

Excerpt from the novel *Saul's Last Book*, by Allison Fine

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## Blue Heron

Saul was not with his cronies. He was having an office visit with his cardiologist who made a special appointment to see him on a Saturday when he'd rather be at the gym or watching Tournament Poker on television.

Here was this aging guy, a famous writer who carried his towering sense of entitlement in his hair or something. *I need to see you*, he said on the voice mail, *it's urgent and I don't want to go to the hospital and talk to a third year medical student*. Understood. But those medical students are probably better diagnosticians than some doctors, Michael thought. They bust their ass to figure out what's going on, they take copious notes, they ask a hundred questions, (some of them irrelevant, but still--) they leave no stone unturned.

Michael Birkin had been top of his class at the University of Illinois. At first he wanted to be an internist, but cardiology caught his fancy. What makes the human heart so strong and so frail? In all his studies of medicine he always got down to the nub of the matter—that essentially, even though we can treat the body and give allopathic remedies to a complex series of systems, even though we know or think we know how it all works—there is still something magical and mysterious about how the mechanism operates—medicine explains the body as a piece of machinery of moving parts—everything performs on cue until one part doesn't quite do what it ought to do. Yet

ultimately he began to realize the cause of disease is more complex than symptomatic analysis. It was all tied up with the life of the person who you were diagnosing. You could not really separate the life from the disease as many doctors tried to do. He wondered if psychiatry might not have been a better choice, but then the thought of sitting all day listening to litanies of woe disgusted him. People ought to realize that life is “not a walk in an open field,” as Herberto Padilla once wrote, and get on with it. Although he recognized not everyone had the capacity to get on with it as he did. Maybe he compartmentalized too much?

Saul arrived at Michael’s office breathless with a stuffed black messenger bag filled with paper, books, notebooks and a laptop spilling out of it like guts spilling out of a stomach.

I’m doing research for my book, he explained as he sat down. Thanks for seeing me.

No problem, Michael said.

It’s Saturday. I know what Saturdays are to professionals.

I’m a doctor.

Yes.

Which means I am on-call 24-7 essentially.

Your wife must love it.

My wife and I are both doctors. So what is it, Saul? What can I do for you?

I’m not feeling right. Maybe it’s the medication. Things just don’t seem to be like--usual. I get weak at times—the other day I was working out and I nearly fainted.

I told you to cut back on the workouts. Don’t push yourself so hard.

Well—I thought maybe it would be good for me.

Why did you think that?

Make my heart stronger.

Your heart muscle is fine, Saul. This is basically a valve problem.

So, you're saying I should just allow my life to diminish in its capacity—slow down, let the disease take over and die.

I don't think it's a wise idea to have open-heart surgery right now. It's not at critical phase.

So, I should wait until its critical—until I am flat on my back unable to move from the office to the bathroom, and then call you for emergency open-heart surgery?

Maybe we should switch the anti-depressants.

I'm not depressed.

You sound depressed.

I'm anxious.

Well, there's medication for that too.

There's medication for everything! So what? Are you listening to me?

Have you ever considered therapy?

They haven't got me there yet.

It might be helpful.

Nothing is helpful.

That's a normal way to feel. I'd feel that way too if I were in your place.

What is this—placate the patient day? Is this what they have in the bedside manual—how to make the patient feel as if we are all brothers in this disease business?

You know what? I think death is horrible. It's dirty, it's ugly and it stinks. Now that's it. What you do to survive kills the things you love—so that's it—maybe my ideals—well I might have never had any. But lately, I've had an erosion of sorts—even worse than before. Not that I am really a cynic. I'm not. I think deep down I'm a sweet old guy who just doesn't want to get hit before the other guy. I'm a winner. But maybe I'm a loser. I don't know.

Dr. Michael Birkin, (Bierkinovsky a few generations back) a tall man with thick deep brown curly hair and brown eyes that looked as if they had never really experienced a bad time, smooth skin, a patina of ruddiness over the deep olive tone, made a decision. He had a CD player in the office that he played when he was doing patient records or answering email.

You know what? Michael asked.

What Michael—Dr. Birkin?

You can call me Michael.

Michael walked over to the CD player and hunted through a pile of unjacketed CD's.

Just a minute—

What are you doing?

*Blinded by the light*

*He got down but he never got tight*

*He's gonna make it alright...*

The rough New Jersey funky voice of Springsteen blasted out of the CD. A great smile burst out on Michael's face.

You know this don't ya?

Of course dude! What do you think—I'm a writer! You think I'm some kind of dead square guy?

Saul smiled at *cut loose like a Deuce*...and as if on cue the two men started to move around the room. Michael's moves were young, motion fluid, his legs like rubber and his arms flailing. Saul motivated his hips, the movement that fascinated women all his life, and got down to the motion. The two men flashed and danced around each other in a circle transforming the office into a dance floor. Saul grabbed a stethoscope off the wall and played around with it. Michael took a surgical mask and pulled it over his ears. *Take a right at the light/keep on going straight into the night*. The voice and guitar drove two men crazy—horns snapping right into Saul's body. He was cutting loose with his doctor and it didn't matter what happened tomorrow.

Arms waving above their heads two men sang *I was blinded! I was blinded! I was blinded!* Voices cutting through the antiseptic, surgical smell of medicine and then like a car screeching to a dead halt the song ended. Michael switched off the CD player.

Dance.

The two men were winded, Michael inexplicably more so than Saul.

I feel great. Got any steroids? Maybe I can keep the workouts going.

All right. Low dose.

I won't morph into a boxer will I?

They both laughed.

I swear, Saul, I learn more from my patients than they learn from me.

That could be true.

Saul picked up his black messenger, shook Michael's hand and left the office. On the elevator down the euphoria stayed with him. Walking outside the building the ragged feeling stayed at bay. It was spring in DC and the cherry blossoms made his heart ache, but it was not the physical heart.

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Saul gave himself a rare day off from the driven schedule he put himself on. After the office visit dancing around to Springsteen, (*I suppose he thinks this is some kind of play therapy*)— he realized he had spent most of his life dismissing the very experiences that made him who he was, but then, who was he? (He wouldn't go into that right now, he thought), after that experience, with Springsteen's musical phrases repeating endlessly in his head, he recognized that the drama of his life was something less than original. In fact it could be called typical and routine. There was nothing novel, notable or innovative about it at all—it had all the attributes of the usual common place, boring, complicated layered plots of everyone else's lives. He was like everyone else. He was slowly dying of heart disease, but it was not some unusual thing, he would live for a while on medication, but that was common, he was writing as normal—*well what's new?* And on and on. Perhaps he cared more for the invention of drama than the drama of life itself, which had become ugly, stained and somewhat stupid. He had spent his life being malicious and had no regret for it, he found people transparent and stupid, by and large, he had a penchant for beautiful women, but he had no confidence in their intelligence, and anyway, he was conditioned to appreciate them as one would appreciate a Grecian Urn—*Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss*—the words of Keats were more interesting than most of the beautiful women he had known. Nothing was more important to him than his writing and

the aggrandizement of his own ego. He understood that the human heart could not solve the problems of life on earth. The only thing that remained was to realize that he, like everyone else, was a player in the human drama and that we were all participating in stereotypical dramas reenacted endlessly.

Once Saul fastened on this it was not much of a leap to move into dissecting the essential components of his own particular ridiculous role in the larger human play. He was certainly not a man driven by morals—he couldn't stand morality anyway, religious, spiritual or otherwise, he had a specific distaste for people driven by *ideals* and although power used to excite him, now that he had it, he could see through that as well. Power-driven economics had its down side just like everything else—power people were unyielding, selfish (as he was) wholly without inspiration and he found them yawningly boring and unpleasantly lacking in inner vision. He knew with clarity that he possessed inner vision of some kind that serviced his work as a writer, but that was it. There was nothing supernatural or inspired about it—it was simply there to serve his creative drive—the novels and books and words and paragraphs and characters and plots he dished up to make money, have his variety of drama and cross one leg over the other. Simply that. *A bene placito: at one's pleasure*. He could, if he wished, admit the unsatisfactory nature of the games people play in the mess of human interaction we call society, but that would be admitting that he was unsatisfied at being a winner at those games (utterly bored with it, to be honest) and it might smack of ingratitude. After all, he had been given so much: uncommon intelligence, charisma with women, money, fame, talent, children and grandchildren and a loyal wife! Andrea flitted across his mind like a gnat on a hot summer night. She could intimidate him but he would never admit it, the

relation between persons is simply about projection and introjection—there is no such thing as actually *knowing* a person, he thought. And who cared if you did? The failure to see the behavior of one person in relation to the other has led to civilized confusion. Utter despair overtook him. There was, really, nothing to live for, yet the organism craved, desired, hungered, needed, required and longed to stay alive! What an absurdity! To have a body that has to feed itself, create excrement and waste and spend its time playing undeclared games with other organisms. It was utterly inane. Yet he took great pride in his large repertoire of games, games he had mastered based on particular sets of learned interactions. His normal alienation from being was the inexplicable knowledge that nonbeing existed somewhere—all of this life was simply pseudo-wants, pseudo-values, pseudo-realities of the endemic delusions of what we call life and death and so on.

This thought led Saul to shut off the computer, at the twenty-seventh chapter of his novel, which was clipping along at a reasonable pace, and stare out the window of his office. Outside the analogy of enchantment, myth and fairy tale rose up suggested by the flowering pink buds of the Cherry Blossom trees. D.C. in the spring! How could he ignore, despise or neglect these tiny moments of pleasure? They welled up inside of him and brought relief. A thought emerged from inside—he was nothing more than a witness; the medium, the occasion of a happening that the created thing makes evident. He was not engaged in the discovery of what was there, or in production of an imitation of it, nor even in communication with the anxiety of culture or his own peculiar pathology, he was the conduit to enable being to emerge from nonbeing. The experience of being the medium for a continual process of creation helped him glide past thoughts of depression, persecution or glory into the very mystery of liberation itself! He had spent his entire life

personifying opposites when in fact the deeper mystery was that there was no dialectic at all. He had played the game of dialectic with such ease that he had convinced himself it was real, but in fact, as Jung said there was only the alchemical process of conjunction. Archetypal ideas give the illusion of loosening the soul's attachment to the body, but in reality *the soul animates the body*, as Jung declared. Oh God, Saul spoke aloud in the office—I am thinking of God and the Soul and I don't even believe in either one! It was there that it dawned on him that suicide was not inexplicable—it was simply *the dawn of hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable*, as Laing wrote. *I can recapture personal meaning in movement, words and space, but it is essentially meaningless*, he thought. My soul is caught in the chains of desire. My wishes and my fantasies are just part of the deceptive glamour we all fall pray to.

Outside his window a bird lighted on the Cherry Blossom branch. Blue Herons were mating in the shallow waters of the Potomac, their cool forms belying their scavenger hunger to eat fish, other fowl and animals alike. Stabbing their prey with a quick lunge of the bill, the Herons killed diseased fish and fowl that would probably die anyway. They were, in essence, cleaning out the unwanted species from the environment and creating ecological balance. Perhaps, Saul thought, my attack on fat women, stupid people, rotten game players, inferior intellects and pseudo artists performs exactly the same function. My job is to be on Separation Detail—I separate the unwanted species from the pack. At this thought he smiled and turned away from the window back to his computer with relief.

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The philosophy behind an innate goodness that resides inside the unknown part of humankind we call the soul or the subconscious or whatever is one of the most erroneous and false doctrines that we've fooled ourselves into thinking since Adam and Eve took the apple, covered with fig leaves and copulated.

As Saul spoke this he reached a hand across the table to grab the wineglass sitting there that his wife Andrea just poured. She took a moment to consciously notice the hands—hands that already found secrets of her body during their married years, hands that looked like carpenter's hands that had never done carpentry, the thickened palms and muscular fingers were stronger than he wanted—the length of the fingers gave him the opportunity to wave his hands around while talking making unseen images in the air about his head. They were not small hands, somewhat large in fact, but with a curious personality all their own, an amalgamation of both feminine and masculine converging together. Quite confusing, in fact. These were hands that held power and waved it away at the same time.

Saul drank from the wine glass while Andrea pretended to look above his head at the bookcase behind him. She knew all the titles without really looking but while she appeared to be looking at the books Saul put one of his hands on his face and leaned on his elbow, waiting for her to reply. He knew what it would be but he wanted to see if there might be a chance she would surprise him with something different. She disappointed him all the time.

So you are saying what you always say, Andrea exploded in the softest voice imaginable for an explosion. Everything is pragmatic, there is no real good, we are all essentially evil and that's it.

We are all essentially selfish and totally difficult and completely indifferent to the well being of others. Evil would be a relief. At least it would be interesting. Evil is not evil at all—it is simply total honesty—a man or woman acting out their fundamental being without the hypocrisy of covering it up with all sorts of phony personality structures and high-minded lies and stories. If it weren't for laws, the police and jails every one of us would murder someone at some time in our lives. Every citizen would be an executioner. We could probably commit total genocide on ourselves if given half the chance. Auto-genocide. The fact is—Nazism was never a German problem it was in essence the illustration of the fun we can have if given the opportunity to experiment with total disaster and cruelty—to go as far as we could possibly go. The human condition, if left to it's own devices is completely senseless, devoid of moral certitude and repulsively survival driven.

Do you plan on murdering me?

I already have—in a thousand different ways.

So—you see no possibly for redemption, for a savior, as it were? The Christ means nothing to you?

The Christ is a myth that we made up as a rationalization to convince ourselves we are better than we are. The most absurd point is when you read Anne Frank writing in her diary, two days before her family is captured and placed in a concentration camp, that at heart human beings are basically good! What rubbish! Human beings are basically stupid, blindly driven by hunger and ready to destroy anyone who gets in the way of their eating what they want! We eat animals, plants, and soon each other. Then we pile the shit up in waste management systems but we are incapable of managing our own psychic

waste. We are at the mercy of our Endocrine systems and worse, at the mercy of our eyes, our stomachs, our penises, our wants and our desires. Although desire is just another high-minded rationalization to my mind because what is desire anyway but just some kind of biological response to external stimuli?

I don't have a penis, Andrea reminded him.

So you don't. All the more pity for you.

And why is that?

Because your desires are sublimated—it all goes internal. You punish yourself with your wants instead of having the direct means to go out into the world and consummate them with lust, thrust and conquest.

So men do the conquering and we just sit around eating ourselves up with Penis envy? Isn't that the stupid crap Freud introduced into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that has basically destroyed relationships between ourselves and our bodies and disempowered women ever since?

Power is just another desire—another want—another action predicated on hunger. We want to vindicate our selfishness by subjugating another and making them pay for being alive. It's the price of life on earth I'm afraid.

You have the most repulsive and hopeless view I ever heard.

Thank you.

Saul smiled at Andrea out of the goodness of his heart which was not good at all and which probably wasn't even his heart. Forty years of marriage had glided by them as a fly glides by the head of someone reading by the lamp on its way to the light bulb thinking it might be interesting and fun. The fly buzzes around the light hoping for

salvation while the reader has picked up a magazine; ready and poised to swat the fly into oblivion. The black corpse of the fly makes a tiny yellow stain on the lampshade but the reader is filled with glee because the yellow stain is a small price to pay for the death of the annoying fly.

I hate these discussions; Andrea said as she cleared the wine glasses from the table and practically threw them into the sink. Saul came up behind her and put his arms around her breasts, moving down to her rounded belly and hips, one hand on her tummy and the other on her right thigh.

I'm teaching you.

No, you're lecturing me. You're just trying out some of your imagined theories. You don't believe a damn word of it. Even you are not that cynical.

She turned to face him and they stood together, belly to belly, her head just touching his chin, his hand caressing the back of her head.

I love you, he said, in spite of myself.

Has Michael changed your medication?

Yes, he told her, all the while rubbing her back with his hand, up and down, feeling the energy of her spine moving with his hand, into his hand, from his hand to her back.

Well, thank God. What has he got you on?

Look at the pills in my office.

I never go in your office; you know that.

I wish you would. Sometimes.

You never told me that, Saul, ever, in all our married life. It was always stay out of my office, your cave, your magic carpet-land or whatever.

I had a moment of realization yesterday.

Of?

Of something.

What?

It doesn't matter.

It matters. Tell me.

I can't. It wouldn't make sense anyway. It was internal.

He spoke of internal as if it were separate from external, as if there were no correlation between the two. She understood this because it was familiar to her—this was Saul—always separating, dissecting, compartmentalizing, untying, unscrambling, unraveling, sorting, disentangling things that were forever entangled and woven into one another. The sense of wholeness seemed to be missing from this man, she told herself, but then it didn't matter because *he is going to die and anyway I love him*.

I just know, he said moving away from her, grabbing a new wine glass from the cupboard and pouring another glass of wine, that something moved, shifted. I am no longer concerned about some things.

Like what?

Like whether the day is sunny or clouded over, whether your cat explodes or disappears—

**My** cat?

She's always been your cat.

Well.

And—I don't like her. She barely tolerates me.

You used to like her.

Yes.

So what happened?

She shit on the bed, I smacked her and we're over.

She was mad at you because you ignored her.

She ignored me!

There you go projecting as usual.

Hah!

Are you going to walk away now?

Do I usually?

At this point in the conversation? Yes. Whenever—

Whenever you make a point that you think is right.

Whenever I am right.

Saul, wineglass in hand, moved toward Andrea with a rush of desire that came up so suddenly he thought he was dizzy.

Let's go upstairs, he said.

She followed him with a sense that maybe for once in life the power had shifted.

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The Kid (his real name was Chris Foley) decided it was time to go and meet Saul—his nemesis. Why not travel down the River Styx and find the gorgon in his own

habitat? He needed a reason, an excuse and he didn't have one but he had always been inventive.

Living in Arlington was a blessing—there was no chance that Saul's path would cross his accidentally and he spent most of his time either in the apartment or over at The Little Theatre in SW. Saul never came to the theatre—he gave Andrea the seed money but disdained ever setting foot in the place, except for opening nights when he'd arrive as some kind of rock star to lend cache to the place. His name was on the program as Executive Director and under Patrons, but Andrea and Molly did all the work. As long as his investment didn't go belly up he remained content and invisible.

The thought occurred to Chris that he might be stalking Saul. Who am I really in love with—Saul or Andrea? Something about the man fascinated him—he represented the kind of person that young men fantasized they wanted to be—yet how could such a man take a woman of Andrea's caliber for granted? Chris mulled over in his mind who interested him most—Saul or Andrea? He had to confess that the gestalt of the whole affair was complex. You couldn't take the Saul out of Andrea, but could you take the Andrea out of Saul? Was Andrea as much a part of Saul's gestalt as he was of hers? (Chris liked using the word *gestalt* ever since he read Fineberg's character Frank Hope use it in that brilliant monologue in the middle of the book *Restored Text* {Frank Hope—a really corny name, Chris thought}) Chris knew that his tendency to fasten on people, not as role models exactly, but as paradigms of human behavior to watch, to analyze, to dissect, was an essential part of his nature and was, in fact, what made him a playwright. He enjoyed stalking people in their familiar habitat, unknown to them, watching them move and enact their lives, (judging them perhaps?) using their characters as stand-ins for

his own character creations, drawing on their physicality, their behavior and extrapolating their motivations. He was, in essence, *stealing* from living beings to create his own characters! Stealing, pillaging and plundering from life itself, Chris felt more alive than if he were actually living. Well, this *was* living for him, he concluded. And anyway, writers steal from other writers all the time—what was that quote? *Good poets borrow great poets steal*. He felt a sense of love-hate toward Saul—something about the man—

Nearing the campus building where Saul had his office, nerves hit him. *What is this guy really like? I've seen him read, I downloaded all his interviews, I even followed him across the Mall one day—he doesn't have a clue who I am. I've read six of his books—even though I found the third one, Past Caring, incomprehensible—half of it read like prologue—well, I'm a playwright, what do I know? I live for dialogue and character, and the Aristotelian dramatic arc—ok, I may be in love with the guy. Maybe Andrea is just a way for me to find Saul. Saul will become the great love of my life*, he thought with a smile.

*Abandon every hope, ye who enter here*. He climbed the steps of University Hall to Saul's office. *What am I going to say?* He had a sheaf of writing with him, as a kind of foil—something to begin the conversation. He had a sense that he was beginning the most stupid journey of his life and it would probably backfire into something appalling, but he was doing it for love, and what else is there? He'd made an appointment with the secretary of the Graduate Writing program, saying he was a writer and had done some things at The Little Theatre and Andrea Fineberg recommended he see her husband and have a chat. This was a lie and if he knew it. If Andrea got wind of it he'd be thrown out on his tight little ass, but then, he knew she needed him terribly, longed for their moments

together, even when she rejected those very moments, needed to know she was still a woman, still desirable, still capable of tremulous excitement at the hands of—at the hands of—Chris reached the top of the stairs winded.

*I am an unbaptised and virtuous pagan*, Chris thought as he knocked on the closed door with the sign, *Saul Fineberg* on it. He heard voices from within. The low, gentle tones of Saul and the high-pitched squeaky whine of a female student.

Just a minute, Saul called out.

Chris paced the hallway and looked, unseeing, at the bulletin board filled with notices of graduate positions, teaching fellowships and writing contests. A painting (probably from a graduate art student) hung next to the bulletin board. A young romantic, 18<sup>th</sup> century, lay draped on a bed covered with a deep green coverlet. A half-open window looked out onto Elysium fields, with one lone plant on the windowsill above him. The young man, with bright carrot-colored hair, slept exhausted, depleted, his head hanging down off the side of the bed, right arm dangling to the floor. His cream-colored blousy shirt unbuttoned to the waist; his left arm curled up to his chest, the hand touching just below the heart. The scene gave Chris a pang in his own heart. The boy wore blue knee britches and white stockings covering his legs and feet, no shoes, a red dress draped seductively over a chair, a deep brown wicker table was at the foot of the bed; on the floor next to his arm a heap of tattered paper (he'd torn up, most likely) provided the only bit of illumination, other than the window, in his bleak and dark room. The painter gave the papers an extra shot of light—imbued them with a luminosity all their own. The painting gave Chris an understanding of despair and freedom all together. The window scene promised liberation, but the room was dark and the boy, (just a mere boy, really,

not a man) had obviously fallen asleep in the midst of work, eager to create something great, and desolate, found sleep the only refuge. Sleep and an open window—is that all there is?

A young woman left Saul's office and smiled at Chris, blond hair over her eyes, dark pants and a light green lace top, her face pretty, evasive and troubled.

He's all yours, she said and clumped down the hall in her sandals.

Chris knocked again.

Come in, Saul called. Chris felt his heart jump and a jumble of energy, ambiguous at best, hit the pit of his stomach. *What am I doing?*

Chris Foley, he said as he entered and shook hands with the man.

You're interested in the graduate writing program.

Possibly. Chris sat in the chair opposite Saul and looked up into Saul's eyes, hidden behind the faintly amber-tinted glasses. The face looked expedient, expectant (but not too expectant—perhaps just professionally curious) and completely unhurried. This surprised Chris. He expected Saul to be abrupt but the intelligence of the man shot out at him like a bright red flower in a field of dying grass.

You're from Montana? Saul's modulated, warm voice asked.

Oh, yes, sir, born and bred.

Kalispell?

Yes.

I've been there. Once. For a day.

Not much to see there.

Oh, but Montana is beautiful.

Yes, if you don't live there. Saul smiled.

Well, what questions can I answer for you?

Chris stole a glance at the window to a picture of Andrea, in much younger days, wearing a glorious yellow blouse open at the neck and smiling out into a distant landscape of ocean and trees. Next to that were piles of books and another picture of two old, Eastern-European looking people (his parents?) standing stiff, with their arms at their sides as if they didn't know what to do with them, grimly staring into the camera in front of a small, brick house.

Chris looked back to Saul.

*I really don't know what to say. I have nothing to say to this man.*

Saul—I—may I call you Saul?

Everyone does.

I'm having an affair with your wife.

Saul burst out with a laugh.

Oh! What a surprise.

Are you being sarcastic?

No! I hardly get surprises in the course of a day. I welcome them.

That's it? That's all you have to say?

My wife has affairs all the time. They're not serious.

Saul reached behind him to the bookcase and grabbed two bottles of pills.

Indigestion, he explained. He popped open the top of one bottle, shook out a pill and swallowed it with the *Evian* water bottle sitting on his desk. He took his time. He

shook a pill out of the other bottle, replaced the bottles back on the bookcase and turned to look at Chris.

You're a nice looking boy.

I'm not that nice.

A lot nicer than you'd like to be.

I don't know, Chris faltered.

Well, there it is.

There what is? I am in love with your wife and you take it like I just told you the traffic report.

You did, Saul smiled, his big, white teeth showing. I can't get too upset about it.

Why not?

It doesn't matter. And I have a lot of work to do.

I'm sorry.

That's ok. It took a lot of courage for you to come here. I'm not sure I would do it. For different reasons, of course.

What reasons?

It's completely stupid. Who would do such a thing-- sabotage a short-lived affair?

I would I guess, Chris said glumly. He was losing this battle and he knew it. Now the only thing left was to find an exit point and get the hell out of there.

I was hoping maybe we could become friends. I've admired your work for years.

How many years is that?

Well—

How old are you?

Twenty-six.

Twenty-six. I was married, expecting my first child and starting graduate school.

That's what I've heard.

Chris felt the energy shift.

Oh? She gave you my life story--from her point of view, of course.

No—she didn't. I gleaned some things—most of our time together is spent on each other—not you. Chris knew this was a lie but in chess players must find alternate moves.

How would a friendship between us look to you?

I've wanted to be mentored for a long time. I'm a writer. I brought—

Isn't Andrea mentoring you?

Not, exactly.

Well, there's mentoring and there's *mentoring*, if you get my drift. Anyway, I don't have time. I have thesis students I need to devote my time to, I teach full time here two classes a semester, I am editing a literary magazine, I'm on the board of The Little Theatre and The Smithsonian Library—I teach a workshop in New York in the summer *and* I am working on my last—my 11th novel, which takes up a lot of time, and of course, I *am* married—but you know all that.

Yes. Chris felt checkmate imminent. Still—I'm worth it.

That's gutsy of you. But, as I said, I don't have time.

I see.

What other things did you want to ask?

I don't know—

You want my advice? Maybe you don't—but I'll tell you anyway. Milk the moments you have with my wife for all they're worth because it won't last long. Don't do as some of the boys did and try any fancy tricks, or suicide attempts, or blaspheming me or her or whatever, don't get all romantic about this—it is what it is. Then go and get yourself into some graduate school; work your ass off and find a young, beautiful girl you can tolerate for more than a year.

You're cynical.

I'm a realist, Chris, in all things except Art.

In Art you are—

A romantic. In some ways. Anybody who makes a living off lying has to be a romantic somewhere in his or her system.

Lord.

Don't call on him—He won't answer.

A knock came at the door.

I'm in office hours now and there are other students I need to see.

Chris stood up and offered his hand, but Saul sat in his chair, looking at him from his deep-set blue eyes, disdaining him, curiosity and benevolent sarcasm coming from his face, the beard hiding the slash of a mouth Chris had seen so many times in the picture in Andrea's office, waiting patiently and with traces of humor, for him to leave.

I guess this is it.

This is it, Saul said and smiled. I am not adverse to you—really I am not. Andrea needs her diversions, but our lives are changing—she's shifting and so am I. A lot of this stuff is just going to fall away.

What stuff?

Her need for escape.

What about yours?

Don't presume to second-guess my motives, Chris.

The knock came again and the door opened. A young woman with short dark hair, tight jeans and hi-heeled boots leaned in.

Saul?

Hi dear, I'll be just one second.

She shut the door.

I don't want to go, Chris said, feeling about to cry.

I know you don't. You need a father. But I can't be your father.

I have a father.

Most likely inadequate. Do your best with it.

Chris held the sheaf of papers in a trembling hand and walked to the door. As he opened it, the young woman gave him a searching look.

Good meeting?

Not answering, Chris rushed out the door as she walked in, to the stairs where tears came in spite of the fact that he hadn't cried since he was a boy.

~

After Chris left his office a tremendous letdown invaded Saul's body. He suddenly felt crumpled, ignored, not nearly as sarcastic or as bold as he had pretended to be with this kid. He knew there was no God and thus there would be no assistants sent to help him through. He'd built a shrine to his ego, to his work, to his life as a man who

never showed the suffering of severe loss, and now he felt abandoned inside of it. He knew himself to be handsome, or at least, he had something essentially sexual about him that appealed to women, he knew he could retreat when wounded and recuperate on his own, he knew that writing and ideas and sentences were the flavor of his soul—if he had one, he also knew that the fight was nearly up. He had neglected Andrea for so many years he wondered if he could gain her special privilege ever again; if she would or even should continue to serve his heart—both physical and the other thing—he hated to use the word but it came into his mind like a buzzing fly on the window—his soul.

Assessing his own character was a loathsome task and Saul avoided it at all costs, but this visitation brought back to him a curious lack of confidence in himself—as if the kid had marched over forty years of entitlement and annihilated them with one soft look of his youthful face. He was the enemy, Saul concluded and what does the Tao say about the enemy? *The good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat.* Saul understood the kid had come in under false pretenses like the Trojan horse, gained admittance into the inner sanctum by lying about his motives, and there he had been laid waste and vulnerable. Thank God the kid didn't know that, but Saul did and it gave him a pain, a bitter sense of defeat—he hated to lose the game—any game. What was his next move? Confront Andrea or leave it like a soft mussel inside a hard shell? *To lift an autumn hair is no sign of great strength.* Ah, this kid is attacking an old dying man—what triumph in that? *He needed to look upon me and learn reverence—if nothing else than for my work,* he told himself with smug satisfaction. Immediately smugness gave way to a swarm of doubts like field mice crawling all over the place, eating his weapons and leaving holes in the quivers, the bowstrings and the handles of his shields. Something as small as a mouse

can ruin everything, he surmised, including all the weapons he had stored up for an instance such as this.

Saul many times had wanted to beat the shit out of Andrea but of course he never did. He subjugated her mentally, humiliated her intellectually and ignored her emotionally. All of this gave him a great sense of satisfaction although he was never quite sure where the satisfaction came from or what part of his psyche it satisfied. Nevertheless he congratulated himself on the pure joy of treating her to the cesspool of his imagination, which knew no bounds. This was not egotism; this was flair! And he had it. Even now, with heart disease marching all over his life force, he still felt capable of fucking any girl he wanted—young students, older students, faculty, married or single—he knew he could find a way to get them to beg for his attention and it all got down to sex anyway. They just wanted to get fucked.

Blue streaks of twilight hit the window of his office warning him that night was on the way and he'd better pack up and go home. He thought he smelled garbage and shut the window. It was still too early in spring—night brought cold snaps and sometimes frosts on the ground in the morning. And in two days Passover. Saul made a mental note that this year they would spend it at home. In previous years they had gone over to their friends or family—Andrea liked socializing in other people's homes—but this year Saul didn't feel up to donning a tie and suit and playing the Patriarch to a bunch of fawning friends and family who pretended to know him and counterfeited their worship. He loved himself and that was enough.

Saul stuffed a load of student papers, books and notebooks into his messenger bag, hoisted it onto his shoulder and got up from the chair. Just as he rose a terrible ache

hit his shoulder blade, moved down to his stomach and doubled him over. His knees went weak, he sank down to the floor for a second, willed himself to stand up again and fell into the chair exhausted.

That's it, he thought. I'm done.

He panted for breath for a few moments, put his hand on his heart, which was pounding as if he had just run a marathon, and rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. In a few seconds the heart slowed, his breathing calmed and he felt renewed. He opened one of the pill bottles he'd stuck in the side of the bag, shook out a pill and swallowed it. I'm ok, he told himself and went to the door, waiting for a moment to see if the attack would come back again, but it had slid away like so many other things. He went out of the office, locked the door and walked to the faculty parking lot.

Andrea had not been his first choice. Not by a long shot, he thought as he walked to the car. There were many other women he could have married at that time, but something about Andrea caught him—her long legs, the wonderful skin and hair, maybe her brown eyes looking at him as if she wanted to devour his intelligence and inhale it into every pore of her body. She exuded admiration, but with a smart-ass come back, which he liked. He would have hated her if she'd been obsequious, but in later years his constant battering pushed her into a cowering position. He never would have thought it possible that this smart little girl could turn into a housewife and a personal assistant. He felt no compunctions about this—he needed her that way. No man can really tolerate a dominating bitch at home. Those women are only good for affairs, one-night stands and sexual flirtations in the workplace. At home, the woman must—the car was at the far end of the parking lot and he hauled the bag and his body, feeling heavier and heavier, across

the empty lot, cold and dark coming on quickly. Key in the lock, start the car, turn on the lights.

Those girls. In the younger days I was a Samurai warrior, he thought as he turned onto the beltway toward home. I never had it so good, legs and arms in every manner of configuration, breasts, butts, some of them Oriental, some Hispanic, some plain white *shiksas* in Maiden form bras—Lord! The choices were staggering. If he could have got away with it he would have been a modern day Gilgamesh and forced all virgin brides to come into his tent before marriage. Then he would truly be King! Or he would have been a Cossack with a harem of Jewish beauties. He couldn't get enough, but he pulled out just in time for save himself from being a joke.

He knew that something had just freed him—the attack in the office, whatever it was—he was a black crow leaving the confines of a dirty cage. No more! The luxury of his memory was so replete with elaborate smells and feels and sights—the musk smell, pale-faced girls with fearful doe-eyes, a woman of thirty shivering at his door, holding her handbag like a talisman, the rattling chains of memory caught him into the flow of its mixture—how much dignity had there been? He didn't care. And even now, the women-girl students wearing wonderful tight jeans with hi-heeled sandals, snapping their eyes at him and crossing their legs in his office, talking about homework. Oh, being a man was luscious! he concluded, and with the depth and maturity of age it only got better.

Turning onto River Road he thought: *how profound and magnificent life is!* And even if he sometimes treated Andrea with contempt, could it be helped? She had endured him, she had become frigid and worried and highly uncreative. Was this his fault? What

he must do, what he had to do, was go on, finish the book, pen his last opera and touch interior lives with his Dionysian revels—who could argue with that?

He looked down his nose at people who could not talk about anything except sensual pleasure and yet he was the King of sensuality—the Renaissance of the erotic flamed within him at sixty-nine—so how could he die now? Isn't it touching? He asked himself. A man realizes his greatest strengths, he knows culture, art, laundry, money, power, union and sex and just as his happiness reaches the absurd level he dies! How romantic, he concluded. I have become my own anecdote. As he turned onto his street and parked in the one space left open across from his house, lights on in the upstairs window signaled that Andrea was in bed busy brightening her life with masturbation. The thought disturbed him—he longed to face her with tenderness and trust, but he could only lie if he did that. Better to bear the truth in all its ferocious and harmful beauty. The expression of the erotic deceit came to him in full force—it was certainly not only about love but something else—perhaps violence? In the face of his own mortality, at this moment, he really didn't care.

~

You know, I raped a girl once. Saul set his glass of gin on the table next to his right hand, where he could reach it repeatedly without effort. He and Andrea sat at the dining table with the decimated remains of Pesche Lesso and steamed mixed vegetables strewn around on various plates. Andrea had gone all out to cook for Saul, as usual, really trying hard to please, but also thinking about his health.

What girl?

A girl.

Who?

A girl.

Well, tell me who it was. Someone you knew. Someone you didn't know. In a taxi? Or a museum?

Andrea—what an imagination. You always go for the dramatic.

Who was it?

What difference does it make? The point is I did rape her, not who she was.

Was she a colleague?

She was a student. All right. She had it coming to her in a sense but I did rape her.

How did she have it coming to her?

I won't justify it. She came into the office, probably in all sincerity. Certainly sincere. On some level. She wanted some advice about the Hemingway story we read in class—she wanted to know something about the narrative. How she could—understand it better, I suppose. *Big Two Hearted River*.

I know the story.

She wore a very tight shirt and I couldn't take my eyes off her breasts. Plus she was breathing heavily, from climbing the stairs I suppose, which just made it worse.

For who?

For both of us.

I don't want to hear this.

But I am telling you. I insist on telling you.

Why? What's the payoff, Saul?

Saul thought about this for a moment. There's no payoff, he told her, mostly to calm her nerves, but he knew that there must be some kind of payoff. He never took lightly the pleasure he had in telling certain kinds of stories—stories to shock, or stories to upset or just stories. To tell Andrea this—there must be a reason, but he was damned if he knew what it was. I just want to tell it, he said to her and took a drink of his gin.

Don't you think it's dangerous to be drinking as much as you do and be on the medication you're on? Don't you think—?

Do you want to hear this story or not? Because I'm going to tell you anyway, whether you want to hear it or you don't want to hear it. I think you should hear it.

Alcohol is not good for heart disease, she said picking pieces of cold, dried fish off a plate.

I have to make certain decisions in my life and one of them is that I am not going to give up all the things I enjoy just because someone has pronounced me dead.

You're not dead.

You wish I were.

Go on about the rape.

She sat there, breathing, and I started to feel turned on. We talked a bit; I talked mostly, about Hemingway. She laughed. Something about her laugh—I made a joke or something—I don't remember--and I wanted to move across from my chair and grab her.

Did you?

Not yet. I wanted to string it out.

How long did you string it out?

Not that long—about five or ten minutes and then, I asked her, what are you doing for sex?

That was bold.

She'd mentioned something about how she'd been celibate for a year or—and some boyfriend dumped her. So—I asked her.

What?

What she was doing for sex. And she said she had a suitcase full of dildos, one with my name on it!

What a bitch.

How a bitch? It was a tantalizing come-on—a smart aleck remark for a young woman and it got me interested.

That she would be a brazen slut?

That's an old fashioned concept. Women who are sexually charged are not brazen sluts.

How modern of you. I didn't know you were a feminist.

I'm not. But I do love women.

So what did you do, Saul? Cut to the chase.

Hah. Good but corny phrase. I just looked at her in a certain way—she knew instantly what it meant.

What did it mean?

Come here.

What?

Come here. It meant—“come here.”

What—

She got up from her chair and walked over to mine. I unzipped my zipper and she put her hand on my penis, which by this time was large and hard.

I am almost ready to get sick.

Why?

The thought of—how old was she?

I don't know—twenty-three—twenty-four I suppose. I didn't let her fool around too much. I grabbed her by the ass, pulled her in, undid her jeans, drew her onto my lap and got into her. She wasn't soft or yielding at first, but then I took her head in my hands, caressed the back of her hair, whispered something into her ear and all of sudden the whole thing opened up. I pumped her right there—she let out tiny little cries of anguish—I could tell she was uncomfortable and she might be about to cry and she even tried to pull away, but then she just couldn't because my arms were very heavily around her and not allowing her to move and I just kept going until I came. Then she leaned back and pulled herself off me and I could see she was crying and her face was all red. Professor Fineberg, she said, I wish this hadn't happened. It's not your fault, I told her, blame me entirely. I am sorry. Are you sorry? she asked, but I was busy grabbing Kleenex to clean her off—my semen – and myself—and I said she'd better get out of there because other students were waiting in the hall to see me. So she pulled her shirt down, her pants up and wiped her face from the tears and left.

What happened to her?

She tried to drop my class but I talked her out of it. I told her studying the American greats would make her an American great. I gave her an “A” in the class. That was to be expected.

Why?

Because she did good work.

She never told anyone?

Of course not! Who would believe it? Anyway, there was not a little bit of collusion there, so one might question—anyway, I have tenure, and the veracity of an imaginative twenty-something writer—it’s not all what it’s cracked up to be. So—she kept going to class as if nothing happened, although, obviously, we didn’t have a repeat performance.

Did she ever come again?

Never—not alone. Not in my office. But she did good work. She was actually a talented writer.

I don’t understand why you feel this was rape. I mean—it sounds to me as if—she did come on to you—but—however-- Andrea reached for Saul’s glass and took a nervous sip, well, you are the adult. It isn’t appropriate for you to allow it even if a young girl-- they are so liable to fantasize about powerful men who are professors and you especially, as a well-known writer—there’s bound to be hero worship. You know this Saul. You know this! Why would you—?

Don’t you see? That’s precisely why I told you! Why would I?

Am I supposed to understand something here?

I think you are.

What?

Something about who I am.

You are unscrupulous and totally immoral—is that it?

No. Saul laughed and poured some more gin into the glass. I am objective about myself, that's all.

Andrea looked at this man who had been her husband for forty years and tried with every fiber in her not to ask him 'how many others were there?' For one thing, she did not want to give him the satisfaction of asking it, because certainly he would expect her to, and because she really didn't want to know.

I suppose you want me to continue having sex with you.

There are many, many stories like this Andrea, and many men like me.

Not many men like you.

Oh, yes—but we like to keep it on the backside, so to speak.

Backside of what?

Backside of the tapestry. It seems you always want to revel in the front where everything is beautiful and organized and sane. It's not like that. The world is not made that way.

I hate you, Saul.

I know you do, but you'll get over it.

She left him sitting at the table, drinking his gin, while she cleared the plates, washed the dishes and pretended not to listen to a single thought in her head. The honest truth was that she had been having affairs all along too, and it wouldn't be entirely fair to act the prissy bitch or the miffed wife in any case. She was sure, although it made her

mad to admit it, that Saul wouldn't give a rat's ass if he knew about The Kid or any of the others anyway. He was that egocentric, he was that sure of himself, he was that nasty, selfish and totally oblivious to the feelings of others. Her feelings. Which were mixed at this moment. Saul came into the kitchen and watched her for an instant, this wife of his, slamming dishes into the dishwasher and splashing water from the sink all over her clothes and everywhere else. A bag of unpacked groceries sat on the little kitchen table where she kept recipes in a small card catalogue and he kept a notebook for his thoughts.

Are you mad at me?

I thought we were making progress, she said, slamming the cupboard shut with a bang.

You're going to demolish the cupboards and I'll have to replace them.

So what?

Progress. What kind of progress? He asked, filling his glass up with gin and placing the nearly empty bottle on the counter.

It's going to be Passover Saul—in two days. What do you want to do?

Let's have it here. Just us. Alone.

That's sounds awful.

We can read the *Haggadah* ourselves can't we?

I suppose.

I'll help you make all the stuff.

You need to work. We've got an opening on Thursday—I have to be there.

We can do *sedar* on Friday—what's the problem?

The other night—

We had great sex.

I thought we had reached some kind of turning point.

I thought so too.

So you think that telling me about your sexual history is a good idea?

Why don't you tell me about yours?

Because I don't want to, she said softly.

Why? Because it would diminish the excitement—the secretive, nasty, clandestine quality which is about all it has going for it?

How do you know what it has going for it?

Maybe you better call him and find out.

I have to go to the store. We need to get some things in here if we're going to do it right. And you need to work.

Ah yes, I do. Saul smiled an enigmatic smile that excited her, but she refused to respond—at this point resistance was all she had.

I'll kiss you if you let me, he said, moving closer.

What for? You can kiss me later.

No. Her pulled her close, next to his body; she smelled the warm, predictable smell of his hair, his essence—his odor always turned her on—the smell of his shirts before she threw them into the washing machine, the scent of the sheets from his body on the bed—perhaps it was her nostrils that loved him and nothing else. How important the smell of a man is! She realized, how lovely and warm—she felt his lips on hers, the tongue inside of her mouth and gave in for just a moment. It was what she always did.

After he kissed her, he patted her rump, tucked a hunk of hair behind her ear and downed the rest of his gin.

Use the visa. I'm keeping household stuff on it.

Fine.

She slid past his exotic form to the front hall to grab her keys, her purse and her cell phone.

~

You can't appeal to a person's sense of fairness when they haven't got one, Chris told Andrea. They stood outside the 7-11 in Centreville, drinking the bitter Columbian coffee and watching the dark sky and clouds ruin the rest of the day. Chris had a friend in Manassas and suggested they meet at the 7-11 where his friends worked the night shift.

I have to get back. Saul thinks I'm shopping for Passover.

You are.

Yeah, a spicy big bite is not exactly kosher.

You keep expecting Saul to behave as if he has a conscience. He hasn't. You need to understand the difference between conscience and consciousness.

It seems to me if a person has consciousness they have a conscience.

Not necessarily. How is he different from you? You're married. You have affairs—

I don't have affairs.

The kid hoped that meant she saw this as a relationship but said nothing. Nothing about the office visit either.

Maybe he's feeling insecure.

I doubt it.

Men hide their insecurities in all kinds of weird ways. Confession is a form of insecurity.

It didn't come across that way, Chris—you don't understand.

What don't I understand?

She looked at his eyes, brown and rather shrewd for one so sensitive, something about the corners, his blond hair had an erotic, downy quality to it—she longed to touch it. Something about this man was childish, she decided, not mature, not a man, as Saul had been at the same age—maybe he fulfilled her need for a son.

Consciousness is more a modern concept—I mean, I am sure the Greeks had a highly developed consciousness, but they didn't call it that. They named their Gods. We don't name ours—they just hang about in the ether like amorphous thought constructions, or even worse, just vapors and veils. We don't really understand the basic principle.

Which is?

Shakespeare had it: “nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” Thought doesn't just analyze reality; it creates it. We can change the world with our thoughts. And conversely, the world, as we see it, is a reflection of our collective thought.

Andrea looked out at Centreville highway past Chris. The strip malls, cars speeding past in the rain that had begun to fall ugly and slanted, slate-colored; nothing about the day suggested spring, there was nothing beautiful about it at all. And if this was what collective thought produced, she had no respect for imagination. Andrea pulled her jean jacket closer.

It makes me sad to see you, she said. He pulled her closer to him to keep her warm. I just don't know how to put all this into context. I don't understand how Saul has done it all these years.

He compartmentalizes. The world is not static, Andrea, it moves constantly. Everything moves. It all changes. The existentialists are hopeless cripples in the face of all this movement.

Maybe they are but I like them anyway. I think Saul is like Camus's Mersault—the only way he can find self-knowledge is by committing a crime.

If Saul is committing crimes, his worse one is lying to himself.

I think his worst crime is lying to me. He seems to be brutally honest about himself. Mersault says, "anger emptied me of hope." To be honest, I wish I could be like that—get so angry I lose all hope and stop believing in Saul altogether.

That isn't possible for you and that's why I love you.

Don't say you love me. It's almost an offense to the word. You make too many demands on me in that way.

By saying I love you?

Yes.

Chris wanted to tell Andrea about the office visit with Saul, but something stopped him cold. Maybe it was the weather or how vulnerable Andrea looked in sweat pants and a jean jacket, her dark hair blowing around her face. She didn't know how beautiful she was and that gave him a sense of something grand—an instinct for the power he had to beautify her, make her revel in her own exquisiteness—she had subtlety, wisdom, history, experience, but no confidence in her own supremacy—she didn't

believe she could transform the world around her. The rain's density increased and drove them back from the sidewalk to stand under the roof.

This coffee is horrendous.

I love it. It's bitter.

Yeah—7-11 can't compete with Starbucks.

But this coffee is \$1.25 and you can't get shit at Starbucks for under \$4.00.

Starbucks is for the rich.

Oh, bullshit Chris. Are we going to stand around here and talk about coffee? I've got to get to the store and go home.

Chris pulled a book from his pack.

I've been carrying this around to give you.

What is it?

Alejo Carpentier, *The Lost Steps*. You'll love it.

What genre is it?

Magic realism, I suppose. I'm sure Saul hasn't read it.

I'm sure he has—Saul's read everything.

I doubt it, Chris said, although he doubted his own statement.

Her cell phone rang.

Where are you? Saul's voice barked into her ear.

I'm still at the store.

Pick up some more gin. Two bottles. Beefeaters.

I think you should cut back.

Fuck that.

All right.

She slapped the phone shut.

I have to go. He needs his gin.

When are we going to meet?

I don't know—couldn't you just let things be casual? With a clear, tense face, Chris trained his eyes on her, his expression desperate and stylish at the same time. He dropped his coffee cup into the trash barrel and turned to walk to his car.

Aren't you even going to say goodbye? Andrea shouted in her head, but did not utter the words. Her coffee was cold and the day flung itself into the wind like a pennant waving ridiculously on a flagpole. She felt her whole life was like being tried at birth, found guilty, and sentenced to live forever. She watched as Chris drove his Chevy Cavalier out toward Centreville Highway. Maybe it is best this way, she reflected. Some things just fail and she felt too short-tempered to do anything about it. She opened the flap of the book and saw an inscription from Chris on the title page: *A bitch is just a diversion by invitation only*. It made her laugh—mostly because it made no sense and the attempt to be insulting was just plain ridiculous. The Kid was incapable of precision. If your going to do nasty do it the way Saul does, be nasty with some cleverness, she thought as she headed to her car. Perfectionism wouldn't hurt either. If your goal is to cause pain in someone else, you'd better know how to get them where it really hurts—otherwise--she hated to admit that Saul's ability to destroy her was one of the things she admired most about him.

On her way home she saw Saul's face in front of her windshield as if he were making a visitation—she saw his bushy hair and his shaggy salt and pepper beard hiding

the jaw line, the thick eyebrows and the prominent blue eyes that he used to his advantage when he felt like it and hid from others (to his advantage) when he felt like it. A rumbling inside of her, as if his voice were living down at the pit of her stomach, droned words from some language people spoke a thousand years BCE—grunts, maybe, but intelligible grunts. Saul was groaning out his message inside of her bowels, she reckoned, and even on a tedious failed mission--a tryst at 7-11--she couldn't get away from him.

Driving home Andrea suddenly realized Saul knew about the kid. That was what the face in the windshield was all about, although she was hard pressed to understand that from any pragmatic point of view; nevertheless it was clear that Saul knew. How did he know? And who would tell when no one else knew? But he knew! That was absolutely certain, she felt it in her gut and wherever else her feelings wandered. Driving in the rain was not her favorite pastime and she knew she'd have to invent an excuse for why a one-hour trip took three hours instead. No one would believe she would be driving to Centreville, to 7-11 no less, for a romantic encounter, but then of course, there was nothing romantic about it. Andrea adjusted her rearview mirror and thought she saw Chris's car behind her but it was another red, banged up Cavalier like his.

She made a decision to pick up the gin and leave the major Passover shopping for tomorrow when Saul would be in his office, drowning in his own imagination or whatever he did when he wrote. What reason would she give him for this? She couldn't think of one except the rain, and after he had a couple of gins it wouldn't matter anyway. Manassas was crowded and the traffic was backed up—once she got onto 66 she breathed

deep and expected nothing. She planned to stop at the liquor store on Connecticut and pick up some chops at the Safeway—steamed broccoli, chops and salad.

~

Saul waited in the living room glancing over notes from twenty years ago when his mentor, Lawrence Solon had instructed him to simplify his narrative and approach things from the sentence level. Poor old Lawrence. He remembered the last years of his teacher, a man who had been a tennis instructor, a boat enthusiast, a cyclist and a climber, hunched over in his oversized leather chair, covered with a ratty pale blue blanket, his nose running from the blood thinning medication, his wisps of white hair (which had always been thick and wavy) sticking out all over, his eyes clouded over with anger, sadness and frustration. His thick brows, always furrowed down close to his eyes, except when he raised them with surprise (Saul, fortunately, surprised him often as a student writer) were now thinner, whiter and forming a straight line across his forehead. The man knew he was dying and spewed out resentment to anyone whom he felt was still in the game of life. Saul was no exception. Their last meeting was filled with a subtext of hostility on Solon's part and bewilderment on Saul's. (He was only twenty-six, after all) He'd just married Andrea and Solon expressed doubts about his choice.

Do you think she's enough for you? He asked at that last meeting, dabbing his runny nose with a Kleenex. It's the Cumadin, he explained, it thins your blood so you don't clot or whatever, but it makes all the liquid in your body run. The mucus, you know.

Saul knew or did not know and had no interest in hearing about Solon's mucus, although something inside of him wondered if he would end up like this when he was

old—a cranky, fastidious man complaining about the mess of a body falling apart. As he thought of this memory he made comparisons between himself and Solon—how close was he to the crabby, mean-spirited, dispirited and broken down man Solon presented to him at that tender age? Although, as he reflected, how tender had he been? No question that even at twenty-six or so Saul was cynical, hardened by life in Queens, by parents who were either abusive or dismissive, by living in an environment that both encouraged him to rise above it and secretly hoped he'd be sucked down into it. He had been both. Sucked and risen. The risen Saul Fineberg. Sucked into delusion. But as to Solon's take on Andrea, Saul knew he would pay no attention to it. Perhaps Lawrence longed for something sweet and young and he was jealous, or perhaps Andrea might have seemed a bit fluffy on first impression—"frothy" was the word Solon used—isn't she just a bit frothy?

As Saul stood at the threshold between his office and the living room, Andrea came in the back door with a small bag of groceries and a treat for the cat, who mustered up no energy or vitality whatsoever, but sat patiently on the dining table waiting for the whole scene about to play out.

Saul walked into the kitchen where Andrea was unpacking the chops, the broccoli and some strawberries she'd picked up. She could feel the kinesthetic heat of his body as he approached her; something about it always brought an electric charge to an otherwise dull existence.

What took you so long?

I have your gin. I'm doing the Passover shopping tomorrow.

I didn't say anything about the gin.

Here. She poured some gin into a glass and reached into the refrigerator for ice.

I don't want ice.

Straight up?

He grabbed the glass from her with his right hand and reached for her elbow with the left.

I want to know where you were.

You never wanted to know before, for God's sake. In forty-some years, when have you cared what I did? She poured herself a glass of gin.

I care.

Now you care.

It's never too late.

Let go of me Saul.

He pulled tighter, his hand squeezing her arm, hurting and likely to make a mark.

This hurts.

I want it to, he said.

Stop it. She tried to wrench free but he held on—his arm taut and rigid, the hand curving around her soft flesh pressing into it. He put his glass of gin on top of the stove and slapped her with his hand. The slap shocked Andrea into numbness and then tears and then she flashed back to him a hardened, angry look he had never seen before.

You hate me.

No.

I'm angry.

Why?

Because you've betrayed me.

It isn't the first time.

It's the last time. That's what hurts the most. He looked dejected, like a spoiled child who learns the last cookie has been eaten from the plate.

We'll go together to shop, she offered, even though the slap had affronted something so deep in her she wondered if she'd ever recover. He put his hand up to her face, massaging the redness, touching softly where he had moments before assaulted and offended.

All right, he said. I'm sorry.

I know you are. You're just jealous.

He took another sip of gin. There was between them that awful silence.

The white crown of his face with the plume of curly, steel-colored hair turned on its neck. How adaptable a man can be, hovering over fish and fowl, eating what he wants, avoiding high tension lines, finding small things floating to the surface that are always more vulnerable to his appetite. Occasionally a heron will choke to death trying to swallow a fish that is too hard to swallow.

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