

TARA

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Tara & Luc

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He fell head over heels in love with Tara. He quit trying to explain it to himself, and he never had to explain it to anyone else because they had never told anyone about it. The greater mystery was not him but her. She was, to put it bluntly, beautiful and sexy, and every male lifter in his crowd at the gym, where she taught aerobics thought, the same thing. She was engaged and never showed any interest in the gym rats except, in the last months before her departure to wed, for Luc. What was she up to with a guy more than twice her age? That became more troubling to Luc than trying to unravel why he fell as hard as he did. He never found out from her what her feelings were and never figured it out for himself.

He had never experienced such intensity of feeling before. It started very slowly, no more than a whimper. If she had disappeared a month after they met, he would barely have noted the loss. The intensity grew erratically, but in time it was all-consuming: his body, his mind, his movement, his reverie, all the music he listened to, all the words he read, all the conversations he had, all the impulses and the flutters in his day, the totality of experience became infused with his love and his desire for her. He tried to pull back, to disengage, to reset the controls but to no avail. And yet in many respects this never got beyond acquaintanceship or perhaps verged on friendship. No dating, no kissing, no long walks in the woods, no eating by candlelight, no, none the prerequisites for launching a romance except what she said or did, unexpected and incomprehensible. She may never have intended anything romantic and sexual, and he simply had an overactive libido or utter incompetency in divining her aims, and yet there was more than that. He knew what was going on in his heart, and he was willing to bet that something similar was going on in hers. A figment of his imagination was found wanting. It was the ending that made that seem likely. Almost as quickly as it started, it ended. And it ended by her ordering him out of her life. Not a brawl, not piling on lots of accusations – you piss me off – no, a few simple but choice words like “get out”. That was it. She turned and walked away, and having no choice he also turned and walked away. “get out” was a bit ironic because he wasn't sure he was ever in her life very far – and besides she had done the inviting, not him. He knew what her reputation was so he had always tried to deferential and hang back when he sensed her mood was uninviting.

He was still coming to terms with his abrupt dismissal and the events that followed, but since they had gone their separate ways, nary a word, he had resigned himself to living with it and not wrestling with it. Since moving he had been able to put Tara aside. He was skiing everyday this first season in at Tahoe, had joined a key gym, which he'd never heard of before, made friends with the owners Deb and Nick, had been to San Francisco several times and by and large had made a good start on his new life. Every once in a while he felt that she was seated on his

shoulder, like a phantom, simply observing, maybe calculating, the extent of his continuing devotion. That truly was a figment of his imagination. But he would brush his shoulder briskly just in case.

On this day heavy snow, the second or third time since his arrival, however, he wasn't skiing. He was sitting in front of his fireplace and trying to read the *Iliad*, which he'd promised himself he'd do properly, but after a lot of blood and warfare he found his mind wondering back to Tara. And often when Tara showed up so did Ally. Time with Tara was complicated by the fact that there were other women in his life than just Tara. There was also Ally Suzanne, whom he had met and befriended more than a year before he'd met Tara and who worked with Tara. He loved Ally deeply but after an initial burst of lust unrequited, of course, he dismissed the idea of ever dating her and instead chose friendship, something he'd failed at with Tara. Ally and Luc became good friends, and once the boundaries were established he never crossed the line. Luc liked having Ally in his life. In a curious non-romantic way it deepened his feelings for her. Just as he had never said anything about his love for Tara, he never said anything about his love for Ally either. Ally was Tara's age, and that meant that with Tara he faced the same age question with her that he had with Ally when he was hoping for more than he could expect. In fact, the age question had troubled Luc since his divorce. The simple fact, as he told himself over and over, was his inability whether by design or stupidity to come to terms with his age. Women he could have he did not want, and women he wanted he could not have. With Ally he had been able to suppress his feelings in order to protect their friendship. He was inwardly proud of his "perfect-gentleman" demeanor around her, although at times he found himself tempted to stray. One night at a party at Ally's house, she threw her arms around him and said "Take a puff with me...." He'd never taken a puff, even though he came of age during the sixties. It was a test of his resolve, and he was surprised how quickly he'd responded in the negative. Ally kissed him and said, as she released him from her embrace, "I knew it!". They walked off together for a drink, about which he was less scrupulous.

Ally and Luc had found ways to be friends without ever becoming lovers. They enjoyed times together walking her dogs, sharing meals at a local vegetarian Indian restaurant, drinking coffee at Café Gourmet and skiing. She was as precious as anyone Luc had known and loved, and, as he sat there with the Tara phantom on his shoulder, he knew he would teared up anyway just thinking about Ally and how much he still missed Ally. If Ally had made even the slightest gesture or remark to suggest their friendship was moving to a new level, there would have been no Tara in his life. The reason he was having this conversation with himself in the presence of a phantom was the intimations that never came from Ally came instead from Tara. The more mysterious of these two women, Tara, had pushed the door open just enough to make Luc struggle for months to push it further. It became a fiasco, another private romantic misfortune that unhinged him until he found the wherewithal to corral it. He had the capacity to move on, having called upon that quality more than once in his life, and yet at this moment in this place he found himself replaying the time with Tara and indirectly the time with Ally with whom he still had a long distance connection.

In the time he'd known Ally she'd dropped Jack and hooked up with Jared. He had met and socialized with both and could only scratch his head when he tried to figure out how they were chosen. He could not, he fully admitted, be objective about this. Jack, a year or so younger than Ally, was a serious engineering student and not without conversational charm. But the contrast with Ally was palpable. She possessed a wicked and cynical wit that could skewer rather than charm. She had a career in mind, having graduated with the appropriate degree, but her academic record was too spotty to allow her to proceed. She knew how to drink, cook, argue and above-all ski. Her outbursts were passionate, especially concerning animals and natural habitats that could cause Jack to pose challenges that did not always please her. She once said that pouting was how she kept him reined in. By implication it might have been worse, and while they had talked about marriage, they were in fact, pouting and all, a long way from the altar. She dumped him at the end of the first year of Luc's acquaintanceship with her, and out of nowhere arrived Jared.

A much younger man, he had skipped college and spent those years surfing around the world among other ventures and was then trying to write about them. Jared had shown some of his jottings to Luc, but did not ask for comment or criticism. Luc had offered none, although he had dismissed what he read as unclear and unfinished. He said something to the effect that he was envious of the chance that Jared had made such good use of. Ally looked at him dismissively with cold blue eyes, as she did when she was dubious.

Luc then remembered he'd written in his journal during those days of juggling desire for and friendship with Ally how significance was the difference in ages. She was half his age and a fifth older than Jared, but wasn't a twenty-five-year-old closer in maturity to him than Jared. Besides, if she kept choosing younger men, wouldn't she end up with the same dilemma Luc faced?

Meeting Tara had set all these emotions and calculations in motion again. There were some differences. Tara was engaged to a man about her age. While both women sought privacy, Ally felt constrained with too many people around her; she preferred a more primitive environment, like the top of a mountain, to bi cities and developed communities. Tara, on the other hand, Tara's aloofness seemed to evolve from fear and distrust, and she wanted to move to a small town because she thought she'd have more control over her life. It took Luc a while to figure this out, after he'd come to know Tara, at about the same time he began to realize some other dynamic was at work between them. With Tara after-while the age factor had no significance. Even her engagement appeared to be dismissible, temporarily at least, in her developing relationship with Luc. There was what might be called an attraction.

Luc had replayed this story so many times, and yet each time he kept trying to find new angles or rediscover forgotten facts. But there were never enough new angles or facts to dissolve the mystery of why Tara pulled him into her vortex only to expel him. Even the beauty and enchantment of Tahoe, what he could see through the door across the balcony, peeks of sunlight as the storm took a rest, no, not even this magical place had dislodged more details or insights than he had before escaping from the East. At the time he met her he wasn't exactly in the mood for a new relationship. He wasn't on the prowl. He dated several different women after he met

Ally, and he was still dating one of them when he met Tara. He had seen Tara at the gym and admired her beauty from a distance, as did many at the gym, heavy lifters being what they were. She was known to be stand-offish and sometimes rather abrupt and unfriendly. He never made any effort to talk to her, in part because she seldom ventured into the free-weight section, and he had never considered asking Ally to introduce them. As he thought about the return of Tara to his conscious world, he was not even sure that Ally ever had any idea how Tara had intruded into his life. What he did remember was that after Tara's pronouncement he was informed by a mutual friend that he would not be invited to her wedding, not that he would have attended. Weeks later Ally said to him, "I'm pissed, well, more puzzled than pissed that I have been disinvited to Tara's wedding but my roommate who barely knew her has been invited." He said nothing but couldn't help but wonder, was there a connection with him?

He'd met her not at the gym but one morning after leaving the post office and heading to Café Gourmet, his coffee hangout, he ran into her hobbling along on crutches. She was trying to negotiate a curb, and he stopped a few feet away and asked if he could help. She handed him her bag and finally stepped up onto the curb. She said thanks as he handed her bag back to her, and they walked along together.

---"I think I've seen you at East Coast," he said with an element of tentativeness in his voice.

---"Right," she said, "I've seen you. Also you're Ally's friend."

---"I am," he answered. "You both teach aerobics. May I ask what happened to require crutches?"

---"Nothing too serious. Old sports injury. Surgery by way of the football team's orthopedic staff. I'm finishing my MA in sports medicine, and I decided to take advantage of the medical services before I leave at the end of the summer."

---"Is the gym off limits for now," he asked, somewhat amazed how friendly she seemed to be after what what he had heard.

---"For another week, and then I can slowly move back into the full aerobic class instruction. I am Tara, and thanks again for the assistance," she replied, as if she knew he had reached his destination.

---"I'm Luc, with a c but no k or e," a line he was used many times. "Will you be okay from here?"

---"Is that French?" she asked.

---"It is but I'm not French. My parents couldn't spell very well."

She laughed, assured him she was okay, bid him adieu and hobbled her way down the street toward the university.

Inside the Café, where he was a regular customer, his express was waiting for him. Erin, whom he had dated a couple of times, even though she was an undergraduate and he was more than thrice her age, had noted his arrival. He wasn't sure she had brewed the express because she was pissed that he had not called her after their last date a month ago. He had tried to explain, but she had tried not to listen. Bad blood had resulted, and yet when she was on duty, she managed somehow to subdue her anger and prepare his express. He wondered if this was not a perilous cup of coffee. The fact was he liked Erin and would have done whatever necessary to patch up their relationship, but she was not interested. Her moods intrigued him but not her boss, who found them irritating. Just then the boss, Billie, joined him. Billie was a tall, statuesque, glamorous woman whose father had been a New York City jazz musician and played for Billie Holiday, thus the name.

---“You'd better be sure it isn't poisoned,” she said as she slid into the other chair.

---“As usual, you've accurately read my mind,” he replied.

---“Actually, it's fine because I brewed it.”

---“Can I trust anyone here?”

---“Not her. She's pissed beyond description. Her moods drive me crazy. I'd fire her if it weren't for a promise I made to her dad. So, who's the other chick on crutches no less. You can be sure someone else was shooting you full of daggers.”

Billie missed nothing.

---“I just met her – her name is Tara – but I'd seen her at the gym, the same gym you gave up on. She teaches aerobics.”

---“Knowing you as I do, I predict another romance, another sweetheart. I can see it in your eyes. That's what gyms do to people. Let them live in fantasy worlds. I think you need to cut back. Buy a rocker. At your age....”

---“And yet nothing, right?”

---“Settle, man, settle. Would it make any difference what I told you? Are you interested?”

---“Nothing to be interested in. She had a diamond on that tell-tale finger. Leaving at the end of the summer. Must be getting married.”

---“You know the lady who's waiting to be asked out? You had better not pass up the chance.”

---“Thanks, but it's going to be passed up.”

The Café was filling up, Billie patted his shoulder and went behind the counter. He was left to think about these events, but what he was really thinking about was how good the express tasted today. Escape, perhaps. He was well-tuned into the code of the express.

That's how it started. Nothing more than a helping hand. Her face was as beautiful close up as he assumed it was at a distance. A large round smile on a face that was more chiseled than round. But her eyes, oh those eyes, as blue as a Tahoe sky and mesmerizing.

As he thought about this story and the many versions of how it unfolded, he remembered a discussion once in which the question was whether life consisted of returning to the same, an eternal action, that never ceased. His recollection was in the days before and after the summary dismissal he revisited life with Tara daily, sometimes hourly. He was heartbroken and bewildered. Occasionally he'd speculated about his own mental stability under pressure of disappointment and loss and whether or not his own eternal action offered a kind of repose or denial. At times he seemed to wish for a breakdown or something less to stop the cycle. That had ceased once she was gone and he had moved. It still happened – the returning – but with less angst. At this very moment, when he had questions and doubts about this mysterious woman, he realized he found enduring pleasure in thinking about her and letting their experiences be told and retold without any resolution. That he always came out in the same place – continuing mystery – didn't change that. He could not deny to himself that he had let their relationship move in a different direction because he wanted her love and her body, preferably on some warm Mediterranean island. He couldn't remember and he'd never taken time to look it up if in the discussion about the eternal returning the process was thought to be destructive in some way. So far as he could figure, it had caused him much more suffering in the days immediately after his expulsion but the suffering abated, even dissipated. Wasn't that how life was in large measure? That old villain or friend, time. Or was he forgetting details about his emotional state as he had forgotten details about Tara.

In truth he knew that he had never been very close to any edge. He would breakdown in tears, and then he would come back to life and wonder what the hell he was doing. There were not tars now, but there was still sadness. He was not sure he wanted to see her again or to try to pick up from where she had assigned them, but he missed here. The missing part might bring a tear or two to his eyes but never the sobs of those days immediately after he lost her. But he was digressing. More about the process than the memory. Years ago a therapist-friend had complimented him on keeping journals and trying to create a narrative about the things that bugged him, amazed him or puzzled him, and he had stuck with what he called journal-rendering. His journals contained several versions because when he thought of Tara he would try writing what he was recalling. Today, this snowy day, a five-footer, he decided that another

written version as not very inviting. But a glass of wine was to accompany his recalling, his returning.

He couldn't remember honestly the time between meeting her with crutches on the street corner and seeing her again in the gym. It was probably weeks. Nor can he recall whether he thought much about her in that time. He saw Ally off and on and had coffee with her, Jared and their friends. Ally loved these meetings because by prior arrangement with Billie Luc paid an amount each month from which his purchases and his friends' purchases were deducted. He had no idea how much money he spent. Billie simply informed in person or by email that he needed to replenish his account, and he wrote a check. One one occasion, not necessarily during the early days of his acquaintanceship with Tara, Ally and eight or nine friends showed up when he was at Gourmet, and after pushing a couple tables together he did the honors after checking with Billie as to his balance, more than sufficient. The second or third time that Ally returned with a refill (drinking the least expensive “pour of the day”) she sat down next to Luc, threw her arms around him and exclaimed “Luc, you are the model, I want to live like this, coffee on the tab” and cheers - “Hail to Luc” - reverberated around the Café as Ally kissed his blushing cheek.

Ally and Luc had their secrets. The one he most enjoyed repolishing was Dare's Crème au Citron, biscuit, not a cookie. While drinking coffee at the Café one evening after they'd had splurged on omelets at a popular, student restaurant, Luc pulled a bag of Dare's out of his backpack. He offered Ally a Dare, and she accepted with that snarl she had perfected for situations just like this. Then she had another...another...another. They were waiting for a friend so they could do some bar-hopping later, and before he realized what had happened she got up and left without a word. Since they were sitting outside, he could observe her walking down the street. He concluded she wasn't trying to escape or hide. He saw her turn into the grocery store on the corner. Minutes later she was walking back up the street toward the Café, and when she arrived she threw two bags of Dares on the metal table. They both howled. For as long as he knew her, a woman who spent a lot of time worrying about her body and her diet, Dares became one of their bonds.

At some point Tara returned to the gym, and Luc asked how well her recovery went. She said she was ninety-five percent. Initially the conversations were brief because she came to the gym to teach and once in a while she'd work with a few weights after class. Luc could see immediately that she knew very little about using weights and her well-conditioned body was the result of aerobics – the aggressive kind – and running, which he learned she did almost daily. Slowly the brief conversations turned into longer conversations without any pretext of doing weights after teaching aerobics. She seemed to be staying after class to see Luc. She simply walked over to wherever Luc was working out, and the conversation would begin.

One day she showed up at the Smith Cage where he was doing squats. She came straight to the point. Her research for her Master's paper was to test how flexible older bodies were, older in this case fifty years and higher. She explained it would take about an hour in which the subject would see how far forward or backward he could bend without moving his feet, and she asked if he would like to participate. Luc said yes, and they agreed upon a time. A few days later he showed

up at her office, and from there they walked into a room with circles on the floor, several machines with long cables and a computer. She was very professional, and they spent little time bantering. He removed his shoes and stepped inside the center-most circle, she attached several cables from the machines and then for the next hour he would bend this way or that, sometimes only a few degrees and other times as far as he could, at which point he had to hold that position for a few seconds. Tara was taking notes on each bend-and-hold position relative to the other circles that fanned out from the center where he was standing and also watching the machines. There would be a break, and she would record the data into the computer. Luc learned pretty quickly that he was less flexible than he thought he was, for someone who had been as athletic as he had been most of his life. Holding a bend and keeping his balance with the more extreme bends for more than a few seconds was difficult. When it was over, she thanked him, said she'd give him a report, and disappeared into her office without another word. Luc remembered he felt momentarily abandoned because he had assumed, incorrectly it turned out, they might get a coffee and have a chat. The more he got to know her, the more he liked her, but he could see, as he had been told, she was mercurial. He could never tell when they struck up conversation how engaged she would be. Over time he began to realize she was often in the mood to talk and even to walk home with him since they lived a block apart. Most of the time the shared moments – and they were moments rather than hours – he had good feelings about Tara. He wondered how she felt.

They had also exchanged email addresses, and while he was a much more active netter than she was, they had exchanged a few messages. He learned more about her college years, her fiancé who had also been a student at her college, and their plans after their marriage to live in Madison so she could finish her doctorate at the University. She'd apparently graduated on time even though she'd missed a semester due to illness, but she'd never explained what the illness was or whether she had totally recovered. She had a younger brother who had dropped out of college and was tending bar along the Gold Coast in Chicago. She grew up in the suburbs in a very rambunctious and sometimes dysfunctional Irish-Italian household. She wanted to settle in a quieter world, perhaps somewhere in northern Wisconsin. Luc had filled her in on his life, his recent divorce and his pending early retirement. He said he was undecided where he would end up, although he knew for certain it would not be in this town where he'd lived since returning from Paris or in his hometown a hundred or so miles away and he was leaning toward Tahoe and California. He was ready to leave, and she had chimed in that after just a year (having started her graduate work during the summer before) she was ready to leave as well. She had not made many friends and felt out of place in her department and in the community. He was not surprised by that because he had long ago found it easier not to fit in than to fit in.

On the more relaxed occasions Tara could be gregarious, articulate and funny but even then never completely open. More intimate aspects were seldom discussed. Luc sensed that there were some dark holes that she would not talk about and he would not ask about. She told him the name of her sophomore -year illness but very little else. She told him where her brother was a barkeep and that Luc should stop and talk to him when he was in Chicago, but not why he had quit college, now almost three years ago. She mentioned other family members – a sister and of course her parents – never what they did or how she felt about them. Bits and pieces of her life but never enough from which to draw a very full portrait. He was sure she had gone through some difficult times, but no hint as to what they might have entailed. Luc could see how poised

and confident she could be but also how quickly they could vanish when their conversations reached a boundary. He was certain she wanted to confide in him and perhaps – this was iffy – to be with him but it was touch-and-go some days. When she seemed especially uncomfortable, she had a habit of looking away from him, talking, if she talked at all, into a space somewhere beyond her and him. He was by contrast more open about his life than she was, but he tried to exercise discretion. At times he sensed she had things she wanted to get off her chest but then couldn't, and he'd simply let them pass. One thing was clear that since the day of the crutches they had become pals, and almost every day they inched into new territory. Luc was willing to take the ride and not force the issue. He had always been a good listener and this was a time when he to rely on what he was good at. He was learning when to follow up on a remark of hers and when to drop it. He wanted to know more, but it also didn't matter that she wasn't so forthcoming about her past because when her mood was high they had fun just gabbing, making jokes and teasing. Her humor was understated, and she tended to use it to change subjects. She was curious about him and his life, and since he was less inhibited, she had learned more about him than he had about her. He tried to keep track of all the details of their conversation, even the most trivial, just in case they would help fill in the portrait. Even with what most might consider generic conversation she would block further inquiry. When he had asked her how she ended up at this university instead of going straight to the University of Wisconsin, her answer avoided the question, and he was disappointed but had ceased being surprised. They never talked about her friends, even though he knew that she and Ally occasionally palled around together.

The most obvious and seldom violated taboo was about her feelings. She wasn't reluctant to ask him about his feelings, especially during his divorce, almost to the extent of trying to play therapist. He found that curious, as if she were looking for some palliative, not so much for him – by then his divorce was past history – but for herself. She also asked questions about his writing, which constituted a substantial oeuvre. When he said he thought he would do more and different writing in retirement, she said something to the effect she wanted to write but was afraid to and wrote as little as possible. He didn't pursue that because he had decided that her comment had pretty much closed the door. They discovered they had a common interest in cooking, and she always asked him what he planned to prepare for the evening, and if he liked it would he send her a note with the details.

Most of their infrequent emails had to do with food. More than one of his lifter friends had observed how friendly she was with him and no one else. He had thought about that but had no explanation for himself and wasn't about to speculate to his friends. He simply deflected their queries almost in the same manner that she deflected his. He too observed how curt she could be with those who tried to talk to her. When she finished her classes, unless she stopped to talk to him – and sometimes she didn't – she rather hurriedly exited the gym. He never brought it up, and he certainly wasn't going to confide in anyone else including Ally. He had a friendship with Tara that seemingly no one else had with the possible exception of Naomi, who also taught aerobics and had stayed with Tara briefly after losing her apartment. Luc talked to Naomi once in a while but Tara never came up in the conversation. As hard as he tried not to feel any special attachment, it was happening anyway. He thought a lot about her when they were not together and he tried to make sure they got together as often as possible without overstepping whatever boundaries she had unconsciously or consciously laid down for them.

As Luc was trying to figure out his new relationship with Tara, he was also trying to put behind him a brief but intense, sexually speaking, relationship with his neighbor whose apartment was several doors away from his. She was only slightly older than Tara but had nothing else in common with her. He had talked to Lacy any number of times in the hall and on the elevator. They kept saying we should get together, and then months later it happened. The plan was to take in a movie but they never executed that plan. She was sitting on his sofa, and they were trying to decide about a movie. He actually hated movies, and her tastes ran to horrors, thrillers, high-tech, basically plotless productions. The only movie he would ever acknowledge was “Dinner with André”, a movie he had seen innumerable times on TV. But he was willing to endure anything to have an evening with her.

Before they could decide, the conversation turned to how this had happened after so many “Let’s try to do it sometime” conversation. Lacy revealed that she had talked to her uncle about going out with an older man like Luc who also had a different race and educational background. Her uncle knew she was lonely since moving to this rural university town from New York City, and he said what did she have to lose. She had never married the man she met after being discharged from the service, and she had raised their two boys in New York City pretty much by herself until she nearly broke under the pressure. They were teenagers and would not leave the city so she left them in the custody of their father. She stayed with her uncle for a while before finding a technical job in a local chemical company. She worked the graveyard shift. She had few interests outside of soap opera and long fingernails, the longest he had even seen. She confessed she spent more hours and dollars in the local nail salon, but like it or not that was her thing. She plowed a narrow furrow and made no apologies. He liked that. He had never dated anyone with these credentials. Besides, she attractive in a sexy way – medium height, a trim body with no extra weight and a shy manner enlivened by sparkling green eyes. Her language, unpolished and colorful, kept him on his toes, although he adjusted more quickly than others might have because he had grown up in a family and among relatives whose language was course and unrefined.

He learned this while they were trying to figure out which movie to go to. She asked him some questions about his life and kept remarking “our lives are so different”. Indeed they were, and then it happened, although he can't remember who initiated what. And as they kissed he carried her into the bedroom. As he lay her on the bed, she pulled him down, turned him on his back, undressed him and pulled to the edge of the bed – his feet on the floor and his heads on the mattress – brought his cock to life as she undressed. Never in his life had he been so aroused, so quickly. He wasn't sure – it didn't matter - how long it continued, and then she quit, lay on the bed, pulled him on top of her, nibbled his ear as he slid inside her. For hours, literally hours, they fucked. She kept whispering how hard, how hard, which just seemed to make it harder. A half hour before her shift started, she dressed and left without a word.

Luc tried to sleep but couldn't and lay awake most of the rest of the night replaying their fucking. He did not see her the next day, and after he had finished dinner and cleaned up the kitchen, he heard a knock on the door. When he opened it, she brushed past him. She was dressed in pajamas with slippers that featured a big furry bear's head. After entering his apartment, he turned toward her with a fierce face and her hands behind her back and said something to the effect that HE had busted something of hers in their sexual free-for-last night and what was HE going to do about. He looked like the proverbial dog with his tail between his legs, and then she tarted to

laugh and pointed to a mended nail. He didn't know it was mended, and she had to described the necessary surgery at the nail salon. She threw her arms around him and said

--“I loved it, broken nail and all.”

---“They can do that?” was his response, an incorrect response, it turned out, as she rested her knee a centimeter from his balls and spoke with a glare,

--“You ain't listenin', Luc. Did you not hear the I-loved-it part? Are you more obsessed with my nails than I am and not remembering how well your cock was treated last night?”

And the love-making picked up where it left off last night on the floor of a fully-lit living room without the shades being drawn. Of course, on the seventh floor at the top of the building that didn't much matter. The fucking was more familiar and more exploratory, but after she came, she turned in her side and pulled him as close and as tight as she could without a word, a position they held for a long time. He could feel her heart beat a regular rhythm, her body twitch at unpredictable intervals, her breath fanning against the side of his face, the stillness of the room that all the world could observe. As the night before she left a half hour before she was due at her job, and he was left to wonder again what was happening. This was unique in his romantic life. He was with a woman unlike any woman he had ever known and loved, and he was totally at peace with that inner emotional world he was often doing battle with.

A routine was soon in place. She spent the evenings before leaving for work with him, having dinner or cooking dinner and always cleaning up the kitchen. On weekend they might venture out to the grocery store or to a pizza parlor, but generally they stayed close to his apartment. He had a large two-bedroom apartment whereas she could only afford a small studio. They fucked every night before she went to work, and after he gave her a key, she woke him up with more fucking in the morning. One morning she said: “I've been thinking about fucking you since four am. I could hardly finish my job for the night.” That was his life for nearly a month. It was what he had dreamed to be the ideal relationship. No talk whatsoever about feelings, although he knew how he felt and he thought he knew how she felt, nor about where do we go from her. He remembered a favorite novel, read years ago, about an academic with a beautiful wife and family and a promising career spent several evenings a month with a lover, a different kind of woman, because he had to escape all the relationship talk, the family scheduling and the unrelenting devotedness. In the arms of his lover he was seldom asked anything and they never planned anything except perhaps their next *rendevous*. They stuck to the script that had brought them together. Lust was a singular force with a simple purpose, the professor character would say to himself, keep it that way. The novel ended badly. His love making with Lacy could end at any time, but he doubted it could end as badly since no other parties were involved. He knew there was a termination ahead because he was retiring and leaving for California in the fall. He simply pushed it out of his mind, something he had learned to do but not always with the desired results.

None of his friends knew about Lacy, although several asked why he was so occupied, and no one in the building knew them. Instinctively, in public, they were both utterly circumspect. They spent most of their time together in his apartment. For the first time in his life he felt relaxed in a relationship. He wasn't sure how she felt since she seldom talked about feelings. They

watched TV programs of no redeeming social value; they ate big juicy cheeseburgers and greasy crisp french fries; they talked about her nails and his messy hair; and they fucked. One night she turned his long hair into scores of corn curls. It was a sight to behold. When he showed up at the Café for his morning, Erin took one look and refused to wait on him. Before he could react, Billie appeared from around the counter with his coffee, grabbed him by the shoulder, although she aimed at his nose, and dragged him to a table in the corner.

---“OK, out with it. I'm the only one here who knows what's happened to your head. Who is she?”

So he explained, and when he finished, she just shook her head.

---“You're driving Erin crazy, you won't date the women you should be dating and you've shackled up with a bundle of sex. It's a good thing that I like you AND that you're moving soon because soon you have a bride to leave by.”

---“Remember Erin threw me out, and the other woman is sweet but...,” and before he could finish Billie got up, came around the table and threw her arms around him before her final comment,

---“And am I jealous?” She was gone. He was almost immediately joined by Greg, a local industrialist with a big house and a beautiful wife, who was risking almost everything by chasing Billie who could be chased but never captured, and he had told Greg that.

---“Jesus, man, you've got her in a bad don't-fuck-with-me mood, and what the hell happened to your hair.”

He was not about to tell Craig anything, for if he did, he'd be writing it in the sky with his bi-plane.

---“I just got lectured about my bad behavior so maybe her mood will change. My hair, a new style for single, hep men, do you like it?”

---“Well, I can tell you who doesn't like it.”

---“Imagine that.”

---“So I'm flying to Vegas and then to Tahoe to ski – are you in?”

---“I'm heading in the other direction to ski with some New England friends. I told you that, but as usual you were watching Billie and not listening. You're going to end up in the gutter if you don't get squared around. Mary Sue will take everything you have.”

---“I'd forgotten. I'll have the better skiing, and since Mary Sue is meeting me there, we'll get back on track.”

---“You'll just get more pissed off than ever because she can ski circles around you. I know those mountains better than you, and you may join the Tahoe disappeared.”

---“So when your final day before you take off permanently for those mountains?”

---“Late fall. I have to stay for half the fall semester, then I can legally make my exit. I expect to buy a condo this summer for possession in the fall. Any work it may need could be done in the meantime. And when will you be showing up sans some tootsie?”

---“January, by myself and maybe my brother.”

---“So long as he leaves his stuff at home – skiing and stuff don't work well together when you're as unskilled as he is. It's your responsibility.”

---“And this hair-stylist tootsie – she'll be joining you. I can assure you Erin won't be. She can hardly wait until you're gone.”

---“The answer to the first is NO, and the answer to the second GOOD. I'm going to write and write and write some more, and you and cranky and silly and boozy will all make cameo appearances. Cameo is about as good as I can do, given what I have to work with.”

---“I've already made a cameo in the last story?”

---“I was being kind....”

---“Gotta run and please no trouble. You've been living on the edge with twenty-year-olds and sometimes thirty-year-olds, but never older; you need to try to be grown-up for a while.” They both walked toward the counter with their cups. Luc was greeted on his left by daggers and on his right by smiles. In fifteen minutes he was sitting at his desk and wishing he were some place else.

The good times with Lacy came to an end while he was skiing. When he got back, she was nowhere to be found. He knocked on her door, no answer; he slide an invitation under her door, as he had done before, no reply. He never saw her again, and to this day he had no idea where she went. It was then that Tara made her entrance.

About half way through their time together he found on his computer an email from Tara with a quiz, which she asked him to answer and he did. It was designed, he figured out, to highlight his emotional side, and he thought that curious. He read all sorts of motives and desires on her part for sending it, and he knew without a hug or kiss or any encouraging words he was slipping into a different mode with Tara. He liked her, and he began to think she liked him. One evening they joined Ally who like Tara had just finished teaching a class. It was friendly and jocular. A few days later she arrived at his office early one morning, long before he'd ever show up – although he wished he had that morning - and left a packet (leaning up against the door). He still had the packet somewhere in a desk drawer. Among others things was the analysis of their compatibility points based on the tests they had taken. What she wrote was certainly not a love letter, but it was

more than just casual commentary about their scores. He wrote her an email with his reactions and said maybe they could get together after their workouts one of these days. He kept trying to open the door a little wider which she kept holding pretty much shut.

She was not at the gym that night, or the next, or for several more. He wrote an email expressing concern and hoping she was okay. No response. He dare not ask the manager or anyone else, so he waited.

A week later he saw her by the pull-down machine. She was just standing there, almost oblivious to what was happening around her. He slowly walked toward her, and he observed once he was in line of sight, she never took her eyes off him. She was not smiling. Her face was tense, and she was poised as if to strike or shrunk, he wasn't sure which. He was fearful what might transpire, but surprisingly she broke the ice by saying thanks for the email.

---"I'm okay. I admitted myself to the local psychiatric center, The Elms, for observation and therapy."

He looked startled. Her expression changed as soon as she said that. She looked as if she had intended to say something that would startle.

---"Do you have something against people who admit themselves for such care?" she asked, anger in her voice and in her expression. She glared at him, her eyes almost flared, and he feared that she was about to lose control.

---"Not that I know of. I'm surprised and concerned. Was the admission helpful?"

---"I'm calm now," she said in a totally different voice, subdued and her head bowed as she placed her right hand on his left arm, "but before I was admitted I was frantic, not quite out of control but almost."

---"Is there anything I can do?" he asked instead of what he wanted to ask. Why?"

She said she had to leave, and he walked her part way to the exit. Not much was said, but he was and he was feeling troubled as troubled as she was and had been.

When he returned home, he had to do everything he could to stop himself from calling, emailing or walking over to her apartment, which he'd never seen.

She was absent the next few days, and then out of the blue she called him at the office to ask for some computer help. Her data were so messed up she was afraid she'd miss her deadlines. He said of course, and he would even ask his closest friend who was a computer pro to join them. That turned out to be a mistake. They set a date for the next day.

Luc had just arrived at his office the next day when the phone rang and Tara, sounding a bit at loose ends, said she'd be late. She explained she'd accidentally thrown his wallet in the dumpster chute. He tried to sound calm. He said the time could be changed and offered some suggestions

as to how to retrieve the wallet, although he didn't have clue about his friend's schedule or her dumpster arrangement. At that moment she said the super was at the door and he was going to help her. She thought she might still make the noon appointment and hung up.

Luc decided to do nothing until he heard from Tara. A strangeness was overtaking this relationship that had the earmarks of a romance but the dynamics of a disaster.

A few minutes before their appointment she showed up. The door was open, and when she entered she closed the door and walked toward the corner before turning toward him, not a word. He had uttered a greeting, risen from his desk and walked toward her. She looked tense and overwrought, but fiercely determined in a way he'd never observed before. She stepped toward him, not a word, eyes an icy blue, and began to extend her arms. He inched toward her, as the thought that flashed across his mind was she was going to make something happen. The rap on the door froze them both in place. She looked flustered, and he must have looked devastated. He touched her hand, and then opened the door. His friend apologized for being a little early. Introductions were made, and her computer problems were solved within an hour. She had a class and left without much more than thanks and goodbye. He chatted briefly with his friend, and then citing an appointment he bid him adieu. He stood in the corner where something was about to have happened. He couldn't make sense of it then or now years later. It was a moment unlike any he had ever experienced.

As Luc left his office, he knew unalterably he was in love with Tara, and he knew why – because, he thought, she was in love with him. He wanted it all, and yet he was utterly baffled as to how to proceed. He lay awake most of the night – not customary for him who had started sleeping like the proverbial baby once he got divorced. He felt despair that caused him to cry; he felt hope that caused him to consider reversing his vasectomy; he felt lust that caused him to masturbate. Toward morning he fell asleep and dreamed about open spaces that in dream theory, he knew from his own therapy, could signify disorder ahead. In twenty-four hours, he realized, when he woke much later than usual, his life had rocketed into a different sphere.

The semester had ended, and he was making plans to travel west to Tahoe to look for property. His retirement was set for the end of the Fall Term, although because he had been given the term off in exchange for adding a class several semesters before, he could leave before the end of the semester. No responsibilities whatsoever except packing and cleaning loose ends. The new head and the college dean had asked him to reconsider. His latest book had been received with much praise, and they both made the argument that if he stayed on for several more years instead of taking early retirement he could write his own ticket. And it would mean a much richer pension. No thanks, he had said. While he liked his head and dean, he disliked most of his colleagues. We wanted out. As he was thinking about wanting out, he was thinking about taking Tara with him. Not even her pending marriage had any influence on what was happening in head and heart.

He had talked to Ally about his retirement and what was ahead for him (but not a word about Tara), and Ally had surprised him with her announcement that she and Jared had decided to move to Colorado. They both laughed at the comment they'd be close but not as close as now. A pleasant prospect, thought Luc, and in his mind he threw Tara into the mix of relocation and fun.

He would Ally no matter if he traveled West alone or in the company of Tara. In the company of Tara was hardly more than a glimmer.

Luc and Tara saw each other at the gym, walked home together and she even agreed to have lunch with him. He had chosen a bistro-like eatery where he thought she could be comfortable. She was waiting for him at the entrance; she looked terrific but he soon realized she was as nervous as a cat, so nervous she didn't order because she couldn't eat. She ordered a cold drink, was evasive and almost inarticulate. She looked at him from time to time, and when she did, he could see tears had formed. After a very uncomfortable lunch, he walked her back to her office, where she told him she was leaving tomorrow for Chicago to finish her wedding plans. She did not wait for his reaction. She patted his arm and disappeared inside. Another restless night with more despair than hope, he remembered.

Ten days later she showed up at the gym. Of course, he had not had a word. She did not look in direction, but he decided to walk over and greet her. She was working was some very light weights, and without putting them down, she turned and snarled (that's how he remembered it and wrote it in his journal) "Stay away from me". Shock would not begin to describe his feelings. He felt paralyzed as he tried to exit as fast as he could. His face felt so red it burned. In a wobbly stride he was sure everyone noticed he walked out of the gym into a very warm evening. He never drank enough to get drunk, but he came close while sitting on his seventh floor balcony, not the best choice of venues.

He was trying hard after these intervening months during a Tahoe blizzard to remember what happened rather than what he wanted the story to be. He pulled the appropriate journal out of the box since he was not yet completely unpacked. When he found the pages written after the day of rejection, he was surprised he wrote long passages about how he felt but only a few sentences about the details of what had happened that afternoon in the gym. Not much help. He was sure of the basic outline but not the details. He thought he was paying, but he wasn't. He remembered the fire in her eyes, once so gorgeous to look at, the deep-throated pitch of her voice, a few choice words, and having said them how quickly she turned and walked away, nary a hesitation. Was that it? After months of building a foundation for a friendship at the very least it was ripped to shreds in minutes. Even if he had known more, would his time with Tara eve make sense. Was the only sensible explanation that he got sucked in, got to hand around a while and got pushed out. That was the sum of it except it wasn't.

Luc was sick with broken-heartedness for days. He had the summer off so he had no reason to spend much time at the university. He continued to show up at the gym, kept to himself except for a conversation or two with Ally. If she knew anything, she never let on. Tara had told him earlier that her last week would coincide with his trip to California, but she would be in touch. She was also sending him an invitation to the wedding in the fall and insisting he attend. He could not imagine himself attending her wedding. He would be tempted to stand and shout out "I object", but he assured her he would be there. During the days from rejection to California he saw her twice in the gym. The first time she was on the Stair-Master when he arrived. He tried not to make eye contact, but if he took a peek, she was watching him. The natural beauty of her Italiano-Irish face was gone; He doubted that she had gained weight but that was how she looked – puffed up as it were. He hated to think how he looked. She left before he did, and then Ally

surprised him with hug from behind. He agreed to have dinner with her and the gang before he departed on his West-Coast trip.

The second and last time he saw her was on the eve of his departure. He hadn't noticed her when he arrived, and as he finished his bench press and sat up, she and Mel, the young trainer who often worked out with Luc, were working on the bench next to him. She was standing behind the bar, while Mel was instructing her on procedure. She was paying no attention whatsoever to Mel who was then lying on the bench with the plateless bar overhead. She was not paying any attention because she had locked on Luc the way she had from the corner in his office. Her expression was as fierce as he had ever seen it. Luc decided to stare her down, and then he thought he should walk over to her and kiss her in front of Mel and everyone else and walk away. As they stared at each other, she raised her hands to her hips until she formed two triangles, as if she were conveying a message or readying a pronouncement. Like the knock on the office door, Mel broke the spell, and she slide onto the bench. For the next twenty minutes, Luc recalled, their time overlapped, but he was on one side and she on the other. Then he left, flew to California for a month and when he returned, without any prompting the manager of the gym duly informed him that he and his wife had invited Tara to dinner during her last week - something they did with long-time staff - and she'd blow them off. He called her apartment on the appointed evening and the next day, but no answer. Not a word. Nor did she show up for her final check. They were pissed, of course, and his parting remarks to Luc was management had put up with her scheduling eccentricities and other absences because they thought she was carrying a heavy load, but the truth was she was crazy. Luc thought about her self-admission.

He never saw her again and never heard from her. The wedding invitation obviously got lost in the mail. The only other remark about Tara except for self-conversations in his head was the comment by Ally about not receiving an invitation but her roommate did. Ally had nothing else to say. Luc thought for a minute he should confess to Ally because if he explained the circumstances of the past few months she might actually pierce the mystery. But he didn't. Apparently Ally's roommate found the invitation odd because she asked Ally what she should buy as a wedding gift, having spent so little time with Tara.

II

She turned the postcard over again, from the sketch of Palo Alto to the brief message on the back, as she had done how many times. “Miss you even though our time has come to an end. Jogged through these hills. You would have loved it. Always my love, L/.” That was how he signed most everything.

She had found the postcard in a box stuck away in a closet. She hadn't thought about Lyle for years, almost not at all during her marriage, and now he preoccupied her. Since her divorce, more like abandonment, she had found success as a writer. That would surprise Lyle if she ever got a chance to talk to him. The story she just read through was written from an imaginary Lyle's point of view. She couldn't abide hers. It needed work but for now she'd leave it as it was. She found herself wondering how Lyle would tell the story if he were writing it. Maybe he had written it. She wanted to ask. She didn't believe in all that paranormal stuff, but she smiled as she thought that maybe the gods had guided her fingers over the keyboard, as if Lyle were writing the story. Did he care enough to write about them? she asked herself. She knew part of the answer even before the question. He did care then. He cared for her in a way no other man including the one she married ever had. She couldn't trust herself with him and pushed him over the edge. The feelings, the desires, buried deep inside had for the last couple of weeks since the discovery of the postcard, the only remaining artifact from their never-to-be romance, been burrowing their way to the surface were hard impossible to ignore. Not at this stage in her life. A life of missed opportunities was past. Suddenly, out of the proverbial blue, she realized the postcard wasn't the only remembrance. She had diaries, but where were they?

An early sunny morning on a cool fall day was among her favorite times. She wasn't sure how that had happened. There were many grand sunny mornings, warm and cool, but why this particular configuration? As he thought about it, she begin to sense a risk. Since she'd last seen Lyle, she'd not only been a wife and husband, but also a patient several times in a local psychiatric clinic. Short stays, like the one she'd told Lyle about. Most of the time the meds keep her on track. Somehow she'd been functional even before the meds, while the kids were growing up. They were now at private school and under the custody of her ex. That was a good thing, she had agreed, after her last breakdown when he decamped. They knew what had happened to her, but they had not seen it first-hand. The writing had started in the clinic and saved her as far as she was concerned. There was more to it than that, she knew, but the writing was crucial. A friend had read her stories, and without asking her had shown them to an agent. She was not angry about it because she might never have had the guts to contact an agent. The writing, the stories, the publications had become nobs on a sheer rock wall that she had to use to climb out of that hole. The title of one of the collections and the lead story was “That Hole”. Most of that collection was written in this very room where she now sat with a postcard and desire - “black swell of desire” she recalled from Simone de Beauvoir, whom she read late in life, and that turned out not to be a bad thing.

She was in her mid-forties, and if she remembered correctly Lyle would be near seventy, that is, if he were.... She refused to finish that thought. She had run off to her fiancé without saying goodbye to anyone because she was afraid she would run off with Lyle instead if she had to say

goodbye. She had never written about him and what might have happened. When her couch sessions turned to former lovers Lyle was so completely blocked out that he never entered the conversation. She remembered that her analyst seemed puzzled because there were obviously gaps in her narration that couldn't be explained, but however she had done it she had succeeded in suppressing stuff she should have let loose. This was going to come up today at their session, no doubt about it. She was ready to talk about it, although she was glad she had written about it first. She had emailed the story to Gale. There was no doubt what they would be talking about. Gale had seen her through so much in the last decade, and she knew – that was the big change in her mental state, not being afraid to dive in – they would begin to talk about what's next. Was there a next? Should there be a next? She would need some help with that.

Before she left for her appointment, she decided not only to pack the postcard in her purse but to check the web for Lyle. She had resisted since finding the card and composing the story, but now she was ready. What came up almost blew her out of her chair. Page after page. Quickly she counted five individual web pages, and maybe there were more. What had this guy become, she thought, a web exhibitionist? She bookmarked one of the pages, and then noticed he was also on Twitter and Facebook. Oh my god, she said to herself. When his Twitter site appeared with a photo, her eyes became glued to the screen. He had posted something about an hour ago, quoting some lines from a Tom Waits's song. She wanted to look further but had to leave.

Gale had that uncanny ability after so many years of working with nuts like her, thought Ann, as they embraced, to subtract a little tension each time they met. Even the most bizarre – and Ann had brought many bizarres to these sessions – Gale betrayed very little about how they were going to proceed. Ann laughed to herself – maybe Gale doesn't know either. Of course, over the years Ann had learned that part of the dynamic of these sessions was to allow things to develop. Only a few times was she so distraught that she wanted to push ahead faster and faster until Gale managed to rein her in and slow her down so they could begin to resolve the inner conflicts rather than racing through them. That would not be the case today. She was content to let Gale set the agenda and the pace.

---“So, do you want to talk about this not as a fictional story but as a real event? Are you ready for that? And who was Luc?” Gale asked, laying out a series of questions that Ann could choose which to respond to.

---“Yes, enthusiastically yes, the real story, which is also in part the fictional story. You know that Luc was actually Lyle, and I'm Tara,” declared Ann firmly.

---“Will we need the Kleenex?” replied Gale solemnly and without missing a beat.

So for the next half hour and for the first time in her life she talked about Lyle.

---“And the story you've written, straightforward and literal or mostly made up?” was Gale's first question.

---“Yes and yes” replied Ann, somewhat sheepishly. “I'm afraid more is made-up than real.”

---“Can you help me with that?” asked Gale followed by a smile.

---“The events or episodes involving Lyle and me I remember, but the context for them and most of the accompanying conversations, whole cloth. I've had to create.” answered Ann, her spirit returning. She realized she loved talking about this story and the crazy guy who “wrote” it by way of her keyboard. Crazy, she thought for the first time; serious, no doubt; witty, most definitely; but crazy, yes, she said under her breathe, he was trying to topple Everest.

---“His flaming love affair with the corn-curler, real or fictional?”

---“Pretty much made up except once under circumstances I can't recall he mentioned he had dated a young women – my age – who enjoyed mussing up his hair and twisting it into curls. I took it from there.” Ann knew what the next questions would be. “I suppose I made it up in a way to substitute me for the curler.”

---“We've been at this too many years,” lamented Gale as she sipped some water.

Ann shook her head in agreement.

---“So, you know where he is and what he's doing?” inquired Gale in a more serious tone

---“Yes and no. I know he's alive and a web maniac.” Then she explained to Gale what she'd found. She also pulled out her cell and showed Gale his Twitter post.

---“He's misspelled Waits's name,” observed Gale without sounding menacing.

---“That only makes him more endearing,” replied Ann.

---“The next step?”

---“Ugh, that next step. Honestly, Gale, I don't know. I tried to write the story from his perspective but you know how the omniscient voice operates. I tried not to include things that he could not possibly have known, but since I did not know because I did not ask I did a lot of backing and filling to get a story. I was pretty up tight over what was happening, and in retrospect, I'll admit, about this guy. I'll bet if I'd paid closer attention to what he was saying I would have learned a lot I wish I knew now. As I try to recall why I didn't pay attention, I run smack up against a heart aching for his embrace, his kiss, his body, and the improbability that any of that would ever happen. I doubt if I would have put it that way then. If the story has an ethereal quality, that's because even now fifteen years later that's how it feels to me. I fled because I was spinning out of control. I took a sharp right and here I am. I ran back into a relationship I had doubts about even before I met Lyle. I was too afraid to talk or to listen or to do much more than spend a few minutes, maybe a hour with him, before my fears drove me back to my apartment. I did open up a little at the Elms, the clinic I had admitted myself to for a weekend. They knew that some form of suppression was taking place, even as I tried to disguise it. I talked about how nervous I was about my forthcoming marriage, and the therapist kept trying to push the conversation to a deeper level. The marriage-fear factor was not enough to

satisfy her curiosity. Not at all. That's why she asked me to set up some appointments to talk further. Once I was released I dumped the idea. I thought I had calmed down enough to handle Lyle, my fiancé, our families, my MA thesis and a thousand other things churning in my head. I made up the story about losing my wallet so I wouldn't have to meet Lyle and his friend at his office, and then I showed up at what I thought was an hour early so I could do something with him. I don't think I had any plan about what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted something physical, something real, something more than all of the words and all of the sidestepping and all of the discretionary and diversionary action. I couldn't write those into the story because Lyle didn't know about them. I took some liberties, but generally I tried to keep it Lyle's story based on what he might have actually known or guessed. Gale, as I wrote the story, I remembered for the first time in years how scared I felt - you know my armydala - because if I bolted, I had convinced myself that Lyle would save me and point us in direction of that rosy path. I came so close, but I had to tell him and I couldn't. I never overcome that last stage of fear."

---"If he had told you?"

---"I would probably have collapsed, out of fear. But he wouldn't. He was always a gentleman, although at times I could sense how hard it was for him."

---"Ann, I knew you as well as anyone I've ever counseled, and let me be blunt in a way I'm usually not. You may be reliving the scariness of the events with Lyle, but you're not reliving the actual emotions. You're beyond that. You have a pretty good grip on your emotional state, at least your present emotional state. You may feel anxious or excited about getting in touch again, but it's a safe bet you're ready. You have the wherewithal. You may slip and fall - I doubt it - but you're determined to renew contact whatever the cost. In a sense you have some unfinished business with yourself as much as with Lyle. Should we try in the few minutes left to fashion a plan or are you going to do this on your own?"

---"What do you think?"

---"As if I didn't know? You know how to get in touch with me."

---"It's mine for now. I know what to do if I start getting all shivery over this this." They embraced and Ann left. She was sorry she had driven because the walk of thirty minutes would do her some good. She could come back...and then she decided she'd drive into the country for a while. When she knew Lyle, she often drove into the countryside to walk and think, well, more like fret.

While she was driving her cell went off several times, but she ignored it. She wasn't quite sure what she was thinking about, as she jumped from one set of thoughts to another, but unlike a decade ago she was far better able to handle the disarray in her head. She knew it would eventually resolve itself.

At home, as dusk passed to darkness, she poured some red wine - with her meds she was allowed a half a glass - and opened her cell. There were messages, almost always there were messages. She thought how for so many years she ignored the exterior world, not answering her

phone, erasing emails without reading them and blowing off appointments except with her students or classes. How many disorders did Gale tell her she fell into according to the DSM-IV? Adjustment, Anxiety, Mood, Personality, Somatiform, which she loved because she never figured it out, but in the end after she decided she had to get better and after numerous scans and sessions it all boiled down a couple of treatable disorders. She now realized she'd spent half of her life not fighting the disorders but fighting the treatments of the disorders. That was when Lyle knew her. She recalled one thing that scared her about him was his relative calmness. He seemed to know how to manage without a fuss. Her fiancé, husband, ex could manage but only if he could make it into a production through which he could extol some form of Catholic overview. She had been raised a Catholic – what chance did she have being Irish and Italian – but had long ago left the church, years before she was divorced, much to his dismay. The guilt lingered until the crash came and the recovery began.

She thought about the journals and made a trip to look through the dozens of boxes in the basement. She finally located a box that was marked “Personal”, and there they were. She was eager and excited until her clawing through the contents dismayed her. She had some “Dear Diaries” from her teen years and nothing else until after she was married. She sat on the cool basement floor, trying to recall why the gap. When she opened the first journal the answer stared her in the face. “Lyle had urged me to write down my thoughts and desires, my triumphs and fears, and now the time has arrived.” She did not remember writing that sentence, and until now she couldn't recall that she'd ever given much thought to Lyle after she arrived home, but apparently she held on long enough to start keeping a journal. She'd thought about him at times over the years but only fleetingly and never with any intention of pulling him back into her life. How much did she think about him immediately after their separation? That opening sentence suggests more than she had recalled. The mystery remained. No way to know, at least not until they got together, and that was her aim, a reunion, she said to herself, as she climbed the stairs with some of the journals in tow. Nothing between Dear Diary and her journals because she didn't write. And now she had trouble stopping.

Back in her study she finished her wine and had a good laugh. How proud she was that she so was much better at ordering her life, and yet there lay an anxious cell with its flashing red light and a pile of mail several days old plus a computer screen filled with unattended emails. And next to her was a new pile of diaries and journals that she had just rescued from their tomb in the basement. She decided the pile from the basement could wait.

Computer messages from her kids about some future plans, and she looked at her calendar to check the dates and wrote them back with a thumb's up and a smiley face. A note from Suzann with whom she'd reconnected some months ago. Suzann told her the wedding was on after some delay (without explanation), and she was welcome if she wanted to come. Immediately Ann thought about Lyle and his deep affection for Suzann. She also knew that Suzann had ended all contact with Lyle (again without explanation to him or anyone else) and wondered how...no, she didn't have to wonder, she knew Lyle would have been devastated. They had never been lovers, but Ann had surmised they were in love with each other. Somehow they had forged a friendship that had existed a couple years before and after Lyle had moved to Tahoe. Suzann had never talked to Ann about her feelings for Lyle back then or since they had made contact again. Ann's own feelings for Lyle had made her life tumultuous for the few months they danced around their

own maypole, but not so for Suzann and her feelings. She and Lyle managed somehow to keep whatever feelings they had toward each other under control, perhaps under wraps, and they stayed in touch until Suzann called it off completely. Finally, she read a note from her agent, who said the galleys were ready for *In & Out*, and Ann should call ASAP.

Ann sat back in her chair and realized that she wanted to include the piece that she had just written about an ill-fated romance with Lyle. Her agent would go ballistic. The story needed work, perhaps several days worth of work, but it should be the final piece in a collection of stories that portrayed the torturous journeys everyone must experience in and out of relationships. Given the sales of her last collection, neither the agent nor the publisher would refuse ultimately, but she did not relish the fight. Mischievously, she thought about the other publishers who had contacted her offering better deals and laying out how easy it was to switch. But she got along well with her agent, who was just barely in control of her own life, more spun out than Ann in some ways.

The decision was made. The Lyle/Luc story would be added, come hell or high water. She wrote a long email to her agent and then turned the computer off because she didn't want to deal with the response she knew was coming until tomorrow.

She turned the cell to quiet, fixed some tea and a light salad and returned to her desk to read her journals. She noticed, of course, that her cell lit up within a half after she'd sent her email, but she simply turned the cell face down. She read until midnight. It was far more satisfying than she had anticipated. After that initial entry Lyle never entered the picture again. But what she became engrossed in was the fact that this twenty-seven-year-old engaged woman knew herself better than she had ever given herself credit for. The time with Lyle was what she wanted; what she got was not what she wanted. And yet, echoing what Gale would surely ask, why did the marriage work for fifteen years more or less and produce two kids who were talented, independent and lovable. Yes, Ann said to herself, why did it? What was that story? Having read enough for one night she picked up her flashing cell, switched off the lights, climbed the stairs, took her meds and once in bed fell quickly asleep.

During her run the next morning she thought about her dream. She knew little about dream analysis until she and Gale had tossed around some of her more provocative dreams. Generally she paid little attention to dreams. Last night, as she remembered it, a cat, a very large cat – and she wasn't a cat lover – was lying under her bed and refused to respond to any request. She tried all sorts of elaborate ruses to dislodge the cat, and nothing worked. Certainly far from a nightmare, but still dream-wise agitating. Bed, cat, under, refusal, trickery, room, inside and her – she was taught to isolate the elements before trying to analyze. But she was lost. One thing she came to realize was that after writing the piece, the made-up parts were now eliciting their facts from somewhere in his memory banks. Whereas when she started, she could almost count the basic facts on her two hands, and now having written the story, talked to Gale and turned the whole thing over and over again in her mind she was becoming awash in new facts, times together with Lyle and long-forgotten conversations. Was her mind playing tricks on her? She was having a hard time sorting out the real and the fictional. She was almost at the stage of believing the story on the screen was a true account. Of course, it wasn't. As more facts (or fictions) crowded into mind, she recognized that a verification process was taking place. Some

things that she had doubts about now seemed more authentic. Other things seemed beyond the realm of possibility. As she turned into the driveway, she wondered if she should redo the story, perhaps, in spite of the note she sent her agent last night, rework it and publish it later. No, she said to herself as she entered the kitchen. "I'll tinker," she said aloud to herself, "but the story is set."

After editing the story and ignoring her cell, she took a break. Her Gmail inbox had a dozen items and her cell had more. She made some tea and sat back with a view of her garden on a splendid fall day. As she had been editing, she felt the mental undercurrent of the most difficult matter: how was it that she so completely erased her time with Lyle? She knew she had had feelings for him, they cascaded through her body and soul, yet except for a few times after her departure – certainly on the trip home – she had simply erased those months. She knew she was culpable; she could have ended all associations immediately but didn't; she'd encouraged him and she would if she could have fucked him. The context as well as its complexity was growing the more she dug around.

Finally, she looked at her cell messages. Of course, the agent was there several times, but also unexpectedly so was Gale. She listened to the message from Gale, who claimed it wasn't urgent, but called her immediately anyway. Gale often picked up the phone herself as she did this time.

---"I thought I'd have to wait at least till late afternoon," she heard Gale say instead of the usual greeting, "Dr...."

---"You got chosen because I don't want to talk to the others."

---"At least I'm not the lowest of the low. Did you run this morning?"

---"I did, and it was invigorating. You?"

---"Yes, but that's not why I called. I went through my notes last night after reading the story again – more engaging a second time, at least for your shrink – very much in your style – and I found no mention of Lyle in my notes, not even the tiniest of recollections. I didn't ever recall hearing the name. Does that surprise you?"

Another one of Gale's direct queries.

---"After all these years our heads are melded together. I've been thinking about that all morning. Where did he go? It's virtually total. As I drove home that August, I couldn't get him off my mind or out of the car and a week or so after I arrived home before the wedding, I'd lie in bed sobbing. And Houdini arrived. After all the dredging we've done for a decade and nothing came up. I can't find the answer so you shrinks will have to figure it out. How about a case study?"

---"Well, not that I think it's unique or dangerous, but we may want to talk about it sooner rather than later. What do you say?"

---"Agreed." And they made an appointment.

Ann knew what her agent was thinking, and she wasn't surprised by her notes, that got increasingly testy as Ann worked her way through them and hadn't yet responded. So, Ann wrote a two-sentence response. "No, I'm set on this. I will call this afternoon."

Ann then set to work, again with her cell turned off and upside down. By noon she had made further changes, read several parts of it again and declared it done. She fixed a sandwich and some herbal tea and walked into her garden, which was warm enough for her to sit on the bench, which she had made in a wood-working shop, taken to assuage despair over the collapse of her marriage. Not a bad job, she observed, as she perched in the corner to try to catch up with life of the past few days. To Lyle or not to Lyle, she thought to herself. She ran down the list of cons that was longer than the pros she could think of. If so many memory doors hadn't sprung open, she might have had an easier time just saying move on. Her life had been a mess for so long, and in the last couple of years she found the calmness and self-assurance to turn it in a different direction, she was happy with where she was in that transition and she was not so much afraid of complicating it but uninterested in doing so. Lyle was complicating it and frankly that was OK. He had complicated her life before not because he intended to but because she had given him no other choice. Now she wanted to give him the choice. In those few months she now recalled more clearly than a few days ago how tranquil his demeanor appeared to be in her presence, but, as she had written, in private he was distraught. She wanted to know if that was true?

On his web pages he looked older, as he was, and the personal entries – she paid little attention to his scholarly achievements – were funny, serious, current and reflective. At that level she more or less recognized the Lyle she had known. And then there was Jimmy, her companion for the last few months. He was quiet, reliable and kind if uninspired and to some degree uninspiring. At times he seemed more frightened of life than she had been, although that had not yet unhinged him the way it had her. As she finished her tea, she whispered to herself, was that the future she wanted? She slowly walked back inside to the sounds of the birds who had foolishly, she thought, decided to risk another winter. To risk another winter, she said to herself, to risk another winter.

She checked her cell to find a message from Suzann. They hadn't talked in weeks, and she thought Suzann was the one she needed to talk to. She pressed the number, and within second Suzann answered with "Ann, how goes it, my dear?"

---"I'm still walking and talking and trying to be naughty."

---"Quit the first two, focus on the last, I speak from experience. Of course, naughty at our age takes a hell of a lot more energy than I've got. So I'm not sure I'm envious."

---"How's married life? I ask even though I know the W-E-D-D-I-N-G's ahead of you."

---"The official ceremony to please the two religious contingents is becoming a pain. How much Protestantism you throw in with how much Judaism holds no interest for me nor Matt, and that's why we called up the JP and got hitched. I know you can't come, but I could use a piggy-back ride."

---“Oh my god, I hadn't thought about that in years. We were both higher than kites, and riding piggy-back around the room just seemed like the thing to do.”

---“I didn't just think of it, it popped up in a dream, the context for which I haven't a clue. There you were, hauling me around as if I were a child. I loved it then, and I loved it in the dream now.”

---“Do you have time? I have something to talk to you about.”

---“I do. No appointment for a half hour. Shoot.”

---“I don't know how to start. It's about Lyle.”

---“Oh my god. You too?”

---“Me too? What starry alignment are we dealing with?”

---“Lyle must have seen the announcement of the wedding somewhere, probably on the wedding registry. You know I keep a low profile on the Internet, but the registry allows public access. Anyway I always get a birthday card and once in a long while he'll write a very short note about skiing or dogs or something but nothing personal. I haven't responded in a decade because I can't. A few weeks ago I got a card with a wedding message that only Lyle could write. I almost buckled at the post office. It's crazy after all these years.”

There was a pause.

---“I never told you, Suzann or anyone else for that matter, except my therapist, Lyle and I had a non-physical fling a few months before I left the gym.” She waited in case Suzann wanted to respond. She didn't so Ann continued. She described the friendship that might have gone in a different direction, how it ended, the discovery of the postcard and uncertainty about what to do.

---“I know, Suzann, how he felt about you and I never knew how you felt about him.”

---“We stayed in touch for a few years after I moved,” said Suzann in a quiet, serious voice. “I saw him once and confided in him about some things. I always had boyfriends, but, as long as we remained in contact, I couldn't get him out of my mind. I'm not sure now what my mind expected. We never had any physical contact, and once in while we kidded about living together, either in this life - he could hang out secretly in my basement - or in the next life, in which neither of us had any faith. He's still a presence in my life, but I've kept him at bay, in isolation, beyond contact for a long time. I'll always...shall I say the word?...love him but it will have to be activated in the next life. Not even the basement is safe. I don't know what to tell you, Ann, I really don't.”

The conversation ended abruptly because Suzann was on call and had to deal with an emergency. Ann sat back and pondered their conversation. She now had a piece of information that she had

speculated about, that Suzann like her had an attachment. To inject a little humor in this heavier than expected moment, how many other women were there? And would Suzann remain a competitor? She felt a tear well up, not so much for herself but for Suzann and Lyle, two people who should have a shot at a life together.

Then, as she had promised, she called her agent, who by then had quieted down and they quickly, almost painlessly, agreed to delay publication until they worked out the details. Her agent warned her the delay would involve a penalty according to the contract, and Ann reminded her, somewhat more fiercely, that there were other suitors. There was a time in Ann's life when she would shrink from such a conversation, would literally hide, but no more, although she'd learned to pick her battles carefully. She had picked this battle and was prepared to see it through. Later, she joined Jimmy at a local bistro for drinks and supper.

After a run the next morning Ann arrived a few minutes before her appointment with Gale, who showed up in her running clothes. They embraced, and Ann almost happily stretched out on the couch.

---“This is what I need right now, I'm not sure why, it just feels right,” intoned Ann, while Gale was gathering up her notes.

---“Maybe I should seat you in a chair,” she responded, “you are much too relaxed to be in need of counseling today.” Gale slid into her chair.

---“So what do you think happened that Lyle so thoroughly disappeared, but when he returned, what, twenty years later, you can't seem to get enough of him?” Gale asked.

---“I can't answer the first – some form of super memory repression – one of the few successful undertakings in that time of my life. Unfortunately, I have a bunch of other memories from that time I'd sure as hell like to suppress. As to the second – I'm not sure I agree; maybe so.”

---“More a thought than a conclusion. We'll come back to that. Let me be sure I understand. Except for the few weeks after you and Lyle parted – and you've not seen him or had any contact with him since – he more or less vanished from your mind?”

---“That how I remember it. Was I being weird?”

---“Not really. Complete repression of unwanted memories goes back to Freud, and current neural research has in fact identified the areas involved and has shown that complete repression is possible. So, now that you've started opening up this off-limits memory bank, your feelings and recollections are getting mixed up. It's not unnatural to want a second chance – we all like second chances – but you can figure out the risks without me spelling them out. You never told Lyle why you vamoosed. What would you tell him now?”

---“ For weeks before we had our parting, I was fearful of what was happening. I did admit myself to a local clinic, as I told in the story, because I was almost paralyzed with fear. By the way I'd never told you that, and you didn't ask. Why?”

---“I didn't have to, although I hadn't forgotten about it. I would have brought it up eventually, but at the moment it was one of the few things in this story about Luc or Lyle that made sense.”

---“OK, knowing you as well as I do, I have no doubt you hadn't missed the significance of the episode. Anyway I wasn't sure I could stay committed to my betrothed or later to my marriage. Lyle was someone so different from any other male I'd ever known. But the insurmountable issue was age difference – how many years? Thirty? Can you imagine the tumult if I dropped the younger for the older and then taken the older home to meet my family? As I've turned these things over in my mind lately I think the age factor was never much of an issue until after the breakup or breakdown, and then it became the post-justification for what I did. The situation – and this will amuse you – was driving me crazier and crazier, and I did what I had done most of my life - find an escape. Would I tell him this? I couldn't then mostly because of me. I don't know how he would have reacted if I had gotten up the courage to tell him how I felt, but my guess is we would have fucked.”

---“And now? Would you tell him and then fuck him?”

---“Ha-ha, the short answer is yes.”

---“What made you think your pending marriage would save you? You don't say in the story.”

---“I'm not sure why it's not in the story. It may be implied. I spent ten days with family and my ex, and while we never directly talked about Lyle – my ex knew there was a Lyle – changing course was just too overwhelming. Getting rid of Lyle was easier than getting rid of all the baggage in a life – in several lives – you know about. On the flight back, I rehearsed what I had to say, but actually what came out was not what I had rehearsed. I was going to explain calmly why we shouldn't see each any longer, but what I said, as you know, was in so many unkind words, fuck off. On the final car trip home I was tense and moody because I had seen him the night before and we both knew we were staring at each other, trying to figure out the space between us and the past behind us. I remembered last night, as I was reading through some old journal I found in the basement, that on car trip several times I thought seriously and in some detail about flying to California to hook up with Lyle. I knew I could find him by way of emails. What I also learned last night was that I started keeping journals after I got home because I had remembered what Lyle had said about the potential value of writing some things down. In fact the first line in the first journal is about Lyle and journal-writing. And so far that was the last line. By the time I got to the wedding I'd erased him. Is that possible?”

---“Indeed it appears to be. Not only did you erase or suppress Lyle but also his role in what became a pretty important thing in your old and new life.”

---“Nothing escapes you, my dear Muse. That's why I keep coming back. And, damn it all, I should have cherished it but I tossed it instead.”

---“Although Lyle has been resurrected, so to speak, in a more pleasurable context, that was not the context at the time. Without realizing how it would work, you chose not only to end but to

forget. That you did. What is worth considering now is the context for the resurrection? Is there a context? You could have just tossed the postcard ,as you did Lyle earlier?"

---"It strike me as funny that the things I should have been repressing beyond recognition were flaying around in my life, while, the one thing I might have reveled in, I got rid of. Am I trying to make up for that?" Ann sat up, since lying on the couch was not a requirement, and then asked Gale, "How the hell do you make any sense of this – a rejection, an absence, a resurrection?"

---"You've asked that question before, and the answer hasn't changed."

---"I know. We were gathering information, doing history. The figuring out will occur. And neither one of us is any further along than we were earlier. Of course, I am impatient. And while my behavior is baffling, the context is equally baffling, I know two things are going to happen without any further understanding than we now have: I'm going to publish the story, and I'm going to get in touch with Lyle. In a way what I saying is that we've determined pretty definitely that the questions we have and would like answers to will be around for a long time. I'm not going to wait. Why shouldn't I take the next step, despite the risks, and make contact. I don't need the questions answered to do that, and who knows, doing it may turn on light bulbs all over the place."

Gale had to marvel at, at time also worry about, the newly-burnished persona of Ann. She wasn't sure where the self-assurance had originated and how it had evolved. She'd be more worried if Ann hadn't worked as hard as she had to find the right balance. She knew that the chemistry in her brain needed constant monitoring as well as her impulses and reactions. Gale had concluded that the Lyle business would be a good test to see how secure Ann was not with her present but her past. Unraveling and reassembling what she had gone through had taken years, literally years, and now came test that neither Gale nor her client had anticipated. At the moment Gale thought the risks were small. People change, as Ann will attest personally, so if Lyle was not the person she was expecting or vice-versa, Gale thought Ann was up to accommodating.

---"Well, let's take a moment to talk about your plans. Let's begin with the understanding that you might have found the postcard anytime in the past or in the future. I doubt that God's hand was at work? But, it is also true that a different time, earlier or later, might have had a different impact. Keep that in mind."

It took longer to work through prospects than Ann had anticipated when she made her declaration. That was Gale's great skill – turning rocks that Ann didn't even see. Ann talking and Gale directing had grounded their relationship years ago when Ann could barely open mouth. Even when she was sick years ago and had to drop out of college for a year she could barely talk to her doctor or her parents or her adviser about how she felt physically and certainly not at all about her mental state. With Gale she discovered she could feel healthy or advance toward a healthier state by letting go. Lyle was on her mind, and Ann knew she was going to make an effort to find out if she should keep him in her life. She was no longer afraid of the not, although from time to time she needed Gale to play catcher.

---“You've pretty much figured out there's some risk in making contact again. Your dream suggests that may be running your subconscious, and yet the risk has to be weighed against what you think you can handle.”

---“I didn't react to the dream in the same way you did. You may be right. Too risky to try to take up where we left off. Regardless, I pretty much have the options and risks in mind, and I've got to deal with the extent of my curiosity. So stay tuned!”

Gale walked her out, and after an embrace she said, “I don't need to say keep in touch because you're a star-pupil in that regard.” They laughed and parted. Ann stopped for a coffee on the way home, greeted several people she knew and then enjoyed a lingering time just staring out the window, drinking her Mocha and letting her mind wonder.

Ann ambled her way home, not taking the direct route. She realized she hadn't mentioned to Gale that she had talked to Suzann. She decided it was not so important except it might throw a little light on the long span of time between then and now. As she reached her driveway, Ann concluded that Lyle had almost nothing directly to do with cease-and-desist orders in her case or in Suzann's case. He was the victim, what she had felt for most of her life. As she sat down in front of her computer, she knew what she was going to do. So far as she could determine, her brain and his soul were agreement about this. She checked his web pages again and then she dialed his number. She never made any attempt to rehearse what she was going to say. Let it flow.

III

Lyle's morning began like most mornings. He read a stock-market briefing on his BlackBerry while the water for his coffee was reaching a boil. He seldom turned on his computer until after he had his first cup. It was warm enough to sit on his second-story balcony while the sunlight found holes in the fall foliage that remained in the wooded area behind his condo. He had worked late into night and, as was often the case, slept late. It was almost time for lunch by most people's clocks.

The market was uninteresting, as it had been for months, so he checked the news headlines, finished his first cup and retrieved his laptop. He was accustomed to the various sounds for email, downloads, alerts that often greeted him, but he couldn't immediately place the sound he was hearing. When he checked the bar, he saw that Skype was demanding attention. Skype? He had used it once or twice, and when he opened it, he saw a menu of missed incoming call from an Ann. He knew several Anns or Annes, so he wasn't sure who this Ann was.

When he clicked on missed call her face appeared, the least likely of the Anns he knew appeared. How many years, he asked himself, as her unexpected reappearance took a moment or two to absorb. There was a number to call with a message that she hoped he would. He asked himself if reconnecting was a good idea after how many years? He couldn't immediately remember how many years had intervened since she'd expelled him. This was only a momentary reluctance. He knew he would return her call. Making sure the video camera and ear phones, hanging on the side of the table, were working he clicked her number and tried to anticipate what was going happen.

Within seconds her image appeared on the scene. He felt bowled over. It was definitely Ann. Older, a bit stockier but not by much, and those big Irish-Sea eyes dominating that round Italian face. She looked terrific. Apparently she was doing the same thing, surveying Lyle physical appearance. It was a reunion unlike any other he could remember. Like two teenagers, fascinated and embarrassed at the same time. Then Lyle saw that magical smile. He also observed a self-confidence in her voice, as she began to speak, that was not a part of her persona before. She could smile and laugh then, but she so often seemed weighed down, not so much an open fretter as a quiet worrier.

---“So, we meet again...,” she said.

---“We do, and I'm speechless, more or less, not my normal state,” replied Lyle, his eyes locked on a woman who was causing his memory to work in overtime. He had a few vivid recollections but not much else to go on yet.

---“I'm not quite sure where to start or what to say, but let me do the honors since I made the initial call.”

---“Sounds good to me. I'm still trying to catch my breath. Why don't you start. Before you do, though, let me say I'm amazed how familiar you look, no, how beautiful you look, even after how many years. Is it the same you?”

---“Ha, I'm afraid so. Such a compliment, though, can't be ignored. Thanks. And let me return it. We're both scrutinizing and pleased with what we see. Older by a couple decades, but the physique gods or goddesses have treated us well. I assume you're still working out, daily, as I remember it?”

---“Yes, almost daily. I take off a day or two but a six-day workout week is pretty standard. And you? If I remember, more aerobics than weights, and yes teaching aerobics.”

---“No more teaching. Haven't taught since I got married. But still a gym rat several days a week. More weights than aerobics the last few years partly because aerobics after all these years bore me. And it just dawned on me – this may be a conversation with lots of dawns – you never had good things to say about aerobics.”

---“And for the record I still don't. I quit doing them entirely after I moved to California, I was skiing almost daily in the winter and working out on those damn Cross-Trainers and Stair-Masters had even less appeal. I imagine you're still running. You were such a pro.”

---“Yes, I'm still an avid runner. How did you remember?”

---“Well, there's a funny story, funny to me at least. After our divorce,” at which point he heard a howl of laughter from the other end, “I was walking to the university one morning, and as I approached your building, you came around the corner. You saw me standing at the intersection, and to avoid crossing the intersection and passing me, you took a quick right down an alleyway that was a dead end. I watched you run to the end, turn around, observe I was still standing in the intersection and take another right turn at a driveway. I waited a few minutes to see if you were trapped and would have to exit through the intersection from where I was watching, but you must have found an outlet. Or you decided to hide out in someone's patio. You never appeared again. Your running was brilliant.”

---“Good lord, Lyle, your memory's amazing. I guess I was determined to avoid you all contact at all cost. And now it seems to be the opposite.” What she said surprised her and took Lyle by surprise.

To end the potential embarrassment, she added, “I don't remember that you were a runner.”

Trying to recover Lyle replied cautiously. “Not when we knew each other, but before we met, I was. I ran three to five miles three days a week. I do a lot of walking now because I don't drive any more, and I treat that as my aerobics. Walking is certainly easier on the leg joints....” Before he could finish he heard,

---“No car! Wow, I keep wishing, but I live where driving is still required. Bikes are popular but not for me.” Then Ann, turning cautious, asked, “Did you give it up voluntarily?”

Lyle could sense a note of concern in her question.

---“I gave it up voluntarily. It's been almost a decade. I lived abroad off and on for a few years where I didn't need a car, and when I moved here I bought a condo in the center of the city, which also has good public transportation, and decided my driving days were over permanently. I don't even have a driver's license. I can buy lots of champagne with the money I save. I would be pleased to share a glass,” he threw in just for the hell of it. This conversation had developed a relaxing quality.

---“You're on, Lyle. I'm not very familiar with bubbly, but that doesn't mean I don't like it.” Ann seemed to read his own mind. “I'm surprised, Lyle, how easy this seems, as if we picking up from our pre-divorce conversations, except I'm not as cranky and riddled with fear as I was then. Obviously I didn't call to talk about lifting or biking or drinking. If anything, I called out of curiosity. I'll explain.”

For the next fifteen minutes she told the story of how the discovery of the postcard provoked a flood of memories and half-memories about the time they knew each other, and this was a time in her life when her curiosity was often her guide. She told Lyle she had become a published writer but said nothing about the story she'd written, although she probably would.

Lyle's brain was busy was not very productive, as he tried to keep up with her narrative but also to fill in the many blanks they were both struggling with. There were bits and pieces of memories along side of two or three episodes that came crashing back. Those episodes he'd not forgotten, and they were so imprinted in his memory that he could think that they were still as mysterious as this call now. He was having a devil of a time blending his memories of Ann on the screen with the woman in his memory. He wondered if his bewilderment showed up on her screen. Talking by computer was not like talking by phone, nor was it exactly like talking face-to-face. You could see each other and yet there was this space in which actions and reactions were momentarily frozen. If they had been talking by phone, he would have found it hard to believe that this Ann was the same Ann he had known. On the screen even though she did not sound like the old Ann, she was definitely Ann. No doubt. He was loving this morning. They were having a real conversation. Maybe if they could have had a real conversation back then...well, who knows. The longest conversation he could remember was on the knoll outside her apartment building overlooking several tennis courts and baseball diamonds, and while his recollection was she was having a good time sitting on the grass with her arms around her curled-up knees, he could see she was having a better time on the screen. What they talked about on the knoll was completely lost, but he had no doubt he would remember this conversation.

---“I hadn't thought about this before I called, but now that I've retraced some of the moments in the short time we knew each other I owe you an apology. I was rude, crude, I couldn't tell you why I said what I said on that day at the gym when I dismissed you?”

---“I remember that day, although I couldn't repeat your exact words. Your order was brief, that I remember. You didn't explain why. My own recollection, now that I'm trying to pick up the bits and pieces, so long buried, is that initially I thought it was temporary, the result of some family

or boyfriend spat. I was hopeful that your absence was temporary. I couldn't think of anything I'd done to piss you off except, I suppose, I had come to like you. It wasn't temporary, of course, and I was sad about that, more than just sad. Hence, the postcard. As was and still is my nature, I always try for a while to restart relationships I don't want to lose. I didn't want to lose you, Ann, that's for sure.”

---“And it wasn't temporary, that's for sure, unless you consider two decades as just a interlude. Honestly, Lyle, I was becoming unhinged because of you. I spent time trying to assemble what brought us together into a workable narrative, but it proved to be unworkable and unbearable. The eight-hundred-pound gorilla was ever present. What I wanted and what I had could never be reconciled. I can be more open and blunt about things now than I was for most of my life – a nasty divorce and an unforgiving therapist can do that to a person – and...,” she heard Lyle singing a song with words about the new love in my life, my therapist, and she stopped mid-sentence to listen. Was this the same Lyle? She'd never heard him sing, but he had the lyrics down pat.

When he finished, he apologized – that was the same old Lyle – and said “I interrupted, I'm sorry, but I couldn't resist.”

---“You just made my morning! I don't think I've ever been sung to, certainly not by way of Skype.”

---“More like talking lyrics since I have an awful singing voice. You may recall I met you shortly after my rather raucous divorce. Mine ended quickly so the personal nastiness was short-lived, even though I continued to carry some strong ill feelings toward my ex for a while. My therapist saved me from worse emotional nightmares, and out of those sessions I learned how to manage my inner life. I'd always been pretty successful at managing my external world but less so with the internal stuff. I tended to shunt the unresolved and unpleasant aside in hopes they'd take care of themselves. When one starts trying to be more honest about what one's feeling or thinking, one can end up being less the shrinking violet. I had a colleague who publicly denounced therapy as creating a bunch of narcissists who came to care only about themselves, a risk I agreed, but necessary to reset the controls, hopefully in a more manageable mode. Maybe it can't be controlled. Anyway, I'm sorry, I interrupted.”

---“Interruption welcome. I never once thought of you as a shrinking violet. But what you just said makes it easier for me to say what I was leading up to. I had awful fights during that week or ten days I was away from the gym. You were the loser, I'm afraid. I wanted to delay the marriage to give myself time to sort things out. No soap, no dice – full steam ahead. You were dispensable, and in my dizzy mind I was pretty much blaming to you for the dilemma, even though you were not to blame. I knew that. I was never sure about your intentions, I always thought we wanted the same things, but during it all, whatever your desires, you were a perfect gentleman. It was my fault. You were there, and I wanted time with you. That seems so simple to say now but then, holy shit, Lyle, it would detonate a bomb.”

Lyle was still trying to organize his thoughts around the few recollections he had of those few months. She was apparently willing to give him all the time he needed, as she never took her eyes off the camera in the computer. Finally, he broke the silence.

---“Ann, I'm not sure you were entirely culpable. I knew you were about to be married, and yet I was trying to drive a wedge of some sort. I don't recall that I had much hope of doing so, but I do recall I fantasied about what a more intimate relationship might have been like. I can't conjure up many details about those fantasies right now, but I'm sure of the fantasies. So, if you were feeling uncomfortable, I wasn't helping.”

---“If I remember, we talked a little about relationships and marriages – reticent thought I was – and I recall one time you said how easy it was to make the wrong choice, and because it was easier we preferred it to the alternatives. And then, I think, you told me a story about your mother's reaction to your decision to marry the woman you did. Something about trust. That's all I recall now, and quite honestly, it never entered my mind again, not even when I was going through my own divorce, but here I am trying to pull it out of somewhere. Does that ring any bells?”

---“My mother's distrust, yes, I've thought about that many times in my post-divorce life. I think she might have used it with nearly every woman I've dated since. The only one she trusted I gathered from the few things she said – relationships, marriages, intimacies were not subjects my parents talked about EVER – was the woman who preceded my ex, a woman I had dated in college and for a while afterward. I always knew they were close, but nothing much was ever said until I got divorced. My parents were suspicious about the outside world, and yet the woman my mother liked the most was a native of New Yorker, a big-city kids who had grown up on the streets of Queens. They hit it off whereas my ex, always treated well by my mother, was suspect. My mother was not naturally trusting, but not necessarily cynical. Like my mother I've grown more distrusting but unlike her more cynical. That's a story for another time. Is it possible – did I ever say anything that caused you to question your decision to be married? You obviously had your own doubts, which I do not recall you ever articulated. I had feelings, and knowing myself as well as I do, I'm willing to bet I was highlighting your doubts to satisfy my own feelings. That sounds awful in retrospect. That thought just occurred to me – it's insidious in a way to sense something was amiss and to use it to gain some advantage. Ugh, that's not a proud moment, if it occurred, but I'm wondering?” He was trying to recall, think and talk, all at the same time, and as he did, the conversation grew more intimate and personal. He heard her chuckle, then her voice.

---“I had doubts, lots of doubts, I had them before I met you, but, as I came to know you, the doubts seemed to take on a life of their own. I remember saying to many people, perhaps even to you, I can hardly wait to move to this small town upstate away from the city, and then thinking, what if it doesn't work out, what will I do? I don't recall you ever said anything directly to make me feel less certain or more doubtful about something I was struggling with. I think, Lyle, I felt comfortable with you at a time I was tearing myself to pieces. If you had departed from your gentlemanly manner, I might have welcomed it, quite frankly. In retrospect the path I should have followed looks better than the path I did follow. But that's history. Of course, Lyle, it's history that keeps our shrinks in business, isn't it? There's the other problem too. After all the

years and the experiences we've both chalked up we don't know how much we're making up because we can't recall as much as we want to.”

---“Absolutely. As I said earlier, I tucked you away. In the last half hour I've been untucking a lot without much certainty of what is real and what is fantasy. Your memory is better than mine, though.”

---“I've been thinking about it for a few weeks, Lyle. When I started my untucking after I found the postcard, believe me, I was adrift. The shoreline is in sight now. I'm glad I called, and I hope you aren't dismayed by it all.”

--“Not at all. Part of me is saying, wake up, you've overslept, get up. For the record, I oversleep every morning. I do have an appointment in a few minutes. Could we continue this conversation in a day or two? With a little time maybe I could make my memory bank work a little better. Besides, whether I can or can't, I'd just like to keep the conversation going.”

---“By all means, let's. Do you want me to call or give you a turn?”

---“I'll take my turn – mornings, afternoons or evenings? I usually work out, as you may remember, late afternoons or early evenings. An evening conversation would allow me or us to pour a glass of wine, since I don't drink during daylight hours. I'd be happy to power you a glass virtually except my recollection is you don't drink?”

---“Right you are then, wrong now. Yes, in evening and I'll join you in a glass of something alcoholic.”

They made sure they had correct email addresses and cell numbers, and then signed off.

Lyle sat for a while, putting off his errands so he could center himself, as Billie used to urge upon him. He felt some fear, no discomfort, at having Ann back in life. When he saw her on the screen, what could not escape him was how much he had desired her, the most beautiful woman he'd come to care about deeply either in his married or post-married life. She was under thirty then and now she's in her mid-forties, the mother of several kids, and still beautiful. Watching her expressions he knew she was the same woman in a physical sense, but listening to her, he wasn't sure. Could he ever make the transition from the woman, whom he had never fucked, never even came close, as much as he'd desired her, and who threw him overboard anyway, to the woman who seemed almost ready to fuck him on the screen.

He would run his errands, do his chores and then take an earlier than usual spin at the gym. Memory needed a time-out. It was several hours before he arrived at the gym. After an hour plus working on the upper body – closest to the brain – he picked up his bag and headed to door only to be intercepted by Em, the owner-manager, another beautiful woman but not at all like a younger Ann. Em had long-distance runner's body, a little fuller because she was also a lifter. She was taller than he remembered Ann with long limbs. Being Irish she shared with Ann a devastating smile. She wasn't smiling at the moment.

---“You are deep in thought. When your workouts are efficient and quick, you're pondering. I've been watching. So what gives, as she crossed her arms and blocked the exit.”

---“I can hide nothing from you. Not that I ever intend to. I'm just amazed at your Delphic powers. Com'on let's slip next door and have an express.”

Em signaled her clerk at the desk as to her departure, and they bounded out into the street and around the corner to “Fresh Brew” with pretty good coffee. They found a couple of stools by the window and “cat and mouse” began.

Finally, he gave her a short version of the recent morning events. He kept to the facts that he could remember, but he knew some of Ann's narrative would get talked about.

---“I'm jealous, of course, and if you invite her to town, I'll have to take action.” Her expression was severe, and for the second time today Lyle found him so surprised he felt unstable. He thought he got the drift of her remarks, but he went ahead anyway even if he wasn't sure.

---“Em, there's nothing to be gained by tying up with me, and besides the army of lions who kept circling your lair would turn into a posse in pursuit of my ass if you did. I'm too old to take the risk, and you're too young to take the chance.”

---“That's for me to decide, isn't it? You have a point,” she said quietly with her head slightly bowed and her eyes focused on the counter, “but today, after what I just heard, is as good as any day to tell what been on my mind a long time.” She quickly turned her head and with a degree of fierceness said “You don't get it, do you?”

---“Probably not. I'm not very good at getting it. Never have been.”

---“I didn't know you fifteen or twenty years ago, but I'll bet you weren't much different then from now. You now older, yes, more elephant skin, stockier, but attractive, desirable and available. You're not sitting in some jail or monastery beyond reach, although you may prefer to think that. In fact you've been available for the past five years since I first met you. What's with this?”

---“I'm hardly in a position to agree or disagree with you. I don't know now or didn't know then how attractive or desirable I am or I was. I do have a better idea about availability. I seem to prefer available to taken.”

---“Look, buddy, you're one of my best customers and one of my favorite males. It's the male part that I'm more interested in than the customer part. So tell me, why available and never taken, at least since I've known you? I find the Ann business puzzling. Fifteen or twenty years later she finds you worth pursuing, and you after all those years aren't sure. You're older and wiser than I am, so clue me in,” as she slapped his arm, now a little sorer than before.

Before he could answer – he really wanted to answer since he'd had few if any friends he could ever talk to about these things – some of them bottled up for years - just then her cell went off and after a brief conversations of “Yes”, “No” and “OK” she said “Shit!”

---“OK, what's on your agenda for tonight?” she asked firmly while turning him toward her and demanding an answer with her lips pursed, her eyes aglow and her grip as strong as his.

---“Nothing much, shower, light supper, probably some booze and maybe some writing. Typical Lyle Evening,” he said in hopes he'd not thwarted the invitation he thought was coming.

---“I'm on the desk until eight, and then I plan, after a shower as well, to show up at your place. No is not acceptable. I've got to run.”

---“Do you need the address?”

---“Of course not, silly, I've had it for five years.” She was out the door. He was left to think, was this day real?

Preparing for guest was not a problem for Lyle. His larder and his cabinet were full because he celebrated every night as if someone might be coming. He decided not to do anything special since he did not know anything about her tastes. They could always do a run to the gourmet shop two doors from his building. The cleaning people had just been there so the condo was spic & span. After years of hoping a guest would show unannounced, perhaps it was going to happen, almost that, just a little advanced notice. And then the doorbell announced her arrival. There she was at the door. Walking straight to the kitchen, as if she lived there, she said she'd brought the makings for Margueritas, which he could not have come up with and once they were in the kitchen he simply sat back at the bistro table and watched her work. She handed him a glass that looked overpowering simply because of appearance, and she sat in the empty chair.

---“I thought you'd have two chairs, but I was pretty sure you wouldn't be making Margueritas.” They clicked their glasses and drank. It was splendid, it was superb, his first in ages.

---“Excellent. And where did you learn your art?”

---“You won't believe this. My father is a bartender.”

---“A noble profession. It got me through graduate school.”

---“As it did many. My dad's a bit different. His family owned several name bars in New York City. He always knew he would take over the businesses. He decided to do more. He became a mixologist – that's his term for his profession. No college, but he spent several years working in famous distilleries and then in famous bars here and in Europe. Later, he added the Far East. In addition to more than a dozen upscale bars across the country including the best hotels in Vegas, he runs a booze school in New York City. My mom is the business manager and my other sibs have responsibilities.”

---“And you?”

---“I'm the Ivy-Leaguer in the family. Psych major at Princeton. Came here with a boyfriend, whom you met, who was admitted to the med school. It turned out he hated not being boss and I hatred being bossed. I thought about business or med school, and then I found the gym was for sale. My parents flew out, and with a loan from them I bought it. I've made money, I've enjoyed the work, I'm ready to move on. The gym will probably be up for sale before the year's out. On the qt. I've paid back most of the loan. I've got some ancillary businesses you don't know about and wouldn't much interest you. Oh, I started mixing drinks long before I was of legal age, and, of course, I've worked in the bars in New York, Vegas and Santa Monica. My story is simple compared to yours.”

---“How do we know that? A superb Marguerita. Who needs complicated? Do the bars have names?”

---“They're all called Encore – Encore New York, Encore Vegas....”

---“Where, my dear, I had an excellent martini...several actually. I'll be damned.”

---“We were destined – martinis are my father's favorite. Great care in selecting the gin – no vodka – and vermouth plus the right temperature, the proper olive and the gentle shaking. It takes the barkeeps weeks to satisfy my father's exacting standards. So, that's me. How about you? And you can probably skip the marriage/divorce, ancient-history stuff since I'm curious about the chick period, who my competition is,” she said with a bit of a smirk.

She poured another Marguerita, and while he should have refused, he didn't. He thought to himself, another New-York-City kid in his life. His mother would approve!

---“A little ancient history might help. I'll leave out the boring parts. To an extent you've followed in your family's footsteps. A different business but nonetheless a business. Your parents and grandparents were urban folks, familiar with the larger world, educated and cosmopolitan, it appears. My point is that the world you grew up with, the worlds of your parents or grandparents, were not what you ran away from. You chose your own path, but having done that you're closer to your family's than I ever was. My parents' life and my life diverged beginning in my youth. In the summer before my senior year in high school I lived and worked in black communities, then called Negro communities, in southern Appalachia. It changed my life from top to bottom. My parents would not sit in the same room with blacks, whom they called something else, and I was sleeping on their porches, living rooms and kitchens. All of this took place before the civil-rights movement began in earnest, and you won't be surprised to learn that I was deeply involved at both the national and local levels. I tell you this simply to illustrate how far removed I was from the household and the community I grew up in and to suggest that by the standards of my parents and relatives including an uncle who wrote me out of his will, I was living an unorthodox if not evil life. I have often mused that my job on this planet was to defy rules, not the basic rules of humanity that we can all agree upon, but all the rest. With some rules I may come around but not before I've tangled with them.”

He paused to take a sip and then continued:

---“Now, to what interests you. After I got divorced, finished therapy and reopened for business, if you will, I'd made some decisions. I would sell the properties that I'd bought and refurbished – I did have my father's carpentry skills - properties my ex and I initially lived in and then rented out - and I would retire early with the extra money I could expect from the property sales and most importantly I'd move somewhere else. I wasn't sure I would date again, but what I did know was I had no interest in another marriage. One can always change one's mind, but I haven't, although the events of the last twenty-four hours reminded me I was so taken by Ann I was prepared to abandoned my no-marriage pronouncement and have my vasectomy reversed.”

That had brought a howl of a laughter from Em, and, of course, Lyle had to join in.

---“You were smitten that bad, were you?”

---“That bad, I'm afraid.”

---“Had you dated anyone before meeting Ann?”

---“Oh yes, several. I had just broken up with my neighbor in the apartment building to where I had decamped after I sold my properties and had announced my pending retirements – to shouts of joy I might add, from my colleagues who had come to hate my guts. That's another story. Actually, I didn't break up with her, she simply disappeared, a recurrent theme in my life. We had little in common except for sex morning, noon and night – she was a factory worker on the graveyard shift so it was morning, noon and night. When we talked it was about the fact that that we had nothing to talk about. It was in the spring before I moved to Tahoe in the fall. That's when I met Ann, although I had seen her at the gym many times before.”

---“Another lethal gym romance...,” she howled again.

He related his story, as he could remember it, about Ann and for good measure threw in a bit about Suzann.

---“I moved to Tahoe, after several visits, as my first retirement destination, I fell in love once or twice, nothing very deep, I never heard from Ann and soon forgot about her, and I stayed in touched with Suzann after she moved to Colorado but then she too disappeared. After that came Paris and then here – Paris for the hell of it and here because a long-standing friend had asked me to join her in a federally-funded research project – I'm pretty talented with statistics – and I decided I might enjoy being connected with a large university in a big city instead of a large university in the middle of no-where Pennsylvania. Sadly, my colleague died from an undetected heart condition shortly after I'd moved here. I decided to stay, that was six years ago, and like you I'm on the verge of relocating somewhere. I made more money on my Tahoe property – which, like the other properties I'd occupied, I'd also refurbished – more money than I'd ever expected so my financial state was even better than it was when I'd retired. And here we are. I am still unmarried and for the past several years I been mostly unattached. As you know from earlier

conversations, I do a lot of writing and publishing, and I think probably I'll go on doing that for as far ahead as I can see down the road, but I may do it from different place.”

---“And Ann?”

---“I don't know. I'm being absolutely honest. I don't know. Given what I remember about several rather tumultuous months with the young Ann, I'm wary to say the least. I'm having trouble fitting the new Ann into the phantom shell of the old Ann.”

The Margaritas were finished. The conversation was mute. She took his hand, and he was thinking what was next.

They fucked for hours. She pulled him on top and guided him inside where he stayed for long stretches as her orgasms went off like small explosions. Her body taut and smooth. She wrapped herself around his legs and they pressed so hard that they almost fused. When his orgasm came, sex had come to an end, but the pleasure of their embracing and caressing hadn't. She whispered her desire to see him again and again. They fell asleep, and when he awoke she was already showered and dressed. She sat on the edge of the bed, as beautiful a woman who had ever sat on the edge of any of his beds. She caressed his forehead, and as he struggled with wakefulness, he wondered whatever could she see in him, wrinkled, forgetful and more than twice her age. As if she read his mind, she moved her hand to his cock and gently brought it to life. He wanted to believe what he thought was the answer to his question, but he had been disappointed so many times before he dropped the thought.

---“No plans for the weekend,” as she continued to massage his cock, “Z has been stuck away in the garage for too long. It needs a road trip.” Then she squeezed his cock ever so gently as she kissed with more passion than last night. “That's my imprimatur, my love, it will brook no competition,” she said as she stood up.

---“In that case,” he said, as he reached into the night-stand drawer, “you'll need this.” He handed her a card with a black strip that she knew would open the necessary doors. She took the card, kissed him again firmly and left. He lay quietly for a while, and he knew a story was in the making.

IV

---“You jive motherfucker...I'll kill your guru ass.” That was not Bob Gibson singing Shel Silverstein's “Perfect High”. That was Ann in a rage. An absolute rage. No doubt about it. She slammed shut her laptop and headed straight for the liquor cabinet, which was no more than a section of the kitchen pantry. It was too cold to sit outside so she plumped down in her recliner by the window.

---“Motherfucker,” she kept repeating.

She took a swig of whiskey, more like a gulp. She thought to herself, he's fuckin' a twenty-five-year-old, he's three times her age, and he took her to bed, worst yet she let him take her to bed. And now they're showin' their stuff at a resort. Some kind of German-made convertible, fancy clothes, fine restaurants...Motherfucker.

---“I'll detach his balls once and for all, if I ever see him again. That's what I should have done twenty years ago when he played coy.”

After a pause and another gulp, she felt herself calming down. She hadn't exploded like this since her last-hubby battle. She knew she was overreacting. Her hubby purposely drove a stake in heart as often as he could after she told him to beat it. That was not Lyle. She knew that. As she slumped more deeply into her chair, she knew she had no claim. She had lost that twenty years ago when she walked out. Besides when they had their non-fling he was almost twice her age. What was the difference between twice and thrice?

Damn, though, she was a beautiful woman, thought Ann. And he in a bathing suit looked as good as ever. Muscle-building for years had paid off.

---“Shit, I'm jealous,” she said aloud to no one in particular.

They had not talked since their first conversation earlier in the week, and on the weekend, when she was missing him and trying to modulate her sadness, she'd accessed his web page only to find him with Miss America. She suddenly had an urge to look again. She apologized to her Mac for being abusive and reopened his web site. She looked at Em – so identified in the photo - and got up from her desk to look at herself in the mirror with the Mac in tow.

---“A younger me in the face but not in body!” she exclaimed, drawing a quizzical expression from the image in the mirror. “God be damned, a younger me, if you ignore the differences.” She wondered what the last name was? Definitely an Irish face. Did she have, like Ann, an Irish name, that is, her maiden name?

She refreshed her drink, sat again in her lounge and stared into the space of her darkened garden. When she awoke, her drink was still intact. She could not have been asleep long. Long enough, though, for a dream or the thought that might have become a dream, to remind her that it was fear and anger that had haunted her most of her life. She did not want to go back to those

days. She knew that her anger had led her into Lyle's life and her fears had pushed him out of her life. She finished her drink, put on her heavy coat, wound the scarf around her head and neck to protect herself against a howling wind and took a walk as a form of a personal reprimand.

The café was nearly empty. She preferred that. She ordered herbal tea from Jake behind the counter. She had known him since he was a baby. He had grown up with her kids. They chatted briefly, and then she moved to the corner of the room away from the street. She could still feel her rage. In one of her stories she had written about the undulating anger that had coursed through her life. It began when she was young for reasons she could never identify. The pleasure in childhood had transformed into something dark and terrifying. It was episodic rather than continual, but the episodes could be just plain awful. She hadn't forgotten how she alternated between joy and anger that Lyle had entered her life back then. She had wanted to be with him and run away from him, and it was the latter that she chose. Then she repressed it as deeply as she could to make her marriage work. And after-while her marriage refashioned the cycle of joy and anger until years later she ran away from it too.

Some friends arrived, saw her at the table in the back of room, waved but did not venture over. Did she look so terrifying? Probably not. Now that she had become a published writer she acquired the reputation of quirky and aloof, although everyone knew she'd always been quirky and aloof. Lyle had told her, after her self-admission to the local psychiatric clinic, that he was concerned for her well-being, but he was also surprised that her quirkiness, which he found refreshing, had a dark side. They never talked further about what he had observed, but she knew at that point he was falling in love with her. He was never judgmental in the way her family, her fiancé and even her closest friends could act, although she had always taken the view that they meant well. She speculated that Lyle reached her in a different way. They simply talked about themselves and the world at-large, and in those conversations somehow she began to ask questions of herself she had been afraid to ask before and after Lyle never asked again until her marriage blew up. They both wanted something physical. They came close and nothing more. She knew how deep his affection for Suzann was, and yet he had assumed the position of friend and not of lover. She and Suzann had talked about Lyle – quirky in his own way, self-assured but deferential and above-all never intrusive. They had both weighed the consequences of going further with Lyle but chose to be steadfast, although at the time of the their conversation Ann felt herself slipping. Then she ended it with Lyle in grand style – in the gym in a voice that others may have heard...beat it! She also drove Suzann out of her life for reasons she still can't explain. Since reading the postcard and reconnecting with Lyle she had gone over and over these memories, dredging up new ones and repolishing the old ones. Here she was again fighting her anger and fear over Lyle because he was sleeping with a beautiful, young woman who drove a fancy car. Shit, she thought to herself, why shouldn't he. Wouldn't I do the same with a twenty-five-year-old handsome male? She looked across the room at Jake.

Snow must be in the forecast, Ann thought to herself, as she quickened her pace homeward. Despite the cold and wind, she felt better, as if the tension had found a way to resolve itself. Lyle had just re-entered her life and was still there so far as she knew. As a writer, now, she found herself thinking what would a novelist do with this story. Potential lovers toying with the prospects of trying again decades later. The story could be macabre, malevolent or merry.

Suppose it just fizzled after an intense weekend of love-making. Suppose he died in her arms? Suppose they lived happily ever after? Who writes stories like that?

She turned on his Mac and went straight to Lyle's web page, hoping for/not for more of his Z adventures. Then and there after resisting she decided to join FaceBook and Twitter because Lyle noted on his web pages and in his emails he was a member. It took a while, but there she was on his FaceBook page, which anyone could access, she discovered, without having to be a member – but that was beside the point now. She had sent a request to him to be a friend, but he had yet to respond, although, she thought, if he knew what was good for him he will in the affirmative. What she understood immediately was the function of the banner. And Lyle had recently posted a line of poetry from Robert Hass with a new intro: “I am not 'Poor Nietzsche in Turin, eating sausage his mother/Mails to him from Basal.” She laughed. She wondered how many if any who read this knew where he was and whom he was fucking. Maybe Lyle had some of the characteristics of Nietzsche but eating imported sausage in Turin was not one of them. She decided to comment, but their friendship not having yet been confirmed FaceBook would not permit it. She figured out that if Lyle confirmed, anything she wrote on her page would show up on his. So, she wrote in her banner...“Would Dr Nietzsche approve of Lyle's dismissal of sausage and Turin without further explanation?” What appeared was her first post for all (actually no friends yet) to see. She then turned to Twitter, which took even longer. She had selected a full-profile photo of her standing by the sliding glass door to the garden that had been used for a book and was on the Mac even though it was a couple years old. She hadn't changed that much, she said to herself. Finally, Twitter was working. She clicked on the “to follow” icon on Lyle's page and repeated her FaceBook post on Twitter. That was enough for one night, but before she could disengage she saw a notification on FaceBook. It was, of course, Lyle confirming her request and commenting on her post with “And where would you like me to explain?” from his BlackBerry. Jesus, she thought, he's totally wired. She wanted to answer but decided against it. She shut down her Mac, dressed for bed and felt the hormones rising to the occasion, as she thought about where.

The where was Chicago in a suite in an upscale Loop hotel, which Lyle had arranged, two weeks later. The fuck that was delayed twenty years had almost set the room ablaze. They were now drinking champagne, again Lyle's doing, as they watched the city daylight fade and talked as they once had. They soon decided that talking about the details of what happened was fruitless – neither memory bank was dependable. They agreed amidst delicious kisses that each wanted the same thing to happen, but neither could make it happen. Ann admitted that she came to his office on that infamous day to make love. She'd thought about it all night to the point of not sleeping, was so distraught that morning that she had literally but accidentally thrown away her wallet and became so single-minded about what she wanted she had remembered the appointment but not that Lyle's friend was joining them. Her despair worsened that night because of the failure, although she awoke very late the next morning, having missed her classes but in control of herself, much to her surprise. She knew that she had to find a way to a resolution before she spun completely out of control.

Spinning out of control was not going to happen in the hotel. The past would have to accommodate the itself to the present. She kissed Lyle passionately and said with tears she

screwed up years ago and was more sorry than she could ever express except to hold him with no possible release.

Lyle told Ann he was more desperate than he ever confessed to. Of course, he'd never said a word to anyone, although his computer friend figured out something was up. He apologized for all the notes and calls after she ended it, but that was a sign of his desperation and affection. After a long pause in which she caressed his forehead and neck, she said in her own writerly way:

---“We both wanted what we couldn't figure out how to have. Most people do, but we couldn't. I can't think of much fiction in which two romantic desperadoes can't make it work. We didn't then, but we have now. Let the novelists fill in the details. Their stories will be more interesting than any effort by us to remember and arrange.”

They made love once again. In those most sorrowful nights without her, when masturbation was his only recourse, he tried to imagine how her skin felt, how her body extended across his, how the shape of her limbs matched his. Both older, heavier, his youth long ago departed, hers in the act of departing, but they made love the way people ought to make love. It was rhythm and abandonment, it had nothing to do with age. Above-all he loved her hands that created another level of passion. Before orgasm she took his hands and curled his fingers around his cock that was not inserted and laid her fingers against her cunt. Masturbation and intercourse simultaneously. They lay exhausted, eyes closed, without a word, her right hand clasped to his left hand, for moments, what could become hours.

Later, however, they were sitting in Iberico, a Spanish tapas bar not far from their hotel. Ann had never been to a tapas bar. After Lyle ordered sangria, they began to study the menu. They were in a mode that Ann loved – she loved now and she loved then. Lyle talking about various dishes, many of which he had eaten during his trips to Spain. He would just started talking about the ingredients and forms without ever becoming judgmental or supercilious like so many of his generation – for him the game was let's have a conversation that left the whole business of ordering open-ended. He did recommend, intelligently, one or two dishes at a time so they could know when they were approaching the saturation point. An hour and a half later they had tried six or seven different dishes and began to talk about which ones were most memorable. They both agreed that the Spanish ham on toast, so tender and full of taste, with a slice of fruit and a tiny bit of a tart sauce probably took the prize. The dessert, the only one on the menu, was a truly-delicious Spanish flan. The waiter then surprised them with a glass of Spanish brandy from the estate of the Conde de Osborne. Lyle explained that Spanish brandy (from the Jerez region of Spain) was usually sweeter in taste than the French brandies, and Ann could taste that right away. Ann thought, I love this evening, this day, the walking, the fucking, but right now it's at its best. If she had asked Lyle, he would have agreed, she was sure.

As they left their table, half the waitstaff came over to shake their hands and to wish them well.

---“It pays,” said Ann, “to be with someone who knows.” She kissed his cheek, as they walked out into a much cooler evening, the wind now coming off the Lake. They grabbed a cab and headed to a jazz club at which the hotel concierge had reserved a table for them. They nursed

some very good Tennessee single-malt whiskey, listened to some very good local jazz and finally called it quits a hour or so before midnight. They made love with less energy but no less passion and fell asleep. When they awoke, Lyle told her of his dream. He refused to let go of her body, even when ordered to do so, by whom he wasn't sure, because Ann hadn't finished her flan. They both laughed, not having the energy to try to analyze it.

---“It was long ago, and it is this morning. I don't care if we can't remember all the details of our struggle with time and place. I don't have to care to love your body.”

---“And the rest of me?” asked Ann in a snarky voice followed by a grin.

---“I've barely got to know the rest of you I'm so in love with your body....” followed by a blow to the buttock.

They ate croissants and drank coffee, checked their cells without responding and left for the Art Institute. They spent most of their day looking and talking, had lunch in the very contemporary restaurant at the top of the new Piano addition and then took a walk along the Lake since the bright sun had warmed the day. They talked, and they didn't talk, but they both knew the comfort level was very high. They also knew what next had to be faced sooner or later. They had reservations at one of the city's best French bistros – not a formal dining restaurant by any means – but when they returned to the hotel they decided to have a nightcap in the bar off the Lobby.

---“It's too late to order you out,” said Ann after their Cognac had arrived. “We've crossed the orgasm barrier.” She leaned in as close as she could and caressed his thigh.

---“Well, I suppose you could do an about-face and order me in,” replied Lyle, as her hand was having its desired affect.

A moment passed before Ann leaned the other way and pulled her iPhone out of her purse. She called up TweetDeck, while Lyle watched with curiosity and admiration, as her fingers effortlessly worked the icons. Then she began to compose: Expulsion Order 1996 Lifted Welcome Lyle Reply Expected. And before he could react the message was sent across the FaceBook and Twitter cyber-spheres. She returned the cell to her purse and leaned back in again as close as she could. Her hand resumed its assigned task.

---“There...,” she said quietly.

V

Lyle heard the door open, he clicked save to Ann file, he felt Em's arms from behind and then her kiss that was meant, as always, to defy the natural order.

Ann heard Jimmy's car in the driveway, she clicked save to Lyle file, and as she reached the door, she thought a movie was just the thing for tonight.

Suzann and Matt clicked their glasses of champagne before families and friends, and Suzann thought she might write her own story someday.