

SHE & HE

A Short Story of Shorter Stories

by

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I

EYEING IN DARK

She was hanging onto a strap with her left hand, facing the end of the train in the last car, holding her shoulder bag with her right arm tightly against her body. The train had stopped in the middle of nowhere. Typical for rush hour. She was usually calm about such delays, since they happened almost every evening. Not tonight.

It was not fear she felt. Unless someone next to her had a gun or knife, she could defend herself. She was taller than most, bench pressed over 200 and knew basic martial arts. She had never actually had to defend herself. Her self-assurance was usually sufficient to scare off most potential troublemakers. Years ago, she had flipped a slightly-tipsy tennis player who was determined to fuck her without preliminaries. She left him lying on the floor, embarrassed, red-faced, stunned but still visibly conscious. She had said, as she walked away,

"Be glad you can see me walking away...."

In the darkened subway car where the emergency lights had yet to turn on, her self-assurance was visible.

It was not the absence of lighting, she realized that concerned her in the dark. Rather, it was a sense in the darkness that both surrounded and embraced her that the male standing next her, taller than she, casually-dressed, well-built, handsome in a quiet way — she surprised herself that she could recall all that from the few lit moments they stood next to each other — would observe her, and she him. She did not recognize his face, not in the light and certainly not in the dark, but the longer they stood there, she facing the rear of the train, he the front, touching, as was unavoidable in a crowded subway car, she side-glancing him but unable to tell if he were doing the same, the longer they stood there the more fully was she enveloped in his presence.

He did not make a move, nor did she...nor could she. She could eye him in profile...enough light from the outside of the car in the tunnel and from

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people trying to turn on their cells...and she tried to banish from her mind the unwelcome reaction...

"I like what I see...."

The lights came on, the train began to move, people changed positions, shouting and laughing above the rattle of the train, but neither of them moved. Their sleeves were touching, as they retained their backward/forward stances. She did not turn her head, although she pushed her eyes as far as she could into the corners of her sockets so she could take in as much of him as possible. She could not see if he were trying the same thing, but she knew he was. They were kissing and fondling — no fucking in a public space — in the space that they occupied. It was easy in their imaginations — hers and she was sure his — as they stood, she downtown, he uptown.

The train stopped, the doors opened and he was gone. She was still standing, as if glued to her spot, trying to take in as much as possible of what had become an empty, soon to be filled space by noisy, giggling teenagers. She turned her back on them, and as she tried to recall the he of the last few minutes, she found it slipping fast. In her mind or memory, no he, just the darkness of the few minutes the train had actually stopped.

"Shit," she said under her breath. She was someone who aggressively and purposely kept her feet on the ground.

The train stopped at her station, and she exited, repeating,

"Shit."

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II

EYEING IN THE LIGHT

He stuck his card in the slot to open the outside door, took two steps at a time...one flight up to his loft...and used his card again to open his door.

He loved his huge room, sixty by thirty, no partitions, fifteen windows on each of the two long sides and five on the one short side. He was lucky because the building was close to the harbor and had an unobstructed view of the water from one side. On the other sides, cityscapes. Being an old factory its two stories reached more than thirty feet into the air. Certainly, not the tallest building but tall enough since it was situated in an earthquake zone.

He threw his bag and jacket on two empty hooks by the door. Cloudy tonight, as he peered through the windows. Rain could arrive soon. It mattered not. He was in for the evening. He had bought cheese, *charcuterie*, *baguette*, fruit and bubbly earlier on the way home. He did not own a television, but he had all the external links he needed with the net including radio broadcast of his beloved last-place baseball team. In the winter he listened to opera and attended dozens of performances. It reminded him of his years in The city on the river, well, not the baseball but the opera. His time there was a long operatic aria except the soprano voice kept changing faces.

As he sat facing the harbor, after having poured some bubbly, he recalled the subway trip. Usually not a memorable time but tonight he was sure she — the woman, almost his height, standing next to him but facing the opposite direction — was eyeing him. He could see that, even though the electricity had shut off.

He remembered he felt something, not because they were standing side-by-side, barely touching...no, something intangible, as if they were connected or connecting on another level.

That thought called for more bubbly. He took a long, slow imbibe. He let his head fall against the headrest and closed his eyes, to try to smother the

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memory, and...fuck...there she was on the inside of his eyelids. They were not standing side-by-side but facing each, their faces separated by a nanometer of space

He jerked his head forward, almost dumping his bubbly on his lap. That prospect, losing his bubbly in his crotch, made him grit his teeth, determined to erase that woman. His celibacy, declared a year ago after being pummeled by a near-mad painter, had grown comfortable. This unknown woman was not about to disturb it.

Except she was....

He let his head float back onto the headrest, again, her shadowy figure having taken on more and more explicit features that he could hardly have observed and, therefore, remembered. So, to talk himself down from this high, conceived in some romantic subterranean world, he began to call himself all sorts of names...like dumbass, fuckhead, braindead...but nothing really worked.

If he drank enough but not too much, he'd feel sleepy, amble off to bed, drift off, sleep all night — a customary routine — and when he awoke, presto, gone...she'd be gone.

She wasn't....

THE GRANDDAUGHTER

She had fallen asleep early and had not waked up early, as logic insisted. In her late twenties and still sleeping like a teenager. She wasn't a teenager and hadn't been, even when she was. Maybe that was the problem. Reinventing the life she had skipped through.

When her friends sat around reinterpreting their teenage life, she listened bemusedly and silently. Hers had been work, work, work and then more work. She had been living on her own since 15. She wasn't poverty-stricken. Her paternal grandfather had set her up in one of the thousands of apartments he and his sibs owned around the country after her father, his son, had moved to somewhere in South America. She did not know, then, where her mother was but learned subsequently she was dead.

Her grandparents on both sides had shared in raising her after her unreliable — much too mild a term she had long ago concluded — father could do no better than drift in and out of her life. She loved her g-ps deeply. They came from very different backgrounds and in a surprisingly manner had learned to meld these differences into some kind of parenting whole that gave her freedom but also, importantly, set boundaries. It turned out the boundaries were actually invisible but became visible when action was required on her part. It was a remarkable strategy in which responsibility was demanded rather than imposed.

They showed little fear, outwardly at least, when she and her father tried another reconciliation that like earlier efforts failed within weeks. He was not certifiably crazy, but he was loony enough to forget she was around and, even worse, who she was, more than once asking what she was doing in his apartment.

When she found herself in what she knew was a gang-bang organized by her father and his allies with other teenage girls, she, being taller and stronger than most in the room, turned on the assailants singly until the other girls realized what was happening at which point they beat the shit out of the collectives males, including her father.

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Arrests were made but trials were avoided. Without knowing how, she learned they scattered, her father entering some very expensive but questionable medical facility south of the border.

Negotiations between her and her g-ps, now her official guardians, over establishing her residential independence went surprisingly smoothly. The truth was that her g-ps, recognizing the risk with any teenager, laid down some modest ground rules but more than anything they expressed an implicit faith in her maturity. She had been through a lot, never having had much of a normal childhood, and instead of focusing on the potential collapse of her life because of that, they, taking their cues from how she had managed her life over the bumps and around the potholes, looked at her experiences in a more positive context. She did not disappoint them.

Well, she slightly disappointed. After finishing high school quickly, having just turned seventeen, she went to work in a local bar instead of to the university where she'd attended classes and won early admission. Eventually, she found her way, rather circuitously, back to the university, and graduated with highest honors in her mid-twenties. Her paternal grandfather, an alum, benefactor and trustee stood proudly on the stage when she was singled out for her academic excellence. The other g-ps were in the audience, but a father was nowhere in sight — "Thank God" — she remembered saying to herself.

Her job at the bar had given her time to do what she wanted. She worked 12-hour days, 4-days weeks, and, if needed, a Saturday or a Sunday. The fact was she didn't need the money...she had a trust fund, thanks to her father's parents, but she seldom dipped into it. In fact, she had only a vague idea how big it was. She kept getting statements from a financial advisor, but since he was a second or third cousin — something like that — she let him run the financial side-show.

She was conflicted about having so much money. She paid her own way with earnings from her jobs - sometimes she took other work such as freelance editing - and only withdrew money, surreptitiously actually, to help out her mother's parents. They had owned a retail business, which got knocked out by a big box discount chain. They had been frugal and socked

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away some money before they lost the business. They had sold the property where the business had stood during the real-estate boom but they still occasionally needed help. She had never shopped at the chain that almost gleefully killed off independent merchants, had joined a nationwide boycott in person and on a social network and had written and posted a muckraking story about the business dealings and fascist views of founders who had killed her grandparents' business. She portrayed their outsized ambition and endless greed in their own words, which to her surprise could be dug up easily on the Internet and in government and court proceedings (unlike her grandparents, other merchants had taken discounters to court), and, then, contrasted what they said about money versus what her grandparents, both well-read, said about people. When posted on the Internet, it went viral. The title alone — words of her grandfather — "Americans love discounts no matter who's hurt" became a networking tag on. She had also received a threatening letter from the founders' lawyers, and she posted it as well. Then, along came a founder's infamous remark that any retailer who voted for the president should be shot, and suddenly her portrayal of his personal greed was overshadowed by his endorsement of retail homicide.

She had to sign tax returns each year, usually only after perusing the forms quickly and feeling embarrassed at the figures she saw in front of her, and when her cousin needed information, he would text her. He was a decent guy but obsessed with numbers. She also knew her father's parents watched him like a hawk.

So what if she lost all that money that had never truly been hers? She'd survive and probably thrive. Anyway, life had more challenging moments than worrying about money. She was sure her g-ps had worried enough for several generations of kin.

In the last year she had lost two of her four grandparents, one on each side. Her maternal granddad, as she and her two first cousins called him, was a dear, dear person, soft-spoken, hard-working, but a life-long smoker, that is, until ten years ago, but lung cancer got him anyway.

On her father's side his mother had died suddenly from an aneurysm undetected. She was thought to be the healthiest of them all, partly

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because, as her g-kids, kids and husband often said, because she was the consummate venter. She had opinions and no reluctance to share them. She was fiercely intelligent with several advanced degrees. She had never held a full-time job but had written dozens of finely-honed essays on economic inequality, some from an historical perspective and some of contemporary perspective. She had been offered several distinguished lectureships along with awards and fellowships. She turned them all down with gusto. She knew how good she was; she didn't have to told.

"The quickest way to kill my instinct for the juggler is to become an namby-pamby academic, to be embraced by the academy. I never learned how to toot, and I have no plans wasting my time learning."

She loved her grandmother's fierceness, and she knew and she was often told she had inherited some of it. She could not help but reflect on the fact that her father, the oldest of five, more or less collapsed in this competitive, aggressive world that characterized her paternal grandparents. It was not meanness or greed that drove his parents. They were engaged with life on a level he simply couldn't tolerate. He found a soulmate in his wife, her mother. She was engaged in life far more than he was, a talented writer and poet, but also, a softy. She had a heart as big as the cosmos, and while she recognized her husband's insecurities and failings, she could not leave him. He needed her, and she virtually sacrificed herself for him. Her mother's parents, the maternal grandparents, never understood why she lost herself in the torturous world that her husband had created for himself. In the end, her daughter had finally concluded, she was not strong enough to protect herself and lost her life as a result.

In the last year she had never cried so many tears. Long evenings with boxes of Kleenex. Lights out, no sound, except for her own sniffing. She kept asking herself if she should be worried about these tears, but she always came up with the same answer. This was grieving, deeply grieving, not falling apart. The grieving came to an end, and the falling part never happened.

Twelve months later she was still tending bar (fewer hours by choice than before) and freelance editing (fewer projects by choice than before) but writing more by choice than before. And a new man in her life. She nodded

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as she thought about the juncture she now occupied...she had not been here before...she was not unhappy about that.

She loved the passion and lust of sex, but she had always been careful. She had developed that crazy idea that if she could share a bed irregularly, she could live happily on her own the rest of the time. This was not an idea she had grown up with. Caring, nurturing and even depending were the forces that she had known growing up. Her father was such a shit-head, and, yet, the families worked overtime to straighten him out. She came to the conclusion early in her teen life that some shit-heads were irredeemable, and he was one of them. Perhaps, that was where this crazy idea took root...living alone did not necessarily equate to being lonely. In any event, she'd slept with guys cool and not so cool, but she had always aligned her heart with her brain and had thus far escaped the usual debacles that fucking and not committing could lead to. Oh...there had been pleas and threats but she had always made sure an escape route was in place. Funny thing...with this new guy, who showed up at the bar one night, a modestly successful writer whose long story — still a draft on his tablet — smacked her in the face when she finally read it because she thought that she had written it. He came to the bar, but he would not ask her out — too old was his limp excuse — and that became the *modus operandi* until she trapped him and they lost a weekend together hundreds of miles from where they met and lived. In fact, they did not want to leave their Valhalla, stayed longer than they should have and got back just minutes before she had to report to work. They laughed, as she parked her heap and flung open the door, when she reassured him — the first indication for him and the first time for her to make reference to her wealth — "Oh, not too worry, my love, I could buy the fucking bar if I wanted to." His jaw dropped, she turned red, and as they embraced on his side, she bite his ear lobe and whispered — "I'll explain." Another funny thing, she hadn't yet, and he hadn't asked.

Was that the sign she'd been waiting for, looking for, hoping for...she dressed for work and probably late in her shift this guy, a coal miner's son, so self-effacing and yet so self-assured, twice her age, would show up, sit at the end of the bar (she always made sure that stool was open), order an Old-Fashioned with ginger ale, talk only so quietly when she was free and fuck her so deeply the rest of the night.

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He did show up, she served him his O-F, threw an imaginary kiss and tapped the back of his hand, but because the bar was busy she had to race to the other end to take an order, and when she turned to look back at his place at the far end, he was gone. She raced back, found the drink untouched and a Jackson with a note hand-printed across his face an Internet link that she had never known about.

When time allowed her to access the link, she found his personal web page — she knew he had a professional page — with a different name and lots of files, some very old, some very recent like tidy on his home page a poem: *I Knew As Soon As We Met I Had To Leave*.

Months later, true to his word, he was still gone, and so too were the web pages — personal and professional. She had copied and stored the poem but could do nothing else before the site was erased. He had allowed her a quick look before his total vanishment. Every night, though, she eyed his place just in case.

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IV

THE GRANDSON

He stumbled into the bar. He misjudged the step but caught himself before he fell. He was cold sober but embarrassed...stumbling into a bar instead of stumbling out. That could still happen.

The bar was almost completely empty. His embarrassment ameliorated, he sat at the end of the bar, his favorite spot in every bar, and there had been many. The bartender, about his age, welcomed him in a way he had not expected.

"Your first drink's on the house. Your near stumble could have cost us. What will it be?"

He smiled at the bartender and ordered an old-fashioned.

"Your first time?" The bartender asked, as he set a splendid-looking old-f on the bar in front of the stumbler.

"Not new to the city but new to neighborhood. I just sublet a studio down the street. The concierge recommended I stumble on in."

"He's well-paid."

"Having just tasted this old-f, as well-muddled as an old-f ought to be, I'm glad I asked. And with a spoon no less. Delivered in an "old-fashioned" way. You know, most men hate asking for directions and recommendations."

"I doubt you're one of those. You wouldn't want to miss out on the best old-f in the borough. The spoon reference makes me ask...a bartender?"

"The best years of my life. In graduate school at a bar in the city that claims to have originated the drink. Never bothered to look it up to see if it were true. I'd hate to spoil a good myth slash story."

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"Well, I worked in the same city at a different bar that made same claim. At the very least we can say the city and the spoon must have something in common."

They both laughed, and the bartender ambled off to attend to a group of white shirts and ties.

Left to himself the stumbler tried to construct a mental list of what he should try to do to improve the comfort of his studio. It was partially furnished. He knew that when he signed the lease, and even though he'd had weeks to address the problem of furnishing, he'd done nothing. In fact, when he thought about it, what had he done for the last month? Hard to recollect. Did it matter right now? Hardly. The old-f was serving as a diversion, once again, from his real-world failures and missteps.

The "new" bar was beginning to fill up. He'd been known to sit at a bar for hours without engaging his fellow barmates, and he'd been known to do the opposite. What would it be here and now?

Another phase in a messy life, which somehow stayed on track and never became a train wreck, best described as "under review". Fired again from his latest gainful employment, although again again he had set it up to happen that way. He could only tolerate fools for so long and then their shit had to be thrown back in their faces. The moment it happened - this had always been true - he experienced what he could only describe in the vernacular as a high. He knew what an alcoholic buzz was - buzz never became worse - but never knew the high that the word was often associated with. In some strange transcendence he could keep his feet on the ground with booze but never believed that was possible with drugs. Hence, no drugs in his life.

He was smiling into his OF, remembering with amusement how the sweetest gal, — you know, like the gal in song — tried to trick him into **eating** hash instead of smoking it. The spouse of an unfaithful mining engineer or something like and the mom of two kids, a small, lean, wiry body plus a seductive smile...how could he not help but be smashed in the face in love with her because she also used to whisper in his ear "I love you." They kissed, caressed and squeezed. She knew how much he

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wanted her, his erection big enough to lift her to the sky. They never fucked because she was married and observant. Thinking about highs and buzzes, lovers and erections — he adjusted his crouch under the lip of the bar — he replayed again...now decades later...how she tried to entice to beat one of her **famous** decadent-chocolate brownies, which he assumed was full of hash. It was her kiss that raised red flags. It was just too delicious. She had cornered him in the basement stairway, said two women (without specifying the other one) wanted him, kissed him on the lips, tongue working its magic, first time ever, and then handed him a brownie. He nodded "no", she flung the brownie to the bottom of the stairs and her arms around his neck, they held each as tightly as they could, until his erection made her push away and without a word, not even a glance, walked away through the kitchen, the hallway and out the front door. He wanted to ask who the other woman was, for it certainly wasn't his then, unfaithful wife. Later, several years later, after she was divorced but he was committed, she confessed she wanted him as high as she was to see what would happen. She wanted not to be observant and couldn't figure how else to satisfy her desire except with hash. He asked if she was still using it? She told him with some anger in her voice that was the wrong question and ended the conversation. He never heard from her again, never found her on the web and never forgot how certain convictions can screw up your life.

The rising noise level in a much more crowded bar knocked him out of his revelry. He realized that newly-arrived patrons occupied the stools to his right all the way to the other end. He also realized he'd have to decide about a second OF, since, except for the fruit and spoon, his glass was empty. While thinking about a second, he consumed the pulp of the orange and the black (first time) cherries.

"Yes," he responded when the bartender sidled over and asked about a second without knowing for certain he wanted a second. Typical of his moments and days the last few weeks. Not out of control but not in control either.

He began to think about the next steps that did not include furnishing his space. He had the essentials for now, and if he couldn't figure out the next step in the context of gainful employment, a list of furnishing would matter little.

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Gainful employment...gainful employment. The drawback was...had long been...he was not and would never be destitute. Gainful employment made life more manageable, more pleasant, but was not mandated. He had funds to save him from the worst, and he had access to more funds if need be. But, earning those tens of thousands each year allowed him to feel like a deserving prince instead of a ungracious pauper.

His skills? Not lacking. He had several degrees and had distinguished himself in several fields. No, his education, brainpower and experience were not at issue. At issue...he was a pain in the ass. He was generally proud of his suffer-no-fools-gladly approach to life. A strategy that fit his personality, or, perhaps, vise-a-versa, his strategy shaped his personality. Whichever way it originated and evolved, he found that because he was surrounded by so many fools he was "suffering" ungladly, while they seemed not to suffer at all. Awake or asleep he could not escape them, and, as a consequence, he lived in virtual isolation. People disliked him for his outspokenness, especially when it undercut their reputation and rank, and the more outspoken he was, the more isolated he became.

Then, it got worse. He discovered that the saint of all saints, whom he did not care for as a historic or religious figure, had first used the phrase to chastise alleged allies in the rise of the new religion for bearing witness to false preachings while ignoring his, which, of course, were not false. Thus, "you suffer fools gladly." The fucking saint was a chastising type, for no reason, since both he and his competitors were spreading false doctrine.

It was some consolation that in modern times we don't use it as the roving saint did. We use it in the negative...not suffering fools gladly. Either way, he remained pissed that he couldn't help but think about the saint and the wicked world he had wrought with his nonsensical prophecies every time he heard or used the phrase.

And, yet, staring into the cream-colored splashed with red and orange OF, his second, he realized, not for the first time, that all these endless reflections about "suffering fools gladly" may really refer to him...he was the fool whom others had to suffer....

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What he could not face without some deflection was that he was just a "plain" pain-in-the-ass, nothing noble or singular, no...just a pain-in-the-ass. That seemed more the truth today, on his second OF, in a bar he did not know, among people who seemed unimpressed with his presence. He lost his job because he was unmitigated egomaniac and boor.

The bar had filled up quickly. People seated to the left of him, but not to the right since he occupied last stool. But, people were standing behind him and around him in small knots. The knot to his left was made up of three well-dressed gents.

He could hear their conversation. The tallest of the three was relating a story about a subway ride. He was sure that the young lady was eyeing him, when the train stalled and the car was thrown into darkness. Even in the darkness, he was sure she was still watching him. Then, the train started up, traveled a short distance to what was his station and the doors flew open for him to exit before he could do anything. He had dreamed about her every night since, and he believed that the dreams meant he was to feel unfulfilled. He could not react as quickly as the circumstances demanded. His friends commiserated somewhat mockingly by saying subway loves never last.

"So true," said the Old Fashioned drinker under his breath. "Nor do above-ground romances do any better."

The cashier — that was her job at an upscale grocery boutique — had ordered him out three months ago after on-again, off-again romance. He had survived without being punched, knifed or, worse, kicked in the most vulnerable place through other strange affairs. In fact, strange was too mild a term. There had been the temper bitch, who had an insatiable appetite for sex — every night promptly at 10...for hours — but who blew a gasket when he used the word fuck — he had said something like...let's fuck again — because, she shouted, they were not fucking...fucking was what sexually-obsessed did. And then, the cocaine lady, a body to kill for, was doing drugs with her son, jacking off her dealer and frequently proposing that she and her two daughters (with her for two weeks each month) move into his studio (smaller quarters than usual because it had been a long stretch between jobs) after which upon denied had temper fits...once she

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grabbed his shirt and yanked so hard the buttons flew everywhere. And, finally, there was the gorgeous-but-clueless, ex-wife of ex-boss, who made male heads spin including his and who had invited him years later to her lair where to his surprise and his dismay he discovered that she was the exact opposite...inexperienced (she was as old as he was), afraid of any experimentation, frigid when she should have been aflame and mean when contradicted, locking him out in a city where he knew no one and had no cash or credit. (Well, he had his trust fund, which came to the rescue.)

No, the upscale-grocery cashier was none of these. She had straw-colored pupils surrounded by deep, dark, quasi-apostrophes, that he could stare at for hours, and she would let him after demanding silence while loosely embracing his torso. She had perfectly-sized lips that curved seductively when she smiled. It was cat and mouse for months, meeting here, meeting there, never in the open, although in the store in front of the surveillance cameras she would take his hand, hug him passionately and even let her lips cause him to erect. She was as thin as any woman that he had ever dated but more shapely than most. She knew how to dress and to accentuate. She laughed easily, she talked straightforwardly and she never took her eyes off him when he was in the store.

And, then, it happened. She announced that she was pregnant. Not by him, he knew. By another? "Oh," she said, as she turned her head sidewise, "I never mentioned him."

He had his marching orders, and she never looked at him again. He quit the store, the neighborhood, the job (which was temporary anyway, although he had the pleasure of telling his boss to fuck off) and found himself in a new apartment, neighborhood and bar.

Behind him the conversation — her eyeing him [not this him] and a month later he fucking missed her...missed her and missed her — had been elevated to a new level of triumphs, usually at the women's expense, that held no interest for him. He preferred to hear about failures.

He stood, left a Jackson and turned. Magically, a space, more like a parting of the bar's human happiness from his stool to the door, opened for him. No one recognized him because no one knew him, but worse than that no one took cognizance of him.

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As he walked through the space slowly but less than soberly, he recalled a scene from a book, whose title nor author he could remember at the moment, in which a visitor to a foreign capital informed a bank manager with whom he was doing business that only in one place could one live without loneliness, as if it were never permitted there.

Was he making this up, as he approached the doorway...the threshold of danger...or had he read it?

Made up or recollected, it was not the city in the story where he [the character] was doing business but the city where he lived...the only place to live without loneliness. Every other place — village, town city — was lonely until he lived there.

As he failed to stumble into the street, eliciting a yahoo from the bartender, standing now 20 feet away, not behind the bar, he said aloud, "No, no, no..loneliness is a universal constant."

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V

THE REVIEWED

She could barely contain her anger. The review was lying flat in front of her on her writing desk. Her ex had been given the assignment to write a review of her latest collection of stories.

First, she said to herself, the editor was in the dark about their short marriage. The review was in an online journal she did not know. She had received a heads-up from a friend. She called up the journal on her computer, and the name of the editor was an acquaintance. Actually, a friend of her ex. Planned, intentional, premeditated.

Her stories dealt with deception and betrayal among other things. You could read them without imputing to her an avenging narrator. But, the truth was that without his gargantuan ego, his gargantuan whine and his gargantuan failure she would have had to search elsewhere for material.

He had not abused her physically. He dared not. She was a lifter and could manhandle him like a female lifter should be able to do. No physical abuse. Not even mental abuse. She wasn't even sure about emotional abuse. In other words, she was not beaten into a state of despair.

No, it was something harder to describe. It was no more, no less, than living with a crap-head. In fact, one story was entitled just that - **craphead** without the hyphen or capitals, as if she were tweeting. She described crap, she portrayed head and...yes...the narrative conjured up a version of her ex but only if you knew her ex. If not, it could be any other adult brat who would always, no matter age, be a brat. She was careful to clarify all the things crap-heads were incapable of doing to their lovers, their colleagues, their friends. But, it was out of the incapacity that arose their most damnable trait - they had no reason to exist.

As she reread the review, he began to chuckle to herself. HE GOT IT. Either she was a hell-of-a-superb writer, stylist, plotter or, if she wasn't, his pinprick of intelligence was actually grander than she had been able to discern in all the muddle his existence reflected. She wasn't sure. She

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wanted to think she was as good as she thought she was and not to think he was not as dense as she thought he was. She knew she would be bugged for a while because she didn't take kindly to being in the murky middle, unsure which was which.

"Whoa! No matter how pissed off he is, how matter how vengeful he is, he got it, and if the reader didn't, the reader would after reading his review," she said aloud to everything in the room.

He wore the title with a distinction of his own creation. The ultimate **craphead**.

THE REVIEWER

He was surprised - utterly surprised - to be asked to write a review. A golden opportunity except he hated writing reviews. He hadn't been asked in years. He labored over them. He wanted to be sharp and keen, unnesting what others had missed. He seldom did.

In his hands, though, a request fraught with danger...yes...danger...danger that could lead to high drama that could lead to deserved notoriety that could lead to personal redemption.

Neither the author nor the title rung any bells. Who was she...it is a she, isn't it...what could that title possibly mean? But, given the publisher and the magazine, she must be up and coming and it must be a potential blockbuster. He needed to be associated with up-and-coming and blockbuster.

It had been months, actually years, since his disgrace. He had published a very good novel - they said so - to little notice. In fact, several who wrote notices had said openly in so many words "Why bother with this guy?" What did they know because several others — two severals actually...had used words like "provocative" and "intriguing,"

It had flattened his spine, broken his spirit, bashed his ego, but he went to work writing a fictional memoir to contextualize his disgrace. In the end, he felt less disgraced; in fact he lost all sense of disgrace. He convinced himself he had not committed a disgraceful act, despite the airy dismissals, and he had used the fictional model to explore that conundrum without demanding exoneration for what everyone else considered disgraceful.

Except the fictional memoir never got published, and the disgrace of the little notice in spite of the very good became a cesspool he could never disinfect.

Now, an invitation to write a review was causing him to have second thoughts. Was this a setup?

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He slapped his forehead, as he was wont to do when something occurred to him, not necessarily a profound occurrence, just any old occurrence, although he used think that forehead-slapping was an ultimate moment but, then, a former lover told him to quit smacking his forehead because he was making it black and blue and also creating sounds more annoying than farts, which he should not substitute for forehead-banging.

And speaking of banging, she added just hours before she walked out for good, his pecker was not made for banging.

He got sidetracked. Slapping his forehead could do that.

Anyway, if there was something fishy with this review request, he couldn't put his finger on it. But, the more he thought about, the more he knew - not intuited...no...knew - he was being set up.

"Ah," he shouted aloud, The clue was in the title...**craphead**. He'd been called that more than once in his life, probably by the book-review editor, although he couldn't remember when; in fact, he couldn't remember ever meeting the editor, but that was beside the point. The editor didn't have to say to him or in his presence that he was a crap-head for him to have said or thought it.

The mystery had resolved itself. He dispatched a nasty, ironic reply to the editor, who upon receiving his message responded that he was dumbfounded. There was no setup because there was no possibility of one. The editor had a recommendation from a recently-published writer who knew the proposed reviewer in grad school. He remembered a humorous seminar paper that he thought the proposed reviewer had written on scatological nicknames.

"Huh," said the reviewer when he read that sentence. Then, he remembered. That he had written such a paper — humorous he was not sure about — at the time he was dating, more like sleeping irregularly with, an undergrad against all the unwritten rules because she had the most prestigious scholarship that the department awarded. If she should be sleeping with anyone, it should be the senior faculty, in particular the

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professor who had uncovered her and recommended her. A longstanding tradition...grad students did not fuck undergrads reserved for senior professors. Alas, their nocturnal ventures had been discovered, and he had been warned. His descent into the eschatological was his response and also his termination.

He finally poured a cheap red and decided to read the article that he was disinvented to write a review about. The first sentence, which he had been blind to, even though he had read it along with the first page earlier...the first sentence almost knocked his wine off the table..."I slept with him for the grade but spent most of the evening in the head crapping up my disgust. Thus, the nickname."

The next sentence: "I left through the window, and the next day I left a turd, which I concocted later that night in the studio, in his mailbox. Now I plan to write a generic crap-head story, but you get the point."

Suddenly, he threw the manuscript on the floor. Not only had she set him up but she'd won the war.

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VII

MARGINAL LOSS

Finally out. It had taken months. She had cried a lot, not because she would ever miss him but because she couldn't manage a proper and final escape.

He was such a gentleman - weren't they all - when they first met. Month One seemed at the times heavenly. He was smart and well-read, knew his foods and wines, played aggressive singles, allowed her space and exhibited few pretenses.

What went wrong. After how many months of being together, of trying to part, of giving in, of stomping out, what went wrong? She had concluded rightly or wrongly — she didn't care — she was not to blame.

For all his assets, his cynicism finally got to her. How many times can anyone put up with Sisyphus pushing that fuckin' boulder in the hill? Up the hill; roll down the hill; up the same, perhaps slightly further than last time, but, alas, roll down, perhaps slightly longer.

Why isn't the point...quit pushing the goddamn boulder...it ain't going up the hill...move on, but, no, it represent the ultimate profundity, the utter futility of the human condition. We keep pushing the boulder out of the lack of awareness of our purpose and our destiny. And out of this emerges (from where no one can say) a sense of hopefulness (keep pushing) against a backdrop of unawareness or ignorance or stupidity about our chances under the best of circumstances ever to reach then top.

Sisyphus was punished so the boulder episode can hardly be instructive for all of humankind. Just one rock and quadrillions of hands and legs...com'on, now, it would be over the top in no time.

No, the gods were out to lunch....

Leave it up to the pundits and experts to screw up the message...to believe that metaphorically all humanity was condemned like Sisyphus to suffer.

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Oh, to be sure, we all suffer, but we may also be fuckin' smart enough to figure out to ignore the boulder.

That's what she did with him. Her departing gift...the boulder.

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VIII

TOTAL LOSS

What the fuck can he do with a boulder, plopped right in the middle of his 500 square-foot living room overlooking the river. The much-desired river view, for which he paid extra, was blocked from his favorite sitting-chair because of the goddamned rock.

He knew who had plopped it there, but he hadn't a clue how she did it. Another she-dilemma, not unlike the night she twisted his penis into a pretzel...momentarily, to be sure...just as he was about to let go...he screamed and she laughed.

Or the time she slowly removed his attire...a tux no less...while singing *Je dis que rein ne m'épouvante* in that language of love that he understood and in a voice that he did not recognize. He could not move because he had realized that he had become immobile, more like paralyzed, in the nude, his clothes in a knot, hanging overhead. What the fuck was going on or something close to that, he shouted, but the shout was only heard in his head. In all this confused silence he began to see his soul, acres and acres of boulders, bounded by more hills than he could count or wanted to count. Somehow, in that room, on that bed, at that moment his soul, which he had long hidden, was fully on display. He tried to crawl under the covers, but the covers did not obey. He tried to speak — shout really — but the vocal chords failed. Then, he noticed the open window.

The sorceress had departed, without a word or a sound.

And, now in a different place and at a different time, totally disrobed — had he undressed himself — he heard snickers, ohs, gasps, an array of sounds of hilarity and dismay that signaled others knew — were they in the room, on the ceiling, at the window (uncovered) — he was buck naked except for the pile clothes over his feet, the best part of his whole body, a post-sorceress artist/lover who fucked abusively when she was angry...she was always angry mainly because he wasn't...that artist/lover had told him that his feet were his only remarkable feature and she intended on cutting them off. That was when he fled through the window...a different window. Later

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he saw a painting of hers, with feet variously positioned on the canvas of misshapen faces caressing his feet. He couldn't sleep for nights. He bought extra door locks.

And the voices, more like rat-a-tat, seemingly unattached to any bodies, ceased. He had not seen them enter, and now he had not seen them leave. Was his soul still bare? Were specters waiting to appear or reappear?

He stepped around his pile of clothes, still naked, and slowly approached the boulder. He noticed for the first time it had flat sides but a round top. It could not be rolled. The ultimate futility he thought to himself. She had presented him with the ultimate futility.

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IX

NAKEDLY

She undressed him, item by item, and there the story ended.

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X

UNNAKEDLY

He redressed her, item by item, and that was where the story began.

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XI

SADNESS FOR BARKEEP

She fixed him an Old Fashioned...her way.

That was okay, he said, with a smile, when she posed the question.

She liked his smile. "How old is he?" she asked herself.

Bartending was a means to an end for her. She knew a lot about the end she was seeking. She found out early, on the first night he came to the bar, he was well-traveled, but not in the way most travelers were. Yes, part of his traveling was business, what he called "archival." He spent long hours reading historical documents in several languages. Combined with that, however, was what interested her. When not in the archives, he could be found in museums, museums of art mainly, only occasionally other museums. He talked quietly and modestly about these ventures, but after listening she figured he'd spent hours upon hours in every major museum that everyone wanted to visit. Plus, some she never heard of and some off-limits to public. She was envious and admiring and hopeful. She was equally fascinated because he could talk about this life of his so matter-of-factly. Who was he exactly? The owner knew him but said little.

On the second or third night he'd shown up their conversation took a serious serious, personal turn. She had been tending bar long enough to know that if he kept returning, this would happen. He had arrived and seated himself as usual at the end of the bar,. Having been diverted by other requests, she had not yet spoken to him. When she finally stood in front of him, not a word yet being spoken, as if on cue, their eyes locked in that position fiction writers love to turn into metaphors.

"No orders, please," she thought but did not utter.

Moments passed before he said:

"The women I've known with your name have been beautiful but dismissive. I'm gun-shy."

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"Hostilely dismissive?" she had asked without thinking it through?

"I'm embarrassed to say yes," as if he were responsible.

Then, she remembered why that question had slipped into her mind. She had once ordered someone she wanted to be in love with out of her life. He was flummoxed because he knew she was engaged to a guy she married (he did not know she subsequently divorced him) and had never laid a finger on her, although she had once tried to trap him into fucking her...a plan that went badly awry before he would ever find out what was up. Flummoxed because he never knew her intentions but she brow-beat him anyway. Not a moment she was proud of. And now was being reminded, as if the man across the bar was a reincarnation of an earlier....

Called away her mind was not on crafting one of those signature cocktails this bar was patronized for. She excused herself but standing ten feet away from him she could not keep her eyes on the cocktail.

As the bar filled up, she got busier and busier. And, then, when she looked over, he was gone, a Jackson lying next to his empty glass.

Over the intervening weeks, before she left for another place, she never saw him again. Had she become another woman with her very interesting name to add to his list of women to forget. She had flirted subtly and texted him with her eyes. What did he sense, feel, deign, fear? She knew he had a web sites - sites actually - but she'd never made contact. Nor had he with hers.

She decided to look, and when she clicked on Poems she found her answer:

*Beginnings are smiles
Endings are poems
In between see Tolstoy.*

Later...

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*It began with requisite smile
Small genuine wary
Framed by two locks
Dangling, dancing
That momentarily diverted me
From eyes that judged
The space between us
And we talked more than we should
I knew I had to start writing the poem.*

And later...

*In the instant
I saw your face
I heard your name
I started to slide
To fall.
Under the tension
I blurted out
I must be out of your life
Your admonition was
Stop it
Don't say that.*

Finally...

*A blurting out
Followed by
An admonition
Even though
Endearing
Unsupportable
Overwhelmed by
An ancient curse
My agedness
Repelled
By your youth
I live in the past*

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*You in the future
The ending written.*

These lines were crossed out but not erased.

~~*A blurting that
Meant to say
I'm so scared
In love with
The Art you do
The Art you are
Your name that
Everyman name
You said...No
Just the first of
Your Everyman
Just the first
Made me run
Ere I know
Dismissive again*~~

Poetically assigned to his list of **dismissives**, a term, she now recalled, for the list that she has no doubt that she had been assigned to.

"Every reason I should be added," she whispered, not feeling innocence or guilt...no...feeling sadness.

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XII

SADNESS FOR BARMATE

From the moment he sat down and looked into her face...not yet a word spoken...he knew he was at the wrong bar. Then, when he heard her name, he wanted to sink into the veneer of the oak bar.

He did not need this today or yesterday or tomorrow or ever again. Everyone's nemesis was different. Some nemeses were deadly serious. What would someone say if he ever tried to explain his nemesis? At least this one. Women with her name - how many were there...five, six, seven...a thousand or a million potentials - it didn't matter how many because one more was enough to darken his mood for weeks.

They had chatted off and on for 20 minutes. She wasn't busy, and, as had happened with all the others bearing her name, they exchanged more information about each other than would ever happen with a woman of another name. It was the name that drew him in, pulled him apart, tossed him about.

She was everything he loved and desired in a woman...everything he had only barely realized before he was abandoned...no, before he had abandoned himself, as he knew would happen again. He was already writing the farewell poem, and absurdly he'd only known her for at most ten minutes.

Was there a name for his condition other than **loony**? As much as he had thought about it, he had never come close to figuring out why women with her name were always so attractive and so impermanent.

He unlocked the door to his condo, as he wrote the final line to the farewell poem, which she would never read but he would post to save himself. Not more than a whiff of a possibility with her. She did not even take notice. He was just another old, white-haired, slobbering male looking for a way to cut through the boredom of an existence beyond its usefulness. How could his mind or heart or prick or wherever these emotions arise from let him give a second thought to any young woman, to any woman for that matter. Did he

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do this to himself as a form of self-testing, self-reproaching because the boredom, which he denied three times every day, needed to be diverted.

He began to nod off and said to himself:

"Oh Death...your goddamn promises aren't worth shit."

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XIII

WANTING

She wanted a good fuck. One that would set off all the bells and whistles.

Not like the one last night nor the one last week nor the one last month. Like the one she remembered with the guy whose name she couldn't remember.

Was that what it took...nameless fucker.

Her hand lay across her vagina. She knew what was going to happen, while she was trying to dredge up a name that would not be dredged.

"Shit," she mumbled, as she began to arch her back. He may truly have been nameless because we had never exchanged names.

She felt the first rhythm up and down, as she imaged her fingers being his powerful but gentle lips and tongue....

A good fuck...that all she wanted, not with herself but with the him that made her want a good fuck.

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XIV

CALLING

He had exploded once again into some Kleenex. Simpler, cheaper, safer, not what it once was because she was the imaginary he was fucking. Not the woman from last night, from last week or from last month.

What the fuck was her name? The vibration against his fingers, his lips and then around his dick simply made his emotions more explosive for what seemed like forever.

What the fuck was her name....

No name because they had met in the hallway of the hotel, and without a word they nodded toward her door, inside undressed each other, fucked, dressed, nodded toward his door, undressed each other, fucked, dressed...until midnight became midday.

But then...but then...but then...out of the blue it came to him...she whispered three words. Without a second thought he dialed them on his cell.

"Hello" he heard in too strong a voice, and he asked her to whisper the hello again. She knew, he knew....

THE DIRECTION WAS CLEAR

Her politics were her secrets. She voted - not regularly - but more often than not. Her indifference of which she was ashamed must be rooted in her past...specifically her family. Her parents voted. She was not sure how regularly, but they voted...she remembered. They thought politics a dishonorable calling. They would not have used that word, but that was the word. All politicians were crooked, but her parents said their party was less so than the other guys. She had been known to repeat the same shit, and she knew it was shit. Her parents never did.

Her father boasted once that he had never voted for the other guys except when a judge — one of the other guys — ran on both tickets. He had a funny name, which she wouldn't even try to recall. What she did remember decades later was that her father had not done the honorable thing by voting for better candidates. No...he just pulled the lever for his party.

She had pulled the lever her parents never pulled more than once. Maybe a dozen times. At heart, though, she remained grossly faithful to the family tradition. At this time in her life, especially at this very moment, she felt embarrassed when she thought about her politics. Therefore, she seldom ever thought about politics.

She wished she had been more thoughtful about politics. She hadn't ever thought very deeply about her politics before. She had long known that her party was the party of the rich. She was a cohort of plutocrats, although not even close to being a supporter of plutocrats.

She was more open-minded, tolerant, less doctrinaire. Things like workplace biases, income inequalities and safety nets had entered her conscious world more than it ever did her parents' or their parents' world, even though one of those deals had saved her father's parents from the ultimate despair. Moreover, her well-offness was bugging her for the first time in her life. She had been confronted with this in school and at work, but she had successfully deflected any criticism of her lack of concern by

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changing the subject. She was articulate and quick-witted and was seldom caught off guard.

Something had happened to screw up the equilibrium of many years' standing. Something had happened. Her much acclaimed self-satisfaction had been riddled to pieces. It was about her but not her. It was about him and about another her.

Shit! She hated thinking about it but it was unavoidable...a part of her day, her behavior, her life. She slumped into her wingback next to the sliding glass door that she had made into her crystal ball, a flat crystal ball, to be sure. She was sure it spoke to her, understood her predicaments, cued her in, acted like a guardian.

"God damn," she said out loud. I've lived alone too long! Way too long. Then, she remembered, it had only been a month since he had introduced her, and how the she her had defiantly folded her arms across her chest...that spoke volumes.

She was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties: medium height, properly proportional (a phrase her father favored when eyeing a woman not his wife or her mother), infectious smile under a crooked nose, real blonde, fading slightly...in short attractive. That would also describe her. In fact without knowing any details she and she could be twins. It took a few seconds for she who was not her to take this all in and to observe as well the terror in his face. She who was not her was not in the least unnerved when she who was not her had spoken loudly behind them: "Who the fuck is this woman, what the fuck are you doing with her and when the fuck were you going to 'fess up," were 'ore or less the words she remembered from the encounter, a month later while sitting in her wingback, followed by "when the fuck was he going to make clear what the fuck was going on?"

He was terror-stricken and dumb-founded all at once. She who was not her showed neither. If anything, she was ready to flick this man away. She who was not her was somewhere between total bewilderment and utter rage. She was a superb athlete, having learned to box and having earned belts in martial arts. She was pissed but not afraid, even though in the background

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were others watching the three of them. She was me mesmerized briefly by the stand of the other she.

The momentary wait that seemed like hours came to an end with his "I should explain."

"That you should do *toute de suite*," she shot back, as her arms folded across her breasts. *Je suis lent à la colère, mais je suis imprévisible quand je suis en colère.*

She knew he understood because they often spoke in French. It was immediately apparent to her, however, that the she who was not her did not understand.

It did not surprise her, therefore, when he moved between and spoken almost so quietly that he did not want she who was her to hear or understand. In a torrent of French, which he was fully capable of, she heard English terms — insurrectionists, right-wing, paramilitary — inserted into perfectly-constructed French syntax. It took no more than a minute, as if he had long rehearsed it, before he stepped back to where he had been standing. She watched her, whose expression had gone from defiant to raw and menacing and whose right hand was now enclosed in her large pocketbook.

His last words were in Spanish...*Piérdete. Es demasiado peligroso continuar.*

She left, as instructed. He was clearly tied up with some crazies. Days later she received a long but hurriedly-written one-paragraph letter...style unlike his...in which he confessed his *sins*...language unlike his...he had intended to seduce her but not fall in love. Alas, he had done both. There was more to the seduction than sex, and that part he could not carry out. She could figure out the rest. His fate was sealed along with his love.

She had stared at the words, not sure what they meant. Sib e then she had figured out nothing. She was in love with a man who was in love with her but who was a mirage. How can one cuddle, caress and court a mirage and not know it?

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Her face fell into her open palms. What was it she did not understand? Politics, romance, lies, deception? She was smart, she was savvy and she was stupid...all rolled up in one what the fuck ball. She needed to get with it. She pulled her face away from her hands.

"Never in my life have I used that phrase," she shouted at the fridge. "Never!"

As she rose from her chair, leaning on the kitchen table for support, the tears burst forth. He held that position for a time, not counting the minutes. When she raised her head, she knew what she to do. She didn't have to check the weather on her pad. It was cold. She walked to her coat rack.

"The inefficiency of winter," she said to herself. "We spend hours putting on layers and layers of clothing and then more hours 'delaying' ourselves."

She knew where she had to go anyway. The café where they had met. She had to confront it and erase it. Not knowing exactly what the words meant, she murmured to herself, as she locked her door:

"It's not just him. It's all that stuff in my life I thought I could ignore. I can't any longer. All that stuff will rule my life unless I rule it."

No doubt about it when after ordering her espresso she saw the headline and picture in the local newspaper. Authorities had found his body and had arrested her along with others.

It would take time, but the direction was clear.

XVI

THE DIRECTION WAS ALSO CLEAR

He lost his money, his faith, his left hand and his history. Where he was...unimportant. He won't be any place else. Not in the near future, whatever that meant. He had tried several times to alter his place, and several times he had failed, but his consolation was he could add those failures to a long list. Adding relieved whatever was tightening inside him. He awaited intervention at the highest level.

The room was dark but not yet dank. The chair at the table...the only pieces of moveable furniture...was hard and straight back. He sat straight up, feet flat on the floor, as if his blood pressure were being taken. He stared straight ahead into a black space. He could see nothing and everything.

He knew where the door was and also that it was locked...from the outside. Windows...four solid walls instead. Size...not spacious but not cramped either. There was no heat or air because it was, he remembered, fall...coolish outside, he assumed.

He let his mind wander. He realized he was writing a story he would never finish, let alone publish. It was about his circumstance. But wasn't every story about a circumstance? Not the confining part, although that was noted and, therefore, assumed. The character like him was confined. Rather, what was driving the story in his mind was the simplicity of the circumstance. His confinement may be complicated — he resisted deciding at this precise moment if it were or weren't — but being confined was itself a simplicity.

A room, x by x, unlit, barely furnished, moderately temperate, utterly quiet, real but removed from reality that he could understand; a world created for him but a world he was reshaping just by being there, sitting erect in a chair that belonged to the room, not him, but a chair that assumed a different existence because he was sitting in it, in a room with a different purpose because the chair was occupied instead of empty, because he was inhaling and exhaling and changing the status of the air as it passed through his lungs and around the room and over the furnishings, because he unlike the

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room, the furnishings, the place was alive, germs and all, but doomed...what was the fate of the germs or the furnishings?

Minutes passed or was it hours? He began to feel as if he could move, with ease, to any part of the room, not just on the floor but on the ceiling or the walls. The utter darkness and silence playing with his mind...a thought for which he had little enthusiasm because he preferred the transcending of gravity.

He was and wasn't losing his mind. He sensed light in the darkness, luxury in the sparseness, noise in the silence. How could it be both? He would leave it there.

He had lied about his politics to win her affections. He made jokes about what he believed. He fabricated stories about whom he admired. He belittled the left and glorified the right with all the skill his writerly ways permitted.

It turned out badly.

She managed a pizza shop, slept with several men, called him a social butterfly because in the gym next to the shop he spent as much time talking as lifting and unerringly enjoyed turning him on before repeating he was too old to fuck her. He took her at her word until the night when the prohibition ended. Her principal man, the owner, had gotten fed up, fired her and dumped her things on the street. She called him, and he arrived within minutes in his boat of a car. They packed up, and she moved in. She was not only angry but conniving.

"I will fuck you because I am not without gratitude. Also, when I've been treated badly I need to fuck badly." He would not dare venture the observation that maybe her recent dethroning had cause. This was the beginning of his failure to speak the truth. A face so perfectly designed, every feature in proportion, and a body, thin and lithe, not a wasted motion.

He was found out. She denigrated him. He deserved denigration as much as she deserved the same. Denigration was not in her vocabulary. Thus,

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the room, the prison, the end. Heavenly fucking became earthly prison. A lesson never learned.

She said he would die there...but first he knew she was in the room for one more....This was going to be a long, agonizing death.

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XVII

HER SIN

She did not succumb to his guile. She knew what he was doing and, more pointedly, what she was doing because of what he was doing. For her even at her young age, obviously, not the first time being fucked...that happened when she was sixteen and off and on for the next two years. She sighed, not audibly, as he lost his way, again. This was what remembering was for. Long ago a teenage but now lying on your back on crumpled sheets, in a bed that squeaked with an adult guy/teenager on top whose best quality was erotic huffing and puffing. How in the world did she let herself....

She recalled how bad 16-year-olds were at fucking. Slightly better at seventeen or eighteen. It didn't matter. The toughs professing manliness while still boys or the smarties trying to brainstorm you without a clue...no, it didn't matter, they were all the same. They erected fast, poked around for some entry point and spewed their semen before they ever got any place close. Probably a good thing in retrospect. If they had condoms, they'd mistaken their middle finger for their pecker, and that would be what she found inside her. She had been lucky to escape unscathed, even though dissatisfied. As a teenager, she had read about memorable fucks, she thought she knew how they should be and feel, but sadly memorable fucks were scarce even in adulthood, as huffer and puffer was proving once again. Her own organisms were more memorable. Except...there was an exception.

Com'on. Please ejaculate now! She had to put an end it, as she used to do as a teenager. She grabbed his penis, jammed it in where it should be and, presto, provoked an explosion. This guy was not sixteen, except in his pecker strategies. He stirred or left the wrong memory.

Then, to her dismay, she heard...

"Wasn't that great! The best ever. We need to make thus permanent."

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She remembered over her morning joe her disgust as never-cloital she stuck her fingers in some goo on her right knee. She lost it momentarily. She rolled over on top, brought her lower body, in particular her right knee, into his face and wiped herself clean.

"That's as permanent as it gets." She grabbed the loose sheet...being a lifter she was many times stronger than him...and with the speed of an experienced sheet-tier she had him bundled up in no time. She dressed and left, as he shouted out with his unoriginal mind..."When will I see you again?"

Memorable fucks reminded her (again plus again) She went off to college...actually, off to big-city university on the other side of the country. She hated leaving where she lived, but she knew it had to be. Her parents had never let her consider attending one of the good local schools. The discussions were never angry. Her parents had that unique talent to engage a disputable topic without making it into epic warfare. She knew, they knew that if she had insisted on a local or nearby university they would have eventually yielded. She began to realize during the discussions, imbibing good wine or champagne - their modest, sparsely - but elegantly furnished house, their small but serviceable vehicle with more than 100,000 miles, their bare closets and nearly bare basement, their anti-materialistic predilection (except for books and CD spilling off the shelves onto the floors and art covering virtually every square inch of wall space in every room) - she began to realize then that the cocoon would never launch a butterfly if she stayed. Off she went....

It was not as much of a shock, as she had expected. Her professors were like the crowd her parents hung out with and the students were like the big-city kids she hung out with. She knew how smart she was and how well prepared she was, and the first week in classes and labs did not intimidate her in the slightest. She liked her roommates, but she was a maverick about friendships, took her time fitting in, spent long hours by herself at cafés and bistros with piles of books. Class assignments and discussions were at a level she could easily handle, although she knew they would become more demanding. When not studying, lifting weights (the gym was excellent), drinking espressos, writing, she walked through the city to try to come to terms with her new urban environment. It was different from her

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own stomping grounds. She wasn't sure exactly how except in terms of weather it was less sunny and more changeable. She would stop and check out the winter attire in the store windows. She began to think that adapting to winter, which she had only experienced on ski trips into the mountains east of the Pacific coast, had to be her biggest challenge.

"No," she said out loud 30 years later to this reminiscence provoked because of another pecker punch out.

"No...No...No!"

Once in her life a pecker to remember but also...the gods' punishment, she had longer ago decided...diminished the rest of the pecker population - with one or two exceptions, close but always secondary.

"Sex Trumps Weather."

How often had she repeated that line? So often it became the title of a short story, which won fame and some fortune. She was already an established writer, but her career was further solidified with that story. It was based on an event in her life, except everything was turned around. She was not the student but the professor, and he was not the professor but the student. He initiated, not her, when in fact she had. Other things happened in the story that turned real events inside out. However, as she remembered or retold, rewrote, revisited the story, truth became almost purely fiction, and the fiction rang true but not with truth, and the melange had created a third narrative she further modified.

Why today was she thinking she could peel back the historical onion and find the truth? Why today? What had happened today, last night, yesterday, last week that demanded her own intervention? She let that thought die in the air around her.

The air around her...it was filled with so much unfinished business. Her accomplishments were dazzling to many, but if they only knew what was stacked up, weighing her down, diverting her attention, knotting her stomach. The he in her life that marked her for life. The he she had buried and reburied and then buried again and again.

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She had not seen him in person for decades, but she knew where he was; she knew what he did; what she did not know was how he felt. She wanted to know — desperately — because she had persuaded herself that if he said how he felt — angry or sad or indifferent or vengeful — then she could say what she never could: I was wrong. Not I am sorry, not forgive me because neither of them believed in forgiveness.

In their case they both knew the risks and refused to turn back. They talked about getting caught and paying the price. Getting caught now was different from before. Student-professor romances were as old as universities but forbidden in the contemporary world. Even if they had proclaimed their love and their intention to remain together come thick or thin, he would have been fired and she would have been expelled. The rules were that stringent and non-appealable.

What happened was bizarre. A student, dismayed at his failure to win the professor's praise (he was the go-to professor), exposed him but confused the names. She named a woman who had left the university months earlier and was unreachable, living somewhere in Europe. Realizing what a mess she had created for herself, the accuser took off for parts unknown. But, the damage was done. Old Main had an accusation and an untraceable name, and that was enough. To prove its no-nonsense stance, it gave the professor a choice: nothing would be said if he quit; otherwise, a full-scale investigation. He quit. His real lover...the one that really loved him...was never mentioned, either by him or Old Main. He saved her. He never said a word. The campus was dismayed, but not outraged, and months after he had departed, a partial story, which might, if pursued, have uncovered the truth, began to circulate. Since the sketchy details could not be confirmed because the parties had scattered, it was reported as unreliable by the student newspaper. In reality, by then, no one seemed to care, and the matter fell between the cracks.

Not for her, though. She was horrified at what had happened. As she entered middle-age, he knew what she should have done. She didn't and, worse, she hasn't done anything since to rectify her cowardice. It was cowardice. Because she was so young with so much promise, she was not about to screw up her future if she could avoid it. He let her avoid it. When

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she found out he was being forced out, she should have stepped forward to say it was mutual, and more than once she had begged him not to end it.

She still felt shivers when she thought about their first night two weeks after the seminar for freshmen he taught had begun. It was mid-September with summer warmth defining the days but the autumn cool invading the nights. They had run into each other at a local café. Not really, she reminded herself; they ran into each other because she had planned it that way. She had followed him one afternoon from his office to see where he went, where he lived. He ended up at the café, and looking in from the outside she could surmise that he was a regular. After he ordered, he sat by himself with his iPad and a book in front of him. She did not go in but knew she would tomorrow or the next day or the day after that. But, she had to think first, think hard about what she feeling and what she was doing because of what she was feeling.

It happened. She showed up, he recognized her, they sat together through several *cafés* and then they fucked. It didn't happen quite that smoothly. Before fucking but after *café-ing* they talked about what was to happen. She made no attempt to derail the train. And she had made up her she would not, if possible, let him derail it. Engaging herself ever more deeply...never letting him doubt her desire and never letting him contemplate any thought of disengagement...she made herself as irresistible as she possibly could. It proved to be easier than she had assumed. Once she knew that...no entrapment...just common desire...she relaxed...she let it happen.

No chance they would just stand, shake hands and part. At some imprecise, unscripted moment, their bodies and souls connected and intertwined; they rose from their table, retrieved their jackets and backpacks, linked their arms and left for their world concocted without a word.

As they walked, not briskly but purposefully through the streets, filled with students, she knew, not just felt, she knew she was being observed. She was an unknown; he was not. She was with HIM, and that could not be missed by those who knew him and may have once been with HIM. The unspoken was in all the glances. She was young, he was old, she was an

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undergraduate, he was her teacher, grader, critic, she was youthfully attractive, he was agingly attractive, and so forth.

On that day their relationship was at its most open. A flaunting walk through the university's center. Once their relationship took hold...night after night in each other's embrace...their relationship became as invisible as possible. For months they kissed, they read, they laughed, they teased, they did not pretend to be in love, no, they lived for love. Until....

Her inaction had expedited his exit, although his career did not end...rather it took a different turn.

How many times had she replayed those months with him and especially the last day when she abandoned him without a word.

For the rest of your life.... That little voice stuck somewhere behind her heart over which she had no control. Never when it would show up but always knew what it would say. She called it her Nemesis, although she never felt threatened, diminished, insulted. That it was a sweet voice defied her logical nature (by default but not by choice). Sweet or not it left its mark each time...shrinking that emotion of the heart that endears us in rage old-fashioned sense.

She pulled out her cell, found his number, looked at it...longstanding game...will I or won't I? She was a mature rather than young beauty, had married once, vowing never to repeat that mistake again, was childless but not loverless, resigned to her Fate that never felt very Fate-driven, her career wrapped in stars, she was admired and quoted...oh, that quote-variable without which no academic can survive...and one or two sterling men who were no doubt still sterling.

Simple fact in a life with few simple facts...the longer and probably the farther she was away from him the more she pined. Not incessantly or dangerously...to put it simply (wasn't that the theme?) when she thought of him it was deeper, surer and snarlier.

She stared at his number...and she stared at his number....

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XVIII

HIS SIN

The news was not good. It seldom was, for which he blamed himself. Even in his maturity, even when he had so much evidence to the contrary, he couldn't stop making foolish choices. He had analyzed that up and down, back and forth, inside and out...every which way by every cliché...and the conclusion was no conclusion...it was always the same...it had become a verity of its own. Contrary to what we were taught, that further probing self-analysis will reveal deeper truths, contrary to that intellectual bullshit, further did not yield deeper. The answer was the same each time...I'm a fucking fool, but at least I'm fucking...well, not so much any more.

That was why being a fool had become serious.

You had to laugh, he thought; otherwise you'd go insane.

It was reckless and therefore unfathomable. He lit another cigarette. Even if this hadn't gotten him, the smoke would have eventually. Maybe the smoke had already invaded and poisoned and was about to announce itself. More news not so good.

He had come to believe in some form of psychic entanglement. His thoughts and desires and needs got invaded by those he knew and loved, especially the women who had invited him in and then thrown him out, only to re-express themselves in new and dangerous ways. Somewhere during his life he'd lost control of his self. His drive to take on what he should leave at the doorstep had only turned up the spin that pushed him deeper into chaos. He had a new no mathematical theory of chaos. It is the human condition.

His therapist..no longer relevant...had diagnosed his crazed behavior as nothing more than profound narcissism. He had learned a lot about narcissism from a women - ex-wife of ex-boss, oh, so many - who discussed the narcissistic behavior of her philandering husband while fucking. She did neither well, but he would laugh and give a thumbs up,

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and, worse, go back for more lecturing and pretending. She finally shouted out..."Where are you taking me?" He seldom was asked a question that he could not respond to, but he had met his *seldom*. She disappeared. He wanted and missed her, when he confessed all this to his therapist, she shook her head while uttering "I can't take your money anymore because you are incurable." [that utterance, he wished, had been given \$30,000 sooner.] of course, he and his therapist had been fucking weeks - off duty, of course - so he concluded he had consoled himself by saying that he was paying for sex, kinky as it was.

And the narcissism was uncured. But this time, when his therapist, known as Kinkiest to her exes — both lovers and clients — threw him out, he had reached some unobserved boundary, which he could not cross, no matter how hard he tried. He could go no farther. He looked across the line into the future, and he saw his past. The past had stamped and stopped his life.

What next? He was not dead...yet...but was he alive? How to find out? Should he just lie down and let whatever force do its thing? Do its thing. That was what they did with glee. Packs and packs of cigarettes, conversations that had no endings until the edges of their own bodies had disappeared, raptures with no religious contents whatsoever...that was their thing. That thought and the cigarette should make her reappear. They didn't. Far in the past. Easily assemblable in the hippocampus but not at his table. And yes, there are ranking...no narcissist can live without them...and she still sat at the top. And, when he thought about her, like now, he knew she was pulled in and thinking about him.

He walked into kitchen to pour another glass. One-glass a day...no more...except today. It happened from time to time, but it had been happening with more frequency. It was easy to lose himself in another glass. He also knew that was a dumb thought because he never really did lose himself. Restless, to be sure; lost, not even close. He was just looking for a simple explanation that would make it all turn around.

Restlessness...his mantra. Twelve letters, five s's, three e's, the rest didn't matter. The s's and the e's didn't matter. Searching for the next step fell

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under definition for restlessness. Restlessness also disowned resistance. Resisting had little future...oh, that future, again...why embrace it.

The drink poured he moved back into the parlor, the name he had given his ultramodern living area. It was as close to a parlor as he was as close to a prize. There was a time when he thought he would win The Prize, but then he made an uncanny discovery that he was a misfit. Not exactly misfit in the neurotic or psychotic sense. Rather, misfit as in generically not fitting in. He could do lots of things, numerous, wide-ranging talents...name a vocation, he could have done it...but, then, all that talent wasted because he could not get along with people. Pretty simple...generally people turned him off. Everything he tried to do involved people except writing and to a limited degree teaching, that is, when teaching was lecturing. He gave up the teaching...well, it gave him up...and stuck to the writing.

That was his history in its slickest form. At this point nothing else need be known. She knew everything that had to be known, but not everything. She never would.

He finished his drink because he knew what the approaching hour meant. The knock, as he expected. He stood, gathered up nothing, walked to the door, turned the knob....

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XIX

DISCOVERER

Nuts!

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XX

DISCOVERED

Ouch!

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XXI

INBOUND

She didn't want to think she was escaping but why else was she on the train. Going to visit her first cousin, who will know the minute she sees her what was up. The explanation on the phone — "we haven't seen each other in a whole" — was utter nonsense.

Her cousin had responded with exactly the right words — "do it and, as a bonus, you get to work out with me in a brand new gym...not one of those smelly, noisy, upgraded high- school gyms filled with obnoxious weight lifters gyms...this is luxury and the men are sexy" — the sexy remark said slowly and emphatically.

Oh, hell yes, she knew.

Her cousin knew what was cookin...too bad the traveling cousin couldn't figure out up from down....

"Oh, shit, he wants to sit next to me," she said under her breath.

"No, it's all yours," she said out loud.

He sat, after saying thank you but nothing further. He set about unloading gear...a phone, a pad, some documents or notes, half-lenses and a cookie...not just any cookie but one black on outside and mint white on inside.

"That' s how he could win his way into my heart," she thought with her eye lids half open if that. She was not good at pretending, but she wanted to watch but not be seen watching. Actually he seemed to pay no attention to her. That was beginning bug her. He was definitely a senior but still handsome, a small nob of a gut, she had noticed when, standing, he asked about the seat, but broad and probably muscular shoulders...a weightlifter she surmised.

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She turned toward the window, lay her head on her arm folded over the window sill. She would try to sleep, to forget about him and him.

She didn't sleep, partly because her seat mate was so quiet, barely any movement, his breathing was as noisy as he got. How strange. That made it almost impossible for her to drift off.

After a few minutes she turned back into an upright position in her seat, tapped his arm, tried to say...but couldn't. He knew. He folded his pad and his tray, lifted himself out of his seat and offered his hand, which she surprisingly took hold of, even though she didn't need to. She locked the bathroom door and leaned against the wall, bewildered, before she used the bathroom for its intended purpose. He was standing when she reached her seat. He smiled, and she knew she was matching his smile.

When she was seated, he turned to her, his eyes bluer than hers, his face, weather-beaten like the face of the male on cigarette packages that she remembered from her cigarette days...weather-beaten but a face to touch and caress...she almost reached over but stopped herself before it became evident...my god, what was wrong with her. Only a second or two passed before he spoke:

"Going to the city or stopping along the way?" he asked so gently.

"The city. And you?"

"The same," he replied as he repositioned himself to talk without turning his head.

And talk they did. For almost three hours. She was not a storyteller, not because she didn't have stories to tell but because her immediate audience never encouraged her. She had figured out that to gain attention she had to lie more, like her fiancé or her brother, even her best girlfriend whom she had known since grade school and whose experiences were so thoroughly mixed with hers that she could detect when fact became fiction...like the monster fish stories her daddy told except everyone including him they were untrue...she had listened to so many stories during her childhood but

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she never adapted the narrative where the story became her pitch, her persona, her pedestal...no, her narrative was modest and apparently dull.

Not for her seat mate, however. He asked question that only elicited more narrative. He reminded her of the poet, briefly in her life in her late twenties when she was living to ski and skiing to live in the mountains, who was younger than she was but already published — at least two books — and climbing the literary ladder, as he called it, until he disappeared. If he was ever found, she was never told. But, she would not be told because no one knew of their liaison...something that could be gotten away in the mountains...he secluded himself in his mountain cabin from his wife and his friends to write, but for months she joined him, he read her his poetry and most gently since she was a novice those things that poets and writers needed to know. He was a fumbler at sex but mesmerizing while they lay in bed.

She cherished those months, relived them in her memory and waited for another mesmerized, albeit another fumbler, to come along. Had he arrived? In the middle of nowhere? When the maniacs of love had driven her out, temporarily she assured herself but not him?

Did she want to go back? This was not the place or time to ask that question.

They walked from the car into the station, found her platform for the trip to her cousin's (he was walking to his hotel) and started to say goodbye when she threw her arms around him and they held each other tightly for seconds before she said "Stay in touch" as if it were an order...and it was.

She turned toward the escalator, walked a few steps, as he tried to recover from what happened second ago. She stopped, turned back toward him, paused then hurriedly retraced her steps, threw her arms around again and kissed him, tongues intersecting and breasts quaking until she pulled away. Her finger crossed his lips.

You don't exist was what he heard, as she quickly parted, bounding up the stairs instead of taking the escalator. At the top her hand rose over her

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head in a modest wave. She never looked back and was almost instantly lost in the crowd.

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XXII

OUTBOUND

"Thus weather is playing with my heart" shown up on his cell. Utterly surprised. More precisely...paralyzed. More fear than delight. He stared at what appeared on his screen for a long time, he was sure, although he had no idea how time had lapsed.

It had been weeks, maybe months. He had purposely cut off communications because he was doing most of the talking or messaging, her replies so noncommittal, as to be irrelevant. Of course, as much as he hated to admit it, she had no reason to be "committal", a word made up for the occasion.

He thought about a response. He realized he was thinking about the wrong thing. He should be thinking about no response, not how to how to respond. But, that was how it was...not contacting her had not ended thinking about her. And now he was thinking about a response.

It took a while. He decided to write "And the second line of your song."

Another surprise. She shot an answer back almost before he had lifted his finger from the **send** icon. Had she been waiting all this time for his response? Had she already written the response even before she read his? Not like her. She did not act in predictable ways. He had never been able to predict, and he had convinced himself she preferred simply to act without thinking ahead. He often weighed all the possible options as to what might happen, even though he was usually wrong...in her case always wrong.

In this case he had not thought yet about her response. He had thought about what to write and fleetingly about the range of her responses, but he had really worried more about what to write than how she might respond. He really hadn't come to terms with the fact she had written and she might write again. His fall back was don't expect anything. That eliminated having to think about this on again, off again, more off than on, relationship that he was not really having.

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The response arrived, and it said: "I wrote the first line & expect you to write the rest of the song."

He stared even longer at this sentence.

He was bewildered, thrilled, afraid, hopeful...he quit counting the cascade of emotions.

He did not respond because he couldn't. He couldn't because he couldn't think of what to say. He lay awake most of the night composing lines, nearly all meaningless, mixed metaphors, jumbled syntax, in short bull shit. He was exhausted, as the first light appeared. He thought what's-her-name who wrote all those poems upstairs in a bedroom — did she write *The dawn dimmed without you* — was he confusing her with someone else — one thing for certain — he hadn't written that line — but now he was thinking he should send it to her as if he had written it — his agony soon ended as he fell asleep.

Weeks passed. No further word, even though he had sent several short, utterly harmless texts. No responses. Nothing. Worse than nothing. He woke up every morning hoping for a few words. In this world of instantaneous communication, how dependent we had become on words, images, acknowledgment, recognition, in the loop or on the timeline...and long bouts of despondency, despair, depression...all those **d**-words...when nothing showed up. And nothing showed up.

He had, as usual, more than one reaction. He despaired, of course, because he wanted it all, even though he had no sign he could expect anything. Well, he had small, more appropriately, indefinite, ambiguous signs that he could swiftly inflate into the sure thing, the new future, the Athena moment only to be torn to pieces when none of those fantasies materialized.

And there were times when he made sense to himself.

You made up all this shit. QUIT! Nine hundred reasons why she can't — he never used won't — be interested in you, and zero reason why she is.

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Surprisingly, when he arrived in this mood with sincerity and determination, it would linger for days until the mood of longing pushed it aside.

There was even a mood founded on she's as bewildered as you, lost in her own longings, less able to initiate conversations and beyond, dependent upon him to keep the door ajar, waiting in her own desperation for his contact. And when it dawned on him how silly this mood was, for he knew how ferocious she could be, he would drink a bottle of wine.

More weeks passed. His life was further complicated by jag-offs who wanted him to pay his bills, meet his deadlines, move his car, take a bath. Life was a daily battle with forces that reminded him of his marriage...ah, his marriages. He was quite certain that his exes were behind these messes that he best ignored in hopes they'd wither away from lack of attention...exactly what happened in human relationships and encounters. He remembered a colleague who never called back until the fifth or sixth message, usually the one circled in red or now spoken in threats and expletives on the grounds that it could not be important enough to demand his time until the caller reached a level of exasperation. That was his message to the jag-offs except these calls and messages were so numerous and burdensome that he spent his days in darken rooms where blinds and draperies blocked all light. And, of course, he ran the risk of missing the message he wanted if he didn't okay attention to the messages he abhorred.

Then came a Birthday Greeting from an ok'd lover he was still on speaking terms with. It reminded him that his birthday and the her that he hadn't heard from shared the same date. Surely, he thought, excitement pushing back into his life, surely she won't forget.

He awoke the next morning full of anticipation. He checked his electronics. Nothing. He ate breakfast, drank coffee, wasted another hour before checking again. Nothing. He knew there was nothing because all his electronics had alerts. The whole day was passed thus way. In addition, he had chewed his thumbs raw.

Finally, he came to the realization that his birthday would pass uncelebrated. He allowed himself one glimpse of photos of her...one he had

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taken on the train and several he had downloaded from a website. But they weren't there. No evidence of her in any of his albums or on streaming. He spent an hour looking through hundreds of photos. Not even the photos he had sent her in a text or email message could be found.

He was shaking with some preternatural fear when he decided to check the texts and emails. Vanished. Not a trace. Hours later, his eyes blurry from all the screen searches, he threw his head back on his lounge, closed his weary eyes and let his lips finish the job.

"You don't exist."

**FOR THE WOMAN SHE BECAME
AFTER WINE**

She was handed a number. So many digits she just stared at it. Besides, it had some alphas in addition to the numerics. That only made it harder to memorize.

"Excuse me," she said to the nearby attendant...winged at that. "Am I supposed to memorize this ID, and should I receive a card or something similar to use in lieu of my memory?"

The attendant turned from what he was doing..it didn't seem like much...and squinted at his questioner, as if he were standing in a space flooded with bright sunlight.

"Memorize? Why would you do that?"

"Well, I assume there will be occasions when I have to use it."

"Of course, you may have to use it, although that's dubious. The fact is we know your number because we know you, so if the occasion should arise, it's a done deal."

"So, if you know, why do I have a number?"

"Well, yes, that's a sensible question. You see, SHE had a bee in HER bonnet a couple of years ago that ID's would be useful. For security and for ego."

"For security? Heaven has a security problem?" she asked trying to disguise her aghastness.

She looked down to her shoeless feet, never having noticed before what lovely feet they were. This transition, she thought quietly, wasn't going to be easy, though.

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"No security problem here, but since all of you come from security-troubled places SHE decided in all HER wisdom that you might feel more comfortable if we pretended to have a security problem. The digital ID was meant to be like...what do you call it...a pacifier. SHE doesn't have time to absorb all the human idiosyncrasies; in fact, SHE can get so bored with them, SHE just lets them pass.

"Does SHE expect us humans to be smarter than we are, and if we aren't so smart, why doesn't SHE intervene, dictate a change, push us in the right direction? Wouldn't it be less frustrating and more sensible to let us live with more smarts?"

There was no response, and she noticed the winged attendant had lost interest, Perhaps like the SHE just described. Would that become her fate as well? "I could live with that," she thought.

The attendant was consulting what might be mistaken for a cell, except it was just a small, round half-dollar-like thing with no buttons, no screen, no features whatsoever. Even more puzzling, the attendant wasn't saying anything and yet seemed to be engaged in communicating. She looked down, afraid to reveal her puzzlement mixed with embarrassment, and when she looked up the scene had changed completely. The attendant was gone, buildings of sorts had appeared with knots of people here and there, engaged in ways she could not describe.

This place will take some getting used to. Indeed, the first task was to find out exactly what this place was. She thought she knew, but now she wasn't sure.

"orientation" was what she read and what she said to herself, not knowing how and why. A doorway, no more than a break in the light, in a line with others but not really a part of the line. Flashing before her eyes, again attached but unattached, she read...

YOUR LIFE IS YOUR AFTERLIFE

SHE & HE

XXIV

FOR THE MAN HE BECAME AFTER RYE

He was standing on a cloud. It looked like a cloud, and, when he reached down, it felt like a cloud. He'd never stood on a cloud before let alone squeeze a cloud between his fingers. He'd never smoked pot, and he hadn't had anything to drink since last night. Here he was, standing on a fucking cloud with an infinite number of people. Infinite because for as far as he could see...knots of people, laughing, talking, kissing, hugging...and what is that over there...in public...oh, my god....

"Best to sub goodness for that my stuff," he heard, as he looked around for the source of the voice. No one even close. Worse yet, as he looked about he could see he had sprouted wings...more like Buffalo Wings without the sauce. He'd never eaten Buffalo Wings, but he knew they had special sauces, but, more to the point, here he was, standing on a cloud, hearing voices, growing wings and astride a riddle.

"What the fuck is going on," he heard himself say, even though his lips never moved, his vocal chords never tightened.

"We'll, not a lot of fucking in your case. It's been a long dry period. You could really use some."

He whirled around and around, and coming into view, as he whirled, was a handsome, winged, toga-ized male.

"An angel," he said aloud, partly bewilderment, partly curiosity. "An angel," he repeated with a squint, as he tried to reassure himself he wasn't in the nuthouse.

"Indeed I am," said the one so designated. "Never much good at disguises."

The angel threw his right arm over the left shoulder of the man now on the verge of apoplexy.

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"Don't worry...you're in good hands...isn't that what they say where you come from? I wouldn't use that here because it has a different meaning."

He stood perfectly still, eyeing his new winged companion, top to bottom, regaining his composure, presuming not the worst but not the best either.

"Place I come from? You know the place I come from and how we speak? At the moment, however, I don't know the place I have come to. Therefore, I am wary of what to say, or, more accurately, how to say what I want to say."

He sucked in a deep breath in hopes of ending what was taking on the colors and textures of...that other place that he had never given a moment's thought to.

"Wary?"

"Shouldn't I be wary?"

"Oh, heavens no...."

He had to laugh at the expression "heavens no", causing the angel to stop and stare.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said jauntily, feeling slightly more relaxed after a little humor, to the angel. "I was blindsided by 'heavens no'. Isn't this...?"

"Oops, 'a heavens no'. My turn to apologize. First things first. I do not know the place from which you came. That would be too much information to process. We just use that expression to put newcomers at ease. It makes you think we know."

"A little deception, maybe?" He was feeling a bit bolder.

"Of course. Just think how chaotic it would be if people thought we didn't know. But, I can truthfully report that this is the place you call the other place, without the no. And you?"

SHE & HE

"Earth. Are you being deceptive again?"

"Oh, heavens no. Earths are everywhere. Your earth probably has a unique name or more likely a number. I'll have to look it up. We are somewhat systematic in moving people from there to here. You are in a place known as "gibberish", and that means...."

"Gibberish?"

"Right, Gibberish. A nickname...we have fun too...that describes immigrants who bring a lot of crazy ideas with them. That could be anywhere so it doesn't help me pinpoint where you are from. I'll consult a boss later."

"A boss? Is that the...you know?"

"Oh, heavens...enough of that...like a tune in your head, playing over and over. I think you would call it a computer."

"All-knowing seems to have limits here where many in the place I used to live assumed was an absolute," he asked, his reticence less in control.

"All-knowing? Well, why clutter up our heads with too much discrete information when other means exist."

"Point well taken, but not convincingly supernatural, divinely supernatural, that is. From what I've seen and heard thus far some of the crazies on my planet would be appalled at this place they work so hard to get to."

"Not surprised. The shit that has been made up in the name of the boss, who incidentally does not go by the names they call him. HE doesn't have time to get involved with such unstable types. HE leaves that to the medical staff,"

"Oh...they're not going to be happy to hear that."

"That was the topic of a recent skit by a comedy team. If you think "Crazies Need Not Apply", it will appear for you to see. Let us know what you think."

SHE & HE

He was standing alone without ever having seen his angel-consort depart. Just an empty space where the angel was standing...well, not really standing in the human-world conventional sense. More like...he occupied a space that was now just space.

"Getting used to this place will take some doing," he said to himself, "Some doing."

And he too departed. Not that he knew that or willed it. He only became aware because he was standing in front of "orientation." And almost as if without being asked he was ushered there.

A break in the light beckoning him to enter...hardly a doorway...just words shaped like an arch overhead...

YOUR LIFE IS YOUR AFTERLIFE

SHE & HE

XX

SHE & HE

Your turn
Or mine,
One spoke
From under
A tangle of
Sheets,
Blankets,
Pillows,
Bodies,
Maybe even
Champagne
Bottle or two.

Is it time,
Second voice,
To reboard
The subway?
Have we
Exhausted
Our stories
Or ourselves?

Are stories ever
Exhausted, retold
As they often are
In another version
With different
Plots, narrators,
Outcomes, new
Lies laid on
Old fibs to
Make new lies.

Lies that we tell

SHE & HE

To cast that spell
Began the female
We need to quiet
Our demons and
Launch our loves...
Oh, plural are they,
Inserted the male,

Have been hiding
Them from me or
Knowing you they
Are in plain view.

Another story
I venture
Hidden in plain view
Are we not done?
Are you not done
I am done
...And
I am done
Open the gate
Let the stories
Flow out around
We shall be known
By our stories
We shall never know
Who knows our stories
Best that way not to
Contaminate champagne