

Collected Stories from A Muse Bouche Review

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Introduction

This is a compilation of stories I have contributed to the [A Muse Bouche Review](#), a monthly publication of contributors' stories and poetry.

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Contemporary Stories

An Interesting Development About My Mother



This is an excerpt from the first chapter of my novel [I Am Alex](#) [Locus](#). The apartment described was mine some decades ago. It is on West 85th Street. On the Upper West Side.

The bar where we were meeting on Amsterdam Avenue, Teddy's, was typically loud with bass-heavy music and a crowd's rumble as I got close. This, our Thursday night bar-hopping, was part of the ritual that Kate and I shared with half the twenty-somethings living on the Upper West Side, and Teddy's was our favorite. Lots of cute guys were always there, and it didn't have too many Goldman-types in their expensive suits and ties loosened below the collars of their white shirts. And though it smelled like a bar, it didn't *reek* like a bar.

Right after I was inside, Kate saw me and gave me a salute with her wine glass.

"I need one of those," I said by way of my abrupt greeting, and Sally, a waitress who knew me, took my Pinot Grigio order and was gone by the time I was on the stool across the table from Kate.

"You are not going to fucking believe what just happened to me." It was loud, but not quite so loud off to the side where we were, even with the window open. Kate's my oldest and best friend and she knew my mom well back from when we were in

grammar school together in Bronxville, our wealthy Westchester suburb.

Anyway, she was like *What?*

"I went to a book reading at Barnes & Noble to kill time before meeting you."

"I'm sorry but I did have to work late." She was still in her office attire, though where she worked things were a lot less formal than at my bank.

"Anyway," I said, "So I'm at the reading by some girl about our age. She's reading from some short stories and there's this older, very classy looking woman with her. Upper West Side type. I assumed it was her mother."

"And it wasn't?"

Just then, Sally lifted my wine glass from her small tray to the table, and Kate said she was fine with what she had.

I took a long sip. A gulp, really.

"No, it wasn't her mother. She was some sort of mentor for the young one. A big deal author. The girl finishes, and this woman gets up and says some things about getting to know her and that she was the first recipient of the... 'Emily Locus Award.'"

"The what?"

"That's what I thought. The Emily Locus Award. No doubt that's what she said. It hit me like a brick, and I got up and went to the bathroom and I was, like, did she say, 'Emily Locus' and if she did could it be my mom?"

"What else did she say?"

"I was leaving, to get a handle on it, but something about this 'Emily Locus' being a writer who never did anything with it."

"Did your mother write?"

"I don't remember, frankly, though I kind of recall her doing it while we were on vacation at her folks' place upstate. But it gets weirder. Someone needed to use the bathroom and so I left and I went down the hallway and they were just finishing up on the Q&A and a few people are lined up to buy the book and get her to sign it.

"I didn't know what to do. I thought of just disappearing. But what if it *was* my mom? So, I went to that long escalator they have and watched them and just as they reached it and the younger one was going down, I told the other that I was Alex Locus. That's all I said. 'I am Alex Locus.'"

"And?"

"She almost falls down the escalator and is staring at me and waving for me to follow her. What was I to do? I started this. So, I go down and she pulls me off to the side and it's clear that this other, younger writer has no idea what the fuck is going on but the older one literally pulls me to her. She asks if I said I was Alexandra Locus and when I say I am, she whispers 'I miss your mother so much.'"

"So, *her* Emily Locus was *your* mom?"

"I think so. She asked me to go to dinner with her and the other writer, but I said I had to go and raced here to see you. What am I supposed to do?"

"Can she track you down?"

"Who knows? How many Alex Locuses can there be?"

This all exhausted me, and I took a long slug of my Pinot.

"I need to think," I said. Somehow, I finished the glass and grabbed a twenty from my bag and threw it on the tall, small round table and rushed out.

I barely made it a block before a breathless Kate tapped my shoulder and then was next to me.

"You can't just go. Let's be logical here."

We both slowed for the seven or eight blocks to my place and on the way, we agreed to go online and find out what was going on.

My place. I was lucky to get it, and it was only because there was a lawyer in my father's firm who represented the landlord, who let me have it. It was nothing great, not like you see in the movies. You walked in and you were in the living room. This once was a larger room, and there was simple molding on its high ceiling, but a wall was placed between the left and the center of

the three windows that looked out onto the street to create the bedroom.

The kitchen was tiny, and a door opened to an equally small bathroom with just a toilet, sink, and shower. It sounds depressing, but it was very near the park, and it was my home and I loved it.

Kate was its most frequent visitor, and on the Thursday night I'm talking about, when we were inside she went straight to the kitchen where she opened the fridge for a bottle of Pinot and grabbed a can of mixed nuts from a cabinet and carried them to my little coffee table before returning with a couple of glasses, which she three-quartered filled.

By then I was on the sofa searching on my laptop and she was quickly backseat driving me. I started with the B&N site for the Broadway store. There was an announcement of tonight's reading and Karen Adams. There was a photo.

"She's kind of cute," Kate said. "Check out the award."

'Emily Locus Award' went into Google, and there it was.

"Shit."

"That's her," I said, pointing to a photo on the homepage.

"That's the older woman. Nancy Penchant."

Kate leaned in as I clicked the 'About' tab.

"Impressive," she said, and it was. Her novel *Scream* was an American Book Award finalist. She had several other novels and a collection of short stories with links to literary publications.

I went back. On the front page was an explanation:

Emily told me that she had written many stories over the years that no one read. The purpose of this award is to give someone who discloses who she is in writings that might otherwise end up being stuffed away in boxes left in the attic or a basement, never to be seen by anyone else, the opportunity to come forward and have those stories shared with others and, perhaps thanks in part to this little stipend, with the world.

We both leaned back.

"Did your mom write?" Kate asked again.

"I have no idea if she did it seriously. Just stuff when we were away and she was bored. There may be some boxes in the attic in Bronxville. It was years ago."

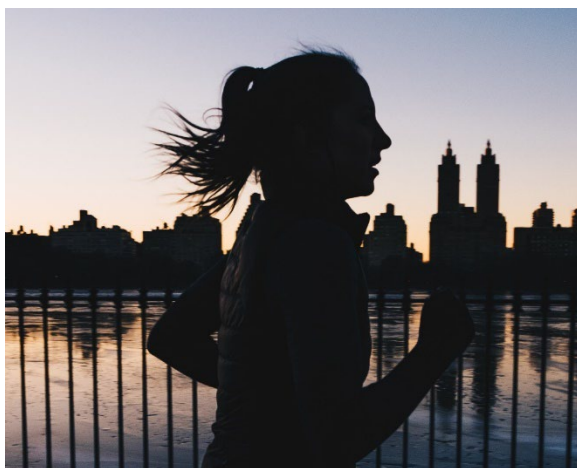
As I scrolled down the page, I found a picture of my mom. With Nancy Penchant. So that was that. In Central Park. They were standing. Nancy had an arm around my mom's waist. They were in jeans and polo shirts and wearing sneakers, their heads tilted slightly towards one another.

My mom was smiling, though she was never much of a smiler.

"Your mom may not have been who we thought she was," Kate said, and I thought she might be right. I grabbed my wine and stared at the photo.

*Image: [Sad Girl on the Windowsill](#), via
DepositPhotos.com. by "xload."*

The 2019 New York City Marathon



These next two stories are from my novel [Coming to Terms](#).

Suzanne and Kerry are a young married couple, living in the suburbs of New York. Suzanne is a very good but not elite runner. This story attempts to convey some of the emotions felt in the final stretch of this race—based in part on the author's own experience in that part of the course—and the complete physical and mental exhaustion that comes from the successful completion of what is a personal competition, one shared (in this case) with a loving partner.

When she turned onto Central Park South, Suzanne Neally was unprepared for what she saw. She was in the final mile of the 2019 New York City Marathon. The racecourse itself, the street lined by barricades, was empty except for a woman perhaps 150 yards ahead.

Crowds lined both sides of the barricades as they had for most of the course. But she hadn't realized that this long, three-block stretch was uphill. The Time-Warner Center was in the distance, defining Columbus Circle. That was where she'd turn back into the Park. If she somehow got that far. Her legs had been wobbly for miles. Her gazelle-like stride, honed over countless laps of the

track, was long gone, barely a memory. Will-power alone kept her going.

This was Suzanne's first marathon. Her goal was to qualify for the 2020 Olympic Trials, or "OT," in the event. She had no hope of actually making the team. But making the Trials would be huge. Her best half-marathon time was fast enough to allow her to enter the "Elite Women's" field for New York. This meant she and a relatively small number of women started about half-an-hour before the elite men and the first wave of other runners. Tens of thousands would be following, but her universe was very simply defined: the Elite Women. They wouldn't get mixed up on the course with men but would have their own race.

Several of Suzanne's clubmates were in her group much of the way, as were several strangers. All were hoping to run faster than the 2 hours and 45 minutes OT qualifying time. They stayed together for the first sixteen miles or so as the truly elite women disappeared far ahead. Suzanne's group started to fray as it entered Manhattan just past mile 16 and right after the 59th Street—"slow down, you move too fast" from Simon and Garfunkel having no place on this morning—Bridge leaving Queens.

Then somehow Suzanne was a half-mile from the finish. There was a big sign saying that, and her time was 2:39:24. Her brain was fried and she tried but couldn't calculate how fast she'd need to run that final stretch and get the qualifying time.

She'd seen her wife Kerry and the rest of her New York family several times during the race. Each time she passed, they hurried to the subway in a carefully choreographed and nervous pack with similar supporters to see and cheer her at the next rendezvous point.

To Suzanne, that was ancient history. It was getting warm with only a few clouds sprinkled in the early November blueness of a New York sky. That, too, hardly mattered anymore. Pushed by the crowd, she made it through Central Park South and again into the Park itself. She was desperate, telling herself it would soon be

over. That was all that kept her moving. "It'll soon be over. It'll soon be over."

Past another sign. "440 Yards to Go." 400 Meters to Go." Then a banner crossing the Park Drive: "26 Miles." 385 yards to go.

Then she saw it. The finish line with 200 yards to go. The clock read "2:42:18." She'd make it. She had the whole Park Drive to herself for the final, slightly uphill stretch and thousands cheering for her and her alone as she struggled through the finish, collapsing two steps after she crossed the line.

"2:43:10."

Two volunteers rushed to wrap her in a high-tech blanket before helping her to her feet. The woman who finished ahead of her hugged her and she waited to do the same to the teammate who followed about 20 seconds later.

After being led to her bag and given some recovery drinks and food, she went to meet her family in the elite family-reunion area. She trained so hard for this. Suddenly, Ss She was nearly bowled over as Kerry ran up to her a bit harder than she realized. The others were there too.

* * * *

After a small get together at her Mother's apartment, Suzanne faded, and Kerry drove her home. She was too tired to shower, but Kerry made her do it. When dry, she collapsed onto the bed and was asleep within minutes. It was just after three, and Kerry gave her a kiss as she covered her with a blanket.

Kerry came in a little later. She gazed at her wife. Suzanne was never more gorgeous than when she lay exhausted, completely spent. So vulnerable. Kerry went for a cup of tea and some biscuits and returned with a romance novel of the type that allowed her mind to drift away. She had a novel's worth of complications with Suzanne but now that they were settled, she used romances to live vicariously in others' worlds of missed opportunities and never-forgotten chances. Of separations and reunions.

She sat in the armchair in the room watching the up-and-down of Suzanne's breathing. As dusk hit—the clocks were turned back

just that morning—she turned a small table-lamp on as she read her book and drank her tea and ate her biscuits. And regularly gazed at Suzanne.

This was one of the moments when she told herself, “I’m happy.” Her beautiful, exhausted Suzanne, having worked so hard over months and months so that she could do something largely arbitrary. An arbitrary time for a race of an arbitrary distance about which no one cared. Except, in the end, Suzanne and thus Kerry and the rest of her family.

It was dark when Suzanne roused herself. She wasn’t expecting Kerry to be staring at her. “Hello, sleepyhead.”

After being told what time it was, she was able to get to the bathroom. Kerry heard the water starting to run in the tub. She ran to get a sports drink from the fridge and brought it to the bathroom. Suzanne was sitting on the toilet seat lid, trying to muster the energy to get her body in the tub. Kerry handed her the drink. She ran to the hall closet and brought back a box of Epsom salts, which she sprinkled in.

She had to help Suzanne get into the tub. The two women were quiet. Suzanne was the first to speak.

“I know I’ve been selfish with all the running I’ve been doing and I couldn’t have done it without you.” Kerry told her to shut up about it. “It was important to you so it was important to me.”

Suzanne again told Kerry to shut up. She continued, “Now that I’ve done a marathon, I’ve done it. I’ll go to the Olympic Trials in Atlanta in February, but I’m not training hard for them. I just wanted to see if I could make them. Just shorter stuff from now on.”

They were again quiet until Kerry helped Suzanne stand to let the shower rinse off the salted water. Suzanne made it out of the tub. They went to bed after a small dinner.

Suzanne was tired, but thanks to her nap, not too tired. More than anything, she was physically spent and her mind wandered pleasantly from vague thought to vague thought. She lay on her back and allowed Kerry to “administer” to her. They did this often

when Suzanne was spent from training. Now, with the exhaustion the result of the race itself, it felt infinitely better.

It was simple enough. It was always like this, Suzanne trying to control her body. It was a challenge Kerry enjoyed, doing her best to take control—if anyone had control—over her lover's body. Suzanne had so much going on in her body and her head after the morning's race that it didn't take long for her to surrender. Kerry, satisfied in having brought her love off, was herself lost in her own pleasure at the, well, thigh of the beautiful athlete to whom she was married.

After some clean-up in the bathroom, they were in bed early and quickly asleep. When Kerry awoke at some time during the night, she was tempted to take liberties with the body beside her but seeing as it was Monday thought better of it.

Photo: [Zac Ong on Unsplash](#). (Lightly cropped)

The image is taken from the cinder path at the eastern side of the Central Park Reservoir. The spired building is the El Dorado apartments on Central Park West between 90th and 91st Street. It is where a runner like Suzanne in the story would have done many a mile when she lived near the Park.

William Nelson's Last Chance



On the final Monday of winter 2020, William Nelson, a middle-aged man who was one of Silicon Valley's most consulted lawyers, sat on a bench across from Starbucks and Baskin-Robbins in an affluent New York suburb. He had never been to the village. The sun was out but the air was chilled, and he watched the people and the cars pass by as he sipped his Caffè Americano, studying the faces hoping to see his daughter, Suzanne Neally.

He hadn't spoken to her since his surprise visit to her Manhattan office a year-and-a-half earlier. That was when she took him to a nearby park and ignored his attempt to convince her to return to California. That was his home. It no longer was hers. Her home was now New York, with her wife. And when they sat that long ago day on a bench in Madison Square Park at lunchtime, Suzanne gave him an ultimatum. It had weighed on him nearly every day since and it had become almost unbearable: Accept me as I am and my wife as she is or stay out of my life.

And now, suddenly, the world was changing. With coronavirus, each day brought more turmoil, more shutdowns. When would he ever again be able to go to his daughter?

At home in suburban Marin County, after a visit to relatives on Sunday when all these ideas had bounded and bounded in his

head until they finally settled, he went on-line. The air was still open, and he found a red-eye flight from San Francisco. It was leaving at midnight and would get into New York at about 8:30. As far as he could tell, the flight was almost empty, and he booked a seat in first class and drove to the airport.

On the plane, he declined offers of alcohol and quickly fell asleep. Only when the plane was on its final approach to JFK did he awaken.

He had no luggage. Only a backpack with toiletries and a change of underwear. When he reached the terminal, he pulled out his phone and found a bench. The picture on the homescreen was of his family in what he once thought was a happy time.

It was about a quarter to nine. He stared at that photo before opening the messaging app. William scrolled down his contact list until he got to "Suzanne." He opened it. The last message was in July 2018. He hoped Suzanne would be working from home. He thought it likely, given what he knew about her company's business.

He typed.

{William:} Suzanne. I'm in new york to see you. Please tell me whether you will see me. And where. Father.

He stared at the draft. Would she understand? Would she respond? Had she blocked him?

He added "Love" before "Father" and hit send.

He had come this far, but there was no immediate response. He went to the sidewalk outside the near-empty American terminal. There was no taxi line so he got in one that was waiting and asked to be taken to Bronxville. When the cabbie asked how to get there, William said he didn't know. The driver found it in Waze, and they began the trip.

Passing the time, the cabbie spoke of how difficult things had been with the virus.

"We have suffered so much. Uber was bad, but this is worse. No one is traveling. This will be a good trip for me."

William was often gregarious with cabbies, but now he spoke just to keep the conversation going. The Van Wyck Expressway

was almost empty though it was Monday, and William never got out of JFK so quickly. Or so anxiously. He held his phone in his hand on his leg, glancing at it as if his will would cause the receipt of a message.

As the cab climbed the bridge to the Bronx and William was looking out over the Sound, the phone chirped. He hesitated and took a breath before lifting it. He opened the message.

{Suzanne:} You should drive to Bronxville. When will you get there?

William breathed again with the words, and he stared at them. Without looking up, he asked the cabbie when they would get to town.

"Waze says it will only be 17 minutes."

William, his hands shaking, typed and sent the information.

{Suzanne:} There are benches by the train station. Across from Starbucks. Near the movie theater. I'll be there in 25.

Suzanne had, in fact, seen her father's first message shortly after it was sent. She was working remotely, as was Kerry, and was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She rushed to the bedroom and showed it to Kerry.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Fuck." Kerry stopped drying her hair and sat on the bed. "There is no way he would come all this way to pull a stunt like the last time." She was quite familiar with that last time, when he simply showed up at Suzanne's office one day.

"Agreed. I have to see him. I told him I would."

Kerry reached up and pulled Suzanne's head down, kissing the top of her head.

"This is why I love you so much. You are so forgiving. I'd never be like you."

Suzanne pulled away. "Yes, you would. Even if you would never admit it. Which is why I love you."

Suzanne plopped on the bed when Kerry gave her room.

"He is your father, and he did believe what he did was right."

"I know that."

They were silent.

"I don't think he should come to the house until I see him," Suzanne said.

"Agreed. And don't tell anyone. Where can he meet you in town?"

"There are benches on the train platform," Suzanne said. She looked at Kerry.

With that Suzanne rose. "I'm sure."

"Should I go with you?" Kerry asked.

"This time, love, it will be just him and me."

Kerry stepped up behind Suzanne. She put her arms around her waist.

"I'm so lucky to have you."

"We are lucky to have each other," Suzanne said, as she often did. "I so hope this works. And whatever happens from here happens from here."

She turned.

"Now, let me tell him."

* * * *

William clutched the phone.

"Is everything all right, sir?" the cabbie asked.

"Couldn't be better. Could not be better. I've never been there before. I'm told there's a Starbucks."

"Beats me. It doesn't look like a big place. Someone'll tell us."

Waze directed them to the middle of town. It was, in fact, not a big place. It was five minutes before Suzanne was due, and William jumped out to ask a passerby where the Starbucks was. When he was told, he leaned into the cab.

"It's just around the corner here. I'll walk. What do I owe you?"

The cabbie rang it up, and William gave him a hundred.

"Keep it."

"Thank you very much. Have a very good day, sir."

"I hope to," he told the cabbie as he started to walk. Then, to himself, "I hope to."

As he approached Starbucks, William saw the benches. He got his usual concoction and sat on the bench to the left, in the sun. It

was a nice little town, and he knew its reputation as being not unlike Mill Valley in its affluence.

His thoughts were diversions, crowding out the only thing that mattered. Suzanne.

He wondered half-seriously whether she would recognize him. He was in gray slacks, an open-necked shirt, and a blue blazer. Suzanne used to tease him that he always looked like he just addressed the U.N. General Assembly when he was in “serious mode.” She once took a pair of scissors to a Hermès tie—it was light blue and one of his favorites—when they sat at a restaurant in San Francisco to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. Kate looked shocked at that and Eric looked amused.

If she were home and up when he was heading out to catch the train to work, Suzanne invariably tried to muss his hair, and he loved the brief contact they had on those mornings, although he always retained the façade of a gulf between father and child much as his parents had with him and his sister. Kate was the same. In retrospect, it seemed cruel.

William wondered whether she would comment that his hair was slightly longer than it had ever been. At least since law school. He wondered whether she would soon have a baby and he would be a grandfather. He wondered about a thousand things as he waited. As he had countless times when he allowed his mind to wander and be free.

He didn’t dare look at his watch. Instead, he took sips of his Caffè Americano. He didn’t know the direction from which she would come. He didn’t know what kind of car she drove or even if she would drive. His head was in constant motion when he wasn’t drinking, praying for a glimpse of her.

Would he recognize her? Then his doubts vanished. He again held his breath for a moment. He didn’t quite see the details of the face but recognized the stride with which he was so familiar. A determined yet relaxed stride as she walked directly towards him. Her dark-brown hair bouncing ever so slightly and rhythmically with each step.

Then he saw the face framed by the hair. Perhaps he saw a smile. He couldn't be sure.

She paused, but it was barely perceptible. As he stood, she rushed to him.

This is the final part of the novel [Coming to Terms](#). It was written precisely when it was set. I was not two miles from what became perhaps the US's first Coronavirus hotzone and a first draft, in which William travels to New York on Tuesday, suddenly seemed unrealistic. He had to leave Sunday or, I thought, there wouldn't be another chance. So that Sunday truly was a do-or-die moment to see if William's acceptance of his daughter would not come too late for (as we recall) the prospect of again flying from California to New York in March 2020 seemed like a pipedream.

Image: Photo by Brooke Cagle on Unsplash

Evelyn on the Sand

Late on an early July morning, a woman sat on a beach in East Hampton, New York staring at the comings-and-goings of the Atlantic's waves. She was a very pretty woman with blonde hair and a face of perfectly imperfect parts. It had rained overnight, and she'd been awakened at some time—maybe three-thirty or four; she hadn't the energy to grab her phone to find out—but had fallen back into a deep sleep. The interruption meant she wasn't well rested for this, the first day of her weeklong vacation.

She shared a house well to the north of Route 27 and thus well to the north of the one-percenters who populated the town, especially in the summer. The women she shared the cottage with had returned to the City the prior afternoon; the weather did not bode well for waiting to fight the traffic back to Manhattan.

Her sitting on the sand without a towel was peculiar. Who'd come to a beach without a towel and sit down, letting the dampness creep up to her ass? She didn't look comfortable to anyone passing but seeing how lousy the weather was there was no one passing except a couple of lovebirds who looked to be heading to Amagansett, holding their hands and weaving back and forth into the froth edge of the water as their shoulders bounced against each other.

She, the pretty one, noticed them walking away and seeing them did not help her mood. Her mood? It was dark. That's the only word for it.

Strangers envied her. Her looks. Her maroon BMW 5-Series and apartment in a brownstone in a fashionable part of the Upper East Side. A job at a prestigious bank in midtown. She was what one imagined a pretty-girl-in-the-Hamptons looked like. Probably partied late into most summer weekend mornings. The type who'd get an invite when on line at the Starbucks on Main Street for a party at the house of some Goldman Sachs or hedge fund guy, a house that overlooked the Atlantic and had plenty of booze and coke for the asking.

Type cast, she knew, and too often she went to those parties and stayed late—or left early for some passingly diverting sex before getting back to her little non-descript room in her little non-descript cottage. And more often than not, the guy she liaised with barely nodding to her, if that, when they again crossed paths at the Starbucks or beach or some other mansion with an ocean view.

That's what she was thinking as she sat in the damp sand. I'm pretty and smart and I have a crap job in a bank's back office and pay too much for my apartment and for garaging my five-year-old beamer. She had no problem getting laid—though she was smart enough to insist on protection (which she carried with her just in case)—and sitting on the beach on this particular Monday she still had a revolting memory of the quickie in the back seat of a black Escalade early the morning before, whose owner, of course, barely gave her a “thank you” when he left her after locking his SUV.

You know, she thought, maybe I could just sit here forever, counting the waves till I ran out of numbers. Then when I got up I'd be a different person, a real person. A woman who could be loved. Not like whatever she had with her fiancé, who'd broken it off the year before for reasons she never understood. That marriage, though, would have been a disaster so she was glad it never happened, disappointed as everyone was by it, her parents most of all.

It was still a bit misty and once her shorts were soaked through it didn't much matter that she was sitting on the wet sand. Her windbreaker kept her tolerably warm in the chill air and her feet had gotten used to the soft sand and her toes had actually dug themselves into it. She wondered about a lot of things as she sat there.

I know what they were because that woman was me. I say was advisedly. There I was. I noticed that there was a glimmer of blue off in the west. Yes, the sky would clear and the beach would fill up. I'd be gone by the time the families invaded, the mothers and

the au pairs with their charges crying and screaming and racing to and from the water.

What was going to happen in an hour or two hardly mattered as I returned to my obsessive staring out into the nothingness of the Atlantic. Before I got up, though, a moment of serendipity in time and place intervened. A stranger, a woman around my age who was pleasant looking appeared. Angelic, perhaps, but she was all too real. She came from nowhere on the otherwise deserted beach. She reached to touch me, and this invasion startled me. For just a moment, though. Her simple, kind touch followed by wanting to know, genuinely wanting to know why I was sitting alone in wet shorts staring out at the ocean. Her simple touch and simple question led inextricably to my finding love, life, and myself. Which is for another day.

*(Note: This is adapted from Part 2 of my novella,
[Accidently in Love.](#))*

It's *Always* a Mistake

It was a mistake. This was a mistake. It is always a mistake.

There she is, sleeping very slightly on her back. The sweat creating a patina over her with beads of it slowly creeping down the valley between her breasts. A sweet cluster of hair is plastered on her forehead, and I can hear a slight whistling through her slightly-parted lips.

God it's hot.

It happens more often than you'd think in a city of this size. New York City. Running into people you know. That she lived only five blocks from me meant it was more likely, of course, as happened an hour or so ago. I'd gone to the corner kiosk to get a copy of *The Times* and grabbed a coffee and cinnamon-raisin bagel with butter at the coffee place halfway down the block when there she was. She always made a good first impression, and she didn't fail. She somehow looked cool in a bright sundress and sandals. She always did like hats, and this morning's didn't disappoint, straw with a thin brown band and a wide brim. Not the man's fedora type. A real woman's hat that you could imagine flinging like a Frisbee across a field of sunflowers if you were in the south of France.

We weren't in the south of France. I'd never been and I doubt she had either. I mean, it might get really hot there, but not sweltering like it did here each August with the park or a movie theater or museum or bookstore being the only respite from the heat for those who lived in pre-War brownstones without air conditioning. I lived in just such a place. So, last I heard, did she.

Me: How are you?

Her: I'm good. You?

Me: Great. You look...very good?

Her: So do you.

This last bit, which is what she said, was bullshit. The former, which I did, was an understatement. It always was with her. Every time I saw her, I had a physical reaction to *seeing her*. I looked "all

right” at best. I was never at my best, of course, when I went out just to get the paper and coffee and a bagel, especially when it was this damn hot, so I had on a race t-shirt, shorts, and sandals. A Mets cap on top and I hadn’t shaved. There was always the chance, long as it was, that I’d run into her and I still hadn’t shaved.

In the right light, though, I guess I could look good.

She smiled and lifted her left hand, stretching and wiggling her fingers.

“Nothing,” she said. She’d noticed that I had checked, and I felt compelled to lift my own, bare left hand and say, “same.”

We turned towards my street.

“Have you gotten a/c yet?”

“No, course not. You?”

“Afraid not.”

“One of these days one of us is going to have to get an apartment with air conditioning.”

“What, and lose the charm of a sultry New York August?”

“Hot time, summer in the city?” she quoted as without another word we started down my block where at least the trees gave some measure of shade. We joined a flow of people heading to the park and a few runners doing the same, passing by in the street.

“You always loved a nice piece of ass,” she said as she slapped my arm when she caught me admiring a pretty young thing in boy shorts and a sports bra heading east, her blonde ponytail dancing left-to-right, right-to-left like a pendulum.

“I’ll do no more than admit that I’ve always *loved* yours.”

She laughed. This always happened. The magical moments when we’d run into each other, a flow of Bogart-and-Bacall banter. (Or Harry-and-Sally in these parts, though Bacall did live ten blocks to the south when she was a grand old dame).

It was so damn hot and it was only going to get hotter and the noise from the avenue hung over everything just like the humidity did and neither of us cared. We never did, these brief encounters.

And we didn't this morning as we got to my place. A fumble for the key for downstairs and then the keys for my one-bedroom place. Once inside, I said I hadn't asked if she had plans, where she was going.

"No plans. I just wanted to get out and...and there was always the chance that I'd run into you."

This last part was punctuated by her right hand gripping my waist and pulling me, all of me, toward her.

I wasn't lying when I said I always loved her ass. My own hands reached and grabbed it and as always happens and as night always follows day, we were in the hot, unmade bed making love and, as always it was glorious and delightful and fun in equal measures.

It was also so hot and sticky. The window was open with the screens in. The sounds from buses driving and taxis honking up and down the avenue came in and so did the voices and laughter of people going to or from the park and when we were done it was as sublime a space I ever knew.

Yes, one of these days one of us will have to get a place with a/c but seeing those beads of sweat flow slowly down to her stomach, which is rising and falling in a wonderful rhythm, and telling myself how much this is a mistake, I run a finger to touch the wetness and kiss it from my fingertip.

It rouses her, and she turns on her side to face me. My hand quickly brushes that bit of damp hair from her forehead. When it is back on my side, she asks, "Why does this keep happening? It's like fate or something."

"You admitted that you thought you might run into me if you happened to be in the neighborhood."

"I did, didn't I?"

She smiles and turns back to lay naked on her back. Her hand reaches over, awkwardly going I knew not where but I take it in mine and place it on my stomach and hold mine over it.

"I like feeling you breathe," she says.

"I like watching you breathe," I add.

"Naked?"

I ignore this. We both know how true it is.

"Seriously," she says, now turning to look straight at me. "Why do we always do this? And nothing more?"

"We tried 'more,' remember?" I remind her. "It was a disaster."

She turns a little further and is now leaning against me with her lips not far from my ear and our sweat once again mingling.

"I remember. We're in one of those relationship in which the sex is the thing that doesn't ruin everything."

She pushes away, and we're beside each other on our backs.

"You want to take a shower?" I ask. She's silent for several beats.

"I really don't have anything else to do today. Can we take it together?"

"You know how small it is."

"You're talking about the shower, right?" she says to the ceiling. I can hear her smile; she is such a bitch. "What did you think I meant?"

She's waiting. It really is a mistake. It is always a mistake.

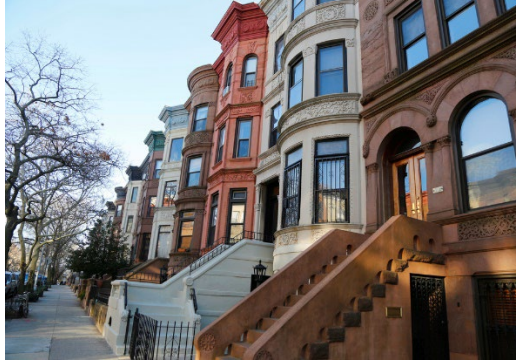
"If we get real close to one another, I think we can fit," I finally say. Then, I imagine but don't say, maybe we can go for a walk—after I shave—and see how things go from there.

I turn to face her. Her finger runs down my nose and across my lips. I kiss it.

"I know you can fit," she says, and her eyes have a bit of a twinkling and her tongue runs across her upper lip though I doubt she realizes it.

And so, not caring that the neighbors across the street can see us, we dash to my little bathroom off the kitchen, and she stands beside me, holding my hand, her arm leaning against mine, until I get the water just right for the two of us.

Another Mistake?



This is a follow-up on the prior story.

It was dark when I awoke. I had no idea what time it was, but all I heard were the passing buses on Central Park West and the occasional voices moving up or down the block. It was very cold outside, but the window was open just a bit. I once asked someone why it gets so damn warm in New York apartments. He said it is something about this underground steam system that heated most of the older brownstones in Manhattan. The knobs on the radiators didn't particularly work, so one gets used to leaving the window open a bit even when, like today, it's about 20 degrees outside. You get used to the noise, too. Of course, I don't have an air conditioner and with my windows open in the summer and pretty much all year round noise doesn't bother me.

What may have awakened me, though, was more pleasant and more visceral. Through the gap between my door and the floor came the fragrance of sauteed vegetables with "All Things Considered" on at a low volume. So that's where she was. After lying back with my eyes closed to savor that familiar aroma, I roused myself and grabbed a robe to go to her.

My kitchen is small, but a good cook can do magical things there. She is a good cook and can do many magical things. And not

just in the kitchen. When I reached her, she was leaning over the stove. Her left hand was holding the handle of a pan and her right held a wooden spoon she was using to move the various chopped vegetables around. It was a heavenly smell.

She wore one of my oversized Columbia shirts. When I stopped behind her and encircled her waist with my arms, being careful not to disrupt her cooking, she said without turning her head, "Hello, sleepyhead."

I gave her a kiss on the right side of her neck.

"You don't have to cook anything. I thought we could go out to dinner."

"Why? Then I'd have to get dressed and it's freezing out and then...I don't know about the then, but I thought it'd be nice to stay in and see."

I gave her another peck.

"That smells good," I said.

"Thanks." She paused. "You can check," she said.

"Check what?"

"You know."

I lowered my right hand to the bottom of my shirt on her body and, well, checked.

Without missing a beat or a turn of her spoon, she said, "Oh, behave."

Having confirmed that she was, in fact, wearing one of my oversized Columbia shirts and nothing else, she gave me a bump check with her ass and I stepped back.

"Look," she said as she turned at the stove. "You keep stirring, and let me get dressed."

"They say the majority of accidents happen in the kitchen," I told her, and she said, "Which is why I'm getting dressed."

I took the spoon from her, and she gave me a kiss on the cheek and headed to the bedroom.

Well, I thought, that takes care of my dinner plans. I don't generally have "dinner plans" as a rule and I didn't for that night. I'd say I was a go-with-the-flow sort of guy, but it's really a combination of inertia and a lack of imagination that leads me to

microwave my dinner more times than not. Even on most Saturdays I didn't have particular plans for going out. What can I say? I'm a homebody.

I'd run into her yet again when I was getting some staples at the Korean market on Columbus. It was then in the mid-20s and I was bundled up pretty much but she still recognized me. So we did what we usually did when we ran into each other. We returned to my place and had sex. Summer. Winter. Spring. Fall. The thing is that when we're done, we both think it's a mistake. Every time. See, the other thing is that we both always love actually doing it. It's something unique. If either of us was in a relationship that was even approaching "serious" and we met, we'd do no more than catch up like normal adult friends do. More and more, though, neither of us was in such a relationship. Hell, my last one was, what, three months ago? And the thing about that last, doomed one—that'd be Susan—was that the sex was really...okay. And she couldn't cook worth a damn.

Now, I'm not saying I'm Gordon Ramsey or anything, but I can throw together something that's at least decent. Susan couldn't.

This one, though. She was a master, or mistress, in the kitchen, as was evident right before me in the vegetables I was sautéing.

It wasn't long before she was back in the pants and shirt, now with one of my wool sweaters on top with its sleeves pulled up to free her hands and no shoes and telling me to get dressed while she finished her cooking.

She found some rice in a cupboard and some two-day-old chicken in the fridge, and by the time I was back, she had the rice cooking in a pot and the chicken mixed in with the vegetables and it was a smell to die for.

"I took the liberty of opening a Cabernet," she said when she heard me come out of the bedroom. "It's on the table in the living room. There's an extra glass." She nodded in that direction.

I poured myself one. "You need a refill?" I asked, but she said she was good. She asked me to set the table, which I'll confess to not doing very often, and somehow I found placemats,

mismatched silverware, and even a couple of cloth napkins to put on the table.

"It'll be in about ten minutes. Then we can talk," I heard. I gave her another kiss on the nape of her neck when I passed behind her to get the plates.

"No," she said. "Leave them. I put the food on them here. You can be the waiter. For now, go sit down. About five minutes now."

I sat on the sofa with my phone, but couldn't resist looking at her. She is gorgeous, no more so than when I study her and she doesn't realize it. She was in profile, her right arm gently making circles in the pan and now and then dipping a different spoon into the pot to check on the rice. She turned back to the pan and took a spoonful to taste it and I could make out a sotto voce "not half bad." It was all like some ballet. Not the herky-jerky modern but some smooth, precise, beautiful Balanchine.

Suddenly there was all manner of movement. She was grabbing the pot and pouring the rice into the colander. She had taken a little-used large white bowl from a cupboard and poured the rice into it. A quick bit of water into the empty pot and that was in the sink. She then lifted the pan and slowly poured its contents in before rinsing that out and returning it to the stove.

"Pour me more wine," she asked midmotion, and I did and topped off my own glass. I could see her very delicately stir her concoction and then dole it out onto the pair of plates.

"Come and get it," she called to me before removing the dish towel she'd tucked into her jeans as a sort of apron. I lifted the plates and gave her a kiss on the lips as I brought them out and set them on the table.

She surprised me by carrying a candle she'd found in a kitchen drawer that she'd lit and put into a candlestick and brought it to the table and then went to turn off the light.

When we were settled, she lifted her glass with the candle light's reflection flickering and I did the same and we clinked them. I took a sip, and she took more than a sip.

"This looks very good," I said as I lifted my fork.

"Thank you," she said. "Let's talk."

*The photo is from [Prospect Heights in Brooklyn](#). By
Zhukovsky via Deposit Photos.com*

Delayed Departure

She was quieter than normal as we headed to JFK. She was, after all, going to grad school at Stanford. We'd talked about it and I agreed that it was a great opportunity she'd be a fool to pass up. "You'll always regret not going," I said. Every time she asked if I was "sure," I said yes.

There were times when I almost believed that. In truth, I had mixed feelings about it. We'd been together for two years and lived together for one, when it made sense that we share the two-bedroom apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn neither of us could afford alone and both realized there was no one else we'd rather have as a roommate.

And it worked out really well as we both began our post-college lives. I had my job at an internet data-collection firm and she hers as a grunt at a publishing house, though neither of us were in the "office" more than a few times thanks to the pandemic. We had our work stations set up on the dining room table, side-by-side, and at times it seemed that that one year compressed a decade of marriage into it.

She'd always wanted to go to grad school and get an MFA. I was something of a geek and didn't know what an MFA was or what it did or what it was good for, but it was her dream and that was good enough for me.

Even in our last year at Cornell we spoke about that dream of hers, but she put it off because she wanted a year in New York and through a family friend got the job at the publishing house. That it ended up being remote was a downer for her and for her ambitions of an office in midtown or near the Flatiron Building but she still felt part of a greater whole during her interminable Zoom calls.

For those and for mine, we set up a little "studio" in my bedroom (where truth be told I rarely slept) with a very Room-Rater-worthy background of classy if largely unread books as the backdrop mixed among various impressive looking knick-knacks.

With the door closed for one, the other couldn't hear what was going on.

In all this, she had applied to several schools, and in the end it was between NYU and Stanford.

And now here we are, on the Van Wyck Expressway heading to JFK and neither of us has much to say. Just banal words.

"You'll call when you get to your room?"

"My ticket's on my phone."

"You'll let me know when you get someone to take care of my share of the rent?"

"I envy the weather you'll have."

We pull up to the American terminal, and as she pays the cabbie I grab her suitcases out of the trunk. The line's longer than I recall, but we finally get to the counter and she gets her bags checked and her seat and we start towards security.

"They won't let you through without a ticket," she reminds me, and as we get to the line for the metal detectors and she only has her backpack and bag for carry-on, she says, "It's time."

When there are only a couple of folks ahead of us we turn to each other and hug.

"I'll miss you."

"I'm not going anywhere. You'll be back for Christmas, yes?"

"We'll see. I may get too busy."

This hits me. That was never part of the plan. Or so I thought.

She's next for TSA and I give her a last hug. She says, "I'll miss you" and I echo it and almost say more but don't and then she drops her backpack and bag on the conveyor belt and removes her shoes and the push of those behind her washes me aside as I watch her go.

She looks back once and gives me a tepid wave before heading to her gate. Gate 17 for SFO.

* * * *

"You're an asshole."

I can't say how often I've told myself that, but it's rare that I do it out loud. A guy near me looks at me, rather pissedly, till I say, "I'm talking about myself. Sorry."

He seems to accept that and continues through and out of the terminal.

I'm in no state to go back just yet and instead find an empty stool at a bar/lounge off to the side with a view to the field. The planes, her plane at least, is at Gate 17, one of the last ones. She'll be boarding in half-an-hour. And gone half-an-hour later.

Gone, baby, gone.

I meant to say it. A thousand times I meant to say it, but somehow the "moment" never happened until she had to go through security. And when she was, I got nothing but the slightest wave.

So, yeah, I was—am—an asshole.

I sit with my scotch, though it's still early afternoon, and empty stools on either side and several monitors behind the bartender. The one on the left gives the status of flights on the spur where her gate and flight are.

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:00 Gate 17 On Time

It's twelve-thirty, and I check the monitor between glances at SportsCenter on the center monitor and sips of my whisky.

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:00 Gate 17 On Time

I'm catching a cab home cause I'm in no particular hurry to get back to what was until a couple of hours ago our place. What the hell.

"Bartender. I'll have another."

He shakes his head as he pours and I figure he's seen it before, though I say nothing. I feel enough of a schmuck already and don't think being told I'm not the first will be of much help.

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:30 Gate 17 Delayed

Oh, taunting me. Her, or God's, final nail.

She always wanted to go to grad school and suggested Stanford now and then. "Take advantage of the rare chance to live out

west.” Who was I to stop her? So when she asked whether she should go I told her she had to. “You’ll always regret not going,” I told her. Having said it, having actually mouthed the words, and having her respond with a “If you’re okay with it” and me insisting I was, there was no turning back.

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:50 Gate 17 Delayed

Delays won’t be a problem for her. She’ll get a cab at the airport and zip down to Palo Alto. There’s no one there for her. She’s just another New Yorker heading alone to the wilds of California.

But why hadn’t I said anything? Did she want me to? If I said something, said what I desperately wanted to say, would it have mattered? I really didn’t want to ruin the opportunity she was getting. Her dream degree at her dream place.

With me always too dependent on her. No, she never said anything particularly, but I knew I was a drag on her.

I thought the chance to tell her would arrive when she came east for Christmas. She couldn’t stay at “our” place, of course, since I have to find a new roommate—though truth be told I haven’t made much an effort on that front yet—but even if she went to her folks up outside Boston, I’m sure she’d stop in the City. Or I could head to Marblehead.

Then she dropped the I-might-get-too-busy bomb. And I let it pass. I was an asshole, saying nothing. Nada. Rien.

San Francisco SFO AA9390 XXXX Gate 17 Cancelled

I call to the bartender.

“What does it mean that flight 9390’s cancelled.”

“Who knows in this day and age? Maybe they can’t get a crew. It’s all screwed up. But that plane isn’t going anywhere. Whoever it is you’re thinking of is going to have to regroup. There’ll be plenty of folks here in just a minute while they try to figure how they’re going to book another flight. American’ll be no help.”

“Thanks.”

I take a last slug of my scotch, pay my tab, and walk to the security area.

Don’t be an asshole. Don’t be an asshole.

I tell myself this again and again. Don't be an asshole.

People are flooding out, most looking at their phones, she among them. She's nearly upon me when my phone rings. I pull it from my pocket and its ring sounds all around me. She looks up.

"I was just calling you," she says, surprised at my being there.

"Don't go," I say.

"Don't go?"

"Don't go. Please."

Running Away



This is another story that follows on a prior one. In this case, this is the other side of the prior story.

It was my dream.

So why did *it* seem that I was running away? From something? *From someone?*

I really hadn't planned it. No one had. I'd put off going to grad school. I could experience once, before I settled down into whatever I was going to settle down into, what all the fuss was about. A year in the Big City.

It'd be crazy expensive, even in some hovel in Brooklyn or Queens or wherever recent college grads congregated. Which was a reason to congregate there of course, before the big money folks started buying everything up and fixing everything up.

After a year piled into a place on the east side, my boyfriend heard about a cheap two-bedroom in a third-floor walk-up on a lesser-known street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and we signed the lease before anyone else could snatch it up.

Then Covid hit. So we were there ALL THE TIME. We were each working and having regular Zoom work calls. And we got closer and closer. Or so I thought. And when I was doing my applying to grad school, he suggested I head out west. I've never been, well, west of the Mississippi as they say other than for quick visits. "Go," he'd say. "It'd be a unique chance for something new."

So I'd applied to USC and Stanford as well as NYU and a few other schools in the east and he was super excited when I got into Stanford's and NYU's MFA programs. Then he started pushing Stanford with that unique-opportunity spiel.

Tell me to stay, I'd think. But he wouldn't. At least he didn't.

As we were in the cab to JFK when I was actually going to Palo Alto, actually *moving* to Palo Alto, I nearly cried. We didn't say much and traffic was lighter than usual and lighter than I hoped it would be. Then far too soon we were at the terminal and he and I were in the line for the American Airlines counter. I checked my bags—much of my stuff was being shipped separately and was probably in Ohio or Nebraska or somewhere at that point—and with my boarding pass on my phone we headed towards the gate.

Then though I was walking a little slower than usual, we reached the TSA check-point.

"They won't let you through without a ticket," I tell him, and he says he knows. I only have my backpack and a bag for carry-on and I'm a few people from the actual security post. We hug.

"I'll miss you," I tell him and I can't believe how much it's true. I give him an extra squeeze. *Please, please*, I'm willing him.

He doesn't seem to notice.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says as we separate, our arms still entangled. "You'll be back for Christmas, yes?"

"We'll see. I may get too busy."

I don't know why I said that. Of course I was coming home for Christmas. If not to New York, at least to be with my folks in Marblehead. He'd be able to take Acela up and I could meet him in Boston. And I don't know why I said I might not be coming home.

He looks a bit funny at that, but I'm going with the flow and I say "I'll miss you" and he says he'll miss me and then I'm through security and there's no going back even if I had a reason to. With a final look back and a slight wave, I continue with the flow, to Gate 17.

I check the board:

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:00 Gate 17 On Time

It's about 12:25 and I find a seat not too close to the gate itself and the crowd and the kids running around but where I'll hear the boarding announcement. There, I can look at the big windows towards the plane. It's a widebody of some sort and I'm in seat 35A. Window on the left side.

Why didn't he say something? Because he wanted me to go. *Wants* me to go. He kept telling me how great Stanford would be. "A unique opportunity." If I asked him, he'd probably suggest I get a tattoo that said that. Maybe in Greek or, who knows?, Chinese. *Unique Opportunity*. Fuck him.

Roommate to replace me? Oh, he'll find someone. And she'll replace me and quickly make him forget I ever existed. *He'll* be the one "too busy" to see me at Christmas.

Why didn't he say something? For that matter, why didn't I? Yeah. Why didn't I tell him I love him? Why did I do what fucking Mr. Collins told Elizabeth he thought she was doing: Playing hard to get.

And was I running away? Was I afraid? That's it. Was I afraid of committing to him? Cliché, I know, but don't they say that there's often an element of truth in every cliché?

I lift my bag and backpack and walk around a bit. Head to the ladies and fill the empty water bottle at a fountain so I'll have it on the plane. On my seat on the port side of the economy part of an American Airlines widebody going from NY's JFK to San Francisco's whatever-they-call-the-damn-airport.

I check the board:

San Francisco SFO AA9390 1:00 Gate 17 On Time

They'll be boarding in a few minutes so I keep myself close, trying to look nonchalant as I anticipate when my row's included in the boarding group so I can get towards the front. I get my phone with the boarding pass out and ready.

Ladies and gentlemen. For American flight 9390 with non-stop service to San Francisco. We'll be boarding shortly, we hope, but we're being told that there's a slight delay. Please stay near the gate as we'll try to get everyone on board as quickly as possible

when we get the okay. Right now, we're looking at a one-thirty departure and we thank you for your cooperation.

Fuck. More sitting around regretting what an asshole I've been. Why am I putting this on him? My mom always said God gave me a mouth to use and I didn't use it.

Doesn't matter now. He's halfway back to our—I mean his apartment. Not long before he'll open the window in what had been my room and he'll air it out—meaning air me out.

Get a room, I think as I look over at a couple with their arms around each other's waist. Too old to be honeymooners—though one never knows—so they'll be married for at least ten years. That could be me in ten years. But it won't be. Cause the only person whose arm I want to encircle my waist is sitting in the backseat of a cab on the BQE scrolling through his phone to see who wants to go out with him tonight. It won't be a girl. Too soon for that. Some of his cronies. *Ball-and-chain finally gone*, one—I'm pretty sure I know which one—will tell him and maybe he'll laugh. But maybe he'll say, "fuck you. Best things that ever happened to me and she's taking a cab to Palo Alto right now, getting out at her 'new life.'"

And maybe he'll get up, throw a ten on the bar and head back to what was Our Place. And maybe he'll be sad that I'm gone.

Ladies and gentlemen. For American flight 9390 with non-stop service to San Francisco. Don't get up yet. I'm afraid we have more...bad news. Right now, we're being told to expect a one-fifty departure. Again, please don't stray far from the gate since once we do get to board—if we do get to board—we hope to do that quickly so we can get you all there with as slight a delay as possible. And we regret the delay and we thank you for your cooperation. We know things haven't been great for any of us, and we really do appreciate you.

No point in standing. This is not looking good and those of us who'd clustered near the gate move away and find places to drop down, and that's what I do, though it's on the floor near a window.

Everyone's checking their phones. Making calls. Checking alternative flights.

Mr. and Mrs. too-old-to-be-honeymooners have even tired of their cuddliness and are sitting next to one another staring at their own phones and I wonder who each of them would call if they could get away with it.

Yeah, I'm getting cynical here.

Ladies and gentlemen. For what was supposed to be American flight 9390 with non-stop service to San Francisco. Yes, you heard that right. That plane isn't going anywhere anytime soon and certainly not to San Francisco. They're not telling us why, but Flight 9390 is officially cancelled for today. We're sorry. That's all we can say right now.

If you checked baggage, it's being off-loaded and you need to go to Baggage Claim area 3, downstairs in the terminal. As to your tickets, please contact AA.com for details. Again, we're very and truly sorry.

They're very and truly sorry! What am I going to do? Well, I can't stay in this madhouse. I have to get my baggage downstairs. *And then what?* I'll call him. *What choice do I have?* I'm sure he'll be okay with me staying until I can get another flight. I'll take a cab when I have my things.

People are flooding out, most looking at their phones. I pull mine out. It'll hurt to see him, knowing I'm going to have to...leave him again. It was so hard this time. But, as I said, what choice do I have?

I hit his speed dial number and it rings. Then he's standing there. He's not in Williamsburg. He's standing there. In the American terminal.

"I was just calling you," I say, equal parts surprised and thrilled at his presence.

"Don't go," he says.

"Don't go?"

"Don't go. Please."

Image: 220SelfmadeStudio at DepositPhotos.com

The 13th Floor

I was more than a little disoriented when I woke up. The last thing I remembered was turning left onto Clarence Street when I heard the sound of a horn of a truck, a very loud horn of what I imagine—I didn't have time to look—dopplering to me. Now things were bright and it took a minute to realize I was in a hospital bed. Everything was very white and to my left I could see a monitor reflecting my heartbeat. That seemed steady.

On my right, I heard a "Mr. Eustace. I'm glad you can rejoin us."

I turned to look at the speaker, and if he wasn't a lawyer he sure was dressed like one. He stood.

"Yes, Mr. Eustace," he said. "My name is William Pressler. I do odd legal jobs and one of those jobs is to apprise people like yourself of their entitlement to bequests from wills of sometimes unknown relatives."

"Nice to meet you Mr...."

"Pressler. William Pressler. Esquire." He shook my hand before reaching down and lifting a quite nice leather briefcase, which he placed delicately on my hospital table. He opened it, and as far as I could tell it contained just a single document and a large, manilla envelope, both of which he lifted.

"Yes, Mr. Eustace here we are."

He took a pair of reading glasses that was dangling around his neck and placed it on his nose, though he seemed far too young to require them. He read, and my mind glazed over shortly after the "being of sound mind" part. Mr. Pressler stopped when he finished that paragraph.

"Ah, Mr. Eustace. I see that you are not quite up to what we lawyers like to call the 'legal mumbo jumbo' so I will tell you what it says. Your Uncle Jeffrey Owens has bequeathed to you a co-op apartment at"—here he lifted the page closer—"at 1060 Fifth Avenue. That's New York, of course. It is the penthouse unit and, Mr. Eustace, I took the liberty of looking it up and it overlooks the Central Park Reservoir. It has...well it has more bedrooms and

bathrooms and kitchens than you could ever use so I'll say it has 'enough' for you."

"But," I said as I was processing this, "I have no Uncle Jeffrey Owens. If I had an uncle of any name who owned a penthouse apartment in New York, I'm pretty sure I'd know about it."

"Oh, Mr. Eustace. You don't want to know how frequently I hear that in my line of work. I've learned, though, that not only do rich people have poor relations come out of the woodwork but poor relations sometimes have an angel appear out of the blue, as it were. I should not, sir, look a gift horse in the mouth. Perhaps we should wait until the painkillers have vanished from your bloodstream to continue this. I do sometimes jump the gun."

It didn't take me long to get a hold of myself.

"No, no. I'm sure he was simply a relative no one bothered to mention. No, Mr...." "Pressler, sir."

"No, Mr. Pressler. I'll sign whatever I need to sign and take the next flight east."

"Ah, Mr. Eustace. I can fairly say that you yourself are of quite sound mind, indeed. Now let me open the envelope."

* * * *

MY RECOVERY WAS astonishing, perhaps aided by my anticipation of owning an apartment that overlooked the Central Park Reservoir. A penthouse at that. Within a week of my meeting Mr. Pressler, I was in a first-class seat heading to JFK. A limo awaited me there, and the driver told me that my "new wardrobe" was already at the apartment.

As we moved quickly along, he said, "It's not everyday that traffic actually moves on the Van Wyck, Mr. Eustace. You must live a charmed life and if you get a Lotto ticket I'd be much obliged if you share the numbers with me," and we laughed as the car turned and I could see the New York skyline.

We pulled up and the doorman opened the door for me and the man at reception smiled at me, both referring to me by name, and the concierge led me to the apartment, refusing a tip. "Just remember me at Christmas," he said as he left.

I noticed on the elevator that there was no 13th floor. “That’s something of a New York tradition,” he said.

It was a Friday and early in the evening. I was still on Chicago time. I called to the front desk and asked for restaurant recommendations. Seeing as that manilla envelope contained a note that I had a prepaid credit card with \$100,000—to be replenished whenever it fell to \$20,000, tax free—I wasn’t worried about paying a premium for a nice steak dinner on my first night in the Big Apple!

“If you’d prefer, sir, seeing as you just flew in, we can have your dinner brought to you. You can have it on your patio overlooking the Park. There’s a menu in the drawer of the table in the front foyer.”

I hurried there and called back down and asked for New York Steak—when in Rome and all—with all the fixin’s and a half bottle of a top-of-the-line Bordeaux.

Within two hours I was finished what was easily the finest meal I’d ever had, sitting on the patio looking at the lights reflected in the Reservoir like pearls all around it and the buildings across the Park, sipping cognac from a snifter, which I raised to thank my Uncle Jeffrey Owens, whoever he was.

I spent Saturday walking around the Park after selecting something from the closets—yes plural—overloaded with perfectly fitted clothes. When I came back in, the concierge told me there was a pair of orchestra seats for Hamilton in my Apartment “and should you need company we can of course accommodate you.”

While I might take the latter part of that offer up down the road, for tonight it was enough for me to go to the musical alone and offer the extra ticket to an attractive woman who might be hoping for one.

Alas, there was none so I gave the ticket to an older gentleman who I saw with a single ticket way up and honestly I quite enjoyed his company, though he vanished into the crowd as we left the theatre.

It was just as well, as I was tired. When I returned to the building, though, the doorman didn't look happy. The concierge approached me in the lobby.

"A thousand pardons, Mr. Eustace. It happens sometimes in these old buildings. The elevators are broken. I'm afraid you will have to walk though I must say that you seem quite in good enough shape to scale double the eighteen floors to the penthouse."

Oh, yes, I'd be remembering him at Christmas. I bid him good night and, feeling in an alliterative mood, I commenced my climb. The stairs were wide and marbled and the air was circulating quite well so it was not as oppressive as I feared, with subtle lighting. As floor after floor passed, I was suddenly at the...13th floor. It was, I must say, quite the surprise. Feeling adventurous, I decided to open it, "because it was there," I laughed to myself.

The knob turned easily and I was inside. It looked like a gentleman's club, at least from what I'd seen in the movies. A man in a tuxedo stepped up to me.

"Welcome, Mr. Eustace," he said with a bow. "We've been waiting for you."

He put his arm to his right side, directing me deeper into the "club." There I found groupings of burgundy leather chairs with small tables and reading material. Porters were walking around with small trays holding glasses of various concoctions and men and some women were chattering here and there.

The maître d', as the man in the tuxedo clearly was, directed me to a cluster of three chairs not far from the bar.

"Your guest has arrived," he said, and the two men already there got up.

"I did quite enjoy that show," one said, "though I've seen it hundreds of times. Always a treat with someone there for the first." He was the gentleman who sat with me at the show. He shook my hand.

"Michael Taylor. I'm the last point of contact till folks like you join us at the club."

The other man stepped closer. "I am your Uncle Jeffrey Owens. I am a pure fiction as to being related to you, of course. But we like to have our fun." We shook on it.

The other two sat, and I joined them. Just as I was comfortable, a porter brought over a tray with three cognacs, and we each took one.

"Now," my "uncle" said, "let me tell you about our club activities."

The Gilded Age



One Final Night

This is where my Gilded Age stories begin, very early on a spring morning in 1870 Ireland. From the novel [Róisín Campbell](#) (pronounced roe-SHEEN).

Róisín Campbell was born on an Irish farm early on a misty morning in March of 1852. From the moment of her first breath her fate was sealed. And now, just over eighteen years later, she quite naturally was anxious about the impending destruction of her prior life. It was her final night in Hospital, the farming town on the eastern edge of County Limerick. It was where she was born and where her family had its dairy farm. In recent years, two of her sisters and one of her brothers had been forced to cross the Irish Sea to Liverpool, where they established some sort of lives for themselves. It was the accepted reality throughout the island.

For reasons she did not fully understand, Róisín's fate would differ in one significant respect from those others. She'd be going to America. Where a cousin said she might find a job as a housemaid in one of the fancy mansions that lined the streets of New York. For a sweet, attractive Irish girl such as Róisín, with a bit of training to know how to care for the person and things of a society woman combined with the basic skills of sewing and polishing all Irish girls had, she'd find a secure place. After a time, she could send some of her slight earnings—she had little to

spend it on herself—home so a sibling or a cousin could follow her.

Aye, it was the Irish way. A life of service. Unless she misbehaved or especially was misbehaved by one of the randy sons or, God forbid, the master of the house, she'd never need worry about being fed or having a warm place to sleep, at least for several decades.

This is what Róisín and all the other Irish farmgirls knew.

For her, it had all been arranged, it had. The steamship on which she would cross the Atlantic was identified and a spot aboard had been obtained from a ships' broker in Limerick City two months back. All that remained was Róisín travelling by train to Queenstown. It was where she'd first see the ocean and would last set foot on Irish soil, for her and the hordes of others who'd embark on the City of Paris for the journey to New York.

This one last night and early in the morning Róisín and her daddy would travel the six miles to catch the first of a series of trains that would take her, and her alone, to Cork and Queenstown. For the last time she would see her mother and the siblings who were still in Ireland, at least for now.

She woke in the night. She did not know what time it was when she shot up from what had been a deep sleep. All was quiet except for the rhythmic breathing of her sleeping sister, Sophie. It was dark, too dark to see anything, and thus her hearing seemed heightened. And she understood that she would never again hear what she heard at that moment. Her sister would never be dreaming beside her. The slight Limerick wind she'd sometimes wake to in the night would never whistle through her room and across her bed.

It was that realization, the concept of never again, that finally chilled her. She long knew the day would come. It was a Wednesday in June of 1870. Her eyes were open, but it made no difference in the pitch black. Still, it gave her the illusion that she was seeing something, and the something she imagined she was seeing was burning into her memory. From the ceiling to the bedroom to the farmhouse itself. Moving from room to room,

imagining she was running her fingers along the walls and the windowsills and the tops of the old, dark furniture she'd long taken for granted. The kitchen with its pots dangling. The outhouse discreetly in the rear corner of the yard, sometimes too far and sometimes not far enough from the back door.

Soon—she could not know how soon—her daddy and her brothers Liam and Aidan would be heading into the fields with the dog to drive the cows to the barn for milking. Her mamma would start making a small breakfast while she and Sophie tried to stay in bed as long as they could. The night before, her mamma gave Róisín the letters written to her by those who'd left for England. Each told of how there was a good, or good enough, life away from the farm. That she should not be afraid though she was going far, far away.

Her mamma handed her the letter from her sister's son Jimmy, too. He worked on the New York docks. In it, Jimmy said he would see to Róisín when she arrived and that he hoped he could help her get placed at the home of an admirable Irish-American family once she was properly trained.

Hours after reading those letters, she was looking at the dark ceiling and trying to memorize every part of the house that was her home since she was born over eighteen years before, and she could not control her sobs. She refused to cry before about this. She knew that she would have to leave. She was strong till that moment. The farm could only support one boy. The rest had to leave. So Liam would stay and he would marry the eldest daughter of a nearby farm—much as Ciara married Gerry Owens—and Aidan and Sophie would follow her or their other siblings to England or America when they, too, turned eighteen.

Róisín fell back asleep, and it took several shakes from Sophie to awaken her.

"Get up, you fool. Today's no day to sleep in." Sophie was a troubling sort and far too unsettled in Róisín's mind, even for a fifteen-year-old. Still, Róisín would miss her.

Things were somber when she reached the kitchen, and her mamma insisted that Róisín do nothing but be waited upon. She

told her mamma when she saw the others finished with their milking, and Mrs. Campbell got the tea ready. Everyone was quiet as they had their eggs and toast and tea, and they were somber as they went about doing chores. For those in the house, the ticking of the clock above the mantel in the front room seemed to get louder with each minute, approaching the moment when Róisín would have to leave to be in Knocklong to catch a train that would begin her destined journey to New York.

Liam carried Róisín's satchel to the parlor. She'd packed it the night before with her mamma, and it contained the clothes they bought two weeks earlier in Limerick City supplemented by family mementos, her siblings' and Cousin Jimmy's letters, and three of her beloved books. Her daddy made a point of buying one for her when he went to the city. She was a good, bright student, and she read alone when she could in quiet times and appreciated that her parents did all they could to encourage it, hoping it would give her an advantage in her new life.

Finally, Róisín's mamma went to her room and she sat on the bed with her child, holding her hands, and Róisín put her head on her mamma's shoulder as the others had done before her, and her mamma said everything would be grand. Not long after that, Liam rushed in.

"Daddy says...you must get going," and he hurried down the stairs, followed a long minute later by the two women, who went to the drive at the front of the house as Liam put Róisín's satchel in the back of the single-horse trap her daddy had brought around. Mamma handed her a large package containing food to have until she reached Queenstown. Aidan and Sophie were joined by Ciara, holding her baby and beside her husband, as well as some of Róisín's friends. One by one they hugged and kissed her—except for little Meghan Owens, who received Róisín's lips on her forehead—until she reached her mamma, and that dear woman clutched her tightly and made her daughter promise to be a source of the family's pride.

Finally, Róisín joined her daddy in the trap for the journey south to Knocklong. There she would catch a train that would

ultimately take her through Cork City and to the port of Queenstown where she would spend the night in a hotel. It was a pleasant day, and Róisín sought to imprint it on her memory as she looked back one final time just as the trap started a turn that would forever leave the farm behind. With a wave, it was gone.

Her daddy was his usual taciturn self for the early portion of the ride, and Róisín's head leaned against his shoulder. Neighbors on farms along the way stood at their stone walls to wave their own goodbyes and shout their own encouragements as had become a ritual, and they stopped at the church, where the teacher, Mr. Sullivan, reached up to her to hug her goodbye and the parish priest, Father Crowe, handed her the book, a Bible in Gaelic, he gave each who left. After the Campbells received his blessing, they continued south, and Róisín took her last look at the town and could just see the church's steeple until it, too, was all gone.

As they neared Knocklong, her daddy spoke in a way he never had before.

"Your mamma and I will miss you, that's for sure. You understand why it must be?"

"Yes, daddy."

"From Jimmy, we hear good things about New York. And some bad things, too. You are a good girl. I know you will do good."

"I will, daddy."

"Lots of people who are not like us, though. Some very poor. They are God's creatures and do not forget that. You will also see people who think themselves superior to you. Like the English do. Remember you are a good, Irish girl."

"I will, daddy."

"And be sure to write to your mamma regular. Some of the ones in Liverpool are not so good. But you are in America. Write when you can."

"Yes, daddy."

They arrived at the station shortly after nine. Róisín's daddy handed her a bag with money. This was for the train and the boat and the hotel in Queenstown plus enough, according to Jimmy, to

tide her over until she could cash the modest bank draft her daddy got for her in Limerick City, which was safely stowed in her satchel.

Father and daughter found a place for the trap, and after Róisín bought her ticket, they went to the platform. When the train pulled in some ten minutes later, the two hugged. She put her head out the window and waved as she looked upon her daddy, waving back, for the last time.

As the train neared Cork some hours later, Róisín was amazed at how crowded and congested everything seemed. She was in Limerick City a few times. It was nothing compared to this. But she was in Cork only briefly as she switched to the train to Queenstown. She had the name of a small hotel near the quay. At the desk, she was asked what boat she was on and when it was departing. Róisín shared a room with another girl, from County Sligo. She'd arrived at the hotel the day before, and the two went to the dining room. It was full of girls and boys near Róisín's age and some older men and women and some families with wee ones. All were waiting to go to America, and Róisín was at a table with seven others.

"You think Cork is big, lasses?" It was addressed to the table by an older man. "I hear tell that 'tis tiny compared to New York." He slurped his soup, and his wife said, "And the hurrying. Our son be there, and he says they never stop. But he says it'd be a good life for us." They looked to be from a farm, and Róisín could not place their accent, and she missed some of their words.

After the meal, Róisín went out with her roommate and several others for the air of their last night. They were mostly quiet, paired arm-in-arm till dusk appeared. Róisín had never seen the water before, though some of the girls from the west had. The group strolled to the quay, where they saw the City of Paris on which they would all sail to America, and they watched the darkness cover it and the sea. They returned to the travelers' hotel, going to their rooms to sleep at home one last time

*Image; From **The Blue Feather** (1917), by the American William J. Edmondson (1868–1966). The model is Caroline Mytinger. Kindly made available by the Open Access policy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.*

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A Forced Parting

For the theme of Separation, I returned to New York in 1874. Róisín Campbell's younger sister, Sophie, has appeared out of the blue with a letter from their mother in Ireland. Sophie is pregnant. Can Róisín take care of her? This creates a complication with Róisín's close friend, Elizabeth Geherty. It's complicated, but Elizabeth is at the School for Nursing at Bellevue Hospital. Her family lost its money but Mrs. Abigail Geherty still hopes Elizabeth will recover enough to find a proper husband. And she feels guilty about having fired Róisín as a maid some years earlier (though Róisín has done well enough to now be working as a nurse).

* * * *

It was not long after Sophie Campbell's condition became evident that Abigail Geherty appeared at the clinic where Irish and other immigrants received some medical care to see Róisín. Róisín recognized her at once, though it had been many years since she sat in that lady's fine study and was told she was too pretty, and thus too tempting, to remain at the Geherty House. The once fine lady asked to speak to Róisín alone, and after a flurry of patients cleared, Róisín walked with her to the café on the avenue where she often sat with Elizabeth before Elizabeth was accepted into the Nursing School, Róisín not having the family pedigree required for a place.

When Mrs. Geherty and Róisín were seated, the older, stately woman said, "I said your beauty would be your curse." They both recalled those words from the morning when the recent Irish immigrant was fired from the Geherty house. "I fear it may instead be your sister's beauty that will be a curse for you both."

Róisín looked across the table. "We must all bear the burden or reap the benefit of members of our family. And in the end, we must still love them."

The waitress appeared just as this was said, and their orders were taken.

“Sadly, while we love them, we must sometimes choose between them.”

“Or be forced to.”

Róisín liked Mrs. Geherty enough to know that she faced a Hobson’s Choice as to Mary and the money she still had from her marriage, which predated the Geherty’s financial collapse. It was Mary’s house where she and her husband were guests, a status of which that daughter reminded them. Róisín elected not to push the point.

“I must ask you something that may be difficult to you,” her erstwhile employer said.

Róisín placed her cup onto the saucer slowly and deliberately. “You wish me to have no further contact with Elizabeth.”

Mrs. Geherty looked across. She regretted dismissing her but knew she was far better off as a nurse than in service.

“Yes. She is not in society and I am proud of what she is doing. But a continued connection with you, and hence with your sister, will end any chance for her to reenter it. While it will, of course, tarnish me and my dear husband, I promise you that I am past the point of caring. Look where it got us. Depending on the kindness of my other, cold daughter.” She had softened her voice and leaned closer to Róisín, placing her cup on her saucer, but gripping it tightly. “But Elizabeth is still young and may come to care about society. I do this for Elizabeth and no one else.”

The visit and the plea were inevitable. As was Róisín’s decision. She and Mrs. Geherty separated, leaving their coffees half drunk when Róisín made her promise, and Mrs. Geherty watched her leave.

Elizabeth perhaps understood it too. Her dearest friend was not at Immaculate Conception for mass that Sunday, and when Elizabeth went to her room above the clinic, there was no response. Róisín had insisted that Sophie accompany her to church and for a stroll afterward. Nurse Evans came down and told Elizabeth that Róisín was out for the day and would not be back till dark.

The scene was repeated the following Sunday, though this time Róisín and Sophie were in the apartment. Róisín was frozen in the rooms. She ignored Elizabeth's knocks and her plea to be allowed in and commanded Sophie's silence. Róisín knew her sister would have leaped to the door to cure the fissure that was her fault, but Róisín's glare kept her in place.

Then a second knocking and a third. After a long pause, a note slipped under the door.

I understand. I pray for you and your sister and the child.

EG

Elizabeth left, vowing not to disturb her friend again.

A Summer Afternoon in Piccadilly in 1872

This is an excerpt from [A Studio on Bleeker Street](#), after Clara Bowman and her mother go from New York to London to help Clara try to recover from the death of her best friend and that friend's brother, who Clara had long expected to marry.

As Mrs. Bowman hoped, her daughter Clara slowly emerged from the grief that had sent her spiraling down after the deaths of her best friend Ashley Davis and of Ashley's brother Thomas, the man all knew Clara would eventually marry. That was all back in New York, though, and the summer air of London and the serendipitous meeting in Regent's Park with the young artist Felicity Adams did wonders for Clara's recovery.

Then there was John Adams. Felicity's brother and the heir to a title. She had met him when he came by Felicity's flat one afternoon and again that night with Felicity and Mrs. Bowman for dinner.

For all her claims of being immune to his charms, Sir John was not unlike the Adams's mansion in Piccadilly, of which Felicity gave the two Bowman women a tour the week before. How, for some reason Clara could not articulate, that house was superior to the grand ones with which she was familiar in New York.

Now (and at a deeper—or perhaps more superficial—level), there was something about Sir John that was a cut above the gentlemen she knew at home. His Saville Row suit was slightly better tailored. His laugh the slightest degree more amusing. And even his face and his moustache were the slightest degree handsomer than even the most well-regarded young man who attended the balls and operas that Clara enjoyed before that horrible day in May when the Davises were killed. And when he pretended not to be waiting for her so he could accompany her to her hotel from Felicity's—claiming to "be passing by chance" his sister's building when Clara happened to emerge from it—a white lie he owned up to when he understood she'd not be so easily fooled—and told her as they walked south how pleased he was to

be in her company, she felt the pleasure was on balance more hers.

Meeting and then walking with Sir John just the once removed a veil over everything, one she did not realize she'd put in place with Thomas's death. She suddenly felt deep inside herself the physical loss from that death. They had never had intimate contact, nothing beyond a brotherly kiss. But that was the point. They had never had physical contact. Now they never would.

An ocean from home and a charming, titled man. Clara dared to think about him as a man and herself as a woman. So, yes, she would keep that first stroll *entre nous*, as he asked at its end.

And from that point, she began to anticipate his appearance on the street when she prepared to leave Felicity's flat over the next days. But he did not come and she walked back to her hotel alone and disappointed.

Then he did come.

It was quite a nice afternoon, and Felicity offered to accompany her guest to the Langham Hotel, but Clara declined. She did not say why. When she stepped onto the sidewalk, she was thrilled that she was alone. For there her brother stood, a smile plastered on his face.

The walk was much as it had been that first time; was it just a week earlier? Yet Clara felt the two strolls were worlds apart. She walked a hair closer to him and held his arm the least bit tighter and they did not speak quite so much. By the time they reached the Langham Hotel, she felt a desire to lie with him. She knew he was opportunistic. She knew he was shallow. She knew he was engaged.

She also knew that she would soon be gone. They'd never cross paths again. So when he suggested they share another, longer turn the next afternoon, when, he said, Felicity had an obligation with the family barrister to review and sign some papers, she agreed.

That next afternoon, Clara told her mother she wished to walk alone for a change after lunch. After a morning the Bowmans and Felicity Adams spent together, and lunch at the Langham, Mrs.

Bowman went to their suite, and Clara accompanied Felicity to the street. When they parted, Clara told her new friend she would take her own stroll to Regent's Park. Which she did.

It was where she met Sir John.

She quickly was lost to him. His modesty and kindness were so at odds with how he was with his sister. Felicity had warned Clara about him, yes, but she was perhaps jealous that Clara would spend time with him and not with her.

She lost track of the time, but it was warm and she was tired. John asked if she would like some refreshment, and when they left the park near its southern end, they were in Piccadilly, not far from the family house. They soon were in its foyer.

Jones appeared, and John directed that refreshments be brought to the drawing-room on the left, off the grand stairway. The butler brought lemonade and small sandwiches and left the couple to it. Clara was on the sofa, and John was beside her, his arm draped over the sofa's back.

"You look awfully warm." His hand reached for her neck, and she allowed his fingers to graze against her skin. Far from rejecting his touch, as she knew she should have, she embraced it with a moan. She inhaled his smell, a masculinity she had never before known, and it filled her like some strain of opium and fueled her excitement. He stood and reached out his hand and she followed him up each step of the single flight that brought the pair to his bedroom, ignoring the paintings of his notable ancestors.

His room was infinitely more masculine than his sister's. The shades were lowered but not so much that the room was dark. The window was open and the slight sounds of the street drifted in. Even the air had a musky, manly smell.

Clara let him lower her gently to his bed and lift her lower dress and petticoat. Her moans had grown to panting, and she felt the sweat on his neck as she pulled him down for their—her—first lover's kiss. Clara knew every moment what she was doing and she did it. She allowed him to make love to her. It was in some respects painful but in others glorious, until he was done. He

stood and cleaned himself as well as he could before pulling up his trousers, leaving her unfulfilled and alone on his bed.

"I shall be waiting in the drawing-room when you are decent," and Sir John was gone.

Her mother had spoken to her shortly before she came out about relations with men, and her friends had spoken in general and sometimes very specific terms about it. They shared pulp novels and at times circulated particular passages from scandalous books purloined from beneath a brother's bed, and half-laughed at what they read. While there were times Clara was tempted to explore matters with Thomas, she never did, and he never insisted, much as she knew he wanted to. Now Thomas was gone and it was never done and it never would be done. She would not let that happen again. She had known what she was doing and insisted to herself that she did not regret it.

Until the moment she heard the door of Sir John's bedroom close behind him. It took her some minutes to make herself outwardly presentable. She could do nothing about the bedsheets or the odor she felt covered her skin. She slowly went through the door and down the stairs to the drawing-room. She was able, with some difficulty, to compose herself.

He was at a window, looking out. He had a glass of lemonade in his right hand and a half-eaten sandwich in his left. He turned when he heard her.

"That was very pleasant. But I must get you back now."

Without waiting, he put what he held on to a nearby tray and passed her on his way to the door, his steps then bounding down the stairs. When he saw her at the top of the broad stairway, he called out, "Thank you, Jones. We shall be off now. I shall be back to dress for dinner in an hour or so."

He waited, and Jones appeared. When Clara's foot hit the floor of the foyer, the door was opened for them, and she followed Sir John to the street where he hailed a cab to return her, alone, to the Langham, kissing her hand before she left.

When she was deposited at the hotel, she told her mother that she felt under the weather—"Perhaps it is something I had at

lunch.” She undressed carefully and took a bath, alone. Mrs. Bowman let her be after they shared, wordlessly, some tea and sandwiches brought to their suite.

In the warmth of the summer evening in her room, Clara lay on her bed and stared at her ceiling until sleep reached her after she knew not how long. When she awoke, she could not recall what she’d dreamt but promised herself that no one would ever know what she had done.

Image: [Portrait in Black and Green](#) (1906) by John White Alexander, published courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Blizzard on the Palisades

This is an excerpt from the novel [A Studio on Bleeker Street](#). Clara Bowman is the second daughter of a wealthy family whose expected fiancé as well as her best friend died in a May 1872 train wreck. She discovered painting on a recovery trip to London some months later but was sidetracked when her studio on Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village was burnt out in an arson attack that nearly killed her. This excerpt begins shortly after she was offered the use of a mansion in Riverdale, New York to try to recover.

* * * *

As 1877 began, Clara Bowman was taking advantage of the hospitality extended to her by Mrs. Agnes Nathan, a virtual stranger who'd offered the artist her mansion in the Bronx's Riverdale section, one of many "country cottages" that lined the Hudson for some of New York's society families. There, she could paint in solitude—and perhaps recover her strength and confidence in peace.

But in mid-January, a blizzard came through and it served Clara well that the Nathans kept their pantry generously stocked and their cords of wood stacked high.

As the snow fell and mounted in the yard, she heard nothing but the dull thumping as more accumulated. In the fading light of that afternoon, the Palisades became invisible through the thick flurries and what sounds there were were muffled except for the bracing wind and sleet crashing into the windows.

The next morning, the air was very cold—she touched a window and it felt like a block of ice—and the sky was crystal clear and the sun's reflection off the snow almost blinding. Snow drifts were, Clara thought, two feet high. Maybe more. The stone wall that separated the lawn and the slight wood that led dramatically down to the Hudson was gone, concealed by snow, but the Palisades were back, capped in white with their colors enhanced by the sun burning into them, at times finding a reflective surface that shot bolts of light back across the river.

Below the cliff face, Clara saw small ice floes passing south with the tide.

The house had an octagonal wing on its southern side and large windows there opened to the west. Clara had always enjoyed the vista it offered toward New Jersey. Not sure when she'd again see a human being, she set fires in the small fireplace in the wing and in the larger parlor to which it was connected.

She was surprised that she did not find this storm-enhanced solitude lonely. Instead, she decided she mustn't squander the unique opportunity that had come her way. She stood in the wing, tightly holding a wrap around herself and looked to the west. She would do what she knew best. She would paint.

Other than eating and sleeping on the couch in the parlor (the warmest room in the house) and tending to other necessities, it was all she did. After a week, when several warm days melted off the worst of the snow and passage to the house was again possible, four completed canvases sat in the wing, now dank from the accumulated smell of her oils. Each was different but when placed end-to-end they created a panorama of the Palisades, the river, and the white-blanketed lawn of the Nathans' yard.

The canvases weren't large. Clara hadn't anticipated doing a set. She'd started in the middle and then took advantage of the quiet to go to the right and to the left. The works weren't precise, but they flowed from her right arm and through her right hand as nothing had before, as her treasured mentor John Evans suggested they would. When the fourth and final one was finished, she arranged them carefully for the first time.

She realized she'd done something significant. It was not nearly Paris-quality and many of her colleagues in Greenwich Village had done better landscapes. But as she had realized the quality of her better portraits when she first stepped back to take them in from a viewer's distance, she felt similarly as to these landscapes.

* * * *

Once the snow had largely melted away, it wasn't long before visitors and neighbors again came to see Miss Bowman, making sure she'd survived through the bitter storm. She often arranged for a carriage to take her to spend days with her parents and others in the City. But the Bowmans and the Nathans and John Evans and especially her dearest friend Emily understood she had to return to Greenwich Village if she was to again be the artist Clara Bowman who'd been forced to leave when an arsonist nearly killed her.

There was no question she would move back. She first went there those years before as a mourning eighteen-year-old to see if she could become an artist, and it was where she found she could. It was where she must return. Evans found a delightful, sunny apartment for her about a block west of her burnt-out (but since repaired) place. It was superior in many details. The light was better and its separate bedroom had a window to the back.

She ended her exile on May 1.

By mid-morning the next day, there was some order to Clara's new studio. The building was on the south side of Bleecker, and the flat was on the fourth floor to its back. The studio portion was to the left, and its windows faced south and across the yards of the brownstones along Mott and Mulberry Streets.

As a homecoming gift, her parents paid to furnish it. Her sense again overcame her pride in accepting the tables and chairs and bed and the other pieces throughout. Except for the studio itself. For that a group of former students joined with John Evans to buy her what she needed and then some.

Evans often visited the new studio on Bleecker Street. He even brought his newest batch of protégés to see the landscapes and portraits strewn about in no apparent order. He thought one of the four paintings Clara completed in the wing in Riverdale in particular was worth exhibiting at a forthcoming show nearby.

"Blizzard" was very white and given the press of other paintings at the exhibition, the best Evans could do was place it partway down a hallway from the main works on display. Clara

was not happy about this, and she nearly took it home where she saw where it was to be hung.

But Evans prevailed on her. It was important, he said. It would be seen by the people who he, and she, wanted to see it.

In the end, Clara did not think it mattered. The exhibition ended after three weeks, and Evans took “Blizzard” to his house on Washington Square for safe keeping.

* * * *

Done with Yale, Joseph Nathan—Agnes Nathan’s only child—needed to decide whether to journey off for the Grand Tour with several classmates or to begin the humdrum existence he would toil at for the next forty years. It was not much of a decision, and he was set to leave town with a group of fellow graduates for Europe. Paris. Rome. Venice. Berlin. Ending it all with two weeks in London.

With time on his hands, he stopped in at the office of Art Illustrated where his ambitious friend Buddy Castle worked. Buddy was a year older and had done his own tour in 1876. They were to go to Buddy’s club together, and Joe was anxious, pacing around the large space.

“Do you know a Clara Bowman?” Buddy asked.

Joe stopped. “Vaguely. She stayed at our house in Riverdale. Did some painting there. Why do you ask?”

Buddy handed him an advance copy of the next issue and said, “Page 12.”

There Joe saw a review of the exhibition where “Blizzard” was hung. He knew little of art and hadn’t gone to the exhibit.

“Almost at the end,” Buddy said.

The critic, a Mr. Thornton Isaacs, described the event in general terms and highlighted in glowing terms the specifics of several of the younger artists’ works. Then:

Mr. Evans has been coy, though. He slipped in (almost literally as it was halfway down a hallway that one expected would lead to a kitchen) a landscape. Since the balance of the exhibition was of portraits, the scene of winter in Riverdale, unmistakably the

place given the desolate Palisades that haunted its background, was bound to attract attention and it surely did that for this correspondent.

Inquiries of Mr. Evans established that it was, in fact, by one of his recent protégés. Clara Bowman is her name, and she displayed great promise in a series of portraits that were shown in Paris and London last year.

But it is well known that she suffered horribly in the still-unsolved fire on Bleecker Street of last year. Word was that Miss Bowman had lost her ability to paint, but I am happy to report that this is far from true. Indeed, if this simple yet overwhelming landscape is any indication, her ability has been enhanced by her “brush” with death.

The painting—its official name is the turgid “Winter on the Hudson,” although that may be an intentional slight at the famous school—combines a perspective of, say, Mr. Church with the excitement of the denizens of Paris. It is understood that Miss Bowman, with Mr. Evans, enjoyed the hospitality of many of those Frenchmen, and their influence on her at least is palpable.

While Mr. Evans remains a staunch defender of the more realistic work that has stood him and so many others in good stead, Miss Bowman’s landscape and some of her earlier portraits suggest that she is among the American artists who will prove the equal and perhaps the superior to those no longer granted admission to the old, encrusted salons of Paris, man or woman.

“I cannot say I know anything about painting, but this chap seems to think she is talented,” Joe Nathan said when he finished.

“If he likes something,” Buddy said as he grabbed his hat, “it is worth liking. She is well on her way, my friend. Well on her way.”

With that, Buddy led his friend to his club a few blocks to the north but not before Joe got a copy of the new issue from him.

After their lunch, Buddy returned to work. Joe was bored. He decided to see if he could find Clara Bowman. Show her the review. From their few dealings at the Riverdale house, he knew she was nice and attractive enough. She came from money, though Joe didn’t care about that since so did he. She became a

great friend of his mother and did a first-rate portrait of her. Maybe she'd help him pass the time until he left for Paris, maybe suggest things he might do when he got there. She was surely worth a bit of wooing.

It didn't take long to track her down in Greenwich Village. Clara was well known given the drama surrounding her but also because she was considered one of the best of the artists flooding into the neighborhood. Joe soon had the address and climbed to the fourth floor of her large building.

"405." It was to the back, and Joe knocked at its black door. She recognized her benefactress's son when she opened it.

"Mr. Nathan?"

"Indeed, Miss Bowman. I'd like you to see something," he said, pleasantly surprised that she'd remembered him. He held out *Art Illustrated*, open to page 12. She invited him in, brush in hand, and he stepped beside her at the painting.

"I just need a moment," she said.

On the easel was the most recent landscape. He recognized it as being done from his house. She pointed her brush at it. "I did not give your grand oak enough attention but I realized how wonderful it was when I painted your mother, so I hope it will forgive me for my earlier lapse."

She made several more strokes before putting her brush down and wiping her hands on a rag that was draped across the top of the painting. She reclaimed the *Art Illustrated* she'd placed to the side and began to read as Joe looked around but his glance ended up on Clara.

She was in profile to him. Fingers on her left hand tapped against her lower lip while she read. Her concentration on the story allowed him to study that profile. Before his thoughts on that front advanced too inappropriately, he looked away when she said, still eying the page, "This is extraordinary."

"It is, isn't it?"

She looked at him.

"My manners. May I get you something?"

"You can say you will accompany me to dinner this evening."

It was a spontaneous utterance. Joe had arrived with no idea of what he would do or what he was doing. Now he was asking her to join him for dinner?

It turned into enjoyable evening for them both.

* * * *

For reasons he could not explain (perhaps chose not to explain) to his classmates, Joe announced at their club that circumstances were such that he could no longer make the journey with them. He assured them that it had nothing whatsoever to do with his family's finances. He admitted that it was not a burning desire to begin work at his father's financial firm.

"It is a woman," was suggested by one but thought by all. "Confess it, you dog."

Joe's resistance was low. He meant nothing to her, he knew, but the thought that she meant something to him was enough to forgo being absent from New York for an extended period.

"All I will say is that while my prospects are slight my hopes are large and should I fail, as I almost surely will, I would like you to know that I fought the battle well and warrant being taken from the field on my shield and buried in a place of honor and not pitied but celebrated by you, my band of brothers, though I dream that when you return I shall still be in her bed!"

And with that Shakespearean invocation, his mates were satisfied, and Joseph Nathan was able to watch them sail into New York Harbor two days later with his head held high.

He was a fool in what he said but he was carried away with the thought of Miss Clara Bowman. Though it was true that it was far more likely that he would be carried off on his shield than ever lie in her bed. But he was a happy fool, and he might have detected the slightest hint of a smile when he told her during the third or fourth time he visited her studio after he showed her that article on page 12 that his plans were changed and he was compelled—he did not say it was because of his heart—to remain in New York while his friends sailed to Europe.

A Nurse



Tall. Shy. Plain. These were the words most likely to be used by someone asked to describe Miss Abigail Adams Livingston. And rich, of course. But everyone knew about that.

When our story begins, she'd only recently returned from a six-month stint in Europe, accompanied by two similarly wealthy friends from her family's circle (and a spinster chaperone). She was out in the highest level of society but for whatever reason she'd already been passed over by eligible bachelors (and their mothers) in her first season, which explains why she could visit Paris and Venice, London and Berlin. Miss Livingston was a blueblood, with lineage extending nearly to the Dutch days, and her money was secure and untainted, both factors that put the Livingstons in the uppermost tier of New York society in the decade following the end of the Civil War.

The problem, if indeed that is what it was, was a fifth word to describe our heroine. Smart. For while a secure man could tolerate a taller woman and would surely relish a richer one, few could consign himself to a cleverer one. Not that this particularly

bothered her. She had ambitions, though at her young age of nineteen she did not know how to go about realizing them.

She was set, therefore, to enroll at Vassar College in the fall of 1872. This concept, a woman's college, was a relatively recent phenomenon in America and some demeaned it as a sort of older, unmarried girls' finishing school. Here, too, Abigail did not care and of course Abigail Adams Livingston had the luxury of not caring. Had she been of a literary bent, she might have leaned towards writing poems or prose or the like. She wasn't, at least not yet.

It happened, as changes in one's life can often simply 'happen,' that Michael Melman was among the guests at a small ball held at the Livingstons' mansion on lower Madison Avenue near the Square in June. The weather season had not yet hit the horrid stage of heat and humidity and bugs that hastened the arrival of the social season and its move to Newport and Lenox and Saratoga. But that flight from the city was not long off. The Livingstons' *fête* would be one of the last.

Michael Melman was some fifteen years older than Abigail. God gave him two arms but Johnny Reb took one at a skirmish during the Vicksburg Campaign. Melman, a West Point grad, was a brevet colonel in Grant's army and an engineer by trade and temperament.

With the left arm cleanly cut off, he remained with the army and with Grant for the balance of the war, rising to the rank of brevet Brigadier General. He decided against continuing in the army after Appomattox and undertook a career as an engineer in New York City and Brooklyn. It was as such that he came to the attention of certain members of the Eldoran Club and though he was not rich, he was sufficiently credentialed to be granted membership. Which explains why he was invited to the aforementioned ball.

He was not a dancer anymore and while the floor was cleared and an octet played music for those who were, he kept off to the side, near one of the pair of tall windows that opened out to the Avenue, and it was there that Abigail found him. They'd met two

or three times at other families' houses and they had a liking for one another, though never with any hint of romance.

"What are you to do now?" he asked her as they watched the couples twirling in a complicated clockwise pattern before them.

"It's to Vassar for me, which will allow me to contemplate the more intriguing question of my future."

"Might I make a suggestion, Miss Livingston?"

This was a strangely intimate question from a man she barely knew. Politeness dictated that she respond. She looked from the couples to the engineer and nodded. He took out a small cigar from an inside pocket and with his single hand dexterously lit it with a struck match.

"As you know," he said, delaying his sentence with a pull on his cigar and a turn of his head from her to exhale the smoke, "I have had first hand knowledge of the medical practices in our country." He looked at his cigar and in some embarrassment said, "I pray this doesn't bother you."

"It is fine, General Melman. I think most of the smoke is leaving the room."

He smiled but brought the cigar to a small tray on a table and snuffed it out before returning it to his pocket.

"Thank you, Sir. But what is this to do with me?"

"I became painfully aware of the...inadequacies of the care for wounded soldiers."

"But that was in the war, General."

"Yes, it was, Miss Livingston. Yet the care on a battlefield is not much different from the care in, say, New York City and especially in its...harsher neighborhoods. It is that the conditions are marginally better and the utensils are somewhat cleaner and the time can be devoted as appropriate because there are not lines of screaming men on...Pardon me, Miss, I did not intend to become so...graphic."

"I am not a hothouse flower, General. You need not apologize."

He nodded. "Thank you for that."

"But still, what has this to do with me?"

"It is all of a piece, you see."

The music for the next dance began and the revelers' bodies were flailing about. Off somewhat away from the chaos was a small table with wooden chairs on either side. The seats were vacant, although used and half-used glasses were scattered atop the table itself. The pair took the seats, with a view through another pair of windows out to Madison Avenue, and were interrupted as a waiter filled a tray with the glasses and left them with a slight bow after they declined his offer to get something for them.

He leaned slightly, but acceptably, towards her. "It is just this. Miss Nightingale, of whom I'm sure you've heard."

"Of course."

"She had quite an experience with the British in Crimea. Since that war, she has gone throughout Europe finding disciples for the training of women as nurses."

"I believe I have heard of that. But that is Europe."

"That *is* Europe, yes. It is coming to New York. Have you not heard?"

"Heard?"

"The idea is simple and in some ways revolutionary. A training school will be opened in some months, once the temperature cools, for teaching the skills essential to providing nursing."

"Nurses? Sir, that is hardly an appropriate calling for a...lady."

"Miss Livingston, I do not for a moment wish to besmirch your status. Quite the opposite. If nursing can be viewed as a, as a *profession* for an upper class woman, it will go very far in creating acceptance of nurses in the treatment of diseases, and surely you know how deficient such treatment now is, especially in the doubts people have of ever leaving a hospital should they have the misfortune of entering one for treatment."

"I am sure this is all very good and very useful, but I am completely without any skills that could possibly be of service to anyone in such a situation."

The General leaned back in his chair and clapped his hand against his right thigh before leaning even closer to her than before.

“Miss Livingston, good God, do you think that one in ten, one in a hundred women in your situation has the least idea of possessing any skills that could be of service? Of course not. This is something new. Revolutionary in this country. I have spoken to gentlemen who are amazed at the progress being made in Europe, of taking clever, uncommitted women with a fine level of breeding and molding them into nurses who understand how to properly care for patients. They’re using the latest teachings from the Crimean War and from our own Civil War, teachings gotten harshly and painfully on the battlefield.” He waved his empty left sleeve in her direction, but she barely noticed, having kept her eyes on his.

“You cannot say we will be sent into battle.”

He shook her head. “Of course not. I’m sure there will be many who will go with the army, as they have done in every war in all of history.

“But this is to be something more methodical. Of more general application. In society and in the tenements. Women like you, your learnings will be applied to the more genteel aspects of life. Miss Livingston, think of the lives you could help save. Think of the suffering you could help ease. What I wouldn’t have given for the presence of a knowledgeable nurse, a woman to tend to me in my darkest hours.”

He reached into his jacket pocket for his cigar but paused and restored it. The music of the dance was ending and the participants were bowing to each other and clapping for the small orchestra.

He smiled. “Miss Livingston, I fear our little *tête-à-tête* will soon set tongues wagging through society, probably already speculating on the church in which our wedding will be held and who will be invited.”

The General smiled broadly and was quite satisfied with how his planned conversation with her evolved. She was a clever girl...woman indeed. He stood and held his hand out for her, though she remained seated. She took it lightly.

“Miss Livingston, I ask only that you consider my proposal.” He pulled his hand back and reached again into the inside of his jacket but this time pulled out a card. He handed it to her. She glanced at it and placed it in her purse and now she offered her hand to him, which he held briefly.

“The first class will be limited in size. Each student will live at Bellevue Hospital for the duration. I have been asked by an associate of William Osborn, one of the spirits behind the venture, to think of women who might be appropriate for the first, indeed the historic, class. You cannot make a decision now, and none is expected of you. But I ask that before you go to where you are going for the season—”

“We go to Lenox in three weeks’ time.”

“Aye, before you go to Lenox, that you contact me and I will arrange for you to meet with him and also with Helen Bowdin. She is to be in charge of the school and has been recruited from London for the task. Indeed, it is a task being taken very, very seriously, Miss Livingston, and I hope you give it due consideration.”

He lifted her hand—it was encased in a white linen glove—and kissed her knuckle and with a “Good evening, Miss Livingston,” which was returned with a “Good evening, General,” he gave her a slight bow and fought his way through the crowd so he could leave. And when he was on the sidewalk, he looked up at the ballroom. And she was there, standing at the window where they’d begun their intimate *tête-à-tête*, having decided that indeed she would contact him and she would meet with whomever she needed to meet with so she could become, she hoped, an agent of care and perhaps mercy.

Image: [*The Englishman at Moulin Rouge* \(1892\) by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec](#), courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Somewhere Else

The rain. It didn't matter anymore. Whether the rain came or the rain didn't come. It was just us. For miles around, there was nothing alive excepting grass shoots that emerged from the soil here and there. The taters if they existed at all were hardly alive.

"We used to pray for this," my Grandmama said. We were in the cottage, and the door was open. The rain rolled from the roof to the ground where each drop joined a river of water heading down towards what had been our patch.

Last time anything edible grew on our bit of land was nearly a year before. Instead, my Papa and I would walk the mile or so into the village and collect the corn that the government was distributing now that the crops failed two years in a row. It was from America, and we pulled the wagon with the bushels that were our allotment each week.

We still had some of our own small potatoes and turnips and parsnips and some salted pork we'd managed from the pigs we slaughtered before they starved.

When too many of us were gone to the city, they only let us come in once every fortnight to get the corn, but there was still enough, barely, to see us through till our next trip.

Now the rain was just something to watch as it rolled in across the pins to the west. Enough as always to make things look green. Livestock might be able to eat the grass but we couldn't and we had no livestock anymore that could anyway.

It was just me and Grandmama. She was so much older than her years, transparent skin barely covering her bones and stooped over. The others were just gone. Plots for them dug out back.

She didn't need to say it. We all waited too long. My Papa was a religious man. "The Lord will see us through," he said when a neighbor would ask when we were leaving. Neighbors never asked one another if they were leaving. It was always when. The others had pretty much gone before Christmas, before the really

cold weather. Several were kind enough to give us some of what they'd been storing up for the winter. "We can't take it with us and hope it'll see you through" they'd say, and my Papa and I would pull our wagon—the horses long since dead—down the pitted road and load it up and bring it back and shovel it into the circular silo out back.

The next day or the day after that, the neighbor and his family would pass by—they never had horses neither—with walking sticks and whatever they could carry on their backs and with platforms they could pull so the little ones could sit bundled up. They wouldn't stop, afraid they'd never start up again, as they headed to town some miles from our village where the government set up places for them to try to make it through till spring, when they could head somewhere else.

"Somewhere else," they'd always say when we asked where they were headed and soon we stopped asking. "When you coming?" and some would wave for us to join 'em, but my Papa'd laugh and say, "I have faith in the Lord." They'd shake their heads and move along to wherever their somewhere else was.

Their landlords didn't bother with their places anymore. There was nothing to be done about them. Goats and cows might move in, but there weren't any of those anymore. Maybe they could get some fools to try planting again come spring. Everyone knew only a fool would do that, after two failed crops and no seeds to sow anyway.

Papa died not much after the last of our neighbors passed. He went quietly. Down, down, down till he was skin and bones and one morning was nothing but skin and bones and whatever the Lord planned for him was done.

After Papa died, Mama said "maybe we best try to go ourselves," but it was deep cold then and she was too weak anyway and died a week or so after he did.

We—it was only my Grandmama and me by then—couldn't dig a grave for either of them till the ground thawed and we laid her beside him, out back and close to the house, both wrapped in blankets. There was no point in heading to the village. The priest

had long since gone with the others. So, when my Papa died my Grandmama—he was her boy—said some prayers with me and we did the same when Mama was gone.

They were lying out back and I thought them might haunt us but they never did, though some snow came through one day and I brushed it off their corpses which set me to crying till my Grandmama called me from the doorway and told me to come in or I'd end up like them and then where we would she be?

I was weak but young. Grandmama was weak and old, as I said.

I didn't know how to read back then but it didn't much matter since there was nothing to read excepting a bible and by the time of my eighteenth year I knew that whatever salvation it offered would not be of this earth. My Grandmama didn't read either, but she sometimes told me stories she was told when she was a girl from the bible. They were the only stories she knew, and we were desperate to have something to talk about in the long nights other than how hard things had become and how bad it was that Papa and Mama were gone.

She wouldn't surrender, though. She'd been born in this house and expected she'd die there. When we lay down, the rain was still pounding down. It was dark, but I knew more and more of the soil, the useless soil, was washing away.

In the morning, though, it was a new day. The sky was cloudless and blue. It was February but felt like spring.

"'Tis time," she said. We sat at the two chairs we still had that gave us a view outside. Her voice was very low, but I was used to that. A panic ran through me, and I reached in for her slight, bony hand.

"I know what I been sayin'," she said, looking at the mud in what was left of our yard, "but 'tis time to go."

I gripped her hand more tightly.

"You can't be going, Grandmama. You can't leave me alone."

I could make out a smile. "I reared a fool, I tink," she said, turning to look at me. "'The Lord will see us through.' Look where that got him. And your Mama. Poor girl. It ain't happening to you and it ain't happening to me."

“But this plot and the village. They’re all you’ve known.”

“It’s all I knows, aye, but that don’t mean it’s all I can know. I’ll die here and then you will die here if we stay. It’s warming up, it is. ‘Tis time. God willing, we’ll be free of this bit of hell. I been too much a fool for too long and it wouldn’t be so bad if I have to pay for it, but you shouldn’t.”

There was little to collect. Not much beyond some old, torn clothing that fit into a satchel and a walking stick that’d been around forever. It took us hours and hours and miles and miles with the sun burning down on us, but we slowly made it to the outskirts of the big town. We were seen by a farmer with a wagon who brought us in, and from there we began our journey to somewhere else.

Austen Fiction

Catherine and the Colonel



*This is an excerpt from [Becoming Catherine Bennet](#), a *Pride and Prejudice* variation/sequel.*

On the rainy afternoon when they were returning from the barrister's office in a carriage, Anne smiled at Kitty. "And what, my dear Catherine, do you think of our Colonel Fitzwilliam?" she asked.

"He is surely not a handsome man and I think he loved his wife quite well and would have loved their child even more."

"Aye. A love like that will not soon be forgotten or gotten over. I do not know if a man can ever recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman, though I never met his wife. My knowledge comes only from the Colonel himself, who spoke of her virtues when I saw him while she was still alive and especially when the child was expected."

"I'm sure you will learn love yourself."

"But what of *him*? The Colonel?" Anne asked.

"I think he is very fond of you. I think he enjoys being with you quite much, now that he needn't worry that people will think him an adventurer after your money."

“‘Adventurer’?” Anne laughed. “I’ve never known anyone less a corsair than him. Do not prove yourself such a fool, Catherine. This cousin is no more suited for me than the other was.”

“Mr. Darcy?”

“The very one,” Anne replied with a smile. “You know what I mean and stop avoiding it. Do you love Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“‘Love’? Me? Now who is the fool?”

Anne would not respond, and Kitty could not abide the silence.

“He is civil enough, I suppose. With his small fortune.”

“Do you need anything more than a ‘small fortune’?”

Kitty laughed. “I am not my sister Lydia. Though she may have to survive on something less than a fortune of any size.”

“She has her brothers-in-law.”

“Who are not quite what they were in the way of money. And, of course, there’s Mr. Collins swooping in when my father dies.” It was the type of thing she would never dare say in the presence of her mother or her younger sister but neither was with them and her favourite woman was.

“You have again, my dear Catherine, avoided my direct question. Do you or could you love the Colonel.”

“You quite astonish me,” Kitty said truthfully. The thought had never occurred to her before. But its appearance had a profound effect on her. Her countenance changed markedly.

“Do you think it is something I *should* consider?”

“I think it something you *must* consider. I believe he is in danger of becoming very much in love with you.”

This was absurd to Kitty. She’d not had a hint of any such nonsense.

She said, to correct the illusions Anne obviously had, “Do you not see how he hovers around *you*? How often he comes to visit me but mostly sits with *you*? Talks with *you*?” This was ignored, and Anne fought to keep her expression blank with a hint of disapproval.

“Do not forget, Catherine, that he is a soldier, trained to use a bit of stealth to achieve his objective.”

“Oh, you are just too absurd.”

In this new silence, Kitty was without the words to fill it. Could she love Richard Fitzwilliam? Another soldier like Wickham, that dangerous obsession she'd had as a girl.

Alas, they were soon back at Russell Square and Taylor had the carriage door open, holding an umbrella that gave both women cover as they hurried up the steps to the foyer and no more was *said* about the widower.

*[Portrait of Mary Sicard David](#) (1813) by the
American artist Thomas Sully (1783–1872). Courtesy
of the Cleveland Museum of Art.*

Mr. Darcy's Regret



“There was a girl, as I daresay there often is,” he told his cousin as they sat in the library that had been the late Sir William’s. The house was now their aunt’s. It sat majestically in the Kent countryside.

The two had just finished dinner at the aunt’s table and, most particularly, with the aunt’s daughter. The aunt had a name, and it was Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter was Anne. The two gentlemen had arrived from London some hours earlier, and the talk immediately after they were alone and settled into their fat leather armchairs, each with a fine claret, turned into what was clearly the wish of their aunt. That Darcy marry Anne de Bourgh.

“Tell me about this girl,” the Colonel said. Darcy rose and filled his glass, lifting the decanter to his friend, who declined. He came back and resumed his seat, taking a long draught of the wine before lowering his glass and holding its stem between his fingers above his lap.

“My friend Charles Bingley—who you’ve met in town—was renting an estate in a quiet part of Hertfordshire. As is the custom in such country parts, a fuss was made about a local ball commemorating some event or another. It would have been churlish for him not to attend and so he did, bringing not only his sisters but me as well.”

He took a slight sip of his drink before placing the glass on a table beside his chair.

"You know my view of the country."

"Yes, Darcy, I've heard you say one moves in a very confined and unvarying society in a country neighbourhood. Other than, of course, around Pemberley."

"True enough," Darcy said with the sort of smile he reserved for his closest friends, of whom his cousin was one. "I may have said some such thing a time or two."

"The girl, Darcy. Tell me of this girl you mention."

"Word had reached us that there were some few women and girls of slight accomplishment and much beauty and so I went to the country ball with great expectations as to who would be there."

"Even if they were just country girls."

"I was willing to be convinced."

"You, Darcy? Willing to table your prejudices on that front? I should have liked to have accompanied you."

Darcy ignored this slight.

"Charles and I rolled up with his sisters and his brother-in-law and, of course, much was made of our appearance. It was like some country livestock auction with mothers pressing their daughters to the front of the crowd and I was half-tempted to check the teeth on some of them as we passed."

"You are incorrigible but I must know about this evasive girl."

"Ah, the girl. She was, in fairness, far more a woman. She was there with her four sisters and introductions were made and, my god, how her mother was the very epitome of an ill-raised country mother."

"Who cares about the mother? "

"So there were five of them, daughters I mean. The oldest was very pretty, I will say that, but she lacked any sort of spirit or depth, though my friend found her enchanting."

"But you did not."

"It will take more than a pretty face to tempt me."

"But this other one, I'm guessing that she did tempt you."

"She was the second daughter. The other three were truly girls of no consequence. Two of them flitted about like children, and the other made it obvious that she was miserable about being there."

He lifted his glass, took a sip, and restored it to his fingers, turning it this way and that without conscious thought.

"At first I found her tolerable and not handsome, though she'd been labeled a beauty."

Though his glass was half empty, he rose to fill it. When he put the decanter back and its stopper in, he turned to his cousin.

"Things got very peculiar after the ball. Charles's sisters invited the girl's older sister—and just her older sister—to their house for a visit when Charles was out but the sister got sick from being caught in the rain and as a matter of kindness the sisters—Charles's sisters—allowed her to stay until she was well enough to travel back to her own home. The sister, the one I'm referring to—"

"The one you won't get to."

"Indeed, the one I haven't gotten to. She appeared a day later, having walked the three miles from their home through the muck and the mud to see how her sister fared."

"She didn't have a carriage to carry her?"

"She was...strange. I spent a fair amount of time with her over the ensuing days. And like a fool I didn't fully understand it, though I was impressed by her devotion to her sister."

"Her name, Darcy? What is her name?"

"Didn't I say? Elizabeth. Elizabeth Bennet."

Darcy returned to his chair, cradling his wine.

"Over time, given what I took to be Charles's infatuation with the eldest Miss Bennet, I found myself in the presence of Miss Elizabeth with some frequency. I confess I was not as discreet as I might have been, though I daresay she never suspected a thing as to my fascination with her. With observation, I began to find her face was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes."

"You are now a romantic, Darcy? I hardly know you."

"Indeed, I hardly know, or knew, myself. She was not in the least fashionable in her manners but had an easy playfulness one would never encounter in town."

"Especially by a single woman in want of a large fortune."

"Quite so. Especially not. She was completely lacking in perfection in any particular, but I now realise that she came together quite well. Her looks alone were light and pleasing."

"And the rest of her?"

"That is the worst part. Light and pleasing as she was in appearance, she was...intriguing in herself and I think had I given her a chance I would have found it very pleasing, if not light. I think I should have very much enjoyed going for walks with her and simply sitting of an evening with her nearby."

"Did you not pursue her? She was a gentleman's daughter, was she not?"

"She was. There were some difficulties in that regard, though. He had five daughters and no sons, and his estate was entailed."

"To whom?"

"To, much to my regret, a distant cousin."

"Regret'?"

"The daughters had to marry well. I understand now why their mother was so intent on that, more so than most mothers, I think. Were the father to die, they'd all be left in poverty were none of them to marry well."

"Not unlike me, being a second son and needing himself to marry well for just that reason."

"The way of the world, Richard. The way of our world, at least. And I'm afraid that's where that distant cousin comes in. He is, in fact, Mr. Collins."

"Mr. Collins'? The parson?"

"The very same. The one given a living in Hunsford by Lady Catherine."

"So, he will inherit the Bennet estate?"

"He will inherit the Bennet estate. And at Lady Catherine's suggestion, he traveled to that estate some months ago and not

long after I myself was introduced to the Bennet family. His specific intent was to find one of the daughters to marry."

"Him? He is such a stupid fellow."

"He is, but he has somehow earned the favour of Lady Catherine. In any case, he went to Longbourn—that's the Bennet estate—and proposed to Miss Elizabeth Bennet and she said yes."

"But if she was as you say, why would she accept him?"

"Because what choice did she have? When her father dies, she will become mistress of Longbourn and be able to protect her mother and those of her sisters who remain at home."

"If she is Mrs. Collins, I assume I will meet her presently."

"Yes. Lady Catherine mentioned to me that they would be invited to dinner several times while we are here."

"And this is what brought back memories of her?"

"I'm afraid I cannot say that. It takes nothing to bring back thoughts of that woman. She has long tortured me. Even in my sleep. I've long compared her to the women I meet, those who thrust themselves at me."

"Like Bingley's sister?"

"Especially like Bingley's sister. And none of them was or is or, I'm afraid, ever could be her equal. In beauty or any other womanly trait."

"So, are you resigned to marrying our cousin Anne?"

"And joining Lady Catherine's estate with Pemberley? It is what is expected and having lost the one opportunity to truly be content by my pride and refusal to see beyond her family."

"Your prejudices have done you in, then, as I always feared they would."

"And I was too proud to do what I now regret more than I daresay anything in my life. Not giving her the slightest encouragement about my growing feelings towards her."

"And her sister? The beautiful one?"

"It is not my proudest moment and perhaps was beneath me but I convinced Charles that there was not the slightest hint of true affection on the side of the Miss Bennet and that she'd likely forgotten him before he'd reached town upon leaving the country

house he leased and so nothing more was done about it or with her. I do not know what became of her and I'm sure that given her family—"

"Other than Miss Elizabeth."

"Indeed other than Miss Elizabeth, he is well rid of her and perhaps even regrets leasing that estate so near Longbourn since it led to this unrequited infatuation. But that's all I can say on that."

Darcy was again up, though without his glass.

"Damn, Richard, had I only rejected my first instincts with that woman and allowed the truer feelings I had for her to grow, I know I could have convinced her to have me. And now I am all anxiousness about the thought of seeing her, of being in the same room with her after all these years."

With that, Fitzwilliam Darcy turned on his heel and abandoned his cousin to fend for himself when the Colonel was called into the drawing room to make conversation with his aunt and the cousin, Anne, who seemed destined to become Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, the mistress of Pemberley.

* * * *

NOT A MILE FROM the events just recited, the object of the gentlemen's conversation was herself ill at ease. Her husband had given her the fine news that they were invited to Rosings Hall for dinner the next day and that they were to be graced to be in the company of Lady Catherine's nephew Fitzwilliam Darcy—who Mr. Collins had met at Meryton while he was seeking (quite successfully in his view at least) a wife—and a separate nephew who was a Colonel who neither Collins had met.

His wife was strangely affected by this news. She'd not thought of Mr. Darcy very much or very deeply since those days long ago when they crossed paths when Darcy's friend leased Netherfield. Indeed, the whole lot of them vanished and Bingley gave up the lease on the place with barely a by-your-leave and Elizabeth's older sister Jane was still prone to moments of regret for that disappearance. Their uncle, Mr. Gardiner, had managed to find a

husband for the beautiful Jane and she already had a little boy from the union and was living in Cheapside, London but she confessed to at times wondering what would have happened had Charles Bingley not gone to town and not come back.

As was her custom when she felt deep emotions, Elizabeth decided to write to Jane. Her only other friend in the world was Charlotte Sebel, as was Charlotte Lucas, but Charlotte was not a woman to whom Elizabeth could divulge the deepness of her heart, much as she was a great friend.

Mr. Collins had suggested he read something to his wife while she did needlepoint, as was their usual way of spending an evening, but Elizabeth deferred, saying she wished to write to her sister. Her husband accepted this and sat in the front parlour with one of his books and was contentedly reading as Elizabeth extracted some stationery and pens from the desk that sat in the corner. She sat down to write to her sister.

Dearest Jane,

I hope you and the baby and your dear husband are well. I confess to you that I do not know if I am.

I've just received the most startling news. Do not worry, it is of no significance except, perhaps, to my heart which I find is rumbling in a manner I have not known it to for many, many years.

Mr. Collins advised me with some excitement while we were at dinner that Lady Catherine has two visitors and that we are to be honoured to dine with them tomorrow at Rosings Park. I will not long tease you. The two are Fitzwilliam Darcy and his cousin, an unknown colonel who is related in some manner to both Darcy and Lady Catherine.

You'll recall that Darcy is Lady Catherine's nephew and, according to what Mr. Collins said upon delivering the news to me, he is destined to marry Lady Catherine's daughter. That is Anne de Bourgh, of whom I have made reference as a small, rather sickly creature of great financial worth and, so far as I can make out on the evenings I have been with her at

Rosings House or when she has deigned to stop while passing the Parsonage, little else.

But Mr. Darcy.

He was such a disagreeable man when I met him—as you and everyone else agreed—that I at least was pleased when he disappeared from Netherfield and Meryton while Mr. Collins was “courting” me. I am sorry to bring up what I know is a difficult period for you, but I fear I must to explain the difficult period through which I am going through.

You see, the mention of Mr. Darcy’s name and the prospect of again seeing him has roused something in me that I did not know existed, or at least that I did not know existed since I have become a married woman.

Oh Jane. I must take care as Mr. Collins is not ten feet from me as I write this, reading some sermon or another, but I cannot but tell you that the time apart from Mr. Darcy and the time not given to a thought of him has allowed the fermentation of something truly womanly and I fear what might become of me the moment we are together, when we are introduced and I must feign complete indifference which is, I fear, the exact opposite of what I will feel.

I know this is insanity. I know nothing can come of it. I know so many things but I cannot but know my heart.

I write in the hope that this fever may break between now and when I curtsey to him and he bows to me. I know he is completely indifferent to my existence. He never indicated by word or deed the slightest interest in me as other than a curiosity. Of being a country girl with something of an independent streak. Of some attractiveness but not nearly enough to tempt him.

I so wish you were here with me again. That we could walk along the paths around the Parsonage and talk in the manner we did as children, though the subject will be that of women.

My only hope, dear Jane, is that the reality of Mr. Darcy proves far less than my imaginary Mr. Darcy has become. Yes, I am sure that is the case. He was an unattractive man when

I met him—save for his looks and his money!—and I am sure he still is. He was indifferent to me then as I am certain he is indifferent to me now. I should not be the least concerned that whatever ember once was present in my heart has long since gone.

It is only that I fear that to the contrary it has been smouldering and smouldering and that it will burst into flames the moment it meets the oxygen of the presence of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

As what happens will have long since happened when you read this, I am not sending this letter to you. I do not know what I will be able to say in twenty-four hours' time. I do not know if I will be able to say anything. But I am afraid, Jane. I am afraid in a way that I have never before known.

*Love,
Elizabeth.*

"Are you finished my dear?" Mr. Collins asked when he saw his wife blow on the page to help dry the ink. "I hope you sent my regards to your sister."

"Of course, my dear, I have done. As I always do."

Mr. Collins rose, and Elizabeth lifted the pages to shake them dry and he could not see them.

"Very good, my dear," her husband said, as he came to her. "I am tired—perhaps from all the excitement about tomorrow—and am retiring. I wish you good night."

He gave his wife a kiss on the cheek before carrying his Sermons in one hand and a candle in the other to retire to his bedchamber.

Elizabeth Collins looked at the letter. It had served its purpose. There was a small fire in the grate. She placed the pages on top and watched as they crinkled away and then opened the window slightly to allow the smoke to vanish into the Hunsford night.

Image: [Mrs. Klapp \(Anna Milnor\)\(1814\)](#) by Thomas Sully, courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

A Tenth Anniversary

SCENE: HE and SHE, both in their early 50s, sit on folding chairs in a park. He to the left (from behind). She to the right. To their left is an ice bucket from which the neck of an opened wine bottle appears.

The two are dressed as if for a wedding. SHE is wearing a floral dress in a cream background and flowing green stems and various colored flowers. Stylish low heels strapped to her ankles. Her hair is well-sculpted and is cut above her shoulders. It is amber. She wears simple jewelry, including a simple wedding band.

HE is in a well-tailored tan suit. His shirt is white, with French cuffs held together by onyx links, and he wears a red tie. His socks match his suit and he wears brown loafers.

The park they are in is a cemetery in Queens, New York. It is an old, Catholic cemetery with large mausoleums scattered about and statuary. They sit in front of a large angel. The name "SOLARI" is at the angel's base.

Each has a glass of white wine in their hand.

HE

Ten years.

SHE

Like yesterday.

They lift their glasses.

HE & SHE

To Enrico.

They clink their glasses. They take long drinks of the wine. She cradles her glass in her lap. He looks at his in front of his face.

HE

Now will you tell me?

SHE

Tell you what?

HE

You said you'd tell me when he was dead for ten years. Which is today.

She looks at him. Confused.

HE

You said you'd tell me today why you didn't give up on him when you found out about us.

She turns to look at the angel.

SHE

I did, didn't I? As I recall, I said something like, "In ten years I'll let you know why I didn't cut off his balls and yours when I found out about the pair of you."

HE

You've always had a way with words.

He takes a sip of his wine and she follows suit.

SHE

To be clear, I probably would have if I'd caught you in our bed.

HE

We never did it there.

SHE

So that made it alright?

HE

I didn't say that. It just makes it...less wrong.

SHE

Well, that's all water under the bridge anyway.

HE

It's just that we reached a point where there was
no going back and we both knew he had to tell
you.

SHE

Which still doesn't tell you why I didn't...you
know. I had every right to.

HE

You did. So why didn't you?

She looks at him and then turns back to the angel. She takes
another drink.

SHE

I was stunned, of course, first of all. We had a ten-
year-old son and he and I had what I thought was
a good or at least good enough sex life then he sits
me down while Davey's at some game for the day
and tells me he wants a divorce. So, I was stunned.

And then when he said it was with you, who I
thought of as a friend, as my friend as well as his,
and almost an uncle to Davey, I was more likely to
shoot myself than shoot him. Or you.

He reaches for her hand, which she pulls away.

SHE

In all these years I didn't tell you. We've been
together so often, and I never got around to telling
you.

HE

Maybe that's why you put the ten-year clock on it.
She smiles and moves her hand to his.

SHE

Maybe. Maybe I needed you and me to...evolve
and let the passage of time soften the edges of the
pain of the betrayal. Not just his. Yours too.

HE

And are there still “edges”?

She takes a sip of her wine, holding the glass in her right hand,
her left still in his right.

SHE

They’ll always be “edges” and we both have to live
with them.

HE

And can you live with them?

SHE

I have for ten years, haven’t I?

Maybe it’s because he was the first man I really
loved. I still love him.

HE

I can say almost the same for me, you know.

SHE

I do know. Maybe that’s why.

You know when it happened, I kept searching for
signs. Things I might have missed that he...that his
affections went in a different direction.

Do you think he always knew?

HE

What, and was afraid to let anyone know? Afraid
to be himself?

SHE

Why did he marry me?

HE

Couldn't it be as simple as he loved you?

SHE

Well, I love you and I don't want to marry you.

HE

Hold on. You love me?

She squeezes his hand.

SHE

You were the second man I fell in love with.

HE

Wait. When did you fall in love with me?

SHE

It wasn't like there was a...a sign. Just looking back
at this decade since he passed, you must know
how important you are to me.

HE

But that was mostly because of Davey. He needed
a father figure. I mean, he was only fourteen when
Ricki died.

SHE

I needed a husband figure.

HE

But you were always going out on dates.

She raises her left hand from his and moves the fingers in front
of him.

SHE

Then why am I still wearing this? For a gay guy,
you sure can be dense.

HE

I was always afraid to ask.

She puts her left hand in her lap and uses the fingers of her right, still holding the stem of the glass, to rotate the band slightly.

SHE

Maybe it's because other than Davey, it's all I have left of him and now that Davey's gone, it's a comfort.

HE

Davey's not "gone." He lives like twenty minutes away.

SHE

You know what I mean.

Have I ever told you how much I appreciate you being here for him?

HE

You don't have to.

SHE

But I should.

HE

I love him.

SHE

I know that.

And, of course, you had the man-to-man talks with him I never could have.

HE

You should have heard what his friends told him, but I've been sworn to secrecy. It's a guy thing.

SHE

I don't want to know. What do you think of his new girlfriend?

HE

I like her. I think she's good for him. I hope she lasts longer than the last one.

SHE

Cindy was a bit of a pill but, I swear, I said nothing against her.

HE

Neither did I. But I agree about the "pill" part. I think Suzie could be the one.

SHE

I've only met her once, when I had them both over for dinner.

HE

Yeah, he told me about that. He said it was like an audition and that Sue half expected you to go "thumbs down" on her before dessert.

Are you glad he's not like his dad in that regard?

SHE

You mean gay?

HE

Yes.

SHE

To be honest I am. But you know I don't care as long as he's happy being who he is. I just wish Ricky was as confident when he was Davey's age.

No, I'm glad because I'd really like a daughter. Even just a daughter-in-law.

HE

Grandchildren?

SHE

Jury's still out on that. Just let Davey find someone he loves and I'm sure you and I will both love her.

HE

Agreed.

SHE

But I'm glad you're around so he can talk to you about his love life more than he does with me.

HE

Jesus. You're his mom. Has he ever spoken to you about his sex life?

SHE

I said "love life." But I take your point. Again, that's one reason I'm glad he has you.

HE

What about you? And what other reasons do you have?

SHE

I surrender. I'm glad I have you too. Satisfied?

HE

Seriously, though. You're always telling me about your dates and yet...Why haven't you found someone?

SHE

You know how I've tried. How often have I called you after Mr. Right was out the door before I really knew he'd...come in?

HE

Well, as I recall, it wasn't his coming that was the issue.

SHE

So, I faked it just to get him out.

HE

And now you're bitching that they left too soon?

SHE

Okay, so I'm a collection of contradictions. What
can I tell you?

HE

I think what you are telling me is that you still
haven't gotten over him.

SHE

Have you? It's been ten years and how many
relationships lasting more than a month have you
had?

HE

Okay. So I'm a collection of contradictions too.
Shoot me.

He gets up and takes the bottle from the ice bucket and refills
both their glasses. He puts the bottle back and remains standing.
He turns to the angel.

HE

How can one lovely person so fuck up the lives of
two other lovely people? For. Ten. Years.

She gets up. Puts her arm around his waist.

SHE

Look. The car'll be here in ten minutes.

They each drink from their glasses.

HE

Should we get married?

She chokes. She runs the back of her left hand across her mouth.

HE

Come on. You can't tell me you haven't thought
about it.

SHE

Can you tell me you haven't?

HE (pause)

We are so pitiful.

SHE

Which makes us perfect for each other.

HE

Yeah, but I think we both enjoy sex too much
and...well...

SHE

Damn him. It's never been anywhere close to what
it was with him. And he wasn't even trying.

HE

You mean he wasn't even trying fucking?

SHE

Touché.

HE

Don't kid yourself. He loved you and he was
intimate with you so never doubt he wasn't trying
to please the both of you every time you were
together.

SHE

Did he tell you that?

HE

I wasn't in the habit of talking to my husband
about his sex life with his ex-wife. But you knew
him as well as I did. Maybe better. Can you say I'm
wrong?

Just as you say you've loved, really loved, two men
in your life, you must know that he only really
loved two people in his.

SHE

And now they're both standing at his grave.

HE

Now they're both standing at this grave.

They each drink more of the wine.

SHE

What about you?

HE

What about me what?

SHE

Don't make me ask.

He reaches for her hand.

HE

For me, there was someone in college I fell for and
the feelings weren't reciprocated. But other than
him, yeah, just the two. Ricki. And you.

SHE

Hence the "almost"?

HE

Hence the "almost."

SHE

The car's coming. We have to get our stuff
together.

HE

What did you bring?

SHE

It's the tenth year so...

She reaches for her bag, which is dangling on the back of the
chair, and opens it. She removes a cuff link.

SHE

He wore this at our wedding. I'll always have the
other, but I guess it's time I separated the pair.

She steps to the angel and places a single cuff link, a pearl surrounded by gold, on the angel's pedestal. She returns and stands beside him. He reaches into his jacket pocket and removes a watch.

HE

I thought of placing this here a few times but wanted to save it for the tenth. I got it...I got it for him on our honeymoon.

He steps to the angel and puts it next to the cuff link.

SHE

You realize they'll probably be gone before we're through the gates.

HE

They're here now. We're here now. That's all that matters.

They bow their heads for a moment then lift their glasses.

HE

To Ricky.

SHE

To Ricky. With all my love.

HE

Our love.

SHE

Yes, with all our love.

They each drink and step to the angel, putting their empty glasses on the ground in front of it.

Each folds a chair and she lifts hers. He lifts his and picks up the ice bucket and stand. The two head towards the car that's come to pick them up.

The Author

Joseph P. Garland has written numerous stories and several novels. This is his third venture into the world of Jane Austen. He has published three novels set in the early years of the Gilded Age in New York and a contemporary novel set chiefly in New York. He is a New York lawyer.

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Pride and Prejudice Sequels/Variations

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[The Omen at Rosings Park](#): How Elizabeth Became Mrs. Darcy (on KU) ([first chapters](#))

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