

**IS IT OVER**

**BY THE HE IN THE STORY**

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**Richard L Garner, 2011**

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Hef engaged to a twenty-four-year-old. All over the Twitter world, he discovered as he scrolled the screen of his BlackBerry.

He thought to himself: “I drank coffee with a twenty-four-year-old yesterday and no proposals. Alas, I’m even younger than Hef.”

They had met at the exit of his favorite grocery boutique. A grocery boutique...a far cry from the grocery store and butcher shop he grew up with...the Southside Market owned by his uncle. There she was in the exit after her shift as cashier/manager and he with his full red satchel.

---“I’m going next door for an express. Would you like to join me?” he asked with as much nonchalance as he could muster. Nonchalance was his fallback.

---“Why not.” Her quick, brief reply caught him unawares.

They order their coffees, she a latte and he, as always, an express and sat next to the window. Not much of a view outside, but opposite him was a resplendent face. He had talked to her numerous times during numerous checkouts and had discovered beautiful eyes...a rare straw-color encircled by pronounced jagged but tiny black apostrophes. He was not one to focus on a woman’s eyes. It made him uncomfortable, but with the cashier’s he just wanted to stare and watch how they took in the surroundings.

They talked for nearly an hour. She learned more about him than he about her. She was shy with personal information, although he learned she was nearly finished with her undergraduate studies, several years later than average undergraduates. He asked if she were a Twitterer or a Facebooker, and her response was again rapid and brief:

---“Who would do that? You do that?”

After hemming and hawing for a second or two, he admitted he did. She looked at him very intently, for the first time, as if to chide.

In his mind, from what she said, he figured out she was twenty-four or twenty-five. He also figured out she was smart, a hard worker (full-time job plus college) and full of dreams.

---“Would Hef have proposed on the spot,” he asked himself, as he walked toward his condo.

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She was not the youngest he had thoughts about falling in love with. He threw his coat on the hook and laid the satchel on the counter. He clicked the remote and on came Tony Bennett and K D Lang singing *Because of You* in a way you never heard at weddings, as he put away the few things he'd bought for dinner.

He swung his legs over the stool, dropped his chin into his cupped hands, stared through the floor-to-ceiling, double window overlooking one of the city's main arteries and knew what was coming. His mind, the trickster, was at work.

---“How many years?” he asked himself, always the question he asked himself when she popped back into his mind.

---“Why does my head do this?” he mumbled to himself, “Why?”

She had glared at him, a glare he thought was unbecoming for a twenty-year-old, and while he waited for a barrage of accusations, which he probably deserved, he was confronted with only a glare in silence. She walked away without a word. What had seemed so promising a few days ago was in tatters. It would have been clear to any person of average intelligence that they were done, and yet years later he was still churning out new scenarios by which they'd get back together, at least, briefly.

He once asked a scientist-friend whether there was anything to the idea that when somebody was stirring around in your brain, it probably meant that you were stirring around in the other's brain. The idea being that undetected and undetectable forces were at work between individuals.

He also remembered glimpsing future events in his dreams. The most memorable was a dream about his mother, who had been gravely ill for months but with no apparent sign of imminent death. She was telling him in the dream she was actually dead. A day later, she was dead. After he woke up from the dream because it was so vivid and clear and before the news arrived he wrote a long description in his journal. In large printed letters at the end of the passage, he wrote,

---“DREAM RECORDED AFTER I WOKE UP ON THIS DAY” with a date in case, he had thought to himself then, anyone should question his veracity. When he told the lost lover about the dream and the subsequent death, she poked her index finger into his barrel chest, a favorite terrorizing tactic of hers, with the same words:

---“I could stand you if you were just a fibber, but you're wholesale liar, night and day, a wholesale liar,” as if that phrase constituted his final indictment.

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It was in a way.

So, how did his scientist-friend react to his query?

---“Our measurements of brain waves indicate they seldom get outside the skull,” she said with dispassion of a scientist and then added with a twinkle in her eye, “what the hell do we know. Walking down the street, filled with people exercising their brains in myriad ways and generating waves of all sorts, we might be zapped by neural invasions we know nothing about. The natural world around you is filled with waves. Why shouldn’t brain neurons be a part of the mix?”

---“Those odd coincidences,” he asked, “when something happens or someone calls after you’ve had a premonition may have a physical source?” He knew, of course, there were lots of times when there were happenings without warnings or warnings without happenings. He wanted to know why some got tagged to warn and others not?

That question elicited a shrug.

---“What all those itchy noses? Nothing foretelling there?”

That elicited a snort instead of a shrug. She knew he wasn’t easily dissuaded once he got his minds around something, so she continued

---“It is possible that our heads or minds have developed over time a defense mechanism that allows us to conjure up scenarios, which are unlikely and, if quantified, seldom happen, just to smooth the way in case bad things begin happening. Your mom death was predictable, not the exact day or hour, but still predictable. You were preparing your self for that. That her death happened a day or two after the dream was pure coincidence. Nothing else.”

---“Okay,” he thought to himself, as he recalled this conversation, “these scenarios about the lover who not only left the premises but also left the indelible imprint of the tip of her index finger on his chest were preparatory for...”

He was still sitting on his stool, but his body had assumed a supine position and he began to feel her body pressed against his. A short, round body, not his type actually. Women of medium height or taller, with lean bodies and lithe movements – several were actually formally-trained dancers – that was what he had chosen more often than not. Her face was round like her body and nearly perfectly-formed with gorgeous sky-blue eyes. Her roundness was trim in its own way. She biked, swam in ponds and, of all places, abandoned water-filled, strip-mine pits and knew how to kick-box. (That was why she could terrorize him.) But when she fucked,

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she could stretch her body around his, enveloping him with as lusty a fucking rhythm he had ever known. He had decided that with more body, she was simply more powerful, more embracing, more fuckable.

He had begun to rethink his love of Renoir women, all of whom were plumper than the lean he thought he preferred. Artist always knew because they spent their loves engrossed with bodies in their studios and in their imaginations, and they came to understand more rather than less.

He often connected the departed kick-boxer with the lead dancer in Donato Nacho Spanish troupe. She was the exact opposite of a Balanchine dancer. She was short, stocky rather than plump but exquisitely proportioned and enormously talented – the male lead played her as if she were a stringed instrument and then, as if she, i. e., the instrument, were hinged, folded her up to put her away and carried her off stage. It brought the house down, a Parisian house, and he fell in love with that body just as he had and still was in love with the kick-boxer.

He had met her just after my divorce. She was young, very young, having just turned twenty. Most of the women he had dated were younger, but she stood in a class by herself. because he was undeniably attracted to them over older women, women his age. But she kept inquiring about him through a friend with whom I drank coffee every morning, and that began to feed his ego or is it his libido? Not his type, but his libido seemed to have missed the memo.

Their hellos became more extended conversations. One thing led to another, and they ended up spending a couple of nights together. Then came her exit. A few weeks later he ran into her outside the coffee shop. She did not acknowledge his presence let alone his greeting. She looked mean as hell. That was the last time he saw her in person, even though he saw her far too often in the shadow of his mind.

The next day he had an afternoon appointment with his travel consultant who used to be a ticket agent. When he'd first met the consultant/agent years ago, she booked his air and hotel reservations and made sure the limo picked him up. The Internet destroyed that business, and so now he consulted with her for a fee, and what they were consulting about was how he was going to handle a bunch of speaking engagements without going crazy. The woman he was actually sleeping with, not with regularity, he had nicknamed The Expeller. She hated his traveling because she hated traveling. And now that he had a month, more like six weeks, of traveling ahead of him, she had locked him out – her place, not his, which she hated because it had too few floral patterns and soft pillows. Besides, she didn't trust him. He never bothered to correct the record, her record, that is, but he was incapable of seeing more than one woman at a time. And fucking on the road was

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full of potential disasters. She repeatedly vowed to expel all the women in his life, none of whom was a current lover. He kept thinking “Exit, Exit,” the gods had failed to endow him with any exit power.

ErinErinErinErinThe travel schedule was becoming as complicated as his love life, and yet there was so comfort in the hands of his consultant/agent who a gem of a woman, mainly, he was sure, because he’d never made a pass at her, nor had she at him. In fact, he knew almost nothing about her life outside the consultancy/agency. A sense of contentment flowed through him as she took him through the itinerary, step-by-step, no, leg-by-leg, because he would leave town without ever seeing The Expeller. Limo arrived, security cleared, champagne poured, poof, he was gone!

During their consultation a week earlier around a beautifully-designed glass and chrome desk, which he had often threatened to steal, he noticed a brochure. It advertised a trip that started in London, moved to Paris and Rome and ended up in Tokyo where during a single month the “cruises” would visit with a half dozen haute couture designers. He could care less about clothing designs but he did care about print designs. The original must have been done in brilliant but light pastels and dark acrylics and in a line that was both elegant and muscular at the same time.

---“Who did this?” he asked.

---“A marvelous, half-starving artist – painter and illustrator – from NYC. You would like her, but I don’t think she’d like you.”

---“Am I paying you to be insulted? By the way, the wine this time is very good. You’re learning,” and with that came a glare plus more information, as he knew would happen.

---“Here name is Erin, Erin Sevco. I really don’t think that’s her name, but...”

---“Oh, yes it is. I knew her years ago. You’re right, she didn’t like me.”

---“Keep your paws off her.”

---“You know the power of The Expeller.” To the point...when I knew Erin, she wasn’t into painting or illustrating that I knew of. She was doing a field in science or quasi-science. Was I so terrorized or traumatized I never asked what she did? Was it the same person? How many Erin Sevcos could the world hold? I began to doubt I actually knew this designer.

---“Oh well, if you ever see her, tell her I stole one of the brochures instead of your desk, and I’m going to hide it away for old times’ sake.”

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We finally got our business done, and I remember now on that cold, winter day as I walked home “the waves” began to operate. Back in her world, as she in mine. What ifs – no end to the possibilities when the mind is let loose. I had to leave in a day or two, but I had some searching to do first.

It didn't take me long to find her on the Internet, but not a web site. There was a picture, which confirmed who he thought she was. It was a publisher's webpage, and the photo was of a party launching her husband's new book of literary essays. He went to Amazon, found the book, and while scrolling through the few pages of the book available to read, he saw a credit to Erin Sevco, designer and illustrator. She designed and illustrated her husband's book. He typed in the name of the company next to her name, and the site that came up had another picture of her plus other designers and samples of their work. He got out the brochure, and as he looked at it again, he knew his first impressions were right – brilliantly done. He found her brochure design plus several more with the usual info about rates, contacts, etc. He studied the brochure in his hands and compared it with what was on his PC screen, and he judged the travel brochure to be superior to the others. Had the cruise company given her license to do what she wanted or had something happened in her life to inspire it?

As he sat in front of the screen mulling over the contents on that wintry day his thoughts returned to a show he had helped to curate thirty years ago at a small Midwestern college where he was employed for a year. His friend, head of the Art Department, had invited a New York painter to come to the campus for a week of lectures and conversations. As part of the visit there would be an exhibit of his paintings. He had never asked his friend where he ran across this guy, but he had looked at photos of several paintings and agreed he might be worth showing and featuring. Several days before the artist was due and the exhibit was to open, the paintings arrived. After opening the crates and lining up the paintings in the gallery, they had exclaimed in unison, “Oh shit!”

They slid to the floor, lit a couple of cigarettes and looked across the room in dismay. The Art Department Head, a good abstract painter with a regional reputation, summed it up succinctly:

---“This, this and this are fine, the other 12 are shit.”

---“What do you suppose happened? Did we get the wrong crates?”

---“I haven't any idea,” came the Art Head's reply.

The three good ones, all abstracts, had balance of color with bold splashes in unexpected places, an alternating light and heavy brush (all oils) and a wonderfully

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engaging dynamic. The rest were landscapes of perfect trees, perfect buildings (all monastic in character) and a total lack of engagement or depth. They looked as if they belonged in monasteries.

Being more the A personality than Giff, he picked up the gallery phone and called the secretary who had all the paperwork.

---“Hi, Janette, I’m calling from the gallery. Do you have the number of Larry Gould in NYC handy? I want to give him a call. I’ll wait. Thanks.”

---“Why Larry?” asked Giff. He liked Larry when he was here a last fall. He was also amazed that Larry and his cigarette-smoking, one-year-appointee partner in crime were friends, close friends actually, and had been since their freshmen year in college.

---“For information,” he whispered to Giff with his hand covering the phone.

---“Ah, thank you Janette, you’re the best,” and hung up.

---“Do you say that to all the female staff?” came the query from a not-very-happily married Giff.

---“Only to Janette.”

---“Are you sleeping with her?”

---“After a few more, ‘You’re the best’ yes.”

Gould, who lived and worked in a high rise off Fifth Avenue, never left the house before dark and never returned before light.

---“Hello, Gouldmania here.”

---“Gouldmania? Who the hell is that?”

---“Your old college drinking, trouble-making pal. Can you come to the city this weekend. A show you’ll love.”

---“Thanks for the advanced notice. I’ve told you before, get out your Bic and write the shows and dates on the backs of your hands along with all the formulas for the old college calc exams we used to cheat on. That way I may get the info before the show’s over. Serious stuff. A NYC painter named Musser. I’m sitting in front of his canvases. What do you know?”

---“Don’t you feel like joining a monastery?” came the reply.



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---“Indeed I do, not by choice.”

---“A good painter 10 years ago, then he converted while on a pilgrimage in Italy.”

---“I didn’t know Italy still allowed pilgrimages. There’s nothing here”

---“Absolutely nothing. His abstracts have personality, his landscapes have grass. And not the kind I care for”

There was a pause and then in a rush of words, typical of Larry under the new alias Gouldmania, the solution.

---“The landscapes have no tension. Art needs tension. It’s like friendship with you – if I can’t tell you you’re a loser with women, it’s pretty dull. Here’s what you do. Put a wall just inside the gallery door. Mount the abstracts on the wall in good light. It’s important that folks can confront these abstracts first. As folks walk around the wall into the gallery, have a bevy of coeds handing them glasses of champagne. Mount the landscapes from best to worst in soft light, very soft light. Music is a bit much but it would help. Make sure Musser is standing in the middle of the main gallery. Don’t let him near the paintings. They’ll love it.”

---“A wall? Two days and you want a wall built at the entrance? As usual, I think you’ve got it right except about my women. At least I’m consistent. I’ve got to run and save Giff whose about to trample a landscape with his shoes.”

---“You know what he really needs. Musser can’t help him.”

---“Right. Thanks again, and tell Amy I’m still interested.”

I’d actually married Amy, a mistake.

---“So we have a convert on our hands. Our due diligence sucks. Here’s the plan according to Larry Gould....”

And they built the wall, hung the show, adjusted the lighting, ordered the champagne, lined up the coeds and hoped for the best.

The folks loved it. Musser was a gentle, urbane sort who reassured them that art could really be therapy. Our artistic friends quit speaking to us.

In front of the computer after thinking about that earlier exhibit (how many times had he recounted or told that story...so many times, he had to ask, what was the real story...it had become a template for his own aesthetic) he picked up Erin’s brochure again. What was he looking for? A message? A statement? After all it was just a brochure meant to convey information. A come-on. And yet the shapes and colors

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conveyed something different. The colors were pleasant to the eye, but the shapes were challenging, no, disturbing. Was that a purple ribbon dancing in the corner? What about the black hole in the center? As he thought about it, he decided that was being drawn in and held captive, not by the information but by the artist. He reminded myself that he liked the brochure even before he knew who the artist was. Now that he knew, it was damn hard to let go.

“Make me an angel/Fly me to Montgomery...Just give me one thing, I can hold onto/To believe in this living is/Just a, hard way to go.” They had gone out in public once together to a local bar...210 something...to hear his friends, S & M, perform, and they had sung John Prine’s most popular song and dedicated to him with Erin at his side. He never figured out her reaction.

---“Goddamn, I miss her, I can live without The Expeller, but I never wanted to live without the kick-boxer,” he moans.

Since an email address was attached to the web page he took a chance. What did he have to lose? He had survived her first assault. In the note he reintroduced himself, explained how he came across her brochure, brought her up to date briefly on his life since and praised her work. He didn’t solicit a reply. Off went the note, and off he went to pack.

He heard nothing from Erin until weeks later, sitting in CDG in Paris and checking emails.

---“It’s the same me, and you are you, although I’m impressed with the resumé. Can it be true?” He could feel her finger against his chest. “I would never have guessed it possible. Glad you like the brochure. My best thus far. Can’t see myself doing brochures forever. Thanks again.”

He had no doubt it was Erin, and he had many doubts about what to do next. Then after a few weeks he sent a reply to her reply in which he said among other things that he might be able to help her husband with his next manuscript. The President of Northwood Press – the best of the literary presses – was a friend. He had saved his ass, circumstances he did not care to recall. That was the most substantial part of the message.

He heard nothing back. The Expeller had expelled him, and he was heading to NYC to comfort Gouldie, to use another new and preferred alias, whose cancer had returned. He sent an email to Erin about the trip and suggested lunch with her and her husband. No word until the day before I left.

---“No dice. You’re erased.”

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A coincidence, as he stared at his PC screen with iTunes in the background. Tony Bennett had hooked up Elvis Costello to sing “Are You Having Any Fun?” At this moment, he wasn’t. And the scenarios racing around in his head were both confusing and reassuring.

In one he could see her so madly in love that she would be too distraught to lunch with him in the presence of her husband; even he, a man of inordinately large fantasies, knew that was silly; it was Erin; he had seen her angry but never disoriented.

Another, somewhat more defensible rationale had her unsure how she felt and not wanting to risk whatever fall-out might occur, she had erased him; that seemed out of character for the woman who created that brochure.

A third scene, highly improbable, was that she and her husband had a squabble over the luncheon invitation; he was willing to knock on any door he could to get published; she prevailed, as she often did when he knew her, but he would receive an email from him, apologizing for his wife’s obtuseness and hoping they could stay in touch; such divisions were known to exist in marriages. That was even more nonsensical.

The fourth, which he hated the most, was she hated him, period.

Before he could allow too many variations on these themes, he hopped off the stool and fixed himself a drink, fetched the suitcase and substituted Renée Fleming, Fred Hersch at the piano and Bill Frisell on the guitar with *Conção do Amor* – “to dream of the blue dusk of your love which is absent” for Tony and friends. But, instead of getting to work, he just listened to the Portuguese, which he knew a little of from the time he bummed around South America. He could feel that language unlike any other language he had tried. In his next life. And in that next life, several Renée Fleming please. He didn’t know if any love was absent at that moment, but she convinced him there was.

He had a second drink, finished packing, listened to the rest of the Fleming disc and called Gouldie, although he would choose Gouldster from their college days.

---“How’s it going?” he asked.

---“You know I’m feeling better this week. The new medicine seems to work. If nothing else, it calms me down. By the way I’m glad you’re coming.”

---“Well, sometimes I forget I’m an asshole and do the right thing. Anything you need that I should pick on the way?”

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---“Not really, just arrive.”

---“I will, tomorrow afternoon about 2 pm, unless LGA decides to fuck off the flights.”

---“They promised me they wouldn’t. Tomorrow.”

It was hard to get used to the fact that Gouldie was as sick as he was. Since college – they roomed together four years – they had been in touch weekly, often daily. They had talked through their triumphs and their failures, of which there were many, they had told and retold the stories of their romantic adventures and misadventures so often they could fill in for each other. They played a game in which they told the other’s stories with new twists and endings so that the original, closer to the truth, versions had been lost. Would he tell Gouldie of his latest with Erin. Gouldie knew Erin, and every time he decided he’d spare Gouldie, especially now that he was so ill, but then he couldn’t. And, surprisingly, Gouldie had his own new stories.

I was shocked to see how well Gouldie looked when he opened the door.

---“My god, man, you look great” he blurted out.

---“Probably better looking on the outside than the inside,” as they embrace.

---“You know where the bedroom is. It was cleaned yesterday.”

---“I do, and it won’t take much to be cleaner than mine.”

He stowed my bags, they sat next to each other on the most luxurious sofa in New York City and enjoyed the afternoon light through the twelve-foot-high window.

---“Larry, I know it’s been a struggle, but I can’t get over how well you look. What am I missing?”

----“Larry, such a funny name. Only you, Amy and my mom. The fact is that my appearance is not fakery. I’m better. Not yet in remission but closer than I’ve ever been. I can work, I can sleep and eat and I can celebrate albeit mildly.”

---“Amazing. Three months later. Amazing.”

---“The explanation, if any, is part medicine – lots of new and experimental stuff for someone like me with the resources – and part me. It’s not that it won’t be over, it will be sooner for me than others in my cohort, but with a medicinal boost I actually feel as if it ain’t over yet. I don’t try to figure out what the invaders have in mind. I don’t like having cancer, and I don’t feel that I deserve to have cancer. No

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doubt, though, it changes one's perspective. So how many perspectives have I had during my 60 years? I've lost track. How many am I allowed? I don't care to be told. But I'm still here, and I'm willing to check out as many as possible. And before I forget Amy's coming by in a couple hours. She's like a hospital-life-support system for me – and believe me, I know about those systems. You lucky bastard, never been in a hospital, a pill for your cholesterol and a pill for your thyroid, and a weight-lifter's body that defies the odds. Anyway, I'm asking you to change your perspective just for tonight. Are you up to it?"

Gouldie could see his pal who had endured so many of Larry's perspectives was nonplussed, as if he had offered him a cup of hemlock.

---"I'll make myself up to it. We're on."

He missed Amy, and he didn't. It was a marriage that shouldn't have because it had not even a shot in heaven itself. They tore into each other as lovers and at each other as mates. They were utterly faithful to each other, and after too many years of falling into each other arms from sheer exhaustion of making love or making battle, they called it quits. Ironically, their careers took off: hers on Broadway where she performed in both dramatic and musical roles, and his as a teacher and author in the area of constitutional law, the antithesis of the Scalia nuts who seemed to be reading texts with a finely-honed ahistorical perspective because history didn't really serve their interests.

Gouldie put his hand on my knee, stared out the window for a few seconds and finally stood up with more agility than I had seen in several years. Even before the cancer was diagnosed, he showed signs of a troubling weakness.

---"The only plan is dinner later. When Amy shows up you guys can open some champagne, which I may take a sip of, and maybe we'll just talk, reminisce, hope, dream. Speaking of hopes and dreams, how's your love life? I know there's a crisis because there always is," as he headed to the kitchen with me in tow.

---"My god, you prepared all this?"

---"I love hors-d'oeuvres, and these are among my favorites. When you and I couldn't talk about anything else, we could talk about food. Do you remember when we got our doctors to write letters about nervous stomachs and the onset of ulcers so we could get out of the dining hall and east downtown in those greasy spoons?"

---"Do they still have dining halls? I know what's happened to the science of ulcers."

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---“Try this Wisconsin cheese. I know what you think about Wisconsin, but be open-minded and try this. We’ve battled over cheeses for years, and I can honestly say you’re a stuck-in-mud about cheese and let me add wine. France could fall off the globe, and the rest of us would be enjoying cheese and wine without you.”

---“It’s good – my guess is a European or French background.”

---“You’re right. Just enjoy it. It’s not a conquest. Let me check the champagne. Do you remember the night we were dining with JJ & C in their Paris apartment, and JJ refused to serve the champagne because it was too cold? He wrapped the magnum – it was a magnum, wasn’t it – in a warm towel for ten or fifteen minutes while we were salivating like rabid dogs. JJ had the best vault of champagne ever. And C, utterly bemused, took the whole thing so coolly. I never found such coolness in anyone else. A view of French domestic life that few other outsiders ever saw. How in the world do you, being the asshole you are, manage to draw such interesting people into your life, the man with no more than one or two permanent friends?”

Before he could respond, the door bell rang.

---“Amy,” called out Gouldie, “the doorman lets her in without ringing up. Go for it.”

They stood eye-to-eye, not having seen each other in years, before she said in very Broadway voice,

---“You’re not Larry, you must be...”

---“The hired help. How are you? Please come in.”

No embrace but a hand on his shoulder. “You look great! Too bad.”

---“Don’t feed his ego.” Gouldie handed Amy a champagne, and they exchanged kisses.

---“Please forgive an old sentimental goofus, but I love having the three of us together again. Let’s hit the sofa.”

They talked almost seamlessly for an hour. Both Amy and her ex began to relax. They hadn’t sat on a sofa together for probably a dozen years. She was still as smart, clever and attractive as she was then. They had both stayed single, but she had a child by one of her lovers. Ethan was now 13, lived with her part of the year and his father, a movie producer, the other part. The ex had never met Ethan.

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---“How’s Ethan?” Gouldie asked, as if he was reading his pal’s mind and he probably was.

---“Doing well considering it’s not an easy life with the parents he has. I’m hopeful.” She turned to her ex and continued: “Ethan and Larry have grown close and that’s been good for us all. How about you, anyone of interest?”

---“Not really. I just got expelled.”

---“Again?”

---“Again. Somehow I survive. Actually, I’ve patented my own survival kit.”

---“It’s poison, don’t touch it,” from the host.

---“No need right now,” said Amy who then turned to Gouldie to remind him:

--- “We have reservations at Gascogne for 7. Are you up to it?” The soft side of Amy I miss.

---“You bet.”

Le Gascogne was a favorites, and after four courses, a little wine but mostly Perrier out of deference to Gouldie’s non-alcoholic regimen, several deserts and *les expresses*, they grabbed a cab back to Gouldie’s. After a short Armagnac poured by but not drunk by Gouldie, Amy prepared to leave. Gouldie commented that the two formers were enjoying each other more than he remembered when they were married, to laughs.

---“Perhaps a danger signal,” as he peered with that sideways glance he was famous for.

All three hugged before Amy departed. Staying in touch was not broached.

---“Let’s sit and talk,” said Gouldie after her closed the door. “I feel good. I’ll tell you when it’s time to quit for the night.”

---“Fine. Do you want anything to drink?”

---“Bring me some Evian and pour yourself another Armagnac. It’s first-rate, *n’est pas?* “

---”Always at your place.”

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When I returned with the water and the Armagnac, he had pulled the ottoman closer and had settled into the sofa in a manner that suggested he expected a long conversation.

He first asked about The Expeller, keeping it brief for which he thanked me because she bored him.

Somehow Erin flowed into their conversation, almost as if it had been planned. Gouldie learned about the latest and when he was asked,

---“So what do I do?”

---“Stay in touch because you need to be slapped around some more,” was the response.

Silence. It was not uncharacteristic for him to say something like, but this time I was unprepared.

---“More slapping around is good for me?”

---“I didn’t say good for you. I said you needed it. We’ll find out if it’s good for you. I can’t criticize you for falling for younger women and not being able to let go. I go to the head of the class on both scores.”

There was silence before he said,

---“I’m quick-witted, a fast learner, but you’re just deadly serious, scary smart. All those brain cells get in the way of your wits. You can’t change that, and you may even have figured out our essential difference. You can’t tiptoe through the shit, you have to go through it on all fours. You’re too smart, though, to get buried or stuck in the shit. You aren’t comfortable with emotional short-cuts, even though you’ve figured out all sorts of rational short-cuts to explain why you fall the way you do. Is Erin tuned in? You want to believe it so you will. Besides we hate to have science tell us it isn’t possible. It’s what we count on in those times when we need to count. You’re counting now, and you do it more deliberately than most of us. That’s the end for me tonight. Your arm, please,”

---“Thanks, and the TV won’t bother me. There is a pill for sleeping along with everything else.”

The guest room was very comfortable with a fridge, TV, stereo, bathroom – everything. I turned on “The Daily Show” but I couldn’t focus. Finally, I turned off the TV and watched the city’s night-light show. I knew I was going to try again.



## IS IT OVER

---“Someone to hold you close, Someone to hurt you deep,” how many times had Sodheim’s lyrics cascaded through his head.

---“‘Being alive’ is what we all want, but then we keep changing our minds about what’s being alive. The guy at the end of the hall has had to make up his mind.”

It was well past nine o’clock when the house came alive for the guest. In the living room Gouldie was busy on his cell. The computer screen was flashing as well. He gave his late-rising pal his arm and guided him to the French press on the table.

---“Do you also control the weather? It looks gorgeous outside,” he asked Gouldie.

---“It is. The croissants are from down the street, and you know where the coffee is from. How long has it been since we discovered our coffee? The only thing we ever agreed on. By the way your phone went off a half-hour ago.”

---“I forgot to shut it off or take it into the bedroom. I’ll check it after some coffee.”

---“How’d you sleep?”

---“Better than I thought I would after last night.”

---“Amy called earlier. She always does before leaving for work. I’m to tell you, you’re ok, she’s ok, whatever that means.”

---“And old joke, not worth retelling,” was his reply to Gouldie. “It’s too late to say I’m sorry it didn’t work out for us, but I can say I’m glad last night happened. Do I need her slapping me around?”

---“An emphatic no! Of all the women in your life, you have arrived at a point with Amy where the two of you can exist post-divorce. Keep it there.”

Looking at the message on the BB screen, he could see it was from Erin. She asked him to call ASAP.

---“It’s from Erin. Do you mind if I call her?”

---“Of course not. I’ll clean up the kitchen.”

He called, recognized her voice right away, and found myself agreeing instantly to an invitation for coffee in two hour.

## IS IT OVER

As he prepared to leave the apartment, Gouldie asked if he would be needing his old goalie's helmet? He declined, and out in the street he had about a half hour to make their 11:30 meeting at a coffee shop about 10 blocks north. He also discovered to his surprise that the brain scenarios were totally gone. No waves at the moment.

She was waiting for him. She stood. A bit heavier and certainly older and to his surprise dressed in a uniform with a Sloan-Kettering logo. She could see my puzzlement and explained in a sentence it was her other job.

---"Shall I order us some coffee?" he asked gingerly, since she only had water in front of her.

---"Shall was always your word, wasn't it? No thank you," she said.

Then without taking her eyes off him she continued,

---"I'm keeping this brief. I don't wish to be in touch because I don't like being in touch with you."

The pause was no more than five second, time enough to recall an earlier scenario.

---"I can't forget you, even though I've tried. And you were always right, I was the one who initiated the whole thing and led us into your bed. You don't deserve to be hated because you're not a mean person, regrettably you're the opposite, but I hate myself for making it happen and you for letting it happen. I could tell from your emails that you haven't forgotten, and I've already confessed I haven't either. Let's just say at this stage in our lives we need to be each other's enemy because we can't be each other's friend. I don't want to be in your world and I don't want you in my world, but let me add I need you to help me with this. If you take that as admission of something deep-seated, fine, but I need your help. I don't want your reaction or any further discussion. You can join me by not joining me. That's how you can help. Two more things: age doesn't make much difference in bed but it does afterwards; and stay close to Larry, whom I know because I was his health-care aide for two months. Eventually it will be over for good."

With that she left. He sat there stunned. It was masterful. Never lost a beat. All in several minutes. He now needed coffee. He drank an espresso and headed to the apartment. No waves to be sure.

When he opened the door to the apartment (having been let in downstairs, I'm sure on Gouldie's instructions) Gouldie was standing by the tall window. He closed the

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door and stood still for a moment or two. Gouldie never turned away from the window.

---“Should I have lent my goalie’s helmet?”

---“It was one hell of a show. Unlike anything I might have expected from her. I know more and less.”

---“True for all of us. Of course, now you will know why I can say she’s a tough cookie. She took care of me for two months in a way that may explain why I’m still here. She doesn’t have a heart of gold, and she will end up throwing whatever his name is out into street. You knew her years ago as a lover, but you don’t really know her. Do what she says. She’s right.”

The rejected walked toward the window, and by the time he had reached Gouldie’s side he had put his arms out and they embraced. Since he was leaving the next morning, they spent the rest of the day pattering, talking and remembering. Oh, and laughing..

The next morning, while waiting for the limo they made some plans, always tentative. After a difficult farewell, he was home in three hours. The brochure was lying on his desk where he had left it. He turned it over in his hands. It was indeed beautiful. The powers-to-be had not moved it anywhere. Nor had they thrown any magic dust around it or any other place. His nose itched, but he knew it was just itch. It was over. He thought lovingly about Gouldie, Amy and, yes, Erin. He knew it would work out for him and them. He opened a good Bordeaux and wrote a long time in one of those three dozen journals that sat on his bookshelves. Gouldie became Larry again, and they would stay in touch frequently, perhaps daily. He knew he would think about Erin every day and love her to his last day. And he knew from what she said she would think of him as well...but no waves.

Some things weren’t over yet, but one thing was.