frowned. "What we're doing?" she repeated. She looked pained. "What *are* we doing?"

"You know. Being . . . just friends."

"Well obviously we're more than *just* friends," she said, irritated.

Hugh's heart pounded. He leaned forward and almost took her hand, got his fingers within an inch of hers. "We are?" he asked hopefully. "We are," he repeated gratefully.

“We’re good friends. Very close friends.” Sue sat back, her hands retreating. To avoid his eyes, she looked out the window at Fifth Avenue in January, stained by winter, black lumps of snow and white blotches of salt and ice.

Despair returned. *Courage. Make her choose. Don’t let her have you when she wants you, and not give you anything in return.* “I . . .” He had to fight to say it. “I can’t.”

Sue didn’t look at him. She didn’t speak. She seemed not to have heard.

“I don’t want”—he yanked hard to pull the phrase clear of his dread of losing her forever—“to be friends.”

Sue’s eyes fixed on him. She asked sharply, “You don’t want to be friends?”

“I love you,” he said.

She was silent for a long moment and then mumbled, “Thank you,” and looked down, embarrassed.

Thank you?

Wasn’t that a joke in a rom-com as the worst possible response to “I love you”? Was she kidding? He must have misheard.

“I’m not exaggerating,” he said. “I’ll wait as long as I have to. I love you. And I can’t pretend to be a friend when that’s not what I feel. I don’t feel like a friend.”

To his surprise Sue continued to look pissed off, brow in a line, mouth turned down. “Love isn’t part of friendship?”

“Come on, Sue, cut it out.” He covered his face with both hands, massaged his forehead and pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. He was overcome by a profound exhaustion. For a month he hadn’t been sleeping much or well, between the discomfort of

his jaw and the anxious checking of emails to see if she had written. He had been getting perhaps four hours a night, and not restful ones.

“Honestly, Hugh,” he heard her say in a gentle tone, “I don’t know, really know, what it means when someone says ‘I love you.’”

He uncovered. She was looking at him with sincere bewilderment in her eyes, hands parted in a plea, vulnerable for the first time since she had broken off their courtship. She appeared completely honest about this claim of ignorance. Still, he didn’t believe her. “Of course you know what ‘I love you’ means.”

“No I don’t. I really don’t. Be honest, Hugh. You’ve known me a couple of months. There’s a lot you don’t know about me and my moods. You can’t know you love the real me because you don’t know me. So what does your feeling mean? Is it desire? Is it your ego?”

“Ego?” Now Hugh was baffled.

“Lots of men love the pursuit. They get you; then they lose interest.”

“I’m not like that!”

“I’m not talking about you specifically. I’m talking about the dance between men and women. I’m asking what does love mean beyond ‘I want you.’ I’m not sure it ever means anything more than that.” She leaned forward eagerly. “You know what my shrink told me? You probably already know it. The Jacques Lacan quote?”

“Your shrink?” he said, surprised.

“Yeah, I started seeing a shrink. It’s good. Really good. Life changing. Anyway, we were talking about love and she told me the Jacques Lacan quote.”

“Who’s Jacques Le . . . ?”

“Lacan,” she said. Her sexy look of quiet amusement returned, accompanied, as usual, by the tartness of disappointment. “He was a French psychiatrist. Lacan defined what love is. It’s the only definition that’s ever made sense to me.”

“I don’t know it. What is it?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I can take it,” he said, angry that she was forcing him to ask for it twice. She wanted to knife him with the quote; otherwise why had she drawn it from her sheath?

Sue straightened, head high, reciting like a proud student: “Lacan said, ‘Love is when you try to give something you don’t have to someone who doesn’t exist.’”

He repeated the quote in a mumble to himself, absorbing it. He understood the first part and was insulted. The second phrase, ‘to someone who doesn’t exist,’ confused him. He struggled out loud to clarify it. “You mean, my feelings for you are a delusion?”

She nodded condescendingly. “You don’t know *me*, Hugh.”

“I don’t need to know you,” he said, matching her superior tone. “That’s a naïve thing to say. You don’t need to know everything about someone to know you love them. Okay, so maybe you fart in bed while you sleep, have halitosis in the morning, maybe you binge on cold SpaghettiOs at four a.m. and love Michael Bolton music—none of that will change that I love the way you move, the sound of your voice, your smell, your touch, what makes you smile, how you listen to me, the way you express yourself. Sure, I may get tired of you someday, I can’t know that, no one can, but that’s the uncertainty of the future, not the fraudulence of love. Only someone who’s never been in a long relationship, or a bitter old man being a smart ass, would think my loving you is invalid because I don’t know everything

about you. Not knowing everything about the person you love, not being able to fathom them, is part of what makes it love.”

That was the longest speech he had ever spoken about love, probably his first speech of any length on the subject. He thought what he had just said was quite beautiful and wise. His only regret was that he hadn't written it in an email since he was sure he would never be able to reproduce it.

Sue seemed impressed as well. Or at least he had wiped off the general smirk of her body language and cleared her mouth of all slyness. He had even rendered her momentarily speechless.

“I love you,” he said, this time without a hint of embarrassment or desperation. “I really and truly love you.” He was able now to pronounce his feeling as a solemn and confident assertion, to put into it what he was now convinced she needed to hear: reassurance. Looking at the worry that came over her, he was sure he understood at last, at long last, why she had broken it off with him so abruptly after their first lovemaking. She was afraid to give herself to him, afraid to give herself to anyone because she had been hurt, again and again. *I'm the perfect man for her*, he thought, *the loyal, supportive, patient giver of love she's wanted, and needed, all her life*. “I love you,” he said a third time.

Sue waited a moment, then took a deep breath, as if readying herself for the plunge. “Thank you,” she said.

4.7

Hugh asked Ginnie and Ray to come home in the middle of February to sort what keepsakes of their childhood and adolescence they wanted to take with them, and what they wanted Hugh to keep for them, and what they were willing to throw out. It would be their last time in their childhood home before Hugh moved out on March 1st.

Arranging this farewell weekend was difficult. Ginnie's work in DC was especially intense these days; besides her restaurant and art blogging for the *Washington Post* she was working as a writer and on-camera interviewer for Ethan's documentary on the growth of gourmet-level food trucks. Ray didn't feel he could abandon the embattled Obama campaign even for one night; its demands on his time were round-the-clock. In fact, his first reaction had been to say, "Throw it all out. I can't spare the time and I don't really care. It's just Legos and comic books, right?"

Hugh, who was loath to argue about anything that called up feelings of loss, offered this demurral: "I don't know what's in your room. It's your room. I don't feel comfortable going through it on my own."

"You can go through it," Ray teased. "There's no porno in my room. It's all on my computer."

Hugh had also lost his sense of humor. He couldn't manage even a chuckle. He said solemnly, "I don't want to go through your things. If you really want me to throw everything out without looking at it, I will." There. Tough love. What everyone thought him incapable of. Especially Sue. In the weeks before that appalling final conversation in Pain—Pain was

how he now thought of Le Pain Quotidien—when they were supposedly “friends,” Sue had said about his allowing Ray to drop out of college: “He needs tough love. Can you do tough love, Hugh?”

He hadn’t written her or called her since January 6th. She had sent one email, the following afternoon:

H - I felt I was too harsh yesterday. I do believe in love. But I’m not ready to accept or feel it. Just need to be clear about where I am these days. - S

He had gritted his teeth to restrain himself from answering. And he had succeeded. Seven weeks of silence. *So there. How about that for tough love?*

And toughness had worked with his son. Ray had backed down, said he would leave the campaign early Saturday, go through his stuff all day Saturday, and leave late Saturday night so he could be back Sunday morning.

Ginnie sounded weepy as she agreed to come. “Ethan and I’ll get there in time to have dinner with you Friday. Can we go to the Knickerbocker for old time’s sake, even though there’s nothing there I want to eat?”

“Ethan? Ethan’s coming?”

“Of course! He’ll definitely want to come.”

Tough love. “I wanted it to be just the three of us.”

Long pause. “Daddy, are you saying Ethan’s not welcome?”

“I’m saying I want it to just be the three of us, the three people who lived here.”

Another long pause. In a squeezed voice—holding back a flood of tears, Hugh imagined—she said, “I really want Ethan to be there. He’s my husband. Or he’s going to be.” She gasped as if she were about to sob. “I need him there, Daddy.”

On the evening of their arrival he took Ginnie and Ethan to dinner at the Knickerbocker. The first challenge came during their entrees. Ethan, in his pleasant I’m-just-muddling-through-life tone of voice, said, “Say, Hugh, I brought the Hi-Def camera in case you’d like me to film you three going through things. Maybe you’d like to have a record of it. A home movie?”

“Oh, that’s a great idea,” Ginnie said, offering a kiss on the lips which Ethan accepted. “You’re a sweetie,” she added after the buss.

“No thanks,” Hugh said and had dark thoughts about Ethan’s real intention, making this so-called home movie.

“No?” Ethan seemed surprised.

“Oh Daddy, please? I’d love to have film of the apartment, the way it was, and all of us at this time of our lives. It’s been so long since you took any video of me and Ray, right? And we don’t have anything of you, you were always behind the camera. And Ethan’s a great shooter. Unobtrusive but really thorough.”

NO, NO, NO! Hugh wanted to shout but he was having a T-Bone and had put a big juicy piece in his mouth. While they waited for his answer he remembered a disgusting image from Pasolini’s *Salò*, of a woman urinating into a man’s mouth. To stop himself from spitting up he swallowed prematurely. The meat felt stuck, so he took a gulp of water that he partially inhaled, and a violent coughing fit ensued.

“Daddy, you okay?” Ginnie got out of her chair, patting him on the back. “Do you need the Heimlich?”

He nodded frantically to assure her he was fine. He choked out that she should sit. After food and drink had settled enough, he made a speech. “Honey, this is a very stressful event for me. I know it is for you, of course, but I think maybe, in this case, it’s even more so for me. You have a new home, a new”—he gestured at Ethan, who was dispassionately peering at him through oversize round eyeglasses as if studying an insect under a microscope—“person in your life. It’s natural at this time in your life for you to leave home permanently and leave”—he shrugged apologetically about the quote—“childish things behind. But this is . . .” He paused. The upset was regurgitating again. He swallowed hard. “This is my life, my whole life that’s being tossed . . .” He had to stop.

Ginnie leapt from her chair and hugged him, trembling and crying herself, mumbling, “Oh Daddy, I love you, I love you,” and Hugh couldn’t help but feel that they were making fools of themselves as he noticed all the surrounding tables were looking on. He spied the maître d’—who had known Amy, had watched her deteriorate—turning away. Sympathetically to be sure, with a kindly regretful smile, but like all the living he naturally felt, had to feel, that grief was an embarrassment, a weakness to be overcome.

I’m weak, Hugh confessed to himself. *I’m weak. Why am I so weak?* Then and there he resolved no matter what was radiating inside, he would become the man his father was, cool to the touch, a man who would rather have a martini than an emotion.

He eased his beloved, kind-hearted daughter out of his arms, looking as hard as he could at Ethan. He gave her away then and there, packing her up neatly for all their sakes.

She's yours now. Don't fuck it up, he put into the stare, saying out loud, "Okay, honey. I'm fine now. I just need another drink."

Ginnie sat down. Ethan protectively put an arm around her and said in a low voice, "No cameras. I'll help pack."

"No." Hugh drained what was left of his martini and pointed out the empty glass to their waitress. "I've changed my mind. Ginnie's right. You should shoot it." He grinned at the happy couple. "I'm ready for my close up now."

4.8

The following day Hugh focused on his children while they sifted through their possessions, ignoring his aching jaw, throbbing head, and roiling stomach. Ginnie lingered over each choice, sometimes cheerfully and sometimes tearfully reminiscing. Ethan filmed her but not all the time, and Ginnie talked just as much when the camera was off.

Ray, immediately after his arrival around noon, raced through his choices in silence. His sweating, ruthless process was obviously an attempt to hide from pain. When Ethan appeared on his doorsill with a camera he said, “Don’t film me.” Ginnie immediately launched into an impassioned speech pleading that she wanted it for her memories, but Ray interrupted, ignoring her and saying to Ethan, “You can shoot Pop and Ginnie and me when I’m with them, but not when I’m in my room doing this.” He was throwing Legos into a box to give Toys for Tots. After his declaration Hugh entered the room and politely shut the door on Ethan and Ginnie, deciding to stay with Ray until he was done.

Ray grimly separated the books he loved—mostly fantasy novels, his Latin dictionary, and volumes of Yeats, Neruda, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wallace Stevens—with the understanding that Hugh would keep them in storage until he settled somewhere, along with the balance of his clothes and his original Nintendo system and games.

“Really?” Hugh asked with gentle skepticism, picking up one of the clunky cartridges. “You’ll actually play these old things instead of the spanking new ones?”

“These are classics, Dad,” Ray said. “Like Sophocles.”

Ray worked quickly to ensure he'd make a flight back out at ten p.m. Hugh asked him once to stay over, and Ginnie asked twice, but Ray said, "I gotta get back to Wisconsin. If we beat Hillary there, the super delegates will domino our way."

"Obama's great," Ginnie said, "but today I hate him."

They had Chinese take-out at six-thirty so he'd have plenty of time to get to JFK. After eating he asked, "Can I have Mom's baseball cap?"

"Baseball cap?" Hugh asked.

"I mean her tennis cap. You know." Ray moved toward the front closet. Ethan picked up his amazingly tiny camera, hardly larger than his fist, and followed.

After Amy lost her hair, she began wearing a faded red U.S. Open hat to her chemo treatments, which she endured cheerfully, hoping they would cure her. For six months she did go into remission, and her hair grew back during that hopeful time, in a bristly mass different from her gentle curls. Maybe because of that, or maybe because she thought it would bring her luck, she kept wearing the cap. If you held the fabric close you could smell a little of her still. Hugh had put it under a few of his own hats on the highest shelf to hide it from the children so they wouldn't think him morbid. Apparently Ray had known it was there all along.

He put on his mother's hat and looked at Hugh. "Okay?"

"Sure," Hugh said. As Ethan's lens came his way he smiled and took a long gulp of his cold Tsingtao.

"Didn't Mom wear that to her treatments?" Ginnie asked. She had been away at college for most of that period, but she had visited often enough during the chemo days to know the answer. Hugh suspected the question was for the record Ethan was making.

Ray spoiled her attempt to document his sentimental gesture by walking out of the room without a reply, presumably to stow his mother's cap in his backpack. When he emerged from his room with his belongings, the cap wasn't in evidence.

Hugh hugged him at the door and Ray squeezed back so hard he pushed some air from his father's lungs. "Promise me you'll cheer up, Pop," Ray whispered in his ear. "I can't be worrying about you while I'm getting Barry elected."

Startled, Hugh pulled away and looked into Ray's eyes, inches away. "It's just the moving out. It's stressful."

"Bullshit," Ray said and kissed him on the cheek. "I don't know what's gotten under your skin, but shed it. You're still a young man, Pops, and Mom wanted you to be happy. 'Your father deserves to be happy.' She told everybody—right, Ginnie?"

"Said it to me," Ginnie said, smiling with tears in her eyes. "Twice!"

"So get to it, okay?" Ray kissed him again and hurried out the door.

Ginnie had to chase her brother to the elevator to garner her hug. Ethan moved toward the door to film them in what turned out to be a long clinch, but Hugh stepped in his way and gave him a look that lowered the camera. Later, painful hours later, when Hugh finally got into bed and was trying to fall sleep, he smiled at the irony: life had contrived to make him, a movie lover, hate filmmaking. He wished he could tell Amy. She would have laughed long and loud.

Stage Five

5.1

Some six weeks later, the day he moved his possessions from temporary storage to 109th Street and Fifth Avenue at the north end of Central Park, was the first day Hugh didn't have a single passing thought of anguished longing for Sue.

And the next day, and the day after that, when he did think of her, there was no cringing inside. He thought: *She doesn't love you, she doesn't even like you.* And the next day, again he didn't think of her.

A week after moving into a two bedroom with empty spaces awaiting furniture yet to arrive, Hugh began to feel, as Ray had hoped, that he was beginning a whole new life. He wasn't happy. (Had he ever been happy?) But dread of the future had passed and was replaced with, if not anticipation, then at least curiosity. And though he now believed he would never find love again, he felt okay that he was going to be alone for the rest of his life.

That's what he told Roberto Salazar, the grief counselor. Triggered by Ray's scolding he had made an appointment—a refresher, Salazar called it. They were meeting weekly again.

It took him three sessions to confess the entire sordid, dismal story of being cock-teased, then cock-rejected, then love-rejected by Sue. That was the bitter narrative stew he had cooked up to describe their brief dating history. He had been deluded about her from the

beginning. She had used him as a stopgap after her breakup with Mike; as soon as he insisted she deal with him as a real suitor rather than a lapdog, she dumped him.

Session four he reported to Salazar his sanguine Harlem vision of his future life as a dutiful widower, happy to be alone. Instead of approving, Salazar said with what Hugh could have sworn was a smirk, “What if another Sue comes along? Won’t you fall head over heels again?”

“That’ll never happen.”

Salazar cocked his head. “How will you prevent it?”

“Well, I’m not going to . . .” Hugh came to a halt. He wanted to say “I’m never going to speak to a woman again” but that was absurd. He talked to one every day. Some of them would prove to be single and . . .

Salazar interrupted his thoughts. “You’re not going to what?”

Hugh didn’t reply.

“Be attracted to women? Go on dates? Kiss them?”

“What are you asking me, exactly?”

“I’m asking why you’re confident another Sue won’t happen?” Salazar shook his head as if rejecting his own question. Sure enough, he changed his query. “Let me ask you something else. What do you think happened with Sue? Why did it hit you so hard that you considered killing yourself?”

“That was the move!” Hugh protested. “I wasn’t going to kill myself over her. It was everything. Losing everything.”

Salazar ignored the very cogent point Hugh had made and remained obsessed with Sue: “You only knew her for six weeks, a short time, a very short time. Why did it hit you so hard?”

Hugh crossed his arms. He said sullenly, “I was in love with her.”

“After a month of no-sex dates? After a month of listening to her talk about how badly her ex-boyfriend had treated her? You were in love with her?”

“Don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

“Infatuation, yes. Love? The kind of love you had with Amy?” Salazar looked at Hugh the way parents regard their children when they are being silly.

“Well, I didn’t say I loved her the way I loved Amy.”

“Yes, you did. You told me you hadn’t felt that way about a woman since Amy.”

“Yes, but you just told me that was merely infatuation.”

“Right. You were infatuated with Sue. She excited you in the same way you felt excited when you first met Amy, and then what happened? Through no choice of your own, she was taken away from you. You wanted to be with her and you weren’t allowed to be.”

Hugh nodded. He felt stupid. What was Salazar getting at?

Salazar waited. When Hugh didn’t volunteer anything, he said, “You told me you wanted to be with Sue for the rest of your life and you weren’t allowed to be.” He looked at Hugh and waited.

Pain. It had felt so acute when Sue turned him down. Abandoned and desolate. A child left to cry himself to sleep. Exiled forever from love and comfort. To no longer hold or smell her, never to hear her voice. It had felt like . . . grief.

“Did you love Sue the way you loved Amy?” Salazar asked, so softly it was almost a whisper.

“No.” Hugh felt the sadness coming, like a tropical storm gathering on the horizon, the air cooling rapidly, darkness spreading over his face, and soon the rain, heavy hot drops of rain would arrive. “I couldn’t have her,” Hugh said. “It was like watching Amy being taken away from me all over again.”

Salazar nodded.

“Sue made me feel alone. Because I am alone. I’m all alone.” He felt a tear fall.

“Sue allowed you to do the hard work of grieving,” Salazar said softly, with as much tenderness as Hugh had ever heard in a man’s voice. “A thirty-year love was taken away from you. You felt very, very sad for a few months, then very sad for a few more, and after a year you decided you could connect with someone new and you started dating. You didn’t let yourself feel the full pain of your loss until this depressed, unable-to-commit woman forced you to grieve. That’s why the future is no longer full of dread. That’s why now you’re feeling you can be alone, without a woman, by which you mean without Amy. Because for the first time you’ve accepted that you are, in fact, alone.”

“Yes.” Hugh heard the huskiness in his voice and felt another tear fall. But he was calm. He was alone and he was calm.

“It all makes sense now, doesn’t it?” asked Salazar, that smug asshole.

“Fuck you,” Hugh said.

5.2

Hugh quickly made friends in his new neighborhood, happy to find a variety of people, a city of mixtures as compared to the recent homogenizing of the population in Greenwich Village. Instead of being surrounded by hedge-fund managers, the subsidized children of the wealthy, celebrities, or rich foreigners whose pied-à-terres were dark most of the time, he was reunited with the New Yorkers he once knew, all of them washed up on the north shore of Central Park. Writers, painters, dancers, actors, nurses, journalists, teachers, a cop, a man who owned a small hardware store on 96th, two lesbians who ran a bakery over on Third Avenue. And many of them—well, more than half—were people of color, recent immigrants or long-time Harlem residents.

Hugh connected with his neighbors easily. Within a couple of weeks he couldn't walk more than a block without stopping to chat with one of his new friends. Someone who knew the minister of a Methodist church asked if he would run classic movies there and lecture on Saturday afternoons to the seniors group. Hugh was happy to say yes, to show films to people who didn't think of themselves as cineastes. He wondered aloud to Leslie about how it happened so fast, his becoming part of a new community.

“You really didn't know that you're friendly and people like you?” she asked.

“I guess I thought they liked Amy.”

They were having dinner at the old standby, the Knickerbocker. Hugh had expected to feel and wax nostalgic, getting out at his old stop at Union Square and walking the blocks where he had lived for thirty years. Instead, after only a few weeks away, he realized most of

what he remembered fondly on University Place was gone: Bradley's Bar, the chicken man (he sold only chicken in every conceivable variation), the grumpy but genius watch repairman, the friendly shoe guy who claimed to be an Anarchist, the stationery store where you could do everything from notarize a will to find a decent Mother's Day card, even on Mother's Day! Whitney Chemists, although still there, had lost to retirement the senior pharmacist Fred, who had remembered every allergy and every illness of Ray's and Ginnie's. The death of neighborhoods, Hugh was reminded, the death and renewal of all animals and things, was a natural feature of the universe, no matter how painful to the individuals who suffered their loss. To his surprise, after only two months he didn't miss his old home.

Leslie whacked him on the arm. "Are you serious? You really think everybody liked you because of Amy? She was the introvert. You were like the Mayor of University Place." Leslie lowered her eyes. "Until she died."

"I was sad," Hugh said.

"You were sad," Leslie agreed. "I was sad," she said. "I'm still sad. I haven't replaced Amy. Except for you." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "You're my new best friend."

Hugh looked deep into her big brown eyes, full of affection, and realized that prick Salazar had been right about her too. His conviction for over a year that what he felt for Leslie was more than friendship, that he was in love with her, another unattainable woman like Sue, was another transfer of grief from Amy, dead and unreachable in every way.

"And you're my best friend," Hugh said, knowing that she, more than Peter or Kyle, was the one he would call on when he needed to. Then and there he told her about his

infatuation with Sue, no longer embarrassed or ashamed to admit that he had made a fool of himself because finally he understood he hadn't.

After that confession to Leslie, although from time to time he still thought fondly of lying in Sue's arms, he remembered the embrace without Pain.

5.3

On Memorial Day weekend, Hugh declined invitations to country homes from Karen and Didi, Leslie and Guillermo, and Peter and Debby, and instead stayed in town. Saturday he had the seniors' film afternoon to curate and all weekend he had screeners to look at. Melissa was dating a marathoner and had taken up training on weekends to do a half-marathon herself. She had also started hosting Wednesday night screenings of what she called Oldies But Progressive Movies in an old warehouse in Greenpoint, leaving less time to make sure that they saw all submissions to the Hamilton program together. Hugh missed her company if not her adoration.

That night he had to press pause on a short by a promising filmmaker who was applying for a grant in order to answer a phone call from Ginnie. It was past ten and he immediately feared she must be upset. "Hi Dad," she said in so relaxed a tone that he was surprised when, after a few pleasantries, she announced, "So, you've probably guessed I'm calling because something's up. I've broken up with Ethan. Not just called off the wedding. Broken up. I don't hate him, of course, or anything like that, but we're done."

Hugh was relieved, even delighted—but he was also very worried. She had seemed so happy and deeply involved; they were even working together. He probed gently: "You ended it?"

"Yeah. Frankly, as soon as I accepted his proposal I got very anxious and wanted to take it back. I tried really hard to ignore my doubts, but—you know, I think only you will

really understand this and not think I'm crazy—I realized, I've been seeing a shrink to get some clarity on my doubts and I realized in therapy I was marrying Ethan to please Mom.”

“To please your mother?”

“Yeah, he was exactly the kind of guy she would've picked for me. You know,” she said and then began to sing, adapting the lyrics of the old-time song: “the kind of guy who married dear old mom.”

What the fuck is she talking about? Amy would have pitched a fit about Ethan. “Ah,” Hugh said. “Sure. I get it.”

“Anyway, he got very upset, of course. I feel bad what I put him through. I was in denial, I didn't realize what was motivating me. It was sad and painful to tell him but”—a big sigh—“what a relief. I have my life back. I have myself back. Oh! That's Becky, she's calling me back, we keep missing each other. Listen Daddy, I want to come up next weekend, just hang out with you, so you don't worry about me and I don't worry about you, cause we really haven't spent any time, fun and calm time together since Mom. Okay?”

He had trouble getting his okay out clearly but he managed to.

Early Sunday morning he rented a Zipcar and drove to Amy's grave in New Jersey, her family's plot. He didn't care for the place, hard to get to, near nothing he or Amy loved, but he hadn't objected to the location because it was convenient for Ruth and Bernie. They were regular visitors anyway since their parents and a couple of siblings were buried there. Hugh had gone once a year on Amy's birthday, always with Ray and once with Ginnie, too. This was his first visit not on her special day, and he went by himself.

He brought a small gardening spade. He arrived so early, seven-forty-five, that he had the place to himself. He dug a shallow hole behind her stone, in its shade, deep enough to

bury the three nude photos of her, each removed from the triptych frame and placed in a transparent archival envelope.

First he put to rest his bride, so young she was nearly a stranger to memory.

Beside her he placed the beautiful mother who had given him his beloved children.

And last he laid to rest the mature woman who had nurtured him with her love.

He smoothed the dark earth back over them. And then he said goodbye.

Monday, Hugh decided to take advantage of the Metropolitan Museum being open on holidays to look at Vermeer's Young Woman with a Water Pitcher. He was curious about it, having read a new theory that the great realistic painter had devised a camera obscura and in effect painted photographs of his brilliant arrangements, thus reproducing degrees of shading that supposedly a human being working from life models couldn't perceive. In short, hundreds of years before the invention of film Vermeer had understood the power of the camera to see better than we can.

Hugh had been happily alone all of Sunday night and most of the morning when he walked down Fifth on a beautiful late-spring day. He did pass a pair of his new friends, Bob and his amazingly elegant greyhound, Legs. Bob prodded him for the hundredth time, "Why don't you get yourself a puppy, Hugh? Better company than a woman. And cheaper."

Hugh didn't tell the truth, that he hesitated because Amy had disliked pets and so he hadn't had one since he was a boy. This time he thought, *Why not? This is my life now, for better or worse. I love dogs. I should get one.*

The prospect of someone to care for kept him happy all the way to the Vermeer. Then thinking about how to work the camera obscura theory into a talk about the art of

cinematography made him happier still as he marched down the wide interior steps to the main lobby. Someone tapped him on the shoulder as he was about to head for the exit.

“Hugh? Hugh Reynolds?” a woman asked. For a moment he felt excited because hers was a lovely voice, mellifluous, obviously someone he knew and liked.

But when he turned, he saw the face of a woman who hated him. It was Cathy Moriarty, whose early attempt at luring him into dating he had rejected, who had denounced him for being a “lying sack of shit” after she saw him kissing Hilda. He froze, half-expecting she was going to assault him in some way, verbally at the least.

“Hi, it’s Cathy,” she said. Her hair was auburn—had it always been? Must be dyed. Her eyes were green. Very green, dazzling against her porcelain skin. “Cathy Moriarty, you probably don’t remember me. At least I hope you don’t. I saw you coming down the stairs and I followed you . . .”

He stepped back and stammered, “What?”

“I want to apologize. I, uh, I know you heard that I . . .” She shook her head, dismissing that thought. “I was in a bad place when I called you, not long after Amy died. Remember? I pretended I wanted to console you? You called me on it and I . . . My husband had just dumped me for his twenty-three-year-old secretary. They’re married, they have a kid now. Actually I kind like of her. Sort of. Anyway, I was in a really bad place and I took it out on you. I’m sure you don’t remember but I’ve had struggles with anger . . .” She sighed. “Anyway, that’s not your problem. My anger issues,” she said, rolling her bejeweled eyes. “You know, the five stages of being dumped. Stage two took forever for me. So I wanted to apologize for unloading on you. You were straight with me, you said no

as politely as you could, and I just didn't accept it. So." She took a step away, preparing to go. "I'm sorry. Have a good holiday."

"Wait," Hugh said.

She paused. Her lips parted as she waited. They weren't extraordinarily full or painfully thin, she didn't have on bright lipstick, they looked natural, nothing special, but he wanted to kiss her.

"I said no to you, didn't I?"

She cocked her head, puzzled. "Very politely. But yes."

"Are you still available?"

The First Kiss

They had coffee for two hours, telling, it felt like, everything about themselves, from her bout of tennis elbow—she loved to play—to his left knee starting to hurt, from her “fucking like a bunny to build back my self-esteem,” to his confession that he had had trouble all his life saying no to women.

When they were leaving the nearby Pain Quotidien—Hugh hadn’t objected when she suggested the one on Madison—she texted him her email address so they could arrange a real date soon. “Well, goodbye for now,” she said, but she didn’t move away, her green eyes glittering, he imagined, with excitement and desire, and so . . .

Hugh bent down—she was five inches shorter than he—arms encircling but not touching her yet, and he kissed her.

Softly, then a little harder, a slight parting of her moist lips, a hint of espresso and something sweeter than himself as his arms enfolded her and their mouths met, opened, sealed, widening with each additional contact until he was falling into her taste and texture, losing self and time and place.

At some point he heard a thud. Later he learned Cathy had dropped her purse. But he didn’t relent for that or any other distraction. He shut his eyes and did not fear, or even consider, that someday this kiss, a perfect one, would end.