

At Last

Experimental Fiction

Part I
October 24, 2021

At Last

"Excuse me," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You should be," she said. "That doesn't make any sense."

"What?"

"Whatever is, is good," she repeated his comment. "That isn't the basis of religion, if there is such a thing."

It was a tea for graduate students, one of those events he hated. Elbow rubbing and ass kissing. But he knew he had to polish the egos of his professors, just as he hoped, someday, his students would polish his. These social events were part of academic life, part of the show.

Had their colleagues, sipping port or cans of beer, known the future, this first meeting would have sounded like a wreck on the highway outside, screeching tires on the pavement followed by the sound of twisting metal and breaking glass.

She was a hippie from Kansas in the anthropology department studying prairie Indians. He was a graduate student in religious studies, finishing his thesis on H. Richard Niebuhr, and doubting his vocation. He was also about to fall in love.

"Because, in the end, that's where every religion ends up," he said setting down his plate of cucumber sandwiches.

"Do you know anything about indigenous cultures," she said, setting down her plate. "I mean anything?"

"Let's see," he said, putting his hand on his chin and looking skyward. "I don't know, human sacrifice?"

"Are you that ignorant," she asked. Now she had her hands on her hips.

The dam he had arduously constructed against falling in love was breaking. Her hair. Her eyes. Her anger. Her fight. Her intelligence. But he wouldn't fall in love with her hair, her eyes, her anger, her fight, or her intelligence. And as the cracks grew into a flood, he'd do his best to resist it.

Later, he'd find himself falling in love with her because of how she could call him ignorant and make that feel both insulting and flattering at the same time. He would keep falling in love with her and the way she could scream, "I hate you," or whisper it in his ear.

But at that moment, he recognized the light in her eyes, that light that no other eyes reveal. It was a light he'd been warned about. He felt a bit of panic that this contentious woman might be his ideal.

"Look," he said. "You're right, I don't know shit about indigenous culture."

In a rare moment of intuition and intention he said something else.

"Maybe you can instruct me," he said.

Their eyes connected.

"Yes," she said. "We could do that."

"If you'll let me tutor you on morality and ethics," he said, picking up his can of beer.

"Sure," she said. "Fuck you," she added.

As some of their colleagues watched, they exchanged phone numbers the way two people exchange insurance information after a crash.

Their next meeting didn't go well.

When they met, they kept up the argument. He pressed her on methodology and epistemology. She questioned how a market with winners and losers could be moral. As she left the coffee shop, she slapped him.

The next day he wrote her about it on the new but odd, and dodgy university electronic mail system.

"Why did you go all Bernadette Devlin on me yesterday?" he asked.

"I'm surprised you know who she is. She's my hero, Reggie," she wrote.

"She's one of mine too," he wrote. "She's the only one to think about fucking with the mace since Cromwell."

"There's a place for that thing," she wrote. "Way up there, deep."

After that incident, they stayed on email. Back and forth they went about epistemology and ontology and then eventually to what they thought of each other, all on a screen with green, illuminated text, and a relentlessly blinking cursor.

"You're such an asshole," she wrote. "You don't seem to grasp that I don't care the slightest about you."

"Fine," he wrote back. "Let's stop writing each other."

But they kept at it.

"I don't really feel comfortable that you love Margaret Thatcher," she wrote. "That's messed up."

"Who do you love?" he asked

"Don't try to do psychological stuff on me," she wrote. "Ok? You won't win."

"Why would I want to do that?" he asked. "Why would I want to win?"

"Hmmm. I can feel it," she answered. "Harriet Tubman. Gloria Anzaldua. Frida Kahlo. Rosa Luxemburg."

"Rosa Luxemburg?" he asked. "How about Hannah Arendt?"

"I'm not sure about Hannah," she wrote.

"Because you've never read her," he typed.

"And you've read Anzaldua?" she responded. "I think maybe you think I'm not as smart as you. Which is wrong."

"I don't know," he wrote. "I'm not that smart."

"Well," she wrote, "you are the only one who can challenge me, push me to the breaking point, where I become irrational."

"Nobody is going to dispute your designation of 'asshole' when it comes to me," he wrote. "I am one. Guilty!"

It went like that for days.

"Why don't we go on a date?" he typed, finally.

"What?" she asked back, "You like me?"

"Yeah," he wrote back. "I like you a lot."

Why did he use that term, “a lot,” one he hated?

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve said ever,” he thought, and he put his face in his hands in front of the computer terminal. Maybe if he was in the 7th grade it might have been romantic.

But really? “I like you a lot?”

He sat there for what seemed like an eternity waiting for her response. The green cursor just blinked, and blinked, and blinked. It was mocking him.

A lot.

Fuck.

How embarrassing.

Then a response.

“Yes,” the message read. “Let’s do it. Let’s go on a date.”

Finally. When the message appeared, he felt that weird feeling he felt back home when he caught a grasshopper in his hands, holding it like parentheses. It would jump in his clasped hands like a heartbeat.

“I got it,” he thought. “Now, what do I do with it?”

He’d meet her at the nicest place in town. She’d be impressed. She’d be annoyed. The hotel bar he often drank at would be perfect.

When she arrived to their date, she was as late as she was beautiful. She wore her hair up as always, but she was in something elegant, purple and embroidered, not the Raiders of the Lost Ark jeans and button-down shirt he was used to seeing her wear.

What would it be like to be out with her? Until now, he’d wait for the modem to lock into that low hum, then read her messages, diatribes really, criticizing him, his work, and opinions. He loved every word of it.

Now here she was, walking across the lobby toward him. She saw him. She sat down in the big chair opposite him. Now this meeting wasn’t an academic exercise, but a date.

“What the fuck?” she asked. “Why here? You’re going to rub capitalism and colonialism in my face?”

“Of course!” he said. “My paymasters are here.”

There was a pause. She gave him a penetrating look he would become addicted to.

"I like it," he explained. "And nobody knows us here, our students our professors, would never come here."

"Yeah, well it looks like we just walked into Room With a View," she said. "The Elephant Bar," she repeated the bar's name mockingly.

"Where's Hadji?" she asked. "They should put Hemingway's head up there too."

She looked up at the fake Ibex heads mounted around the lobby bar.

She had the darkest, thick, reddish hair. Her eyes were green. Her skin was a burnished brown, from the sun, like coffee with cream. Her eyes looked out over everything like a soldier looks over the top of a trench or around a corner.

"C'mon, you can say you've been here, right?" he said.

She stared at him.

"Ok," she said leaning forward, "But buy me a fancy drink."

"Another dirty martini and a Singapore Sling for her, please," he asked the waitress.

The drink, when it arrived, was a feat of cocktail making.

"There's your fancy drink," he said. "Go native!"

"Fuck you!" she said. And she took a big swig from the straw.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Good," she said. "You know I hate you, right?"

Before he could answer her reminder, she rhapsodized about – or satirized – the drink.

"I think they've done it. Made a cocktail I'll remember. Not sweet or cloying. Not bitter just to challenge. Just the kind of thing that would get you out of bed in the morning to write another chapter of "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

"Who doesn't," he said.

"You are a classic narcissist," she said. "Totally stopped at when I said, 'I hate you' and missed what I said about this fucking fabulous drink."

She looked at him and smiled.

"Can I have your olives?" she asked.

"This time, Franny, the answer is no," he said. "The only reason I order these is for the olives. So, no."

"Well, well, well," she said. "You never cease to amaze me, Lane."

He looked at her and smiled.

"Looks like we've both read Franny and Zooey," he said.

"Yeah," she said, "I can keep up and then I'll fucking pass you."

He looked at her. He was really staring at her. His eyes were fixed on hers and that light from the ancient flame that burned there. He could hear a voice saying, "Troppo fiso!" She would always say he had a staring problem, holding his gaze at her much longer than she liked.

"Let's dance," he said, breaking his reverie.

A small band had started to play. They were playing a very respectable version of On a Slow Boat to China.

They danced awkwardly.

"This is such a racist and sexist song," she said.

"I know," he said. "Everyone should be outraged."

"It's like a rape fantasy," she said.

"Except when Ella Fitzgerald sings it," he said.

The singer kept singing. They kept dancing.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It doesn't seem like you're much of a dancer."

"I'm not," he said, then he twirled her around. "But I try."

They danced around alone on the dance floor.

It was the band's first song, and then they finished.

"Better than that email thing," he said.

"I guess," she said.

They sat back down. They drained their drinks and ordered two more.

"This really sucks," she said.

"What do you mean?" he said. "We're getting drunk at the fanciest place in town, my treat."

"I think I'd rather go to hell than admit it, but I'm starting to like you," she said.

He felt that childish feeling again, the hunt, the chase and the capture. But was he catching her in his hands, or was she catching him in her net?

"Let's dance again," he said.

And they did. Now the band was playing "At Last." The singer was doing something as close to Etta James as anyone could in such a place. He was drunk though, so, for him, it might have just as well been Etta herself.

"You really don't know how to dance, do you?" she said.

"No idea," he said. "Where'd you learn?"

"High school gyms and the VFW."

Then they kissed.

And then they looked at each other a long time.

"That was inappropriate," he said.

"I'm going to report you," she said.

They kissed again, deeply, deliberately. By now there were lots of elderly people shuffling around, and for a moment, they forgot themselves.

The song ended.

"Hey," she said putting her finger under his chin, "let's go play pool."

For a moment he thought, "This is a set up. She's going to kill me."

He thought of his students, especially Dart, a surfer kid from Irvine who wore his baseball hat backwards and for whom school was a kind of purgatory.

"Is this going to be on the test?" he'd often ask.

"Dart," he'd say. "Maybe. But remember there are 50 questions on the test. If you miss this one, you'll be fine."

What would Dart do if he was murdered?

"Pool," he said "So, tonight we do things I can't do sober and try them when I'm drunk?"

"Yeah," she said and pulled him from the dance floor. "It's a test."

Carthage

*No, faithless Man, thy course pursue,
I'm now resolved as well as you.
No Repentance shall reclaim
The Injur'd Dido slighted Flame.
For 'tis enough what e're you now decree,
That you had once a thought of leaving me.*

Looking back on it later he marveled at how few questions he asked. When she considered it, she knew he was to blame for being so incurious about her. They both agreed, later, that it was meant to be, as if someone had designed it so.

Elsie's, the bar where they played pool was loud and crowded, but they found a table close to the juke box. The game was mostly taking turns shooting, making fun of each other, and making out.

"What do you want to hear," he asked her as he went toward the juke box.

"Whatever makes you happy, loser," she said.

He loaded up \$5 worth of George Jones, Hank Williams, Webb Pierce, and Johnny Cash.

As the steel guitar of "You Win Again" started from the speakers he said, "this one is for you."

She liked that selection. She liked him. He liked her back.

"I'll always win," she said.

"At pool," he said. "Sure. But everything else? You lose."

They didn't talk about themselves or where they were from. They hardly talked about where they were going. They protected themselves by speaking intellectualse and a sibling banter, cutting, but not mean.

But just before the bar closed, as they sat having another drink, he talked about his program, his studies.

"That day I met you I was about done," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "You're dropping out?"

"I'm fed up with this academic nonsense," he said.

"Are you going to chop wood and carry water now," she teased.

"Yeah, exactly," he said. "I'm fucking out."

"You're just not up to it," she said. "Or maybe you picked a silly area of study; philosophy and religion?" she said.

"Oh, and anthropology?" he said. "The deeper meaning of Indian blankets and shards of pottery?"

"For like the millionth time, fuck You," she said. "I like your music better than I like you and your right-wing philosophy."

"Oh Jesus," he said, putting his hands in his face dramatically.

"Yeah," she said. "You should pray."

He looked up. He stood up. He grabbed her hand.

"Let's go," he said. "Let me take you somewhere."

They stumbled out of Elsie's and felt rain drops. Soon it was a deluge, with hail mixed in and lightening as the drops got larger and fell faster and closer together. They held hands as they made their way back to the hotel where they had met earlier.

They paused in a doorway and they watched water rushing in the gutters.

"Fuck," she said. "Looks like another flood."

The fires in the foothills of the Santa Ynez mountains in the summers meant floods in the fall.

"Maybe," he said as the wind started, "All the more reason we need to find a place to go." They were distracted by each other for a moment in the doorway shelter, kissing and grabbing each other. Then he took her hand again and they splashed through growing puddles and murmur of the wind in the palm trees.

But when they found their way to door of the room, she was the one that pulled him in, pushed him onto the bed, and climbed on top of him. As the rain fell harder and the wind thrashed it against the window, she undressed them both.

"A woman who takes charge of the deed," he teased her.

"You thought you had me," she said. "But I have you."

She did. It wasn't what he had expected, but he didn't resist although something in him felt like he should. Maybe he'd regret giving her the advantage, even though he liked it. Everything they did had the quality that would shape their lives together, he'd advance, she'd withdraw, resist, then surprise with a sweet vulnerability. This only drew him in deeper then and after.

The rain didn't stop and neither did they until someone pounded on the wall next door. She laughed in his ear and whispered, "Let's go to sleep."

"Am I still your prisoner?" he asked.

"It's a hotel," she said. "You're a guest. You can leave whenever you want."

They slept for a while. He woke up and struggled to read the digital clock. It was 4:23. He found the hotel pen and notepad and wrote her a note.

You win. Call me later.

He hesitated and wrote another word he immediately regretted, but to cross it out and start over would be worse. The word, he thought, might cover the shame of his leaving her.

Please.

He put on his clothes, quietly used the bathroom, then opened the door and walked into the hallway.

He let the door close and lock.

He had to get home.

He walked down the hallway and heard a door open behind him. He stopped for a moment and looked back.

She stood in the doorway naked, her dark hair framing her green eyes that stared at him sternly, like they were looking over a wall.

"Leaving so soon?" she asked.

He stood there, held his breath, and squinted stupidly. Then he shook his head.

"Fuck," he said as he exhaled.

Then he walked back and the door closed behind them and the hall was empty.

*Let Jove say what he please, I'll stay.
Offend the Gods and Love Obey.*

— Dido and Aeneas, Henry Purcell

Joseph

His roommate was camped out on the couch with the television on. He wasn't watching, but C-Span was airing Questions for the Prime Minister in the House of Commons.

When he walked in the door, he could hear Margaret Thatcher's voice.

"...If the hon. Gentleman will just listen, he might hear something that he did not know. The average pensioner now has twice as much to hand on to his children as he did 11 years ago. They are thinking about the future. This massive rise in our living standards reflects the extraordinary transformation of the private sector..."

"I love you Maggie," he said as he walked in with books under his arm.

"She's not into you, dude," said his roommate, not looking away from his book. "You know she's fucking Pinochet, right?"

"She'd never do that," he said dropping the books on the kitchen table. "She's just using him."

His roommate laughed.

"You're ridiculous," he said, still not looking away from his book.

"Messages?" he asked his roommate.

"You know I never check that fucking thing," the roommate said. "I'm not going to be your secretary."

"Well maybe Fidel Castro finally called back about your solar powered composting toilet," he said.

The roommate laughed again.

"I love you, man," he said.

"...People on all levels of income are better off than they were in 1979. But what the hon. Gentleman is saying that he would rather that the poor were poorer, provided that the rich were less rich. That way one will never create the wealth for better social services, as we have. What a policy. Yes, he would rather have the poor poorer, provided that the rich were less rich. That is the Liberal policy..."

He went to the answering machine and hit play. The light was blinking.

Beep.

"This is the third time we have called about your residency issue..."

He hit the erase button.

"Hey, I was listening to that," the roommate said.

"Well I hate to ruin for you, but it's resolved," he said.

"Fuck," the roommate said, still reading his book, "I was hoping you were finally getting thrown out."

He shook his head and laughed.

"It was a pain," he said. "But you're stuck with me."

Beep.

"Hi, it's me," a voice said. "We have to talk. I think I'm pregnant."

He hit stop on the machine.

The roommate swiveled his legs to the floor and set his book aside.

They both were still. He had his hand on the machine.

"... Yes, it came out. The hon. Member did not intend it to, but it did. The extraordinary transformation of the private sector has created the wealth for better social services and better pensions—it enables pensioners to have twice as much as they did 10 years ago to leave to their children. We are no longer the sick man of Europe..."

He hit rewind.

"I think I'm pregnant."

They looked at each other.

"The anthropology chick?" the roommate asked.

He nodded slowly.

"Dude, that won't work," the roommate said. "She's a communist!"

A question for the Prime Minister cut the silence.

"...Will the Prime Minister tell us whether she intends to continue her personal fight against a single currency and an independent central bank when she leaves office?..."

Then Dennis Skinner perfectly interjected.

"...No. She is going to be the governor..."

The laughter from the television filled the room.

"Fuck," he said.

"Yeah, that's how it started," the roommate said.

"She probably isn't," he said. Then he was irritated. "This is probably one of your jokes. Did you put her up to this?"

"What? No way," the roommate said. "I wish I had. This is good!"

He stopped for a moment. It had been a while since that night. Two months? Six weeks? He did calendar math.

He walked into his bedroom and closed the door. He sat on his bed.

"This isn't for real," he thought.

He picked up the phone and dialed from memory. It had been a while. It hadn't gone well. They fought with each other as hard as they were drawn to each other; the greater the passion, the worse the arguments.

And, she hated him, or at least resented him as much and because of how much she liked him.

He heard the rings. One. Two. Three. He almost hung up. Four.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," he said. "It's me."

"Well, so, you got my message?" she asked.

"Yeah, I did," he said.

"So I am," she said. "I'm pregnant."

Suddenly he was in Mrs. Lloyd's health class. It was 7th grade. He did a report on the effects of caffeine. They learned about the reproductive system. They took tests about it. He seemed to remember warnings about this. He thought of the diagrams and condoms. He thought about how they didn't show a bottle of wine or a martini glass or the room layout of a hotel.

He thought about his mom and dad. He thought about his grandmother. He thought about this woman he hardly knew being pregnant. He wondered if it — it — he stopped there for a minute. It. Was it his? He wanted her to be not pregnant. He wanted this to be a mistake. It was, he was sure. But he wanted to show that he cared about her, but she was not the first thing he thought

about. And it wasn't the second thing he thought about either. The first thing he thought about before everything else he thought about, was about himself.

"So," he said. Then there was a pause.

He raked the soil of his brain for the right thing to say.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Please."

"Are you, ok?" he asked.

"Please."

"What can I do?" he asked.

"Please"

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Please"

"I'm sorry" he said.

"Please"

"What!?" he asked.

"Please"

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Please, stop talking!" she shouted into the phone.

Then there was silence. He sat down on his bed.

"Thank you," she said. "And I know you're wondering. I haven't been with anyone since that night. Nobody."

"But what about the forger guy," he started. "The guy with the letter. Where's he?"

"I don't love him," she said. "I didn't love him. It's not him. It's you."

"Hey, so," he stammered. "Can I ask if you're, ok?"

"Yeah," she said.

"So, I want to do the right thing here," he said.

"You do?" she asked. "What's that?"

"I have no idea," he said.

She laughed. He felt close to her. She was so difficult to deal with. Now they had a common enemy. A problem of their own making.

"I don't know you," she said, "Except that I really don't like you."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Did you just roll your eyes?" she asked.

"Of course not," he said. "I closed them and thought about our wedding."

"Fuck You," she said.

They both laughed.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" he asked.

"You'd better," she said.

He could still hear Thatcher's voice on the television when he hung up the phone and laid back on his bed.

"...No one can doubt the dangers which lie ahead. Saddam Hussein has many times shown his contempt for human life, not least for the lives of his own people. He has large armed forces. They are equipped with peculiarly evil weapons, both chemical and biological...There is something else which one feels. That is a sense of this country's destiny: the centuries of history and experience which ensure that, when principles have to be defended, when good has to be upheld and when evil has to be overcome, Britain will take up arms. It is because we on this side have never flinched from difficult decisions that this House and this country can have confidence in this Government today..."

Peter

They sat silently together on the porch. It was a pause in a longer conversation. A bit more time passed as they swung gently.

"I love this swing," she said. "Was it here when you guys moved in?"

He looked off into the distance over the Eucalyptus.

"No," he said, as if his mind was elsewhere. "We had Jimmy Buffet's people install it."

She shook her head.

"You know me," he said, "Strumming my six-string, searching for my lost shaker of salt."

"Whatever," she said.

"You know," he looked at her earnestly, "Some people claim that there is a woman to blame."

He laughed.

"Fuck," she said. "Everything has to be a joke with you."

"Well, you know," he said, "It's that New Mexican thing."

"What?"

"At this wedding once, I had to introduce an uncle," he said.

"They said 'Keep it short and funny.' I said, 'They said keep it short and funny. This man is from New Mexico, where everyone is short and funny!'"

He laughed.

She looked over at him.

"That's not funny," she said.

"Yes. It is," he said. "I actually had it checked out. It was funny. People laughed."

They kept swinging.

"I don't want to go back," he said.

“We said we’d go back at Thanksgiving,” she said. “We should tell people there in person.”

He leaned forward and put his face in his hands.

“C’mon,” she said, and rubbed his back. “It’s not that bad.”

He just moaned. They kept swinging.

“Maybe there’s a way I can explain it,” he said and got up and walked inside. The screen door slammed.

She could hear him rummaging around. She folded her arms. Now she was contemplating talking to his mother. Their relatives.

“We’re having a baby!” she imagined saying.

She could see them sitting on a couch looking at the two of them.

“Que dice?” Grandma would say.

“Estan comprando un niño, mama,” an aunt would say.

“No, no,” he’d say. “We’re not buying a baby. We’re having one. She’s pregnant.”

“Who’s the father,” an uncle would ask.

Awkward. He’d grab her hand.

“I am the father!” he’d say proudly.

Awkward silence.

“Bueno, Darth Vader,” the uncle would say making the sign of the cross.

Then the uncle would burst into laughter.

“Now that is funny,” she thought.

The screen door opened and slammed shut, stopping her reverie.

“You guys have to fix that door,” she said.

He took his place next to her on the swing. He was holding a narrow and thin book with the word “Record” stamped in stationary-store gold on the front.

"Are we going to balance your check book?" she asked.

"Fuck you," he said. She laughed pretty hard now. She touched his hair but her laughter built.

"I'm not going to share this shit with you," he said.

"Ok," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm just thinking about how they're going to react."

"Yeah," he said. "It's going to be hilarious."

"What's in the book?" she asked.

"It's a diary I kept when I was in high school," he said. "I was looking at it the other day."

"And it explains why you don't want to go back there?"

"Well," he hesitated, "I burned that bridge. I had to. I was done with the place."

He hadn't been back to New Mexico since he left for college. He hadn't spoken to anyone there, including his parents since he left.

"I know," she said. "But we agreed, right, at least for her."

"Her?" he said, "We don't know that yet."

"I do," she said.

"Ok," he said. "Read some of this."

He gave her the book and pointed to a page. She started to read out loud.

"I have succeeded in removing every threat to my safety. I am safe. I am alone but I am safe. I am in control. There is power in this realization."

She stopped.

"How old were you here?" she asked. "This sounds like Scarface."

He grabbed the book back.

"Sixteen," he said. "That was sixteen."

"I'm sorry, honey," she said getting close to him. "I know. You're angry. You deserve to be. We both are angry, and we should be."

"I basically ran away from home," he said.

"I did that too," she said. "We're both runaways. It didn't work the first time, but I kept at it. So did you."

"Well, we made it," he said. "And for me going there is like going backwards. Imagine having to go back and explain all this to people in Lebanon. Your brother."

Mentioning her brother riled up some anger. But she knew what he meant. She let it go and, instead of starting a fight, put her arms around him. She pressed her forehead to his. They looked into each other's eyes.

"I see the doorway to a thousand churches," he said as he looked into her eyes.

"The resolution of all the fruitless searches," she said back.

He pulled away.

"I'd drive around that town and listen to that over, and over again," he said.

"I can't wait for you to take me on your drive," she said. "Tramway, to Los Ranchos, and then to the Valley. Then back through Corrales and Bernalillo. I can imagine you killing time that way."

"Sometimes we'd manage to get vodka and cranberry juice at the drive through liquor store," he said. "We'd make Cape Cods in the back of the truck in a field out toward Bernalillo, and when the juice ran out, just vodka. That's how we killed some time waiting to get out of there."

She took the book again and opened it.

"April 18th, 1987," she started, "Loneliness is the debt we pay when we run out of friends and borrow time from strangers."

"Brilliant, huh?" he said.

"It sounds like you," she said. "Always about the exchange of value."

"Yep," he said leaning back and starting the swing.

"October 13, 1986," she read "When I say I love you, I mean it."

"Oh Jesus," he said, reaching for the book.

She pulled it away.

"I will do anything to maintain what we have. I believe that we can run away, I believe that we can get married."

He stopped fighting for the book. She read another sentence.

"I don't just think it's a fantasy," she finished. "Who was the lucky lady?" she teased.

"That's not the point of sharing this," he said. He took the book back and searched its pages. "It's that I built myself on giving up, getting away from there."

He pointed to another page and handed it to her. She started reading.

"It's an outline, there are five Roman numerals," she said with her finger on the page. "One is 'Truth,' two is 'Strength,' three is 'Pain,' four is 'Loss,' and five is," and she stopped and looked closer.

"Five, Roman numeral five is 'Never turning back,'" she stopped. "Then two points under it, little a is 'bury the dead deep,' and little b is 'never dig them up again.'"

She stopped and looked at him.

"Did you kill someone or something, dear?" she asked only half joking.

"Of course not," he said taking the book and looking at it. "Just that place and my memories of it."

They sat in silence again for a moment.

"I know it's angsty teenage diary bullshit," he said. "But going back wouldn't be easy anyway, but you and me and that."

"That?" she said. "That!"

"This," he said, "I mean, you know."

"I could start a big fucking fight with you now," she said. "But I just love that boy in the record book. I mean he's you, so hurt. It's so sweet."

They turned to each other. The sun was drifting below the horizon casting a reddish glow.

"I'm, well," he struggled. "I'm glad we're going back together. I mean, I guess..."

"Don't worry," she said. "I love you. And whoever that girl was from October of 1986 better watch herself."

Jonah

He walked into their apartment hoping she wasn't there. But she was.

"How'd the sermon go, Reverend Swaggart."

"Jesus," he said. "As soon as I walk in the door."

"I thought it was good when I read it," she said. "Did they all have their hearing aids on?"

"First of all," he said taking off his coat and hanging it on a peg by the door. "Jimmy is one of the greatest preachers ever. I mean Hall of Fucking Fame."

She shook her head as she looked back at the notebook she had been writing in.

"Second," he said. "Yes, the old Episcopalians loved it. They thought it was a fucking anti-war sermon, but...."

"Ahhhh," she said. "I told you. You didn't listen to your advisor. The Saddam reference. Forgiveness." She wagged her finger at him with satisfaction.

"Yeah," he said. "A bunch of them came up and thanked me for being so bold."

"What did you say?"

"I was like the guy in that song, The Weight," he said. "When one guy shook my hand and asked, 'You're against the war, right?' I just grinned and 'No' was all I said."

She laughed.

"What did your advisor say?"

"Well, he said I did a good job of drawing the people into understanding the story, the narrative. But he worried it was too controversial."

"The war thing?"

"No, he was all worried about Calvinism," he said. "All my talk about 'our destination,' and God being all powerful and all knowing."

"I told you," she said. "People were confused. They didn't get it."

"We'll, he did," he said. "He said I was wandering into a hinterland — he used that word — of accepting predestination as a fact while suggesting salvation comes from exchange with each other. I was, he said, accepting the Westminster Confession but

"Did he pick up on capitalist crap you put in there?"

"No," he said sitting down on the couch. "And Goddammit, it's not crap."

"You know I think all your Calvinist stuff is nonsense," She laughed again. "But I know you, and I can see what you're doing."

"He didn't like that I said that thing at the end about communion being in the presence."

"Transubstantiation!" That made her chuckle and she turned to face him. "In a way, it makes me love you more, you're like the people I study."

"Yes," I know. "Data. I'm data to you."

"But I know the back story," she said. "I know what you're trying to resolve."

"Look," he said. "I'm tired of this. I'm just trying to figure out what the fuck I'm supposed to do with myself."

"Are you still going through with baptism?" she asked. "Or are you going to follow the other Tractarians and become a Roman Catholic?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm going to be baptized — As an Episcopalian. I love the liturgy. Eucharist is like dinner in a fancy French restaurant, everyone with different outfits, moving around plates and cutlery. The hymns. There's no fear, only beauty. I can't help it. I love it. Silly, I know."

"It isn't," she said. "We can't always live in our heads. There are other things we need to do besides think all the time. At least they ordain women."

He held back his response on ordination. He'd thought about becoming a monk himself. He wasn't rejecting Catholicism; he was embracing it. He was tired of explaining it to her and himself.

"I preached a sermon to help cap off my Master's degree," he said. "You're pregnant. I have no skills other than arguing about arcane bullshit. Where am I going? Where am I supposed to go? He's right. I am in a hinterland. That's what I was getting at."

She sat down next to him on the couch.

“I’m no theologian, but I thought you wove yourself and your own thinking together beautifully,” she said. “I know what you were doing, I know the needle you’re threading.”

She put her hand on his chest.

“You’re somewhere between grandpa’s fire and brimstone and John Henry Newman’s syncretism; somewhere between that boy in the pews wanting to live his life, and that pervert Swaggart.”

“Thank you,” he said looking at her, laughed, and lightly pinched her ear. “Did I tell you that you were looking especially pregnant today.”

She shook her head and smiled at him.

“Fuck you,” she said and leaned over and kissed him.

The Sermon

The reading today includes part of the book of Jonah, from the third and fourth chapter. Unlike most prophetic books, Jonah is biographical; we are drawn to his story, his drama, as he attempts to evade God’s will. I suggest that our lesson from it today is about free will and forgiveness and how they are connected

The story of Jonah is about a man who is called to go somewhere, a destination, a place he does not want to go to do something he does not want to do. The call is the same one God has for us; go to your neighbor and forgive and love them.

At the beginning of the story, God calls on Jonah to save the city of Nineveh—in modern day Iraq, a place we’ve come to know in the news the last several months—and Jonah tries to run away. Jonah runs because he knows God is merciful, and Jonah wants Nineveh to be destroyed; the last thing he wants is God to be merciful. But God wants to use Jonah to save the city. Jonah was a nationalist and Nineveh was part of Assyria, an enemy of Israel. Why would Jonah want to help God save them?

Imagine God calling one of us to go to Bagdad to preach to Saddam Hussein knowing that we’d be successful, he’d repent. But wouldn’t that just delay the inevitable? Wouldn’t that just leave a bad man in power? We can imagine that this was the kind of thought Jonah was having.

But after Jonah stubbornly forces the crew of the ship to throw him overboard, and he spends three days in the fish, Jonah agrees to go to Nineveh. He arrives at his destination. His efforts are successful, Nineveh is spared, and at the end Jonah sulks, unhappy with the outcome.

The central question of Jonah is the one God asks Jonah and He asks us: “Should not I spare Nineveh?”

But today, this story should make us wonder, “Why would an all-powerful and all-knowing God choose Jonah, a disobedient, and self-centered man who even after saving a whole city can only worry about himself? Why does that God need Jonah? Couldn’t he just save Nineveh on his own? Couldn’t he have found someone else?”

In the *Enchiridion*, the stoic philosopher Epictetus extols his listeners to,

“Remember that you are an actor in a play, the nature of which is up to the director to decide. If he wants the play to be short, it will be short, if he wants it long, it will be long. And if he casts you as one of the poor, or as a cripple, as a king or as a commoner – whatever role is assigned, the accomplished actor will accept and perform it with impartial skill. But the assignment of roles belongs to another.”

We’re Americans. We don’t like to think that the “assignment of roles belongs to another.” More deeply, as humans, we resent the notion that we have no choice, that we are predestined for anything. Don’t we have free will? Can’t we act using our own strength to save ourselves, to save a city? Or has the story already been written?

Let’s consider forgiveness.

Have you ever prayed to be forgiven as ‘we forgive those that trespass against us’ and not really meant it? Have you ever wanted God to forgive you but, well, maybe give that other trespasser what they deserve? If you have, then you know how Jonah felt. His conflict is not one that the book presents as a villainous one, that is, he does not undertake to subvert God’s will but to simply avoid being an instrument of it.

What if I love and pray for my enemies and it actually works? Then my enemies will escape justice and fairness. My enemies will end up benefiting from what they’ve done to me or others. How could God be so merciful? Can you imagine shaking your fist at the sky saying, “Stop being merciful to my enemies!” This is a human thing.

In the Eucharist, right before we pray the Our Father together, the priest says, “Jesus Christ our Lord, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the Church, and the author of our salvation.”

He is the author. What sort of story is he writing here? What is our destiny? Will we resist the role he has assigned us and like Jonah try to evade it, or shall we, as Epictetus suggests, “accept and perform it with impartial skill?”

The answer to the question of whether God should spare Nineveh, Jonah, us, and our enemies is in the Our Father.

Listen closely to the words, their logic: ‘As we forgive.’ For though our request for forgiveness comes first as we pray the Our Father, salvation is in the second part of the phrase.

As. We. Forgive. Those. His forgiveness of us can only happen when we forgive others, even those who deserve what they have coming to them. Especially those people.

In our other reading, Jesus calms the storm. In an earlier verse, the narrator tells us that when he was alone with the disciples, he “explained everything.” Yet when on the boat in a storm, they were afraid, and they were afraid after he calmed the storm. Jesus asks them, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

In Jonah, God asks the prophet, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Why do we sometimes feel so angry and afraid at the prospect that we have no choice but to love and forgive those we feel don’t deserve it?

Here’s the message, the Good News.

God needs us just as we need Him. He has a relationship with us, and like any relationship with a partner, a loved one, a mother, a father, a boss, a friend, an enemy, there are many feelings and frustrations, ups and downs, joys, and disappointments.

In the same way God needs us as a collaborator as he writes the story of our lives, we need each other. Yes, it could be easier to be free of dependence on other people. And it is true that those we forgive may not be worthy of our forgiveness. Life isn’t fair or just. But what redeems that fact, is the relationship we have with one another, a spontaneous order of interaction, mutual benefit, and dependence.

God can do anything, he’s omnipotent He didn’t need Jonah to save that city. God is omniscient. He knows whether you are saved or not. But he’s telling us, ‘Go to Nineveh.’ He’s telling us, ‘Go the trespasser.’

God wants us to engage with Him, in faith and confidence, and with each other and, as frustrating as this may be, He will not let us evade his will, He will be sure we arrive at our assigned destination. We cannot be saved without our neighbor; when we save the other, we too are saved. Salvation is not a solitary endeavor, or affirmation of the Creed, or repeating of words at an altar call. Salvation is ongoing, willful action based on our faith in His will for us.

Salvation isn’t a transaction solely between you and God. And we cannot save ourselves by what we do. Instead, salvation is an exchange of value between each of us and Him.

Salvation is to be forgiven by forgiving. Salvation is an exchange of the love and forgiveness that he freely gives to each of and which we must share with one another.

In a few moments we will share a meal with each other in the presence of Christ just as the disciples who met him on the road to Emmaus. Before we do, I will pray, “We do not presume to come to this thy Table trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.”

Amen.

Rudy

*Maybe when I answered, yes
Maybe I became a bore
Maybe if I loved you less
Maybe you would love me more
Maybe it's because I've kissed you too much
Maybe that is why my kiss means so little*

*-- Maybe it's Because I Love You Too Much
Rudy Vallee*

She was asleep on her back. A deep sleep.

He was awake. He couldn't sleep anymore. She always slept better than he did. And he wasn't just awake, he was watching her enlarged belly, pregnant stomach, rising and falling. He was staring really. He was wondering how he'd be a father. How?

"What are you doing?" she said groggily.

"I'm watching the baby," he said.

"What the fuck," she said. "Stop that. It's weird. Stop staring at us." She rolled over.

"No, it's not," he said spooning her and putting his hand on her belly. "And the doctor says you're not supposed to sleep on your back."

"Don't worry about it so much," she said. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm a worrier," he said. "I'll worry for all of us."

"I'm going to get up and make some coffee," he whispered in her ear and tickled her.

"Stop it," she laughed. "Make coffee and I'll wake up."

In the kitchen he ground beans and boiled water. He watched it roiling in the pan. Then he poured it into the pitcher.

"I had so many dreams last night," she said standing in the doorway. She walked to the table in the small kitchen and sat down.

"About your dissertation?" he asked as he put the lid and the press on the pitcher.

"Well, yeah," she said. "And those fuckers on the committee."

"Well, you're making it harder on yourself," he said.

"And you're starting in on me about it first thing?"

"Well, fuck, honey just do scholarship," he said pushing the plunger down. "Save the world when you get the degree."

"Look, you're the one who's walking away," she said. "You won't defend your shit, you'll never stood in front of a PhD committee."

"Yes," he said putting the pitcher on the table and leaning toward her, "You are better than me and I admire you." He kissed her on the forehead.

"God, you're so patronizing," she said. "How is what I'm doing different. You get it."

"Yes, we're both pragmatists I guess," he said sitting down with two cups. "But this Sistaca thing is just trying to rewrite history."

"But that's the point," she said. "If he gets to tell his story, it changes everything."

"I get it," he said. "But I think your lover, the forger, just made that thing up"

He poured coffee into the cups.

"We've been over this, over and over," she said. "Who cares? You keep making everything about him. That's over. It wasn't real but I think the letter is."

He poured cream into his cup. He leaned back in the chair.

"You'd do anything to make a fucking point," he said. "And he'd do anything to get back in your pants. Your point about saving the future from the past, and past from the future is enough. You don't have to beat it to death with a document of dubious origins."

"Wouldn't you?"

"What?"

"Do anything to make your point," she said. "To win the argument?"

"I believe in the past," he said. "I think it happened and we have to find out what it was. I think it matters."

"And I don't?"

"You think we should change it, rewrite it, make shit up because of the urgent need of justice."

"I do," she said. "We have a will and we have a way. I want to find things that will fuck up the whole thing."

"Listen," he said. "We disagree about what happens once we discover we have a will here."

"You're as much of a nihilist as you say I am," she said.

"You say nihilist like it's a bad thing," he said closing his eyes, "I told you, I'm pragmatic. We don't have to know where all this came from, we've got to make the best of it."

"What good is having a will if we don't use it?" she asked.

"You're so odd," you sound like John Wesley, "I told you, I think all this was predestined, we're what Epictetus advises us to be, the best player of whatever role He," he rolled his eyes upward, "assigned us."

"Right," she said, "And that's what I'm doing, making the best of it. I'm just, you know, fixing the script."

"All I'm saying is play along a little longer," he said. "I think you've opened up new stuff, important stuff."

"Tell me again how what I'm saying is different from what got you in trouble," she urged. "That religion comes from a common experience, whether that experience is internal or external."

"I quit because I just didn't believe in the academic project anymore," he said. "I want to change things with our common experience our common language, not in spite of it. Nobody there believed that. They were more like you."

"When we look at text," she pressed him, "We're looking at life, the stories people tell, that's what's real, right?"

"But I think you're just making shit up," he said. "This letter, if it's a fake, it is going to destroy you. And that guy just wants to fuck you. He'd do anything. Even plant that letter."

"I'm sitting here having coffee with you and your baby in my belly," she said. "Do you think I'm an idiot? Do you think I'm that stupid?"

"Of course not," he said. "You're a million miles more smarter than me." He raised his coffee cup and winked.

"I know the risks here," she said. "But I'm going with it."

“And I’m trying to separate what I know about him and you from the value of that document,” he said. “For fuck’s sake, it’s a find. But you don’t need surprise documents to support your scholarship. You’re a genius all by yourself.”

“I appreciate the acknowledgement,” she said. “But I want you to recognize that I don’t think we owe anything to the sanctity of tradition like you do.”

“Yes,” he said. “Sometimes something numinous breaks through, a miracle. Sometimes miracles might just be shit that someone made up, like the Book of Mormon or the Aeneid. It’s brilliant. Valuable. It’s made up. But it’s still a fucking miracle when you think of what those origin stories did, the lasting impact on culture.”

“So, honey, this time maybe I’m the one just making shit up,” she said. “It’s a miracle.”

He stared at her as she sipped the coffee.

“Caffeine is bad for the baby,” he said. “And I love you.”

“No, it’s not,” she said. “And maybe I love you too.”

Zora

Her dissertation committee was waiting for her, two men, sitting at a table. In between them, sat a woman, the chair of the committee. There was a podium and water in a pitcher with a glass on a shelf below. When they said they were ready, she came in. Her hand was in her pocket where it gripped a clear film canister filled with dirt.

She walked across the floor to the podium, a bag over her shoulder, the canister in her right hand and her left hand across her abdomen, swelled by pregnancy. She set the bag down, and once she reached the podium, she removed her hand with the canister from her pocket. The baby was kicking and moving more than usual.

"Thank you for being here," the chair said. "Take your time getting set up."

"Thank you," she said. "It'll just be a minute."

She took the canister and emptied it into the glass and poured water into it. The dirt from the Santuario roiled like a dust storm in the glass. She lifted the glass to her lips and took a long drink. Then she filled the glass again and drank it the same way until all the water and sand were gone.

"I have some materials you'll need," she said advancing toward the panel and handing them copies.

"Thank you," the chair said and passed them to her colleagues.

"I'm ready," she said with a smile. Throughout her presentation she didn't look down at any notes; she spoke entirely from memory, keeping eye contact with the committee, a fact that they would grow to find as unnerving as the baby's kicking unnerved her.

"Please begin with a general introduction," said the chair. The members of the committee each wore glasses and they peered over them without irony.

"*Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.*" she began, quoting the opening of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

"*For some they come in with the tide,*" she went on, but paused.

"For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men."

She stopped for a second or two. Then she went on, still from memory, looking at the committee members in their eyes.

"Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."

"These words are the opening to, *"Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* she said. "The odyssey of a young black woman early in this century, in Florida, on the pilgrimage from girlhood to womanhood, from being a victim to being in charge."

"My own journey here began on a road at the corner of my hometown, Lebanon, Kansas, near the intersection of a dirt road and Kansas State Route 281. I would ride my bike and park it in the middle of that dirt road, road 833, facing west. I would sit there and dream of what was beyond the horizon."

"Eventually I learned of my family roots in New Mexico. Then, later, I learned that, in the past, a Spaniard expedition from New Mexico in 1720, the Villasur Expedition, passed just to the west of where I sat gazing off into the future. The destruction of the Villasur Expedition was historically important, establishing the limits of Spanish expansion into the heart of the North American continent."



FIG. 1. Probable route of the Villasur Expedition, 1720. Fort d'Orléans was founded in 1724. Expedition route adapted from Gottfried Hotz, *Indian Skin Paintings from the American Southwest*, and Donald J. Blakeslee, *Holy Ground, Healing Water*. Map produced by Laura Vennard, Map and Geographic Information Center, University of New Mexico.

“The documents we have from The Spanish Archives of New Mexico, establish that Pedro Villasur was incompetent and rash and that well-armed, regular French soldiers combined with Pawnee Indians were responsible for the route of Spanish soldiers.”

“Here, we find the counter to what Sir William Francis Butler said of the unknown Scottish dead at Culloden: ‘It is the victor who writes the history and counts the dead, and to the vanquished in such a struggle there only remains the dull memory of an outnumbered and unwritten sorrow.’”

“In this case, however, it was the vanquished, the Spaniard survivors, who wrote the history of this battle. It was poor Villasur, dead and unable to defend himself, who, we are told by the survivors, walked stupidly into a French trap, one baited by the ‘ánimo sospechoso’ of the Pawnees. The Spanish loss was not at the hands of indigenous peoples but at the hands of a fellow European power using those people.”

“Were the Pawnees being used by the French? Or were the Pawnees using the French against Spaniards allied with their enemy, the Apaches? Were the French involved at all? To further reify the European nature of the battle, someone commissioned a painting, the Segesser Hide Paintings that show French soldiers in uniform at the battle.”



“There is a key passage in the documents from the archive:

“Y habiendo llegado a vistas la población de los pananas, en que habitan franceses, envió un

panana católico, para que a sus nacionales les expresase iban en paz. Quedóse entre los suyos, y ellos enviaron a unos indios, con respuesta que no fue entendida, pero sí percibida su reserva y malicia.”

“Before the battle began, Villasur sent a Pawnee Indian – an Indian who had supposedly become a Catholic – to communicate with his fellow Pawnees. He never returned, instead a note came back. What did the note say? The next day Villasur was destroyed. Who was this ‘panana catolico’ who stayed with his people? What if he could speak? What version of the story would he tell? Will his story remain an “unwritten sorrow?”

“It will not. I have discovered a first-person report from a Pawnee Indian, Francisco Sistaca or Banit Hadikuas he called himself, that expresses the balance of power between white explorers and colonists in the new world and the people who had lived there already for centuries. This account unravels the notion that native peoples were primitive, meek, and easily subjugated. This account is found in a letter from no less than George Washington, passing the Indian’s story on to his superiors. My research will be to expand the understanding of this document, its origins, and the light it sheds on the history of the plains Indians and their role in the larger world.”

“Indigenous people of the prairie were not victims of powerful European colonial interests but were equal participants in a worldwide global effort to understand, give meaning, and control the vast North American continent. The indigenous people of the prairie were as much conquerors as the so-called conquistadors of Spain, taking advantage of far-off disputes and prejudices to leverage benefits for themselves.”

“The indigenous people of the prairie were not monolithic; instead, they were a complex web of societies connected by a sophisticated transportation network, a diverse economy, and many shared traditions and origin stories. Often, they were less than impressed with the shabby, exhausted men from European colonial powers that arrived in their world often defeated by the terrain and confusion. Those men depended on the prairie people for translation, direction, and meaning in a vast unknown place.”

Most important, my work won’t just rewrite history but it will rewrite the future. Traumas can be healed, pain and dislocation resolved if we can remember and dream. The sorrow of the vanquished need not remain unwritten.”

“Now,” she repeated her opening quote, “women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.”

“I’m ready for your questions,” she said.

There was a pause and shuffling of papers and squeaking of chairs.

“Isn’t it convenient,” said one of the men, “That this document you seemed to have discovered just fills in this loose end so nicely. It’s almost as if the letter wrote itself to support your thesis.”

This was going to be a fight.

“Convenient?” she asked rhetorically, “Isn’t any substantiation of a claim or a proposition or of a narrative a good thing? I’d hardly say it was convenient. I had to go further than 7-11 to find this document. What is your point?”

The man folded his arms. His colleague leaned forward.

“Why would you go rooting through George Washington’s papers?” he asked. “What in the world does the French Indian War have to do with your thesis?”

The woman on the committee looked at her and then at the two men, “Yes, what evidence is there that there were prairie Indians engaged in the French Indian War? Isn’t this a stretch?”

“If I hadn’t dug into this question, this committee would have asked, appropriately, ‘why didn’t you consider the role of prairie Indians in the French Indian War if there was one?’”

She stopped. She lifting up a copy of the stapled papers she had given them.

“The Pawnee, and many prairie tribes were heavily dependent on the French and the French on them. If the French lost the continent, the Pawnee would lose an important trading partner and ally against hostile Apaches and Comanches. Remember, the Villasur expedition was an effort by Spain to probe the limits of their colonial influence over and against the French. An expedition the Pawnees destroyed.”

She walked out from behind the podium.

“Zebulon Pike,” she said, “when he visited what is now called “Guide Rock,” heard from Indians who told him that Otos and Osage Indians had joined the French effort to defeat General Braddock at the first battle of the French Indian War.”

“But that doesn’t mean Sistaca and Pawnees would have been fighting in the Ohio river valley,” said one of the men.

"I didn't expect that he was," she said. "I wanted understand more about the native peoples who were involved in that war. I was as surprised as anyone to find a Pawnee Indian at the beginning of the greatest world war of the 18th century, just as surprised as most Americans are to find George Washington there."

She walked back behind the podium, felt another kick from inside her, and then quoted George Washington's words from one of his letters when he was tangling with the French.

"Another thing worthy of consideration, is, if we depend on Indian assistance, we must have a large quantity of proper Indian goods to reward their services, and make them presents; it is by this means alone, that the French command such an interest among them, and that we had so few. This, with the scarcity of Provisions, was proverbial; would induce them to ask, when they were to join us, if we meant to starve them as well as ourselves."

"That's George Washington," she said. "In a letter to Governor Dinwiddie. The French understood how to work with the native population far better than the Anglo-Americans. The native population and the colonists were interdependent. The French leaned into that. So, the prairie Indians needed the French to win that war to keep their trade going, and the French needed the Indians."

"How do you do that?" asked one of the men. "You're not reading anything."

"I have an amazing memory," she said putting her index fingers on her temples.

"So, the route," said one of the men, "what facts do you have to support a route that goes from Quartalejo, well, by your house?" The other man snickered a bit. The woman on the committee faced her colleagues, but her eyes swiveled toward their student, and she held her breath.

She could feel her lower lip curling under her front teeth as the "fuck you!" came racing up from her soul, deep inside her, past her lungs, where it would catch a blast of breath then traverse her vocal chords, then leave her mouth, travel across the room pass through his auricles, down his ear canals where it would trigger the malleus and incus, and then stimulate the cochlear nerve and reach the bastards upper cortex like a hard punch.

But she stopped, even while her hand began the search for something to throw. It felt like the baby was doing summersaults inside her.

“Excellent question, professor,” she heard herself saying. Before she could answer the other man added another question.

“What about the idea that Villasur went through Colorado, not Kansas?” he asked. “What if Quartalejo was in Colorado? What if, as my colleague suggested, he didn’t go by your house?”

“The archeological evidence and common sense don’t support that,” she said. “There is no archeological evidence in Colorado for Quartalejo where the expedition stopped. However, there are ruins in Kansas at a distance from Santa Fe that matches with accounts from participants.”

She pointed to page in the handout she had given them.

“And as for the distances, all the primary documentation of the diaries from participants in the Villasur expedition say they traveled 300 leagues from Santa Fe to Nebraska. A league is about the distance a man could walk in hour, about 2.63 miles, about 780 miles.”

The men looked perplexed.

“A route that assumes a Colorado location for Quartalejo has a marching distance from Santa Fe to Nebraska that is only 231 leagues, about 150 miles less than the distances in the accounts.”

“I have a calculator if you need it,” she said reaching into her bag. “The Colorado route, well, comes up short. Something I think you’d understand.”

The men were rankled and the woman tried to come to the rescue.

“It’s not necessary,” she said. “You’ve made the point.”

One of the men leaned forward and took off his glasses.

“You have cited a known forger in your notes,” he said. “Let’s be honest, how do we know this letter from George Washington isn’t a fake?”

“It’s pretty easy to look at this and see it’s forged,” said the other man.

“How would you answer that?” the woman asked.

"And there is reason to believe you and the forger have a closer relationship that just academics," said one man.

"Now I don't think that's fair," the woman started.

"Stop!" she said. "Of course, it's fair."

She came from around the podium.

"If it's a fake I want to know who faked it and why," she began. "Maybe it isn't a fake, and maybe this man Washington met was lying. Why was he lying? Maybe George Washington made this up. Why? Maybe the person Washington met was Sistaca and maybe he lied to Washington. Was the person in this letter is the source of the Indian Blanket legend, or did he already know this story and add it for effect? This is the essence of scholarship, asking questions and finding answers."

There was a nervous silence.

"As for the forger," she said, "Of course I would engage someone who understands forgery of historical documents. He was a consultant, and he was important to helping understand these questions."

The room was silent. The sun was beginning to set, and the room was now on fire with a reddish light. The men shifted around nervously. The woman looked at them. All of them made eye contact. Then one of the men stood up and started to clap. Then the other man did the same. The woman smiled and joined them.

She smiled and sighed.

"Goddammit!" one of the men exclaimed, his hands on his hips, "You are good."

"But this is child's play compared to what you're going to get outside of this committee," said the other man.

The woman walked over and hugged her.

"You've done some great work here," she said. "We're on your side. But not everyone will be."

The Document

Library of Congress, George Washington Papers, Series 8, Miscellaneous Papers ca. 1775-99, Subseries 8A, Correspondence and Miscellaneous Notes: Correspondence and Miscellaneous Notes, 1773-1799 [Misfiled*]

*The following document is under consideration. It was discovered in the Library's collection of Washington's correspondence from a later period than the date, apparently misfiled. Work is underway to determine its authenticity.

To Robert Dinwiddie

From our Camp at the Great Meadows [Pa.] 30th of May 1754

Honorable Sir

I regret to inform you that my last correspondence relaying the recent encounter with the French and their Indians must be slightly amended. I conveyed before that I had sent Lieutt West and Mr. Sprilldorph with 20 men to contend with the prisoners which I noticed to you would receive all the respect I cou'd to them here, including cloathing and food. As we were affording these men what they should have, a man emerged from them who spoke to Mr. Spilldorph in plain English though he said he was an Indian. The man is older, he says 54 years, and that he was born in what is now French Louisiana but was then a great disputed area on the plains between Fort Orleans and Santa Fe.

He says he is Pawnee and his given name is Banit Hadiku or Black Bird in English. I trouble you with this seemingly trivial set of facts only because he was Spanish slave in 1720 when he was part of a foray by the Spanish into the convergence of the Platte and Loup rivers, an excursion which was a disaster for the Spaniards. His given name as a slave was Francisco Sistaca and he asked earnestly of both West and Sprilldorph that he might speak directly to me because he wished to unburden his conscience about his role in the conflict between a Spaniard called Villasur and the Pawnee Indians, the one which the Spaniards were defeated.

At the outset, I confess my skepticism, for although I was familiar with the skirmish more than 30 years passed, I was sure that his claims were a rouse. But as I considered it, I asked West to bring the man to me which he did. He was a striking figure with dark black hair and streaks of gray. His eyes were of the most peculiar green color, lit like glass from some ancient flame. One could not forget them. But importantly, your Honour, he struck me as sincere and honest at least as I measure a man.

As we spoke, he prevailed upon me to transcribe what he said was his testimony. I assured him he was not on trial, neither for the late events between our troops and the French, and even less so for some event that has long passed into history. But it was this point that he pressed, your Honour: his testimony was for History. He won my heart, being myself but one little bit of floatsam in the waters of action and struggle that one day will be called the ocean of history. Any man that is swept into it and lives long enough ought to be able to name his own Livinium should he reach the shore.

So, then I tasked Mr. West with a quill to take down this man's efforts to square himself with posterity and his own conscience. I promised that I would forward this to you, in confidence that you might determine its use and value. For his part, Banit as I took to call him, felt that his purpose would be fulfilled with the transmission to you and the whatever consequences or lack of them was irrelevant.

Two notes I would add. Banit made the point to me that the Spaniards had told a story of French regulars to deflect their loss to the Pawnees. Better to have lost to trained French soldiers than savages. When he told his story though, he did not burn with indignation at the Spanish lie.

Second, the child mentioned is alive, a boy, now a man. In what follows, Banit did not discuss him, but he shared more with me in other moments together.

What follows my signature is the story I heard and Mr. West wrote down.

As ever and always, I am Yr Honour's most Ont Hble Servt

Go: Washington

My name is Black Bird, Banit Hadiku, and I was named after the omens given to the families of warriors still on the plains. When warriors were too long in returning home, and families worried, the priests would point to the black birds flying overhead that would promise their return. My mother knew what my story would be when she named me.

My home was in a round earthen lodge among many others south of the river named by the white man after my band, Kitkehahkis. My home was along what would be called the Pawnee trail, it ran south to north from the trail that runs from Santa Fe in the West to Missouri. Our people fished, foraged, and hunted here and made black etched pottery we traded with parties along the trails that crossed back and forth between the Spaniards and French.

Ours was a prosperous and peaceful people, tending to ourselves and with welcome hospitality. But the Apaches to the west and south found us easy to raid and pillage. Our time wouldn't last before we were in a struggle. We took to taking horses when we could and we fought back. And even still, despite their incursions, there was trade with the Apaches and Comanches.

I learned how to steal horses and trade and the languages spoken along the trails. One time, I wrapped myself in a blanket from another tribe and I sat on a hill above their village. When a man is wrapped in a blanket it is assumed he wants to be alone, he is talking to God. But I wasn't talking to God, I was watching where they put their best horses and kill after the hunt. They left me alone, and then I went down and surprised the women. They saw me and the blanket and thought I was someone important. I rode off with the kill and the two best horses.

By the year 1718 I had experience but I also met my wife Sakuru. She and my mother warned me of the dangers of my life, but I ignored them. One day the Apaches overtook me, following me home. Sakuru had run away into the trees. I knew she could hear me when I said I would return. She heard my voice saying the “Black Bird will return!”

The Apaches took me to Santa Fe, and a man named La Serne bought me. La Serne gave me a different name, Francisco after Saint Francis and something that sounded like Pawnee for fair or white man, chahistaka. They said, Sistaca. I became Francisco Sistaca.

I was valuable and thus fortunate. I spoke languages and could translate, I knew horses, and I knew fighting. So, when Valverde told Villasur to prepare an expedition, La Serne made sure I would go. How could I not go? Sakuru was waiting. I knew she was. Francisco Sistaca would join the Spaniards to challenge the French as you do now here in the Ohio. I would even become a Catholic. Or so they thought.

We set out along the trail to Missouri to an old Pueblo camp called Cuartelejo. We followed the trail to the Pawnee trail that ran north right near my home. Nobody knew anything about Banit Hadiku; I had woven a story to cover him with Francisco Sistaca. They didn’t know I was home when we passed the dwellings. I had cut the hair on my head and let the hair on my face grow, so my people wouldn’t know me, even family. When we stopped to rest, I looked for Sakuru.

I learned she had been taken as a wife by another man, my brother. But I said nothing. I had been gone two years. I was sure they had forced her and said I was dead or gone forever. But Black Bird had returned dressed in the blanket of Francisco Sistaca. And I’d keep the blanket on for now, because Villasur wanted to go north, towards the rivers. So, we did.

It was many long days and nights that August as I wondered about Sakuru, longed for a return, for revenge. But I waited and took my orders. The Apaches followed us to where the Loup and Platte came together. Villasur was foolish and inexperienced. I knew there were no French forces, only angry Pawnee, an anger made worse because of all the Apaches trailing our expedition.

I rode out to the Pawnee. They tried as hard as they could to learn who I was and where I was from. But I wouldn’t give them a chance to see past Francisco. I knew some of them, including my brother who was there asking about what the Spaniards wanted.

“The French,” I said. “They expect French soldiers.”

They told me there were only traders and no regular French troops.

I rode back to the Spaniards. They told me to go back and negotiate and Villasur gave me a letter. I never gave my people the letter. I kept it. That was the 10th of August I believe. I looked at my brother.

“Move toward the river to the south overnight,” I said. “I’ll tell them to go that way, that you are further north. They’ll think you’re further away from them than you are. In the morning you can

ambush the Spaniards.”

Instead of going back to the Spaniards, I sent some other Pawnee with a note telling Villasur to move south toward the Jesus Maria River. Later I learned that Villasur did what I’d said to do in the letter, moving into a position where they could more easily be attacked the next morning.

The Spaniards worried when I disappeared and about whether the note was a trick. That was the only time they worried about the right things, and the only time Villasur took my advice.

When I returned to the Pawnees, my brother greeted me.

“The Black Bird has returned,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve given you victory tomorrow, now give me back my Sakuru today.”

He held up his hand and rode his horse away, just out of site, and he returned with Sakuru on another horse.

“Expect no treachery from me, brother,” he said. “But you are dead now and so is Sakuru. I will tell our mother the Spaniards took her.”

He told me I was to disappear into the East, as far as I could go. So, I did, with Sakuru. But we had not gone too far before I learned she was pregnant with my brother’s child. I could have lived with this, perhaps. We carried on until we arrived in Quebec. She died in childbirth, so I never learned if I could live with her and raise my brother’s son as my own.

I did betray Villasur’s expedition and the Spaniards, but not to the French only to the Pawnees who were incensed by the presence of Apaches. I deceived my master, but only for the love of a woman who held a promise greater than what I owed him. That the great God above deprived me of any spoils of this is no tragedy, only His will of which we are but grateful actors.

Since then, I have been in the service of France, fighting with them against the British as I did in this late battle. I sense this fire will burn hotter and brighter soon between your people.

As for me, I am happy to be a prisoner again. The Black Bird has returned to his cage, and Francisco Sistaca is free.

Heraclitus

The two of them settled in on a bench near the beach. It was a brisk evening; a crisp wind was blowing. She handed him a giggling baby swaddled in warm wrapping.

"Can you hold her for a minute?"

"Sure," he said grabbing a hold of the baby.

"I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life," she remembered.

"Whatever," he said. "How was I supposed to know?"

"You're pretty pale, but when that nurse started describing colostrum and meconium you looked like a piece of Wonder Bread," she laughed.

"Yeah," he said shaking his head. "I wasn't necessarily grossed out as much as I thought maybe I'd missed some state of being described by Heraclitus."

"You're killing me," she laughed. "And when they talked about an episiotomy you squeezed my hand like a little girl on a roller coaster."

"Jesus," he said. "Can you cut me some slack?"

"That's what an episiotomy is, dumbass!" she drilled in.

"God," he said. "This stuff is all so gross and you revel in it. I'm just glad she's here and you're ok."

"It's fine," she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "It has been fun watching you deal with all these bodily functions."

After she stopped laughing, she paused and looked at him seriously.

"Ok. Something is on your mind," he said. "What is it?"

She absorbed the site of him holding their baby. What did it mean?

"If someone wrote our story, if someone bothered, what would the story be?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe we could go on Oprah. Jerry Springer?"

She sighed and socked him in the arm.

"C'mon," she said. "If someone wrote a book about us. That's what I mean." "

"Well, I guess it would be a bildungsroman, or maybe an adventure," he said. "Although, I think maybe Stephen King might be the one. A horror novel."

He laughed to himself and kissed the baby on the head.

"You think we're a horror novel?"

"Oh c'mon sweetie," he said apologetically. "You know we're biblical. Our story is that good."

"Biblical?" she asked. "Like what story?"

"How about Adam and Eve?"

"I suppose," she played along. "Eve is the original muse, the inspiration of the whole story in the Bible and even your faith, Christianity?"

"What?" he asked, sensing her mocking Christianity to get under his skin. "I don't get where you're going with that."

"Have you ever heard of *De Mulieribus Claris* by Giovanni Boccaccio?"

"Boccaccio? He wrote *Decameron*, I've heard of him, but that book, no."

"It's his biography of famous women" she said. "He starts in the obvious place with the first woman, Eve."

As he looked at the baby's face, he saw the same eyes he saw set in the face of the woman next to him, the one about to make a point, probably a compelling one, about Eve. She did this kind of thing, treading on to what she thought to be his intellectual territory to pick a pillow fight – or sometimes a knife fight. Now he looked over at her.

"Wait, so now you've got me rethinking Adam and Eve," he said. "That's a fucking awesome way of thinking about it. Eve as muse for an adventure story, The Bible."

"She enticed him to taste of the tree of knowledge, to become aware," she said. "And Boccaccio casts them as outlaws too, breaking the rules and having to go on the run."

"Outlaws?" he wondered aloud. "Adam and Eve as Bonney and Clyde. Are you and I like outlaws? Are you a muse? I suppose our life is definitely going to be a journey, an adventure."

He handed the baby over to her.

"Yes, an adventure" she said. "And we're just at the beginning."

"No," he said. "There's all kinds of shit that happened before this, before us, and more that will happen after."

"Speaking of shit," she said. "I think our buddy here needs a diaper change."

"See that wasn't part of what I thought my story was going to be all about, dirty diapers," he said reaching around the bag he had next to him. "I figured I was Aeneas, you know striking out from home, never to return, and to found a new empire."

She stared at him as he handed over a diaper.

"No," she said, pushing it back. "Your turn."

"I didn't know they went so through so many of these," he said as he took the diaper. "I thought maybe a change in the morning, a change at night. Jesus."

"Had Virgil been a woman," she started and then stopped as she remembered something. "Saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset ante fugam suboles."

He squinted at her as he began the process of changing the baby's diaper.

"You know my Latin's not that good honey," he said. "I got a C+ remember?"

"Dido didn't have Aeneas' baby; but I *did* have yours," she said. "But she looks like me."

Trinity

They stood next to each other holding hymnals as the procession moved down the aisle of the church. She leaned toward him and whispered something in his ear.

He laughed, then scowled, and elbowed her. She covered up her smile.

The processional was the ponderous hymn, Saint Patrick's Breastplate.

*I bind unto myself the power
of the great love of cherubim;
the sweet "Well done" in judgment hour;
the service of the seraphim;
confessors' faith, apostles' word,
the patriarchs' prayers, the prophets' scrolls;
all good deeds done unto the Lord,
and purity of virgin souls.*

The crucifer passed and he turned and bowed. It was Trinity Sunday, an especially interesting day on the liturgical calendar. Somehow, she had convinced him to get high at the park beforehand. He never liked pot, but she was a bad influence.

He went along with it. Part of his brain was experiencing the liturgy like never before, like it was in technicolor, like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments.

The other part of his brain was profoundly amused by the whole thing and the fact that he was there with her. He asked her to come and she refused.

"I'm not going to some fucking Republican church service," she said.

Then she changed her mind. Then she decided they should be stoned, so they got high in the park beforehand. Now he was wondering how he would navigate her through communion without her making a scene.

"Just hold your hands out like this," he said showing her. "Like your holding water in your hands?"

"Is that where they pour the wine?" she asked.

This made him laugh and panic at the same time. He thought that would be a good innovation, pouring the wine into cupped hands. But it made him laugh, and people were going to know he was stoned.

"No," he whispered, "You put your hands out for the bread. First the bread, then you drink the wine."

The usher got to their aisle and it was a man he knew. He smiled, let her go first, then knelt and made the sign of the cross. They managed to be the first at the kneelers.

The priest arrived at her smiling face and said, "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven."

He was praying rapidly, she'd thrown off his timing, "Lord we do not come to this thy table trusting in our own righteousness but in thy manifold and great mercies...."

The priest looked into his eyes, "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven."

Now the wine arrived. He realized he'd made a terrible mistake in letting her be first. Had he taken the first position, he could have shown her through example. Now, as the cup approached, his eyes got wide.

"Oh fuck!" he thought. "She's not stupid. But what is she going to do?"

"The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."

She took the chalice, a crystal goblet filled with a cheap ruby red port. He'd argued about the wine with the altar guild. He wanted something a bit less sweet, maybe something that wasn't purchased in gallon jugs.

She took the chalice in both hands and drank it all. The whole thing in one drink. Then she handed the chalice back to the chalice bearer who looked stunned. The priest somehow noticed this and signaled one of the roving chalice bearers who had flasks of wine to refill the chalices.

One of them arrived and sloshed the ruby red port into the chalice.

"The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."

"I'm sorry," he said and took a drink and made the sign of the cross after.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," he said as they walked out of the church. "You slammed the blood of Christ!"

"How was I supposed to know you're supposed to sip it?"

"You knew," he said. "You think that Jesus was shot gunning wine at the last supper?"

"That wine reminded me of the stuff we drank in the cornfields in high school," she teased. "Do you think anybody knew we were stoned?"

"They're Episcopalians," he said. "Half of them were probably stoned too."

"On what?" she wondered. "Pain killers and high blood pressure medication? I haven't seen a crowd that old since the last time I watched a Lawrence Welk rerun."

That made him laugh.

"Oh my God," he said. "I haven't thought of Lawrence Welk in years."

He imagined the Lawrence Welk Eucharist with bubbles coming down during the elevation of the host. His ribs were hurting from laughing so hard.

They walked down the street back toward Alameda park where she convinced him to get stoned earlier.

"That one part was weird," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That thing everyone mumbled," she said.

"I take you to church," he said, "You said you wanted to see my church."

"Don't get all defensive," she said. She took out the service leaflet.

She jumped in front of him and read from it.

"We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all that is, seen and unseen."

She looked at him with that light in her eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "So, what?"

She put her arm around a tree and smiled.

"They're monotheists, right?" she asked.

“Look,” he said, “We were on our way to get donuts. I was promised donuts, not anthropology and theology.”

She hid her face behind the tree. She sang the creed from behind the tree, doing her best Ambrosian chant.

“We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.”

He laughed.

A couple of ladies walking by looked at them as she sang the creed.

“Hello, ladies,” he said. “We’re just talking about the Creed.”

She peeked back from around the tree. She was wearing a tank top. It was warm. He felt warm as he looked at her face.

“So,” she said, handing him the leaflet, “Explain to me how they can be monotheists but have God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and this Mary lady.”

He snapped it from her. He folded it and put it in his back pocket. He reached for her and held her close. She held her arms out for a minute, and then closed them around him. They looked at each other in an embrace.

“It’s not one God, it’s a clown car,” she said.

He laughed.

"You're not supposed to understand the Holy Trinity," he said. "But yes, the Godhead is a clown car." Now he was laughing harder.

Then they kissed as they leaned against a tree.

"Hey," she said, "Donuts." She traced a circle in the air.

"Fuck the donuts," he said, "I want you."

"You'll get me later," she said.

"Donuts first," he said.

They wandered into the park forgetting about the donuts. She sat down and pulled him down with her. Then they both fell back looking up at the blue sky.

"It is a beautiful day, anyway," she said.

"Anyway," he repeated mindlessly.

"Hey, when you were a kid who did you want to be?"

"Besides President of the United States?"

"No, not a job, dummy," she said. "I mean like someone in the world who existed but, you know, you wanted to be. Like I wanted to be Madonna."

"Madonna?"

"Yes, she was like a god-hero. Powerful. Sexy."

She sings softly.

"Life is a mystery
Everyone must stand alone
I hear you call my name
And it feels like . . . home"

When she got to 'home' she socked him in the ribs. They both laughed.

"Well, if we're talking pop tarts," he said. "I mean pop stars."

Now she was laughing and rolling over on him on the grass, throwing one arm and leg over him.

"If I had to pick a pop tart," he said keeping it going, "I'd have to say Bryan Ferry."

She laughed.

“Why him? He’s such a fuddy duddy like Frank Sinatra born too late.”

“That’s exactly it. He wore a coat and tie and is just sexy. Yeah. Like Sinatra I guess.”

He sings to her.

“To need a woman
You've got to know
How the strong get weak
And the rich get poor”

“An erotic redistribution of emotional wealth. I like it. More of your value exchange. And Bryan Ferry is just a pop tart version of you. Like a professor that stumbled onto the stage. Or politician”

He looked at her and said, “What about Lavert?”

She laughed. He started to sing quietly to her.

*I ain't much on Casanova
Me and Romeo ain't never been friends.
Can't you see how much I really love you?
Gonna sing it to you time and time again.*

“That’s just silly. Lavert?”

*Every man deserves a good woman
And I want you to be my wife.
Time is so much better spent with
A woman just like you in my life.*

She sat up and looked at him.

“Wait,” she said. “Are you asking me to marry you or are you just stoned silly?”

He got on his knees and looked at her, took her hands, and smiled.

Don't you know that I'll get down on my knees for you, baby?

“Where’s the ring?”

“Why ring when you can sing? I’m stoned but I’m serious. Marry me!”

“But it’s illegal, we’ll have to go to Mississippi or something.”

“It’s probably a sin too, but let’s do it any way.”

“Yes! Yes. Whatever. Let’s do it.”

They kissed each other. They had been sitting close to two other couples sitting on blankets in the park. The couples had heard his proposal and started applauding. They stopped kissing, and relaxed their embrace to acknowledge the approval with embarrassed smiles. Then they stood up and starting walking across the park toward the donut shop holding hands.

“I guess it’s going to be me and you and our little buddy,” he said. “Just the three of us.”

“Yeah,” she said. “A trinity. Father, daughter, and Holy Ghost. I am the Holy Ghost.”

“That’s just perfect, since the Trinity is held together with love,” he said. “And you really are the fucking Holy Ghost.”

Fancy Like

*Yeah, we fancy like Applebee's on a date night
Got that Bourbon Street steak with the Oreo shake
Get some whipped cream on the top too
Two straws, one check, girl, I got you
Bougie like Natty in the styrofoam
Squeak-squeakin' in the truck bed all the way home
Some Alabama-jamma, she my Dixieland delight
Ayy, that's how we do, how we do, fancy like*

Fancy Like
Walker Hayes

"Something from the chef," the waiter said in a thick French accent. "Cold asparagus soup served in a hen's egg. Please enjoy."

Another waiter set down a plate with a small terracotta flower pot with an eggshell. A small straw extended out the top of the shell which was perfectly cut.

"Wow," she said. "That's cute."

"It's an amuse-bouche," he said. "It's supposed to tease and tantalize."

"It sure is a tease," she said. "It's like a spoonful of soup." She sucked the contents of the egg all at once and it made a slurping sound.

He shook his head.

"What?" she protested. She was wearing a velvety, blue dress, with her hair up as usual but with small pearl earrings that had belonged to her grandmother, her dad's mom. She hated dressing up. But she did it for him. For the fancy place.

"Just take it easy," he said.

"Alright," she said with a sigh. "I said we wouldn't fight. Although it's fascinating to hear you speak French." She laughed. He gritted his teeth.

"Yes," he said. "French. I prefer the food to the language."

The waiter returned. They each had a drink they ordered at the bar that followed them to the table. His was a martini. Hers was a glass of sparkling rosé.

"I think we'll have the pre fixe," he said.

“Very good, sir,” the waiter said. “Have you had a chance to consider wine?”

“Yes,” he said, pointing to selection on a page in a leather-bound book.”

“The Pomerol, sir?” the waiter confirmed.

“Yes. Bold, is it?”

The waiter returned a wan smile.

“Of course, sir.”

“And a glass of white with the sweetbreads. Select something for us.”

“Absolutely, a Cave de Lugny Les Charmes,” the waiter enthused. “It is 100 percent Chardonnay from Burgundy.”

“Hmmm,” he said looking up at the elaborate tent like ceiling of the Fleur de Lis restaurant.

“Well, generally I don’t like Chardonnay, but we’ll try it.”

“If you’re not happy with it,” the waiter started.

“No, no,” he said. “I trust you.”

She giggled throughout his effort to look sophisticated. Especially when he pointed to the wine list rather than saying the name of the wine.

“Think of how impressed they’d be if you ordered in French,” she teased.

“You’re never going to let it go, are you?” he said furrowing his brow as he looked over the centerpiece into her green eyes where the light of the candle danced comfortably, as if the flame had found its true home.

And why hadn’t he realized how his failure to pass that fucking French exam in graduate school would make his efforts to impress her in one of the best French restaurants ever would allow her to gain control.

She laughed her girlish but annoying laugh.

The waiter arrived with the white wine and the first course, sweetbreads. He described the dish and her eyes got wide and she looked down at her plate.

When the waiter left, she leaned forward and whispered, “What the heck is this?”

"Sweetbreads, honey," he said. He looked at an anxious older couple next to them. He whispered back, "The thyroid. Glands. Don't worry. They're delicious."

She sat back in her chair. "What am I now a haruspica? Am I supposed to tell your fortune now?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he said as quietly as he could, glancing sideways at the old couple next to them.

"I thought it was like a sweet bread," she said more loudly. "Glands. We used to feed this stuff to the pigs."

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Can I not take you anywhere?" He glanced over at the couple and smiled.

"I'm sorry but where I come from," she began.

"Listen," he said sternly. "This is not a meeting of the 4H club. Just fucking try it, ok."

"Fine," she picked up a piece of the breaded delicacy with her fingers and bit into it. Chewed. Swallowed. Put it down. Then she gulped down the glass of wine. "That's gross. I'm not eating it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," he said.

She started looking around for the waiter. He caught her eye and came toward the table.

"No, no, no," he said with alarm.

She started speaking in French. His eyes got wider and wider. They darted back and forth between her lips and the waiter's. The waiter was laughing. She was laughing. He couldn't make out what they were saying to each other, but she was winning him over. The waiter was tickled she spoke such perfect French.

At one point she looked over and pointed at him and made a face. The waiter laughed too hard.

"Ok! That's it!" he shouted. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Oh, sir," the waiter said. "Your companion is marvelous. I believe we can prepare something you will love."

"Well, yes," he stammered. "I mean what..."

“Don’t worry honey,” she said laughing. “I’ve taken care of it. Enjoy your wine.”

He sank back into his chair and put his napkin over his face. She and the waiter kept talking enthusiastically. The old couple next to them just stopped eating, forks in hand and looked over at their table. Even through the napkin, he could feel their disapproval.

Then he heard her say.

“Donde esta los Mexicanos?”

He pulled the napkin off his face in time to see the waiter extend his arm and she took it and they started walking toward the kitchen.

“Are you going to fucking organize them or something?” he said.

She smiled as she walked off and blew him a kiss

“Maybe,” she mouthed silently.

“Fuck,” he said.

The couple kept eating but glanced over at him.

“She’s from Lebanon,” he said. “Lebanon, Kansas. You know. Kansas.” He grimaced, shrugged, and threw up his hands. They just looked away.

“Kansas,” he muttered under his breath. Then he downed the martini and the glass of white.

By the time they returned, arm in arm, he’d had an Amontillado, a Madeira, and was working on a cocktail called Tombé du Ciel.

“Hey,” he said to the waiter when he ordered the cocktail. “Is this named in honor of Charles Trenet? Wait. Don’t answer. Let’s just say it is. Bring me that.”

While he waited, he hummed the tune of the song to himself, satisfied and sure that she didn’t know anything about Charles Trenet. Or Lully. Or Tati. Or Clouseau. Clouseau. That made him laugh. He was getting drunk.

“Does your dog bite,” he asked the couple next to him in a fake French accent as they finished their final items. “I’m sorry about all this. You know. Kansas.”

Now she sat down, and seconds passed before two waiters cleared the table and set a rotisserie chicken between them accompanied by mashed potatoes, corn, and escargot.

"I got those for you," she said earnestly pointing at the snails, and walked around the table and kissed him. Then she laughed. The couple was gone.

"You know," he said. "We could have just gone to fucking Kenny Rogers."

"I love Kenny Rogers," she said. "Sing it for me."

"A warm summers evening," he said haltingly. "On a train bound for nowhere."

"C'mon," she said. "Stop being such a stick in the mud. Everyone in the back knows you. They remember you. They even like you. And they did this special for us."

The waiter returned with a cart with a bottle and a decanter. He uncorked the bottle, lit a candle, poured a bit into two glasses. He took one and handed the other one over.

"Sir," he said. "Please taste with me."

The wine tasted like it was poured from a leather bag that had been soaked in cherries.

"God, that's good," he said.

The waiter winked at him.

"It gets better."

He decanted the wine by the light of the candle.

"I don't think this is what I ordered," he said as the waiter filled their glasses.

"No, no," he said. "This is much better. It's for you and Madame. From us."

He looked over at her and smiled.

"You're fucking something else," he said. "Are we in a union shop now?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "That happens later."

By now the waiter had revealed a tall can of Budweiser.

"A glass, Madam," he asked.

"No, no," she said laughing. "Just set it down."

"Oh my God," he said.

After dinner, they walked down Sutter holding hands, laughing.

"Jesus Christ," he said as they stepped in front of a building with two parking spots. There was country music playing from speakers somewhere.

"Isn't that funny," she said. "They play this to keep the homeless away."

"But for you and I it's like moths to the flame."

Alan Jackson's Livin' on Love started playing.

"Let's dance," he said.

As they improvised a two-step, shuffling across the white lines of the lot, they whispered back and forth.

"You're getting to be a better dancer," she said.

"I've never been so embarrassed in my life," he said. "But this has been the best honeymoon ever. Even with you trying to ruin it."

"Stop. Were you more embarrassed than when your pants fell down in front of the cheerleaders at football practice?"

"Tonight, was a billion times more embarrassing. A trillion."

"Just be yourself," she said.

"What if there is no self?" he said. "The source of all suffering is that we think we have one."

"Well," she said. "If there is no self, there's nothing to get embarrassed."

"But Ananda," he whispered to her. "Perhaps embarrassment is enlightenment."

"Well, then I guess you achieved nirvana."

"I guess I have," he said. "Alan Watts might say..."

"Shhh," she whispered and put her finger on his lips. "Are you gonna kiss me or not?"

Trudy and Dave

*Trudy and Dave,
They're outta their minds.
Man, they're crazy.
But they did it for love!
-- Trudy and Dave, John Hiat*

When they got to the grocery store, he plopped the little girl in the shopping cart's seat.

"Seat belts on a shopping cart?" he said. "God. More regulation."

He smiled and looked at the woman he knew would not let the comment pass without a response.

She belted the girl in.

"There you go again," she said.

She smiled mildly and looked back at him.

"I thought you hated Ronald Reagan," he said tauntingly. "One of his best lines."

"Right. No," she said, "I mean making everything about government and regulation."

"Well," he said loosening the girl's shopping cart seatbelt. "It's just silly. We don't need seat belts on shopping carts."

She grabbed the cart away from him and pushed it toward the produce section.

"Who says we don't?" she asked to no one in particular.

They started looking at the produce. She was by a pile of apples.

"Well, that's just it," he said following her, "You want to decide. You and your friends want to decide what's right and wrong — but reject the notion that there is an objective right and wrong. You just want to make shit up."

By now she had an apple in each hand. He stood leaning next to the baby girl in the cart who seemed amused, an amusement that would turn in later years into embarrassment and then envy.

"Well, once again, you have a knack for stating it exactly right," she said, "but in a way that pisses me off."

He shook his head and brushed the little girl's hair with his hand.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Can we just shop. I mean I know you don't shop, you forage, right?"

She hadn't let go of the two apples, and she dropped her right arm, her pitching arm, to her side.

"Are we going to have a fight, this fight, right now?" she asked.

"A fight?" he taunted. "Sure. Choose your weapon."

Her right arm cocked and fired, and she threw the apple as hard as she could at his face. She connected. For a moment he was dazed. The apple sputtered and rolled to a stop at the feet of an astonished older lady with her hands on a shopping cart.

He grabbed an avocado and tossed it at her. She dodged it, and buried itself in a pile of lettuce.

He grabbed two more avocados, one in each hand and he walked around toward her. She switched the apple, tossing it from her left hand to her right.

"All meaning is just constructed," he said "It's all just a big construct built by 'the man' to keep us down. We have no choice but to revolt and impose a new order to be free. But someone has to decide what order means."

She relocated, looking for a strategic spot to answer with another volley. She found a stack of potatoes but she stuck with the apple.

The older lady pushing the cart, was wearing something like a bathrobe, held on to her cart with a death grip, her eyes and mouth wide open.

A produce clerk saw what was happening too. He mobilized, moving toward them. The baby belted loosely in the cart chuckled at the scene.

"Fuck you," she said "La liberté est le pouvoir de choisir nos propres chaînes."

She connected with another apple. This time it glanced off his forearm and landed in a scale with a clatter. It registered a perfect half-pound.

"Freedom is not limited to choosing an ending," she yelled, grabbing two potatoes. "It's changing the whole story!"

She fired them, and the both hit him in the torso.

“Ouch,” he said. “What does that even mean. Remember, I failed my French exam.”

He repositioned himself behind a display of pineapples.

“Je me souviens,” she said.

“But how, if there is no objective reference point,” he shouted, running around the looking for a better shot and cover, “No ideal, no God, what’s left but force?”

Then he fired both avocados. One hit the top of her head where she had her hair all up in a bun. The other one sailed over the top of her head.

“Hey!” the clerk yelled as they repositioned and looked for more projectiles in the stacks and piles of produce.

“You guys can’t be doing this,” he said.

“Language is force, it’s violence,” she said rearming herself with avocados, now on opposite side of the produce pile. “Your seatbelt critique is all about the assumption that we can’t change the story, make people safer with rules, better rules.”

The produce clerk wore thick glasses was between them now, right in the middle. He looked back and forth at each of them, holding up his hands like a traffic cop.

“What’s more violent than constraining choice?” he asked. He had his hand on a mango that felt ripe. “We get to choose. We have a reference point. We’re not idiots. We can make sure babies don’t die in the grocery store.”

“This is such a stupid time and place to have this argument,” she said.

“Yes, it is,” said the clerk. “It is. Just take it easy.”

“Young man, help us out,” he said, stepping out from behind a pile of fruit. “Is reality, your job, this market, just a construct of some people who made it up, or does it proceed from a long train of connection to a rational past, precedent, and tradition?” he asked. “Is it real?”

“Yes, tell us,” she said. “Are you working here because you choose to or because you have to? Do you feel fulfilled by your labor here or is this whole place, your job designed to rob you of your dignity in exchange for your survival?”

The clerk stood between them looking confused, glancing back and forth at each of them. A few ladies had pushed their shopping carts around like they were watching a drive-in movie. The baby still sat eyes wide open, amused, like she was watching a cartoon.

Shaken a bit, the clerk said, a bit desperately, "Look, I just work here!"

They each relaxed their postures, let go of the projectiles and just looked at each other as they talked.

Their voices were calm now.

"See, people accept their roles in society and the economy," he said "to fulfill both the past and the future."

"No, they work here because they have to, to survive," she said, "Because that's how it's set up. We should change that story." By now she had her hands crossed over her chest and was leaning on her left leg.

"Sure, but if you change the story, you have admitted there is a story in the first place," he said somewhat triumphantly. "You've conceded narrative is a continuity, and so you can't say it doesn't exist."

"I never said it didn't," she responded. "I said we start over."

Even the clerk knew this argument started a long time ago, long before this crazy couple walked into his produce section.

"Sure," he said "But once you've conceded narrative, you've conceded that people — you or 'the man' — don't just make shit up. You can't have a revolution without being arbitrary, without making government a consideration of convenience."

He looked at her and saw everything he had ever wanted but didn't really want to find.

She saw in his face the same determination she found in her own face when she looked in the mirror; she saw the family she never had.

They were mysteries to themselves, to each other, and to the gawkers there in the grocery store.

"Do I need to call the cops?" the clerk asked. "You guys can't be fighting like this in here."

"Yeah, you're right, sir," he said putting his arm on the young man's shoulder. "Sorry. No cops. We'll carry on."

The clerk picked up the spent ammo that had hit the floor and the couple steered the cart and their baby out of produce. The ladies clutched their cart handles and watched them go.

Later, in aisle 8, the one with cleaning supplies and cat food, they embraced and started

laughing. And they started really making out. The produce clerk watched from the end of the aisle, wide eyed, holding two melons.

They broke apart from each other. She pushed him away.

“That’s enough,” she said.

He went to the cart and kissed the baby’s forehead.

“Your momma is fussbudget,” he said. “But I love her.”

Raymond

She was translating a document. She had no problem with the language. Spanish was easy. So was French. The problem was all the loopy calligraphy. Suddenly her concentration was broken.

"Momma!" the little girl yelled. "It's all wet now."

The little girl, playing not too far away had spilled milk all over her toys.

"Oh sweetie!" she said, rushing over from her books, grabbing a dish towel.

The interruption wasn't unwelcome. She'd been absorbed in the material for some time, searching it for clues, validation, evidence.

"Let's clean up this mess," she said.

"Yes, let's clean up the mess," she repeated enthusiastically. "Sorry momma!"

As soon as they'd cleaned up, the phone rang. She answered.

"Hello," she said. "Oh yes, of course. I'll check. Thanks for letting me know."

The text she'd requested was ready. The library had gotten better lately about making reference material available remotely, via modem on the World Wide Web.

"Ok, sweetie," she said, moving some toys onto a clean blanket. "Mom has to check out the computer."

The little girl was mostly low maintenance, keeping herself busy, often talking to herself and her toys. She watched her mother move down the hall to the monitor. She always watched her movements. Sometimes she'd stare at her in a kind of awe or envy.

When she arrived, she sat down and flipped some switches. The computer annoyed her; he seemed to love it, spending hours testing its limits.

Often, she didn't know what she was doing and didn't care. She kept clicking and hitting return until she got what she was looking for. The mumming of the modem started and then made the abrupt and grating sound that meant it connected.

"You've got mail!" a male voice said. She'd heard it before. But a box opened up with blue names, a colon, and messages. She wasn't looking for this. It was his screen name, Laocoon. When he told her that was his name on AOL, she just shook her head. She didn't recognize the other name.

Achampneglass: We have Friday afternoon meetings down there... I don't usually go

Laocoon: It looked like it is a long meeting

Achampagneglass: I'm headed out. Were you still interested in hanging out?

Laocoon: Yeah. What are you gonna do now?

Achampagneglass: I don't know! I'm free as a bird! Ps, I drink way too much when I'm around you. What is that about do ya think...

Laocoon: Well I enjoy our time. I always think "we should do this more often."

Achampagneglass: Lowered inhibitions helps some part of it. We like each other — sometimes you can't get around that. Honestly even if she was ok with you being with other people, I would only see you as a very temporary thing before finding someone I wanted to be with long-term.

But I already know she wouldn't be ok with it. And I wouldn't either, if I were her.

Coffin is nailed shut.

Laocoon: I still would like to see you.

Achampagneglass: So I can berate you about your moral compass? 😊' cause I could do that all night long.

Laocoon: I like what has happened between us. And I don't want things to be weird. My intention is to ask you out next week with the expectation that you might say 'no'

Achampagneglass: The only way I'd go out with you again is if you weren't married or if she was ok with it. Neither of those things are going to happen. No dice. And I still can't believe that other people you've been with haven't been in my same moral position. It's sad to me, especially knowing her and that she was hurt by you being with others. Terrible.

Her heart was beating fast. Now she knew who this was on the other end of these messages. Everything else seemed to disappear. She kept reading those words:
"It's sad to me, especially knowing her and that she was hurt by you being with others. Terrible."

How the fuck did she let this happen? How could she have been so stupid to not see this unfolding right in front of her?

The little girl was on the floor, staring at her as she sat staring at the screen. She stared back. That lasted awhile.

She stood up from the chair and walked past the little girl to the kitchen and opened a drawer. She pulled out the biggest knife she could find. She opened the cabinets full of dishes. She stood there for a while looking at them, breathing hard.

She reached up and grabbed a bowl. She looked at the window. She could imagine the sound the bowl would make hitting the glass as it went through the window then crashing down below. But she stopped.

She looked at her little girl. Then she looked at the bowl. Then their eyes met again. She set the bowl down and went to the phone.

"Hey," she said after dialing and a voice said hello. "I need a favor. A big favor. Would you be able to baby sit for a few hours?"

The voice responded.

"Yes," she said. "God. Thank you. In fifteen. Thank you! Bye."

She called in a favor. No explanation needed. She started packing some things for the baby sitter.

The little girl was quietly setting up some blocks.

"Momma?" she said, "Am I going now?"

"Yes, honey," she said. "Nanny is coming to get you for a bit."

She kneeled down and then picked her up. She looked at her face as she held her.

"Some things are going to change, baby," she said. "We'll talk later. Right now, you'll be a good girl right, and go?"

"I guess," she said.

"I need you," she paused. "To work with me on this. We're a team. Me and you. Okay?"

She didn't wait for an answer. The baby sitter arrived and the girl was bundled off. She looked back as she walked out the door. She had a childish look of admonition.

"Don't look at me like that!" she said.

When the car was gone, she went to the windows facing a yard down below. The yard was just off the first floor near their parking spot. She pulled the curtains open.

She went to the boom box nearby and put in a CD and dialed the volume to 10.

*I go crazy when I'm without you
What have I done today
Just sat and watched the jets fly over
A car goes by*

*And the sun goes down
We talk about the town*

She unplugged the computer, monitor, and modem and walked them over to the window and pushed them out. They crashed into the grass below.

*Sue-Ellen looks so upset
This isn't the first time
And it won't be the last
Things going on behind her back
Oh they give you a heart attack*

Next, she went to the closet and grabbed his clothes on hangers and sent them out the window. Next, she emptied drawers. Then she started working on his books and papers. Then she sent toiletries and pictures out.

Two old guys were sitting on the porch of the neighboring house. Each had a can of beer in hand.

"Looks like we're getting a show with dinner tonight," one said.

"Goddam I miss those days," the other one said.

"I know, I know," the other answered back.

He pulled up and parked as papers were fluttering down.

"Oh fuck," he said. "Jesus Christ."

He jumped out of the car, as she came to the window with his Affe mit Schädel.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he yelled up at her.

"Cleaning house!" she yelled down. "Here's your fucking monkey!"

The figurine barely missed his head and crashed through the driver's side window of his car.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" he shouted.

"No," she said before closing the windows. "I just fucking found it!"

Raymond : An Epilogue

He staggered into the bar holding what she called his “monkey statue.” Well, maybe he wasn’t staggering on the outside, but on the inside, he was still rocking back and forth.

He walked toward the far end of the bar and put the statue down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet as the bar tender walked over.

“What the hell?” the bar tender asked.

“What do you think?” he said.

“All I know is you and she help me pay my bills,” he said. “Are we going to be listening to George Jones all night?”

“Well maybe,” he said. “Maybe.”

“Or is it going to be *Swinging Doors*, some Merle?”

“You know I’ve run a needle through that one.”

“I hope this break up isn’t for good,” the bar tender said.

“The words, ‘for good ’have nothing to do with this,” he said. “But yeah, I may have found the natural limit.”

He put a bunch of bills on the bar.

“You know we don’t allow animals in the bar,” the bar tender said.

“He’s not an animal,” he said. “He’s my business partner, and he needs a drink.”

The bar tender slid a pile of quarters, a basket of pull tabs, a pint of lager, and two glasses of brown liquid toward him.

“I hate whiskey,” he said. “So that better be Southern Comfort.”

“Marry me next time,” the bar tender said, “Of course it is.”

“Well, a southern man don’t need you around anyhow,” he said, walking toward the jukebox, taking a drink with him.

He flipped through the selections until he found what he needed. He drained the glass. He found the first one he wanted, *Will There Ever Be Another*, a George Jones and Melba Montgomery Duet. Flip, flip, flip.

“Oh of course,” he said to himself, as he selected, *Still Doin’ Time*. Flip, flip, flip.

"Yep, this one," he said as he plugged in Porter Waggoner's *Misery Loves Company*. Flip, flip, flip.

"Oh my God," he said. "Of course." He plugged in the Spin Doctors. "*Little Miss Can't Be Wrong*," he said as he kept flipping.

As soon as his first song started to play, he felt better.

Belinda

"Dad what's this song?" she asked.

The girl sat in the front seat stroking her doll's hair. She'd stop and then look out the window, then turn her attention back to playing with the doll.

He was lost in the Santa Barbara hills and in his thoughts; he was as lost as the little girl was bored. His mind was drifting as he took turn after turn, and then steered the car up a road further into the hills. He kept turning, aimlessly, finally finding the road he was looking for.

"It's a song by Sting," he answered. "I used to listen to this tape all the time when I first met your mom."

She leaned forward and picked up a cassette tape case from a pile.

"It's this?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the one," he answered. "I'd drive around up here and think about your mom. I'd listen to this song over and over."

He stopped the car at a pullout overlooking the Pacific. The town was below and the ribbon of highway unrolled between the ocean and hills. The ground was blackened from a wild fire the summer before. Then he turned back onto the road.

"It seems like a sad song," she said.

*Dark angels follow me, over a godless sea
Mountains of endless falling,
For all my days remaining*

"I guess it is," he said. "Sentimental, maybe. Sappy even."

"Sappy?" she looked at him.

"Yeah, you know," he struggled. "Oh, fuck I don't know: maudlin."

"Mawdlin?" she repeated.

He laughed and looked over at her.

"You're learning too many big bad words for your age," he said.

"Mawdlin," she said to her doll. "My mawdlin baby."

"Oh, here it is," he said, "Finally. The Tea Garden."

He steered the car through a metal gate and up a winding road.

"I don't think we're supposed to be up here," he said. "But fuck 'em."

"Fuck 'em," the little girl repeated and smiled.

"Jesus, honey," he said shaking his head. "You can't say that. I'm sorry. I need to watch my mouth; your mom will kill me. She might anyway."

"She would not," she said.

"Look at this honey," he said. "You can see the whole ocean from up here."

They looked out as they arrived at the top of a winding road passing an assortment of Greek looking ruins. The hill had what looked like cascading amphitheaters with little plaster channels. Here and there were concrete cisterns that could catch the water flowing down the hill.

At the top of the hill was a brick structure with three arches looking out over the ocean.

"Let's walk, honey," he said.

He helped her out of the front seat and they walked toward the arches holding hands. He sat on a curved bench next to the arches looking out over the ocean. He sat her on his lap.

"Beautiful," he said. "Isn't it?"

She looked out at the water and put her arm around his neck. Then she looked back at him worriedly.

"Momma says you are knarkacisstics," she said. "Is that something bad? Will you die from it?"

This made him laugh very hard. And he held her and then looked at her face.

"Goddammit," he said looking in her eyes. "She shouldn't be telling you shit like that."

He sighed. He turned and straddled the bench and sat her, cross-legged opposite himself. They looked at each other.

"You and momma aren't going to get back together," she said.

He leaned close and held her face.

"It's too volatile, sweetie," he said.

"Vol tile," she repeated.

He now had tears in his eyes, as many as he could have, which was only a few, with enough surface tension not to break and fall.

"Yes," he said. "You have your mama's eyes for sure." He leaned back marveling at them for a moment.

"Her eyes confess the flame her tongue denies," he said.

"What's that from?" she'd gotten used him saying things like that. She'd always be curious. "What is that?"

"It's from an opera," he said. "It's called Dido and Aeneas and it's based on a story about a man and woman who fell in love but they couldn't be together."

She was curious.

"Where were they from, daddy?" she asked.

"The girl, Dido, was from Lebanon," he said. "Just like your mom. And I imagine that, maybe the place they met looked like this." He looked down toward the Ocean.

"What happened?"

"Well, one night, Aeneas decided he had to go, to leave. So, he took his ships to sea, like those ones way down there." He pointed down to the ocean.

"Is that what you're going to do?" she asked. "Go out to sea?"

"Well, honey," he said, "Not exactly. No. But your mom and I won't live together. But I'll never leave you, never."

"What happened to the girl?" she asked.

"Oh, Dido," he said feeling a bit panicked, "Well, she founded a great empire called Carthage. And Aeneas founded Rome. And many years later a man named Hannibal who was from Carthage climbed the Alps to fight Rome."

As he explained Hannibal, he took his fingers and walked them up her left arm.

"He crossed a big mountain range called the Alps, covered with snow, with a bunch of, can you guess what?" he asked.

She looked at him and twisted her face.

“Chickens!” she said.

He laughed and picked her up in his arms.

“No, silly, “he said, tickling her, “Elephants! Elephants! And he kicked their Roman assess good.”

They walked over to the arches and stood in one of them and watched the sunset.

“There it goes,” she said. “Goodbye sun!”

“Yes, goodbye Helios,” he said. “He’ll be back and we always know where to find him.”

They got back in the car as the sky began to turn a dark red in the west and an edgy purple in the east.

Miss Jones

"I love what you've done with the place," he said as he stood in front of a large poster of Che Guevara.

She scowled at him from the table where they were eating dinner.

"Fuck you," she said. "I asked you over here to talk business, not interior design."

"Right," he said walking back to the table. "Business. That's an ironic way of putting it coming from you."

"You know what I mean?" she said.

"Speaking of business," he said as he sat down. "Did you make any money from that yard sale of all my stuff you put on the sidewalk?"

"You're lucky you didn't wind up on the sidewalk," she said.

He smiled at her. She had a stern look on her face that he could see was softening, the way the pitch dark of night inexplicably warms at the start of the day. It doesn't happen all at once, but it is inevitable.

"I am," he said. "Thanks for having me over."

"Well," she said. "I don't want to go to war with you."

"Good," he said. "We don't want another Battle of Zama."

She laughed.

"Zama?" she said. "You're no Scipio, my love. Think Cannae."

He took a drink of wine. Her eyes were locked on his but he could see the dawn just at the ends of her lips, turning up in a terse smile.

"Yes, honey," he said. "When it comes to you, I am always Varro."

Now her smile widened and spread to her eyes which were shining with satisfaction.

"I always told you," he said. "I wasn't ready for all this. I love our girl. I love you. But it doesn't fit."

"You're either throwing yourself into something or you're quitting."

"I don't know," he said. "I feel like I need time to catch up."

"What the fuck does that mean?" she said. "You don't need to catch up, you need to grow up."

"I'll go to Seattle, I'll see what I can make happen there," he started.

"And then?" she pressed. "Then what?"

"Politics," she said. "I've already got inroads there. I'll run a campaign. It makes sense."

"Poets, priests, and politicians," she said, letting her allusion hang in the air for a minute.

"Words?" he asked, raising his glass again. "No. Wine is all I have. Will your love ever be mine?"

"Shut up," she said flatly. "You're probably right. Liars make great politicians."

When he arrived, he carefully loaded the CD player for dinner and now Art Tatum's ensemble was playing Have You Met Miss Jones?

"Hey, let's talk while we dance," he said. "I love this one."

He stood up and throwing his napkin on the seat of his chair, holding his arms open.

"You are such a moron," she said. "No. I'm not going to dance. Sit down."

She kept drinking her glass of wine. He stood there smiling stupidly, but their eyes locked for a moment.

"Oh fuck! Fine."

As they waltzed around the tiny kitchen, he tried to pull her closer. She'd push him away.

"Now this is a date," he said. "What were we discussing, again?"

"Oh, I think it was about what an ass you are," she said. "And how you lied to me — and your kid."

"Yeah. Right. I lied. Yes. I did."

He managed to spin her around once.

"I am sorry," he said. "But I was just lying because you shouldn't have asked. Why mix the kid into any of that. I just thought we had a deal."

She stopped dancing and put her finger under his chin.

"A lie is a lie. You are a liar. Just tell the truth. And there was no deal."

She sat down.

"Even she knew that," she finished.

"Alone on the dance floor again," he said. "Hmmm. Maybe there's someone else around here."

He opened a closet and pulled out the mop and started dancing with it and stroking the strings like they were hair.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Jones," he said to the mop. "Oh, yes, I was in love once. But she didn't love me. She said I was a liar and an asshole. She hates me now."

He twirled the mop around.

"What's that?" he asked the mop. "Oh sure, but I'll never love anyone like that again."

As she's watched him, she started to laugh, and unable to resist the joke and him, she stood up and grabbed the mop from him.

"Excuse me, miss, Jones, was it?" she said looking at the mop. "Don't you have some homework to do?"

She dropped the mop and draped her arms on his shoulders.

"I never should have let you in here, dad."

"Well, mom. We went and had a kid together. Now, you know, here we are."

They kissed each other just as the saxophone flared up. And they keep dancing until the song finished.

She reached between his legs and grabbed him hard. He winced a bit. She tightened her grip.

"Yes, here we are," she said looking him in the eyes. "Whatever happens I'm not going to let you hurt our girl. I expect follow through. Or I hurt you."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I know. Now ease up."

She let him go, just as Check Yes or No started to play. They sat back down at the table.

"We said this way might work out better," he reminded her. "Then maybe later, you know."

“Maybe later, what?”

“We’ll get back together.”

She stared at him and he stared back. Neither of them was sure whether it was a good idea. But they knew the friction between them, the heat and the light, was too much for their girl. Just then the little girl emerged from the hallway rubbing her eyes.

“Oh sweetie,” she said getting up and going toward her. “Did we wake you up. Let’s go back to bed.”

“Let her come over here a minute,” he said. The little girl walked over to him and he set her on his lap.

“Are you staying over, daddy?” she asked.

He looked over at the woman who had the answer, and she stood there looking back at him. Their girl’s question bounced back and forth between them, silently. Her face had softened but still had steel behind it. In that moment they knew each other and themselves.

“Well, that’s up to mommy, baby,” he said glancing back at her.

She looked at him and shook her head. Then she mouthed the words, “I hate you.”

“Sure, baby, we’ll all have breakfast tomorrow,” she said lifting her off his lap. “But now we all have to go to bed.”